

UNDERSTANDING THE MATERIAL
PRACTICES OF GLAMOUR

Nigel Thrift

THE BODY

various artists

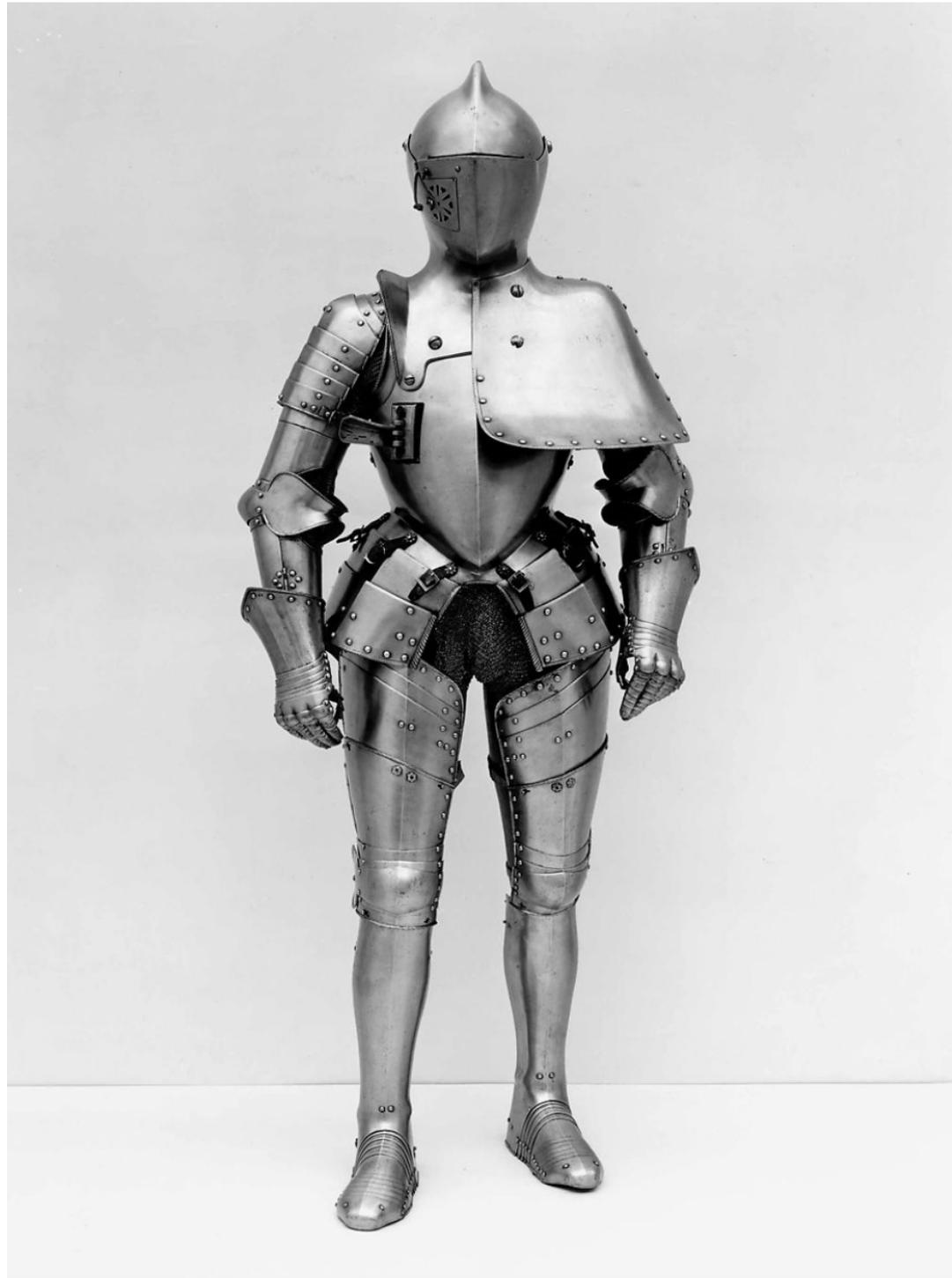
Imagination and Aesthetics

Contemporary capitalism's magical powers arise from two intersecting imaginary forces, namely the force of aesthetic practices, honed now over a number of centuries, and the rise of so-called public intimacy, a series of practices with an equally long historical bloodline. Let me begin by touching on the practical aesthetic imagination. It is crucial to note here that aesthetics is understood as a fundamental element of human life and not just an additional luxury, a frivolous add-on when times are good. Postrel puts it thus: Aesthetics is the way we communicate through the senses. It is the art of creating reactions without words, through the look and feel of people, places, and things. Hence, aesthetics differs from entertainment that requires cognitive engagement with narrative, word play, or complex, intellectual allusion. While the sound of poetry is arguably aesthetic, the meaning is not. Spectacular special affects and beautiful movie stars enhance box-office success in foreign markets because they offer universal aesthetic pleasure; clever dialogue which is cognitive and culture bound doesn't travel as well. Aesthetics may complement storytelling, but is not itself narrative. Aesthetics shows rather than tells, delights rather than instructs. The effects are immediate, perceptual, and emotional.

Kristin-Lee Moolman and IB Kamara

*White T-shirt and Y-3 interpreted for Items:
Is Fashion Modern?*





1



2

2. Element of an Italian light Cavalry Armor, ca. 1510

1. Armor for the Tilt, ca.1580

The point is that aesthetic pleasure has quality and substance that is generated by that side of sensation that is sheer formless enjoyment (Harman 2005). It is an affective force that is active, intelligible, and has genuine efficacy: it is both moved and moving (Thrift forthcoming). It is a force that generates sensory and emotional gratification. It is a force that produces shared capacity and commonality. It is a force that, though cross-cut by all kinds of

impulses, has its own intrinsic value. Aesthetic practices can take on a number of forms but among their chief expressions must surely be the vast spectrum of consumer objects that, as numerous ethnographies have shown, are able to produce all kinds of affective allegiances. Aesthetics is bound up with the discovery of new and alluring imaginative territories that reflect upon themselves. Though these territories are usually vicarious they are no less real for that. Goods are a substantial part of this process of imaginative exploration. From early on, goods have provided a sensual means of inhabitation that is also a means of captivation. As elements of aesthetic experience, they do not just provide evocations of times past or moral reckonings but affective senses of space, literally territories of feeling.

