Seriously Unserious: Theoretical Implications of the Gimmick for Film and Media Studies

Sianne Ngai, *Theory of the Gimmick: Aesthetic Judgment and Capitalist Form* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020).

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Imagine a mechanism that, upon waking you up, could wash you, brush your teeth, dress you, and seamlessly transport you from bed to a dining table, where freshly brewed coffee and breakfast await. One variation of this whimsical and gimmicky morning mechanism is humorously depicted in *Wallace and Gromit: The Curse of the Were-Rabbit* (Nick Park and Steve Box, 2005), tied to the character of an eccentric inventor (Fig. 1–2). This is likely the fantasy of many who dread leaving the warmth of their bed each morning. It reflects one of the recurring dreams of modern convenience — emerging from the promises of mechanization and automation — allowing individuals to rationalize the workload of boring and mundane tasks and devote time and energy to labor that truly and genuinely matters. Typically, such a mechanism occupies a significant portion of the living space, comprising an intricate network of wires, pulleys, and gears.

However, these contraptions rarely function flawlessly. The journey from bed to breakfast often becomes slow, cumbersome, or chaotic, resulting in comedic mishaps. Thus, the promise of such a gimmicky mechanism highlights the tense and fluctuating balance between labor, time, and value. While the humor of such a contraption captures the imagination, it also invites a deeper reflection on the nature of gimmicks, a theme explored in Sianne Ngai's *Theory of the Gimmick: Aesthetic Judgment and Capitalist Form* (2020). After briefly introducing key points from the book, our focus will turn to how

Fig. 1–2: A pleasant morning routine for Wallace

"gimmick-ness" can be further examined through the lens of film and media studies and how the theoretical gesture of the gimmick might benefit from closer dialogue with audiovisual media.

Gimmick 101: Flashy, Bold, Futuristic, Yet Flimsy, Outdated, and Forgettable

What is often designed to save time and effort can swiftly degenerate into a spectacle of inefficiency, prompting deeper inquiries into the paradoxical nature of such gimmicky devices — their simultaneous allure and frustration. Sianne Ngai explores the gimmick as a concept operating at the intersection of aesthetics, labor, and critique of capitalism. This juxtaposition reflects broader socio-economic conditions under capitalism, where (for example, the already mentioned) labor-saving technologies are both desired and condemned. On the one hand, these technologies promise increased efficiency, convenience, and comfort, aligning with capitalist ideals of productivity and progress. They aim to streamline labor, reduce costs, and maximize efficiency in both personal and industrial spheres. By automating monotonous tasks, they promise individuals to focus on more meaningful or profitable pursuits, increasing personal freedom and economic output. Yet, these mechanisms or gadgets might reveal the fragile link between time, labor, and value production. The promise of greater agency for workers may often prove false, as technological solutions can lead to the opposite effect — the work may change, but it is still there, with value being passed up the hierarchical ownership structure and individual agency being reduced by automatization, abstraction, and fragmentation. Even though such processes occur daily without much reflection, it is the gimmick — whether tied to technology, gestures, or art forms — that can expose the shifting modulations of value in relation to labor. Thus, Ngai's primary intervention lies in rethinking the gimmick as a complex and contradictory phenomenon — one that encapsulates both excess and insufficiency, often promising more than it delivers while overextending itself in the process.

Examples such as labor-saving devices, futuristic visions of smart homes, and speculative financial instruments like cryptocurrency illustrate the defining characteristics of the gimmick. These objects and technologies demonstrate an oscillation between extremes — being "too much" and "not enough," "working too hard" and "working too little," "sav[ing] us labor" and "not sav[ing] us labor," "outdated, backward" and "newfangled, futuristic," or "mak[ing] capitalist production transparent" as well as "mak[ing] capitalist production obscure" (72). Audiovisual representations of gimmicky mechanisms, alongside gadgets and applications embedded in our daily lives, challenge our fundamental understanding of the relationship between labor, value, and time. These devices prompt us to reconsider the role of technology in mediating these concepts, particularly within capitalist frameworks. For instance, shall we understand the "irritating yet strangely attractive gimmick" (1) as something emerging from capitalist form or as something transgressing it? Is it a feature attached to an object, mechanism, or tool, or is it rather a matter of aesthetic judgment?

