

# Introduction

This book is about the irritating yet strangely attractive gimmick as an aesthetic judgment and capitalist form. Focusing on an *ambivalent* judgment tied to a *compromised* form, it underscores the fact that aesthetic categories have two sides—the judgment we utter, a way of speaking; the form we perceive, a way of seeing—sutured by affect into a spontaneous experience.<sup>1</sup> In the case of the extravagantly impoverished, simultaneously overperforming and underperforming gimmick, we are dealing with an aesthetic specific to a mode of production that binds value to labor and time, giving rise to a unique set of collectively generated abstractions and peculiarly asocial kinds of sociality.

Always dubious if never entirely unappealing, the gimmick wears multiple faces. It can be a catchy hook, a timeworn joke, a labor-saving contraption. In the studies that follow, we will encounter it in even more specific guises: as a smiley face, a financial strategy, a readymade artwork that interprets itself. Gimmicks are fundamentally one thing across these instances: overrated devices that strike us as working too little (labor-saving tricks) but also as working too hard (strained efforts to get our attention). In each case we refer to the aesthetically suspicious object as a “contrivance,” an ambiguous term equally applicable to ideas, techniques, and things.

In our everyday encounter with the gimmick, we are thus registering an uncertainty about labor—its deficiency or excess—that is also an uncertainty about value and time. These metrics become inseparable in a system necessitating unceasing innovation as competing capitals move

around the world in search of profit, expelling labor from abandoned lines. Each variable determines and is necessary for expressing the others. The gimmick thus acquires its reputation of bad timing—being too old or too new—based on its deviation from a tacit standard of productivity. Under- or overperforming with respect to this historical norm, it strikes us as technologically backward or just as problematically advanced: futuristic to the point of hubris, as in the case of Google Glass, or comically outdated, like the choreographed jerks used to simulate turbulence in television episodes of *Star Trek*.

Finally, as what we call devices that strike us as cheap even when we know they were expensive to develop, the gimmick is a judgment that asks us, in a well-nigh blasphemous way, to conflate aesthetic value with economic value—money—and more specifically, unproductively utilized money. For one of the gimmick’s paradigmatic instances is the overrated product one would be a sucker to buy, and thus an unsold commodity whose value cannot be realized. Yet from the stainless steel banana slicer to the cryptocurrency derivative, our very concept of the gimmick implies awareness that, in capitalism, misprized things are bought and sold continuously. Its flagrantly unworthy form can be found virtually anywhere: manufacturing, law, banking, education, politics, healthcare, real estate, sports, art.

The gimmick is thus 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 labor, and the expansion of value, it gives us tantalizing glimpses of a world in which social life will no longer be organized by labor, while indexing one that continuously regenerates the conditions keeping labor’s social necessity in place.<sup>2</sup>

Notice how the appraisals of labor, time, and value that our judgment of the gimmick conjoins are left unparticularized, as if implicitly grasped as historically relative and moving. This is strikingly akin to Kant’s judgment of beauty, which not only claims universality in the absence of concepts, but as Rodolphe Gasché suggests, “denudes” or strips the concept of content, retaining it as “bare” form, or in Kant’s words, “merely formal” (*bloß*).<sup>3</sup> Similarly, our implicit assessment of the deficient or excessive amounts of labor, value, and time objectified in the gimmick all presuppose social norms that the act of judgment leaves unspecified.<sup>4</sup> None of the appraisals encoded in our judgment of the gimmick thus interfere with its affective spontaneity. Rather, our experience of the gimmick under-

scores the surprisingly dynamic formalism—the formalizing activity—of aesthetic judgment overall. Grounded in feelings activated by appearance, as opposed to in concepts, rules, or laws, aesthetic judgment is by definition neither cognitive nor practical. Yet such judgments are crucially elicited in its immediate aftermath. In the gimmick, specifically, our spontaneously affective, explicitly aesthetic appraisal of an object's form as unsatisfyingly compromised triggers and comes to overlap with economic and ethical evaluations of it as cheap and fraudulent.

Labor, time, and value are of course interconnected nonaesthetically through the billions of interactions between capital and labor that enable the calculation of wages, profit, and interest. This interconnection presupposes a mode of production involving competition between capitals, the equalization of intrasectoral profit rates, and the structurally compelled transformation of labor processes toward increasing productivity. If the gimmick seems too expensive or too cheap, it is because the technology behind it is too new or too old. And the fact of technology being too new or old often directly accounts for why a gimmick seems to be over- or underperforming. These relations hold true in reverse. If the gimmick seems to be working too hard or too little, it is because the social timing of its appearance is off. And when it is said that a productive technology has arrived too early, what is meant is that its cost is proving too high.

