30

Widok. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture

title:

There's Something Wrong with the Entire Mode of Valorization. Sianne Ngai in Conversation with Magda Szcześniak

authors:

Sianne Ngai, Magda Szcześniak

source:

Widok. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture 30 (2021)

URL:

https://www.pismowidok.org/en/archive/2021/30-visuality-of-social-classes-structures-and-relations/theres-something-wrong-with-the-entire-mode-of-valorization

doi:

https://doi.org/10.36854/widok/2021.30.2391

publisher:

Widok. Foundation for Visual Culture

affiliation:

SWPS University

University of Warsaw

keywords:

gimmick; valorization; capitalism; aesthetic categories

abstract:

A conversation about Sianne Ngai's latest book Theory of the Gimmick: Aesthetic Judgement and Capitalist Form (2020), which explores the uneasy mix of attraction and repulsion produced by the gimmick across a range of forms specific to capitalist culture.

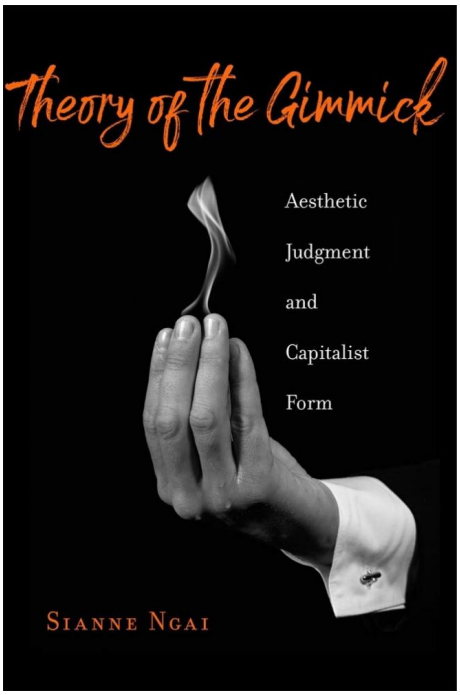
Sianne Ngai - Professor of English at the University of Chicago, whose work is most broadly concerned with the analysis of aesthetic forms and judgments specific to capitalism. Author of Ugly Feelings (2005), Our Aesthetic Categories: Cute, Zany. Interesting (2012) and Theory of the Gimmick: Aesthetic Judgement and Capitalist Form (2020). Extending Ngai's previous investigation of the rise of equivocal aesthetic judgments (such as the merely "interesting"), Theory of the Gimmick explores the uneasy mix of attraction and repulsion produced by the gimmick across a range of forms specific to capitalist culture.

Magda Szcześniak - Born 1985. Assistant Professor at the Institute of Polish Culture, University of Warsaw, leader of the MA program in visual culture. Author of books Normy widzialności. Tożsamość w czasach transformacji [Norms of Visibility. Identity in Times of Transition, 2016] and Poruszeni. Awans i emocje w socjalistycznej Polsce [Feeling Moved. Upward Mobility and Emotions in Socialist Poland, 2023], co-author of the two-volume Kultura wizualna w Polsce [Visual Culture in Poland, 2017]. Recipient of the Fulbright Foundation Junior Advanced Research Grant (2010/11, University of Rochester, Graduate Program for Visual and Cultural Studies) and the Fulbright Foundation Senior Award (2019/20, Duke University, Institute for Critical Theory). She has also received stipends and grants from the National Science Center (Preludium grant, 2013-2015; Sonata grant, 2018-2023) and the Ministry of Higher Education and Science (stipend for outstanding young

scholars, 2017-2020). In 2017, she won the prestigious award for young scholars granted by the "Polityka" weekly (Nagroda Naukowa Polityki). She has published articles in numerous academic journals, including New Literary History, Oxford Art Journal, Journal of Visual Culture, Teksty Drugie, Dialog, Konteksty, Kultura i Społeczeństwo. She is currently leading a research project titled Representations of the popular classes in contemporary Polish visual culture.

There's Something Wrong with the Entire Mode of Valorization. Sianne Ngai in Conversation with Magda Szcześniak

Magda Szcześniak: You devoted your latest book to the gimmick, which you describe as "an aesthetic judgement and capitalist form." A gimmick can take many forms – it can be a material object promising to save us time, a flashy gadget, an artistic device, or a magic trick. How did you first start thinking about the gimmick? Would I be correct in assuming that your interest was sparked by gimmicky objects, and that later you started noticing them in art, literature, and critical theory? Or was it the other way around?

