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## A glamorous feminism by design?

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### ABSTRACT

Glamour is often understood as a capitalist technology of allure and as a device with which women are objectified. The consumption glamour has also been theorized as representing a refusal to be imprisoned by the norms of gender, class, and race, as well as a form of escape from everyday life. In this article, I explore the attractiveness of glamour both as a technique of feminine performance and as a technique of capitalism. By defining and historicizing the aesthetic, I consider if, and how, glamour could be utilized to strengthen a feminist politics. I argue that glamour has become more salient in a contemporary context in which the myth of natural beauty has generally been debunked, and in which the performance of femininity constantly refers to its own artifice. Through analysis of examples of the material practices of glamour, such as putting on lipstick, wearing high-heel shoes, and drinking cocktails, I suggest that glamour works as an imaginative resource by both triggering a sense of the already enjoyed and provoking idealized visions of the future. I document how everyday experiences of glamour involve the acknowledgement of artifice, fantasies of 'the good life', and inevitable failure. I argue that these qualities make glamour a powerful existing resource that can be used to explore how femininity functions and to speculate about the future of feminism. Just as feminist discourses have been incorporated and reterritorialized by capitalism, I suggest that feminism could incorporate and reterritorialize the material practices of glamour in order to counter capitalist neoliberal imperatives. I explore how speculative design could allow feminists to use existing optimistic attachments, such as glamour, to think beyond capitalism.

**KEYWORDS** Glamour; consumption; speculative design; feminism; femininity; aesthetics

In popular discourse, the feminist has often been imagined as a stable and coherent subject summed up by the character of the 'man-hating, unfeminine, lesbian' (Scharff 2012, p. 2). While this may be changing,<sup>1</sup> it was this stereotypical and individualized character that informed my early involvement (or lack of involvement) with feminism. As a young woman growing up in the UK in the 1980s and 1990s, I believed in equality, but I was resistant to feminist ideas because I associated feminist practice with assuming masculinity, and I felt that an acceptance of masculine power was recognition of my

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own inferiority. As I got older and experienced greater structural inequalities, my attitude changed.

Nevertheless, the characterization of the feminist continued to prohibit my engagement with feminism. This was not because I thought negatively about identifying as a 'man-hating, unfeminine, lesbian' feminist. I saw this as a position of strength. It was because I felt more superficial than that. I was bisexual, I giggled a lot, and I liked shopping, clubbing, and dressing up. Sometimes I even enjoyed being whistled at by a builder on the street. How could I identify as a feminist without being a hypocrite?

As I studied more, I began to find texts that dealt with the complexity of feminine identity, that recognized the multiplicity of subject positions,<sup>2</sup> and that discussed the ambivalent feelings that many women feel towards men. I started to go to feminist groups and found myself surprised by the appearance of the people in the room. Never had I been surrounded by so much red lipstick. A demonstration by the Fawcett Society in November 2011 illustrates this (Figure 1). The demonstration was organized in order to highlight the ways that budget cuts in the UK were affecting women, and to urge the government 'not to turn back the clock' on feminism. Publicity for the event was purposefully retro, and demonstrators were asked to dress up in 1950s-style clothes. The glamour of the outfits, which included red lipstick, high-heel shoes, housecoats, and stockings, was obvious to passersby. While this example is a one-off event, at the very least, it demonstrates a willingness



**Figure 1.** Fawcett Society anti-austerity demonstration, 2011. Image credit: Peter Marshall. © 2011, Peter Marshall mylondondairy.co.uk.

to look glamorous to prove a point. In my experience, however, glamorous practices are also part of the everyday lives of many feminists.

In the feminist groups that I went to, glamorous practices were framed as problematic, or at least, troubling, if they were discussed at all. Some, seemingly unaware of their own activities, would critique the processes of objectification and sexualization involved in the pursuit of glamour. Questions arose over whether we, as feminists, were just as duped by consumer capitalism and heterosexual patriarchy as everyone else. Some contributors suggested there was a difference between the type of retro visions of glamour valued by feminists and more extreme engagements such as glamour modelling. A minority of queer feminists celebrated glamour as a claiming back of femininity.

While there is validity in all of these perspectives, and I explore some of these ideas in this article, I believe that there is more to the allure of glamorous objects and practices than is voiced in these discussions. Thus, I aim to deconstruct the attractiveness of glamour both as a technique of feminine performance and as a technique of capitalism. I consider whether glamour should be an object of critique or if the aesthetic could be utilized to strengthen a queer feminist politics. To do this, I define and historicize glamour and explore how glamorous objects work as powerful imaginative resources. I draw together feminist discussions of beauty and glamour with literature that has considered the material qualities and history of the aesthetics of glamour. I refer to a number of examples of the material practices of glamour such as putting on red lipstick, drinking cocktails, and wearing high-heel shoes. While clichés in terms of glamour, I have chosen these practices because at points in their history they have been associated with femininity and have been argued to represent the objectification of women. The examples and analysis are not meant to be representative of all engagements with glamour, but to conjure a feeling of everyday experience. In this respect, my approach is informed by Thrift's article 'The material practices of glamour', in which he argues that style matters, and that material objects act upon us as 'behaviours, not sets of properties' (2008, p. 11).

I consider the multi-sensory experience of the material practices of glamour, as well as the desires and routines that intersect with them. This emphasis on the creation of the cultural mood of glamour draws on Highmore's (2013) approach to everyday life. Highmore suggests that instead of focusing on individual practices we should turn our attention to the 'patterning of desire and routine as they connect and disconnect' (2011, p. 2). To that end, he pursues a 'science of singularity' inspired by Michel De Certeau. This method describes the particular as if it can contribute to a more general view of the world. It allows for analysis of the role of affect and emotion in everyday life and takes materials seriously. Highmore's approach also draws attention to the importance of the ordinary, and is particularly relevant to this study

because it attempts to add depth to existing understandings of objects and practices often thought of as superficial. In addition, the focus on the ordinary allows for a 'political aesthetics of everyday life', a project that I will argue has been, and is, essential for feminists to engage with (Highmore 2011, p. 164).