Ngai's work positions the gimmick both as a product of capitalist systems and as an aesthetic judgment, which suggests a deeper entanglement between economic structures and cultural perceptions, further complicating our understanding of its role in contemporary life. The book opens with an in-depth presentation and theoretical implications of gimmicks, followed by chapters analyzing concrete examples across consumer culture and the avant-garde. The examples range widely — from the tricks of illusionist David Blaine to Torbjørn Rødland's photographs, from the American suburban teen thriller *It Follows* (David Robert Mitchell, 2014) to the Italian giallo horror film with gothic twist *Suspiria* (Dario Argento, 1977), from Marcel Duchamp to a Rube Goldberg machine, and others.

Far from being peripheral or anomalous within capitalist systems, the gimmick, as Ngai suggests, is emblematic of the fundamental economic and aesthetic contradictions of late capitalism. She adds, "the gimmick implies an awareness that, in capitalism, misprized things are bought and sold continuously" (2). This observation reflects a broader cycle of "planned obsolescence and routinized innovation," (6) in which commodities are designed to lose their value or be replaced, forcing consumers into an endless loop of consumption. The intrinsic instability of the gimmick, characterized by its temporal sensitivity, showcases its constant adaptation to contemporary trends, including technological advancements, claims of labor efficiency, and shifting standards of value. For instance, the rapid turnover of consumer electronics — devices marketed as essential tools for convenience and productivity — illustrates how products quickly become obsolete, with newer models touted as superior alternatives. In its very nature, the gimmick might be understood as a mirror that exposes the complex and evolving relationship between labor, time, and value. It persistently prompts us to ask: for whom is this efficiency truly intended, and how has the equilibrium between these elements been recalibrated in the context of late capitalism?

Gimmick in Movement

Ngai explores the concept of the gimmick dialectically, emphasizing its inherent tensions. The gimmick simultaneously embodies excess and inadequacy — it is overproduced and underwhelming, intricate yet cheaply made, an object that intrigues while also frustrating. Often marketed as a labor- or time-saving device, the gimmick frequently fails to deliver on its promises, leading to skepticism and disappointment. Applying this perspective to audiovisual form and history, we might find various technologies, artifacts, and moments that embody the contradictory nature of gimmicks. Some artifacts promised increased immersion and viewer agency (Virtual Reality), while others aimed to enhance visual rendering (LaserDisc) or proposed different forms and affordances of video editing (such as the star wipe).

Taking the example of special editing transitions, the star wipe may have once seemed like a "futuristic" or innovative option, yet it simultaneously evokes a sense of obsolescence, provoking laughter or disdain rather than admiration due to its overt and clumsy performance in contrast to contemporary cinema's more seamless and "invisible" editing norms. By exceeding the historically established editing standards, the star wipe exemplifies the gimmick par excellence: once a novel-looking feature, it has found itself out of time and out of place. The star wipe's exaggerated visibility distorts the balance between labor, time, and value, dazzling the viewer with its novelty while ultimately exhausting their attention. In this way, the star wipe complicates our perception of technological progress as a linear trajectory toward simplicity, usability, and sustainability. Let us follow the star wipe and see how this particular artifact might extend the theoretical gesture of the gimmick as described by Ngai.

Working Gimmick or Gimmick Is Working: Sophistication and Disaster

Ngai's exploration of the gimmick is closely tied to questions of aesthetic judgment, particularly how aesthetic critique intertwines with economic evaluation. She argues that the gimmick is often dismissed as aesthetically inferior precisely because it appears to be a cheap trick or shortcut — a way of

maximizing profit while minimizing labor. This raises the question: for whom is the labor minimized? For users, employing a star wipe might be as simple as clicking a button; nonetheless, integrating a star wipe into the realm of digital editing was not a straightforward task for developers, who had to simulate and create a digital version of the effect, capturing its shape and temporality while ensuring ease of access and use. In addition, once a gimmick is lost, trying to simulate it can be more laborious than creating it in the first place. As Ngai reminds us, we might understand the gimmick as a form of aesthetic failure, a product that reveals the unevenness of labor relations under capitalism. The gimmick exposes the hidden labor involved in commodity production, even as it seeks to obscure it. To make another step, the gimmick serves as a never-ending reminder of the connection between work and technological foundations, continually redefining value, capability, performance, and affordances of both everyday and creative labor. As Ngai argues, the gimmick compels us to confront the inseparability of aesthetic and economic categories, making the presence of gimmickry inherently visible, exaggerated, and comic.