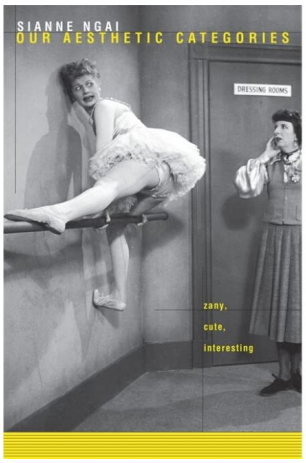


Sianne Ngai: I think the answer to that question has something to do with how I felt at the endpoint of *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*.[1] I had used the cute, zany, and interesting as quilting points, a way of anchoring ourselves in this huge chaotic sea of aesthetic ideas and concepts. For, as aesthetic categories that are about our fantasies of power over the things we consume, about work in its sometimes uncertain relation to play, and about difference as we encounter it in the form of information, the cute, the zany, and the interesting index socially binding processes of human activity – the consumption, the production, and the circulation of commodities. They thus seemed useful for grasping the unity of the capitalist system. The point was not to suggest that these aesthetic categories are the only

important or relevant ones; the goal was rather to single out three that were useful for schematizing Western capitalist culture as a totality. Having done that, of course, I had to wonder if I left something out.

For a while I thought the gimmick was a term that should have been included in the previous book. Then I realized the gimmick is not another aesthetic category somewhat like the others, but that it's a deeper structure permeating all made things in capitalism. If the cute is about our mixed feelings toward the seemingly powerless commodities we consume, if the interesting is about the circulation of discourse, and if the zany is about work, then the gimmick is about the overarching process of capitalist valorization that links those three other socially binding activities together.

Valorization is a Marxist concept, referring to how commodities become impregnated with surplus value through unpaid labor in production, and how that value requires realization in circulation or exchange. The gimmick goes straight to the heart of this process. As an aesthetic phenomenon, it is a kind of diagnosis of the misappraisal of value. When we call things gimmicks, we're basically expressing suspicion about a claim to value on the part of the gimmicky object – whether it's a financial strategy promising to generate new value through the mere exchanging of promises about exchanges in the future, a ready-made artwork, a high-performance kitchen gadget, or a foam on a plate in a high-end restaurant.



MSz: What I find fascinating is that the gimmick is both an aesthetic judgement and a form, an object. You write that "this damaged form knows certain truths," which I have come to understand as meaning that our irritation with the gimmick – the irritation we feel when we discover that something is a gimmick – is a sign of distrust and suspicion about how capitalism assigns value. Something doesn't seem quite right about this process. It does seem to be a wariness of the process in general, although I guess if we judged everything as a gimmick, that would potentially lead to questioning the capitalist system in its entirety. At the same time, I was wondering why recognizing a gimmick seems so strangely pleasurable – I'm irritated, but also pleased with seeing something that others don't.

SN: Right, absolutely. It is worthwhile pausing just to note how rare it is to have a name for an aesthetic experience that immediately relates us to the economic. It's just so direct here. The gimmick is an unconvincing *aesthetic* object that we evaluate in specifically *economic* terms; as "cheap," as "overrated," as "overvalued." But yes, there is something pleasurable about the detection of the gimmick, which is also to say the experience of the gimmick – the two things cannot be separated.

Let me say something quickly about form and judgement. An aesthetic category is double-sided: it relates a perception of form – in this case, a form that seems aesthetically dissatisfying or compromised – to an evaluation based on feeling. It's a spontaneous affective judgement. Gimmicks are primarily annoying. When we say that something is a gimmick, we're

saying that there's something false or unconvincing about its claim to worth. Gimmicks are also ubiquitous – we find them in every domain of culture: art, business, politics, pedagogy, food, technology, fashion. But it is also a very unstable form. Given the anarchy of markets and the basic way capitalist valorization works, you can't ever fully know whether something that looks like a gimmick today won't turn out to be a socially useful commodity several years down the road. My favorite example of this is Google Glass. This was a big joke when it came out in 2012, when it was initially marketed as a fashion accessory for consumers. It failed spectacularly, but since then it has been cleverly repackaged for use in factories and warehouses, by workers who need to process a lot of information quickly but also need their hands free. What seemed like a gimmick in one part of the economy is thus no longer one in another part today. And vice versa: a cinematic "special effect" that may have produced aesthetic awe at a certain moment in history can look embarrassingly outdated at another. So, there is an ontological instability to the gimmick. When something isn't a gimmick, we don't "call" it anything. It's just a device, doing what it's supposed to do. A gimmick indexes something about valorization gone wrong.