But in making such a claim about aesthetic enhancement, I want to go one stage further for I also want to claim that the aesthetic objects have their own existence. As Thrailkill puts it, aesthetic objects are “more than telegraphs of meaning that either are received as a form of penetration or possession (‘sink[ing] right into your brainstem’ as Walter Michaels writes) or remain forever unread, unreceived, and unrecognized (‘we cannot know each other,’ as Janet Malcolm puts this position)” (2007, 250). Thus, on one level, they are, as I have pointed out, connection machines, technologies that facilitate imaginary recognitions. But on another level they inhabit a separate existence. Qualities can belong to objects themselves rather than to our consciousness of them; they are not inert targets for our thoughts to animate (Harman 2005). In other words, I want to make space for the stuff of aesthetics as not just about human access to objects. Objects must be understood as involved in multiple overlapping negotiations with human being and not just as sets of passive and inanimate properties. The power of objects is crucial to the account of aesthetics that I want to give, so I will expand upon this point. Objects are not there simply to furnish a human world as a feature of human perception that follows us around wherever we may be, only existing when chaperoned by a human subject (Harman 2005). They are a feature of reality itself that can be deployed at many levels at once, some of which intersect with the homeland of human presence and perception, some of which do not. They are a surplus. They are, as Harman (2005) would have it, “phosphorescent.” Thus, the human contains all manner of objects within its envelope but it does not exhaust their presence, so that objects can signal in all kinds of ways that we may only partially perceive, or perceive as “magical” in that they provide associations and conjunctions, dissociations and echoes, that stimulate perception and imagination and, indeed, enjoyment. They allow us to create mental objects that can be briefly fixed, not only achieving a contouring of perceptions but also allowing these perceptions to ripple out as surges of affect (Stafford 2007). Contemporary art works have struggled to illuminate these qualities.

Technologies of Glamour

So how does capitalism make its mark on the aesthetic sphere? What is the source of value? And how does it operationalize it? I want to pick out two technologies that act as crucial parts of the generation of allure, a quality that like other forms of charm limits and fixes our vision but also acts as a tool of exploration. Both technologies might be considered as magical in the sense that they seem to have a life of their own, part human, part something else. And that is exactly the point: they do. If we had to describe this kindred, magical quality, it might be better to describe it through the descriptor of style. However, style does not consist of a list of factors that have to be ticked off, nor does it constitute a totality of meaning. Style is a modification of being that produces captivation, in part through our own explorations of it. Style wants us to love it and we want to be charmed by it; we want to emulate it, we want to be definite about it, we want to be absorbed by it, we want to lend ourselves to what it has become. Style, in other words, can be counted as an agent in its own right in that it defines what is at issue in the world that we can engage with (Harman 2005). With this minimal definition in play we can now move on to consider how capitalism captivates by addressing a specific style of allure, namely glamour.

