Reviews

Gimmickification

Sianne Ngai, *Theory of the Gimmick: Aesthetic Judgement and Capitalist Form* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2020), 416pp., £28.95 hb., 978 0 67498 454 7

'[I]f only we could forget for a while about the beautiful and get down instead to the dainty and the dumpy'. In this oft-cited remark, made in the context of his 1956 paper 'A Plea for Excuses', J. L. Austin glancingly alludes to a subclass of 'minor' aesthetic categories, suggestively hinting at, yet in the end failing to elaborate on, their critical significance for the philosophy of aesthetics. The theoretical investigation of 'minor' aesthetic categories, as Sianne Ngai notes in *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (2012), 'remains surprisingly marginal to philosophical aesthetics', which has, since the discipline's emergence in the eighteenth century, continued to be organised around two primary aesthetic categories, the beautiful and the sublime, and their respective moral and theological resonances. Indeed, as Ngai observes, philosophical aesthetics typically appeals to these rare and powerful aesthetic experiences as models for theorising aesthetic judgement in general, paying little attention to how more 'trivial' or 'affectively equivocal' aesthetic categories 'might put interesting new pressure on the theory of aesthetic judgement', as well as 'the role aesthetic judgements might play in criticism with explicitly extra-aesthetic goals'.

In *Our Aesthetic Categories* Ngai singles out three everyday aesthetic categories – the 'cute', the 'interesting' and the 'zany' – whose aesthetic judgements are underwritten by 'mixed or equivocal feelings'. In doing so, she challenges 'the longstanding assumption that aesthetic judgements must always be based on a single and unequivocal feeling', such as the disinterested or strongly visceral feelings of pleasure or displeasure that give rise to judgements of the beautiful or the disgusting. The aesthetic evaluations of cute, interesting and zany, by contrast, can take either a positive or negative form, and are accordingly capable of functioning as both praise or criticism, something that is not the case for other 'minor' aesthetic categories (like 'dumpy'). As in her earlier study, *Ugly Feelings* (2005) – in which Ngai explores how a range of negative emotions and dysphoric affects can be interpreted as indexing the 'suspended agency' and 'social powerlessness' of individuals living in 'late modernity' – the affective uncertainty at the heart of 'our' everyday aesthetic categories, as Ngai suggests, critically points to how aesthetic experience has been radically 'transformed by the hypercommodified, information-saturated, performance-driven conditions of late capitalism'.

In *Theory of the Gimmick: Aesthetic Judgement and Capitalist Form* (2020) Ngai continues her critical inquiry into how everyday aesthetic categories encode larger social and historical processes by turning to the 'gimmick'. The gimmick, as Ngai claims, is 'capitalism's most successful aesthetic category'. Its 'flagrantly unworthy form can be found virtually anywhere': from manufacturing and finance, to mass culture and contemporary art. We encounter gimmicks in the form labour-saving contraptions, financial strategies and artistic techniques. As Ngai explains,

> Gimmicks are fundamentally one thing across these instances: overrated devices that strike us as working too little (labour saving tricks) but also working too hard (strained efforts to get our attention). In each case we refer to the aesthetically suspicious object as a "contrivance", an ambiguous term equally applicable to ideas, techniques and things.

As an '*ambivalent* judgement tied to a *comprised* form', the gimmick names 'a relationship between a relatively codified way of seeing and a way of speaking that the former compels'. As such, it renders explicit how aesthetic categories always have two sides: 'the form we perceive, a way of seeing' and 'the judgement we utter, a

way of speaking'. This latter discursive 'side' of aesthetic experience – originally identified by Kant in the *Third Critique* in terms of the compulsory sharing of pleasure that attends judgements of taste – has typically been neglected by both aesthetics and art theory, where scholars have focused predominantly on 'forms of appearance'. Going against the grain of such literature, *Theory of the Gimmick* continues to develop an argument that is central to *Our Aesthetic Categories*: namely, 'that ways of speaking tethered to specific ways of perceiving are as meaningful as the latter'. Here Ngai follows Stanley Cavell in his emphasis on the 'dialogical' and 'performative' dimension of aesthetic judgement as what makes an aesthetic encounter socially significant: namely, 'the way in which we face or address others to appearances we can only perceive for ourselves'. The gimmick, as Ngai underscores, uniquely reflects this intersubjective dimension of aesthetic judgement in a 'redoubled way', registering how our 'encounter with a form making wrong claims to value that our judgement refutes' implicitly evokes 'the image of other judges who evaluate differently'; judges who *buy into* whatever it is that the gimmick is promising or selling. The gimmick is thus always also a 'metajudgement' – 'a judgement on and about judgement' – that highlights 'how other judges, abstract figures standing in for our relations to others in general, are already "inside" our most spontaneous, affectively immediate experiences of form'.

