



**University of Dundee**

## **Theory of the Gimmick: Aesthetic Judgment and Capitalist Form**

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*Published in:*  
New Global Studies

*DOI:*  
[10.1515/ngs-2021-0005](https://doi.org/10.1515/ngs-2021-0005)

*Publication date:*  
2021

*Document Version*  
Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication in Discovery Research Portal](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Smith, D. (2021). Theory of the Gimmick: Aesthetic Judgment and Capitalist Form: Review Essay Theory of the Gimmick: Aesthetic Judgement and Capitalist Form, Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2020. 416 pp. *New Global Studies*, 0(0), 1-8. <https://doi.org/10.1515/ngs-2021-0005>

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Sianne Ngai, *Theory of the Gimmick: Aesthetic Judgement and Capitalist Form*, Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, £28.95.

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This is the penultimate version of the following article: Review Essay Theory of the Gimmick: Aesthetic Judgement and Capitalist Form, Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2020. 416 pp (available here: <https://doi.org/10.1515/ngs-2021-0005>)

One of my favourite courses to teach is an undergraduate module called 'Introduction to Aesthetics.' The content and themes of the module have changed over the years, but the first class always starts with the same question: 'When did you last visit the dentist?'

A ripple of perplexity invariably follows. Some students make as if to cover their mouths. Others grimace and look disapproving. Some smile. Some look to be wrestling with imaginary drills. The ripple is sometimes slight. Unless I'm very much deluded, however, it is dependably there, year on year, waiting to bridge into other questions. I then ask: 'Did you get an anaesthetic?' Then: 'Do you know that 'an-aesthetic' literally means 'without feeling'?' And then, the punchline: 'If the job of an an-aesthetic is to take feeling away, then the job of an introduction to aesthetics must be to put sense and feeling back in focus – to refine and criticise concepts and judgements related to sense and ways of feeling.'

Starting those classes with that question is one gimmick. Starting this review with an anecdote about it is another: 'two gimmicks for the price of one'.... Except now it's three, because I've just used a 'Buy One Get One Free' cliché. And therein lies Sianne Ngai's deep thesis in this wonderful book: gimmicks proliferate under capitalism, because capitalism gets everywhere, and because the gimmick is the aesthetic form most integral to producing value for that system.

What is a 'gimmick'? Etymologically, the word stems from 'gimac', an anagram of 'magic.' As Ngai relates, the word originated among street magicians in the USA in the 1920s, who used it as a code word for props and tricks of misdirection. And this colloquial origin has tracked the gimmick ever since: whereas an aesthetic category like 'the sublime' is, Ngai argues, a 'theory word used primarily in the writing of academics', gimmicks '[come] to the fore for [their] pervasiveness in everyday conversation across social divides' (p 33).

With this pervasiveness comes polysemy. Tracking this across her book, Ngai describes gimmicks in a massive range of ways: as 'overrated devices' (p 1); 'aesthetically suspicious object[s]' (p 1); hauntological presences that 'lie latent in every made thing in capitalism' (p 5); 'deus ex machina' (p 28); 'damaged form[s]' (p 39); 'labour-saving devices' (p 52); 'distancing judgement[s]' (p 55); 'special effects' (p 224); 'MacGyver-like trick[s]' (p 239); and 'registration[s] of uncertainty' (p 273).

It would be mistaken to view Ngai's approach as tending towards semantic bloat, however. Instead, Ngai invites the polysemy of the gimmick as part of a hermeneutic approach that sits proximate to deconstruction, the practice of 'imaginative variation' in the phenomenological tradition, and that of 'constellating' in the critical theory of Adorno and Benjamin. As for her thesis, it emerges early and clearly, and features as a strong motif throughout the book:

The gimmick is ... capitalism's most successful aesthetic category but also its biggest embarrassment and structural problem. With its dubious yet attractive promises about the saving of time, the reduction of labour, and the expansion of value, it gives us tantalising glimpses of a world in which social life will no longer be organised by labour, while indexing

one that continuously regenerates the conditions keeping labour's social necessity in place (p 2).

'Time', 'labour' and 'value' are, Ngai holds, the three terms most crucial to the gimmick's constitutive ambivalence between attraction and 'fraudulence.' Consider that first question I ask my students: it is time saving because I don't have to think of a different question; it is labour reducing because I don't have to spend the weekend before the first class worrying what the new question will sound like and whether it will work or not; and it is value expanding because I can depend on it to segue into other questions (and transpose it into a - perhaps cheesy - introduction for a review essay).

All of which provokes the kind of churlish 'cut to the chase' question capitalism is so good at seeding in us: if 'time', 'labour', and 'value' are manifestly so precious as part of what Ngai calls our 'capitalist lifeworld', does this book give good value for the time and labour required to read it?

