

## **Examining Primo Levi's Short Stories through Sianne Ngai's Theory of the Gimmick**

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This study intends to investigate Ngai's critique of the premise of Kant's aesthetic judgment that is constantly intertwined with Marx's notion of capitalist form. The inquisition highlights Ngai's notion concerning the gimmick of passionate utterance that can be honey-coated words, deceptive language, demanding words, and persuasive appearance that is concealed in any commodities that substantially impact aesthetic judgment and affective judgment. These aesthetic and affective judgments are created from the ambivalent feelings and ideas initiated by the appearance and evaluative language. Every time the value of an object is calculated, the paradoxical feeling of doubt and speculation are overpowered by its appealing appearance and gimmick in language.

Ngai's reminder that gimmicks can strike anytime and anywhere, Primo Levi's short stories, "Order at a Good Price," "Some Applications of the Mimete," and "Retirement Package" have a nonsensical theme yet depict the practical examples for my argument. In these stories, Levi illuminated his creative ideas in the characters of Mr. Simpson, a sales representative with the power of persuasion with his charismatic sales talk, and Gilberto, an image of a modern man, impulsive and easily persuaded by the gimmicks of technology. Both were entrapped by the appeal of the devices, the Mimete, an innocent duplicating machine, and the Total Recorder. Ngai's perspective on the capitalist form is depicted in Levi's account of the two devices controlled by a big business firm- NATCA. The capitalist company dictates the production, labor, marketing, and prices of the commodities. The Mimete and Total Recorder's appearance are captivating that the promises of ease misled consumers like Gilberto and Mr. Simpson. The packaging and unique component like pabulum is the silent language that speaks for its status. Mimete built its name by standing on its promise to 'create order from disorder'. The importance of building the language's reputation to boost the appearance of an object is another description of Ngai's stance on the passionate utterance. The price is also part of the language that comes from its abstract labor. Forty technicians are working behind the perfection of the Mimete. A device that is more expensive, the better its quality. So, the pricing comes from the abstract labor in the production.

The gimmick of Mimete is to duplicate basic human needs like cheese, peas, sausage, and sugar into materialistic wants of diamonds, money, and even living animals. Gilberto duplicated things that can make his daily survival with comfort and satisfaction, even duplicating his wife and himself. The perception is that everything can be multiplied to save time and accumulate profits through exchanging values. Regardless, his too-much dependence on the device led to the deterioration of his reasoning. A device that can copy more copies from its original form illustrates Ngai's notion of an aesthetic form that can work dynamically. Hence, it also describes Jameson's idea of singularity that Mimete can be useful for some time and soon be disfigured.

Moreover, Levi wanted to deliver his intention to gain insight from the Total Recorder, a highly functioning device that acts to have human attributes that can even produce artificial sensations. A device that Mr. Simpson acquired as part of his retirement benefits from his long years of service in NATCA. The charming word "benefit" is a big word that entices him. With this single word, he thought it was wise to have a companion like a human who can satisfy and provide what he needs when he ages. It is a futuristic device with limited production that only the privileged can have. The pricemarket of the Total Recorder comes from the value of each tape that can play in countless times.

Each video had actual subjects written and recorded by intellectual writers and poets. A one-of-a-kind machine, classy and expensive, aside from activating the sensory, it can also serve as a teaching aid for studying geography, and natural science. However, the Total Recorder has more damaging effects than its benefits. It deprives freedom

and social interaction in old age. A machine that is so dynamic and can also be used many times yet decreases mental and physical abilities. The gimmick has more harmful effects than its entertainment benefits. It kills their sense of reality. Also, in a capitalist society, no one cares how many died and got an accident during the tape recordings; all that matters is to mass-produce the units to gain approval from Congress. Ngai mentioned Kant's thesis on 'subreption' that there is more hidden truth (22). It is the suspension of reality to cover -up the real intentions. Unfortunately, there is a dishonest act by NATCA. It aimed to sell this Total Recorder to the entire senior population to profit from the pension (Patruno 458).

In every aesthetic experience, the appealing appearance in every particular commodity is a persuasive language that initiates aesthetic judgment. Consumers are continually faced with the charming appeal of gimmicks present in most contrivances, inventions, and accessories.

