UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES

"PRELIMINARY MATERIALS FOR A THEORY OF *GOSSIP GIRL*"

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ABSTRACT

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"Precisely because of her nothingness, each of her judgments carries the imperative weight of the entire sovereign order, and she knows it." —Tiqqun, *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl*

My thesis examines the ways in which gossip, intertextuality, and fashion intersect with affect, relationality, and the "Young-Girl" figure to form various discursive networks both within the world of *Gossip Girl* and extradiagetically, generating meaning on multiple levels. My analytic techniques include explicating the show, comparing it to outside texts, many of which it references onscreen, and examining the show's impact on an increasingly digital, surveilled, and "connected" world and its lasting cultural imprint. I aim to find a middle ground between those people who critique *Gossip Girl* from a very specific theoretical and critical position, and its existence as a highly successful and popular television show in which many people, myself included, find value and artistry. I hope to contest the dichotomy of either condemning or valorizing a media relic that one may form strong feelings about due to its subject material, aesthetics, or the cultural moment it depicts, and instead represent *Gossip Girl* as an amalgamation of form, content, and rich theoretical ideas that engenders pleasure, value, and conflict in its audience members. I suggest that the show stands out in the genre of teen soap operas because of its dual relationship to a) art and critical theory and b) popular consumer culture.

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Introduction

My thesis focuses on the hit teen television show, *Gossip Girl*, which ran on the CW from 2007 to 2012. The series follows a privileged Upper East Side group of teenagers, centered on "It" girls Serena van der Woodsen and Blair Waldorf, and perpetual middle class Brooklyn outsider, Dan Humphrey's quest to prove his worth and navigate the upper-crust world he finds himself in. Kristen Bell voices the eponymous and anonymous blog "Gossip Girl" that chronicles the lives, romances, and deep secrets of the main characters. The show is based on the book series of the same name by Cecily von Ziegesar, though showrunner Josh Shwartz's auteur stylings took many liberties with the plot. Alloy Entertainment, which produced *Gossip Girl*, the television series, also functions as a book packaging unit (its parent company is Warner Bros. Entertainment) and was involved in the creation and marketing of *Gossip Girl*, the novel series. Developed as a profit-generator for the CW, a network whose target audience is primarily young women 25-32, *Gossip Girl* was wildly popular with teen audiences as well. After its initial airing, the show was available to stream on Netflix until prestige-TV HBO Max bought streaming rights in 2020 and produced a reboot developed by Joshua Safran, one of the show's original writers. The first episode of the new *Gossip Girl* aired July 2021 and has been renewed for a second season.

Gossip Girl's psychic hold on pop culture is immense: a simple Google search produces hundreds of pages of articles, listicles, think pieces, podcast episodes and fandom sites. From being lambasted by critics, idolized by fans, called a "guilty pleasure" for its unabashed soap opera stylings, "reductive" for its portrayal of class and race, and "powerful" for its characterization of proto-Girlboss Blair Waldorf, *Gossip Girl* is nothing if not a complex portal into the many representative and discursive layers of mass media and popular culture. However,

I will not limit the scope of my analysis of *Gossip Girl* to just focusing on the evocative cultural object it is. I intend to analyze the show for its critical importance, contributing to the few academic conversations about the series. In my thesis, I will illuminate some of the main meaning systems that operate within the show, as well as the modes in which they are communicated, in order to provide a deeper cultural, aesthetic, and theoretical understanding of the show. The three primary meaning systems which I will discuss are that of intertextuality, which deals with high-brow art, referentiality, and cross-genre and medium connections, that of the gossip system, and that of fashion, while weaving ideas of visual pleasure, melodrama, and affect throughout my entire analysis.

Gossip Girl is a show about networks. Gossip Girl, the blog, in addition to serving as narrator, also acts as a forum for the constant exchange of ideas, a circuitry of constant communication. In *Gossip Girl,* there is an integrated and complex way the teenagers interact with one another- through the titular persona and website, Gossip Girl. The network of Gossip Girl, the in-show website, is independent and ever-expanding, as is the actual show's impact on both youth culture and media. The network of gossip within the show as mediated by Gossip Girl (the persona and website) organizes both people and space. The flow of information is constant, and when Gossip Girl briefly goes dark in season 5, the show is for all intents and purposes dead. The main characters, either because they are from different classes or hate each other, do not interact. The show becomes indistinguishable from other teen melodrama series with the unique voiceover by Kristen Bell as GG that spans the entire series. When Gossip Girl comes back, the teens are once again reunited under the blanket of constant and immediate communication.

Technology is the preferred forum for the dissemination of important messages and statements, but on a filmic level, we see both network technology, as represented by Kristen

Bell's voiceover as "Gossip Girl," and dramatic face-to-face confrontations vying for spectator attention on screen; it is in this space that network and affect converge. On this note, Serena and Blair are constantly battling the perception of them as created by Gossip Girl, negotiating whether the pixelated images and juicy secrets represent them, or if they can establish identities outside of the purview of Gossip Girl. Additionally, many important confrontations or beats in the show occur online, via Gossip Girl, raising the question of whether, if an interaction occurs entirely in cyberspace, it really happened in "real life." Gossip Girl suggests that online interactions are as, if not more important, than "irl" ones.

The show is a testament to how media can become uncontrollable. In the final episode of the series, Gossip Girl is revealed to be none other than Brooklyn outsider Dan Humphrey, and he has been the mastermind behind the blog for most of the series, except the brief interludes where Georgina Sparks or Serena had control (not knowing, of course, that Dan was the original Gossip Girl). Initially made as a tool to control and manipulate his peers, who denigrated him as a weird and irrelevant social outcast, Dan Humphrey's project spirals out of his control and becomes "owned" by both everyone and no one. Everyone participates by sending Gossip Girl anonymous tips that she (he) posts at strategic times, wreaking social havoc that ensures that more "gossip bombs" will inevitably be sent to Gossip Girl. In this way, the network of Gossip Girl takes on a life of its own, becomes its own distinct character, more effective and powerful than Queen Bee Blair Waldorf or Golden Girl Serena van der Woodsen combined. For Dan, however, the Gossip Girl website allows him to be privy to information (gossip) he would never have received otherwise, as a member of the oft-scoffed at upper middle-class (the irony that his family owns a loft in Brooklyn is lost on the show, Dan is the "poor" character). This access, in the form of the tips Gossip Girl is constantly sent, offers him an entry point into a world he desperately wants to

be a part of, and one which will ensure him opportunities to accumulate power and wealth of his own. Despite characters using the gossip site for their own personal gain, though, no one, not even Dan, becomes the "boss" or face behind Gossip Girl; rather, she takes on a life of her own that cannot be curbed by any one player in her "game" of sorts.

Ideas of affect and the body are integrated with ideas of network, gossip, and information in the show, resulting in a unique convergence of the digital and real teenage girl. *Gossip Girl* asks if the teenage girl exists in real time or in cyberspace, and whether her image is or is not a representation of herself. For example, events as interpreted and reported by Gossip Girl often do not align with reality, but are interpreted as fact. In Season 2, Gossip Girl opines that Dan is having an affair with his teacher Ms. Carr (or Rachel, as he calls her), which isn't true when the post comes out, but due to the increased scrutiny and attention on them (everyone of course believed Gossip Girl), the two end up getting together. In this way, Gossip Girl is able to change the course of events simply by speculating about what she thinks might have happened, or reporting fiction as fact if it is beneficial to her to do so. In regards to this idea of the real or actual versus the fictional, the show asks, are the images of Blair or Serena that the other teens see on their phone screens not an accurate rendition of their beings? This idea is complicated by the fact that Leighton Meester and Blake Lively (Blair and Serena) are actresses attempting to represent teenage girls. The many layers of representation create a metaverse in which ideas of representation and reality converge.

The show is also fixated on fashion, both the wearing of it and the elite fashion industry. Fashion is a signifier for wealth, status, coolness, and sexuality. Fashion speaks its own language, and the world of fashion on the show is intertwined with fashion in real life, as significant designers are name dropped, make cameos, and are commissioned to make

one-of-a-kind designs for the characters. This is just one of the many ways in which fiction and reality are blended, and the lines between them blurred.

While fashion is one meaning system at work in *Gossip Girl*, affect is a related one- the languages of faces, feeling, and sentiment. The use of soap opera narrative tools, including extreme close-up shots, a prolonged, non-teleological structure, the lack of one specific protagonist, and an emphasis on the family transmits affect to viewers, making the characters at once perfect and impregnable, but human and relatable, too. The effectiveness of Gossip Girl, in part due to its melodramatic and stylistic flair, has engendered an extremely involved and passionate fanbase, which translates into higher profit margins for executives at Alloy Entertainment, the CW's parent company. Affect also functions in the show as the disruption of a more masculine or male-oriented mode of storytelling and meaning-making. As media scholar Tania Modleski notes in "The Search for Tomorrow in Today's Soap Operas," soap operas are intentionally designed for women from both content they focus on and how they focus on it; for example, the "complex obstacles between desire and fulfillment" are intentionally crafted for the specific viewing pleasure of female audiences. We can see Blair's ongoing relationship with the initially toxic Chuck Bass as an example of this phenomenon. Blair successfully redeems Chuck from a broken and morally reprehensible badboy to caring, intuitive, and charming young man, through the power of transformative relationality (and female sexuality- Chuck is motivated to change due to, in part, his sexual desire for Blair). The two unite as a happy couple only after they have to endure trials such as Chuck's father's death and Blair's regrettable engagement with a prince of a small monarchy, demonstrating the intentional elongation of the "complex obstacles" Modleski notes.

As Mark B. N. Hansen argues in his essay "Affect as Medium," affect can offer "an interface between the domain of information (the digital) and embodied human experience." In *Gossip Girl* it does just that, providing a logic, ethical code, and context for the digital platform that is "Gossip Girl" and encouraging viewers to engage affectively with that which is virtual (Hansen). In this way, Gossip Girl is not presented to us as simply an existing entity but through a moral framework that underscores the show, though this moral code is relative, as poorer characters are held to a higher ethical standard than their richer peers. While the Gossip Girl blog in and of itself is not ethical or moral, it helps in establishing standards of behavior for characters and chastising them when they step out of line. While Gossip Girl does not encourage only "good" behavior, she lets the characters know that their actions will inevitably be broadcast for their entire social circle to see- everyone is under constant surveillance. In this way, the world of Gossip Girl is not a digital Wild West, and even when the rich characters act with impunity, they know that the social fallout will reverberate through everyone's cell phones.

Another way in which information and affect intersect is that Gossip Girl (the website) mines affect and trades it in for gossip: a form of currency in this diegesis. Characters' innermost thoughts, feelings, and private moments are broadcast to the world, sometimes to their detriment, and sometimes to their favor, but nonetheless, an economy in which interiority is traded in for power and privilege emerges. No matter how much they decry Gossip Girl, the characters know that the more they are featured on the blog, the more their power and sphere of influence grows, and the easier it becomes to achieve their goals, be it buying a hotel for Chuck, publishing a story in the New Yorker for Dan, or, on an interpersonal level, securing the allegiance and fear of her friends, for Blair.

An additional and perhaps most defining meaning system at work within *Gossip Girl* is that of intertextuality. This realm encompasses the various iterations of pastiche, referentiality, and high art and avant-garde affinities that appear on multiple levels within the show. The show's references cover famous locales, authors, literary works, and films name-dropped in conversation; examples include Rainer Maria Rilke and *The Age of Innocence*, films such as *Breakfast at Tiffany's* and *The Graduate*, the many restaurants, bars, and hotels visited by characters (mostly filmed on location), and, lastly, the movie titles which lend each episode its title. The vocabulary of popular culture situates *Gossip Girl* in a rich intertextual network of cultural literacy.

Not only does the show pull from other types of media, but it is creative and generative in its own rite. Its visual culture, from the distinctive late aughts era fashion, to the sleek hair and flawless, lip gloss-friendly make-up, to the discernibly 2000s look of the characters, plants it firmly in the cultural zeitgeist, as legitimate an indicator of the time as a Rihanna song, fedora, or bandage dress. However, I argue that the show's relevance is not limited to the aesthetic and cultural. *Gossip Girl* has critical and theoretical importance for both the content within the text and the outside texts it can be read alongside with. I will be situating *Gossip Girl* between a pre-text and a post-text, *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl* by the French theory collective tiqqun, published in 1999 and the novel *Reena Spaulings* by the avant-garde art group Bernadette Corporation, published in 2005, in order to investigate how *Gossip Girl* reflects and extends upon tiqqun's conception of the "Young Girl," and how the mechanism of Gossip Girl (the website), as portrayed in the original book series, inspired Bernadette Corporation to collectively and anonymously pen *Reena Spaulings*.

In addition to its somewhat peculiar affinities with the world of avant-garde and theory, *Gossip Girl* is connected to the world of high art and the highbrow by way of the existence of significant contemporary art pieces hidden amongst dining room tables and teenage girl bedrooms in the show's mise-en-scéne. These exact recreations were made in collaboration with their artists, such as Marilyn Minter and Richard Phillips, names no one outside of the insular world of contemporary art would be likely to recognize. Though the presence of such art pieces serves to further reify the insider-outsider binary that the show revolves around, *Gossip Girl* in fact traverses and makes less rigid many boundaries, including those of genre, taste, audience, gender norms, and class.

At the same time, it is a massive draw for its parent company and succeeds in luring in its target audience, teenage girls, by the masses, for the sake of profit. *Gossip Girl* is both superficial and normative, while also being rich with textual intricacies uncharacteristic for a teenage television show and engaged with conversations about internet ethics and futurity. Its complexity has been a source of conflict for critics, both cultural and academic, who want to categorize it as simplistic, regressive, or problematic. While it arguably is at times all these things, it challenges categorization altogether by existing across form and genre. My thesis will cover several meaning systems that exist in *Gossip Girl* that make it exceptional as a purportedly mainstream, profitable, and hegemonic piece of media. These systems include the system of intertextuality and the gossip and fashion system. Within my analysis of these three categories, I will also explore notions of affect, celebrity, network, and the way they intersect with class, gender, and race.

I am also interested in the tools of narrative and meaning construction utilized by soap operas in order to appeal specifically to female viewers, and the way in which soap operas are in

turn devalued by critics as less meaningful or important than programs that employ more masculine modes of storytelling. I will also briefly explore my own experience of watching the show at three distinct time periods of my life, thus allowing for a temporal understanding of the show as well as a cultural, theoretical, and aesthetic one. In this regard, I will become one of the subjects that my thesis will analyze[1], along with the actual text of *Gossip Girl* and the many pieces of media it gestures to and has generated.

[1] I would usually avoid self-insertion in a serious academic paper such as my undergraduate thesis, but as I was a teenage girl not so long ago and am currently a Young Girl, I think my first hand perspective of watching Gossip Girl is relevant. Also, on the note of theories of affect, I am committed to the ethos of Chris Kraus in *I Love Dick*, who believes that personal experience can hold meaning and relevance beyond one's own subjective, contained experience of the world, as an individual.