That the answer to this question is emphatically 'yes' can, I think, be underscored through attention to three key aspects of the book. First, Ngai pulls off a delicious 'transcritical' balancing act between articulating a convincing theoretical position and immersing us in an exciting range of source materials. Second, this book is aesthetically empowering: as ought to be apparent by now, *Theory of the Gimmick* by no means sets out to *reduce* other aesthetic forms to 'gimmicks' (capitalism does well enough at that). Instead, this book blasts out a universe of other aesthetic forms from under the dominion of the gimmick, all the while setting them in instructive relation to its problematic ambivalences and criteria. Third, *Theory of the Gimmick* succeeds in deflating the affect of capitalism in ways that are genuinely inspiring and experientially enriching, and that mark this book out as a core contribution to the field of affect theory.

The term 'transcritical' comes from Kojin Karatani's 2003 book, *Transcritique: On Kant and Marx*. Karatani is cited by Ngai, and Kant and Marx feature as the key theoretical references for both *Transcritique* and *Theory of the Gimmick* (three of Ngai's other recurring references are Theodor Adorno, Stanley Cavell, and Moishe Postone). There is, however, a more profound complementarity between these books: in a methodological reversal of the chronological priority that the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781/87) enjoys over the *Critique of Judgement* (1790), Karatani reads Kant's theoretical conception of 'critique' as conditioned by aesthetic and affective impulses from the start, before extending a similar interpretive principle to Marx; *Theory of the Gimmick* is informed by a similar approach, but pushes it further – whereas Kant and Marx are *themselves* the focus for most of Karatani's book, Ngai lays out the terms of her thesis early in way that cuts across Kant on aesthetic judgement and Marx on labour, before spending the majority of her book immersing us in a more diverse range of affective source materials: from the fantastical machines and artworks of Rube Goldberg and Marcel Duchamp, to horror films (*It Follows* and *Suspiria*); from poetry (Rob Halpern's *Music for Porn*), to a novel of ideas that uses dark humour to foreground gender-based injustices in the workplace (Helen De Witt's *Lightning Rods*); from art photography (the work of Tørbjorn Rødland), to early modernist novels (the work of Henry James).

By 'transcritique', Karatani wanted to convey a theoretical approach that would be as transcendental (critically focused on conditions of possibility) as it was transversal (focused on forging surprising connections). A first key strength of *Theory of the Gimmick* in relation to this is that it is not merely transcendental and transversal, but *transfiguring* of a wide range of source material through its aesthetic and affective practice. This, in turn, links up with a second strength: through this process, the book becomes aesthetically empowering for a range of other aesthetic categories.

This involves a tricky move whereby the gimmick alternates between featuring like a blackhole and a lodestar. On the one hand, Ngai describes the gimmick as ‘an entirely capitalist aesthetic’ (p 53) that threatens to englobe all other aesthetic categories. Here, she gestures towards a kind of overwhelming gravitational force that the gimmick threatens to exert under capitalism: a reduction of all other forms of sense and feeling to cheap, nasty, and repeatable tricks. On the other hand, Ngai uses the gimmick as a powerful criterion for gaining perspective on what makes other forms of affective experience possible: a point on a celestial map for celebrating certain surprising aspects of gimmicks, and for charting important distinctions between them and other aesthetic constellations.

Ngai has a strong track record when it comes to this kind of work: in 2007’s *Ugly Feelings*, she explored key negative affects including irritation, envy, paranoia, and disgust; in 2012’s *Our Aesthetic Categories*, she did the same for apparently marginal aesthetic criteria such as the zany, the cute, and the interesting; and, in her early poetry collection *Criteria* (1986), she made a virtue of stressing poetic devices of analogy and repetition almost to breaking point. Given this background, the decidedly gimmicky move would have been for Ngai to simply recapitulate all of this in relation to the new category of ‘the gimmick’, as if the latter could be construed as merely one more term to be added to an encyclopaedic series of categories, or, at most, as a kind of ‘cherry on top’ of an aggregate of other ways of feeling. But this is precisely what Ngai does not do.

To be sure, *Theory of the Gimmick* explores a cornucopia of other aesthetic categories: from Ngai’s established categories of the zany, cute, and interesting, to the categories of ‘shame’, ‘fetish’, ‘garishness’, beauty and sublimity, the ‘kitsch’, ‘loquaciousness’, and ‘promiscuousness.’ What *Theory of the Gimmick* does that is far bolder and more aesthetically empowering, however, can be indicated in relation to the following observation from chapter two:

We have no distinct aesthetic term for that which is ‘not gimmicky’, because in capitalism the device that is not a gimmick, that simply performs its function in an unremarkable way, is no longer an *aesthetic* object. It is just a device (p 96).