## Glamour and feminism

The viewpoints expressed in the feminist meetings mentioned above are influenced by (and influence) theorizations of feminine beauty and glamour in feminist texts. Before I move on to define glamour, I consider some of these theories because an exposition of this literature is necessary to draw out gaps in understanding. Historically, feminism has engaged with the idea of beauty rather than glamour. Despite differences in these concepts, however, discussions of beauty can shed light on attitudes towards glamorous practices among feminists.

The notion of feminine beauty has always had an uneasy relationship with feminism, particularly in early seminal texts. In the eighteenth-century writings of Wollensteincraft (2009 [1792]) women who focus on appearance are criticized as 'feathered birds' with nothing to do but 'plume themselves'. Over a century later, de Beauvoir (2011 [1953]) called on women to transcend their bodies, put aside emotional responses and reject beauty in order to gain equality. The conceptualization of fashion and beauty as a superficial preoccupation, and the idea that feminism needed to reject activities traditionally viewed as feminine continued in many mid-twentieth-century feminist works. These attitudes have been well documented and problematized. For example, Joanne Hollows uses the examples of Betty Friedan's *The feminist mystique* and Mary Daly's *Gyn/ecology* to identify problems with feminist understandings of the relationship between beauty and femininity.

Hollows suggests that the first problem with Friedan's argument is that she understands 'masculine behavior traits as preferable, and more "human", than those associated with femininity' (2000, 12–13). Friedan views female emancipation to be achieved by education and commitment to the masculine world of work. This perspective reproduces the greater value given to masculinity in patriarchal societies. In her commitment to masculine values over feminine ones, Friedan also represents 1950s femininity as monolithic, that all women (whatever class and/or race) have similar lives and values. In addition, Hollows suggests that Friedan's understanding of culture is simplistic: women are represented as duped by media messages and as unquestioning of their own objectification. Friedan hoped that the *The feminist mystique* would overturn this false consciousness.

Friedan was not unique in this regard; other second-wave feminists reproduced the masculine/feminine binary in their critiques of the objectification of women (see Segal 1987). Fashion and beauty practices featured as part of this

critique and were seen as oppressive, exploitative, and a form of 'bondage' (Hollows 2000, 139–140). This was particularly true of 'restrictive' items of clothing such as the high-heeled shoe and the corset. For example, Elaine Showalter documents how the corset has frequently been held up as a metaphor for the 'straight-jacket of femininity' (1985, p. 98). Behind this critique lies the idea that culturally created femininity is superficial, and that women's 'true' nature (a deep femaleness which presumably lay in their biology) 'was waiting to be released once the "surface" trappings of femininity [such as corsets] had been thrown off' (Hollows 2000, p. 17).

The idea of 'natural femaleness' is the second problem that Hollows identifies in feminist attitudes to beauty. This notion not only assumes that gender follows sex, but it also sets up the natural as superior to the artificial. In her critique, Hollows is clearly influenced by Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity and Donna Haraway's criticisms of nature/culture binaries and essentialist feminisms. This is particularly evident in Hollow's discussion of *Gyn/ecology* by Mary Daly. Daly writes:

those brave enough to become 'wild women' are not only threatened by men but also by feminine 'painted birds' who are after them: the wild women 'who sheds the paint and manifests her Original Moving Self ... is attacked by the mutants of her own kind, the man-made woman'. (quoted in Hollows 2000, p. 15)

While noting how problematic this idea is because all human culture is artificial, Hollows (2000) outlines two types of feminist 'anti-fashion' and 'anti-beauty' practices that emerged from this perspective. She suggests that some feminists advised women to adopt masculine dress, while others suggested that it was necessary to step outside fashion altogether. This celebration of the masculine, or the natural, conceals the gender politics of fashion and beauty. For example, 'to understand all "uncomfortable" dress as merely one aspect of the oppression of women is fatally to oversimplify; dress is never primarily functional and it is certainly not natural' (Wilson 2003, p. 244). Indeed, there is often as much labour involved in creating the illusion of the natural, as there is in the unnatural.

As Holliday and Sanchez Taylor (2006) have suggested in their discussion of aesthetic surgery, throughout history the critique of the unnatural has been a thoroughly raced and classed narrative. Holliday and Sanchez Taylor document how decorated women were conceptualized as 'other' women (frequently Egyptian) in religious texts and were thought of as sinful because they used artificial beauty to seduce and manipulate men. Artificial women were coded as bad because they expressed sexuality, whereas naturally beautiful women carried out the will of others (fathers, husbands, brothers, gods) (Holliday and Sanchez Taylor 2006, p. 182). Holliday and Sanchez Taylor explain how the negative feelings associated with artificial women were

incorporated into the binaries established in enlightenment discourse. Respectable subjectivity was associated with a 'controlled, slender and unmarked' body that was frequently white and middle-class (2006, p. 182). This was juxtaposed with classed and raced bodies viewed as unbounded, emotional, and driven by (sexual) pleasure. However, what is interesting in the denigration of artificial beauty, as Holliday and Sanchez Taylor note, is that 'we are left with a startlingly different formulation to that proposed by many feminists: naturalness = passivity, false beauty = agency' (2006, p. 182).

Despite these critiques, the championing of the natural continues in some feminist discourse. For example, in *Living dolls: the return of sexism* Walter (2011) is highly critical of the glittering pink aesthetic, fake boobs, short skirts, and high heels, that have become central to some young women's vision of feminine beauty. She argues that female success has been redefined through a narrow framework of heterosexual allure obtained through consumer culture. Walter writes that 'for our daughters, the escalator doesn't have to stop on the doll's floor' (2011, p. 10).

