

SIANNE NGAI: THEORY OF THE GIMMICK:  
AESTHETIC JUDGMENT AND CAPITALIST FORM

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In the preface to his, by now canonical, book *Marxism and Form* (1971), Frederic Jameson wrote that it was time for the “Anglo-American tradition to learn to think dialectically.”<sup>1</sup> He hoped that his book, which introduced readings of Benjamin, Adorno, Marcuse, Lukács and Bloch, would contribute to this. Jameson also wrote that Anglo-American philosophy’s hostility to critical thinking lay in its own specific intellectual history: “that mixture of political liberalism, empiricism, and logical positivism.”<sup>2</sup> We can continue Jameson’s brief genealogy of Anglo-American philosophy and add that such theoretical and intellectual history—together with French theory imported in the 1960s and 70s—became the building blocks of what in the USA in the 80s and 90s developed into cultural theory.<sup>3</sup>

In her latest book *Theory of the Gimmick: Aesthetic Judgment and Capitalist Form* (2020), cultural theorist, literary critic, and professor of English at University of Chicago Sianne Ngai shows that cultural theory, with comparative literature at the forefront, *has* learned to think dialectically. At least partly. Moreover, the book demonstrates something that Jameson could perhaps never have dreamt of. Cultural theory has not only caught up with the critical lineage from Hegel to Adorno via Marx, but has developed an expertise in an advanced Hegelian Marxism, prevalent in discourses such as German value-theory and discussed in communist non-academic journals such as *End Notes* and *Théorie Communiste*. But *Theory of the Gimmick* is also firmly grounded in a cultural theory tradition. Something that is most noticeable is that it understands culture as a structure, in which each part is assumed as a “text” to be analysed frontally and consistently.

At its best, the book shows how different cultural expressions—novels, films, poems, and conceptual photography from the late 1890s to 2012—have mediated modern capitalism and its ongoing crisis. As one example, in James Baldwin’s essayistic “Letter from a Region in My Mind” (1962), the author

beautifully writes that he needs a gimmick to survive crime and unemployment, which Ngai refers to as “racial capitalism.” (p. 10). Ngai’s method of applying advanced Marxist theory onto cultural phenomena and treating them uniformly—from smiley faces to horror, to experimental art films—works less well with the book’s overall argument. Whilst Ngai’s main thesis is that the gimmick is the main aesthetic form of modern capitalism, the fact that art emerges as a distinct modern cultural form in such a context is not dealt with at all.<sup>4</sup> Although Ngai’s work, together with other North American thinkers, such as Leigh Claire La Berge and Jasper Barnes, could be described as new Hegelian Marxist cultural theory, Jameson’s question remains unaddressed: is it dialectical enough, or is it simply a gimmick?

Although wonders were used in precapitalist times, Ngai argues that:

“[t]he capitalist gimmick, however, is both a wonder and a trick. It is a form we marvel at and distrust, admire and disdain. Indeed, the gimmick is the perpetual slippage between these positive and negative judgments in a way that sparks comedy, opening a porthole to this genre of ambivalence in a way that the precapitalist device does not.” (p. 54).

Specifically, the gimmick reflects capitalist modernity from the 1920s to the present, and its ongoing crisis (from the 1930s depression to the oil crisis of 1973, on to the 2008 financial crisis and its developments in 2011 and 2016). This is also something that Ngai ties to the “timeline” of the term: “The *Oxford English Dictionary* dates its first appearance to 1926, while Google shows its steadily rising usage coming to a spike in 1973...” (p. 4). With one or two exceptions, most cited examples are from the same time period.

Ngai’s overall claim is surprising, since categories like montage, the ready-made, and the new might first come to mind when one considers mediations of modernity in art and culture of this period. One of the consequences of Ngai’s approach is that the gimmick as an aesthetic category subsumes all the others. For example, she argues that the ready-made at its core is a gimmick, since the ready-made, like the gimmick, uses such ideas as “pre-existing discursive materials or objets trouvés” (p. 106) for the purpose of “attracting attention or publicity.” (p. 105). Ngai’s book is also productively unsettling because it argues for an aesthetic category that is rarely, if ever, considered and insists

that it is “latent in every single thing in every made thing in capitalism,” and thus “can be found anywhere (politics, business culture, social media...)” (p. 47). Whilst this grand claim is the strength of the book, it also reveals something about cultural theory’s tendency to generalise concepts to an extent that they become mere signposts.