These days, the fast-growing use of technology can be associated with the eureka feeling like the first market launching of Mimete and Total Recorder that hit the market. However, in the descriptions of the antinomies, Ngai mentioned that devices are time and labor-saving and frequently not.

A couple of years ago, I debated with one of my family members about a particular brand that she was very fanatic about, no other brand, just that particular brand. I questioned its value, what makes it so different from the other brands, and why I needed to give her the amount that was so hefty. So, to please me more, she sent information specifications of the said device. The online manual guide persuaded me and provided the money she asked for without my one-sided judgmental comments. I watched those advertisements and was convinced that the brand she was targeting was high-functioning and branded. Hence, I had contradictory feelings when I agreed, in my mind, I had questions like, did the amount correspond to its quality and performance? Did I pay for its name only? What makes that brand so expensive? However, I was not concerned about who manufactured the gadget nor interested to know their moods while assembling those parts. I was only worried about its price, why a small device costs a lot. The market idea correlates to its price and quality. Expensive devices are regarded as high-quality. Indeed, language has a significant influence on affect judgment. The prints that are distributed in the market are the keystone in building its name and image.

Ngai and Levi underpin the self-evaluation in every aesthetic experience. Ngai exposes the ordinary experience of late capitalism and how passionate utterances in varied speech acts affect aesthetic judgment. On the other hand, Levi encourages self-reflection to liberate the mind from too much fixation and dependence on devices. In the technology era, many are like Gilberto and Mr. Simpson, easily persuaded by the gimmicks of silence, when language is muted but the colorful, glittering, sparkling, shimmering, and other adjectives that can make an object phenomenon stand out. A passionate utterance can be categorized as a non-verbal language when the silent aesthetics of an object capture the consumers' attention. Unfortunately, many of the commodities, from personal to household appliances, were bought without careful evaluation.

Ngai's reminder that gimmicks can strike from anywhere and anytime. The fifteen-second standard to lengthy thirty-second advertisements is the quickest gimmick we experience while watching television. The background, colors, lighting, and choice of words flashed on the screen have the powerful impact of altering the sense of aesthetic judgment on a particular commodity. The aesthetic experience of the moments while capturing the quick advertisement is an example of the aesthetic form that has the power to persuade for a short time. Along the busy streets and highways, numerous giant billboards hang around, aiming to captivate consumers' attention. This kind of marketing strategy is an example of the aesthetic form that communicates in non-verbal language.

In Levi's stories, pabulum, a unique chemical used in the duplicating machine, and the Total Recorder with multiple tapes available to satisfy the desires are the gimmicks to lure the target consumers. Today's market knows very well the demand of the market, what is saleable and out? Flashing on the televisions screens and window shops are selected striking words like buy one take one, cheesy language, and price tags that are discounted or overpriced. The aesthetic experience of seeing and perceiving these commodities, from cheap accessories and multi-purpose appliances to expensive digital devices, has distinctive characteristics.

Marx's ideas on use-value and exchange-value are essential in marking an object. Levi's characterization of the Mimete and Total Recorder as the devices that give the sense of status and privilege. The gimmick of the Total Recorder is its unique distinctions from the other inventions. It can simulate real-life experiences of meeting Earth's great people and can satisfy the experience of being affluent, influential, and intellectual.

The price, marketing, and production are capitalized. Levi wrote his short stories five decades ago. Today, reading those reminded the readers that the devices with fascinating appearances are already sending the language and can give an initial perspective to the consumers.

Levi anticipated that the influx of innovative devices would soon happen that would preoccupy the time of human beings. In our modern period, the one that is such an in-demand device is the acquisition of the internet. The internet is a small network device but has the function of connecting people and sharing information worldwide. In Ngai's notion, this is an aesthetic form that is so dynamic and futuristic that can be used numerous times after the purchase. The internet has a simple appearance, black or white, in varied shapes, and its impression on affective judgment is more favorable than its disadvantage. Internet is an inanimate object that stores many gimmicks. It is an aesthetic form as well as a capitalist form. It is a small device that earns a tremendous amount of money; every minute counts and is equivalent to currency. It offers excellent convenience while sitting on a comfortable seat, anyone can meet, learn, and travel in different places, but the downside is if interruption and disconnection happen. Ngai is right that any device has its gimmick, that its service and promise of ease, is in return, anxiety, and irritation if missed the payment of subscriptions or money billing. It works not much after its installation in the device or at home. It is standstill yet works magically. Imagine a small device that can connect a thousand miles across boundaries worldwide. Internet is an aesthetic form with the gimmick of billion times usage that corresponds to Marx's law of supply and demand. The prices of smartphones, laptops, desktops, and other technological devices are insanely increasing from one company to another tied up to the internet companies.