Richard Hamilton

Pin-up
1961





1



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3



4

Glamour

Glamour is a constant if fitful quality in consumer spaces, arising out of an environment that mixes human and nonhuman so as to produce captivation. But where did glamour originate from? How did it become an effective field that so many people feel inclined to explore? In this section and the next, I will recount a capsule history of glamour, and especially the role of theater, film, and performance, and try to set down why it has become more important and now has such a grip on Euro-American civilization. Affluence brings with it the construction of the quality of glamour as a key imaginary in producing allure. In using the term “glamour,” I am aware of a certain awkwardness of expression. But I need a term that operates in the everyday and as both an economic and an imaginative force, as (in its eighteenth-century meaning of magic or enchantment) a spell that is both erudite and occult but that can also encompass the nineteenth-century meaning of “a deceptive or bewitching beauty or charm” as well as its current usage, which denotes the spell cast by unobtainable realities. And glamour does this.

Aïda Muluneh

1. *All in One*, 2016

2. *City Life*, 2016

3. *Morning Bride*, 2016

4. *Strength in Honor*, 2016

Glamorous Materials

There are many ways in which it is possible to produce glamour and I cannot fix on them all. Iconic experience like glamour is constructed from many building blocks. It can be sound. It can be the play of brilliant or subdued light. It can be powerful smells. It can be a haptic association. It can be pace. In this essay, I have chosen to alight on just one of the means of production of glamour, namely colorful materials. Straightaway, it is important to note that I take such materials as having their own resonance, not least because their appeal is mainly directly to the pre-personal domain in the form of movement sensations (Humphrey 2006). As Harman points out in discussing color, “There are qualities so free and nonteleological that they no longer even belong to specific things” (Harman 2005, 67) and color is one of these. Of course, color has a long history of manufacture and it is one of the key moments of aesthetics, understood as the sensual impression of light and color, whether found in Newton, Goethe, or the universal color symbolism of Berlin and Kay (Delamare and Guineau 2000, Leslie 2005, Pastoureau 2001). It may, indeed, be ingrained in us as a very part of how we are, as an element of archaic patterns of communication predicated on ritual and performance (Lewis-Williams 2004).