Chapter 1

Intertextuality in *Gossip Girl*

Arguably the most defining meaning system that operates in *Gossip Girl* is intertextuality, which manifests in various iterations, including but not limited to pastiche, referentiality (including namedropping and "easter eggs"), and the show's high-art and avant-garde affinities. In my study of intertextuality in *Gossip Girl*, I will be situating the show between a pretext, *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl* by the French theory collective Tiqqun, and a post-text, *Reena Spaulings* by the avant-garde art group Bernadette Corporation.

While not directly cited in the show, Preliminary Materials maps onto *Gossip Girl* as a text that studies the same subject (the Young-Girl), but with different ideology and different historical framework that informs how the text came to exist. *Reena Spaulings* continues the theoretical tradition of Tiqqun to the modern-day (they are still active in art circles today). As scholar Heather Warren-Crow writes in "Gossip Girl Goes to the Gallery: Bernadette Corporation and Digitextuality," *Reena Spaulings* was inspired by Gossip Girl, the blogger, as evidenced by its collective format, in which hundreds of artists participated in writing one disjointed and fragmented novel about the New York art scene post-9/11. It is unclear whether the Corporation was being serious or tongue-in-cheek when alluding to Gossip Girl as one of its inspirations, especially when considering *Gossip Girl's* social currency and cultural capital specifically in the art world- is it "cool" enough to be seriously considered by Bernadette Corporation as a legitimate frame of reference, or is it too capitalist and mainstream? Nevertheless, its strange appearance as a citation for an art group enmeshed in the New York avant-garde is proof that, despite being off the air for ten years, *Gossip Girl* continues to be

relevant as both a cultural touchstone synonymous with post 9/11 excess and a generative force in the current media landscape.

Key to understanding intertextuality in Gossip Girl is to understand the various ways it appears within the fabric of the show. In *spotted: your one and only unofficial guide to gossip girl*, TV-guide-writer Crissy Calhoun details the various references that occur throughout seasons 1 and 2 of the show, including locations, connections to the "Original Gossipverse," or the book series by Cecily von Ziegesar, connections to the O.C., television auteur Josh Schwartz's first foray into television, fashion brands, artists, and songs. These references lend a kind of cultural literacy and legitimacy to the show: not only does it know about the latest hits and trends, but it sets them. The second episode, "The Wild Brunch," contains plot material that is adapted directly from the original *Gossip Girl* books in which, upon Serena's return to NYC, there is a brunch attended by the main characters (this is not always the case; the show often significantly differs from the books, plot-wise). The appearance of models painted to look like statues is also taken directly from the books. Calhoun identifies the source for the title of the episode: the 1969 film *The Wild Bunch* (dir. Sam Pekinpah). Calhoun calls it "an extremely violent and critically acclaimed Western," and writes that although "the 1913 Texas-Mexico border is a far cry from today's Upper East Side…at the heart of both The Wild Bunch and "The Wild Brunch" are friendship, loyalty, betrayal, and abandonment." Other references or homages to different mediums of note include the embroidered Blumarine flower dress Serena wears to brunch and the Rihanna song "Shut Up and Drive," which plays while Blair ignores a message from Serena and reprises later in the episode. Additionally, "Believe" by The Bravery, which closes out the episode, scoring a scene of Serena throwing her phone into a trash can, is an indie rock ballad, substantiating the idea that *Gossip Girl* has an auteur or "bohemian" sensibility, allowing it to

transcend its packaging of a "normie" television show[2]. The various layers in which referentiality operates in the show contributes to the illusion that *Gossip Girl* is actually embedded in the real New York City mid-2000s art and fashion "scene," inviting viewers to take part in a world that they lack both the economic and cultural capital to access in real life.

As indicated in my brief explication of "The Wild Brunch," there is a general logic or organization to the references which appear. For instance, the categories by which references can be classified cover the literary, the cinematic, fashion, and the art world. The purview of some of these categories, for example fashion, is so broad that it becomes its own distinct system that defines the show, thematically speaking. However, referentiality in Gossip Girl tends to serve one of three purposes: lending a sense of cultural credibility or "coolness" to the show, lending a legitimacy to the alleged "upper class" characters on the show, or lastly, allowing the show to participate in the ongoing conversation of where it stands in the media landscape, and what its legacy will be. While some references appear to serve more than one purpose according to this framework, the show's astute sense of its own role in the media landscape it exists within is also evident in the tongue and cheek, self-reflexive tone which classifies it as more intellectual or self-aware than other teen television shows.

In "Genericity in the 90s," Jim Collins writes about the two types of genre films that "have emerged within the past decades as reactions to the same cultural milieu- namely, the media-saturated landscape of contemporary American culture" (Collins 243). While Collins is working in cinema, not television, I argue that the sense of "eclectic" genericity, as defined by "the changing forms and functions of "genericity" in postmodern popular culture," which either embrace a kind of "new sincerity" or involve "an ironic hybridization of pure classical genres,"

[2] Such as *The Hills*, *90210*, *The Vampire Diaries*, for example.

is just as if not more pronounced on television as it is on the big screen. For instance, television is often separated into even more specific categories or genres than cinema. Just to name a few, there are soap operas, situation comedies, daytime dramas, reality shows, sports, news, Telenovelas, game shows, and family dramas. However, television shows often have defining characteristics of more than just one genre, and Gossip Girl is most definitely a testament to the fact that TV has a unique potential and ability to transcend genre categorization.

In his discussion of the way genre criticism has shifted from a belief in "genre-films-as-myth," or as iterations of popular cultural and social mythologies representing some underlying "mass consciousness," Collins writes that the reason this could be is "due to the interconnectedness of social, technological, and demographic changes that give rise to target myths for target audiences" (Collins 245). He states that this development "has serious ramifications for any claim that popular films reflect some sort of unitary, mass consciousness in some abstract sense" (Collins 245). This presupposition can be seen in *Gossip Gir*l because the references are so broad and diverse, it is unlikely that any casual viewer would be able to catch them all, unless they are doing a serious study of the show. It is possible that the reason *Gossip Girl* appeals to such a wide-ranging fanbase and has remained relevant over the span of ten years is because of its broad appeal to fans.

Some viewers, like the journalist who wrote the article titled "What Gossip Girl Got Right (And Wrong) About the Art World" that was featured in the art and design website ARTSPACE, may be tuning in just to see the one-of-a-kind Richard Phillips and Marilyn Minter paintings that were specifically commissioned for the show, but which remain in the background blending in with furniture and other mise-en-scéne. *The Architectural Digest* writer Rachel Wallace who wrote an article dedicated to the luxe furniture featured in the 2021 reboot might

just be paying attention to the high-end designer furniture or artwork chosen by curators Jenny Mushkin Goldman and Culture Corps. Says the reboot's set decorator Rich Devine, "We had a good purse [to work with]. It is real estate porn, lifestyle porn." In light of all this, there are certainly viewers who don't think twice about the show's set dressing but are instead attuned to the impossibly expensive designer fashion that features in every episode, or the books that are name-dropped by aspiring writer Dan Humphrey or the surprisingly culturally literate Blair Waldorf who read *Howl* by Allen Ginsburg, *Swann's Way* by Marcel Proust, *The Sound and the Fury* by William Faulkner, *The Crying of Lot 49* by Thomas Pynchon, and *Wuthering Heights* by Charlotte Brontë. This is all to say, there is no singular television viewer Gossip Girl caters to. It has an understanding that the idea of a "unitary mass consciousness" is outdated and irrelevant in light of a media and internet landscape the scope of which is almost impossible to describe. In other words, Gossip Girl becomes the perfect "information" show for the "information age."

The season 2 episode titled "The Age of Dissonance" (2.18) is an example of all of the various forms of referentiality and intertextuality in Gossip Girl intersecting and overlapping to create meaning. The 1920 novel *The Age of Innocence* by Edith Wharton and the 1993 film adaptation directed by Francis Ford Coppola and starring Winona Ryder, Daniel Day-Lewis, and Michelle Pfeiffer provides inspiration for this episode, in which the teens put on a school play version of Wharton's novel. The novel is a tale of nineteenth century New York City high society, in which Countess Olenska's (Pfeiffer) return home interferes with the nuptial plans of Newland Archer, a gentlemen lawyer, and the beautiful but sheltered May Welland (Ryder), threatening to create a scandal that could disrupt the various families' places in society. As Gossip Girl states in a voiceover in the beginning of "The Age of Dissonance," "Before Gossip Girl there was Edith Wharton, and how little has changed." The world of Old Money nineteenth

century New York maps cleanly onto Old Money twentieth century New York, and the characters each student assumes resembles their personality in some way, as well. Blair portrays the worldly Ellen Olenska, Serena plays the naive and trusting May Welland, and Dan plays the conflicted Archer who is torn between his bride-to-be and his strong feelings for Countess Olenska (Dan is at the time engaged in an illicit affair with his teacher, Ms. "Rachel" Carr). Nate plays Julius Beaufort, the disgraced heir whose family has lost all their money, which tracks with his own life since his father got sent to jail for embezzlement in Season 1. Even the play's so-called "lame dilettante director" Julian, a minor character in the episode, also resembles the character of Beaufort, who is arrogant and righteous, and who tries to have an affair with Ellen (Julian appears to want to have an affair with Vanessa, but it turns out he is gay). Like many of *Gossip Girl*'s allusions to outside cinematic or literary texts, the plots of the texts are relatively similar, but key details are skewed to establish *Gossip Girl*'s idiosyncratic individuality- it may borrow from other texts, but its gossipy essence is its own.

As Calhoun writes in *spotted*, "The creators of Gossip Girl have always acknowledged Edith Wharton's novels of high society in the 19th century as an inspiration for the show" (Calhoun 289). However, the usage of *The Age of Innocence* operates in more specific and complex ways to achieve meaning in this particular episode. Not only does it lend the writers cultural credibility and legitimacy, being a verifiable standard of the American literature canon, the "play within a play" structure creates a metacommentary on form. We are watching actors portraying fictional characters portraying another set of fictional characters, on a stage within a (symbolic) television set. This setup constitutes multiple levels of fiction, in various discursive modes. The scenes of the cast literally performing a stage play of *Age of Innocence*, which so nearly mirrors their own lives in modernity, is an example of the hybridization of class aesthetics

and tastes within the show, and of intentional overlap between high and popular cultural aesthetics and terminologies, in this case a stage drama and a television show. As Calhoun mentions, “The Age of Dissonance” echoes key plot points and scenes, such as when Dan kisses Rachel’s wrist as they say farewell after a meet up in the costume closet; this gesture is taken directly from a scene between Countess Olenska and Newland Archer. Dan and Blair also reenact the scene onstage as Olenska and Archer, but as they lean over for a kiss and their faces are concealed from the audience, they are actually whispering threats to each other, as Dan blames Blair for Rachel almost getting fired and Blair blames Dan for her getting kicked out of Yale. At the end of the meta-play, it falls apart entirely, as each teenager just uses it as an excuse to soliloquy about his or her own personal problems. The director, Julian, is enraged, but the theater critic lauds this choice, thinking it a directorial one, and Julian takes credit. The play is used as a vehicle for the showrunners to: advance plot and characterization; allude to a classic work *Gossip Girl* is indebted to for inspiration; honor the theatrical tradition; and play with and subvert said tradition.

Within the episode, there are various other textural references seamlessly woven into the layers of plot, narrative, mise-en-scène, and cinematography and sound. Oftentimes, but not always, this referentiality exists outside the purview of the literary and the cinematic. These textural references flesh out the diegesis seen on screen, making it appear more realistic, more specific, and more rich. An example of this referentiality is the song “Hong Kong Garden” by Siouxsie and the Banshees, which plays during a montage of students getting ready for the play. Stage lights fade into a shot of white gloves, a hand applying makeup, a hand buckling a shoe, and someone applying mascara. These textural images of the world of the episode strongly correlate with montages in Sofia Coppola’s 2006 film *Marie Antoinette*. Also a period drama,

like the *Age of Innocence,* and also depicting the day-to-day events of "aristocratic" teenage girls, the thematic similarities between *Marie Antoinette* and "The Age of Dissonance" are immediately present. More subtly, the "look and feel" of *Gossip Girl* is extremely similar to that of *Marie Antoinette*, as Calhoun points out in *spotted*. Particularly, the shopping and poker sequence in Marie Antoinette is similar to the way in which Shwartz presents the world of *Gossip Girl.* A roving shot of shoes lined up in a closet, set to upbeat music, including a brief glance at a pair of purple converse, recalls the cold opens of Gossip Girl, which often depict expensive clothing or decadent food. In fact, the beginning of "The Wild Brunch" features one such sequence, in which shots similar to the ones of gloved hands pouring champagne in the aforementioned Marie Antoinette sequence appear. Even the color grade of both works are similar: bright, rich, decadent, and highly saturated. The obvious *Marie Antoinette* homage in "The Age of Dissonance" connects *Gossip Girl* to a filmic predecessor that provided inspiration for *Gossip Girl*'s distinctive tone and textual "feel," exemplifying an homage that nods to the artistic sensibility of another work with similar themes, characters, and visual culture.

Notably, the New York Times theater critic Charles Isherwood makes a cameo in "The Age of Dissonance," lauding the play as an artistic achievement despite it falling apart in the latter half due to the students' flippance. Isherwood's appearance serves to bridge the real world and the world of *Gossip Gir*l, grant prestige to the theatrical circles the fictional play and director are apparently working in, and demonstrate *Gossip Girls's* literacy in the world of prestige theater. On accepting the invitation to make the cameo, Isherwood wrote, "As someone who makes a living assessing the achievements of people who have the courage to risk making fools of themselves every day- to be a good actor is to be fearless about emotional self-exposure- I knew it would be cowardly to say no." As Julian namedrops the significant playwright Eric

Bogosian (*Talk Radio*) as someone he has worked with, it makes sense that Isherwood would be aware of the fictional Julian's work, because he purportedly works in the same prestigious live theater circles as Isherwood does, in real life. The irony of one of if not the foremost theater critic in the country dropping in to see the students make fools of themselves and selfishly hijack the play, is pronounced. It is an example of high-art meeting popular culture, and the tongue-in-cheek, coy sensibilities of the minds behind *Gossip Girl*.

