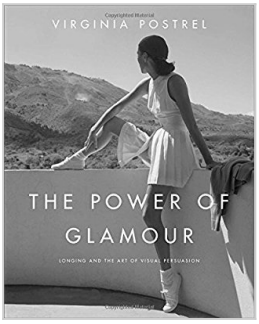

The Power of Glamour: Longing and the Art of Visual Persuasion

By Virginia Postrel

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In provocative detail with more than one hundred illustrations, critically acclaimed author Virginia Postrel separates glamour from glitz, revealing what qualities make a person, an object, a setting, or an experience glamorous.

What is it that creates that pleasurable pang of desire—the feeling of “if only”? If only I could wear those clothes, belong to that group, drive that car, live in that house, be (or be with) that person? Postrel identifies the three essential elements in all forms of glamour and explains how they work to create a distinctive sensation of projection and yearning.

The Power of Glamour is the very first book to explain what glamour really is—not just style or a personal quality but a phenomenon that reveals our inner lives and shapes our decisions, large and small. By embodying the promise of a different and better self in different and better circumstances, glamour stokes ambition and nurtures hope, even as it fosters sometimes-dangerous illusions.

From vacation brochures to military recruiting ads, from the Chrysler Building to the iPad, from political utopias to action heroines, Postrel argues that glamour is a seductive cultural force. Its magic stretches beyond the stereotypical spheres of fashion or film, influencing our decisions about what to buy, where to live, which careers to pursue, where to invest, and how to vote.

The result is myth shattering: a revelatory theory that explains how glamour became a powerful form of nonverbal persuasion, one that taps into our most secret dreams and deepest yearnings to influence our everyday choices.

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Editorial Review

Review
"THE POWER OF GLAMOUR is another reminder why Virginia Postrel is one of our keenest cultural observers and most important social thinkers. Using lively prose, fascinating images, and examples that range from Alexander the Great to Kate Moss, Postrel brings to life an elusive subject. This book is essential reading for people in advertising, marketing, politics, and entertainment -- as well as for anyone interested in seeing our culture with fresh eyes." (Daniel H. Pink, author of TO SELL IS HUMAN and A WHOLE NEW MIND)

"[Postrel] offers a thoroughly researched, analytical, illustrated view on the characteristics, both keen and subtle, that qualify an object, person, event or location as glamorous...Postrel cites innumerable sources, weaving quotations and vignettes into each of her chapters, and the result is exhaustive and wholly entertaining. For those interested in the evolution of glamour over the ages, as well as readers with a stake in marketing, this is a must-read." (Kirkus)

“Postrel’s cleareyed and exhaustive analysis looks not only at the history of glamour, but at how it works…[Postrel] seems to be the kind of public intellectual for whom the TED Talk seems to have been invented." (The New York Times Book Review)

About the Author
Virginia Postrel is a columnist for *Bloomberg View* and has been a regular contributor to *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Atlantic*, *The New York Times*, and *Forbes*. Formerly the editor of *Reason* magazine, she is the author of *The Substance of Style* and *The Future and Its Enemies*. She teaches a special seminar on glamour in the Branding program at the School of Visual Arts in New York. She lives in Los Angeles.

The Power of Glamour

ONE

THE MAGIC OF GLAMOUR

When she was four years old, Michaela DePrince saw a picture that changed her life. Then known as Mabinty Bangura, she was living in an orphanage in Sierra Leone; her father had been murdered during the country’s civil war, and her mother had starved to death. Even among the orphans the little girl was an outcast, deemed an unadoptable “devil child” because of her rebellious personality and the vitiligo that left white patches on her dark skin.

One day, a discarded Western magazine blew against the orphanage’s fence, carrying with it an image from a mysterious and distant world. “There was a lady on it, she was on her tippy-toes, in this pink, beautiful tutu,” DePrince recalls. “I had never seen anything like this—a costume that stuck out with glitter on it. . . . I could just see the beauty in that person and the hope and the love and just everything that I didn’t have.” She thought, “This is what I want to be.” Entranced by the photo, the little girl ripped off the magazine’s cover and hid it in her underwear. Every night she would gaze at it and dream. The image of the graceful, smiling

ballerina “represented freedom, it represented hope, it represented trying to live a little longer. . . . Seeing it completely saved me,” she says. She yearned “to become this exact person.”

DePrince was lucky. Adopted by an American couple not long after she found the magazine, she showed her new mother the tattered clipping and began studying ballet when she settled in New Jersey. By age seven she was already dancing en pointe, and in 2012, at seventeen, she joined the Dance Theatre of Harlem as a professional ballerina. “I just moved along fast,” she says, “because I was so determined to be like that person on the magazine.”1

DePrince’s story is not just a heartwarming tale. It’s an illustration of a common and powerful phenomenon. The same imaginative process that led an orphaned child to see her ideal self in a photo of a ballerina has sent nations to war and put men on the moon, transformed the landscape and built business empires. It made California the Golden State and Paris the City of Light. Cinema and fashion traffic in it; so do tourism and construction. It sells penthouses and cruises, sports cars and high-heeled shoes, college educations and presidential candidates. It inspires religious vocations and scientific research, suicidal terrorism and show-business dreams. It gives form to desire and substance to hope.

Glamour. The word itself has mystique, spelled even in American English with that exotic u. When we hear “glamour,” we envision beautiful movie stars in designer gowns or imagine sleek sports cars and the dashing men who drive them. For a moment, we project ourselves into the world they represent, a place in which we, too, are beautiful, admired, graceful, courageous, accomplished, desired, powerful, wealthy, or at ease. Glamour, the fashion writer Alicia Drake observes, offers “the implicit promise of a life devoid of mediocrity.”2 It lifts us out of everyday experience and makes our desires seem attainable. Glamour, writes the fashion critic Robin Givhan, “makes us feel good about ourselves by making us believe that life can sparkle.”3

Consider two glamorous images. The first, from a 2008 ad for the Riviera Palm Springs hotel, employs the stereotypical elements of what many people think of as glamour. With their glistening luxury, the black limousine, white satin, and pearl necklaces hark back to the black-and-white films of the 1930s, evoking the styles we now call “old Hollywood glamour.” Glowing against the desert twilight in her strapless gown and elegant updo, the model contrasts with the dimly lit photographers in their jeans, distancing herself from their workaday world. She is special—the center of attention and the embodiment of luxury, admiration, and fame. Even as she smiles for the cameras, she remains inaccessible; her cool self-possession is cordoned off from the eager camera flashes by a velvet rope. She doesn’t look us in the eye, preserving her mystery and allowing us to enter the photo and imagine ourselves in her place: transformed into stars, living a life of excitement and acclaim in the Palm Springs of legend.