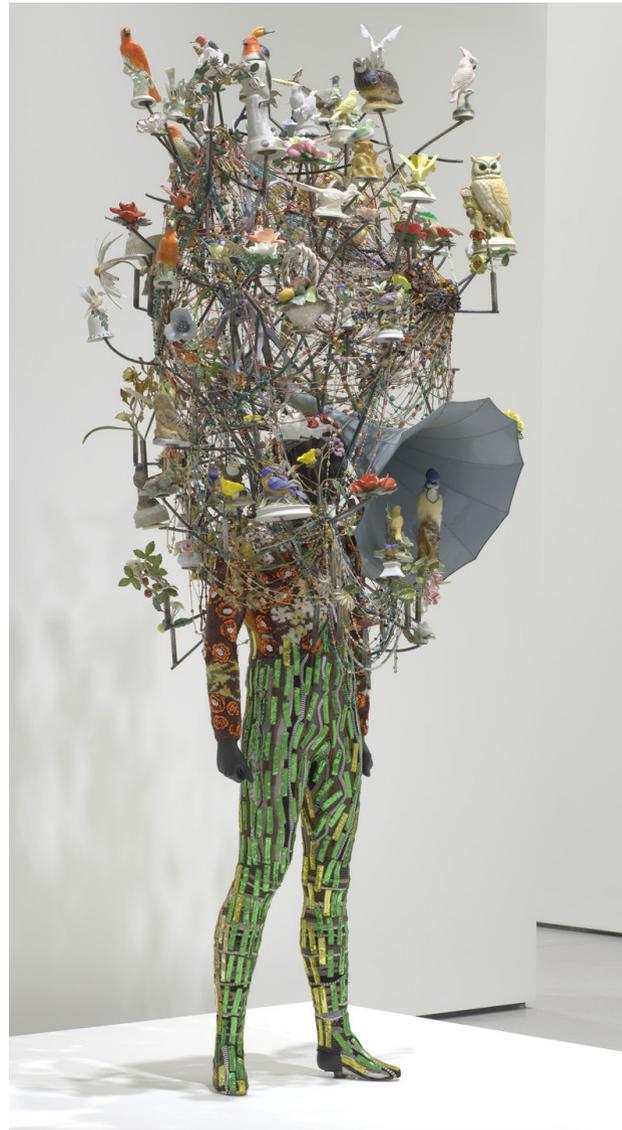
Ralph Borland

Suited for Subversion (Prototype)
2002





1



2



3



4

Nick Cave

1. Soundsuit, 2011

2. Soundsuit, 2011

4. Soundsuit, 2015

3. Soundsuit, 2015

Glamorous Personas

Glamour is hardly just the domain of objects. It equally concerns persons, understood as fractal, that is as both singular and plural. A fractal person is never a unit standing in relation to an aggregate, or an aggregate standing in relation to a unit, but always an entity with relationships integrally implied. The person lies in between as a individual rather than an individual. Persons do not exist as autonomous entities but have the capacity to act directly upon one another. And because persons are “fractal,” they are able to incorporate others and parts of others, including objects. This becomes particularly apparent when we consider how glamorous personas are constructed. Nowadays the glamorous persona is often associated with high-end fashion. It involves a combination of sex appeal, luxury, celebrity, and wealth. Historically, the social bearer of glamour was the aristocracy. Now, however, the bearers of glamour tend to be celebrities. Of course, celebrity covers a host of sins—it consists of all manner of species and levels. But I want to concentrate on just one form of celebrity, namely charismatic celebrity of the kind found among major stars of stage and screen, certain (and by no means all) politicians, some sports stars, some top models, and the like.

Jean Patchett

Fashion with Handbag
1950



In one sense, what I have outlined could be seen as another episode in what Sheldon Wolin (2008) called capitalist totalitarianism, recalling Arendt's definition of the driving force of totalitarianism as put forward in her book *The Origins of Totalitarianism*: "The aggressiveness of totalitarianism springs not from the lust for power ... nor for profit, but only for ideological reasons: to make the world consistent, to prove that its respective super-sense is right" (1958a, 458). But that would, I think, be to give that supersense too much force. Equally, accounts of "ontological domination" (Lash and Lury 2007) seem to me to be too strong. It is surely the case that the new forms of capitalism may often seem all-encompassing. But the system cannot work unless there are loopholes through which the new and quirky can make their way. It may be that capitalism can use the power of aesthetics and the momentum provided by the consequential urge to explore in its favor, but that can only be with the accompanying risk that the exploration move into hostile territory.

As importantly, this kind of account ignores the wealth of empirical research on consumers that shows that though there may be many who are attracted by glamour just as many use consumption as an integral part of gift giving and of sharing. Then again, many consumers do make attempts to link their consumption to ethical imperatives, sometimes half-heartedly, sometimes mistakenly, but certainly showing more than a slavish devotion to consuming for its own sake. It would be possible to see these kinds of practices as minor or subordinate but they have had sometimes considerable effects, ever since the original consumer boycott of sugar as part of the campaign against slavery in the eighteenth century (see also Trentmann 2007). Not everyone is taken in by the secular magic of glamour and other forms of allure, but sometimes even the most hardened feel its tug—in an impulse purchase, in some small sign of obeisance to a persona they can't help but fantasize about, in an object placed just so in a room. So perhaps a better way of understanding consumer capitalism might be as part of a series of overlapping affective fields. Perhaps one of the most powerful means of setting up counter practices might be to aesthetically modulate these fields. For example, Belk (2007) argues that sharing is a culturally learned behavior that can be disseminated in all kinds of ways and that with the rise of intangible goods like information, images, and ideas it ought to be possible to promote sharing on a much wider basis than currently, especially through the design of aesthetically pleasing objects that are predicated on precisely this kind of activity. Such goods can, of course, have their own allure. The challenge is to build that sort of charm, and at the result, knowing that it can and must be done.



All in One, 2016
Aïda Muluneh
Museum of Modern Art



Armor for the Tilt, ca.1580
The Metropolitan Museum of Art



City Life, 2016
Aïda Muluneh
Museum of Modern Art



Element of an Italian light Calvary Armor, ca. 1510
The Metropolitan Museum of Art



Fashion with Handbag, 1950
Jean Patchett
The Metropolitan Museum of Art



Morning Bride, 2016
Aïda Muluneh
Museum of Modern Art



Pin-up, 1961
Richard Hamilton
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Soundsuit, 2011
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