If aesthetic judgements are evaluations based on feelings related to how things appear, and not on concepts of what they are, nonaesthetic or cognitive judgements (whether historical, political or moral in kind) are, as Ngai outlines in *Our Aesthetic Categories*, nonetheless a constitutive part of an aesthetic judgement's 'discursive and narrative aftermath'. This 'toggle' between aesthetic and nonaesthetic judgement is, as Ngai shows, 'internal' to a category like the 'interesting', 'an ambiguous feeling tied to an encounter with difference without a concept, which then immediately activates a search for that missing concept'. In the case of the gimmick, specifically, our aesthetic appraisal of an object's form as unsatisfyingly compromised 'quickly morphs into ethical, historical, and economic evaluations of it as fraudulent, untimely, and cheap'. While all aesthetic categories presuppose some relationship to social norms, what distinguishes the gimmick, then, is the way in which its judgement of 'aesthetic worth aligns with a judgement of economic worth'. Although distinctively capitalist aesthetic categories like the 'cute' and the 'zany' speak, respectively, to 'our equivocal relation to the commodity as consumers' and the 'ambiguous borders separating work from nonwork', the gimmick, as Ngai writes, is 'our culture's only aesthetic category … in which our feelings of misgiving stem from a sense of overvaluation bound to appraisals of deficient or excessive labour encoded in form'.

Such appraisals are based on the perceived 'deviation from a tacit standard of productivity'. If a gimmick 'seems to be working too hard or too little', as Ngai notes, 'it is because the social timing of its appearance is off'. A gimmick can accordingly strike us 'as technologically backward or just as problematically advanced: futuristic to the point of hubris, as in the case of Google Glass'. When a technology is judged to have 'arrived too early', what is typically meant here, as Ngai explains, is 'that its cost is proving too high'. Such 'metrics' are specific to a capitalist mode of production 'that binds value to labour and time', and which is structured by an historical dynamic of 'unceasing innovation' and 'increasing productivity'. In capitalist societies, these 'ratios get filtered' – via the mediating abstractions of the rate of profit and price – 'into the conscious and unconscious decisions of all producers and consumers'. In expressing 'how a kind of quantitative measurement can persist, abstracted, inside qualitative judgements', the aesthetic judgement of the gimmick, as Ngai contends, reveals how 'the basic laws of capitalist production and its abstractions' come to structure the 'way we perceive the world, seeping into how people share their pleasures and displeasures'. Indeed, as a 'moving measurement of labour … that binds this abstraction of labour to value', our everyday judgement of the gimmick, as Ngai suggestively puts it, 'has, or *is*, a "value theory of labour"', in that it 'encodes' something 'strikingly akin' to what Marx terms 'socially necessary labour time'.

As in her previous publications, Ngai deepens her analysis of the gimmick as an aesthetic judgement and capitalist form by attending to an eclectic range of modern and contemporary artistic, literary and cultural artefacts that not only represent the capitalist gimmick as an object or idea but 'riskily instrumentalise' its compromised form, 'deploying it to think through other aesthetic, conceptual, or historical problems'. The gimmick, as

Ngai observes, is endemic to art under capitalism, its compromised form reflecting art's 'equivocal' relation to the commodity form. Gimmicky as we might find them now, it is only with the maturation of capitalist relations of production that a pre-capitalist artistic device like the *deus ex machina* comes to be viewed with 'suspicion or contempt', becoming 'the name for a "cheap" or aesthetically unconvincing contrivance for achieving narrative closure'. Artistic devices that appear as 'neutral' can 'flip into problematic gimmicks (and vice versa) with remarkable ease in artworks made, circulated, and consumed in capitalism', as is exemplified by the culture industry's tendency to 'degrade' formal techniques to the status of gimmicks through 'perpetual reuse'. However, the accusation of gimmickry 'haunts' artworks that make claims to being 'advanced' in an especially 'intense' way, hovering over modernism and modernist techniques in particular. For Ngai, this is connected not simply to modernism's affirmation of the new, but to what Cavell (echoing Adorno) characterises as modern art's 'rising technicism', whereby the continuing production of art becomes increasingly dependent on its internalisation of 'a thickening critical apparatus' – a phenomenon that Ngai further elaborates on in a chapter considering the exceedingly gimmick-prone 'novel of ideas'. This structural intimacy between artistic technique and theoretical criticism results in the growing suspicion of the artwork (particularly the conceptual artwork) 'as always possibly fraudulent', an 'uncertainty about trickery that becomes extended to the idea of art in general, retroactively affecting our relation to works of the past'.

