

Interrogating Glamour: *piercing visual pleasure, an antidote to passive spectatorship*



‘When devils, wizards or jugglers deceive the sight, they are said to cast a glamour over the eye of the spectator’¹

This review explores art practice as an antidote, or counter force to stupefying and potentially depressing visual forces that like art act on us primarily through our ocular sense. These forces are accounted for here under the catch all *weak-glamour*, their sources are varied and multifarious: advertising, branding, social media and normative hegemonic patterns there-in that are also found in popular film, fashion and television.

¹ The quote is from the Oxford dictionary and is cited in Wilson (2007). The image *Terina the Paper Tearer & Inferna the Human Torch*, Oil on Linen. 183 x 183 cm by Roxana Halls, 2009. Image courtesy of the artist.

Glamour as a term is understood spontaneously as relating to a positive luxurious experience, perhaps also to a particular kind of physical attractiveness. However, as Elspeth H. Brown (2017) explains pinning down 'Glamour' to an exact meaning is difficult since it has acquired meaning over a long period of time, both positive and negative. For example, while Brown contextualises the term with other seemingly positive words 'charm...(having) it...(the) x factor' (Brown, 2017:291 parenthesis mine) she also via Gundle and Castelli (2006) alludes to its original 'Celtic' meaning which relates to secret knowledge and magical power, problematizing 'glamour' via Jamieson (1840) as a form of intended 'deception' (Brown 2017:291). What is clear is that glamour relates to power, enacted through visual means over the viewer. The distinction here of *weak-glamour* and glamour as disruptive and other is based on Elizabeth Wilson's paper, A Note on Glamour (2015) where she distinguishes between glamour and celebrity/commercialism 'glamour began its retreat in the face of celebrity' (100)². I refer generally to phenomena explored by John Berger in *Ways of Seeing* (1972) where the visual is emphasised 'seeing comes before words' we can attempt explanations via words but can't change the reality of being 'surrounded' by the visual (7). Particularly relevant is Berger's exploration of envy, glamour and publicity (129-155). Berger sees achieving a state of envy as constitutive of 'glamour' (131) pleasure is lacking deferred in place of a remote status, the viewing public are left feeling 'static' as opposed to the 'dynamic' image proliferation that bombards them (130). Images as tools of visual persuasion used by power (Capitalism) to further, normally profit sometimes political ends. These forces are defined as inducing passivity, addictive behaviour and malaise which as Otto von Busch observes (in an assessment of the oppressive aspects of fashion in relation to pleasure) is a common retreat from responsibility and risk, those a result of personal assessment 'Somehow, we come to desire our velvet chains of safe conformity' (von Busch, 2018:12). Furthermore, von Busch observes 'we seek leaders who will help us; designers, oracles and editors, who...decide for us' (von Busch, 2018:13) that intervention is the opposite from the individual self-promoting critical artist (explored later), even where the work is decorative artwork demands the viewer make personal subjective assessments of their output, consider its meanings and make sense of it.

The focus of this short critique is the proliferation of images on the primarily visual platform Instagram due to its popularity and ongoing use in modern commerce as a form of lifestyle advertising that draws on multiple antecedents (as aforementioned, tropes of advertising, television, film, fashion etc). Hearn and Banet-Weiser (2020:1) see Instagram as 'managing and monetizing our attention' in 'new ways' while mediating our 'cultural lives' developing ever greater power. Furthermore, because of the platforms potential to involve the individual user in a depressive closed loop 'the use of Instagram is also associated with increased risk of suffering depressive symptoms' (Jeri-Yabar et-al, 2018:16) and more generally that Depression has 'increasing prevalence' which social media raises especially in young adults (18).

Glamour is a visual force utilised to position the subject, to weaken critical faculties providing an oppressive visual stupor, a thrall, which encourages emulation and cooperation from the viewer. Posting can be seen as an act that demonstrates interpellation of stereotypes because of a 'seeking for acceptance on a site like Instagram' (Jeri-Yabar et-al, 2018:17) where users copy the poses of known influencers and advertising often in sexualised or suggestive poses. Users also make unrealistic comparisons regarding the seeming drabness of their own lives.

² For Wilson (2015) Glamour is distinct from celebrity, here I prefer to understand glamour as constructed illusions drawing on certain visual reservoirs: beauty, luxury, novelty for example. Difference emerges due to intension and skill, where it is used to create conventions for primarily commercial motivations it manifests as glib and superficially normative:- *weak glamour*; alternatively where it is used to create distinction, difference and individuality it disrupts normative habits and retains the positive qualities evidenced in the artwork displayed in this paper.