But as you say, gimmicks are also strangely and perversely attractive. Even when we're calling something out as a gimmick – that is, identifying it as something that is flagrantly unworthy – we are indirectly conceding that there is a kind of charm to this compromised thing.

As you mentioned, there's one way of interpreting the pleasure we take in this sort of judgment, which goes along the lines of what we learn from Pierre Bourdieu. For Bourdieu, aesthetic judgements are ultimately acts of invidious distinction – they're always about social class. Any time I express my taste, in either a positive or negative way, I'm making statements about my place with respect to others in a classed society. There is

something powerful about this theory and I do not think it is incorrect. But I also think this way of thinking about aesthetic judgment is incomplete. Not only because it ignores the social content of particular evaluations (for Bourdieu, all aesthetic judgments boil down to the same thing), but because it oversimplifies the actual way by which social relations enter into our aesthetic judgments. Now, finding something beautiful (or cute, or gimmicky…) seems like a private, idiosyncratic, and purely internal act; it is, after all, a spontaneous judgment based on nothing but feeling. But, as Kant shows us very meticulously in *The Critique of Judgment*, and in particular by analyzing the strangely urgent and compulsive way in which we assume and even tacitly demand that others *agree* with our judgments of beauty (which is not a demand we make about other likes and dislikes), our aesthetic judgments are ultimately less about the objects that trigger them than about our affective relations to other people, and our desire for their feelings to accord with ours. And so, in a funny way, Bourdieu and Kant end up saying the same thing. Both recognize the secret presence of others in what seems to be – and what in some ways is – a private, entirely subjective experience.

With the gimmick, something more complicated is going on than mere snobbery. Of course, in one's dismissive evaluation of X as a gimmick, one is placing oneself in relation to others who are implicitly duped by X. But this feature of the gimmick could also be read as pointing in a very different direction. I need the idea of somebody who *does not* find my gimmick a gimmick, *in order* for me to say something is a gimmick. This is not the case for other aesthetic categories. I don't need to imagine somebody who does not find the cute thing cute for me to have an experience of the cute. Our appraisal of something as a gimmick always implicitly includes a dissenting appraisal. This amounts to an implicit acknowledgement of the gimmick's social success, *in spite of* its particular recognition by me. One could read this not

as an expression of superiority – unlike all the suckers out there, I'm not taken in by the promises of saving labor or increasing value which the gimmick is making – but as a tacit admission of the social power of the form. I'm acknowledging that even as I don't buy into the gimmick's false promises, the promises are socially attractive and thus will always be bought into elsewhere. But what this means is that I am recognizing that the form is efficacious at binding all of us together into a single collective.

MSz: I started thinking about this act of differentiating oneself from those who have been duped when reading the introduction to *Theory of the Gimmick*, since your first examples are about characters from marginalized backgrounds who use gimmicks to trick the system. In James Baldwin's "Letter from a Region in My Mind" (1962), where he describes trying to get by as an adolescent Black man; in the Broadway musical *Gypsy* (1959) about three strip-club workers with elaborate performance routines; and in Charles Stevenson Wright's novel *The Wig: A Mirror Image* (1966), about a Black man trying to get a job, gimmicks are devices which help the characters survive, not thrive, but just get by in a system that's rigged against them.

SN: That is part of the irony of the gimmick. James Baldwin has this fascinating moment in the essay, where he talks about the Black church as his gimmick. He also describes it as a handle, a lever, a way for him – an African-American kid growing up in the 1960s – to escape violence. Obviously, it's also a way to distance himself from the institution. In Charles Stevenson Wright's amazing and underdiscussed novel, the main character is another African-American and queer man, who can't get a job, can't secure a wage. It's the 1960s; there are constant promises about equality made by the Johnson administration; everyone seems to be moving ahead, but he just cannot get employed. So, he decides to change his hair. The gimmick is the wig, which becomes his way to the wage. In *Gypsy*'s very famous number

"You Gotta Get a Gimmick," there is a joke about how to be a successful sex worker – you need a tool, a prop. So, yes, all of these gimmicks are seen as ways of getting very basic things done: surviving capitalism, getting paid.