But what else for Ngai makes the gimmick such a crucial form for modern capitalist societies? How does it reflect capitalist modernity and especially the ongoing crisis of contemporary capitalism from the 1970s onwards? To build her theory of the gimmick, Ngai departs from the term’s most basic meaning: a technical or funny trick and/or device used to seduce temporarily. The gimmick is represented in the book by such varied phenomena as the basic ideogram of the smiley-face used in phone messages, a wig in the comedy novel *The Wig: A Mirror Image* (1966) used by the protagonist as a means to whitewash themselves to get a job, and the weird old-school looking colour setting in Canadian artist Stan Douglas’s essay-film *Suspiria* (2003).

These examples “look” gimmicky according to Ngai—weird, funny, out of sync, etc.—because they reflect, in a specific way, the core of capitalism. What is this specific way then? Drawing on a tradition of thinkers in Marxism, such as Isaak Illich Rubin, Moishe Postone, and Patrick Murray, Ngai understands capitalism as a historically specific social relation. At the heart of this relation is “the extraction of surplus-value from living labour,” (p. 4) which creates a distance between the socially necessary labour needed to produce a commodity and its price. This is capitalism’s social form and structural problem. The gimmick, as an aesthetic form, reflects this discord between capital and labour. It does so, for example, by using technology that is too old or too new. “[...] the simplicity of Douglas’s technique for generating the spooky look of colour escaping its containers evokes the anachronism at the heart of the gimmick form.” (p. 239). Since modes of production change and transform over time, what being a gimmick is also changes. “When a device does not strike us as suspiciously over- or underperforming, we will not perceive it as a gimmick but as a neutral device.” (p. 5). In the Broadway musical *Gypsy* (1959) sex workers need a trick—a gimmick—to make them more attractive on the market. “You gotta get a gimmick/If you wanna get applause,” they sing (p. 15). The trick can be technological, idea-driven, or technical. When represented as a gimmick, the trick is by necessity out of sync (looks too old or too new, works too hard or too little). The discrepancy is what enables it, according

to Ngai, to render visible the disjoint of labour from value that is the ontological basis for social life in capitalism.

Intertwined in the main argument is also a claim that the gimmick reflects the limits of capital accumulation and expansion. Drawing on Marxist historians like Robert Brenner and value-theorists like Robert Kurz, who, in slightly different ways, argue that capitalism as a system has been on a long downturn since the 1970s, Ngai also traces this tendency in the term's usage. She writes: "The circulation of 'gimmick' thus begins in earnest with the onset of global recession in the 1930s and surges at the beginning of the turbulent 1970s, in tandem with stagnating wages, rising household debt, and increasing market volatility." (p. 4). Since the gimmick is proximate chronologically as well as formally to the ontological crisis of capitalism, the gimmick as a form, Ngai contends, doesn't merely demonstrate the fundamental laws of capitalist accumulation, but also its structural failures. "The gimmick is what obtrudes." (p. 201). The focus on crisis becomes evident in the chapters that treat financialization and debt. For example, in Chapter 4 "It Follows, or Financial Imps," Ngai writes about David Robert Mitchell's psychological slick horror film *It Follows* (2014). Set in post-industrial rust-belt USA, the film narrates a story, in which the intercourse between some young people becomes a curse that needs to be passed on, similarly to the way debt is passed on infinitely. In contrast to Hollywood films, such as Martin Scorsese's *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013), in which the financial world is portrayed in an entertaining rapidly moving story, *It Follows*, Ngai writes, reflects the temporality of contemporary finance both in its "narrative structure of seemingly endlessly transferrable deferrals as well as in the content of what is deferred." (p. 160). Ngai focuses specifically on what she calls a financial gimmick in the film, a so-called doodad, which looks like a make-up mirror but is an electronic device on which the main character reads Fjodor Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*. The device, Ngai writes "seems technologically backward and futuristic at once" and therefore "...the representation of the financial gimmick in *It Follows* seems designed to counter the allure of contemporary financial products almost point for point." (p. 161).

