The paradox of Millennial perfection

Their lives are so good they're bad

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Utopia always slides into dystopia. Getty Images

Yoga mats, brushed-steel kettles, Scandinavian armchairs, avocado slices, marble-top pastry tables — this peculiar subclass of objects, and the life that is organised around them, is the subject of Vincenzo Latronico's novel *Perfection* (Fitzcarraldo). That life involves: working from home as a creative professional; travel that pointedly distinguishes itself from tourism; weekends spent drifting through art galleries and underground clubs; membership in "an indistinct Left" less concerned about social change than declaring said membership; and a very large amount of time spent online.

You are probably thinking that *Perfection* is about how Millennials are shallow, demotivated and image-obsessed. You are right, but the book goes one step further, offering a diagnosis of that predicament: according to the novel, the real problem facing Millennials is perfection. Millennials are stuck in the paradox of utopia, living lives so good that they're bad.

To get a feel for this paradox, try a thought experiment: describe an ideal world. Fill it with all the things you think make life great and remove everything that makes life terrible. In the world you are creating, all of your social and political ideals have already been achieved, and nobody has to worry about survival, or oppression, or violence. The food tastes great, it never rains on your picnic, children don't throw tantrums and everyone always gets a good night's sleep. Now imagine you have a

choice between living there, in that perfect world, and here, in the imperfect one with all the flaws you routinely bemoan. If you are inclined to choose our world, because the one you made up seems too smooth, too perfect, too unreal, then go back and add in a few of those obstacles you removed. Now you have an almost perfect world, perfectly imperfect, with just enough of a taste of struggle to mix things up. If you still don't want it — because those struggles are too small and too fake — go ahead and add a few more. Good now?

If your answer is still no, then it is starting to look as though you aren't going to be satisfied until you've added back everything. Nothing short of the real world, with all its real problems, will do. Utopia might be something you want to aim for, but it is not something you want to have. This is the paradox of utopia: why strive for social progress if the endpoint of those efforts is a hollow and sterile world bereft of meaning or purpose? Why do we work so hard to solve problems we would prefer remain unsolved?

Anna and Tom are the couple at the heart of the utopian world of *Perfection*. There is a lot we never find out about them. We don't know what they look like. We never hear them converse. We don't learn about their childhoods, or get a comparison of their temperaments, or access either's inner life. Generally we are not privy to information that could differentiate them from one another. They have the same job, the same priorities, and, most importantly, the same aesthetic: "Either of them could choose anything on their joint behalf — be it a dish from a menu or an apartment — without a second thought, confident that the other would like it." They almost always show up as a unit: "Anna and Tom" occurs 121 times in the short novel, 10 times more than the number of times that either name appears on its own.

Most of those solo-namings are in the few pages describing their sex life, which is a source of mild concern to them: "a thought would worm its way into that bliss: that was the same sex they'd had last week, two months ago, three years ago." But sex is an exception to the rule: they don't have the corresponding worry when it comes to the basic pattern of their lives, their jobs, their tastes, the amorphous friend group that stays the same even as its members come and go, their relationship with their families, or the prospect of children — they don't want any, and that's that. They enjoy their lives, and each other, and each falls asleep with "a silent and strangely solemn prayer for things to remain exactly as they were. It was always answered." The novel offers us what passes for a plot in the small rumblings of discontent that Anna and Tom experience — remember the little fake obstacles you added back in to your utopia — which prompt them to travel, to return home, to travel again. In *Perfection,* nothing really changes, because nothing can change. Everything is the same.

Anna and Tom are not different from each other, nor do they differ from the other expats who populate their friend group. Their apartment is not distinctive either: on vacation in Lisbon, they look at listings of Airbnbs and encounter one indistinguishable from their own. Anna and Tom are originally from somewhere in Southern Europe, but we never learn exactly where. Spain? Italy? Greece? It doesn't matter, I suppose,

because it's all the same. Sameness saturates the novel, even though Anna and Tom, by profession and self-conception, are explicitly presented as curators of difference: "Their exact titles varied depending on the job, but they were always in English, even in their native language: web developer, graphic designer, online brand strategist. What they created were differences." They worked their way into these jobs from youth, having grown up alongside the internet, already as teens pre-occupied with constructing "personal websites and profiles that reflected their tastes and interests, lists of things that made them special". Why does the quest for difference end in a blanket sameness?

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To answer that question, we have to return to the paradox of utopia, which is to say, the tension between what makes a world feel good and what makes it feel real. Humans are creatures who reshape their environments to suit their needs. We are artificers; we produce artificiality. The better we get at crafting the world that works for us — eliminating the parts that cause us trouble and rearranging the remainder — the more perfect and more artificial our environment becomes. This applies to our physical environment: a tangled heap of fallen twigs becomes a neat cone, the better to start a fire. But it also applies to our social environment and even our intimate relationships. A cadre of humans thrown into a wilderness will be forced to stick together for warmth and security, but, given the resources to move into giant mansions where each family member has their own wing, they will. You can blame this on capitalism, but only in the sense that capitalism makes us rich, and wealth supercharges our power of artificing.

As lovely as that bright, warm, smooth, safe artificial world looks to the humans stuck in the scary dark forest, as soon as we insert them into it, they complain. They start to feel lonely. No longer sure that anyone needs them, each tries to prove their value — "this mansion is better off with me in it!" — by showcasing their own distinctiveness. But the more exclusively they devote themselves to producing this impression of uniqueness on one another, the more similar they become. They're living what was once their dream, but they are not happy. They continue to feel that what they need is just a bit of difference, a touch of authenticity, some jagged edges. Remember those little fake obstacles again. Where are they going to get them? They might travel, only to find that everywhere is pretty much the same. They might take up the plight of those less fortunate, whom they regard with a touch of envy — after all, their struggles didn't have to be invented, because their obstacles are not fake. Or they might occupy themselves with normative pictures. Anna and Tom try all of these routes, settling on the last.

A normative picture is a picture that reverses the typical direction of evaluation. Usually, the quality of a picture — be it a drawing, or a photograph, or a painting — lies, at least in part, in its ability to accurately capture an independently existing reality. A normative picture is, by contrast, a picture that tells you what reality is supposed to look like. Reality succeeds if it matches the picture, rather than vice versa. Social media is filled with normative pictures, and Anna and Tom spend their

lives, first, producing such pictures, both on behalf of their work clients, and so as to populate their own Instagram accounts, and, second, consuming them, which is to say, wrangling their lives so as to make them match the aforementioned pictures. The normative picture tells you that you have not quite arrived at utopia, because this — this image of two glasses of Campari on a table overlooking a vineyard backlit by the sunset, "laptops usually somewhere in the frame to prove they weren't on holiday" — is what utopia looks like. The normative picture reassures you that perfection still has to be struggled for, that there is still work to do, which means that complete happiness could, in fact, be yours, if only you could close that last little gap.

Perfection doesn't wear its genre on its sleeve, but I read it as horror. It describes a human future that is bad in a brand new way. It is not violent, or painful, but something even worse: deadly quiet. And I think this horror story is meant as a warning for the reader. On the one hand, Anna and Tom are profoundly unreal. They couldn't be real people. On the other hand, we could become them.

If worries about Millennials eating too much avocado toast seem like a distant, foolish dream now that we have real problems like rising authoritarianism and runaway inflation and the prospect of confronting whatever AI is going to turn (us) into, then Latronico's novel suggests a reframing. Yes, there are problems everywhere, and yes, we should try to solve them, but the fact that we won't know what to do with ourselves once we have succeeded — that is also a problem, and it remains with us even when we are not thinking about it.

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