Either something is a ‘gimmick’, or its value is purely instrumental. Stated this starkly, this proposition emerges like the terrifying first premise of capitalism’s overriding disjunctive syllogism of value, and it shows why we cannot simply add the gimmick to a list of other aesthetic categories: under this premise, any such list to which the gimmick could be added would immediately become a list of gimmicks, devices, and ‘not gimmicks’ (that is: ‘nothing’ terms estranged from their own value and content).

In the canon of critical and aesthetic theory, there are two typical responses to insights like this: act like they are surprising secrets known only to the author, and/or amplify the terror. What makes Ngai’s book bolder and more aesthetically empowering is that she opts for two much stronger strategies: first, she makes the convincing case that such propositions are not secrets, but dull re-articulations of our contemporary common sense (what we all know, *trivially*); second, she exposes the inadequacy of this common sense for approaching anything like the full range of our actualities and potentialities of lived sense.

The first of these points recalls a notorious aside by Deleuze in his ‘Postscript on the Societies of Control’: ‘if the most idiotic television game shows are so successful, it’s because they express the corporate situation with great precision.’ Consider, for instance, what makes TV shows like *The Apprentice*, *The X Factor*, and *Dragons’ Den* (alternate titles: *The Tigers of Money* and *Shark Tank*) so successful: the meta-gimmick of each show is that contestants have to exploit successful gimmicks to get ahead, because devices that function reliably are ‘unremarkable’, and because unsuccessful

gimmicks are (comically) egregious. While the contestants are whittled into ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ based on their adeptness with this process, the meta-gimmick wins out in the background either way: good gimmicks are entertaining, bad gimmicks will turn out to be more entertaining in most circumstances, and the option to elevate an unexceptional contestant is always there (the ultimate populist gimmick – a bone thrown to the ‘average’ viewer).

Now consider a situation where a contestant on such a show might try to become a ‘contestant’ in the more active and *verbal* sense of someone out ‘to contest’ a decision. To the degree that they have initially agreed to compete/been interpellated by the show, we can expect such a shift to barely register with the judges, especially where it is predicated on an attempt to rationally ‘argue its case’: the individual will be condescended to, laughed out of court, or carried off as a buffoon. There is, however, a further affective threshold that can be crossed: the (non)contestant can do something megalomaniacal, pathetic, idiosyncratic, or desperate. And in this case, it will be less as if they have become a buffoon than a bad smell to be fumigated – a bundle of disgusting or pitiable affects.

Early in *Theory of the Gimmick*, Ngai writes:

[P]rotected by its own slickness, as a thing whose sheer stupidity cleverly neutralises the critical feeling it incites, the gimmick defends itself from intellectual curiosity in a way that puts any person seeking to analyse it at a comical disadvantage (p 9).

With the qualification that the kind of disadvantage at stake here is not merely comical, but also potentially tragic and cruel, this passage gets at the logic of the situations just imagined. What makes all the gimmickry present in the first situation so successful, according to both Deleuze and Ngai, is that *we have an engrained common sense of how it all works* (whether as viewers intent on ‘mindless entertainment’; whether as producers and judges intent on ratings and content; whether as ‘contestants’ intent on profile and celebrity). What makes the second situation so comical, tragic or cruel, in contrast, is that *that there are universes of feeling to which this common sense is wholly inadequate*.

What makes *Theory of the Gimmick* bold and aesthetically empowering, I want to claim, is that it wagers hard on the gap opened by this second point. To draw this out, permit me a final reference to the second situation imagined above: a contestant reduced to a bundle of disgusting or pitiable affects will undergo this kind of ontological shift because the logic of the show requires such affects to remain firmly repressed on its outside; the very fact that we are able to imagine such a shift occurring at all, however, is sufficient to show that these affects are *already inside* the situation just described, subliminally working through the sensoria of its viewers, producers, judges, and contestants alike (think of how envy and *schadenfreude* grease the wheels of shows like this...). This gesture towards an affective outside that is already immanent is, I think, isomorphic with the kind of move that Ngai pulls off throughout *Theory of the Gimmick* (for two of the best examples, witness chapter four’s treatment of sex in *It Follows*, and chapter seven’s treatment of remediation and precarious jobs across two versions of *Suspiria*).

This leads me to a third key aspect of *Theory of the Gimmick*. The kind of bleak ‘game show’ scenario just imagined may give the impression that *Theory of the Gimmick* trades merely in bleak affects. But that would be far from the truth.