Accidentally Non-Accidental

The irritation we feel when confronted with a gimmick stems from its challenge to our assumptions about value. A noteworthy example is presented in the star-wipe commercial (Fig. 3) from the TV show *Better Call Saul* (episode "Off Brand," 2017). This precise moment is encapsulated in the quote by James "Saul Goodman" McGill: "The guy at the station said he has never seen so many star wipes in a row. It has never been done." From James's perspective, the star wipe is a fascinating editing technique — visible, prominent, and eye-catching. However, for others, the star wipe might be perceived as repulsive in its unprofessionalism, clashing with our shared understanding of an invisible style, even as it remains undeniably striking. This moment can be understood as a contemporary reuse of the star wipe, a gimmicky editing technique, for the fictional introduction of Saul Goodman, the flashy alter ego of James McGill. It represents an artistic appropriation of an effect perceived in popular imagination as too bold, too flashy, and too eccentric. What is the position of this artistically appropriated star wipe in relation to the "original"? While the gimmick in itself evokes a certain disparity between form and content, in this instance, our awareness of this disparity contributes to the development of Saul Goodman as an extravagant character with loose morals. In summary, the gimmick transforms into a narrative and stylistic device.
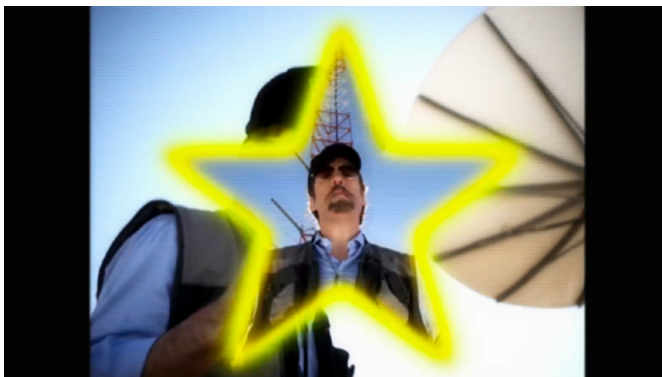

Fig. 3: One of the many star wipes in the Saul Goodman commercial

Under What Tag Can I Find the Gimmick?

If the gimmick results from a constantly evolving relationship between labor and time to produce value, then it is also inherently fleeting. What is perceived as a gimmick today may not be seen as such tomorrow; conversely, what was considered a gimmick yesterday may not be one today. Ngai situates the gimmick within the abstract and modulable realm of late capitalism. In her previous work on aesthetic categories — zany, cute, and interesting — each category reflects "how aesthetic experience has been transformed by the hypercommodified, information-saturated, performance-driven conditions of late capitalism."[1] Nonetheless, according to Ngai, gimmick "is not its missing fourth category but an undercurrent running through all three — and indeed, all of capitalist culture" (32). The gimmick is not singular but plural; it is an aesthetic category linked to material and technological affordances that may change over time. Thus, while the gimmick is an aesthetic category of late capitalism, it is equally mutable, transient, and difficult to grasp. Rather than discussing it on a general level, it is crucial to examine it in specific instances.

How do we capture and preserve the singular forms of the gimmick? Where is the (audiovisual) archive that preserves the fleeting and often overlooked remnants of culture, such as the star wipe? Where can we find the archive that houses these visual effects and the ephemeral gimmicks of technology, art, and everyday tools — the once-innovative devices like early smartphone apps or 3D television sets that captivated attention but have since slipped into obscurity? As Ngai reminds us, "no obviously delimited archive for the gimmick exists," (39) as the gimmick is often absent from archival and historical narratives. The star wipe, as a prominent example, underscores this absence. It is a technique or effect not tied to any specific author, studio, time, or location, further complicating its preservation. The star wipe lacks a distinct form of its own, functioning as a transition between two images in an audiovisual work. This raises the question of whether the star wipe even qualifies as an artifact. Its traceability is further hindered by the possibility that film and television archives may not have dedicated tags or categories for editing effects.[2] Therefore, locating the star wipe in repositories is more a matter of chance than the outcome of systematic preservation efforts.