These ratios get filtered into the conscious and unconscious decisions of all producers and consumers. Yet each carries a seed of worry that the gimmick objectifies. If the overworking device generates the image of too many goods produced per hour for the market to absorb, its underworking twin generates the image of not enough goods produced per hour for a producer to stay competitive. These images in turn invoke bigger specters, such as overproduction or underconsumption (leading to surplus or idle capitals), structural unemployment (leading to surplus populations), and economic stagnation. All lurk at the edges of our sensory encounter with the gimmick's ostentatiously impoverished form.

The gimmick thus names an experience of dissatisfaction—mixed, for all this, with fascination—linked to our perception of an object making untrustworthy claims about the saving of time, the reduction of labor, and the expansion of value. No other aesthetic experience so directly invokes, as if explicitly to solicit our misgiving about these promises. At the same time, the hoaxes of Edgar Allan Poe and P. T. Barnum, avid deployers of the gimmick *avant la lettre*, remind us that the suspicion that the gimmick activates can be counterintuitively enjoyed.<sup>5</sup> In this legacy of deliberately

introducing doubt into aesthetic experience, continued in Marcel Duchamp's incorporation of the gimmick's brazenly contemptible form into his ready-mades (staged collisions of artistic and value-producing labor designed to highlight their equivocal relation, John Roberts argues), and in Alfred Hitchcock's fondness for what D. A. Miller calls "compelling, but meaningless" displays of technical virtuosity (which might be read similarly), it becomes clear that suspicion does not come only in one unhappy flavor.<sup>6</sup> Poe, Duchamp, and other deployers of gimmicks remind us that it is often rather an occasion for comedy and a catalyst for debate, as we will see across this book.

The judgments of labor, time, and value encoded in the gimmick suggest that this aesthetic category reflects nothing less than the basic laws of capitalist production and its abstractions as these saturate everyday life. If this is the simplest thesis of this book, its more complex claim is that in reflecting these laws—the extraction of surplus value from living labor; the systematic pursuit of greater productivity per worker, as rates of profits between industries equalize and eventually fall—the gimmick also encodes the limits to accumulation and expanded reproduction that expose capitalism to crisis. Both arguments are reflected in the timeline of "gimmick." The *Oxford English Dictionary* dates its first appearance to 1926, while Google shows its steadily rising usage coming to a spike in 1973, a common marker for the end of the "Golden Age of Capitalism" and the start of the "Long Downturn."<sup>7</sup>

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. It is accordingly telling that representations of the gimmick in this book tend to thematize what Beverly Silver and David Harvey call capitalism's "fixes": the "spatial fix" (David Mitchell's horror film *It Follows*), the "product-based fix" (Helen DeWitt's novel of ideas *Lightning Rods*), the "technological fix" (ditto), and the "financial fix" (Robert Louis Stevenson's "The Bottle Imp").<sup>8</sup> The texts in which these ingenious solutions become foci are also aesthetic risk-taking experimentations with the use of the gimmick's compromised form. They intriguingly suggest that capital's historical repertoire of remedies—geographical relocation, movement into new product lines with less intense competition, experimentation with cultural and technological ways of organizing production, and eventual movement out of production altogether—tend to "reschedule" crises of profitability rather than "permanently resolv[ing]

them.”<sup>9</sup> Hence they highlight underlying features of capitalism associated with crisis, as much if not more than the fixes applied to them: the expulsion of labor from the production process (*Lightning Rods*), the growth of low-productivity service occupations (the late fictions of Henry James), the rise of “surplus populations” (“The Bottle Imp”).

The encoding of internal barriers to expanded reproduction sets the over- and/or underperforming gimmick apart from other aesthetic categories that also tell us something about how ordinary people process capitalism. The cute, mixing tenderness and aggression, speaks to our equivocal relation to the commodity as consumers. The zany, which is supposedly fun but primarily stressful, highlights the shifting and sometimes ambiguous borders separating work from nonwork. But the flagrantly unworthy gimmick, our culture’s only aesthetic category evoking an abstract idea of price, is also the only one in which our feelings of misgiving stem from a sense of overvaluation bound to appraisals of deficient or excessive labor encoded in form. It names an encounter with aesthetic appearance that not only reflects the capitalist mode of production’s innermost laws but the daily ways in which we interact with the economic abstractions these laws precipitate, from wages to rents.