Ngai expounds on the concepts of aesthetic judgment in Cavell's stance about uttered words with domination. Most companies base the prices on the popularity of the device from word-of-mouth in advertising, especially if authorities endorse it. The capitalists already had strategic plans and knew the essentialness of the internet. The power to increase the price is in their hands. Consumers are bound to work hard to purchase or subscribe to the best plan for uninterrupted service. Consumers rely on the gimmicks in prints (flyers, pamphlets, brochures, manuals). The aesthetic judgment of choosing from varieties in colors, specifications, and models is confusing. Each company highlights its brand flagships and boasts its unique features. Many are entangled in spending much on slight differences and useless applications. However, as Ngai's reminder, gimmicks are tricky and bothersome. Some devices conceal the truth of the internal parts. The only visible for judgment is the captivating appearance of the object. Some devices do not last long; others are for one-time use, an illustration of Jameson's notion about the singularity.

Every aesthetic form exposes its problem and limitations. Mimete and Total Recorder exposed the fraudulence of their materials and company. The Mimete can only copy documents and cannot fulfill the greed to exploit an inanimate object to relieve himself of worldly desires quickly. While the Total Recorder failed to fulfill its promise of comfort in retirement age instead, the machine chained Mr. Simpson to be preoccupied and submitted himself to passivity and slowly degrading his sense of judgment. He realized that the charismatic words of his company fooled him. The passionate utterance lured him into believing that his decision was beneficial to him, but it was the opposite. Like the ordinary appliances and devices at home, they were acquired thinking that they could lessen the everyday hard work. However, after one to thrice usage, their concealed truth revealed contained low-quality parts hiding from its glamorous appearance. The aesthetic judgment of feeling in doubt with the captivating words attached to the external appearance is the pre-plan of the capitalist to confuse the affective feelings that initiate approval and, later on, regrets. Sales charts and statistics speak the truth that the most saleable commodities are the devices that can perform multi-functionally. Many consumers wanted to possess cost and energy savings and reduce the maintenance that requires minimal time to operate. Millennials wanted space-saving, at the same time, highly productive. Consequently, the faultless appearance of the multicooker can be used for steaming, slow, sautéing, and pressure cooking to prepare a variety of dishes that is programmable to have a ready, warm, and savory meal at a specific time. This kind of appliance is a big hit for the household caretakers like the group of mothers.

Clustering the set of words according to its users can also be explained by Ngai's descriptions of aesthetic judgment in language execution in the varied performative field. Group of corpora words for marketing the devices from prenatal to aging period. Language is a powerful tool to capture consumers' attention to tempt target users.

One clear example is the Total Recorder, and this device is designed and programmed for a group of seniors. The aging people are the top priority users of the device as the capitalist sees the quick and sure profit from their pensions. Pondering this kind of capitalistic practice, human benefits are prioritized by the profit system. Most of the commodities in the markets rely on a single-word label like this device is "enduring." The word 'enduring' and other enticing descriptive words are significant. It is essential for a device to have its label, as this word becomes the image of its appearance, especially when words are endorsed by those who have political power in the society.

Consumers are faced with the everyday struggle of weighing the value of any objects captured by their senses. The language in prints, price, and appearance are the gimmicks of the aesthetic forms. These are silent that have a significant impact on aesthetic and affective feelings.

The feeling of indecisiveness and double thinking is inescapable in confronting aesthetic judgment. The problems are exposed when prints lie, prices depend on demands, and the appealing appearances fade over time. Unfortunately, marketing strategies disseminate manipulated prints, and many are fooled by their brands' attractive and appealing packaging. When fraudulence and tricks are exposed, consumers only admit that their initial suspicion is validated and correct. There is a repetitive cycle of gimmicks wearing numerous faces, like the consumer that patronizes the commodities out in the market and capitalists pleasing the consumers' demand, the incessant connection of supply and demand.