Excessive Instagram use could lead to depression by setting body image standards since Instagram is filled with model-like pictures, leading the user to feel as if they are not good enough or perceive their life as boring since many photos are taken in different beautiful locations all over the world (Jeri-Yabar et-al, 2018:18).

This kind of positioning fuelled by a desire for acceptance fits Brown's extended definition of glamour 'optical allure that suggests both beauty and sex appeal' (Brown, 2017:291). However, as von Busch observes it is an 'allure' to pleasure with a locus in the body and can lead to 'anxious' feelings 'fear (of) the judgments and responses of others, which...draw us towards authorities' (von Busch, 2018:14) as Berger (1972:132) observes 'it's the promise...of happiness...as judged from outside by others. The happiness of being envied is glamour'. To be positioned is to be operational in systems directed by relatively anonymous authorities 'power lies elsewhere' (Hearn and Banet-Weiser, 2020:9) with access to user data and in receipt of detailed analysis of many examples of user interface (an entirely asymmetrical relationship). In Xerox and Infinity, a chapter of *The Transparency of Evil: Essays on Extreme Phenomena* (2002) Baudrillard vividly describes a state of being 'operational' via new forms of technology 'Immobile in front of his computer, Virtual Man makes love via the screen and gives lessons by means of the teleconference. He is a physical – and no doubt also a mental – cripple. That is the price he pays for being operational' (52).

Art is an Ocular Bleeding Lance

Art historian Ann Bermingham (1989) describes ideology as a force which presents illusions to the subject legitimising its status as true or factual by 'alluding' to reality (3). Bermingham understands art as being 'capable' of showing contradictions in ideology (3). This is art as an *ocular bleeding lance*, the bleeding lance is the mythic weapon which is said to have wounded and subsequently healed the Fisher King (see Annis, 2007)³. It is a weapon with origins in pagan (Celtic) myth as capable of mass devastation 'marvellous destructive power' (Brown, 1910:2) and in Christian mythology as 'the lance of Longinus' (5) that punctured Christ's side at the crucifixion and is imbued with healing power. The object is an intertextual conflation 'The lance, in so far as it bleeds follows medieval Christian tradition, and in so far as it destroys reverts to Celtic Irish legend' (Nitze, 1946:305) it stands for a healing from the same means as a wound is inflicted. Since we are unable to shut off our ocular sense, or unwilling (understandably) to follow figures like Oedipus in an act of self-blinding (Sophocles, and Young 1991:45) itself a recognition of seeing as duplicitous and indicative of Oedipus's new enlightened position, we might then embrace the bleeding lance as a metaphor for our escape from glamour. The agency of the artist as visual manipulator outside the closed loop of subject in thrall to glamour is also key in my use of the metaphor of *ocular bleeding lance*. We are in the position of the wounded Fisher King 'the Fisher King is completely helpless and depends on another to alleviate his suffering' (Annis, 2007). Glamour and art are both visual forces, creating illusions. *Weak-glamour* is understood here as seeking to secure the subject in the illusion (pleasure as un-freedom and malaise) while art has the potential to activate critical faculty and expose the falsehood of the illusion (pleasure in pain).

Piercing the Illusion, Weaponised Art

The metaphor of the *ocular bleeding lance* is important because it emphasises that problems caused by visual illusions must be solved primarily by visual means requiring better-looking practices, which

³ This figure exists in various forms and various versions sometimes healed in different ways. However as Annis (2007) explains the wounded king is a powerful motif for the links between the health of an individual and society as a whole.

the ethical – critical artist is interested in cultivating. Writing as demystification lacks the sensory pleasure of better-looking, and however insightful is a rationalisation after the act, while turning away or shutting off seems impractical, in both cases as Berger (1972) observed, ‘seeing comes before words’ (7).

Roxana Halls is a contemporary painter whose themes and recurrent motifs perfectly illustrate the use of glamour in its full gamut, her works are expertly crafted illusions which draw on the modern and ancient antecedents of glamour thematically and visually to present the viewer with potent visual experiences. The header image of this text *Terina the Paper Tearer & Inferna the Human Torch* (2009) shows the artist in a double self-portrait engaged in the ceremonial act of creation and destruction of paper dolls. The interaction of the commanding women (situated on a kind of stage) with the ephemeral paper figures (they appear to be in dresses) gestures to both a relationship with an audience (depicted on the paper) and to a relationship with manufactured cut-out tropes in a way that realises Wilsons (2015) dark strong glamour.

The lingering meaning of spells and witchcraft continued to be found in the idea of glamour as the dangerous secret of those outside respectable society; the femme fatale of the decadence and the fin de siècle was a manifestation of this, sometimes literally diseased and deathly (Wilson, 2015:99).