A final aspect of Ngai's central argument, which contributes significantly to its huge scope is the following: the gimmick is not just an aesthetic category, which reflects the social form of capitalist modernity. Building on her previous work (Ngai 2015) on aesthetic categories like the zany, the cute, and the interesting, Ngai argues the gimmick is also an aesthetic judgment in the

Kantian sense (a judgement that is not cognitive but has an indeterminacy between concepts and intuitions) and a performative act. “Calling something a gimmick is a distancing judgment, a way to apotropaically ward off the trick’s attractions by proclaiming ourselves unconvinced by them.” (p. 55). In claiming the gimmick as a performative judgment, Ngai draws on J.L. Austin’s widely cited “performative utterances” that name what they do, as well as on the analytically oriented Kant scholar Stanley Cavell’s notion of “passionate utterance” (an utterance that doesn’t have to name what it is). The main point that Ngai seems to want to make is that to say that something is cheap or a hype (to say that it is a gimmick, without uttering the actual term “gimmick”) is to also perform the activity of producing aesthetic judgments which makes the gimmick into a gimmick. “...our experience of the gimmick underscores the surprisingly dynamic formalism—the formalizing activity of aesthetic judgement overall.” (p. 3). An example of this is Nicola Barker’s *Clear: A Transparent Novel* (2003). The book, which is about a professional illusionist and his work is, according to Ngai, substantially made up of the aesthetic judgements of this work by the illusionist (he is a fake, a liar, and so on), which, in turn, affects the work itself. Almost paraphrasing Austin, Ngai writes that this novel demonstrates how “[t]he affective style of an aesthetic judgment’s verbal performance matters for our determination of the judgment’s felicity.” (p. 135).

*Theory of the Gimmick* is thus built around three main arguments. Firstly, that it is the main aesthetic form of modernity because it reflects the social form of capitalism; secondly, that it highlights the ongoing and built-in crises of the same period; and thirdly, that it also reflects modernity’s perhaps most crucial philosophical innovation, the aesthetic judgment. These three core points are brought forth in the two introductory chapters, which introduce the broad and ambitious theoretical framework of the book. But they are also repeated and evoked throughout the following seven chapters, each of which focuses on a couple of artworks. This makes the book, at times, fall into a performative circulation of argumentation, in which there is a tendency to describe something and then to ontologise that description. It is as if the reflection on what is being studied becomes what is being studied—a gimmick, perhaps? This might also be the result of the way the book has been pulled together, which itself is representative of gimmicky capitalist academia (several chapters have been previously published as articles in academic journals).

*Theory of the Gimmick* is at its best where it links what Marx called the real abstraction of social life in modern and contemporary capitalism and how this might be mediated or represented in culture. In Chapter 5 “Visceral Abstractions,” the author churns through an impressive amount of research on Marx’s understanding of abstract labour to then make a detailed reading of contemporary writer, poet, and essayist Rob Halpern’s intriguing and beautifully written *Music for Porn* (2012). In this poetic essay, Ngai shows how contemporary labour and exchange-value are made visceral and concrete through poetry that highlights the sexuality and commodification of a male soldier. Describing Harper’s writing, Ngai notes: “Capitalist abstraction and their visceral effects intermingle constantly with the language of sex, with concepts like circulation, overproduction, and trade imbalance mixed into descriptions of blow jobs.” (p. 188).

Another main contribution of the book is how, through the analysis of multiple cultural expressions ranging from the late 1890s to the mid 2010s, it shows how capitalist structures have been determined by categories like sex and race for a long time. This is perhaps best demonstrated in Chapter 8 “Henry James’ ‘Same Secret Principle,’” in which the reader is introduced to a close reading of James’s novels from the end of the 1890s and early 1900s where almost all the protagonists work without a wage. Ngai shows, how James in using “cheap” and “poor” literary forms, such as bad metaphors, hyperboles, and narrative coincidence (gimmicks), James’s novels thematise hidden labour, for example, the reproductive labour performed in the domestic sphere. “James’ labo[ur] and secrecy plot, in short, contains the seed of a theory of gender and deindustrialization: a phenomenon often thought of as specific to moments like the 1970s...” (p. 302).

Recurring topics in the book are the gimmick’s proximity to terms like illusion, wonder, and secrecy. Another crucial point is how the gimmick constantly reveals itself as a gimmick: a fiction that reveals itself as a fiction. “The gimmick is thus capitalism’s most successful aesthetic category but also its biggest embarrassment and structural problem.” (2) This is also what makes *Theory of the Gimmick* worth reading, since it repeatedly highlights what Marx called the fetish and fictitious aspect of the commodity, and that the only way in which such system can be reflected or negated is through illusions, fiction, and jokes. Whether the gimmick is the aesthetic category that best reflects this, I am not entirely sure, but Ngai shows that it is definitely a good candidate.

Josefine Wikström

- 1 Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton UP, 2015), xi.
- 2 Jameson, *Marxism and Form*, x.
- 3 Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club: A story of ideas in America* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2001) and Peter Osborne, *Philosophy in Cultural Theory* (London: Routledge, 2000).
- 4 Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 1997 [1970]) and Nicholas Brown, *Autonomy: The Social Ontology of Art Under Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).