Other notable references and homages in this episode include the fall 2008 Marchesa gowns Blair and Serena wear in the play, bridging modern day and period fashion, the classic films Vanessa and Julian name drop as some of their favorites (*The Little Foxes* (1941), *The Heiress* (1949)), and the opera track "La fleur que tu m'avais jetée" from *Carmen* that Blair drinks alone to in the final scene, which achieves a tone of humorous but nonetheless emotionally earnest melodrama (B is upset that she got kicked out of Yale for scheming). These references, though less prominent than the obvious connection to *The Age of Innocence*, make up the look and feel of *Gossip Girl*, which differentiates it artistically and critically from other teen soap dramas, such as for instance The Vampire Diaries (also CW), *Pretty Little Liars* (ABC Family), or *One Tree Hill* (The WB, then the CW), that, though campy, pleasurable, and hilarious, lack the cohesive visual style and cultural vocabulary and connectivity of *Gossip Girl*. "The Age of Dissonance" is an example of *Gossip Girl* at its most referential, operating in what Roland Barthes deems the "referential," or cultural code (S/Z). The show gestures to our shared knowledge of the literary and the historical, making it at once universal, relevant, and culturally significant. However, many of the references and homages contained are specific and niche, allowing *Gossip Girl* to have marginal access to the high-art and elite circles which it claims to represent onscreen.

Another prominent subset of referentiality in *Gossip Girl* is artwork. This subset takes many forms, from the art featured in the show to Rufus Humphrey, Dan's dad, being a gallery owner, to various subplots involving artists, art auctions, art photographs, and even an allusion to the trope of the letter hidden inside a painting's backing. The inclusion of various works of art, utilized as set decoration, give insight into the characters and the society they inhabit. To the untrained eye, these images read as little more than background noise, meant to supply the constructed world of the Upper East Side with artsy visuals that signify wealth, glamour, and celebrity. However, many of the art pieces featured in the show are specific original or high-quality reproductions by relevant contemporary artists, leased to the show through a collaboration with the non-profit Art Production Fund, which "is dedicated to producing ambitious public art projects, reaching new audiences, and expanding awareness through contemporary art." In a 2008 ARTnews article titled "Fake Loft, Real Art," Rachel Wolff writes, "In a recent episode of *Gossip Girl*, the CW network's hit teenage dramedy, an art consultant walks the character Lily van der Woodsen through her newly renovated Upper East Side loft. "Kiki Smith greeting you in the foyer," the consultant says. "Elm & Drag pulling you into the main room. And making a statement on the stairwell: Richard Phillips." It is important to note that despite the Art Production Fund's purported goal of making art more accessible, the way in which art is presented in the show does not lead to a sustained interest in the actual artwork, especially considering the show courted viewers of *The O.C.*, not ARTnews readers. Despite *Gossip Girl* showrunners' and Art Production Fund's ostensible goals of making art more accessible to varied audiences, the way the actual works of art are presented in the show, as consumerist objects secondary to the drama of the characters, is a contradiction that further reifies the distinction between the cultural capital of viewers of the show.

One well-known contemporary artist featured on *Gossip Girl* is Marilyn Minter, whose photographic print "Frostbite" (2006) hangs in Serena's bedroom at the van der Woodsen loft. Minter, a Photorealist artist whose work reflects on beauty, sexuality, the female body, fashion, and pornography, is a popular figure within the insular world of modern art, preoccupied with ideas such as "how much pleasure gives us, but at the same time, how we know we'll never look like that, and even [models] don't look like that." Says Minter, "There's this constant distortion that's happening between all of us- men and women- there's a sense of failure. But at the same time, all of this pleasure." "Frostbite" depicts a blonde woman's light blue eye, blown up to large proportions, and encrusted in silver and blue glitter. The woman is squinting slightly, but it is hard to discern whether her expression is one of sexual desire or anger. The woman's expression is made more ambiguous by the fact that the original art piece is cropped slightly, erasing her facial features and therefore solidifying her slight resemblance to Serena, or allowing her to become even more anonymous, and thus synonymous with the elusive blogger, Gossip Girl.

While the image may enjoy some degree of intentional meaning, that meaning is lost unless one pays specific attention to the set decoration of *Gossip Girl.* The show is designed to be easily and emptily consumed, and doesn't engender much critical attention to the show's details, with the show's involved drama and witty banter being occupying enough. This begs the question, why were these works of art deployed at all, if they can only be recognized by the few viewers with a familiarity with contemporary art (such as the characters Dan Humphrey, Lily van der Woodsen, and Blair Waldorf on the show)? It would appear that *Gossip Girl* exists as both consumerist propaganda meant to romanticize the tawdry lives of the overprivileged elite and sell consumer wares like Verizon phones and Vitamin Water, as well as an intricate example of

metatextuality in new media, in which modern art that comments on the digital age is shown to viewers (often unbeknownst to them) in a show that depicts life in the digital age.

Besides being proof of the show's highbrow aspirations, the deployment of artwork such as Minter's in Gossip Girl suggests that the show is attempting to engender a critical or at least participatory viewing practice in audiences. This aim is twofold: it both imbues the text with greater meaning and encourages engagement practices that go beyond simply watching the show, thus boosting the show's popularity and cultural imprint. In her text "The Rumors Are True! Gossip Girl and the Cooptation of the Cult Fan" Elena Bonomo suggests that the different mediums that *Gossip Girl* unfolds in make the show what film scholar Henry Jenkins calls a "transmedia text." Bonomo describes how *Gossip Girl* "not only appropriates fan practices once described as "cult" into the "mainstream," but also distinguishes itself from other texts in this "age of media convergence" by embedding convergence culture into the narrative itself." This participatory sensibility is mirrored in the various artworks and cultural references that invite viewers to reflect critically on the text. The artworks and references themselves reflect *Gossip Girl's* status in a cultural landscape that it plays an active role in shaping. Additionally, the figure of Gossip Girl herself creates an ongoing conversation of "the gaze" through the ways in which she perpetually shapes both audience members' and characters' perception of the world of the show. Thus, Minter's image of an eye staring back at viewers from the screen is a representation of the ongoing theme of spectatorship that underscores the show.

Another more straightforward reason for the inclusion of an art "system" in *Gossip Girl* is to give the show an "Art World Credibility" which imbues it with coolness or "knowing power" and makes its portrayal of the super elite all the more realistic. For instance, when the Van der Woodsens have their family portrait taken in "The Kids Stay in the Picture" (4.18), they

don't just use any random photographer; instead they commission Laurie Simmons, the well-known art photographer, and mother of fellow television auteur Lena Dunham (Simmons makes a cameo as herself). The *Gossip Girl* showrunners are evidently not catering only to a viewership of adolescent and teenage girls, who are unlikely to recognize Simmons, despite the fact that as indicated by the surprised look on Lily van der Woodsen's face, the characters obviously do. *Gossip Girl* is then in a sense committed to realism in the show, in regards to portraying a certain subset of society, Old Money art-world-adjacent New Yorkers. However, in many ways it obviously flouts the rules of realism, and is very much a fantasy; it does not attempt to masquerade as a possible reality for most viewers. It is in this sense that *Gossip Girl* traverses boundaries of real and artificial, of possible and fantastical. Rather than being disorienting, this hybridization of fiction and fact connects to the hybridization of class aesthetics portrayed in the show and makes it more complex and multi-layered.

Other art world cameos include Patrick McMullen, Spencer Sweeney, and Richard Philips, who all appear as guests at an opening for Rufus Humphrey's new and improved gallery in Season 5. Writes Robert Grand in an ARTSPACE article titled "What "Gossip Girl Got Right (And Wrong) About the Art World," "Rufus, early in the evening, walks over to the bar to socialize with the big wigs—APF co-founder Doreen Remen and Richard Phillips himself. Their cringe-worthy conversation goes down like this:

Remen: I like that your artists reflect the same socially relevant projects we commission at Art Production Fund.

Rufus: And I like that you can see the street art influence. I'm not talking about the '80s, but the '40s. Dubuffet, Pollock, Ray Johnson…

Phillips: …when artists were the stars of New York, instead of celebutantes."

Grand discusses Phillips' quip, writing that 80s New York had figures such as Haring, Basquait, and Warhol as the "epicenter of pop culture." However, he notes that on the whole, the interaction is accurate, writing that Phillips' characterization on the show "represents the worst art world types- the ones whose egos are as large as a Fabergé egg." Grand writes that such a person is "usually not even listening to you; they're just waiting to insert their wisecrack into the conversation and take you down a peg. Of course the conversation's syntax doesn't match up. It doesn't have to. We're thrown off by his "read" about Rufus's social circle- and that was always the point anyway." Phillips' appearance is significant beyond just the fact that he is there as himself. By interacting with Rufus and making a direct reference to Rufus's own "social circle," this insertion helps build the bridge between fiction and reality we come to expect from *Gossip Girl*. Grand wraps up his article by writing, "Also, for Rufus to name drop the late great Ray Johnson on a television show made for teenagers (and twenty-something art writers)? Amazing." This quotation gets at the heart of the erudite referentiality at work in GG. The show masquerades as a mainstream, popular television show, and accepts that reputation happily, as the 13-20 subset is one of the most profitable viewerships, but interacts with other worlds: the art world, the real life ultra-rich, culture and tastemakers, the Downtown art scene. It is committed to both attempted realism and its status as a reflection of the current culture, a lifestyle magazine reflecting the latest trends, an animated fictional Page Six of sorts.

In the Season 2 episode "You've Got Yale" (2.16), named after the 1998 film *You've Got Mail* directed by Nora Ephron, there is a highlighted subplot about the opera. The event is fairly integrated into the plot, serving as the place where Lily formally adopts Chuck, where Jack, Chuck's uncle, assaults Lily, and where Lily takes Rufus for their "society debut" as a couple.

However, in addition to its more obvious function, the opera also serves a purpose in terms of the show's referential code and "sensibilities." The portrayal of wealth may not be a realistic depiction of actual people who hold extreme wealth, in the way that a show like *Succession* might be, which emphasizes the moral impurity and banal day-to-day existence of the elite class, but that doesn't matter to the showrunners. As long as the portrayal of wealth is credible, to the extent that the characters are believable, they are successfully representing the milieu that the show is about. However, the opera discussion in "You've Got Yale" runs too deep for it to just be fodder for the "realism" of the upper-class world the characters inhabit. In particular, the fact that the one gay male character on the show, Eric van der Woodsen, Serena's younger brother, takes a particular liking to the opera and exhibits knowledge about it, is a testament to the show's attempts to integrate itself into existing culture. The gay male opera fan is more than just a stereotype; opera and queerness have long gone hand in hand, which *Gossip Girl* attempts to recognize by making Eric an opera fan. While this is the only time that opera is specifically showcased on Gossip Girl, music from operas is featured on the soundtrack occasionally, and Blair Waldorf resembles the larger than life "diva" figure who possesses an unshakable sense of self. *Gossip Girl* may not fully classify as "camp;" as Susan Sontag notes, "Pure Camp" is "naive" and not deliberate, and *Gossip Girl* would most likely only qualify as "Camp which knows itself to be Camp," which tends to be "less satisfying" (Sontag 1-14). On the other hand, the overbearing, dramatic, and exaggerated Blair Waldorf is reminiscent of the "great stylists of temperament and mannerisms" that Sontag cites, such as iconic actresses and pop cultural figures Bette Davis and Barbara Stanwyck, and the dialogue of *Gossip Girl* consistently pushes the envelope on what is appropriate, expected, and acceptable on a teen television show (Sontag 4). The opera references, as well as Blair's character and the often absurdly culturally literate and

quippy dialogue on the show classify it as camp-adjacent, yet another adjacency it can claim in order to substantiate its cultural relevance and claims of artistic achievement.

New York City is the backdrop to *Gossip Girl*, but it functions more as a character on the show. The way it is utilized by and interacted with the characters is significant, and lead to *Gossip Girl* becoming recognized as inherently "New York" by the city itself. For instance, former Mayor Bloomberg declared January 26 as "Gossip Girl Day" in 2012, and even appeared in a walk-on cameo in the show's final episode, "New York I Love You, XOXO" (6.10). He is shown reacting to the news of Gossip Girl's identity, saying "I'm shocked! I thought it was Dorota." In fact, the final episode serves as a tribute to New York as much as it serves its other purpose of wrapping up the show's loose ends. Since Chuck is considered a person of interest in the death of his father, he and Blair decide to get married to avoid her having to testify against him in court. Blair and Chuck tie the knot at the Bethesda Fountain and Terrace in Central Park South. This location also features during a pivotal scene in season 1, where Blair confronts Serena about leaving for boarding school without telling her. Another significant aspect of this scene is that Blair and Chuck are married by Blair's stepfather, played by Wallace Shawn, a lifelong New Yorker and staple in the New York theater and film scene. *Gossip Girl* has become a part of New York mythology in its own right, with *Gossip Girl* filming sites tours still being offered ten plus years since the last episode of the series aired. The highlights of one such tour includes an opportunity to "pass the Vera Wang boutique where Blair tries on her wedding gown" and "hold court at the Met Steps while you stop for a photo op." In the tour, iconic New York landmarks such as the Empire State Building and Grand Central Terminal are mythologized for the role they play in *Gossip Girl*, further integrating the show into the actual material reality and infrastructure of New York City.

The materiality of New York City is very important to *Gossip Girl*, as many different scenes were filmed on location to contribute to a view of the city as the privileged teenager's playground, which granted the young female characters in particular a degree of autonomy and freedom. Watching the characters navigate a city that they essentially have complete access to plays into the fantasy aspect of *Gossip Girl*, which reflects a completely unrealistic but extremely desirable teenage experience wherein one has none of the limitations of adulthood but all of the perks of legal, financial, and physical freedom. This removal of material constraints allows the viewer and the characters to focus solely on the friendship, family, and lovelife drama which rules the show, which is a much more attractive fantasy for the viewer than the inconvenient realities of material life in a city, as we see in a show like Lena Dunham's *Girls*. While *Girls* is resonant on a level of the realism it offers to the viewer, approaching a more emotionally "true" place, *Gossip Girl* is unencumbered by the material realities of day-to-day life, and is free to indulge fully in the juicy world of emotions, drama, and visual storytelling.

A key example of the intertextual relationships *Gossip Girl* creates is when it literally recreates scenes from movies in the form of dream sequences, which usually serve as "cold opens." A cold open can be defined as a narrative technique in which the viewer is immediately immersed in the show or film's story. Cold opens usually occur before the theme song or opening credits. In *Gossip Girl*, these cold opens serve as a form of what showrunner Joshua Safran calls "aspirational" television-making. Says Safran, "The saddest thing that has happened is that network television has decided that it is not important to tell aspirational stories." He may be speaking about the content of *Gossip Girl*, which depicts a class of people of immense wealth and privilege, but this quote also pertains to the aspirational technical aspects of *Gossip Girl*, which is not afraid of the more difficult task of filming on location in a big city such as New

York, of depicting real-life high fashion, which of course means sourcing countless designer outfits for the characters to wear each episode, and of undergoing a project such as the one with the Art Production Fund in order to make the background and setting appear more realistic to the class of people being represented. Gossip Girl's technical and ideological aspirationalism is embodied by the show's use of cold opens. One in particular that stands out is the rendition of the song "Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend" from *How to Marry a Millionaire*. A recreation of this scene serves as the cold open for the *Gossip Girl* Episode "G.G." (5.13), which also happens to be the show's 100th episode. In this reenactment, Serena plays Marilyn Monroe, lip syncing exaggeratedly while she dances and shimmies in a bright pink dress complete with matching gloves. Nate and Dan play her suitors, and escort her down a staircase that looks like the one in Blair Waldorf's penthouse, only it is drenched in red to match the background hue in the original scene from the movie. As Serena dances with the boys, and several other nameless suitors, Blair saunters down the staircase dressed as Audrey Hepburn from *Breakfast at Tiffany's* in a black dress and white strings of pearls, and Dan only has eyes for her. Not only does the episode create a crossover of *Gossip Girl* and *How to Marry a Millionaire*, it integrates *Breakfast at Tiffany's* too, which we are to understand is a formative text of Blair's personhood. The reenactment serves the plot as well, because Serena and Blair tug Dan from side to side until he ultimately follows Blair upstairs, reflecting a turn of events that comes later in the episode. The employment of a classic and canonical text of American film history honors *Gossip Girl's* ongoing commitment to pastiche, and suggests that Serena and the actress that plays her, Blake Lively, is a modern-day Marilyn Monroe, thus inserting the show, its characters, and its actors in the ongoing establishment of what will become the canonical, important, and timely texts of our day and age.