Like all aesthetic categories, the gimmick names a relationship between a relatively codified way of seeing and a way of speaking that the former compels.<sup>10</sup> As a judgment, however, the gimmick contains an extra layer of intersubjectivity: it is what we say when we want to demonstrate that we, unlike others implicitly invoked or imagined in the same moment, are not buying into what a capitalist device is promising. Robert Pfaller refers to this structure of displacement as a “suspended illusion”: beliefs like the superstitious rituals of the sports fan that “always belong to others, that are never anyone’s own [beliefs].”<sup>11</sup> It is a phenomenon in which one’s cultural skepticism, coupled explicitly here to enjoyment, comes to hang on the abstraction of a believer elsewhere. Conversely, the way in which our judgment of the gimmick conjures the image of a dissenting judge—a generic person for whom one’s gimmick is a nongimmick—suggests that one needs this abstraction to have an experience of the gimmick at all.

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. This judgment will contain no “axiological charge”; it will be cognitive and not aesthetic.<sup>12</sup> But since the gimmick lies latent in every made thing in capitalism, devices can flip into gimmicks at any moment and vice-versa as well. As I write it still feels easy to make fun of Google Glass, which

“went dark” only three years after its overhyped debut as a consumer good in 2012.<sup>13</sup> But a renamed version of Glass is now used in factories and warehouses in which workers need real-time information and both hands free, including in what Marx called “Department I” factories producing machines for other factories. In the same way that credit cards, cell phones, and prepared meals were once but no longer considered extravagances, “smart glasses” look destined to become everyday industrial tools.

Such reversals are endemic to the world that gives rise to the gimmick’s compromised aesthetic. Like capitalism itself, in which paradoxes like planned obsolescence and routinized innovation abound, the gimmick is a temporally sensitive and fundamentally unstable form. As we can intuit from names like Active Edge and Turbo Boost, the toggle between gimmick and device is internal to the gimmick and indeed to the device. Each names a potential station in the other’s developmental trajectory.<sup>14</sup>

This dynamic comes to the fore in early twentieth-century popular science.<sup>15</sup> As Grant Wythoff notes in his study of the “gadget stories” of Hugo Gernsback, inventor of labor-saving devices like the Isolator and Dynamophone and publisher of the science fiction magazine *Amazing Stories* (1926), “the positive sciences and the fantastic arts [have long been] linked in a dialectic of doubt and certainty.” Gernsback’s bestselling Telimco telegraph was for instance “little more than a gimmick, a parlor trick—press a button and a bell in another room would ring without the need for any intervening wires.” Yet “it was also a rough prototype, an aggregate of handmade components that encouraged a conversation on what the wireless medium might look like in the future.”<sup>16</sup>

The gimmick is a trick, a wonder, and sometimes just a thing. But it is also something accounting for the systematic slippage between these positions, in a way that focusing exclusively on its technological dimension will cause us to miss. Overperforming and underperforming, encoding either too much or not enough time, and fundamentally gratuitous yet strangely essential, the gimmick is arguably a miniature model of capital itself, as described by Marx in this oft-quoted passage from the *Grundrisse* nicknamed the “Fragment on Machines”:

Capital itself is the moving contradiction, [in] that it presses to reduce labour time to a minimum, while it posits labour time, on the other side, as sole measure and source of wealth. Hence it diminishes labour time in the necessary form so as to increase it in the

superfluous form; *hence posits the superfluous in growing measure as a condition—question of life or death—for the necessary.*<sup>17</sup>

Some post-Marxists interpret this passage optimistically. The idea is that two twentieth-century trends summarized by “general intellect” and “real subsumption”—the growing role of science and technology in production; capitalist control over not only production but “all of the allied processes of social reproduction (education, sexuality, communication, etc.)”—will eventually decouple value from labor in a way that will prove disastrous for capital, “explod[ing] the older value form” and putting the “Law of Value into crisis.”<sup>18</sup>

Others read the “Fragment” as we might imagine the extravagantly impoverished gimmick doing.<sup>19</sup> Here we see the “moving contradiction” as less a utopian prophecy of an automated future in which wealth will no longer be tied to labor than as a description of what Joshua Clover pithily calls the “annihilation of the source of absolute surplus value . . . by the pursuit of relative surplus value.”<sup>20</sup> In this dynamic, as described by Marx, the accumulation of capital relies on the extraction of surplus value: value created in the hours of labor performed after a laborer has completed those enabling the capitalist to recoup the price of her labor power.<sup>21</sup> Absolute surplus value results from a lengthening of the working day, while relative surplus value results from a reduction in necessary labor time through increases in efficiency generated by technological innovation. Intercapitalist competition for greater productivity (“the pursuit of relative surplus value”) replaces living labor with machines. This makes an increasing fraction of living labor (“the source of absolute surplus value”) redundant but without changing accumulation’s dependency on surplus labor. Regardless of rising levels of productivity per worker, “value-creating labor remains at the heart of the system.”<sup>22</sup> Yet value-creating labor is what is being perpetually thrown off. Closely related to what Moishe Postone calls capitalism’s “treadmill effect,” this pattern as analyzed by Marx in *Capital* leads directly to his discussion of “relative surplus populations”: a “population . . . superfluous to capital’s average requirements for its own valorization,” which can take the “striking form of the extrusion of workers already employed, or the less evident, but no less real, form of a greater difficulty in absorbing the additional working population through . . . customary outlets.”<sup>23</sup>