I do not disagree with Walter's criticisms of the idea of 'free choice' common in post-feminist discourse, or the problems inherent in the narrow framework of heterosexual allure held up by consumer culture. However, Walter's critique of 'artificial femininity' reproduces the issues that Hollows identifies. It sets up the natural as superior to the artificial and fails to acknowledge that artificiality has become central to post-feminist popular culture. As both McRobbie (2009) and Holliday and Sanchez (2006) have argued, in post-feminist discourse the performance of femininity constantly refers to its own artifice. For example, in Western contemporary culture, there is a general acknowledgement that beauty can be created with new aesthetic procedures, diets, and gym regimes. As Naomi Wolf argues in the epilogue to the 2002 edition of *The beauty myth*, while these practices continue to be detrimental, it would be difficult to find a 12-year-old girl who does not know that these "'ideals" are too tough on girls [ ... ] and that following them too slavishly is neither healthy nor cool' (2002, p. 3). In addition, as McRobbie suggests, traditionally feminine fashion and beauty practices, such as wearing spindly stilettos and 'pencil' skirts, have been re-instated as conscious personal choices that make their artifice known (2009, p. 66). In this context, the discourse of natural beauty becomes less salient and it is glamour, which has always been about carefully constructed performance, which comes to the fore. In post-feminist popular culture, the aesthetic labour of femininity is recognized as precisely that: as labour.

It could be suggested that this change is a turn to more working-class modes of doing femininity. For example, Skeggs and Wood (2008) note how 'practical labour' and 'making an effort' have historically been highly valued in working-class cultures. However, class- and race-based distinctions continue in the contemporary context and are contingent on more or less



obvious versions of artifice. For example, it is labour that is a less visible extension of the body, such as going to the gym and eating healthily, which is generally given greater value by middle-class women, over more obvious technologies such as fake boobs and false eyelashes.

In *The aftermath of feminism*, McRobbie understands the acknowledgment of artifice as resulting from the incorporation and reterritorialization of feminist ideas about the fictive status of femininity into the dominant symbolic. She calls this the post-feminist masquerade. McRobbie writes that the post-feminist masquerade is a new form of gender power which

re-orchestrates the heterosexual matrix in order to secure, once again, the existence of patriarchal law and masculine hegemony, but this time by means of a kind of ironic, quasi-feminist staking out of a distance in the act of taking on the garb of femininity. (2009, p. 64)

For example, she writes of powerful women fearing being mistaken for feminists, and thus adopting the air of being girlishly distracted and 'weighed down with bags, shoes, bracelets, and other decorative candelabra items' (2009, p. 67). McRobbie suggests that the post-feminist masquerade not only secures masculine hegemony but also reinstates whiteness as a cultural dominant within fashion and beauty. She argues that this is because the post-feminist masquerade derives its meaning from the heyday of (white) Hollywood glamour.

In her discussion of this new sexual contract, McRobbie also describes how the heterosexual matrix is re-orchestrated through the idea of the 'phallic girl', a more assertive alternative to the masquerade. She writes that the phallic girl gives the impression of having won equality with men by becoming like her male counterparts. For McRobbie, this is epitomized by the glamour model 'who earns most of her money posing naked for soft porn pages of the press' (2009, p. 84). For her ordinary equivalent, 'the girl on the street', McRobbie suggests that assuming phallicism means drinking to excess, getting into fights, and wearing short skirts, high heels, and skimpy tops (2009, p. 85). For McRobbie, this is another example of the reterritorialization of feminist discourse: in this case, prior feminist demands for the entitlement to sexual pleasure are incorporated into popular discourse giving the pretence of sexual equality.

McRobbie is highly critical of the post-feminist masquerade and 'the phallic girl', and her critique challenges the 'affirmative feminism' of 'third-wavers' such as Baumgardner and Richards (2004). For example, McRobbie takes issue with Baumgardner and Richards' denunciation of past feminisms, their celebration of girliness, and the 'good parts' of capitalism (2009, p. 157). I agree that Baumgardner and Richards' work is a superficial celebration of feminine practices because it fails to acknowledge Western privilege and the inequalities created by neoliberal capitalism.



At the same time, however, McRobbie's analysis, particularly of glamour and its related objects such as 'decorative candelabra items', short skirts, and high heels, seems detached from the everyday experiences of many women. In fact, considering much of her earlier work regarding consumer culture and femininity, McRobbie's tone is surprisingly derogatory, and in places, her writing is in danger of reproducing some of the class distinctions of which she is critical.

More recently, McRobbie has suggested that her thesis in *The aftermath of feminism* needs updating (2015, 8–9). In 'Notes on the perfect' McRobbie observes that since 2011 'many new kinds of molecular radical feminism have appeared'. However, she argues that 'the perfect' is:

a countervailing force to these radicalisms, an emerging horizon which supplants the post-feminist masquerade in an era now marked by young women's feminist activism, while also ratcheting up the social punishment of women. (2015, p. 9)

The perfect, McRobbie writes, 'emerges as a horizon of expectation' for women and is 'bought into life' by various regulatory techniques of self-measurement such as managing diet, exercise, family, work, appearance, and sexual attraction. The idea of a perfect life seems compatible with feminism (unlike the post-feminist masquerade and phallic girl which involved its repudiation), in the sense that it appears to put women in control of their own affairs and demonstrates that women can 'have it all'. Yet, this individualized version of feminism encourages self-loathing, competition among women, and ultimately ensures that existing power relationships are maintained.