You Gotta Have a Gimmick from *Gypsy*, dir. Mervyn LeRoy, 1962

We already see here a complicated relationship to wage labor. The pathway to the wage, which is supposed to be so simple in capitalism – it is, after all, the social relation that defines it – is clearly not straightforward for the women and the Black men in these representations. I think what we're seeing here is another version of the aspect of the gimmick that you brought up earlier – that it's a source of both pleasure and irritation. The affective ambivalence of at once liking and disliking the gimmick mirrors the form's economic equivocality. What's visible most clearly in *The Wig* – because the wig, *as* gimmick, is a strategy to get a wage – is the question of needing gimmicks to survive other capitalist gimmicks. There are no other forms available, so if you don't get a gimmick, *Gypsy's* strippers warn us, you will end up in jail, or dead in a dump: the gimmick is superfluous, yet necessary. That's the ultimate contradiction of this aesthetic category: that something overrated is so undeniably essential. Sometimes you need to laugh about this. That is why so many of the texts that I write about in *Theory of the Gimmick* are comedies – comedies that are also slightly horrific.

MSz: I feel this brings us close to Lauren Berlant's idea of "cruel optimism" – the ambiguous affect defining life in late capitalism; an affect simultaneously pointing to life's impossibility and dreadfulness, and one necessary for survival.[2] And those who are most marginalized need these tools – cruel optimism,

gimmicks – more than those who live more privileged lives. It makes me wonder whether gimmicks have subversive potential.

SN: I love the link that you just made between the contradiction of the superfluous but necessary gimmick and the contradiction at the heart of *Cruel Optimism*, a book that I really love. Thank you. I would agree there is something optimistic, if not subversive, about the gimmick, to slide into Lauren's vocabulary a little bit. And that is that the gimmick shows us how much we already know about capitalism, even if we don't know what an "equalized rate of profit" means. Without reading Marx, without picking up an economic textbook, there are ways in which we understand the system, because we live in it, we have bank accounts, pay rent, get wages. We're in the system, we're part of it, although most of us as workers and not as capitalists, and many of us as involuntary non-workers. The gimmick does suggest that even in our ways of feeling a certain kind of aesthetic pleasure and displeasure, and in the compulsion to communicate it to other people, we are registering something real about capitalism: the basic contradictions that arise with the universality of value as form. Just to name one of them: the continuous introduction of labor-saving innovations in production, which becomes structurally necessary for capitalists to survive their competition with one another, ends up repeatedly throwing people out of work. Yet the surplus or unpaid labor of workers is ultimately indispensable for creation of surplus value and economic growth, which is in turn paradoxically necessary for capitalism to maintain itself at a minimal level. So, the gimmick is optimistic in that it reminds us that we already know a lot about how the system works. "We" meaning anybody who uses this concept, which is why it's so important that the concept is universal, traveling across social classes and even national cultures. You can maybe tell me about Poland, but there are many nations that have a concept of the gimmick without using this exact or

specific word.

MSz: I was wondering about how one could translate the gimmick into Polish. There are words that call out dubious objects, commodities, or forms. But they would be closer in meaning to the trick, which doesn't precisely get at the materiality so important to the gimmick. A trick can also be a process, which puts more pressure on the person tricking than the thing. Your book did make me think of a category that's important in Polish culture, one that I've written about in relation to the post-socialist transition, which is the counterfeit, the fake, the knock-off. For me, the counterfeit is a figure of the transition into capitalism – on the one hand it becomes a popular critique, even an insult, of people and things who aspire to be like their Western counterparts and yet fail; on the other hand material counterfeits, knock-offs of Western brands, flood post-socialist markets. In the beginning of the transition, consumers are rarely able to spot the difference between original and fake, between Umas and Pumas, since they're just attracted to their "Western" look. But after a while a class of experts – journalists, corporate representatives, academics – appear and start schooling the public in the difference between original and knock-off. If you want to be a "mature European," then you need to know that you cannot buy counterfeits. I feel that this moment of recognition – only when recognized does a counterfeit become a counterfeit and a gimmick become a gimmick – as well as a sort of innate wisdom on the side of those who consciously bought counterfeits, people who shrugged off suggestions that a three-striped tracksuit is somehow ontologically better than a four-striped one, makes the category of gimmick and knock-off somewhat similar. Where the gimmick uncovers something true about valorization, the counterfeit is a critique of commodity fetishism.