There is a continual slippage in the book, left largely uninterrogated by Ngai, between aesthetic judgement and what Peter Osborne terms 'art-critical judgement'. For as the history of modern and contemporary art makes clear, to judge an artwork as *aesthetically* unconvincing is rarely the same thing as judging it *artistically* or *critically* so. While Ngai is careful not conflate art with aesthetics, or to reduce art to its aesthetic dimension – a commonplace error in the fields of philosophical aesthetics and art theory alike – her discussion of particular artworks routinely shuttles between these two forms of judgement in a way that sometimes leaves their borders and relationship unclear. Do, for instance, aesthetic judgements

ground art-critical judgements, as Ngai sometimes suggests, or should they be comprehended as merely a condition or aspect of the latter (relating to art's necessary aesthetic appearance and the registration of feeling in our experience art)? If, like Adorno and Cavell, Ngai is aware of the dangers of thinking the unity of art as a generalised aesthetic, always insisting on the conceptual, historical and social character of art, these cognitive and nonaesthetic aspects of the work tend to be subsumed by the aesthetic, or restricted to its interpretative aftermath. This stands in contrast to Osborne, who contends that the artistic significance of the aesthetic in modern and contemporary (or post-conceptual) art be understood as both ontologically partial and historically relational.

While Marx's value-theory of labour underpins Ngai's general theory of the gimmick, this comes most to the fore in the chapters that focus on capitalist abstractions. For Ngai, the 'relation between mystified and objective valuation' in our aesthetic encounter with the gimmick 'pedagogically underscores' something crucial about Marx's critical theory of capitalist social forms, wherein 'economic essences must appear as something other than themselves': value as money or price, surplus value as profit, and relations of exploitation as ones of equal exchange. For Marx, financial capital emerges as an intensified version of the fetishism underlying value's various 'forms of appearance', in that surplus value generated within the sphere of production appears to the financial capitalist to be generated within the sphere of circulation through the mere exchange of promises, creating the illusion of 'self-valorising value' or 'money breeding money' (M-M'). As a form of appearance making aggrandised claims to value, finance, as Ngai observes, thus 'confronts us with an interestingly amplified instance of the gimmick's structure and ambiguities'. These ambiguities are compellingly explored in a chapter focusing on Robert Louis Stevenson's story 'The Bottle Imp' (1891) and David Mitchell's psychological horror film *It Follows* (2014): both debt-driven tales, written in the wake of financial crises, that route their representations of finance through structurally similar narratives about 'the circulation of deferred reckonings'. In striking contrast to popular depictions of financial products as impossibly complex and abstract, both 'The Bottle Imp' and *It Follows*, as Ngai's close reading of these two texts foregrounds, 'take the sublimity out of finance' by mobilising 'exaggeratedly crude' story-telling devices to portray the 'ambiguous interval' that defines the aftermath of financial crises (and their attempted deferral), when credit is confronted with its material limits.

In two subsequent and equally compelling chapters, Ngai reflects on how particular artistic instantiations of the gimmick in Rob Halpern's book-length poem *Music for Porn* (2012) and Stan Douglass's video installation *Suspiria* (2003) have their own unique ways of illuminating the 'peculiar ontology' of capitalist abstractions like 'abstract labour' and 'value'. Focusing on Halpern's extravagant employment of the poetic device of 'catachresis' to portray the male body as an eroticised capitalist abstraction, reading *Music for Porn*, as Ngai suggests, helps clarify what is at stake in Marx's notoriously contradictory presentation of 'abstract labour' in *Capital*, *Volume 1* as both a "'suprasensible or social" *and* sensuously material' *substance*. Both Halpern and Marx, as Ngai contends, intentionally mobilise a 'catachrestic image' of abstract labour as a 'congealing substance' in order to emphasise 'the synthetic or *plasticising* action' of an abstraction like value, which, despite being a social relation of validation established in exchange, comes to 'palpably' shape 'the empirical world of collective activity to which it belongs and in which it acts'. In *Suspiria*, Douglas likewise employs a gimmicky special effect to 'allegorise' what Marx terms the 'ghostly' or 'phantom-like objectivity' [*gespenstige Gegenstandlichkeit*] of value, by manipulating outmoded analogue technology to create a blurry spectral image wherein colours escape their bodily containers. This 'comically bungled' looking effect is notably set in tension with a complex, variation-intensive script, whereby a digital algorithm creates a viewing experience of 'computer-driven endlessness' that evokes a feeling of the 'sublime'. In pitting this 'temporally unstable' and 'transient "special effect" against the infinity of the digital/automated machine', Douglas, as Ngai observes, deflates the seeming 'invulnerability of capitalist "value machines"', pointing, once again, to the gimmick 'as the aesthetic flipside of capitalist sublimity'.