Glamour is a significant part of McRobbie's critiques of the post-feminist masquerade, the phallic girl, and the perfect. In the account of the post-feminist masquerade, it is the 'garb' with which women perform femininity and mark their distance from feminism. In the description of the 'phallic girl', it is glamour that allows glamour-models to be both sexually desirable to men while adopting more masculine habits. In the idea of the perfect, glamour is an aspiration that drives detrimental self-disciplining regimes. Yet, in each case, the everyday experiences of the material practices of glamour remain largely unexplored. So it is a discussion of feminine glamour to which I now turn.

## Defining feminine glamour

Glamour is an ambiguous categorization and it is difficult to define because it is relatively subjective. As Gundle (2008) suggests in his thorough exploration of the history of glamour: the quality is elusive and hard to explain in words, but instantly perceptible to those who experience it. Glamour is a fantasy of

excess that can be attached to material objects, people, or places (Gundle 2008, Postrel 2013). Glamour attempts to transcend the everyday by achieving perfection: the smoothest surface, the sparkliest material, the icon least affected by the ravages of time. As Gundle notes, glamour captures the imagination by association with beauty, sexuality, theatricality, wealth, dynamism, notoriety, movement, and leisure (2008, p. 6).

Glamour has a long history and the term was given prominence when used by Walter Scott in *The lay of the last minstrel*. In the poem, glamour means a magical power capable of making ordinary people, dwellings, and places, seem like magnificent versions of themselves (Gundle 2008, p. 7). Gundle traces how the emergence of glamour is intimately intertwined with the rise of consumer culture and feminine identity. He details the way that courtesans, symbolic of the developing consumer economy, became the professionals of performance and reinforced the role of sex in glamour in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Gundle goes on to analyse the centrality of glamour to the Hollywood star system, on which many of our contemporary understandings of glamour have been based. This history is summed up by the glamorous vision of the femme fatale – a woman wrapped in silk gowns and diamonds, who lived in a lavish home decorated in the Moderne style, toyed with men, and ignored the law. By the 1950s, however, these more rebellious associations had been downplayed, and the icon of the glamorous 1950s housewife emerged.

Dyhouse (2010) also documents the role of the media in the circulation of the glamorous aesthetic in her book *Glamour: women, history, feminism*. Dyhouse suggests that glamour is linked to a dream of transformation, of something out of the ordinary and is a fiction of feminine becoming. She argues that a desire for glamour often represents a refusal to be imprisoned by the norms of class and gender. This argument is partly based on the relatively egalitarian nature of glamour. As opposed to natural beauty, glamour is an ideal that most people can share if so inclined, and even small relatively inexpensive objects can make someone feel glamorous, as this quote from a drag queen demonstrates:

On a grey day, the view from my window is ugly, so I turn and face my closet, which is full of makeup and clothes. I see my feather fans, all my jewelry and I either put some of it on or pretend it's already on ... You know, you have to make your own glamour, but that's what's so great about it – you can. (Gundle 2008, p. 3)

For those positioned outside white, reproductive, middle-class, heterosexual womanhood, glamour can be a way of negotiating the tension between sexuality and respectability. As Beverly Skeggs found in her study of white working-class women, glamour is a performance of femininity with strength, that is not always tied to youth. Skeggs writes that 'recognition of oneself as

glamorous serves to engender an identification, enabling femininity to operate as a disposition and a form of cultural capital, even if only momentarily experienced and always tied to performance' (1997, p. 111). Dahl (2010, p. 49), a femme activist and academic, also writes how for sluts, whores, and femmes, glamorous dress acts have been ways out of the heterosexualized order of respectability.

The practice of wearing high-heeled shoes exemplifies both feminist critiques of glamorous practices, and glamour as a performance of femininity with strength.

For example, 'anti-raunch' feminists including writers such as Gail Dines have suggested that 'high-heels that contort ... [the] calves' are evidence of false sexual empowerment (2010, p. 103). Indeed, the material qualities of high heels do change the posture and appearance of the wearer. Heels make legs look longer and slimmer, breasts are thrust forward and bottoms are pushed out. Unless worn by an experienced wearer, the height of heels can make a person feel unstable and physically weak. The tightness of the shoes themselves may also contain bodies afraid to appear 'out of control'. Consequently, it could be argued that wearing high heels reinforces discourses of normative femininity.

Yet, the effect of this technology is also contextual, and thus more complex in terms of the agency of the wearer. For example, writing about high-heeled shoes, femme-ininity, and sex work, Swift (2012) suggests that the meaning of high heels is shifting, and open-ended, not over-determined. Swift writes how '[s]hopping for stripper heels in ... [her] femme ones, drives home how whores and queers use clothing and style to inhabit their differences and claim the virtue of their existence' (2012, p. 102). Her analysis reinforces Skeggs' argument that glamour and femininity can work as resources as well as sources of subordination (1997, p. 111).

Swift goes on to observe how sex workers and femme's relationship with high heels is illustrative of a 'disjuncture between experiencing one's self-presentation as affirming a given identity, and a cultural context that does not adequately appreciate or account for the nuances of these presentations or identities' (2012, p. 105). To varying extents, and while not wishing to lessen the extent to which femmes and sex workers feel this disconnect, I would argue that many people experience the disjuncture between their own self-presentation and cultural contexts that do not recognize the nuances of gender and sexuality.

Indeed, it was a perceived contradiction between my own superficiality and the seriousness of feminism, that made me feel unable to identify with the movement.

In some ways, as these examples demonstrate, the aesthetics of glamour can be about purposefully not 'knowing your place', and a way of transgressing bourgeois norms of moderation and measure. This is one of the reasons

that throughout the twentieth century there has been no shortage of criticism about glamorous practices. In the 1930s, glamour was dismissed as artificial, in the 1950s as vulgar and lacking in class, in the 1960s as lacking in innocence, and in the 1980s as ambitious unfeminine materialism (Gundle 2008).

