

Ngai, Sianne. *Theory of the Gimmick: Aesthetic Judgment and Capitalist Form*. Cambridge, MA, and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2020. 416 pages. \$35.00 (hardcover). ISBN 978–0–674–98454–7.

Published in a time of social, economic, and political unrest, Sianne Ngai’s *Theory of the Gimmick* explores an aesthetic form that embodies uncertainty. Is the gimmick working too hard? Or is it working too little? Is it attractive or repellant? Dynamic or inert? In truth the gimmick is all of these things, and its functionality arises from its contradictions. Ngai’s sweeping account of gimmicks in literature, horror films, photography, digital installation art, and advertising, among other things, captures the pervasiveness of an aesthetic category that raises significant questions about how capitalism structures our social interactions and how much longer we can (or should) sustain an economic system that renders certain lives disposable.

The gimmick “lies latent in our encounter with every artifact in capitalism,” and while we tend to lose interest the moment we label something gimmicky because of its apparent deficiency, Ngai gives us good reason to pay attention (140). Her third book, *Theory of the Gimmick* continues her project of examining aesthetic categories that have not received adequate or serious scholarly attention because their “everydayness” makes them seemingly inferior to Enlightenment categories like the sublime and the beautiful. It is, as Charlie Tyson has stated, her most explicitly Marxist work to date.¹ The significance of the gimmick, Ngai argues, is that it is an entirely capitalist aesthetic that links value, labor, and time. And yet it does more than simply reflect capitalism’s laws of production; in doing so the gimmick reveals the limitations of a system susceptible to crisis.

Essentially, Ngai positions the gimmick as an aesthetic, economic, and ultimately political object that gives us a new framework for understanding capitalism and importantly reveals its vulnerabilities. When we think of the gimmick, we think of something overrated, overpriced, and deceptive. Something that draws us in even as it inspires aversion. And yet, in demonstrating the gimmick’s capacity to make visible the “wrongness” of capitalism, Ngai reframes the category as one that is highly relevant to the social issues at the heart of the recent protests across the United States. In doing so she extends the relevance of her project to a much broader audience than those invested in questions regarding economics, labor, or even aesthetics. Like her earlier books, *Theory of the Gimmick* demonstrates once again the relevance of aesthetics to conversations surrounding

literature, philosophy, history, and ethics, and especially to the kind of rich interdisciplinary work Ngai herself performs.

As a Victorianist whose research focuses on literature and science, rather than aesthetic or Marxist concerns, my own interest in Ngai's work derives from her emphasis on the gimmick as an aesthetic category that reveals the "peculiarly asocial kinds of sociality" produced by capitalism (1). While the opening chapter theorizes the gimmick from a principally Marxist perspective, the remaining seven chapters focus on artwork that reflects and employs the gimmick in ways that help readers think more dynamically about how our social encounters structure and are structured by value, labor, and time. For instance, the second chapter turns to traditionally non-Marxist thinking about the gimmick to explore its manifestation as a technique of enchantment that is both transparent and opaque. In what she describes as a "freestanding prologue" to the subsequent chapter on the novel of ideas, Ngai demonstrates how the gimmick prompts us to participate in at least two different acts of imagination: first, we imagine what we can and cannot know about the gimmick's production. Ngai uses the example of Alfred Gell, who describes being enchanted by a match-stick model of the Salisbury Cathedral that he both thinks he could easily replicate but also thinks might be harder to produce than it appears. What enchants us is essentially a disappearance of labor, one that, according to Ngai, costs or even harms the worker. Second, we imagine others' perceptions of the object, idea, or technique. To declare something a gimmick means to see through its duplicity, but it also means to assume another observer who fails to recognize its deceit. "At their deepest level aesthetic judgments are not about objects at all," Ngai tells us, "they concern our relation to other judging subjects" (95). And in the case of the gimmick, it seems that these judgments and the relationships they give rise to tend to be negative.

The most dangerous aspects of these social relationships are apparent throughout Ngai's fourth chapter on the financial gimmick, which she calls "the gimmick of gimmicks" (171). Through her analysis of Robert Louis Stevenson's "The Bottle Imp" (1891) and the film *It Follows* (2014), Ngai not only captures how the gimmick reinforces capitalism's scheme of "winners and losers," perpetuating the devaluation of particular bodies, but also demonstrates how the aesthetic manipulates time to delay moments of crisis. Both narratives involve characters whose survival depends on transferring their own debts to others, and both conclude with a person deemed economically unproductive winding up with the gimmick. In "The Bottle Imp," this person is a convict who purchases an imp that can grant any wish but will ultimately drag him to hell if he

fails to sell the object at a loss before his death. He makes the purchase knowing this will be impossible because by the time he buys it there is no currency smaller than what he has paid, but also knowing that he is expected to go to hell regardless based on his social position. What this example ultimately does is force readers to confront their own complicity in a system that excludes certain individuals from social protection; those who lack social and political power are more vulnerable to gimmicks, not because their aesthetic judgments are less refined or nuanced, but because they often have to subscribe to or utilize gimmicks as a means of survival, as Ngai points out not only in this chapter but also in her introduction. If what distinguishes the gimmick from other aesthetic categories is “its intimate relationship to the social forms capitalism generates ‘behind the backs’ of capitalists and workers on the basis of the same three measurements it uniquely links together,” then attending to it more seriously might help us recognize social forms that receive too little scrutiny because of how fully embedded they are in our everyday lives (36). And while Ngai’s inquiry moves across examples from different periods and genres, it is not difficult to imagine how a narrower investigation of gimmicks through the lens of Victorian Studies, Twentieth-Century American Studies, Cultural Studies, or any other number of fields might prove generative.