By not looking us in the eye, the model allows us to enter the photo and imagine ourselves in her place: transformed into stars, living a life of excitement and acclaim in the Palm Springs of legend.
Riviera Palm Springs

If the Riviera scene represents popular stereotypes of “glamour,” Toni Frissell’s evocative 1947 photograph of a lithe young woman in tennis clothes, at the beginning of this chapter, reminds us that glamour’s essential elements have nothing to do with red carpets, limousines, or satin gowns. Here we see a more tranquil picture of a desert getaway. Perched gracefully on a curving stucco wall, the model looks not at the viewer but at the hills beyond. Like the Riviera’s star, she appears poised and self-contained; this woman, however, appears to be alone. We follow her gaze, trace the light along the top of her extended arm, and imagine the

sun on our own skin. We do not know who or where she is, nor do we need to. The mystery again encourages us to project ourselves into the scene, filling in the details with our own desires. Rather than documenting a particular place or fashion moment, the portrait evokes timeless ideals. It embodies youth, beauty, athleticism, self-possession, wealth, leisure, and—published in a February issue of Harper's Bazaar—escape to a benign eternal summer. (No sweat, sunburn, or dehydration here.) This image, too, heightens the viewer's yearning for the life it represents: not of fame and excitement in this case but of tranquility and ease. It, too, is glamorous.

Although people often equate them, glamour is not the same as beauty, stylishness, luxury, celebrity, or sex appeal. It is not limited to fashion or film, nor is it intrinsically feminine. It is not a collection of aesthetic markers—a style, as fashion and design use the word.4 Glamour is, rather, a form of nonverbal rhetoric, which moves and persuades not through words but through images, concepts, and totems. (Even when conjured as word-pictures, glamorous images are perceived and remembered as emotionally resonant snapshots, not verbal descriptions.) By binding image and desire, glamour gives us pleasure, even as it heightens our yearning. It leads us to feel that the life we dream of exists, and to desire it even more.

Photo by Grey Crawford, interior design by Darryl Wilson

Though usually a transitory pleasure, this sensation can also inspire life-changing action. From the cub reporters imagining themselves as the Woodward and Bernstein of All the President's Men to the forensic-science students inspired by CSI: Crime Scene Investigation, young people flock to careers made suddenly glamorous by dramas that highlight professions' importance and downplay their tedium.5 For the novelist Yiyun Li, then a child in 1970s China, the glamour of American life emanated from a Western candy wrapper, the prize of her collection: "It was made of cellophane with transparent gold and silver stripes, and if you looked through it, you would see a gilded world, much fancier than our everyday, dull life." The wrapper, she writes, "was the seed of a dream that came true: I left China for an American graduate school in 1996 and have lived here since."6

Courtesy of Aston Martin

Glamour is powerfully persuasive. Yet because it relies on imagery and channels desire, it is often dismissed as trivial, frivolous, and superficial. Photographers use glamour euphemistically to refer to soft-core erotica; interior design magazines apply the word to anything shiny or luxurious; and many self-styled "glamour addicts" assume glamour refers only to fashion, makeup, or hairstyling. Those who do take the phenomenon seriously tend to be critics, who condemn glamour as a base, manipulative fraud. "We are bewitched by the false god of glamour and the fake promise of advertising," writes the British clergyman and journalist Martin Wroe.7 But there is much more to glamour than either "addicts" or critics imagine. Even in its most seemingly frivolous forms, glamour shapes our most fundamental choices and illuminates our deepest yearnings. Although often perilous and always selective, it is not intrinsically malign. Glamour, as we shall see throughout this book, is a pervasive, complex, and often life-enhancing force.

Glamour is, as David Hume said of luxury, "a word of an uncertain signification."8 In recent years, cultural-studies scholars have attempted to limn histories of glamour.9 But without addressing the underlying psychology or adequately developing a theory of exactly how glamour works, such research tends to devolve

into catchall chronicles of fashion and celebrity. The results can be ludicrous, as when the historian Stephen Gundle declares Paris Hilton “indisputably glamorous.”10 At the height of her celebrity, Hilton was many things: rich, famous, photogenic, sexy, pretty, and stylishly dressed. But few adults found her glamorous. She was the anti–Grace Kelly, the touchstone people cited when trying to explain what is not glamorous.11

To avoid such pitfalls, this book begins by building a definition of glamour that allows us to distinguish glamour from style, celebrity, or fame; to establish the relationship between glamour and such associated phenomena as charisma, romance, spectacle, elegance, and sex appeal; and to identify the common elements uniting disparate versions of glamour across audiences and cultural contexts.

In this chapter, we begin to understand what kind of phenomenon glamour is: like humor, a form of communication that elicits a distinctive emotional response. In the next chapter, we’ll identify and investigate that response—a sense of projection and longing—and explore why so many different objects can produce it: what glamour does. We will discover that, like the gilded world seen through a candy wrapper, glamour is an illusion “known to be false but felt to be true,” which focuses and intensifies a preexisting but previously inchoate yearning. The following three chapters then extract and examine the essential elements—a promise of escape and transformation; grace; and mystery—that appear in all versions of glamour and distinguish it from other forms of nonverbal rhetoric, thus explaining how glamour works.