The critical theory market is dominated by books that remind us of the bleakness of our contemporary situation with respect to capitalism’s imperialism (Hardt and Negri), its vampirism (Fisher), its psychopathy (Berardi), and its aspirations to a form of feudalism 2.0 (Dean; Wark). What Ngai refreshingly throws into this mix is a way of *symbolically bursting capitalism’s ball*. This, of

course, isn't to say that capitalism isn't a very serious and injurious game, and that its stakes aren't particularly high for its 'losers'; nor is it to say that those other books appearing on the critical theory market don't have important things to say to us. It is simply to say that, in addition to providing lots of *pathos*, Ngai also finds ingenious ways to communicate the utter and frequent *bathos* of capitalism through her focus on the gimmick (witness chapter six's treatment of 'Barthes's punctum gone wrong' (p 203) and the disembodied hand of 'Hamburger Helper' (pp 213-216)). This move is important because it adds timely depth and dimensionality to the field of affect theory, and, more simply, because it has immense potential to be *salutary and experientially enriching*.

Beginning in the mid-1990s and early 2000s with the work of scholars such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Lauren Berlant, Sara Ahmed and Ngai, 'affect theory' and the affective turn privileged precisely the kind of attention to everyday ways of feeling we have witnessed in *Theory of the Gimmick* (witness Berlant's exploration of the everyday bite of promises that cannot be fulfilled in her 2011 book *Cruel Optimism*). Lately, however, the field has encountered growing forms of scepticism that accuse it of fetishizing and ontologising liminal ways of feeling (witness Susanne von Falkenhausen's critique of the 'blindness' of affect theory in *Freize*, June 2019).

Whether it is intentional or not on Ngai's part, several aspects of *Theory of the Gimmick* that have already been mentioned come together to offer a credible response to this kind of critique. First, there is the fact that Ngai goes after the gimmick as 'an entirely capitalist aesthetic' that sits at the core of how our capitalist lifeworld functions, and that she does so on the basis of a 'transcritical' reading of Marx and Kant; related to this, there is the fact that she does not read the gimmick as merely one more term to be added to an encyclopaedic series of aesthetic categories, or as a 'cherry on top.' If part of the worry about affect theory is that it has tended towards giving free-floating 'bestiaries' of affects, then *Theory of the Gimmick* wholly slays that worry by giving a synthetic (transcritical) theory that zeroes in on the gimmick as a central category of contemporary life.

For these reasons, the theoretical base Ngai lays down in the introduction and first two chapters of this book ought to be central to the future development of affect theory as a field. What is further ingenious is that, having laid down her theory, Ngai uses the remaining six chapters of her book to work through *an instructive and transfiguring bestiary of 'gimmicky' source materials* (as if to say 'A bestiary? What's wrong with that?!') In other reviews of *Theory of the Gimmick* that I've read, qualms have been raised that this approach may be too open-ended, and that it tends towards making everything and nothing 'gimmicky' by the end of the book. What these qualms understate, however, is that this tendency towards inflation of the gimmick is a central feature of *our capitalist lifeworld itself*. In focusing and accelerating the workings of this logic, and by drawing out both its *pathos* and its *bathos*, Ngai does something substantially more than mimic this gimmick; she breaks her theory out of her book, and puts it into the lifeworld of the reader.

To put this matter bluntly, and in a way that risks self-indulgence: there are few books that cite Theodor Adorno as heavily as *Theory of the Gimmick* does that have also made me laugh so much (and in a good way). To put it even more bluntly: reading this book made me look at things as reifying and deadening as my own online research profile and laugh a heady and cathartic laugh. The truth is that one often feels crushed under the weight of one's online presence and watchwords like 'research specialisms', 'potential for impact', 'innovation', and 'research networks' (and one will no doubt do so again); what reading *Theory of the Gimmick* provided in this context was a salutary shot of estrangement: *look at how tacky and gimmicky all of this is*.

I asked a churlish (and gimmicky) question earlier: is *Theory of the Gimmick* worth the time and labour required to read it? The truth is that this book allows you to shake off exactly the kind of

capitalist superego that requires you to reduce the act of reading, yourself, and the things in the lifeworld around you to an endless series of gimmicks (whether in the form of points on 'Good Reads', a shelf full of books behind you on a Zoom call, a research or Facebook profile, or simply that deadening feeling that you are a 'contestant' in a daily gameshow performed for a hidden late-capitalist 'big Other'). The real answer to the question posed earlier, then, must be this: to invest in this book is to invest in a qualitatively different order than questions such as these are capable of recognising; it is to do so, then, without recourse to romanticism, snobby aestheticism, wilful escapism, postmodern irony, or any number of other things that have become gimmicky *clichés*; it is to do so, rather, on the strength of an attempt to let feelings that are already immanent 'back in'.