SN: I think that's fascinating. Your take on the geopolitics of the knock-off makes me realize how fakes have already been swallowed by luxury branding. Gucci made a line of clothes with the logo "Guccy," adapting it from Dapper Dan, a cult African-American designer who basically made his own Gucci clothes. So "Guccy" is now a logo that you can get from Gucci, because some genius marketing director realized that the imitation could be reabsorbed. Here, we have the power of the luxury brand to incorporate resistance back into the brand, creating a layer of insider knowledge. If you see someone on the street wearing a Guccy jacket, you might think it's a fake, but then if you "really know," you might understand it's not. I do think what you're describing is related to this. And the gimmick certainly does carry connotations of fraudulence implying an intent to deceive, which then requires the educational training you're describing. So, they are related, but the gimmick seems a little more specific, in that the concept contains the recognition of the fraudulence but also of the fraudulence's social reality. But it is fascinating to hear about that category as well, the ersatz good.

MSz: Maybe we could go into your objects a little bit. There are many of them in the book, and I have my personal favorites, but even those would be too many to cover in one conversation. Just to point out that they're mainly examples of visual art and literature that are either representations of gimmicks or representations using the gimmick as a form – consciously or not – and all of them uncover something crucial about labor, value, and time. It's hard for me to pick one – are you in the mood for anything specific?

SN: I'm still fond of Helen DeWitt's *Lightning Rods*, a novel about a capitalist entrepreneur named Joe. The plot is fantastic. Joe starts a new business after realizing that heterosexual men

in corporations could be more productive and better-performing at their jobs if they were relieved of sexual frustrations in the workplace, frustrations which might lead to annoying and inconvenient sexual harassment lawsuits by female co-workers. The novel is hilarious, in part because, in the mindset of Joe, the possibility that female workers might also have sexual desires simply doesn't exist. But men must alleviate sexual pressure in the workplace and so Joe invents a kind of device. Earlier, when we were talking about words that approximate the gimmick in different languages, you pointed out that the Polish word would be closer to the trick. I think the French and Italians have this as well, and that the trick would be less an object and more a process or technique. But the gimmick can also be a technique – this is an interesting slippage – it can be an object, but also an idea, a concept, or a strategy. Joe's device is a computerized system through which, when experiencing distracting, productivity-undermining sexual desire, the man can go to his computer and arrange for a meeting with an anonymous female "bottom half," presented on a kind of sliding tray, like a vending machine, that comes out of the wall of the stall of a restroom designed to accommodate people with disabilities. He can then do his thing without knowing who the woman is. The novel is a kind of lasagna of gimmicks, and one of them is that the women employed to lie in the machine must be temps hired by the same corporation. Basically, for this productivity-enhancing machine to work – which requires maintaining the anonymity of the workers incorporated into it – it has to come in the form of a temp agency. The novel puts this gendered and sexualized emblem of unemployment at the heart of the American corporation. In her hilarious exploration of the character's gimmick, Helen De Witt is showing us that at the core of the American capitalist economy is the sexualized female temp, who by definition does not have secure employment. This is one of my favorite examples of a literary text that is not only about the capitalist gimmick,

but that takes on the artistic risk of utilizing it to meditate on its form.

MSz: Another important theme in your book is the ambiguity of art's relation to labor: the question of whether art is work and how it relates to work. We sometimes see art as working too much, other times as working too little. In the chapter about Torbjørn Rødland's photographs, you examine art's relationship to labor and value through a question that has haunted the medium of photography since its inception: is photography a snapshot registration of reality or is it a staged vision? The latter would require labor; the former would not.

SN: I really enjoyed writing that chapter. It was striking to me how ossified the debate around photography is – is it automatism or is it agency? I started wondering if I could twist that debate around, by seeing it rather as an anxiety about what Marx calls the "composition of capital," meaning the combination of dead labor and living labor in capitalist production. Rødland was a good example because, perhaps more than any other artist in the book, he was clearly willing to take the risk of making artworks that seem gimmicky in the effort to think more about what that form means. His photographs are very commercial looking – they could easily double as fashion photography. There are still nonetheless hard to categorize, because he doesn't do many of the typical moves we associate with contemporary art photography. He doesn't do the snapshot aesthetic that we associate with Nan Goldin, nor does he do those monumental Jeff Wall images. Rødland's photographs are sometimes cheap looking and often contain a sexual joke. They don't have the austere look of conceptual photography. Yet I argue that they are an extension of that genre, in which "the concept" is approached as something already compromised or damaged, rather than as an idea capable of elevating our perception of a physical object, like the gas station or the