As we develop this theory, we’ll also learn how to detect glamour’s less-obvious manifestations and, potentially, how to construct or dispel it. The theory allows us to understand why such diverse and sometimes contradictory things can seem glamorous: how Jackie Kennedy is like the Chrysler Building or a sports car like a Moleskine notebook, or why some audiences might find glamour in nuns, wind turbines, or Star Trek. We’ll also resolve certain smaller puzzles. Why, for instance, is glamour so easily lost? How can it be associated so strongly with both elegance and sex appeal? What is its connection to androgyny? Why are certain aesthetic tropes, such as glittering light, silhouettes, or black-and-white imagery, so often associated with it?

Having built a specific definition for glamour, we can then examine its history without fear of going astray. Beginning with chapter six, we’ll trace the growth and evolution of glamour as both a spontaneous phenomenon and a calculated tool of persuasion. We’ll first examine how, and under what conditions, glamour manifested itself in premodern times and how it changed and proliferated with the growth of large, commercial cities. Then, in chapter seven, we’ll look at the forms and influence of glamour in the twentieth century, focusing on its importance in exploring and defining modernity. Finally, we’ll consider how glamour has evolved in today’s media-savvy and fragmented culture.

In addition to the book’s primary text, which uses examples to identify and illustrate theoretical and historical patterns, the “Icon” sidebars offer detailed examinations of glamorous archetypes. Instead of focusing on one specific feature of glamour, each icon allows us to see glamour’s many different aspects at work simultaneously. Together, the icons also demonstrate the wide variety of glamour’s manifestations, from the fashionable femininity of the Gibson Girl to the high-tech freedom of wirelessness. Like most of the book’s images, the icons are placed in chapters where they have particular resonance or complement the argument, but they are not addressed in the main text. Holographically drawing on the book’s ideas, the content of each “Icon” sidebar is not limited to the subject of a single chapter, and the sidebars need not be read in a particular order.

We begin not with the phenomenon but with the word, whose history offers valuable clues to the nature of glamour. Popularized in English by Sir Walter Scott at the turn of the nineteenth century, the old Scots word glamour described a literal magic spell. Glamour (or a glamour) made its subject see things that weren't there. A 1721 glossary of poetry explained: "When devils, wizards or jugglers deceive the sight, they are said to cast glamour o'er the eyes of the spectator."12 Glamour could, Scott wrote in 1805, "make a ladye seem a knight; / The cobwebs on a dungeon wall / Seem tapestry in lordly hall." That power was believed to stretch into the real world. In his diary, Scott worried that "a kind of glamour about me" was making him overlook errors in his page proofs; he wondered whether the right herbal concoction "would dispel this fascination."13 (As both magic and metaphor, glamour and fascination are closely related.)

During the nineteenth century, glamour expanded to include less literal charms, while maintaining the sense of making things look better than they really were. "The glamour of inexperience is over your eyes," Mr. Rochester tells Jane Eyre when she calls his mansion splendid, "and you see it through a charmed medium: you cannot discern that the gilding is slime and the silk draperies cobwebs; that the marble is sordid slate, and the polished woods mere refuse chips and scaly bark."14 In his 1898 novella Youth, Joseph Conrad wrote, "Oh, the glamour of youth! Oh, the fire of it, more dazzling than the flames of the burning ship, throwing a magic light on the wide earth, leaping audaciously to the sky." He wistfully recalled "the deceitful feeling that lures us on to joys, to perils, to love, to vain effort."15

Note that Conrad is not saying that it is glamorous to be young—a judgment from the outside. Rather, his "glamour of youth" is an internal, psychological state. Young people, he suggests, are particularly susceptible to glamour. Like a veil, a distorted lens, or a mind-altering drug, the "charmed medium" of glamour affects not the object perceived but the person perceiving. Reflecting this sense of the word, by 1902 Webster's included two new definitions: "a kind of haze in the air, causing things to appear different from what they really are" and "any artificial interest in, or association with, an object, through which it appears delusively magnified or glorified."16

The "glamour of battle" is among the most ancient and enduring forms of glamour, and military recruiting ads continue to draw on it.
U.S. Department of Defense

As useful as this history is, however, we shouldn't confuse the word glamour with the phenomenon, since the lack of a specific word to describe an experience does not mean that the experience does not exist. Max Weber did not invent charisma. Umami, the hearty fifth taste, is not unique to Japanese palates. While some scholars maintain that glamour is inherently modern, this book argues that the experience is not unique to the modern cultures that use the word, only more widespread and more likely to be deliberately constructed and consciously recognized.17

Nonetheless, the history of the word glamour does highlight two important aspects of the phenomenon. First, glamour is an illusion, a "deceitful feeling" or "magic light" that distorts perceptions. The illusion usually begins with a stylized image—visual or mental—of a person, an object, an event, or a setting. The image is not entirely false, but it is deceptive. Its allure is created by obscuring or ignoring some details while heightening others. That selection may reflect deliberate craft. Or it may happen unconsciously, when an audience notices appealing characteristics and ignores discordant elements. In either case, glamour requires the audience's innocence or, more often, willing suspension of disbelief.

To glamorize is to fantasize. It is also, in some sense, to lie. “The best photographers are the best liars,” said the twentieth-century fashion photographer Norman Parkinson, who was known for the glamour of his work.18 Even when it arises unintentionally, glamour presents an edited version of reality. There are no bills on the new granite countertops, no blisters rubbed by the elegant shoes, no cumbersome cords on the stylish lamps, no bruises on the action hero, no traffic on the open road, no sacrifices in the path of progress.