“The Bottle Imp” provides a striking example of how gimmicks sustain the most troubling aspects of capitalist society, and also raises questions regarding the valuation of bodies that Ngai takes up in her fifth chapter in relation to Marx’s theory of abstract labor. The primary focus of the chapter is Robert Halpern’s *Music for Porn* (2012), a book of war poetry that reveals the distressing position of soldiers as national symbols whose value arises from the depletion of their bodies. In drawing our attention to this particular work, Ngai prompts readers to ask: What does it mean when we value an individual more for their death than for their life? Is this really the way that we value soldiers? And if so, why? Through her account of capitalist abstractions, Ngai forces readers to recognize that though we cannot help but perceive and discuss value as an inherent property of individual objects, it is actually “a process and a complex, dynamic relationship among multiple actors” (195). Value, even the value of human life, is unstable and negotiable in capitalist society. And while Ngai does not address these questions here, she compels us to ask who the “multiple actors” might be at any given moment, how we are complicit in perpetuating ethically suspect modes of valuation, and how we might, instead, become complicit in changing the process.

The difficulty of altering capitalist structures becomes clearer in the next two chapters, where Ngai turns more explicitly to how gimmicks reconfigure time. In her sixth chapter, Ngai calls attention to the repeated confrontation between viewer and idea in Torbjørn Rødland's photography to argue that "ambiguities about value and time in capitalism stem from ambiguities about labor" (209). Ultimately, she argues that the juxtaposition of human-contrived and mechanical elements in Rødland's work captures a tension between living and dead labor. What we find in Rødland's photographs are bodies manipulated by external forces that intrude into the frame, resulting in a blend of contradictory temporalities, crisis and stasis, that we cannot resolve. This temporal instability is central to the subsequent chapter as well, which investigates the gimmick as special effect through a consideration of two art pieces titled *Suspiria*, a 1977 horror movie by Dario Argento and a 2003 DVD installation by Stan Douglas. The latter serves as the primary focus of the chapter, and reflects Douglas's interest in what he calls "temporal polyphony" (229). *Suspiria* uses a looping and randomizing device that Douglas created to generate a seemingly endless series of "recombinant" narratives—distinct stories made by recombining segments from limited source material—that consist of scenes of bargaining and exchange from Grimm's fairy tales running over a grey background of surveillance footage. The dialogue, the behavior of color, which bleeds out of the figures it should inhabit, and the propagation of essentially infinite stories all contribute to Ngai's claim that *Suspiria* reveals, among other things, the illusion that properly timing exchanges can produce new value. Unlike Rødland's photographs, Douglas's installation is not obviously engaged with the gimmick or inherently gimmicky itself. However, it relies on a kind of "jerry-rigging" that Ngai argues is also at the heart of capitalism. Competing temporalities, uncertainties surrounding labor: these qualities underscore how gimmicks, and capitalism at large, keep us on our toes in ways that make it difficult to develop alternative systems. Aware that there is something wrong with capitalism, we remain subject to its social structures.

The propensity of capitalism to create "asocial kinds of sociality" is evident in the final chapter, which focuses on another kind of narrative looping: a repeated plot about labor and secrecy that recurs in three of Henry James's works. The emergence of this narrative coincides with changes in James's own production habits as a result of illness, which required him to move from writing long-hand without others present to dictating his work to an employee. Whereas Ngai's account of *Suspiria* suggests the futility of altering value by altering time, her analysis of James's writing

showcases the difficulty of altering the nature of labor itself, particularly in regards to women. At the heart of James's narratives is the gimmick. In "The Birth Place" (1902), the protagonist must develop a gimmick of his own to counter a gimmick established by his employers. In *The Sacred Fount* (1901), a similar effort to expose a gimmick (or secret) fails, and ultimately makes the novel itself unsuccessful. In *The Golden Bowl* (1903), the gimmick manifests as a disparity between male and female labor. Highlighting the unfair burden placed on women, Ngai explains how the novel reflects the idea that "feminine work must not be recognized as work, and more covert working must be done to ensure that it remains undetectable" (290). In other words, the women in *The Golden Bowl* must work too hard to perpetuate the perception that they work too little. Ultimately, Ngai suggests that James tells this story, "a person struggling to get to a truth obscured by everyday forms finds herself secretly and even more laboriously reconcealing it," because he was anticipating changes to labor that would characterize the twentieth century (298). And perhaps Ngai chooses to conclude with James precisely because we ourselves can relate to these protagonists, knowing that capitalism is flawed, knowing that there is something repellant about it just as there is something repellant about the gimmick, but drawn to it and prone to preserve it regardless.

Ngai's *Theory of the Gimmick* contributes significantly to her own field, and also demonstrates how the gimmick might be generative for anyone eager to think more carefully about social relationships. She invites us to think more deeply about how bodies, labor, and artistic production in particular, are valued in the context capitalist culture, building on her account of the cute, the zany, and the interesting² to address what she persuasively claims is an even larger aesthetic phenomenon permeating our daily lives. The capaciousness of her inquiry is both an asset and an obstacle for readers, allowing her to capture the profound influence of the gimmick in all areas of capitalist life, but also making it difficult for those working within the narrower confines of their own fields to grasp the particularities of the gimmick as it applies to their own source material. Of course, this aspect of Ngai's work is also what opens seemingly infinite questions that might be productively addressed by scholars working on anything from Victorian literature to philosophy. And whereas the capitalist sublime tends to foreclose conversation, Ngai explains, the gimmick "makes us want to talk" (32).

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Notes

1. Charlie Tyson, “The Professor of Gimmicks: Sianne Ngai Is the Most Influential Literary Theorist of Her Generation,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* June 25, 2020, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-professor-of-gimmicks>
2. Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).