Chapter Two

Gossip: Systems, Affect, Networks

Gossip functions as an organizing force, chutzpah, and ethos in *Gossip Girl*. The show relies on the power of gossip to further itself, meaning many shots, dialogue between characters, and plot points revolve around this central idea. As an exaggeratedly melodramatic soap opera organized around the central theme of gossip, *Gossip Girl* begs the question, is gossip an affect? Affect is defined by Jonathan Guzman in *Keywords for Gender and Sexuality Studies* as feeling as a way of knowing, and other scholars have agreed that it can represent coming to knowledge through emotion and embodiment as opposed to typical empirical avenues. *Gossip Girl* argues that gossip could be perceived as an affect, or at least a way of existing in the world. In the "gossip" headspace, any and all information is fair game to be deployed in order to gain social, or sometimes financial capital for the beholder. Gossip is the system through which everything else is mediated- relationships, fashion, what's in and what's out, discursion- it is all channeled through the titular subject, Gossip Girl. In many ways, Gossip Girl is the real "it girl" of New York, and Blair and Serena spend their efforts trying to prove that they can usurp her, unsuccessfully. Despite being the persona of Dan, Serena, and Georgina, at various points, Gossip Girl is more than just who holds the password to her blog. She is an amalgamation of all their efforts, and the power of an endless amount of anonymous tips from teens across the island of Manhattan. The entire system that the characters operate in revolves around her- her whims, her desires, the intimate knowledge that she wields over everyone. Gossip Girl also shines as the ideal "Young-Girl"' subject. Like Serena and Blair, she craves power and relevancy, but unlike them, she doesn't exist in the flesh and can't get hurt the way they can. She has no body, she has no feelings, and she is ultimately a machine of violence, if one is to believe what Bernadette

Corporation writes in *Reena Spaulings* about narration being "war." However, I propose that we consider gossip as a potentially generative force, focusing on the relationality, connections, and ways of knowing it can form, rather than what it has the capability to destroy.

Gossip Girl never crosses over into the literary theoretical universe that the writing collective Yiqqun exists in, but there are many similarities between *Gossip Girl*, the entity, and the Young-Girl the theory collective writes about in their book *Preliminary Materials For a Theory of the Young-Girl*. Looking at a physical copy of this text, one gets the sense you can barely even call it a book; it is smaller than a traditional book, resembling a chapbook or pocket copy of *The Communist Manifesto*. The Semiotext(e) version, translated by contemporary poet Ariana Reines, features photographic collages on the inside covers; nude women and supermodels stare blankly back at the viewer, as well as oiled "Chippendale" esque young men and two staring eyes, like those of Dr. T.J. Eckleberg from T*he Great Gatsby*. The last pages of the book feature photographs of beautiful white women, dolls, and androgynous young men of different races. set on a black background with captions like, "The Young-Girl is currently the most luxurious of the goods that circulate on the market of perishable commodities"(Tiqqun 138). The actual material of the book consists of ten chapters, as well as a chapter titled "Preliminaries." Besides "Preliminaries," all the content of the book takes the form of fractured quotes, sentences, and blurbs, some lifted straight from the pages of French women's magazines, all in different fonts. This formatting gives the impression that the "book" is really an amalgamation of jumbled fragments. Some of the insights seem profound, others banal. "I'm so happy I could give a shit about being free!" reads one quote (Tiqqun 44). The back covers attests, "When morons, against all evidence to the contrary, protest that "The world is not a commodity!" and, for that matter, neither are they, they are feigning a virginity that only proves

their impotence. We want nothing to do with this virginity nor this impotence. We propose a different *sentimental education*." Like *Gossip Girl*, the Young-Girl does not exist in the flesh, and she is not a girl. Rather, she is a machine, preying on her role of a Young Girl, the ultimate product, to increase her value in society. She utilizes the desire projected on the Young-Girl by society at large to get away with her actions and avoid any critique that might tear down her Young-Girl facade and uncover the moral and capitalist implications of her actions.

The Gendered Young-Girl

Tiqqun claims that the Young-Girl is not gendered, but the Young-Girl, Gossip Girl, and gossip cannot be divorced from the concept of gender. This is especially true considering the text uses the quote "I did love you once" from Hamlet as an introduction, invoking Ophelia, perhaps one of the most famous Young-Girls in history who helped give birth to many of the most prevalent tropes about young girls. Writes Heather Warren-Crow in "Gossip Girl Goes to the Gallery: Bernadette Corporation and digitextuality," in what is the only scholarly article I could find pairing *Gossip Girl*, the avant-garde art collective Bernadette Corporation, and Tiqqun, "Gossip Girl has much to offer serious conversations about online textuality, participatory media and the performance of gender and age. These issues are repeatedly sidestepped, however, in the attack on the series as nothing but corporatized girl talk vitiating twenty-first century teens and wannabes" (Warren-Crow 108). Warren-Crow does not deny *Gossip Girl*'s "corporate visage," nor will I attempt to. However, Warren-Crow usefully points out that "terms that circulate within participatory media" such as "sharing," "chatting," "tweeting," and "status," "have not shaken their associations with small talk, trashy slander, and other gendered speech" (Warren-Crow 110).

What if we viewed *Gossip Girl* not through its apparent post-feminist and "girly" trappings but instead for the valuable contributions it has made in regards to participatory media, both onscreen (within the plot) and off (in fan forums, the twitterverse, and the model of social media use it provides)? This would require a reframing of gossip as not inherently vacuous but instead generative, and shaking the connotations of the girl with "alleged emptiness," and trying to understand her in a media and artistic culture that regards "maturity and masculinity" as the embodiment of intellectualism. However, in light of this, it is important to note that *Gossip Girl* often downplays its own seriousness in an attempt to avoid talking about pertinent subjects, such as class, race, and feminism that may highlight its own flaws and potential problems in light of the sociopolitical conditions it exists in. We can appreciate *Gossip Girl*'s critical importance, while also noting the ways in which it sidesteps responsibility for a status quo that it gleefully depicts onscreen.

The Young-Girl and Power/ the Young-Girl as a Scammer

In Gossip Girl, the character of Georgina Sparks most accurately reflects the Young-Girl characterized in *Preliminary Materials*: ruthless, existing completely without morals, almost emotionless, and willing to do anything to attain power or social control. Gossip Girl Wiki accurately calls her a "scheming sociopath," and she shows up throughout the show's six seasons as constant fodder for the main characters, showing that they aren't "that bad " in comparison to her errant ways. Georgina outs Serena's younger brother, Eric, drugs Serena, gets to know Dan and Vanessa under a fake name, crashes Rufus and Lily's fairytale wedding by showing up with their secret son, tricks Dan into thinking her baby is his and raising him with her, and acts as the sitting Gossip Girl with no hint of conflict or remorse about it (unlike Dan and Serena when they act as GG at various points in the series).

Georgina's significance is that she enjoys all the perks of girlhood without any of the moral responsibilities or emotional burdens we come to associate with the Young-Girl, such as an expectation of tenderness, warmth, and emotion. She uses her eroticism to gain power, and her perceived innocence to avoid repercussions. In a section titled "Preliminaries," Tiqqun writes, "Listen: The Young-Girl is obviously not a *gendered* concept. A hiphop nightclub player is no less a Young-Girl than a *beurette*[3] tarted up like a porn star" (Tiqqun 14). Yet, even these apparently neutral examples have gendered connotations. Society both loves and hates the Young-Girl; it loves to hate her. Writes Nina Powers in her review of *Theory Of the Young-Girl* for Radical Philosophy, "*Theory of the Young-Girl* is a text that both parodies and mirrors the misogyny that resonates at the heart of a culture that celebrates youth and beauty above all else while simultaneously denigrating the bearers – young women, overwhelmingly – of these purportedly desirable characteristics." In this case, *Theory of the Young-Girl* is the opposite of *Gossip Girl* because it uses the guise of neutrality but contains many "evaluative" statements. Powers continues, "Tiqqun's equation of the social with 'youthitude' and 'feminitude' is, however, oddly old-fashioned, harking back to stereotypes of women as fundamental bearers of sociability in the form of gossip." Powers refers back to a quote from the text that reads, "Chatter, curiosity, equivocation, hearsay, the Young-Girl incarnates the fullness of improper existence, whose categories Heidegger identified." Tiqqun also writes elsewhere in the book, "Precisely because of her nothingness, each of her judgements carries the imperative weight of the entire sovereign order, *and she knows it*" (Tiqqun 18).

[3] A beurette is a term for a woman born in France of North Africandescent, sometimes used pejoratively.

In the past scholars have imagined gossip as a historical, ancient mode of discourse and communication[4], and while *Gossip Girl* does not contest that conception, it defines gossip as also innovative and futuristic. While the gendered lens of Tiqqun imagines gossip, like the Young-Girl, as something inherently destructive and even violent, the showrunners and characters of *Gossip Girl* don't necessarily moralize gossip, as it is the engine that the rest of the show runs off of. Irit Rogoff supports this assertion of gossip as creative or generative in the text "Gossip as Testimony: A postmodern signature." Rogoff writes, "In the struggle to locate and articulate new structures of knowing and alternative epistemologies which are actually informed by the conjunctions of subjectivities, pleasures, desires, and knowledges, gossip deserves serious consideration" (Rogoff 268). Rogoff proposes that because gossip is "invariably" located in the present moment, it complicates the "conventions of history and truth" "by externalizing and making overt its relations to subjectivity, voyeuristic pleasure, and the communicative circularity of story-telling" (Rogoff 268). In line with this, the function or "point" per se of gossip in *Gossip Girl* is not in its absolute truth but in its potentiality. It could be true, and this possibility of truth generates further speculation, pleasure, desire, precarity, and action. Gossip is the friction or pressure that catalyzes cathartic release, the spilling of secrets, the important act of getting things out into the open. On this note, if affect, feeling, is a way of knowing, as Jonathan Guzman asserts in "Affect," and we are to read gossip as a form of postmodern knowledge-making, then gossip is feeling and knowing. We don't know but we have a feeling, so we speculate. Or, we do know, but we can't reveal the source of our knowledge, to avoid implicating the feelings of others or ourselves. Gossip, though a system of information and discourse, is tied up with notions

[4] Scholars include Michel Foucault, Robert F. Goodman, Aron Ben-Ze'ev, Joshua Gamson, Jacques Derrida, Louise Collins (Rogoff 276).

of affect, and women are associated with feeling as well, due to the age-old conception of the woman or girl as an "emotional creature.[5]"

Rogoff goes on to discuss the "moralizing" surrounding gossip which is also touched upon in *Gossip Girl*, albeit not as directly as in Rogoff's text. Rogoff writes, "Reviled in relation to empirical and verifiable faculties, relegated to the recesses of femininity or feminized masculinity and moralized as a reprehensible activity, gossip seems to bear a multiple burden" (Rogoff 269). Rogoff mentions anthropological studies of gossip in various "remote communities of distant exotic tribes" that have attempted to "decouple" gossip from allegations of "idleness" and "maliciousness." However, *Gossip Girl* does not attempt to resist the idea that gossip can indeed be idle and malicious, as can gossips. In fact, part of the appeal of the show is that the characters onscreen are idle and malicious on an intrinsic level- they don't have jobs, obviously, because they are wealthy teenagers, and do not try to hide the fact that they are hungry for power. This might be the main reason Blair Waldorf fans resonate with her over Serena, because at least she is open about her meanness and doesn't claim to be virtuous. However, as Rogoff writes, "both of these terms (idleness and maliciousness) are highly feminized in culture" (Rogoff 269). In *Gossip Girl*, women are hardly the only gossips, or the worst offenders. In the last episode of the series, "New York, I Love You, XOXO," it is revealed that Dan has been behind Gossip Girl all along, and he developed it as a tool to gain access to Serena's world and ultimately win her over. Dan explains his inspiration to create Gossip Girl by saying to Serena, "Okay, have you ever wanted something so badly, but you just know you're not gonna get it? Oh, that's right. I forgot who I'm talking to. Of course you haven't. But that, that

[5] See. tiqqun's invocation of Ophelia, sinking into her river of melancholia (like the cover of Lars von Trier's 2011 movie *Melancholia* starring Kirsten Dunst).

was my whole life. And the moment you walked away from me, I knew there was no way I could ever pull you out of your world and into mine. But I couldn't give up." Dan successfully spins a move that could be seen as controlling, invasive, and extremely damaging as a romantic gesture, and it works- the two end up married in a time jump at the very end of the final episode. However, perhaps there is more to this idea than just the different implications of men and women's "gossip." Its showrunners have described *Gossip Girl* as a model for digital communication as we use it now, a predecessor to modern day social media. In this way, Dan's purported "love letter" to Serena as embodied by Gossip Girl is also a love letter to the digital mode of existence that at the time of the show, was still fledgling.

Gossip, Celebrity, Fame

Rogoff also mentions another mode of studying gossip, as a way to achieve proximity to celebrity. This is relevant in light of *Gossip Girl* having aired during the true celebrity gossip and paparazzi heyday that was the late 2000s, and several characters in Gossip Girl, chiefly, Serena, are styled as proto "influencer" celebrities in their own rite. This is compounded by the fact that the stars of *Gossip Girl*, namely Blake Lively and Leighton Meester, became huge stars due to the show's popularity. Vanity Fair's ten-year retrospective article titled "When *Gossip Girl* Ruled the World" remarks on this phenomenon, including photos of Blake Lively and Penn Badgley hobnobbing with Ivanka Trump and Jared Kushner (who later had a cameo in the show), photos of Lively and Badgley when they were a real-life couple, and a more recent photo of Lively with her now-husband, Ryan Reynolds. Journalist Josh Duboff writes that showrunner Josh Shwartz said about the casting of Lively, "We didn't see a lot of other girls for Serena…she has to be somebody that you believe would be sitting in the front row at Fashion Week eventually." In order to cast the star of the show, Schwartz and Savage turned to online message boards in which

fans had already picked out Lively from the hit teen movie *Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* to play the lead. Thus, Lively began the process of being groomed into someone who could believably portray Serena- with her onscreen persona feeding her offscreen popularity and vice versa.