Second, glamour does not exist independently in the glamorous object—it is not a style, personal quality, or aesthetic feature—but emerges through the interaction between object and audience. Glamour is not something you possess but something you perceive, not something you have but something you feel. It is a subjective response to a stimulus. One may strive to construct a glamorous effect, but success depends on the perceiver’s receptive imagination. Young men must imagine seafaring as a series of adventures and triumphs. Jane Eyre must want to see the mansion as splendid, not to look for cobwebs and slime, or for the moral rot of a madwoman in the attic. Consider, by contrast, a passage from Peter Pan, in which the glamour of the pirate life, presumably derived from boys’ adventure tales, fails to work its magic on Wendy:

No words of mine can tell you how Wendy despised those pirates. To the boys there was at least some glamour in the pirate calling; but all that she saw was that the ship had not been tidied for years. There was not a porthole on the grimy glass of which you might not have written with your finger “Dirty pig”; and she had already written it on several.19

Unsusceptible to pirate glamour, Wendy sees the grime that the boys, like Jane Eyre, overlook. A “glamorous” person, setting, or style will not produce glamour unless that object resonates with the audience’s aspirations, and unless the audience is willing to entertain the illusion. Conversely, one audience may find glamorous something another audience deems ordinary or even repulsive.

Library of Congress

We see these two characteristics—illusion and subjective response—playing out in one of the phenomenon’s oldest forms: martial glamour. From Achilles, David, and Alexander through knights, samurai, admirals, and airmen, warriors have been icons of masculine glamour, exemplifying courage, prowess, and patriotic significance. Beginning in the nineteenth century, warfare was one of the first contexts in which English speakers used the term glamour in its modern metaphorical sense. “Military heroes who give up their lives in the flush and excitement and glamour of battle,” opined a US congressman in 1885, “are sustained in the discharge of duty by the rush and conflict of physical forces, the hope of earthly glory and renown.”20 A 1917 handbook on army paperwork was “dedicated to the man behind the desk, the man who, being away from the din and glamor of battle, is usually denied popular favor, yet who clothes, feeds, pays, shelters, transports, and otherwise looks after the man behind the gun.”21 (Whether in warfare or business, logistics is the quintessential “unglamorous” but critical support activity.)

European nations began World War I with a glamorous vision of war, only to be psychologically shattered by the realities of the trenches. The experience changed the way people referred to the glamour of battle, treating it no longer as a positive quality but as a dangerous illusion. In 1919, the British painter Paul Nash wrote that the purpose of The Menin Road, his bleak portrait of a desolate and blasted landscape, was “to rob war of the last shred of glory[,] the last shine of glamour.”22 Briefly conscripted in 1916, D. H. Lawrence lamented “this terrible glamour of camaraderie, which is the glamour of Homer and of all militarism.”23 An American writing in 1921 asked fellow veterans of the Great War, “Are you going to tell your children the truth about what you endured, or gild your reminiscences with glamour that will make them want to have a

merry war experience of their own?”24 In the 1920s, pacifism, not battle, became glamorous.

For some audiences martial glamour endures. Today’s military recruitment videos are full of imagery uniting the contemporary glamour of technology with the ancient glamour of battle: a paratrooper leaping from a confined plane into the open sky; a commander issuing silent hand signals as troops move stealthily through a forest; a jet rising gracefully from a carrier deck or swiftly crossing bare terrain; silhouetted soldiers rappelling from a helicopter or down a mountainside; screens glowing in a darkened command center. Like classic Hollywood glamour photographs, these images often use sharp contrasts between light and darkness to heighten drama and veil individuals in mystery, encouraging viewers to project themselves into the picture. These scenes bespeak a world of swift, decisive action, enduring camaraderie, perfect coordination, and meaningful exertion. They glamorize military life.

Glamour is not limited to celebrity, wealth, or theatrical performance. It is a powerful form of rhetoric that can sell just about anything. As such, it is a far more common experience and more widely used sales tool than the short list of “glamour industries”—film, music, fashion—suggests. We can find obvious glamour in sports, technology, tourism, the job market, and the stock market. Glamour stock is even a term of art, the opposite of value stock. It refers to a stock whose price represents an especially high multiple of the company’s earnings, reflecting either rational prospects for future growth or delusionary fads. These securities, the term suggests, may derive their allure from wishful thinking. “Glamour and excitement are not the same as a sound investment,” warned a 2010 Wall Street Journal report on the initial public offering of electric-car maker Tesla Motors. “Indeed the reverse is more often the case.”25

With their evocations of a new life in a new home, real-estate promotions often traffic in a sort of off-the-shelf glamour, recycling visual tropes. Consider two strikingly similar 2007 ads for high-rise condominiums. In the first, promoting the Metropolitan in Dallas, an attractive young woman in a short dress and high heels sits on her windowsill, her bare arms draped around one bent knee. Her head is turned to look out at the nearby skyscrapers of downtown. In the second, for Rector Square in Lower Manhattan’s Battery Park, a black-clad young man assumes almost exactly the same pose. From his window, he gazes across the water toward the Statue of Liberty.

Agency Saks

Each ad offers multilayered glamour. Glimpsing only their partial profiles, we project ourselves into the role of the young condo dwellers. They invite us to imagine sharing their new life, being them or being with them. And they in turn contemplate the scene beyond their windows and feel the pull of its glamour—the promise of a skyline’s mysteriously glistening windows or a river’s passage toward unknown destinations.

Although the two images are almost identical in composition, they are actually selling two different ideals. The Metropolitan promises “the future of the city,” a bustling alternative to the suburban life typical of Dallas. Rector Square, by contrast, offers tranquility, an escape from the noise, garbage cans, and graffiti of other Manhattan neighborhoods.26 The two ads evoke the different yearnings of different audiences.

Like any form of rhetoric, glamour depends for its success on a receptive audience. But even when recognized as an illusion, it can be quite convincing. Enticed by a travel brochure promising “winter sun” amidst the London gloom, the author Alain de Botton considers the ad’s manipulative allure.

Those responsible for the brochure had darkly intuited how easily their readers might be turned into prey by photographs whose power insulted the intelligence and contravened any notions of free will: over-exposed photographs of palm trees, clear skies, and white beaches. Readers who would have been capable of skepticism and prudence in other areas of their lives reverted in contact with these elements to a primordial innocence and optimism. . . . I resolved to travel to the island of Barbados.27

The brochure's images turn a vague dissatisfaction with gray skies and damp days into a yearning for happiness, for rebirth, for a sustained version of the innocence and optimism the photos momentarily evoke. An escape to Barbados, the brochure suggests enticingly, is the means by which those emotions can be achieved. By focusing imaginative yearnings, glamour motivates not just momentary fantasies but real-world action: buying vacations and dresses, sports cars and condos; moving to new cities and pursuing new careers; even electing presidents.