swimming pool in Ed Ruscha's photographs.
Rødland often uses a device in which a hand comes from the outside of the frame of the photograph to diddle with something inside. I had a fun time with this trope. It reminded me of this product called Hamburger Helper: basically, a mix of dried pasta and powdered sauce that was initially marketed at women to make a quick dinner. You put in hamburger and then it becomes part of the pasta. The commodity has a very iconic advertising mascot – a white hand with a face – and a very distinctive jingle, which goes: "Hamburger Helper helped her hamburger help her make a great meal." Hamburger Helper (a commodity) – helped her hamburger (another commodity) – help the unwaged reproductive laborer – make a great meal. I'm sure Rødland did not think of the Hamburger Helper hand, but part of what makes his work so interesting to me is that it is a meditation on the form of the gimmick, its powers and contradictions.



MSz: To me, the disembodied Hamburger Helper is also a gimmick because it's a manipulation. Obviously, it's quicker than making a meal from scratch, but you're still putting in the labor yourself. In your analysis of Rødland's gimmicky device, you show that it's not about encouraging us to imagine the world outside the frame, but a straightforward admission that the inside and outside of the frame are one world. It's a hand that's fixing something on the photograph and is captured in it. It uncovers the staged character of the setting, but perhaps, more importantly, it shows us the labor.

SN: That argument was assisted by Eyal Peretz's concept of the "off-screen," which is the space that is outside the frame but belongs to the image. And that proved to be a useful concept

to think of how Rødland's photographs counterintuitively activate a kind of abstraction. The gimmick hand, coming in from the space that is "outside," but at the same time "of," helps us to recognize a level of abstraction in these images that one might not otherwise see.

By the way, an anecdote: I decided that I had to make some Hamburger Helper – I was curious. And can I just say that it's very difficult to make – it takes forever, it's very frustrating. I don't think I did it wrong, but it was definitely not fast. I don't see why anyone wouldn't just use sauce. I don't recommend it. The product still exists but has been rebranded recently; it is now marketed to male college students.

MSz: Could you talk a little about your interventions in the field of aesthetic theory, both in *Theory of the Gimmick* and *Our Aesthetic Categories*? In both books, you introduce vernacular aesthetic categories, but you also uncover the performativity, sociality, and emotionality of aesthetic judgements. What do you think the stake in this shift is – why is it important and why is it important today?

SN: It's strange how these communicative aspects of aesthetic experience are downplayed. When people talk about aesthetics, in whatever discipline, they often immediately go to the experience of form. But what makes an experience is also judgement or evaluation, and a very strange kind: spontaneous, affective, and not initially based on a pre-existing concept. A concept might arrive later, but it's not there in the moment of the judgement itself. So, the stake is actually just to remind people that there is this verbal, discursive dimension to aesthetic experience which already alerts us to its intrinsic intersubjectivity. And again, this is the counterintuitive argument Kant builds across *The Critique of Judgement*. Ultimately, judgements are not really about objects. Even though objects trigger them, and they can't happen without objects, in some kind

of deeper and more important sense they are about our relation to other subjects. That's not immediately apparent at all. Once you start to pay attention to the judgement side of the aesthetic experience, and to see this as a speech act – separate from one's perception of the form, but also glued to it affectively – you start to recognize the sociality of aesthetic experience. You ultimately can't have it by yourself.

As a literary critic, I just find it fascinating that the aesthetic judgment is such a strange kind of speech. First of all, it's a speech act that can get you into trouble. It would be less controversial to say: "Well, to me, this is a gimmick. I understand that, for you, coming from somewhere else, it isn't, but I judge it this way." That seems logical, but what's weird and more significant is that we simply can't put it that way. We have to forcefully state: "This thing is a gimmick." And Kant is very clear that if you can indeed express yourself in a weaker way, if you're not feeling compelled to turn your judgment into a demand for agreement, you're not making an aesthetic judgement – you're making what he calls a "judgement of taste." Which are statements of liking or disliking that we don't argue about because we do not feel the same compulsion to put our judgment in a grammatical form that implicitly demands universal agreement. I just like sitting in this as a problem: this category of speech, which is at once so absurd and presumptuous, and yet universal and unavoidable. Kant tries to get at what is rational about this utterly illogical thing we say when experiencing aesthetic pleasure. The universality is hard to grasp because the experience is undeniably subjective and affectively spontaneous. And that spontaneity is part of what compels the sense that the statement should be objective. Not "I think" or "I judge," but "it is."