Unlike with Lively, however, interviewers often specify that Leighton Meester is not at all like her character Blair, and that Meester and Lively, while they work well as coworkers, are not friends. These rhetorical tactics reify the "moralizing" impulse around gossip- we are not to approve of Blair's actions, and we must specify that Meester is hard-working, sweet, everything Blair is not. Additionally, this practice of planting seeds that insinuate that there is real-life conflict between Meester and Lively attempts to achieve the same offscreen/onscreen symbiotic relationship that Badgley and Lively's real life romance achieved. This speaks to the totality of *Gossip Girl*, and the all-consuming nature of celebrity. *Gossip Girl* is not just the actresses' jobs, but their lives, and is not something they can openly criticize, because it both made and defined their careers. However, despite journalists' collective chagrin of her, Leighton Meester's character Blair remains a fan favorite, and took over as the star of the show towards the end of the series. Blair is mean, cruel, cold, and calculating, but there is something about her that is reminiscent of the absolute pleasure of gossip: it revels in being bad, yet it usually doesn't have any serious casualties. In this sense, *Gossip Girl* is actually not a "guilty pleasure" show, as it has been repeatedly called, but an example of indulging in the guiltlessness of being bad, but in actuality, being good. For example, the extreme wealth depicted on the show is not a byproduct of the characters' actions, but their parents and their parents before them. Therefore, questions about the morality of extreme wealth can be tidily avoided. While the characters' parents may have or still be engaged in corrupt practices in order to accumulate so much wealth, their

children are not implicated in this morally questionable behavior. How could they be, when they are just teenagers trying to figure out their place in the world, by all accounts a universal experience? Despite the specificity of the social conditions[6] that led to the lifestyle it depicts, *Gossip Girl* works under the guise of universality and moral neutrality. It does not pass moral judgements on the wealth of its characters, in order to be received as both relatable and universal, as well as a spectacular display of aspirational wealth.

The appearance of Penn Badgley, otherwise known as his character Dan Humphrey, at an Occupy Wall Street protest in 2011 reiterated both the irony of the discourse surrounding *Gossip Girl* and the changing societal conditions in the background of the show. Of course, we get no mention of the Occupy protests in *Gossip Girl*, the last episode of which aired on December 17, 2012, but it is interesting that Badgley, whose character Humphrey initially appears as part of the so-called "99%" but reveals himself to be a an unabashed social climber just like the rest of his peers, was even allowed by his agent, manager, and superiors at the CW to attend the protests. Obviously, Badgley can exercise his right of freedom of assembly just like any other citizen, but to publicly engage in a discussion on the ethics of wealth inequality in light of his ongoing role as a star of *Gossip Girl* is pertinent. Badgley's appearance certainly stirred up debate: Gawker called him a "dirty, unemployed Patchouli monster" and Badgley himself was quoted saying he sees ties between the Occupy protests and Suzanne Collins' teen novel The Hunger Games, stating that the Capitol members are "the one percent." Of course, the situation begs the cynical yet relevant question, did the star's appearance at the protest do more to magnify the movement's cause or Badgley's own celebrity (and in turn *Gossip Girl'*s relevancy)? It is also relevant to mention the clicks, likes, and shares it likely generated for the many sites, such as Gawker,

[6]For example, a quickly expanding lower class and shrinking upper and middle class, American oligarchy.

Business Insider, and Just Jared, that reported on it. There are some parallels between this situation and Dan's own purported moral clarity in light of the morally compromised elite class he is surrounded by, which I will explain in the next section.

Gossip as Currency: Social, Cultural, and Economic Capital

As Dan explains it, the Gossip Girl blog came not from his desire to engage in the "feminized " communicative tool that is gossip but to increase his social capital so Serena would finally see him as a potential suitor. By the end of the show, he does end up with Serena, and is a successful author, having published multiple best-selling novels (including one called *Inside*), reifying the idea of social mobility, and in more of a relational sense, the idea that someone from the middle class could be truly accepted into the upper class and gain the respect of their more moneyed peers. Thus, gossip is represented in the show as an equalizing and not intrinsically negative force, and the internet is established as a platform to attain social, cultural, and economic capital. Social capital, as defined by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, is "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to a possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (Bourdieu 248). In the social order of *Gossip Girl*, social capital is the most important form of capital, and a way to acquire the other forms: cultural and economic. In "New York, I Love You, XOXO," Dan explains his reasoning behind the first post on the Gossip Girl site, a shot of Serena getting sprayed with water in a white dress on a school trip to a museum. Dan says, "I overheard two girls talking about you in your white dress, getting wet, and, um, one girl thought you would be a laughingstock, you know, and that everyone would be talking about you, but then her friend said "That's the point.

You're no one until you're talked about." Dan attempts to reframe his action in a positive light, with this anecdote about how Gossip Girl helped Serena avoid ridicule and gain the celebrity status she enjoys by the end of the show. While Dan's motivations appear to lie more in establishing himself as the "good guy," and not the uncaring antagonist he has become by season 6, having spurned Serena for being shallow and substanceless when she confessed her feelings for him, it is not an entirely false claim that Gossip Girl was pivotal in obtaining Serena, Blair, Chuck, and Nate their status in society. Gossip Girl's meddling gave the characters the notoriety which led to Nate's success at the newspaper he launched, The Spectator, Chuck's success in business, Blair's success as a one-time princess of Monaco and incumbent head of her mother's fashion line, and Serena's status as a top socialite. With their participation, which also signifies their consent, Gossip Girl helped them obtain social capital, creating a symbiotic web in which relevance for them led to relevance for her. In turn, the characters used their network of connections, popularity, and social status to obtain opportunities to accumulate economic capital. However, several other characters, including Vanessa, Jenny, and Juliet, who did not come from a background of extreme wealth, were unable to secure a higher social status despite the "opportunities" afforded by Gossip Girl, suggesting that Dan may be the exception, and not the rule, regarding the actual possibility of social mobility in society.

The question of the portrayal of morality and class coincide in *Gossip Girl*, as we see clear delineations of who is upper and who is middle class, and not-so-subtle indications of who we should root for as audience members. In "Sit-Cons: Class on TV" Heather Havrilesky addresses some of these questions, writing that "money imbues characters with honor or shame, dignity or recklessness, charity or malevolence" (Havrilesky 40). She suggests that nuances established in the portrayal of other aspects of characterization often melt away when it comes to

class, where "the very rich are either breathtakingly noble or downright nefarious, while the poor are as self-destructive and helpless as injured baby animals" (Havrilesky 40). Specifically as it pertains to *Gossip Girl*, Havrilesky writes that the "classbound cliches" of *Gossip Girl* are more bearable than the ones in *Two Broke Girls*, which she discusses immediately before, because the "rich thugs vs. poor thugs" trope plays out as more of a "farce than a melodrama." Though I argue that *Gossip Girl* can be read as a melodrama, I agree that the portrayal of class on the show is entertaining and satisfying due to its excessiveness, outrageousness, and unabashedness. Havrilesky usefully points out that "making rich characters evil" can be read as simplistic and predictable, stating that "there's plenty of injustice already built into the picture, even when the characters' intentions are pure" (Havrilesky 49). However, this tacit endorsement of the upper class as seen on *Gossip Girl* has implications in regards to the characters who are not in the elite class, who often are more vulnerable to Gossip Girl's meddling than their wealthy counterparts. In short, it makes for more interesting television that the characters on the show are not unilaterally horrible due to their proximity to extreme wealth, but the lack of attention to middle-class characters' uniquely precarious positions in regards to their wealthy peers leaves them to be judged more harshly for actions they take to attain more social and economic capital. Additionally, while Dan succeeds in ascending to the upper classes, several other characters from similar backgrounds or circumstances don't, leading them to be seen in a less favorable light than Dan, who is continually held up as one of the show's protagonists.

An example of this phenomenon in practice in the show is the arc of Vanessa Abrams, who also happens to be the only main character who is a person of color. Along with Jenny Humphrey, Vanessa appears as a series regular in seasons 1-3 before being downgraded in season 4, and leaving the show entirely after that (though she shows up in the show's finale). The actress

who plays Vanessa, Jessica Szohr, who is of Hungarian and African-American descent, though her ethnicity is never explicitly addressed on the show, recently released a "rewatch" podcast called *XOXO* in which she interviews former cast members and creators and addresses some of the backlash her character received. When asked in an interview by Teen Vogue about her thoughts on Vanessa's characterization, and the fact that Vanessa is often singled out for her actions despite the other characters being equally "selfish and manipulative," Szohr agreed that "Vanessa always got the short end of the stick," and expressed her appreciation for her character grounding the show in reality because "she had a regular job and had to work for her money and didn't go on these crazy trips and wear these crazy outfits."

While Szohr ultimately does not take issue with Vanessa's characterization, stating that she was just doing her job as a character actress, Vanessa's uniquely harsh treatment both by the show's characters and its creators is particularly evident in the episode "Juliet Doesn't Live Here Anymore" (4.8). In a scene at the Lincoln Center, where the characters are attending opening night of the American Ballet Theatre, Vanessa attempts to clear her name to the Upper East Siders, after being accused of sending an email to the Dean of Columbia University alleging that Serena, a student there, is having an affair with her professor (the email was actually sent by Juliet in an attempt to take Serena down, and the blame pinned on Vanessa). Previously, after finding a flash drive containing pictures of Serena kissing Colin, her business professor, Vanessa tells Juliet she's "much more interested in showing the world who Serena really is than exposing some petty class pretender," referring to Juliet as a "class pretender" because she is also middle class, like Vanessa; the difference between the two is that Juliet attempts to fit into the upper class while Vanessa rejects it entirely. However, Juliet rejects Vanessa's offer to help take Serena down. She decides to put her relationship with Nate Archibald over exacting revenge on Serena

for wrongfully landing her brother in prison for statutory rape charges. Juliet knows that without Serena's favor, she will lose her relationship with Nate, and her proximity to the upper class, which she strives to be a part of. At the ballet, when Vanessa reveals her plan to show the photos to the Dean, Nate is in disbelief that she would do such a thing. Meanwhile, Serena is reconciling with Colin (who she broke things off with), who says, "I resigned from Columbia. I don't care about being a teacher, I care about being with you." The irony here is palpable: amongst sweeping shots of the opera house stairs, guests in ball gowns, and waiters pouring champagne, Vanessa is fighting to clear her name of an injustice, and preventing herself from being kicked out of her own college, NYU. Meanwhile, Serena's professor is willingly giving up his job (apparently he doesn't need it anyway, because he's a successful published author) to be with her, and Blair is dealing with petty boy problems: whether or not to keep up her "friends with benefits" relationship with Chuck.

The Upper East Siders' choice to align with each other rather than believe or listen to either Vanessa or Juliet reveals that their class allegiances come before all else, and Vanessa is left looking like a reject and failure, despite the fact that she did not do anything wrong. The clear class delineations are shown by the characters literally standing together, in close proximity with one another, and leaving Vanessa and Juliet on the outside. Blair uses her familiar intimidation tactics to discredit and belittle Vanessa, and despite Vanessa's objective innocence and rational motivation to clear her name, viewers are left with the indication that the Upper East Siders' triumph over the "poor" outsiders is just that, a triumph.

When Juliet attempts to stop her from confronting the Dean, Vanessa says, "I've been losing to Serena for three years, watching her get away with anything and everything, and I'm over it." She appeals to Juliet, asking her if she doesn't "feel the same way" in regards to both

her feelings about Serena, but also, her frustration with the double standard of moral behavior, in which Blair, Serena, Nate, and Chuck get away with immoral and questionable behavior but still remain likable, while people like her and Vanessa get condemned. This question could be posed to the showrunners, too, because they wrote a script in which Vanessa and Juliet are villainized for attempting to secure economic and social security and Blair, Serena, Nate, and Chuck are rarely seriously questioned for their behavior. Vanessa's statement to Juliet, "Face it. At the end of the day, you're an outsider, just like me and if it's ever between one of us and Serena van der Woodsen? They will always choose Serena," becomes true, as the camera pans to a close-up shot of Nate and Blair whispering, plotting to spin the situation in Serena's favor.

When the girls do confront Dean Reuther at the ballet, she admonishes them for their meddling and uncouth behavior, and when it seems as if Serena might be held responsible for her actions (understanding that the sexual politics at the time did not account for the fact that the individual in the position of power, Colin, was actually to blame for the affair), Blair immediately intercedes and dunks the flash drive containing the incriminating photos in a flute of champagne. She then lies and says it's her in the photos, getting away with it because she is not under suspicion for "trading sex for grades" in the past (unlike Serena). Juliet's claims that they are all lying and "protecting each other" are ignored, and a shot of the flash drive drowning in champagne confirms both Juliet and Vanessa will once again lose to the indomitable SVDW. Juliet gets cut off from her source of income (because, in true soap opera form, Colin is of course her cousin), and is forced to withdraw from Columbia. As she is left by Colin, desperate, outside the opera house, the Upper East side crew descend on her like vultures, literally circling her, while the camera pans around, emphasizing her powerlessness and vulnerability. Blair unabashedly says, "Just because you have no money and delusions of grandeur doesn't make it

okay for you to be a single white trash female," in a line that most likely would not be greenlighted in today's cultural climate, but in this rendition, audiences are left siding with the Upper East Siders, because the complexity of the situation (Juliet's brother being in jail, her economic precarity) is left completely out of the picture. Attempting to destroy Serena's "friendship with Blair, her reputation, and her academic career" is apparently a crime worthy of having no friends or livelihood, and Juliet is sent packing to wherever she came from. Viewers are not encouraged to grapple with the true destruction inflicted on Juliet's life, because we rarely see her again, and when we do, she is portrayed one-sidedly as a villain and antagonist. As for Vanessa, she is rarely seen in a positive light again either, and she and Jenny Humphrey, who have accidentally landed Serena in rehab after drugging her (Juliet's idea), are left to fight for the breadcrumbs of sympathy the show and audience has for them, and ultimately leave the show in disgrace. The problem with their portrayal is that their problems, which are often a matter of protecting their livelihood, are seen as no more important than the problems of the protagonists, which are usually about less dire issues like boys, family, and protecting their ambiguous "reputations[7]." In this way, the show also picks sides, painting the Upper East Siders as more honorable than their middle-class counterparts, despite Juliet, Vanessa, and Jenny facing problems, namely, economic and social precarity, that the Upper East Siders will never experience. Their social and economic capital will never truly be threatened, and they will always forgive each other for any transgression, as it is socially and economically advantageous for them to be allied. Thus, we see the clear class lines of *Gossip Girl* drawn, in which upper class characters act with impunity, but are also regarded as innocent, and in the words of

[7] They (Serena and Blair) can't be held in that high esteem, considering the cruel things they are constantly doing to other people to cement their own social status.