The most striking recent exemplar of glamour was not a movie star or a fashion plate but a presidential candidate: Barack Obama in 2008.
Getty Images/Congressional Quarterly

The most striking recent exemplar of glamour was not, in fact, a movie star or fashion plate but a political candidate: Barack Obama in 2008.28 With its stylized portraits of the candidate gazing upward and its logo featuring a road stretching toward the horizon, the iconography of Obama's first presidential campaign was classically glamorous. (The Onion satirized the candidate's many glamorous photographs in a story headlined "Obama Practices Looking-Off-into-Future Pose."29)

The source of the candidate's glamour was not merely his campaign's graphic design, however, but the persona those images signified. Like John Kennedy in 1960, Obama combined youth, vigor, and good looks with the promise of political change. Like Kennedy (and Ronald Reagan, another glamorous president), the candidate was both charming and self-contained. While Kennedy's wealth set him apart, Obama's mystery stemmed from his exotic background—an international upbringing and biracial ethnicity that defied conventional categories and distanced him from humdrum American life. He was glamorous because he was different, and his differences mirrored his audience's aspirations for the country.

The candidate also had little national record, allowing supporters to project diverse political yearnings onto him. Even well-informed observers couldn't agree on whether Obama was a full-blown leftist or a market-oriented centrist. "Barack has become a kind of human Rorschach test," said his friend Cassandra Butts during the 2008 race. "People see in him what they want to see."30 The press corps, wrote Washington Post media critic Howard Kurtz early in the campaign, "sees the man as an empty vessel into which its fondest hopes can be projected."31 Obama's call for "a broad majority of Americans—Democrats, Republicans, and independents of goodwill—who are re-engaged in the project of national renewal" invited the audience to entertain their own fantasies of what national renewal would look like.32 Obama's promise of hope and change meant different things to different people.

Jessica Sample

An asset in a campaign, glamour can make it difficult to govern. A president must make decisions, and any specific action will disappoint—and potentially alienate—supporters who disagree. Nor is governing ever as easy and conflict-free as the campaign dream. Disillusionment is inevitable. In his 2012 reelection campaign,

Obama rallied his base more with fear of his opponents than hope for his second term. “The 2004 version of Barack Obama, who captured the nation with a dazzling speech about unity and went on to win the presidency on a message of hope, died on Monday. He was 8 years old,” wrote ABC News reporter Matt Negrin in May 2012.33 As his mystery and grace dissipated, so did Obama’s glamour.

As a psychological phenomenon and rhetorical tool, glamour is like humor. It is an imaginative experience in which communication and association create a recognizably consistent emotional response. With glamour the response is an enjoyable pang of projection, admiration, and longing. Glamour, writes the essayist Jim Lewis, “offers us a glimpse into another world, more perfect than this one, and for that moment, enchantment swirls around us. And then it is gone again.”34

Glamour may be as universal as humor (though some people have a keener “sense of glamour” than others), but its manifestations vary from person to person, culture to culture, and era to era. In her study of glamour in mid-twentieth-century American buildings, the architectural historian Alice Friedman draws one such contrast. For one group of 1950s Americans, she suggests, “ideas about glamour”

came from Hollywood and rock ’n’ roll, clustering around the iconic images of such celebrities as Marilyn Monroe, Elvis Presley, and James Dean. Others rejected those heroes, preferring to focus on—and emulate—the aura of the “classy” cosmopolitans like Grace Kelly, Audrey Hepburn, and Cary Grant, whose Americanness (or that of the characters they played in the movies) was tinged with European sophistication and upper-class charm.35

Grace Kelly and Cary Grant in To Catch a Thief (1955): For many Americans in the 1950s, their cosmopolitan polish was the epitome of glamour.
Photofest

Reinfried Marass

Even within the same culture, different audiences have different ideals and desires, and therefore resonate to different images. Some people find glamour in elegant simplicity; others, in baroque excess. Some glamorize a whirl of parties; others, the solitude of a mountain retreat. For every military recruiting poster, there is a bumper sticker inviting viewers to “Visualize World Peace.” Declaring “That’s not glamorous” is akin to saying, “That’s not funny.” Glamour is subjective. It must be defined not by the critic’s taste but by the audience’s reaction, using as clues the elements that generate the response.

Some versions of glamour, emphasizing wealth, beauty, and sex appeal, are especially widespread and enduring. But they are neither necessary nor sufficient to the experience, any more than plays on words or scatological jokes are essential to humor. As for styles, to equate beaded gowns or mirrored furniture with glamour is like treating a pratfall or a Monty Python routine as the definition of humor.

Its subjective nature can make detecting glamour tricky. Like an old joke, an image a previous generation found glamorous may fall flat, or even become incomprehensible, to a new audience. The decline of one kind of glamour, whether of nineteenth-century Parisian grandes dames or of the mid-twentieth-century Rat Pack, often presages the rise of another kind, representing different values or aspirations: the glamour of

bohemian cafés or of rock stars. A geisha's glamour meant one thing in the nineteenth century, when geisha were chic style setters, and another after the 1920s, when they became custodians of tradition. In mid-twentieth-century America, a mink coat was the glamorous representation of feminine indulgence. A half century later, it has been replaced by ubiquitous photos of hot-stone massages.