The choices here (figures 1, 2 and 3) all display figures representationally and environments are naturalistic and recognisable to an extent however, they are so in a heightened way, reminiscent of the intense colour of Powell and Pressburger’s films *Black Narcissus* (1947)⁴ or *The Red Shoes* (1948). The result is impactful Hyper-reality which is further intensified by the performative poses of the figures abject enough to communicate un-freedom as disobedience such as the counter-intuitively joyful women in their gloriously camp cocktail dresses of *Laughing While Crashing* (2019 see fig 2). The duo embrace like the eponymous Thelma and Louise (1991) or Betty and Rita from *Mullholland Dive* (2001) while casually walking away from a violent car accident. Particularly relevant here is the way that Halls’ works question the positioning of women in society, satirising the kind of faux happiness and posing so common on social media (and elsewhere in contemporary culture). These themes are evident in *Threesome II* (Self Portrait) (2018, see fig 1)⁵. The painting shows the artist in a tight fitting bandeau dress hugging her body and pressing down on her bust in ways that could be hypersexual if not for the lurid green light and quizzically humorous expression. The consciously robotic pose references the background mannequins each one dressed as iconic lesbian characters: the aforementioned Betty, Mrs Danvers from *Rebecca* (1940) and Petra von Kant from *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* (1972) as Melanie Duignan reflects,

Flanked by a triumvirate of characters from a very specific history of queer cinema, that of the lesbian as seen by male directors. The actresses who played these roles have been replaced by mannequins who are mere approximations of the original women. Thus, questions about authenticity and spectatorship circulate these iconographic portraits (Duignan, 2018).

The banality and negativity of *weak-glamour* that is an aspect of the Instagram images of the posing subject ‘seeking for acceptance’ (Jeri-Yabar et-al, 2018:17) is properly established individually by

⁴ Kathleen Byron as Sister Ruth (2021) appears as a small monochrome painted study on Halls Instagram page (see Halls, 2021) expressing the intense mania that her character lapses into in the intense and remote setting of the Himalayan nunnery.

⁵ *Threesome* was the name of show at the New Art Projects, London and The Gallery, Liverpool (2018) was a collaboration with artists Sadie Lee and Sarah Jane Moon who also produced works on the themes of femininity, homosexuality and societal conditioning. Images of these women make up the other panels of the triptych.

looking via comparison to the strong (expertly manipulated) work of the critical artist utilising glamour 'for Glamour is elitist. The emotions associated with glamour include desire, fear, loss, and an acknowledgment of death. Glamour is tragic' (Wilson, 2015:100). Halls shows us that attractiveness can defy the male gaze and shatter convention. *Laughing While Conducting* (2020) includes a beautiful female figure heavily made up with exquisitely styled Marlene Dietrich hair (for Wilson already an indicator of otherness, 2015:99). The browns and oranges of the slightly diffused background (recognisably the Berlin U-Bahn and the U8 line) perfectly compliment the hues of the central figure and her lavishly undulating over the top leather coat, this is glamour created via 'daring departures from the conventionally well dressed, combined with an aura of defiance' (Wilson, 2015:98) the result is the acceleration of the central figure into intense focus where her gleefully frenzied expression and wide eyes seem to anticipate some terrible unfolding. The title and her right hand which is lyrically following unfolding music implies a crescendo that must be ultimately violent, the gun in her left hand ensures that, she has entered the remit of taboo and returned for revenge 'The forbidden and the dangerous were always saturated in glamour' (Wilson, 2015:99).

Halls like many contemporary artists is active across social media including Instagram (see Halls, 2021) the page is organised like a portfolio come diary of works, inclusive of inspirations and key events. Sitting on Instagram these images act as an invitation to read the works for the uninitiated (sometimes images are arranged to accentuate narrative readings) as well as acting as a point of contact between other artists writers and interested parties, Halls has taken care to present an extended hinterland of ideas. Being plugged into (as we all are) the economic system does not preclude the side effect of this rarefied relationship 'As a consumer I do not want goods as much as the experience of widening horizons and deeper understanding of what I am part of' (von Busch, 2018:84) the agency of the artist is key in a visually saturated world.



Figure 1: *Threesome II* (Self Portrait) Oil on Linen, 140 x 110 cm (2018) courtesy of the artist.



Figure 2: *Laughing While Crashing*, Oil on Linen, 100 x 130 cm (2019) courtesy of the artist.



Figure 3: *Laughing While Conducting – Gun*, Oil on Linen, 70 x 75 cm (2020) courtesy of the artist.

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Figure 1: Halls, R. (2018) *Threesome II* (Self Portrait) [Photograph].

Figure 2: Halls, R. (2019) *Laughing While Crashing* [Photograph].

Figure 3: Halls, R. (2020) *Laughing While Conducting – Gun* [Photograph].