We will see a recurring narrative of this process in the studies of the capitalist gimmick that follow: in the rise of the temp agency narrated in

*Lightning Rods* (Chapter 1), in the unpaid yet curiously still working servants who populate Henry James's mature and later fictions (Chapter 8), in the kinless and/or nonproductive persons used to bring closure to the circulation of a bad financial device in "The Bottle Imp" and the horror film *It Follows* (Chapter 4), and in the allegories of technological obsolescence and fairytale-like stories of exchange in Stan Douglas's video installation *Suspiria* (Chapter 7). These texts suggest that when the gimmick takes the form of a labor-saving device, in particular, it is closely attended by its shadow: the becoming "superfluous" of value-productive labor and rise of more uncertainly productive kinds. As autoworker James Boggs puts it in "The American Revolution: Pages from the Negro Worker's Notebook" (1963): "It is in this serious light that we have to look at the question of the growing army of the unemployed. We have to stop looking for solutions in pump-priming, featherbedding, public works, war contracts, and all the other gimmicks that are always being proposed by labor leaders and well-meaning liberals."<sup>24</sup> Boggs hints that the "gimmick" is as much (if not more) about *non*labor as labor. And indeed, that the relation between nonlabor and labor is already encrypted in labor, the structural antithesis as well as counterpart of capital.<sup>25</sup>

The "annihilation of the source of absolute surplus value . . . by the pursuit of relative surplus value." Reflecting this "moving contradiction" in its abstract or implicitly social estimations of deficient or excessive labor, time, and value, the gimmick is not only an aesthetic "about" capitalism's labor-expelling drive toward increasing productivity. It indexes unease about the future of accumulation attending it.

To say that an idea of crisis lies coiled in the transparently banal gimmick sounds strange. Yet as Miller is quick to notice at the beginning of "Anal Rope," which opens with an acerbic discussion of the way critics "fuss" or hype up Hitchcock's technical stunt in *Rope* (the trick of supposedly shooting without a cut) while casually acting as if its homosexual story is no big thing, the gimmick has a clever way of disarming us from taking it seriously: "The gimmick arrests attention, *but only in the process to relax the demands put on it by an ostentatiously unworthy object.*"<sup>26</sup>

Miller suggests two moments in this aesthetic encounter. The first is a snapping to alertness, triggered by an initially energizing perception of form. The second is a slackening, as one becomes aware of the form's disappointing poverty. The moment in which the gimmick arouses *critical* response is therefore simultaneously a *dissipation* of criticality. Why



continue paying attention to that which you've just judged as undeserving of attention? The "ostentatiously unworthy," "sumptuously extraneous," "compelling, but meaningless" gimmick thus discourages us from not only looking more closely at it but at the very suspicion it activates. That suspicion indexes nothing less than how the relation between labor and capital structures the way we perceive the world, seeping into how people share their pleasures and displeasures.<sup>27</sup> It is our society's distinctively aesthetic way of processing the fundamentals of capitalist accumulation: the production of wealth as value, the binding of value to labor's abstraction, the determination of abstract labor by socially necessary labor time. Yet protected by its own slickness, as a thing whose sheer stupidity cleverly neutralizes the critical feeling it incites, the gimmick defends itself from intellectual curiosity in a way that puts any person seeking to analyze it at a comical disadvantage.

### Handle, Wig, Prop

In a world in which the necessary hangs on the superfluous, the gimmick is often a survival strategy. Let us briefly consider three representations of this dynamic, widely varying in affect and tone.

In "Letter from a Region in My Mind" (1962), James Baldwin describes the summer he reached puberty as the moment when "crime" first struck him as an alternative to waged employment. "One would never defeat one's circumstances by working and saving one's pennies; one would never, by working, acquire that many pennies, and, besides, the social treatment accorded even the most successful Negroes proved that one needed, in order to be free, something more than a bank account."<sup>28</sup> The onset of adulthood thus coincides with disenchantment with social promises tied to the wage, a form linked not just to the "bank account" but indirectly to "school," which Baldwin says had begun "to reveal itself as a child's game that no one could win."

One needed a handle, a lever, a means of inspiring fear. It was absolutely clear that the police would whip you and take you in as long as they could get away with it, and that everyone else—housewives, taxi-drivers, elevator boys, dishwashers, bartenders, lawyers, judges, doctors, and grocers—would never, by the operation of any generous human feeling, cease to use you as an outlet for his frustrations and hostilities.