Some of these critiques of glamour continue today because glamour involves a judgement of taste. While it may be accepted that there is nothing beyond artificiality in the performance of gender, there are certainly more or less 'appropriate' versions of glamour. In the media, the aesthetics and judgements of 'appropriate' glamour differ according to class and race. For example, McRobbie (2009, p. 133) notes how in makeover shows, such as 'What Not to Wear', the pre-welfare rough and respectable working-class divide is reworked through shabby failure or glamorous success. Success is dependent upon an 'appropriately' fashionable, feminine, slim, in control, sexy (but not slutty), appearance.

Middle-class glamour is more dependent upon historical knowledge and vintage styles than the polished looks produced in makeover shows. If one is to believe the media, even cooking and cleaning should be glamorous activities to be completed in fifties hoop skirts and high-heel shoes. For example, Rachel Khoo, 'food creative' and TV chef, wears vintage dresses and red lipstick while cooking in her small Parisian kitchen. Yet as a single woman (at least in the TV programme) and entrepreneur who started her own tiny restaurant in the flat she rented, she is little like the stereotypical 1950s housewife that her style emulates. Through the example of Rachel Khoo, we can see the normalization and domestication of glamour, just as there was in the 1950s, together with the adoption of a quasi-feminist rhetoric of choice and empowerment.

'Appropriate' glamour is, of course, a shifting terrain, and this slipperiness is illustrative of the oxymoronic qualities of the aesthetic itself. Glamour is accessible and exclusive, democratic and elite, sleazy and elegant. It is these contradictory qualities that make glamour hard to pin down, but that also give it seductive power.

## **Glamour, imagination and consumer culture**

As an imaginative resource, glamour is a powerful technique of capitalism. This is because, as Campbell (1987) has suggested, consumer cultures involve a distinct form of pleasure pursued in the art of daydreaming that is fed by collective fantasies and visions of escape. Campbell argues that in late modernity pleasurable potential can be found in all experiences as well as distinct sensations. Pleasurable potential is located in the imagination and the romantic longing to become other. While all cultures produce ideals that are sources of identity and hope, Campbell suggests that desire for 'the good life' has a particular prominence in consumer cultures. Indeed,

you could argue that the entire promotions industry is built on attempts to understand this imaginary realm of desire. For example, in Postrel's (2013) detailed exposition of the power of glamour, she explores many promotional acts of persuasion and argues that glamour works by inciting longing. Postrel is largely uncritical of this process and, within a seemingly modernist framework, sees glamour as a 'persuasive, complex and often life-enhancing force' (2013, p. 8).

In Campbell's view, however, the reality of the everyday does not often live up to fantasies of a glamorous 'good life'. This results in ongoing cycles of longing and acquisition that are part of the dynamism of consumer capitalism. The cycles that Campbell identifies can also be interpreted as part of cruel optimism more recently explored by Berlant (2011). Berlant argues that cruel optimism is a desire for something, an optimistic positive attachment, which actually impedes the aim that you brought to it initially. She argues that in liberal capitalist societies people remain attached to fantasies of 'the good life', despite evidence that the conditions for obtaining this fantasy have been taken away. Brief moments of satisfaction and agency are found in consumption practices, but these are short lived.

Glamour is one vision of what 'the good life' looks like, whereby the consumption of things can supposedly make life more pleasurable and attractive. Glamorous objects often appeal because they trigger a sense of the already enjoyed and provoke idealized visions of the future. For example, the act of putting on red lipstick is glamorous by association with aspirational Hollywood icons, is an idealized vision of perfection, and also a fantasy about a place where women have time to spend on themselves. It is a multi-sensory practice in which we remember the look, the smell, the taste, and the feel, of the red paste in the gold wind-up tube. The already sensed encourages repetitive consumption, and idealized visions encourage future action. While it could be argued that many styles work in this way, glamour is an aesthetic that makes us acutely aware of the imaginative process.

Fantasies of a glamorous 'good life' are alluring because they represent a world with limitless resources including money and time. Glamorous practices can be about appearing wealthy, or a way of claiming back time for the self. For example, having perfectly painted nails is indicative of little engagement in physical labour that will chip the surface, or of having the time necessary to apply polish and maintain it. Time for self has become particularly valuable for women due to the radical dispersal of their labour, whereby boundaries between time for work and non-work, time for care, and time for leisure, are more difficult to trace (Adkins 2009). Thus, rather than a retreat into insular escapism, the desire to be glamorous can be read as a comment on contemporary gender relations: a way of getting relief from everyday pressures, as well as an indication of aspirations for the future (Dyhouse 2010).

Yet, the majority of glamorous acts are played out through the market, and thus, we should question the agency involved in such activities, as well as the extent to which they can challenge patriarchy. As McRobbie warns, feminists should be wary of celebrating an 'entitlement to claim back femininity' because:

[t]his pro-capitalist femininity-focused repertoire plays directly into the hands of corporate consumer culture eager to tap into this market on the basis of young women's rising incomes. (2009, p. 158)

McRobbie's point is well illustrated by the recent *Elle* magazine 'Feminism issue' (2015), which attempts to 'rebrand' feminism. The magazine includes interviews with glamorous celebrities about the pay gap and women's inequality, alongside the usual fashion and beauty advice, and advertisements. This 'rebrand' places feminism within the normatively feminine in order to attempt to appeal to a broader constituencies of women. While the prominence of feminism in the mainstream media could be a useful starting point, the *Elle* 'Feminism issue' turns feminism into a commodity and empties out its meaning. Rather than questioning the gender and sexual roles that constitute and maintain capitalism, the magazine reinforces discourses of what it is to be successfully feminine in contemporary consumer culture. This includes the self-disciplining regimes that McRobbie (2015) argues are detrimental to women's lives.