In the present market, when the appearance becomes the primary language of any device, the more unaffordable it is, the more the gimmicks kick on. The power of materialism mentally defeats some people; even deprivation of sleep is nothing important to them. Some devices are not essential needs, but others treat them as indispensable possession. Gadget addiction is real. Some endured long queues waiting for the launching of the new device in the market, and for several fanatics, purchases even without questioning its price. They are running after the power of the brand name. Most consumers are aware that they are paying for the name. Nevertheless, continue to be ensnared by the gimmicks of the game of luck and maybe not.

Levi alerted our generation that too much dependence on technology leads to frustrations, impairment of reasoning, and damage to social mobility. Most consumers lose self-control and are easily influenced by the language in prints and advertisements. The immense influence of the capitalist businesses gives the idea of having more than what is needed is the new trend of status symbol. Many consumers are experiencing the outcast feeling of not having those devices resulting in fragmented logical thinking and weakening of perception. Many are misled into spending much in cash and credit card. Others loosen the sense of balance in money in hand and abstract money in credit cards. The credit card is another aesthetic form of bondage used by the capitalist.

The appearance of having this small plastic card that can be swiped up to its credit limit is Ngai's description of working too little yet too hard. The credit card company owners are sitting pretty while the cardholders are working hard to pay the single spent with a tremendous amount of interest. Consumers enjoy and satisfy themselves with extreme dependence on using a credit card with the weak realization of actual financial status. It is the same as Mr. Simpson's experience of momentary pleasure while using the Total Recorder. He enjoys the pleasure of learning history, literature, and meeting great people while the Total Recorder is on top of his head unconsciously, ruining his sense of aesthetic judgments. When the act of right decision is overruled by the disagreeing aesthetic judgment that is repeatedly involved in the compromised form, then submersion to too much debt is the outcome of lack of evaluation. Later, this will start the many sleepless nights and sink into more complicated problems. Levi is reminding us of the life of Prometheus that discontentment and addiction to material things will lead to self-disintegration.

I mentioned Ngai's notion concerning passionate utterance that is visible in every device. Its color, style, lighting, and prints are forms of non-verbal persuading language. The capitalist form is any device with aesthetic value and enchains from its contradictory affective judgment.

When the gimmicks of prints expose the anomalous truth, and the warranty, guarantee, contract, or promise of the device purchase fails to fulfill its commitment like the shortcomings of Mimete and Total Recorder, the best action is to find prints that can restore rational and sound aesthetic judgment. Levi's central thesis in his short stories is self-preservation. He highlighted the reading of Ecclesiastes "All the rivers run into the sea: yet the sea is not full..., the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing" (1266). Gilberto and Mr. Simpson experienced self-disorientation.

Their sense of reasoning is overshadowed by too much discontentment in life. Gilberto's greediness and insensitiveness brought destruction to his logical decision. He failed to distinguish the wrong act that crossed the law of ethics. Duplicating human beings is not a commodified object. However, unlike Mr. Simpson, who is obsessed with the Total Recorder convinced himself that he was not fooled in trusting this failed machine. This emotionless machine dominates his independence and intelligence. As a result, he became helpless and passive as this machine imprisoned his intellectual capacity to think and be creative.

Ngai and Levi impart valuable lessons to survive in a capitalist society. The working-class population is striving hard to earn a living to provide for daily consumption needs, a cycle of needs and wants. However, some are misled by what is necessary, plunge into materialism, and lose themselves in hasty judgments. Every day is a confrontation with aesthetic forms that give distressing ambivalent judgments, which taught us to be evaluative and calculative that gimmicks in devices have limitations and discontentment is ceaseless.

The significance of this study is to convey that in the modern technology era, capitalists' agenda is quick to disseminate information worldwide. Internet is a capitalist form vital in carrying the gimmicks of persuading the appearance of any contrivance. The three-second viewing of prints in flyers, manuals, posters, or billboards is crucial in the valuation. Guarding oneself against excessive and unnecessary expenditure and a luxurious lifestyle avoids the capitalist trap of luring the consumers to immerse in huge credit from lending companies.

In the end, to be reminded that a small device is an inanimate object that cannot perform anything without human control. Likewise, aesthetic judgments materialized only with human domination of own mental faculty.

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