Even recognizing and marveling a little at the weirdness of this category of speech is a kind of pleasure. But then, when you see that our aesthetic judgments tell us something about the way

we relate to other people in a specific historical moment, and that this communicative aspect is immanent to the very having or structuring of aesthetic experience, we start to see how closer attention to the judgement side of the aesthetic category can help us think more about our sociality. The example in the book that brings this out most vividly is Nicola Barker's *Clear: A Transparent Novel*. This "novel of ideas" is organized entirely around the public's response to a gimmick or aesthetically suspicious object, more of a stunt than an artwork: the United States magician David Blaine's act of starving himself in a Perspex box suspended over a park in London. But it is ultimately a novel about the surprisingly diverse ways in which people share their aesthetic pleasures and displeasures with one another, and in response to dubious works of art in particular.

Aesthetic judgments don't necessarily need to name the thing they are judging; I can judge a piece of furniture in a dollhouse as cute by saying "it's cute," but I can also do so by hunching over the diminutive object and cooing. This is where Stanley Cavell comes in with his helpful concept of the "perlocutionary utterance." He uses it when talking about ordinary language philosopher J. L. Austin's interest in showing how language is so much more than the making of propositional statements. Austin shows that language does things – it can warn, it can persuade, it can promise – and that is not only the transmission of a meaning, but also a performance. One of Austin's categories of performative utterance – the perlocutionary act – draws its performative force from something very different than the illocutionary act, which tends to dominate Austin's theory of speech acts overall, and is all about power, law, and commands. Illocutionary acts like, "I sentence you to two years in jail," are rule-bound and tend to name the action they perform. In contrast, Austin's examples of perlocutionary speech acts are ones involving affect and for which there are no clear rules for success: insulting, complimenting, seducing, insinuating.

Here, in contrast to sentencing or betting, we can't accomplish the act by simply naming or announcing it. If I tried to persuade someone by stating, "I persuade you," the person would just laugh at me. In order to achieve their intended effects, certain speech acts require that we perform them in ways that are indirect – and aesthetic judgement is one of them. I can therefore call something a gimmick by saying "That's a gimmick," but also by saying, "Bullshit." Or by singing and dancing, like the strippers in *Gypsy*. A great deal of creative improvisation can enter into the performance of the speech act. There is thus an aesthetic dimension to the very performance of an aesthetic judgment, which others can then evaluate aesthetically in turn. The gimmick brings this out because this particular judgement can be performed in so many ways.

MSz: You write about gushing, and I immediately thought of the Home Shopping Network, or any sort of TV channel selling commodities, where their entire content is gushing over gimmicks in a very gimmicky way. They really have to excel in this specific aesthetic judgement to perform the constant and prolonged auctioning of these utterly mediocre or gimmicky commodities. In gushing, we can also recognize aesthetic judgements as gimmicky.

SN: Yes, and it's interesting to consider the way in which other people's aesthetic judgements can sometimes repulse us – not because of the content of the judgment, but because of the specific way in which it is performed. One might agree that the thing someone is gushing over is beautiful, but there is something about the manner in which they are demanding our agreement that turns us off. The novelist Henry James was obsessed with this – he has numerous scenes in his novels where people are judging other people's styles of judging. He seems to have been fascinated by gushing in particular as a kind of inflated, extravagant praise – aesthetic evaluation that seems excessive. Our feeling of this is already the structure of the gimmick,

because in their style of praise, somebody is implicitly attributing value to something in a way that seems wrong. And that to me is the essence of the gimmick – the sense that there's something wrong with an entire mode of valorization.

MSz: What a great end note! Do you have a new project?

SN: I had to re-read a lot of Marxist texts for *Theory of the Gimmick*, and there are still some things that puzzle me about *Capital*. Mainly, why is it that, in a text that is such a lucid critique, illuminating an entire system in a way never done before, there is also so much that seems deliberately hidden? I'm thinking a lot about why *Capital* looks the way it does, why it's written the way it is. I don't know what exactly I'm going to do next, but I think I'm going to go back to that book.

MSz: Thank you so much, that was great!

SN: Thank you for the great questions and for reading the book!

1 Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

2 Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).