The fantasy of the glamorous good life is only remotely possible for a minority of privileged women, and, in this respect, it is evidence of the cruel optimism that Berlant observes. Glamorous lives are visions whereby people not only have the time and resources for work, leisure, familial duties, and social obligations, but are able to enjoy these activities and make them beautiful. Yet if the political conditions to live, let alone enjoy life, have been taken away, then all we have left is the fantasy played out through fleeting, and not always satisfying, acts.

## Everyday life and glamorous failure

However, as much as it is an error to uncritically celebrate glamorous practices, it is also a mistake to see the pleasure experienced from glamorous acts as simply illusory. Glamorous objects, like any other, give pleasure in and of themselves, and cannot be encapsulated fully by a discussion of their socio-political meanings. As Gilbert writes:

[f]or most of the human race through most of its history, [...] the difference between one cloth and another, one cheese and another, and so forth, has been the stuff that cultures, identities and lives have been built from. (2008, p. 115)

From this perspective, a critique of glamorous consumption as illusory is either an elitist exercise that positions the critic as having the authority to determine cultural value, or it ignores the materiality of objects. Pleasure is found in distinct sensation, as well as in experiences and the imagination. For example, as Thrift (2008) argues, the sight of a bright, shiny, or glittery surface can have a direct effect upon mood. Even when sensation is mediated by consumer culture, pleasure continues to be derived from shape, form, texture, and pattern. This point is well illustrated by a discussion of the cocktail.

In 2003, Susan Irvin Gatti published a sociolinguistic analysis of cocktail drinking in which, from a feminist perspective, she was highly critical of cocktail names and practices. She (2003, p. 108) writes that explicit drink names such as the 'Slow Screw', 'Slippery Nipple', and the 'Bloody Tampon', as well as the acts involved in drinking such concoctions, are indicative of the way women are demeaned and dehumanized in society. She is also critical of the return to classic cocktails among 'loungers' and writes that these cocktail drinkers yearn for pre-feminist times. For Gatti, cocktails represent uneven gender relations and she is baffled by women's complicity in cocktail culture. Not only does Gatti overlook the socio-cultural associations of cocktails with glamour (important even when glamour is consciously subverted in the case of the 'Bloody Tampon'), she completely ignores the materiality of the cocktail itself: the way that the design of a glass makes you hold the drink, the strong/sweet smell, the decoration, the taste, the smooth texture of a well-mixed drink, not to mention the effects of the alcohol itself.

While these are perhaps unfair criticisms to make of a pre-defined 'sociolinguistic analysis', Gatti's approach distorts her conclusions. Whereas Gatti links cocktail drinkers ('loungers' and 'fraters') by their anti-feminist attitudes, these groups can equally be linked by their experiences of the materiality of the cocktail and its glamorous associations. As Thrift (2008) argues, the affects of glamorous materials are experienced similarly across subject positions: 'loungers' and 'fraters' are linked by their enjoyment of the aesthetics of cocktails. Thrift writes that aesthetics are a 'fundamental element of human life and not just an additional luxury', and their affects are 'immediate, perceptual, and emotional' (Thrift 2008, 10–11). He argues that aesthetic experience produces sensory gratification as well as shared capacity, commonality, and affective allegiances (Thrift 2008, p. 11). From this perspective, the material practices of glamour have intrinsic value: the power to create 'alluring imaginative territories' (Thrift 2008, p. 11). These allegiances (whether it is a love of cocktail drinking, sports cars, high-heeled shoes, or David Bowie) cannot be fully explained by cultural distinction.

While the everyday aesthetic experience of glamorous materials may well be unifying, the failure of glamour is even more so. Glamorous acts are fleeting, and the façade of glamour cannot always be maintained. Mundane



everyday practices disrupt the aesthetic illusion. The cocktail that is the 'one too many' and makes you feel sick; the blister caused by the high-heeled shoe; the chipped nail polish; the moment when you realize you have lipstick on your teeth: all these occurrences interfere with the glamorous vision. Thus, while glamour may be about transcending the everyday, in practice this is never possible. At some point in time, we all fail to be glamorous.

It is this failure, combined with the knowledge that glamour is constructed, that make the material practices of glamour all the more interesting. Rather than view the 'imperfect' as simply another distinctive position for those who can afford it (McRobbie 2015), I believe that the everyday failures that we all experience have radical potential. As Judith Halberstam argues, from failure a new kind of optimism can be born, 'not one that is based on positive thinking as an explanatory engine for social order, nor one that insists on the bright side at all costs' (2011, p. 5). Rather, failure produces an opportunity to question the hegemony of positivity, and to acknowledge that so-called success and failure exist in 'equal measure' and 'that the meaning of one depends on the meaning of the other' (2011, p. 5).

In addition to its historical associations with camp and drag, understood through the lens of failure, glamour is a queer aesthetic. The everyday experience of glamour demonstrates the limits of normative femininity: that failure occurs even if one could occupy the 'reproductive, white, respectable, heterosexual approximation to womanhood that nobody embodies' (Dahl 2012, p. 61). Glamour is a celebration of artifice, an acknowledgement that 'becoming feminine is a complex process of materialization' (Dahl 2012, p. 59). It is part of what Halberstam (2012a) has coined 'Gaga feminism', a feminism 'of the phony, the unreal, the speculative'.

Using Lady Gaga as a starting point, Halberstam creates a 'Gaga manifesto'. The manifesto includes five feminist ideas, three of which are relevant to this analysis of glamour. The first is that 'wisdom lies in the unexpected and unanticipated' and that '[g]oing gaga means letting go of many of our most basic assumptions about people, bodies, and desires' (2012b, p. 59). The second is that transformation is inevitable, but that change should be looked for on the peripheries and in the margins. While Gaga is commercial pop that is very much at the centre of consumer capitalism, she opens up new worlds for her audiences. The third point that Halberstam makes is that 'Gaga Feminism' is outrageous, it is for 'freaks and geeks, losers and failures' and there is no room for shame or embarrassment. Thus, failure and feeling out of place 'becomes a location for resisting, blocking, slowing, jamming the economy, and the social stability that depends upon it' (2012a, p. 12).