Havrilesky, “pure-intentioned.” A critical look at the treatment of the non-Elites on the show reveals that it is much easier to be pure-intentioned when you have never, and likely will never, face any real threat to your material comfort and security.

Gossip as Autotheory

While it might seem logical to characterize gossip as nefarious, seeing as it helps cement the social status of both the poor and rich characters, such an understanding is too simplistic to fully grasp the nuance of how gossip functions to organize and create relational connections in society, both as it is portrayed on *Gossip Girl*, and in real life. In *Fashion on Television: Identity and Celebrity Culture,* Helen Warner discusses the nature of stardom and celebrity, which is intimately connected with gossip. Warner proposes “the importance of fashion in the construction and circulation of the star image,” and though I agree, I include gossip as another factor that, with fashion, contributes to the celebrification of certain individuals. The girl Dan mentions in episode 6.10 isn’t the first to note that “you’re no one until you’re talked about,” and it’s true that gossip can provide a legendary, mythic status that allows one to transcend one’s real identity and body and become more akin to an idea. However, gossip brings the mythic character back to the earth, allowing viewers, followers, and fans to have an intimate connection with the celebrity figure or otherwise involve themselves in their “life.” Rachel Mosely describes how fashion and celebrity come together to form a reciprocal relationship, writing, “[fashion] can make [stars] special, unreachable, and untouchable. At the same time, however, dress and fashion are also part of the connective tissue of the social, allowing us to make judgements- even sartorial choices- based upon our ability to read their articulations in relation to that identity” (Warner 6). I propose that gossip enters the equation to further establish closeness between us

and the star, allowing us intimate access to their life and creating a symbiotic relationship between a star and their fans. While there is not usually an actual flesh and blood relationship between the "star" and their "fan," sometimes gossip allows these lines to be blurred and creates actual moments of relationality between the two individuals, underscoring the humanness and feeling of potentiality that exists in gossip.

A literary example of gossip creating a heightened sense of relationality between "star" and "fan" can be seen in *I Love Dick*, a novel by New York art scene staple Chris Kraus that can be categorized as "autofiction" or "autotheory," depending on who you ask. In it, 39 year old writer and experimental filmmaker Chris develops a strange infatuation with the critical theorist Dick (widely believed to be based on Dick Hebdige, though for legal reasons his last name is never revealed in the text). Despite being married to Sylvére, an older academic who is friends with the likes of Michel Foucault and Félix Guattari, Chris pursues Dick by writing him a series of obsessive letters (she sends him 200 over the course of the novel). An article in artnet titled "a fusion of gossip and theory" describes Kraus's contributions as a publisher, as she has edited a series of books for the press Semiotext(e) which also published tiqqun's *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of a Young-Girl* and Bernadette Corporation's *Reena Spaulings*. In the article, Giovanni Intra writes that the novel "fuses gossip and theory," and, about the affective state of the reader reading *I Love Dick*, "You feel acute pleasure at the misfortune of others when you read it. And you are very pleased at the luxurious distance which is afforded the reader." It could be argued that this affect is also achieved by Gossip Girl, in which the viewer is not encouraged to support any one character, as all are portrayed in a similarly horrible light[8]. Additionally, the

[8] However, that does not mean you don't relate to the characters, and I find myself rooting for the ones whose horribleness most closely mirrors my own (primarily Blair).

"autofiction" aspect of *I Love Dick* is paralleled in the instances where the characters Blair, Dan, and Serena turn to Gossip Girl to send in stories about themselves. Similarly, Kraus writes not in the first person but the third-person about our hero, Chris, who is most obviously a somewhat fictionalized rendition of herself. When Dan does the same in *Gossip Girl*, he plays it off as being simply an attempt to avoid detection, to throw off the scent of him being the actual Gossip Girl. When Serena does the same, it is portrayed as slightly more feminized or abject, like Serena is so desperate that she has to secretly post stories about herself and her friends online because she is so disconnected from her actual life. But what is so striking about this is that due to social media, now, every young person who hopes to claim any semblance of normalcy is expected to do the same, albeit not secretly. 1960s essayist Joan Didion once famously wrote, "We tell ourselves stories in order to live," and Kraus updated this sentiment to a kind of "we tell stories about ourselves in order to find a way to live with our current conditions," the current conditions for her being an unrequited love for a well-known and successful male acquaintance despite being in a fifteen year marriage. Serena's stint as Gossip Girl, and later, the universality of a personal social media page, seems to prove that storytelling may have become digital, but it is still the primary way young American women "live" or find ways to exist in the world.

Kraus touches upon the notion that female so-called "confessional" writing is thought to be narcissistic or less valid than writing not framed through affect and states of being. Similarly, the critical dismissal or "judgment" of *Gossip Girl* and soap operas as a whole reveals the same bias against the personal within the academy, or lack of ability to fathom that narratives about emotions and states of feeling can be critically valuable or appeal to issues beyond just what they depict. For instance, it might be hard to explain to the average scholar that *Gossip Gir*l can be read as a commentary on our current social and cultural conditions, and not just a juicy visual

deepdive into the world of clothes, shoes, and teenage girls. Within this is also housed the intense scrutiny aimed at media about young women when it is deemed morally impure, as well as the general disbelief that any media about or aimed at teenage girls could have any critical implications or a wider appeal than just teenage girls. Such an inherent "bias" was also aimed at Kraus and *I Love Dick*, showing that the effects of this "bias" are wide-ranging, considering that at age 39 in *I Love Dick*, Chris (the character) is on the far end of the "young women" spectrum, and is still not taken completely seriously as an author or theorist. Says Kraus, about confessional writing, "It was not an introspective, psychoanalytic "I." It was an "I" that was totally alive, because it was shifting." Talking about "a tradition of American poetry that champions and celebrates this," including the New York School and the Poetry Project, Kraus says, "These people are true geniuses because they're living constantly with ideas, they're fluent in a huge literary tradition. And yet they're often denigrated by academe and the institutionalized avant-garde because these ideas are experienced immediately and personally."

While television as a whole doesn't enjoy the same regard as "artistic" that poetry does in academic spaces, it is true that overall, content that is deeply tied to affect and the personal, for example autotheory, is not seen as an as legitimate site for theorizing or the circulation of serious ideas about culture and society. The charm and value of *Gossip Girl* is that it undermines the seriousness of life in the 21st century, or at least finds a way to be unserious about the serious. By virtue of writing this thesis, I am suggesting that unserious things deserve to be critically studied, and not be automatically considered unacademic and undeserving of critical consideration just due to the nature of their subject material. In *I Love Dick,* Kraus finds a way to write about the "serious" parts of life in a way that is scandalous, exploitative, explosive, and in Intra's words, "raw, embarrassing, and virtually obscene." While *Gossip Girl* doesn't approach

human subjectivity and the nature of meaning in the same sincere, intellectually ambitious way as Kraus, it employs a similar kind of irony, in which irony is used not to distance ourselves from feelings and emotions but to bring us closer to a feeling of sincerity and ambition. *Gossip Girl's* employment of pastiche, tongue-in-cheek references, and soap opera tropes is not meant to make light of these storytelling techniques but to pay homage to them, to make connections with the viewer, and to genuinely appreciate a form of storytelling that relishes in affect. Similarly, the endeavors of the characters may be frivolous, but they are emotionally real, and on that note universal to teenagers coming of age in a digital world where affect and relationality is often undermined by digitality and the Online. While *Gossip Girl* is very much vested in the digital and portrays an extremely connected and Online way of being in the world, the use of these digital tools actually brings people together, and doesn't isolate them from each other. In the next section I will further explore how gossip on *Gossip Girl* helps engender relationality and connection, despite the show being entrenched in ideas of exclusivity, and also helps abet the circulation of commodities and trends, specifically fashion, in the show.

The Link Between Relationality, Connection, Circulation, and Fashion

In *Fashion on Television: Identity and Celebrity Culture* Warner writes, on the history of scholarship on fashion, "Mass-produced everyday fashion (often perceived as 'feminine') was not considered a legitimate area of study in its own right, but rather served as evidence of mass culture's manipulation of 'passive' consumers within moralist critiques of consumer capitalism" (Warner 3). Such critiques have followed *Gossip Girl* since its inception, and have also been leveraged against the young adult novels the show is based on, with feminist critic Naomi Wolf lambasting the books for espousing the corrupt values of a consumerist society to impressionable teen girls. However, such perspectives are blind to the missing piece that comes between fashion

and consumerism- the idea that fashion is a "symbolic product" as well as "a material one," an important cultural code that can lead us to an ethnographic understanding of fictional subjects.

Like *Sex and the City* and *The O.C.* before it, *Gossip Girl* relies heavily on fashion to express its characters' identities and establish their social and economic standings in an increasingly visual culture. As Warner points out, *Sex and the City* has "often reflected on the consumption practices of women," and such a critical or at least reflective spin is present in *Gossip Girl* as well. Far from being simply a reflection of each character's economic status, clothes provide a look into the interior world of each character, as well as their temporal orientation over the course of the show. In "Shattered Bass" (4.21), Serena confronts her cousin Charlie, accusing her of wearing the gold lamé dress that she wore when she went to Cotillion with Dan in high school. Charlie, who is crushing on Dan, has indeed stolen the dress out of Serena's closet after seeing a framed photograph of Serena and Dan kissing on the dance floor at the event. Dan says, "There are a million gold dresses," to which Serena responds, "But only one with a Pamela Dennis label cut out." Charlie, who is attempting to emulate Serena in order to make it on the Upper East Side, has literally "tried on" Serena, only to have Serena see right through her efforts and demand that she not leave the party in her dress. The dress represents both Serena's on-again off-again relationship with Dan, as well as her status as a Manhattan It girl, two things she is unwilling to give up. Additionally, the scene is a signal that despite being a less central character in season four, having been usurped by princess-to-be Blair, Serena is still very much the series golden girl, the center of the show and the object of every man's desire and every woman's envy.

The Serena dress debacle also reflects the way in which issues of gossip and celebrity intersect with fashion to imbue certain garments with greater cultural, symbolic value.

Specifically analyzing fashion on *Gossip Girl*, Warner writes, "The importance *Gossip Girl* affords fashion is made clear in the documentary feature, as Josh Schwartz- adopting the rhetoric often employed in discussions of *Sex and the City*[9]- remarks that he wanted fashion "to be a character." Implicit within the claim is the assumption that the fashion is elevated from its position as mise en scéne" (Warner 85). Fashion is often intertwined with the storyline, serving the narrative, characterization, and providing indulgent visual flair (as Blake Lively said in an interview, "You can watch our show on mute and be entertained"), but what interests me most about the use of fashion in *Gossip Girl* is the way that it works in conjunction with gossip to enhance the mythic quality and celebrity status of the main characters. In "Shattered Bass" (4.21), the gold dress from Serena's cotillion ("Hi, Society," 1.10) serves as a symbol of Serena's centrality to New York high society, and is mobilized by Charlie to become closer to Serena, both literally and figuratively. Not only does she covertly take and wear Serena's dress to go to the Constance event with Dan, which was also Serena's high school, she also recreates Serena's hairstyle and jewelry look, pushing her behavior from the coincidental to the pathological. Charlie claims that the dress is a Nina Ricci, and that she cut out the label because it was hurting her back, but Serena insists that it's the custom Pamela Dennis dress that was made for her society debut. Charlie's act of taking and wearing the dress symbolizes her desire to embody Serena, whose persona has been elevated to that of a star by Gossip Girl, but Serena's refusal to let her leave the apartment in the dress is an act of reclamation of her agency and selfhood from the public sphere. She rejects Charlie's attempts to "be" her, insisting that the dress and in turn, herself, are originals that can't be fully known in the online sphere or re-enacted by a mere follower. This negotiation of Serena's right to her image and personhood is dealt with through a

[9] Costume designer Eric Daman worked on both Sex and the City and Gossip Girl.

singular garment, the gold lamé cotillion dress, which carries emotional, narrative, temporal, and philosophical weight for what it symbolizes to each girl and to the viewer, in turn.

In the episode "Hi, Society" (1.10), fashion and gossip again intersect to promote relationality, communicate affect, and create meaning. Coming at the midpoint of season 1, this episode is *Gossip Girl* at its most scandalous and upper-echelon-oriented- the teenagers all attend the cotillion ball, in which friendship dynamics, society debuts, formal looks, and class anxieties are all negotiated on the dance floor. The gossip "soundbite" which appears at the beginning of each episode, on the frontpage of Gossip Girl's blog, is a photo of Blair running away from her sixteenth birthday party, titled, "B and N: It's over!" The subtitle reads, "First Witherspoon and Phillipe. Then McAdams and Gosling. Now Waldorf and Archibald? Say it isn't so." In an homage to the tabloids and gossip columns that ran rampant in the aughts, Gossip Girl alludes to other iconic couples, insinuating that Blair and Nate's celebrity in the Upper East Side is comparable to that of the top film stars of the time. In the opening sequence, we see three sets of characters discussing the merits of a debutante ball, with their outfits telling us everything we need to know about them and their priorities- Serena updates her school uniform with a sparkly cardigan, her tie hung loosely around her neck, Blair wears super-short shorts over red tights with a preppy pinstriped blazer, Nate is classic and classy in a peacoat over his school blazer, Chuck wears a khaki trench coat with a flamboyant scarf, Jenny wears a plaid hat and jacket in an obvious bid to look like Queen B Blair, and Dan looks very L.L. Bean as usual in an army green jacket with a messenger bag slung over his shoulders (apparently he's the only one who has to carry books). As Dan waxes poetic about how "out of touch and totally classist" debutante balls, we get a sense of the class and prerogatives of each character as they prepare to attend the ball. Blair announces that she will be featured in The New York Time's "A Night Out With"

column for the ball, predictably spinning her society debut into an opportunity to reach even more eyeballs and cell phone screens.