There are moments in Ngai's impressively intricate and yet occasionally extravagant readings of artworks and literary texts when the analytical category of the gimmick disappears from view or is stretched beyond recognition, appearing as either an under- and over-performing heuristic device. In the book's concluding chapter, for

instance, Ngai interprets Henry James's late fictions – whose elaborate narratives of coincidence regularly feature instances of 'occulted' domestic and service labour – as indirect indexes of the author's shift from 'writing longhand, silently and alone, to dictating to a hired typist' (the typist and type-writer both representing instances of labour-saving techniques), as well as 'the rise of an incipient service economy that would come to supersede manufacturing and industry in Great Britain and other wealth nations'. This contrived, if always engaging, reading of James's late narratives stands in contrast to an earlier chapter focusing on the Norwegian post-conceptual artist and photographer Torbjøn Rødland, whose kitschy yet enigmatically seductive photographs of people and objects serve to illustrate the gimmick's comprised form in a relatively straightforward manner. Despite the capacious and eclectic character of Ngai's study, there remains, moreover, a latent provincialism in the book's archive, which comprises artists and writers deriving exclusively from North-America and Europe, as well as Ngai's retention of 'postmodernism' as key periodising and critical category in the face of its critical displacement by the globalisation of the resurgent concept of modernity. For if the aesthetic judgement and form of the gimmick tells us something central about 'the basic laws of capitalist production and its abstractions as they come to saturate everyday life', it makes sense to ask in what ways 'capitalism's most successful aesthetic category' comes to be unevenly registered beyond the metropolitan centres of the capitalist world-system? Or does the judgement of the gimmick, like the phenomena of postmodernism before it, name a narrowly conceived Euro-American capitalist modernity exhausting itself?

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Normativity at the edge of reason

Cecile Malaspina, *An Epistemology of Noise* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018). 256pp., £90.00 hb., £28.99 pb., 978 1 35001 178 6 hb., 978 1 35014 176 6 pb.

In recent years noise seems to have become an interdisciplinary concept *par excellence*, apt to capture important dynamics at work whether in technological, scientific, social or aesthetic domains. But when economists, biologists, psychologists, and musicians speak of noise, are they all referring to the same thing? Cecile Malaspina takes this dispersion of the notion of noise as a starting point, accepting that, when removed from its mathematical formulation in information theory and spread into diverse disciplines, noise takes on a metaphorical ambiguity. Yet rather than eliminate this ambiguity, Malaspina sets out to account for it. The key problem in *An Epistemology of Noise* is not to identify the legitimate usage of the concept of noise, but rather to examine what happens when noise moves between disciplines, and what the 'noisiness' of this movement tells us about the conditions for interdisciplinary knowledge. Noise here is both an object (or many objects) of inquiry and a condition for that inquiry, and presents us with the problem of how knowledge can find its ground in these 'shifting sands'.

While not aiming to dispel the ambiguity that noise takes on when adapted for new fields, Malaspina does differentiate her overall theoretical perspective from the notion that has allowed much of this adaptation to take place: that is, is the 'negentropy' associated with cybernetics and Norbert Wiener, where noise is opposed to information. Negentropy, or the negation of entropy (the tendency towards disorder), describes the means by which machines or systems, as bearers of information, self-regulate. The interdisciplinary concept of noise is often posited in relation to such a notion of negentropy, with noise being what forms of organisation, 'from the organism to the ecosphere, from socio-political to economic relations, from networks to the idea of globalisation', fend off in their processes of self-regulation. Malaspina proposes that in the information theory of Claude Shannon we find something quite distinct from this uptake of Wiener's thought. In Shannon's work we find a profoundly counterintuitive proximity between information and noise, and *An Epistemology of Noise* follows