Not only does Gaga use techniques of glamour to high effect, but glamour and Gaga have much in common in the ways in which they can be useful for feminism. They make it necessary to take superficiality seriously, and point to the materialities of becoming feminine. Both glamour and Gaga are highly

commercial, but allow us to imagine living differently. They incite us to acknowledge our failures and perhaps this knowledge can be used to question, jam, or reterritorialize, the conventions of consumerism.

### **Glamour and speculative design: the menstruation machine**

As I suggested earlier, glamour is a style that engages our imaginations; it forces us to speculate. Speculation, creativity, and invention are essential for feminism in order that new more equitable futures can be bought into existence. For speculation to be engaging it should combine aspects of the familiar, with aspects of the strange. Thus, while creation and invention are essential, we cannot just magic new possibilities and futures from thin air. We have to work with the positive attachments we have, and glamour seems like a potent existing resource for speculation about what femininity is, and what feminism should look like. But how can we use or think with glamour beyond the market conditions within which it is often produced? One answer is through speculative design. While other avenues, such as performance art, fictional writing, and relational aesthetics, would be equally as interesting to explore, design is uniquely placed within our everyday experience. On a daily basis, we relate and interact with numerous types of material objects and we are experts in accessing their economic, material, social, and cultural value. Speculative design builds on this familiarity in order to get us to ask questions about the future.

Historically, design has frequently been involved in the production of spectacle in order to encourage consumption, and glamour has been one of its most persuasive techniques. Speculative design, however, is design that is not limited to the marketplace; in fact it often involves a critique of capitalism rather than involvement with it. Speculative designers produce objects that materialize complex debates, provoke users to ask questions, and to consider future possibilities. As Anthony Dunn and Fiona Raby suggest, design that is informed by cultural critique is particularly useful in the current climate because it:

can shift the discussion from one of the abstract generalities separated from our lives to tangible examples grounded in our experiences as members of a consumer society. (2014, p. 51)

Due to its very 'everydayness' speculative design is less easily pigeonholed as pure fantasy than art or literature, and by simultaneously capturing the real and the unreal, speculative designs tell us that 'everyday life as we know it could be different, that things could change' (2014, p. 43). Speculative design is also participatory in that it provokes discussion over how we understand the present and what possible scenarios we collectively want or do not want in the future. By generating and presenting alternatives, it can 'help

people construct compasses [...] for navigating new sets of values' (2014, p. 44).

In my view, speculative design would be useful to explore possible feminine and feminist futures. A materialization of feminist debates through speculative objects would encourage a discussion of complexity in a language accessible to those without a feminist education. In addition, because femininity involves a complex process of materialization, what better way to explore this process than by experiencing not-so-ordinary everyday objects.

One example (there are not many, and this one is not perfect, see Martins 2014) of such a speculative design is *Menstruation machine: Takashi's take*, designed Sputniko (aka Hiromi Ozaki) in 2010 (Figure 2). Sputniko, a student of Anthony Dunn and Fiona Raby at the Royal College of Art in London, designed her final project around the fictional character of Takashi, a young transgender Japanese man who, being unsatisfied with just appearing female, wanted to experience menstruation. Sputniko made a menstruation machine fitted with a blood dispensing mechanism and electrodes that stimulate the lower abdomen. The machine simulates the pain and bleeding of a five-day menstruation process. She also produced a pop song and video that depict Takashi dressing up and wearing the machine when out with her female friends.



**Figure 2.** *Menstruation machine: Takashi's take*, by Sputniko (2010). Image credit: Victor D'Allant. Available at <https://www.flickr.com/photos/globalx/5971110779> under a Creative Commons Attribution 2.0.

Sputniko produced the menstruation machine in order to explore what menstruation meant biologically, culturally, and politically. She wanted to consider why women were still menstruating when technologies could have been developed that stop the process (see Sputniko 2010). By using the central character of a young transgender male, she draws attention to the fluidity of gender and sexuality, as well as causing us to think about which bodies are coded as 'natural' and which are seen as 'artificial'. She also makes us consider the institutions involved in the process of enabling or preventing menstruation. Indeed, one of Sputniko's motivations was to draw attention to gender inequalities, government policy, and the pharmaceutical industry in Japan, including the fact it took the Japanese government nine years to approve the contraceptive pill and only three months to approve Viagra.

To encourage critical reflection on consumer technologies among young people, Sputniko posted the video on YouTube and it was picked up by a number of popular blogs. In the video, she included glamorous practices that would resonate with a young audience. For example, Takashi is shown spending time getting dressed, doing her makeup and meeting with her girlfriends. The menstruation machine itself is also a glamorous object made of sculpted chrome.

The adoption of the technique of glamour is useful in this case because, as I have argued, glamour is a queer aesthetic that can transgress norms of moderation and respectability without necessarily being seen as undesirable. When used in the design of the menstruation machine, it is the glamour of the material object and the video that make the project resonate with us. We have already experienced the speculation involved in consuming glamorous objects and the ways in which glamorous practices sometimes do not fit.

The glamour of the outer casing of the machine is also juxtaposed with its function: the interior mechanism that drips blood and stimulates pain for the wearer. The inside of the machine represents a more everyday experience of glamour: that no matter how much we try to create perfection; glamorous failure is inevitable. The menstruation machine embraces this fact without shame or embarrassment.

By adopting the familiar techniques of glamour to explore the strange, the machine and the video encourage us to consider what would change if men experienced menstrual pain. The project asks questions about what feminine glamour and femininity are and urge us to think about artificiality. By making biological processes into a glamorous product, Sputniko causes us to reflect on menstrual technologies, those invested in their production, and possibilities for future development.