Throughout the episode, we see other moments wherein fashion transcends just the physical garments the characters are wearing and creates an opportunity for connection or conflict between characters. A particular moment in which class and interpersonal connection is negotiated through fashion is a scene that takes place between Jenny, her mom, and Lily Van der Woodsen at Saks Fifth Avenue. Shots of Gucci pumps and black heeled sandals introduce the scene, and the camera zooms out to show Lily, wearing an elegant dress and carrying a Chanel bag, walking with Jenny, who she has commissioned to volunteer at the Cotillion, which just so happens to be at the same time as her mother's art gallery opening in Brooklyn. The camera then reveals Alison, Jenny's mom, buying a pair of black pumps at the counter, looking surprised to see her daughter with Lily. Lily says, "Didn't expect to see you….here," subtly indicating that Alison, who wears a casual cardigan and peasant top, is not a regular shopper at the high-end department store. Alison tells Jenny she will see her at home, and leaves, while Jenny walks over to the black shoe her mother was buying her and picks it up, guilt registering on her face. The shoe references a previous conversation the mother-daughter pair had, in which Jenny disparages her mom for offering her a pair of thrifted "black vintage pumps/" Jenny says, "Mom, the kids I go to school with shop at Saks and Bendel's. I can't be walking around in someone's old shoes." before turning on her heel and exiting, leaving her mom crestfallen and laden with rejected shopping bags. The black heels, both the used and new pair, are elevated from their literal status as shoes to a symbolic status of wealth and "fitting in," which Jenny hopes she can attain by dressing in luxurious designer clothes like the other girls who attend her school. The shoes also negotiate a power struggle between mother, daughter, and "the other woman" trope, showing that

while Lily and now, Jenny value fashion as a status symbol that indicates belonging and exclusivity in society, Alison rejects it as a classist symbol of exclusion and ultimately, a waste of money. She is willing to go against her own beliefs about designer clothing to become closer to her daughter, but is ultimately rejected by Jenny, who shows up to Sak's with Alison's romantic rival Lily. This scene embodies the constant issue of class belonging and status in the show, which is often negotiated through sartorial choices. Jenny has a legitimate desire to work in the fashion world, harboring dreams of being a designer, but she also continually fills the role of middle-class "pretender" who hopes to achieve belonging in the upper-class by dressing like her more moneyed peers.

The episode "Summer Kind of Wonderful" (2.1) is unique in that it showcases both the best *Gossip Girl* can provide, fashion-wise, and is unabashedly a vehicle to sell Vitamin Water. It is at once evidence that *Gossip Girl* has its finger on the pulse of culture, fashion-wise, but is also clued into the "catch-22" of post-modern media that requires involvement, or even complicity in consumer culture. Warner notes that "two key features of postmodernism" have shaped the development of fashion studies: "the supposed collapsing of distinctions between high and low art and the increasing value of style for style's sake" (Warner). This "post-modern" sentiment can be located in "Summer Kind of Wonderful" in both the clothes the characters wear when they attend a "Vitamin Water Party" in the Hamptons, but also in the way that the Vitamin Water "sponsorship" is presented as a completely natural part of the television show. Of course, this episode came before the rise of "sponcon," or influencer product placement, but the integration of Vitamin Water into this episode of *Gossip Girl* is especially blatant. However, due to the nature of the show, and the way in which the ideology of consumerism is effortlessly

woven into the narrative so that it may be mindlessly accepted by the viewer, the Vitamin Water inclusion feels totally acceptable and apt.

As the first episode of season 2, "Summer Kind of Wonderful" reflects Gossip Girl leaning into its status as the new "fashion show" that indulges in late 2000s visual culture, pop culture, and advertising. It opens with roving shots of beachside mansions and is set in its entirety in the Hamptons, allowing for rich visuals of the sunny beach, Serena and Blair lounging poolside and sipping fruity drinks, and the iconic shops and restaurants of East Hampton. The men's fashion is particularly flamboyant in this episode, as exemplified by Chuck's ultra short-shorts. In fact, Warner dedicates an entire chapter in her book to the men's fashion on the show, titled "Relational Masculinities in *Gossip Girl*." She argues that the way the men (or boys, really, because they begin the series in high school) dress indicates both their relationships to the girls in the show and their relationships to each other, as signals to the viewer the kind of man each one is. For example, in a scene at the dinner table, Chuck's green suit matches Blair's Lilly Pulitzer-esque dress. The costume designer often dresses the two in complementary tones, indicating their long-standing love affair that takes 4-5 seasons to fully come to fruition. Blair and Serena's outfits represent their "relational femininities," to borrow Warner's phrase, with Blair dressed in preppy brights and Serena in more of a "cool-girl," laidback look this episode. Not only does each girl's sense of style reveal something about her self, but it reveals to the viewer the "kind of girl" she is in relation to other women on the show. This "relational" identification is important, especially in light of the fact that soap operas often rely on character tropes to impart meaning. Meanwhile, we're treated to a ridiculous look from both Chuck and Nate as they play minigolf, with Chuck in a sweater vest and bowtie and Nate in a lace-up top,

hearkening back to a Ken-doll style masculinity that was not afraid to venture into looks more commonly associated with gay men.

The production goes all out for "The White Party," aka the "Vitamin Water Party," in which shots of girls getting out of Bentleys in white halter dresses are interspersed with bird's eye view shots of the entire mansion and garden, medium shots of photographers snapping pictures of socialites and servants offering guests Vitamin Water on white trays, and "action shots" of guests jumping into the pool. The all-white looks on the guests draws even more attention to the colorful bottles of Vitamin Water, the real "star of the show" this episode, despite Serena looking stunning in a Grecian-inspired dress and jewelry, and Blair looking svelte as ever in a white midi dress, floral headband, and ginormous clutch bag, the white colors bringing out her over-the-top spray tan. Chuck has dressed up his look with a touch of black, always the bad boy, and eyes Blair as she tries to make him jealous with her date. Just as with any GG party, tensions come to a head as Blair and Chuck have an explosive fight, Nate and Serena kiss to make his Mrs. Robinson-esque lover[10] jealous, and Dan enters the party, all while the hit song "Paparazzi" by Lady Gaga plays in the background. Sharp cuts that reveal the richness of the location of the party bring the scene together, creating the impression of "the" summer party, accompanied by "the" summer drink, Vitamin Water. *Gossip Girl* does an incredible job of making its own characters appear as celebrities, dressing them in amazing outfits, putting them in impossibly juicy situations, and never letting them appear flawed, physically. However, the over the top emotions are ever-present, allowing the characters to seem "human" despite looking

[10] The MILFy brunette is played by Mädchen Amick aka Shelly Johnson of *Twin Peaks*. While GG doesn't ever allude to *Twin Peaks*, at least in my perception, any television connoisseur is likely to recognize Amick from the unmatched 90s show, so I count this casting as an example of *Gossip Girl's* erudite referentiality- great television (*Gossip Girl*) recognizing great television (*Twin Peaks*), you could say.

modelesque and Barbie-doll like in every way. As Maya Kosoff writes in "Watching *Gossip Girl* at the End of the World", it is this quality that makes the show so pleasurable to watch, because the stakes are high, but not high enough, because these impossibly wealthy and beautiful characters always come out on top (even Dan, the purported underdog). A scene between Blair and Chuck at the end of the episode embodies this phenomenon; Blair appears devastated by Chuck's refusal to say "I love you" back to her but her hair, eye makeup, and lip gloss remain perfectly intact. Is this what women want, to be able to maintain an impossible beauty standard while also performing intense, crushing emotion[11]? At the end of the episode, Serena wanders down to the beach where Dan has lit a bonfire while the heart-wrenching ballad "Fell In Love Without You (Acoustic)" by Motion City Soundtrack[12] plays. We briefly see Chuck, a sixteen year old inexplicably drinking a large glass of whiskey alone surrounded by Vitamin Water, and the episode closes on Dan and Serena kissing in the moonlight while fireworks go off in the background. It is unrealistic, but perfect, and of course, no matter how emotional the final scene is, the twangy, catchy credit music plays as the credits roll, as always.

Season 2 episode 25 "The Goodbye Gossip Girl" is a final episode I will point to to demonstrate the usage of gossip being utilized to create meaning as well as generate connectivity and relationality. In this episode, the gang graduates high school, but on the UES, this is done "a little differently," as *Gossip Girl* remarks at the beginning of the episode ("Who needs pomp and circumstance when you have paparazzi?). Serena is fresh off an arrest, as orchestrated by her

[11] Arguably, yes- in all my dreams of having soul-shattering confrontations with the objects of my desire, there usually isn't a mascara track in sight.

[12] Upon researching this song, the music video is uncannily similar to the context in which it plays in the show (both feature two lovers on an East Coast beach, as well as fireworks going off over the ocean)- another example of Gossip Girl quite boldly borrowing inspiration from a varied range of source materials.

mother to teach her a lesson, and her mug shot has appeared on the front page of the New York tabloids. Serena remarks that the "end of high school is the end of me on Gossip Girl," but of course that isn't true, because we get four more glorious seasons of the show. Blair declares that the bright side is that Gossip Girl does not report on college, but in actuality, Gossip Girl changes form to continue to be relevant and grow with the cast of characters she reports on.

Vanessa is apparently still filming her documentary about the upper echelons of New York society, and appears with her video camera. Jenny thinks Blair's graduation means the end of mean girls at Constance, but the mean girls prove her wrong, saying, "What would high school be without hierarchy?' They taunt her into participating in the competition to provide the "juiciest piece of gossip" to be the new queen and rule the social order at Constance. As the graduates prepare for their commencement, Serena choosing a truly absurd look of fastening her tassel into her hair instead of wearing a cap, the ceremony is interrupted by a familiar cellphone chime, and every head looks down at their phone. Gossip Girl has interrupted the graduation to apply her "diploma," which takes the form of labels for the members of the graduating class: "Nate Archibald, class whore. Dan Humphrey, the ultimate insider. Chuck Bass, coward. Blair Waldorf, weakling. And as for Serena Van der Woodsen, after today, you are officially irrelevant." These are fighting words, and Serena takes it upon herself to find out Gossip Girl's identity ("she attacked all of us, and she was wrong!"). With Chuck, Blair, and Nate on her side, Serena attempts to "out" Gossip Girl, while the others do damage control to protect their own secrets. When Serena confronts Dan, however, he says, "Serena, we just graduated. Gossip Girl, high school, all these people backbiting and conniving, don't you think we should be moving on with our lives?" This is a very convenient position for him to take, as Gossip Girl herself, but more interestingly, Dan intones that because they will be in different cities and that their parents

are not looking "so great" as a couple, "what's really keeping them together?" The answer, of course, is Gossip Girl, as much a figure of connectivity as she is one of strife and ideological violence. Serena is upset, but as the camera pans around, situating Dan at the center of the party in one of the most expensive penthouses in Manhattan, we realize that, if Serena is playing checkers, he is playing 3D chess. He is Gossip Girl, and he has no intention of stopping until he ascends into upper-class society, and becomes the kind of man Serena would date. Serena's grandmother Cece's comments in "Hi, Society" (1.10) about how he will always be an outsider, ("The way you feel? It never goes away. It just gets worse. You'll always use your dessert fork for your entree. You'll always feel underdressed, no matter what you wear, and at dinner parties, it will be as if there's a language that sounds like English, and you think you speak it, but they don't hear you, and you don't understand them.") cut him deep, and he is intent on fulfilling his self-designated role as the "ultimate insider." That means, of course, continuing the project he has created, which has etched out a vital role for someone like him, a nobody, in the cultural and social lives of the New York elite.

Complete with snappy jazz music that is reminiscent of classic murder-mystery movies, the teens try to pinpoint who has been messing with them since 9th grade, deducing that it must be someone who goes to Constance Billard, and most likely is also a girl who is their own age. Deciding that she is likely in the room with them "right now," at Serena's blow-out graduation party, they test out different hypotheses: Nelly Yuki, the racialized and often bullied nerd, Jonathan, Serena's younger brother's boyfriend. However, it turns out that Jonathan "just hacked into her server during Spring Break" due to boredom, and now he and Eric have "access to every email that gets sent to her." We get a glimpse of the computer screen, and some of the tips GG has been sent and not posted, including "Neil Gabrielson's family lost all their money to Madoff"

and “Blair Waldorf hooked up with Jack Bass on New Year’s Eve!” This is the first time we as viewers have seen the other side of the Gossip Girl site, the side she sees when she is orchestrating her chaotic project. We get a greater sense of the psychopathy of her project- she collects her tips, then lays in wait to release them at the opportune time to “inflict maximum damage.” It also thrusts Dan’s entire character under new light- he is a young man posing as a young woman collecting personal information about his “friends” and releasing it to the world when it is most likely to cause a scandal, to keep Gossip Girl relevant and himself in power indefinitely. Dan is the classic literary trope of the Double or a Dr. Jekyl and Mr. Hyde type. He appears as kind, unassuming, and moralistic, but is secretly posing as a female blogger who rules the Upper East Side, spreading rumors that implicate, at times, his own father and sister. Watching the series with the knowledge that he is behind Gossip Girl the whole time changes the meaning, bringing it out of the nostalgic past and into the technocratic future. Dan is the tech overlord, ruling everything from behind a curtain.

Later, in the middle of Nate’s graduation party, the familiar cell phone chime alert sounds, and on the screen we see Serena’s phone, and the text of “E blast #928: Every gossip bomb I’ve got is about to drop, and if you’ve got a problem with that, take it up with her,” the her being Serena. Serena has brought about mutually assured destruction by trying to dethrone Gossip Girl. As the “gossip bombs” drop, the characters are forced to confront the reality of their secrets, looking from their phones to each other, processing the betrayal and dishonesty that has come out digitally. Within the chaos though, there is a sense of the inevitable, and as Chuck and Blair have a blowout fight, one can’t help but think that it’s one fight closer to them uniting in holy matrimony (which they do by the end of the series). As Serena intones that Gossip Girl is trying to “create a divide” between them, Chuck suggests that maybe it is actually Serena’s fault

for trying to unearth her identity, and in this moment, as everyone turns on Serena, Gossip Girl has once again won, by outsourcing the blame for her actions onto the teens who consent and participate in the project.

When Dan tries to defend Serena, Blair jumps in, declaring that Dan's label was the "only one that was true" stating, "You're friends with Nate Archibald, you played on the soccer team, you got into Yale, you got the lead role in the school play, you got published in The New Yorker, you had sex with a teacher." Nelly jumps in to declare that he dated "the most popular girl in school and ignored the rest of us," getting to the crux of Dan's project- to make himself out to be an "insider," so he could gain access to Serena's world. Blair declares that Dan "pretends to not be like us, but you are, to the bone," and she is more right than she knows, because unbeknownst to anyone, Dan is Gossip Girl (and is fine with allowing anyone else to take the fall for it if it protects him). As for the others, when confronting Chuck, Blair asks him if Gossip Girl was right about him being a coward because he can't tell her he loves her, using GG's dig as a way to attempt to get closer to him. She says if Chuck admits that he loves her, "all the gossip, and the lies, and the hurt, will have been for something," but of course, they have been the something that keeps us watching the show and coming back for more.

At the end of the episode, Serena attempts to trick Gossip Girl into coming to meet her at the Oakroom bar at the Plaza hotel only to have Dan, and half the graduating class show up. Dan admits that Gossip Girl might be right about him, but "she's wrong about you," suggesting that he did orchestrate the entire graduation debacle to get closer, and not farther apart like he pretends at the beginning of the episode, to her (he says, "I might have spent my entire life on the outside, if you hadn't let me in"). For maybe the tenth time, the familiar cell phone alert sounds and everyone whips out their Blackberries and Nokias, which read, "You wanted to meet Gossip

Girl, well look around, you just did. I'm nothing without you. And while most high school friendships fade, it's my hope that what happened today will bond you forever." As the teens celebrate together, she proves herself right; all the "gossip and lies" of the day have been forgotten in the face of everyone uniting to (unsuccessfully) unmask Gossip Girl. She also confirms that she will be coming with them to college, which frankly, no one looks that upset about, because like Dan told Serena, they are also nothing without Gossip Girl.