"Model in Silverblue Mink," 1956, copyright Virginia Thoren, courtesy of June Bateman Fine Art and the Virginia Thoren Collection at the Pratt Institute Libraries

Through much of the twentieth century, middle Americans felt a lack of cosmopolitanism, sophistication, and style. They dreamed of Paris. Today, their counterparts yearn instead for pleasure and simplicity: good, fresh food in a beautiful place without too much bustle. So now they dream of Italy, minus the inefficiencies and frustrations of real Italian life and, of course, without all the other tourists. Witness the popularity of Tuscan architecture and décor and of Under the Tuscan Sun and Eat, Pray, Love, both of which were on the New York Times best-seller list for years.36 Once, studying abroad meant a semester or two in Paris. Today Italy is the second-most-popular destination for American college students, after the United Kingdom, having passed Spain in 2002–03. France is a distant fourth and if current trends continue will soon be replaced by China.37

Glamour is like humor in another way: examine its object too closely and you're likely to spoil the effect. Just as humor relies on surprise, glamour requires distance. A glamorous image appeals to our desires without becoming explicit, lest too much information break the spell. In its blend of accessibility and distance, glamour is neither transparent nor opaque. It is translucent. It invites just enough familiarity to engage the imagination, allowing scope for the viewer's own fantasies.

But "inquiring minds want to know," as the old tabloid slogan put it, so the audience itself often destroys the very glamour it loves. The more we're drawn to a glamorous person, place, or thing, the more we seek to fill in the details or to experience the thing itself. We discover the sports hero's temper and steroid use, the politician's spin machine and unsavory allies, the "fairy-tale" princess's bulimia and troubled marriage, the movie star's plastic surgeries and brainless enthusiasms. When young fan Jane Wilkie toured RKO Studios in 1940, she was disillusioned to see Ginger Rogers "chewing gum—at least two sticks, very possibly a five pack—with considerable gusto. . . . For me, Wrigley struck down an idol," she recalled decades later. "It hadn't occurred to me that movie stars chewed gum, wheezed with head colds, or used the john."38

Experience also turns the inspiring into the ordinary. Skyscrapers become nothing more than buildings, jets merely a way to get places, your dream job just your job. Only two years after challenging the country to land a man on the moon, President Kennedy was already worrying that the space program had "lost its glamour."39 At best, familiarity replaces glamour with enjoyment, affection, or sympathy. At worst, knowledge leads to cynicism and disappointment. We discover the flaws obscured in the idealized images. "Venice is glamorous, until the breeze off the Adriatic brings in the smell of rotting fish and raw sewage, at which point it is like Hoboken with better architecture," says a disillusioned visitor.40

This process produces one of glamour's most puzzling qualities: its fragility. Excited fashion headlines often proclaim "Glamour is back!" without explaining why it vanished in the first place. Someone is always trying to restore glamour to something or some place: to New York, Monte Carlo, Palm Springs, Shanghai, Miami Beach, or Budapest; to engineering, the space program, or high-energy particle physics; to resorts, cruises, department stores, or air travel.41 Yet those efforts often fail. If we enjoy glamour so much, why can't we have it, like candlelight or satin dresses, whenever we want? Why isn't glamour, like luxury, something

money can buy?

The reason lies in the nature of glamour. It is not a product or style but a form of communication and persuasion. It depends on maintaining exactly the right relationship between object and audience, imagination and desire. Glamour is fragile because perceptions change.

Glamour creates a “reality distortion field”—Silicon Valley’s capsule description of Steve Jobs’s persuasive magic—and because of its artifice, it is always suspect. The real puzzle is not why glamour keeps disappearing but why it survives at all. Its mystery and grace violate our self-proclaimed commitment to honesty, transparency, comfort, realism, practicality, even overt sexuality. Reviewers praise filmmakers and authors for not glamorizing their subjects. Social critics denounce movies that glamorize violence or cigarette smoking. Whether selling refrigerators or revolution, glamour is an alluring form of propaganda and not entirely to be trusted. We may have lost our faith in literal enchantments, but we still know glamour can be perilous.

Dorothy Jordan, photographed by George Hurrell: “All of us glamorize everything,” because art demands selection.
Courtesy of Pancho Barnes Trust Estate Archive, © Estate of George Hurrell

When Catholic liturgy asks the faithful to reject the “glamour of evil,” worshippers are vowing to see evil for what it is and not, like Eve contemplating the forbidden fruit, to let themselves fall for an attractive appearance and the promise of desire fulfilled. But we can abjure the glamour of evil without declaring the evil of glamour. Simply to condemn glamour as a lie is to damn imagination. Every innovation requires perceiving a world different from the one that exists, and all art demands selection. “All of us glamorize everything, including the documentaries [sic] who glamorize filth and squalor,” said the Hollywood photographer George Hurrell, defending the glamour of his studio-era portraits. “It’s a question of emphasizing . . . the dirt or the beauty—the viewpoint you assume when you start out.”42 Emphasizing the squalor and hiding the beauty may be regarded as more “serious” than creating a glamorous image, but it is equally deceptive.

There is something civilized, and distinctly human, about glamour. It is, like any form of rhetoric, a humane art of persuasion. “If glamour is magic, if it’s really about casting a spell, one should happily confront the manipulation of it all,” advises the fashion designer Isaac Mizrahi. “It’s adult to manipulate and only human.”43

A scene in the classic film Queen Christina (1933) captures the eternal dilemma. Disguised as a young man, the queen (Greta Garbo) encounters the Spanish ambassador Antonio (John Gilbert) in a rural tavern. Discussing their countrymen’s different approaches to courtship, Christina pronounces the elaborate Spanish rituals “glamorous, and yet somewhat mechanical.”

Christina:

Evidently you Spaniards make too much fuss about a simple, elemental thing like love. We Swedes are more direct.

Antonio:

Why, that’s civilization—to disguise the elemental with the glamorous.

By using the word disguise, Antonio acknowledges that glamour is a falsehood, an illusion. But, he declares, civilization itself is defined by such illusions—by art and artifice, customs and manners. To Antonio, disguising the elemental is a great achievement, not a base fraud. Glamour makes desire more than an animal impulse. Its purpose is not simply to camouflage sexual passion but, by bestowing meaning upon it, to transform it into something more enduring and significant.

Antonio:

A great love has to be nourished, has to be . . .

Christina:

A great love . . .

Antonio:

Don’t you believe in its possibility?