Through projects such as this one, issues that are difficult to conceive in the abstract are made tangible. We are asked to imagine a different future, a practice, that through techniques of capitalism such as glamour, we have become

very familiar with. Perhaps then, we can use this habit to critique capitalist processes rather than to reinforce them.

### **Conclusion: a feminist aesthetics of everyday life**

I began this article by recounting my own engagement (or lack of it) with feminism. I did this in order to highlight some of the issues involved in the public perception of feminism, as well as to introduce ideas about superficiality and feminine glamour.

Through a discussion of feminist theorizations of beauty, I noted how critiques of artificiality have often been gendered, classed, and raced. I argued that feminism should explore that which gets categorized as superficial or artificial because many of these material objects and practices are central to what it means to be feminine. This idea is by no means new: fashion theorists have been arguing this point for decades. If anything, however, the need to explore objects categorized as artificial has only become more important because, as writers such as McRobbie have argued, the performance of femininity in contemporary culture frequently refers to its own artifice and recognizes the labour involved in its creation. Thus in recent times, glamour, rather than natural beauty, has taken on greater cultural significance as a technique of feminine performance, and of capitalism. In both these capacities, I have found that the material practices of glamour work as resources as well as sources of subordination.

As a technique of feminine performance, glamour, and its associated ideas of perfection can reinforce restrictive regimes of normative femininity. For example, as Wolf (2002) has shown us, diets, shopping, and dressing up, can have a negative impact on the lives of women and girls. At the same time, glamorous practices are dreams of transformation. Glamour enables femininity to operate as a form of cultural capital (even if only temporary), and the material practices of glamour can be a way out of the norms of class, gender, and sexuality. For example, as Swift (2012) observes, glamorous dress has allowed 'whores and queers' to embody difference, whilst also carving out a 'valid' identity.

However, it is short-sighted to simply celebrate the material practices of glamour because the imaginative processes involved in glamorous consumption are such powerful and persuasive techniques of capitalism. Visions of a glamorous 'good life' are part of the cycles of longing and acquisition central to consumer culture, and the majority of our glamorous practices are played out in the marketplace. Thus, drawing on the theories of Berlant, I suggested that much glamorous consumption is exemplary of cruel optimism. While moments of pleasure and agency are found when consuming glamorous objects, the way in which we engage with, and acquire, these

objects in capitalist neoliberal societies actually impedes ever obtaining the life we fantasize about.

Yet, there is also possibility in our everyday affective experiences of the material practices of glamour. Glamorous materials give us pleasure in and of themselves and their allure works across subject positions; the glittery surface that excites us, or the enjoyment of the cocktail that connects different subject groups. While neoliberal capitalism functions on an aesthetic register shaping our emotional and sensorial experience, at the same time, everyday aesthetic encounters always already go beyond the limits of capital. Thus, as Christoph Lindner argues, the study of culture should give more space to the study of aesthetic pleasure (the 'reflective apprehension of the cognitive-affective experience of a cultural object') because the aesthetic always acts upon us (2015, p. 234).

The study of aesthetic pleasure is a task that Highmore takes up in his book *Ordinary lives*. Highmore begins by outlining how 'aesthetics' once meant 'the messy work of sensate perception' and 'unruly emotion', but gradually became associated with the rules of artistic appreciation and with cultural institutions (2011, p. x). He argues that thicker descriptions of the everyday can be produced by adopting a more ordinary approach to aesthetics. Highmore demonstrates how this turn to sensate perception and emotion is also a political manoeuvre, one which can highlight often-unseen pains and pleasures, and, in turn, help to reconfigure experience. He writes 'if we live in ... [neoliberal times] dedicated to the perpetuating of habits of fear (of "others"), of emotional isolation and habits of self, we also live with many more invisible habits that tell their secret stories' (2011, p. 171).

As I hope I have shown in this paper, even in the seemingly individualistic and consumerist practices of glamour, radical potential can be found. In attending to the everyday sensual experience of glamorous pleasures and pains, the failure of a dream of perfection becomes obvious. Glamorous materials deteriorate and glamorous practices cannot ultimately transcend the everyday; red nail polish is always chipped in the end. It is this failure, coupled with the knowledge that glamour is constructed, that is potentially interesting for feminism. The everyday experience of glamour demonstrates the limits of normative femininity, that nobody fits the white, heterosexual, respectable vision of perfection held up as desirable. From this failure, a new kind of optimism can emerge, an optimism whereby failure and feeling out of place can be a location for questioning and resisting traditional gender roles, as well as the conventions of consumerism. In agreement with Halberstam (2011), I believe that a radical queer feminism needs to look to 'low-theory and counter-knowledge' for alternative narratives outside conventional knowledge production. For me, like Highmore, it is in the unravelling of our everyday aesthetic experience that these 'secret stories' often reveal themselves.

Of course, this approach is by no means outside the feminist tradition. There is a long history of feminist theory and art that explores the ordinary lives of women. Yet if, as McRobbie argues, feminist agendas are continually co-opted and reterritorialized by capitalist patriarchy, then we need to find new ways of 'producing imaginative acts' that encourage secret stories (Highmore 2011, p. 171). We need a feminist aesthetics of everyday life that creates accessible counter-sensorial experiences. One way of doing this, to which I think speculative design is well suited, is to use and adapt already existing optimistic attachments like glamour. This would create a more everyday vision of the good life than the one that capitalism provides, but not one without its glamorous pleasures.

## Notes

1. In the last few years, aligning oneself with feminism seems to have become more popular, exemplified by young female celebrities such as Lena Dunham and Emma Watson.
2. Hopefully, this encounter has become more common due to the publication of popular books such as *Bad feminist* (Gay 2014) and *Fifty shades of feminism* (Appignanesi et al. 2013).

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