Soap Tropes

Gossip Girl is universally regarded as a soap opera, which is not unique for teen melodramas, but the storytelling techniques utilized by soaps have a specific sensibility that speaks to female viewers. In "The Search for Tomorrow in Today's Soap Operas," Tania Modleski argues that we should "not ignore what is "feminine" about soap operas but [instead] focus on it, to show how they provide a unique narrative pleasure…" In line with this logic, I argue that various filmic techniques within *Gossip Girl*, including extreme close-ups and constant voiceover, and narrative techniques such as the lack of a definite ending and "complex obstacles between desire and fulfillment" enhance viewing pleasure for female audiences. The soapy satisfaction of Gossip Girl is discussed by Maya Kosoff in "Watching *Gossip Girl* at the End of the World." Kosoff writes, "Nostalgia drew me in. But the escapism, absurdity, and innocent stupidity of the late 2000s kept me watching." Kosoff focuses heavily on the escapist and "stupid" aspects of the show, which in some ways undermines the power of what I believe to be a good television show.[13] However, I agree that Gossip Girl succeeds in allowing the viewer to

[13] Which gets into the question of, what exactly is a good television show? What makes a television show successful not just commercially but artistically? I will not attempt to answer that question here.

access it on a completely superficial level, and there is a distinct pleasure in watching television in a mode of not thinking "too hard" (Kosoff). Kosoff explains that throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, "While Gen Z is watching the Office, marveling at the idea of going to work or having a job, millennials are watching *Gossip Girl*, marveling at the concept of rich people behaving badly in ways where they only hurt each other, not all of society." While Kosoff's point speaks more to the after effects of Occupy Wall Street, a social reckoning in which criticizing the rich instead of aspiring to be like them became more commonplace, it also hints at the idea that the stakes are lower in *Gossip Girl* precisely because it is a soap opera and not attempting to achieve realism. Kosoff writes, "I was hooked; I loved the gratuitous name-drops, the jarring cameo appearances, the hysterically dated technological references, and the general absurdity of the show: an 18-year-old owns a hotel? Why are high schoolers ordering vodka martinis during daylight hours at an empty bar? Why is Serena calling the airport to ask them to send her a limo?" The impossibility of *Gossip Girl*, and soap operas, is part of the fun.

As Kosoff later states, the heightened drama of *Gossip Girl* does not negate the fact that things usually turn out okay for the cast of characters. As David Klion notes in an article for the drift titled "XOXO, Ruling Class: *Gossip Girl*, *The O.C.*, and the New Gilded Age," the wealth of the *Gossip Girl* cast comfortably cushions them from experiencing any real consequences, unlike their peers on *The O.C.*, the more earnest soap opera of the two. Klion notes that the characters continually betray each other "sexually, academically, professionally, financially," and experience "no remorse and few repercussion." Klion writes, "No less than prestige dramas like *The Sopranos* or *Breaking Bad*, *Gossip Girl* constantly tempts the audience into thinking its characters might be redeemable, only to delight in reminding us how they will never learn, grow, or change." While I would stop short at saying the characters "never" change, the comparison to

"prestige dramas" is apt in that the melodrama and heightened affect of soap operas is often present in other television shows, in smaller doses. Modleski appears to raise the question of what exactly classifies something as a "soap," and more often than not, the conversation seems to return to the gendered, "feminine" themes of soap operas. In regards to soap operas appealing specifically to female viewers, Modleski notes that "Melodrama typically makes us intersect imaginatively with many lives" as opposed to a single protagonist, elaborating on an idea of John Cawelti's about the ability of soaps to speak to an affect specific to female viewers. She writes that "Soap operas offer the assurance of the immortality of the family, a main support for women (Modleski 295)," another reason for which soap operas are more popular with women and for why women have contributed to their popularization. Specific examples in *Gossip Girl* of these "soap tropes" include the inevitability of families, especially the Van der Woodsen and Humphrey families, and the fact that no singular character is prized as the protagonist by the show. Additionally, the idea of "complex obstacles" between desire and the fruition of desire is exemplified in Chuck and Blair's relationship, which goes through endless hurdles and hardships before the two finally become "endgame." Blair is even temporarily engaged to be and subsequently married to a prince, and after she and Chuck are in a car crash together and she loses her baby, she makes a "deal with God" that if He "spares" Chuck, who has lost a lot of blood and is on his deathbed, she will agree to "never" be with him (5.11, "The End of An Affair?").

In terms of actual structural or filmic techniques that are specific to soaps and present in GG, Modleski draws attention to Marcia Kinder's theory that the "open-ended, slow paced, multi-climaxed" structure of soaps is "in tune with patterns of female sexuality." Modleski also notes that "Another way in which soap opera stimulates a woman's desire for connectedness is

through the constant, claustrophobic use of close-up shots" (Modleski 298). We can see this exemplified in the same episode I just extrapolated, "The Goodbye Gossip Girl." Blair gets dressed for Nate's party, telling her mother that she is dressing for someone she hopes "is ready to love her the way Cyrus loves you" (Cyrus is Blair's stepdad, played by Wallace Shawn), and we see the hope in Blair's eyes as well as the recognition in her mother's, both faces reflected in the mirror. Despite Blair's character deficiencies, this intimate connection that the shot breeds (we are literally and figuratively close to her) makes us love her, and want her to find love. Thanks to expert makeup, her face lacks any physical imperfections, but it is resonant for the hope and openness it exudes. Later in the same episode, Blair is impossibly mean to Jenny, who is holding back the "piece of gossip" (that Blair slept with Chuck's uncle on New Year's) that will ensure she will become queen. Despite her "bad" behavior, we can still root for the impregnable Blair, as well as for Jenny, who is clearly about to let this particular piece of knowledge out into the open, in order to get back at Blair. Because there is not one particular character touted as the protagonist, though, we are able to empathize with both girl's viewpoint, and know that Jenny's betrayal of Blair will be good for the plot. When it comes to soaps, our allegiances as viewers are not mutually exclusive. Meanwhile, Blair confronts Chuck, seductively performing a striptease for him as the Yeah Yeah Yeah's "Zero" plays. The intricate obstacles are all there, as we know that despite "adoring" Blair's headband and "worshipping" her dress, Chuck will never tell her he loves her because he is afraid of intimacy, and when he finds out momentarily that she had sex with his uncle in the ultimate act of betrayal, he will never forgive her.

In a surprisingly well-acted and emotionally truthful scene, after the gossip bomb drops, Blair confronts Chuck, stating that he doesn't actually care about her having sex with his uncle

and “we’re just doing what we always do, finding excuses,” declaring, “I won’t do it anymore.” In a stirring and claustrophobically close up monologue, Blair confesses her “consuming” love for Chuck, but he brushes her off yet again, saying that at one point, he did love her, but not anymore. As Blair lets her rage fuel her to be an even more unforgiving and hateable gossip monster, Lily and Rufus reminisce about a Smith’s concert they both attended. By pairing the scenes together, the show suggests that one day Chuck and Blair will be in a happy relationship, but that day will most likely never be depicted on GG (except for the final episode). The gossip, hurt, and lies represent the complex obstacles between desire and fulfillment, but as Modleski writes, it is the obstacles and waiting that make watching the show so pleasurable.

Conclusion

In “Women’s Cinema as Counter-Cinema” by Claire Johnston, the author writes, about film director Dorothy Arzner,“Working from within this crude stereotype, Arzner succeeds in generating within the text of the film, an internal criticism of it,” and though the source materials we are working with are very different, I locate this same self-reflexivity and self-awareness in *Gossip Girl*. The show functions as a form of metacommentary, both critiquing and participating in the genre of teen soaps as well as the actual subset of society it represents. As both a profitable commercial success for the CW network and a show that was most popular with teenage girls, Gossip Girl has been called superficial, melodramatic, and normative, but I argue that it is all those things, while also being rich with textual intricacies uncharacteristic for a teenage television show engaged with conversations about internet ethics and futurity. Many critics, both cultural and academic, are unable to reconcile its complexity with its simplicity, and insist that it is regressive and problematic. While it is at times all these things, it challenges categorization altogether by existing across form and genre. My thesis has taken a look at some of the main meaning systems that operate within *Gossip Girl,* as well as the modes in which they are communicated, in order to provide a deeper cultural, aesthetic, and theoretical understanding of the show. These three primary meaning systems are intertextuality, which deals with high-brow art, referentiality, and cross-genre and medium connections, the gossip system, and fashion. I have also woven ideas of visual pleasure, melodrama, and affect throughout my entire analysis.

In *Reena Spaulings*, Bernadette Corporation writes about Reena Spaulings as a simulacra, composed of everyone and no one, fulfilling an important social function and existing as a living experiment in collective authorship:

> "The city needs Reena and folds her into its architectures, making itself rise and shine. Loving or hating her, I am narrating the city, one of its twelve million reader-authors. Narratives parasiting each other, stealing each other's words, names piling up, making noise, filling space. But these are not one story. There is no New York story, only an endless effort to make us forget that narration is war, and that there are at least three New Yorks, sometimes twenty, and countless spin-offs, alles gegen alles" (Bernadette Corporation 82).

Like Reena Spaulings, the fashion model titular character of *Reena Spaulings*, Gossip Girl (the blogger) is also a simulacra, representing the "endless effort" of telling a "New York story," in spite of the fact that there is no cohesive one. "Alles gegen alles," German for "everyone against everyone," or "against everything," indicates the inherent violence that Bernadette Corporation identifies in narration, which it calls "war." However, I have shown that the narration, or the eponymous gossip in *Gossip Girl,* is generative and connective, binding the characters together in a joint "New York story" that actually traverses traditional social class boundaries, despite being focused on principles of exclusion and insider/outsider binaries. Gossip Girl is an amalgamation of form, genre, high and low-cultural aesthetics, modes of media, and networks that function on multiple levels in the show. This assemblage of media gives an opportunity to apply theory to the show to both analyze the text and the different connections it makes across media. An example of these connections is my own application of a pretext, *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl* and a posttext, *Reena Spaulings*, both published by Semiotext(e), to *Gossip Girl*. I have analyzed *Gossip Girl* in light of these two texts (one that it inspired and one that it resembles), applied theory to the show to explicate the different systems it contains, and pointed to connections the show makes across media. These intertextual

connections are present in the text in the form of episode titles, cameos, the name-dropping of books and movies, well-known locations, and other "easter eggs," available to the more culturally-literate viewer. I have simultaneously made connections in my own analysis to outside authors and texts, including the director Sofia Coppola and the style of writing known as autofiction, in the vein Chris Kraus's *I Love Dick*.

Gossip Girl's primary focus on pleasure and entertainment and its uncritical view of the ruling class has led many critics to classify it as hegemonic. Despite my personal enjoyment of it, and desire to illuminate its universal value, I will not argue that *Gossip Girl* does not serve to advance the dominant ideology, especially in regards to class and race (a dominant ideology that is subtly communicated through the palatable portrayal of the ruling class, glamorous and conventionally attractive images, and the act of intentionally navigating around potentially "problematic" topics). However, within this extremely stylized and aspirational view of wealth there is a self-awareness that places the show outside the purview of being singularly a vehicle for the advancement of capitalism. Additionally, if it is to be viewed as a legitimate work of art as opposed to mindless entertainment, Gossip Girl's artistic success must also be acknowledged if it is to be denigrated as purely capitalist and hegemonic (see *Gossip Girl: A Critical Understanding* by Lori Bindig, "Ambivalent Aspirationalism in Millenial Postfeminist Culture on Gossip Girl" by Emily Ryalls). What does it mean to love a show that depicts a level of wealth that is inherently violent, and essentially gives the OK to a classist hierarchy that is active in creating exploitative dynamics that harm minorities, including women and people of color, the most? My rationalization is that *Gossip Girl* is fiction, and not only that, but escapism, a way for everyday people to transcend the material realities of their lives, as is much television, even prestige television that is critically acclaimed. I have watched *Gossip Gir*l three times in its

entirety, and revisited many key episodes while writing this thesis, and each time I watch, it offers me something new, which is partially influenced by my own temporal, emotional, and intellectual situation at the time.

Gossip Girl is close to my heart as a show I have turned to when I needed distance from my own life, which has made it uniquely difficult to analyze with a critical distance, but I hold that I am not attempting to "save" or "condemn" the show, but instead gesture to its universal utility as a vehicle for meaning systems to operate on multiple levels within a text, specifically a seemingly superfluous or lucid text.

When I first began recognizing Gossip Girl as a critical object (second watch), I was struck by its unexpected pairing of high, intellectual, and "Old Money" and low, popular, and "New Money" cultural aesthetics and terminologies, and by its own cultural capital. Many references that had flown over my head as a 14-year old were now landing, due to me being partially college-educated and media literate in a way I hadn't been as a young teen. However, both the books and show of *Gossip Girl* are aimed at teenage girls, and became a beloved cultural object to this subset of the population (it would have been hard, as a young teenager, to find a girl who had not watched at least one episode of the show). Like *Sex and the City* before it, *Gossip Girl* has planted itself firmly in the cultural zeitgeist, and succeeds both commercially and artistically through its fulfillment of the female spectator's fantasy.[14] Like HBO's *Girls*, it is also able to generate an internal critique.[15] Insofar as *Theory of the Young-Girl* suggests that young women are the ultimate consumer and product, it appears that these shows support that supposition, having attained massive success due to their selling of the female experience and

[14] Both shows were so commercially successful that they received lukewarm reboots in 2021 and 2022.

[15] Though perhaps not quite so successful at an "internal critique" as *Girls*, at least *Gossip Girl* is not ambiguous whether the actions of its main characters are morally acceptable (obviously, they usually are not).

fantasy. However, all of these shows have a fanbase outside of just young female viewers, including, significantly, gay men (many of whom I follow on twitter). Additionally, why are we so fixated on the act of buying and selling when it comes to "women's" television (*Sex and the City* was oft-criticized for its alleged uncritical support for consumerism), while the dominant mode of critique for "men's" television (*Succession*, *Breaking Bad*, *The Sopranos*) is its artistic merit?

I hope that I have succeeded in establishing *Gossip Girl* as a legitimate artistic object of study, and not just a product. *Gossip Girl's* appeal to traditionally feminine sensibilities, through a proliferation of extreme close-ups, constant voiceover, and the prioritization of affect, pleasure, and process over a more teleological narrative style need not exclude it from being regarded with that ambiguous moniker of "quality television." If Modleski is correct, and we are to locate futurity in today's soap operas, then it seems like *Gossip Girl* will never go out of style.

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