Christina:

In its possibility, yes, but not in its existence. A great love, a perfect love, is an illusion. It is the golden fable of which we all dream. But in ordinary life, it doesn’t happen. In ordinary life, one must be content with less.

Glamour versus realism, civilization versus directness, golden fables versus ordinary life, the pursuit of love versus contentment with less—which should we choose? That neither is obviously wrong only makes the question more difficult. Yet even in our wised-up age, we do not want a world bereft of glamour’s magic. For all its dangers, glamour is a special art. We value not only its transient pleasures but also the inspiration and insight it provides. Glamour may be an illusion, but it reveals the truth about what we desire and, sometimes, what we can become.

Icon

THE AVIATOR

From the days of biplanes and silk scarves, the aviator has been an archetype of masculine glamour, combining youth, daring, grace, bravery, technical mastery, sexual allure, and forward-looking modernity. Even the practical costume of flight suit, helmet, goggles, or—that touchstone of glamour—sunglasses seems calculated to heighten aviators’ glamour, holding viewers at an intriguing distance.1

World War I aces, writes the historian Robert Wohl, “exemplified more purely than any other figure of their time what it meant to be a man.”2 That most aces died young only added to their ageless allure. After World War I, British fighter pilots were called “glamour boys.” The term was both admiring and pejorative, particularly among other military men. It drew a contrast between the celebrated knights of the air and the

anonymous foot soldiers and support crews below.3

Charles Lindbergh: “You are that dream-self we all long to be,” wrote a fan.
Library of Congress

The twentieth century’s most glamorous aviator, however, was a civilian: Charles Lindbergh, whose allure after his 1927 solo flight from New York to Paris was as potent as any movie star’s. “You are that dream-self we all long to be,” declared a fan.4

What audiences saw in the young flier depended on their own ideals. To his American public, the clean-cut young man with a pioneering spirit embodied the best of their country’s heritage. His discipline and midwestern modesty combined youth with the values of an earlier time, redeeming the disillusioned and decadent Jazz Age. “You symbolize our splendid, secret dreams / Ideals of manhood, virtues we hold dear,” another devotee versified.5

In France, where Lindbergh’s grace and deference charmed the public, the praise took on local coloration. Air force officer and poet Pierre Weiss praised the aviator’s “moral elegance” and “intellectual refinement,” contrasting him with “a second-class hero, with a cigarette hanging from his mouth”—the stereotypical American, in other words. Lindbergh’s achievement, Weiss wrote, had inspired “the French masses to re-discover themselves . . . a people who bear in their hearts a desire for the infinite.”6

Although Lindbergh’s feat clearly resonated with his audience’s preexisting yearnings, his profile also benefited from deliberate media craftsmanship. The flier’s image sold newspapers and magazines, children’s books and sheet music, decorative textiles and souvenir spoons. He was Time magazine’s first Man of the Year. When Lindbergh published his account of his flight, We, only two months after landing in Paris, the book became an immediate best seller. That success led publisher G. P. Putnam to look for another opportunity to capitalize on aviator glamour.

Putnam found his new icon in Amelia Earhart, who in early photos was deliberately styled to look like Lindbergh. “Lady Lindy” gave aviation a feminine face, providing an alluring yet similarly wholesome image of the modern woman. Although not the best female flier, nor even the most beautiful, Earhart, who later married Putnam, was surely the most glamorous. The mystery of her 1937 disappearance only added to her mystique.7

Col. Benjamin O. Davis, the commanding officer of the 332nd Fighter Group, better known as the Tuskegee Airmen, and Edward C. Gleed, group operations officer, at their base in Ramitelli, Italy, March 1945.
Toni Frissell Collection, Library of Congress

The Tuskegee Airmen, here photographed by Toni Frissell in a classic skyward-looking pose, claimed the aviator’s glamour for African Americans. Of the many black units in World War II, they are the most famous. Although their story was largely unknown to white Americans before a star-filled 1995 HBO movie, they were a source of pride for other blacks during the war. The airmen, the historian J. Todd Moye suggests, “were among the first Americans to imagine the kind of racially integrated society that most Americans now take for granted.”8 Any black military unit might have played that role, but the aura of aviation gave the airmen’s assertion of competent equality a particular punch.

Given the power of aviator glamour in the early twentieth century, it inevitably became a tool for despotic political purposes as well. Benito Mussolini learned to fly after World War I, and throughout his career he linked aviation with the future of Italy—and with his personal image. A celebratory 1936 biography styled him Mussolini Aviatore, and in 1938 the Futurist painter Alfredo Gauro Ambrosi created an "aeroportrait" of the dictator's helmeted head superimposed on a stylized vision of Rome from the air. "All good citizens, all devoted citizens must follow with profound feeling the development of Italian wings," Mussolini declared in 1923.9

A decade later, Italo Balbo, the Fascist government's marshal of the air force, led a squadron of twenty-five seaplanes on a transatlantic flight, landing to enormous acclaim in Chicago for the Century of Progress World's Fair. A monument marking the occasion still stands near the shores of Lake Michigan, and Balbo Drive still runs through the South Loop.10 "For Italians," writes Wohl, "fascism was synonymous with flying."11

While Italian images drew on the abstractions of Futurism, the modernist movement emphasizing newness, technology, and speed, Soviet propaganda posters appropriated the conventions of Russia's traditional religious art—transforming aviators into literal icons. Instead of Christ ringed by an almond-shaped halo, or mandorla, posters would show a flight-suited pilot against a similarly angled Soviet star. These iconic Soviet aviators were neither reckless aces nor individualistic Lindberghs. "What Soviet authorities offered up is a vision of the glamorous aviator in which the aviator is disciplined," explains the historian Scott W. Palmer, "and his work is undertaken in service of a larger, collective mission, which is to construct socialism."12