Moreover, the star wipe is an artifact associated not only with cinema and television but also with early digital technology. In this respect, we can understand the star wipe as being tied to a specific combination of software and hardware. However, existing archival and heritage institutions often lack a clear strategy for managing the diverse artifacts that emerged with the advent of digitalization. Thus, the gimmick serves as a counterforce to challenge our understanding of the status of audiovisual heritage. Gimmicks are more than mere throwaways — they encapsulate the cultural zeitgeist of their moment, embodying a unique intersection of novelty, function, and spectacle. Nonetheless, they can disappear with a single update, become incompatible, or be forgotten. Therefore, capturing the gimmick is as challenging as capturing the star wipe. Although it may initially seem like a timeless artifact, it actually consists of a group of sub-instances linked to various material, technological, and cultural environments, each fostering distinct aesthetic perceptions.

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1)   Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 1.
2)   Veronika Hanáková, "Lost Media: Collecting and Archiving of Artefacts from the Digital Era" (Master's thesis, Charles University, 2022).

Do I Remember It Correctly?

The continued use of the star wipe across audiovisual productions from the last century to the present raises the question of whether certain elements now regarded as gimmicks were perceived as such in their own time. This prompts an inquiry into the historical understanding of gimmickry: was what we deem as gimmicky today also considered so in the past? In this context, gimmicks not only exemplify the ephemerality of trends but also expose the instability of value production and recognition within a capitalist system, illustrating how what was once seen as innovative and worthy of attention can quickly lose its worth as newer distractions emerge. The temporal nature of the gimmick itself becomes a gesture, capturing both the moment of its emergence and its decline. A more nuanced analysis could illuminate the processes through which certain artifacts, mechanisms, or tools come to be perceived and labeled as gimmicks. Moreover, we might question why we understand and remember certain elements as gimmicks.

The dual character of the gimmick — both as a form and as an aesthetic judgment — introduces a theoretical framework that encourages reflection on alternative notions of functionality and affordances stemming from the possibilities of technology, as well as conventions of the period that were never realized. For instance, the design and functionality of personal technological gadgets (Fig. 4) from *Totally Spies* (Vincent Chalvon-Demersay and David Michel, 2001–2005), illustrate a utilitarian technology that, while innovative for its time, appears less functional by today's standards. Similarly, old websites from the 1990s, although graphically exaggerated, were constructed on a digital architecture devoid of cookies and algorithmic curation.

Ngai's analysis situates the gimmick as both a critique of and a reflection on the contradictions of labor, time, and value within capitalist systems, where the promise of functionality often conceals deeper contradictions regarding value and purpose. In this respect, the gimmick can also serve as a reminder of the speculative "what if." What if the balance between time, work, and value were set differently? What if utilitarian design were built on a different foundation? What if different algorithms bound the digital architecture of the connected world? Such questions extend beyond mere hypotheticals; the notion of "what if" questions whether simply suggesting unrealized possibilities is enough or whether it risks remaining an abstract articulation of potential that never comes to fruition. Yet, even

Fig. 4: Jerry is showcasing a new technological gadget to Clover, Sam, and Alex for their mission

as speculation, the "what if" can catalyze critical reflection. In this way, the gimmick evolves into a productive space for imagining alternative histories and futures — an invitation to reconsider the structures that define our current technological, aesthetic, and economic realities.

Ending in the Virtual Realm

Connecting the gimmick to the theme of this special issue — understanding the various and contradictory representations, formations, and implications of computer labor in and through audiovisual media — Ngai's perspective opens up a space of detailed reflection on the current forms of labor, time usage, and labor production. The current interconnected, virtual, constantly evolving dispositif desperately wants us to forget the technological, material, energetic, and labor-intensive inputs that have already been provided and still remain necessary. Understanding what is presented as a gimmick, what is seen as a gimmick, and what is perceived as a gimmick should go hand in hand with a broader critical analysis of labor, technology, time, and value in a world where labor is increasingly intertwined with information technology.

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