Contemporary politicians still occasionally try to tap into aviator glamour—a flight-suited George W. Bush on an aircraft carrier declaring "mission accomplished" in Iraq, for instance, or John McCain's presidential campaigns using portraits of the candidate as a handsome young flier. But these ill-fated examples notwithstanding, for the past several decades aviator glamour has mostly been confined to the movies. The laconic ease of Sam Shepard's Chuck Yeager in The Right Stuff (1983), the cocky bravado of Tom Cruise's Maverick in Top Gun (1986), and the wisecracking aplomb of Will Smith's Steve Hiller in Independence Day (1996) all partake of the same essential grace. So does Denzel Washington's alcoholic Whip Whitaker in Flight (2012), as he executes an impossible maneuver to save his plane and later struts down the hall to face a board of inquiry, with his aviator shades—and aviator's aura—hiding the signs of his late-night binge. These unflappable men are masters of their fates, of their machines, of the air itself. They are the knights of the sky, Les chevaliers du ciel, the title of a 2005 French action film.13

As Whip Whitaker's secret vices suggest, however, even in the movies, the aviator's glamour has become suspect. In Catch Me If You Can (2002) and The Aviator (2004), Leonardo DiCaprio portrays two cautionary versions of the archetype: the con man and the perfectionist. Pretending to be a pilot in Catch Me If You Can, his Frank Abagnale Jr. uses aviation's glamorous aura to distract his marks. Dressed in a pilot's uniform, he seduces women and scores free plane rides, cons bank clerks into cashing fake payroll checks, and, in one of the film's most memorable scenes, walks through an airport surrounded by women he's recruited to take glamorous, but phony, jobs as Pan Am stewardesses. Distracted by the pretty women, the cops miss the man they've come to arrest.

In The Aviator, DiCaprio's Howard Hughes demands aircraft with bodies so smooth he cannot feel a single rivet. The obsession that makes Hughes a great engineer proves his fatal flaw, however. He goes mad because he cannot abide the real world's imperfections. Perhaps, the film hints, movie stars understand the limits of glamour's illusions better than engineering geniuses. "Nothing's clean, Howard," Ava Gardner (Kate Beckinsale) tells him, "but we do our best."

Even in the movies, the aviator’s glamour has become suspect.
Photofest

Icon

SMOKING

Smoking used to be glamorous, the cigarette an icon of sophistication, power, sex, art, and, to the young, all the grand and mysterious privileges of adulthood. “It was a time when brilliant, brooding professors lectured while holding unfiltered cigarettes in stained fingers, when girls wearing cashmere sweater sets gestured gracefully with extra-longs, when handsome fraternity boys clutched a can of beer in one hand and a cigarette in the other. I wanted to know what they all knew, and for sure, I wanted one of those boys,” recalls an unapologetic smoker. “So I practiced smoking.”1

Smoking gave the awkward something to do with their hands and the graceful an extension of their grace. Like a folding fan, a plume of cigarette smoke simultaneously concealed and called attention to the smoker. A cigarette amplified gestures and emphasized the mouth. Depending on the smoker and the audience, it could represent any number of ideals and aspirations. For nineteenth-century bohemians, the historian Elizabeth Wilson writes, “Smoking orchestrated time, gave it a rhythm, punctuated talk, theatrically mimed both masculinity and femininity, was the intellectuals’ essential accessory, was also an erotic gesture, enhancing the mystery of some unknown drinker seated at her table, veiled in a bluish haze.”2

Humphrey Bogart lights Lauren Bacall’s cigarette in To Have and Have Not (1944): a sign of intimacy, suggesting both sex and solicitude.
Photofest

In Franklin Roosevelt’s upturned holder, a cigarette spoke of optimism and progress. In the Marlboro Man’s rugged hands, it represented masculine independence. James Dean’s cigarette symbolized rebellion, Marlene Dietrich’s was all about seduction, and a Shanghai calendar girl’s epitomized modern femininity. Ayn Rand romanticized smoking as an emblem of creative thought and technological dominance: “I like to think of fire held in a man’s hand. Fire, a dangerous force, tamed at his fingertips. . . . When a man thinks, there is a spot of fire alive in his mind—and it is proper that he should have the burning point of a cigarette as his one expression.”3 Lighting a lover’s cigarette was a sign of intimacy, suggesting both sex and solicitude.

Five decades of scientific evidence and antismoking propaganda have largely punctured the glamour of smoking. It has become that dirty habit that kills people. “I miss my lung,” says the cowboy on a Marlboroesque antismoking billboard. Smokers are those poor addicts huddling next to their office buildings on cold, wet days—the antithesis of grace.

But a trace of glamour remains. As more and more places forbid smoking, observes the British journalist Simon Mills, lit cigarettes have become the markers of “heroic, sexy social outlaws.” The interior designer

and socialite Nicky Haslam, who lights but doesn't inhale, calls the practice "deliciously illicit."4 Perhaps, suggests the essayist Katie Roiphe, the TV show Mad Men owes some of its cult appeal to the characters' conspicuous smoking, which provides an alluring contrast to the health-conscious discipline of today's young professionals. The show, she writes, offers "the glamour of spectacularly messy, self-destructive behavior to our relatively staid and enlightened times."5

In the movies, smoking has come to symbolize a cool contempt for social conventions and bourgeois rules. Mob moll Uma Thurman smokes in Pulp Fiction (1994), as does femme fatale Sharon Stone in her infamous scene in Basic Instinct (1992). "There's no smoking in here," a policeman tells her as she sits down to face interrogation. Uninhibited, unintimidated, and undeterred, she replies, "What are you gonna do? Arrest me for smoking?"

Playing up the bad-girl theme, in 2011 the fashion designer Nicola Formichetti sent the pop star Lady Gaga down his runway smoking, in a typical bit of Gaga spectacle.6 The real rebel glamour came a few days later, however, when the supermodel Kate Moss, absent from the runway for seven years, strutted down the Louis Vuitton catwalk on the UK's National No Smoking Day: "The moment Kate Moss sashayed across the room in hotpants and high heels, puffing on a cigarette," Jess Cartner-Morley, the Guardian's fashion editor declared, "there was no longer any doubt who the star of this show was."7

Femme fatale Sharon Stone lights up in Basic Instinct (1992): "What are you gonna do? Arrest me for smoking?"
Photofest

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