

# The nature of *glamour*

by Jeremy Shere

**T**he cover of Judith Brown's recent book, *Glamour in Six Dimensions*, depicts someone you've never heard of—Baroness Edith von Winterfeld. (The Baroness does not even rate an entry on Wikipedia, the true measure of obscurity in our time.) Her pose, however, is immediately recognizable.

Captured in profile, the Baroness' visage projects cool detachment. Her hair is concealed beneath a satiny, helmet-like head covering. Under painted eyebrows that taper to a sharp point, her heavily made-up eyes are hooded, gazing down and away at nothing in particular. A disembodied, ghostly hand holds a cigarette inches from darkly painted lips that are set off against the Baroness' pale, almost translucent skin.

"There's a hardness to the picture—the blankness of her expression, the fact that she's not engaging the viewer, looking almost inhuman in her perfection," says Brown, an assistant professor of English in the College of Arts and Sciences at Indiana University Bloomington, whose research focuses on Anglo-American modernism and 20th-century Indian writing in English.

"This figure is someone who lives in a different rank of life, and we get the sense that any desire that might circulate around this image is one that cannot be satisfied," says Brown. "The aesthetic of this photograph trades on coolness, aloofness, and lack of vitality."

Brown chose the image for the cover of her book because it's emblematic of the complex nature of glamour. Unlike the campy associations of glamour in our times (think drag queens and Vegas floor shows), in the modern period—roughly the

1920s through the early 1940s—glamour was a defining aesthetic, related to, but not synonymous with, beauty.

"Beauty is often associated with truth and goodness," Brown says. "Glamour requires a kind of beauty, but it has no bearing on truth. Glamour is more in conversation with delusion, deception, and death."

## A DEADLY AESTHETIC

Brown first became interested the topic of glamour as a graduate student. Reading Virginia Woolf's autobiography, Brown was struck by a passage where Woolf describes how, while walking with a friend, she passes by a swamp where the skeleton of a dog had been found and comments that "the glamour of the past was on it."

"It was the conflation of the words 'dead dog,' 'skeleton,' and 'glamour' that got me thinking," Brown says. Her curiosity morphed into a dissertation focused on literary readings of glamour in the modern period. While rewriting her dissertation as a book, Brown came to appreciate the ways in which glamour resonates not only in literature, but also in virtually every sphere of modernism.

As the book evolved, a title gelled. *Glamour in Six Dimensions* suggests that glamour is a multifaceted concept operating not only in literature or commerce, but also touching on celebrity, industry, and violence. Plus, the number six in Greek is *hex*, which means spell—an etymology that nicely evokes glamour's mysterious, quasi-magical aura.

Brown expands on the "six dimensions" of the book's title in chapters touching on disparate topics: perfume and



the poetry of Wallace Stevens; writers Scott Fitzgerald and Katherine Mansfield and violence; Virginia Woolf and photography; Greta Garbo and celebrity; entertainer Josephine Baker and novelist Wallace Thurman; and the strange phenomenon of cellophane.

“Most people imagine glamour in a superficial way as tied up with consumer desire and nothing more,” Brown says. “But glamour as an idealizing fantasy, as a way of using language—this has a lot to do with things that aren’t about money.”

Brown defines glamour as “a negative aesthetic.”

“I don’t mean that glamour is bad as opposed to good,” she explains. “It operates a bit like the sublime, except that glamour projects deathliness as a response to a culture in which people feel a kind of numbness.”

### OF CIGARETTES AND CELLOPHANE

Consider the cigarette, which Brown calls “a perfect emblem for glamour.” Originally a handmade agricultural product, cigarettes were big business by the end of the 19th century. But the cigarette’s significance goes beyond its rise as commercial product. It was also important as a status and cultural symbol.

“The material cigarette opened up to the smoker an immaterial realm of intensified pleasure through the fleeting draft of nicotine, tar, and a curtain of smoke,” Brown writes in her book. “Slim, streamlined, ephemeral, and ultimately deadly, cigarettes produced, through their veil of smoke, a sense of style, transgression, and danger that, together, created glamour.”

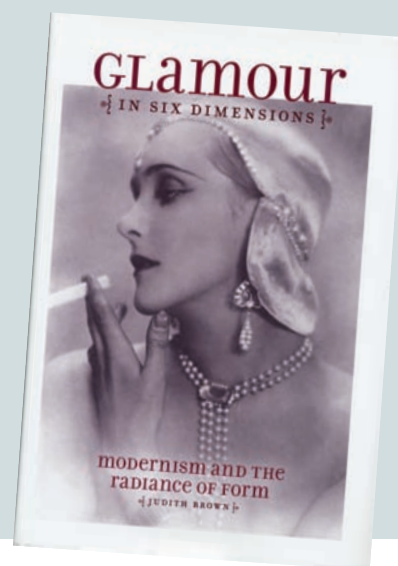
A glamour shot of movie star Marlene Dietrich included in Brown’s book illustrates the point: Her face hidden in shadow by a hat that angles across her forehead, Dietrich gazes at the viewer from beneath hooded eyes as smoke trails upward from a cigarette in her right hand. The effect is otherworldly, a frozen moment in some unreachable place.

“The idea, or intended effect, is that when you’re smoking, it’s a moment of stopped time when you step out of the productive world and into a more leisure state,” Brown says. “Sitting alone, smoking, it’s as though you are protected by the veil of smoke, even transformed.”

Because cigarettes were already recognized in the modern period as a health hazard, smoking was a way of both flaunting and embracing death and, especially for women, a material way to project a nimbus of glamour. “Here is glamour,” Brown concludes of the cigarette, “an experience that moves one out of the material world of demands, responsibilities, and attention to productivity and into another, more ethereally bound, fleeting, beautiful, and deadly.”

Less deadly but equally ephemeral, cellophane was also an emblem of glamour in the modern period. The clear, paper-like plastic used today to wrap everything from CDs to flowers was invented in the 1920s. Early 20th-century interior designers embraced plastic as a utopian material that could be molded

[LEFT] Judith Brown is an assistant professor of English in the College of Arts and Sciences at Indiana University Bloomington. Brown’s book, *Glamour in Six Dimensions: Modernism and the Radiance of Form*, was published earlier this year.



into fashionable, mass-produced objects. In the ’20s and ’30s, plastic, especially cellophane, was elevated as a glamorous new material. Fashionable nightclubs covered tables in the shiny, transparent material. Movie sets for films made in the 1930s often feature cellophane as a backdrop. Wrapping cigarette boxes in cellophane not only solved the problem of stale tobacco but also enhanced their already glamorous image. Even more mundane objects, like donuts, could be transformed by cellophane’s glamorous aura. Grocery stores that wrapped boxes of donuts in cellophane saw sales skyrocket.

“The way that cellophane represents nothing says a lot about the modernist period and its fascination with nothingness,” Brown says. “Cellophane is a thing that’s not really there. There’s no meaning to it, it’s just something you look through and that reflects light, and [people of the] modern [era] were absolutely drawn to it.” For the opera *Four Saints in Three Acts* (Gertrude Stein wrote the libretto in 1927), the stage designer swathed the set in 1,500 square feet of cellophane, creating an effect that, Brown says, drove audiences wild.

Today, of course, we no longer see cellophane, cigarettes, or other symbols of modernist glamour in quite the same way. And yet, Brown says, our appetite for glamour has not changed.

“We’re still attracted to the glamorous, but in a sort of retro, nostalgic way,” she says. “The Academy Awards are one example, where stars like George Clooney evoke nostalgic comparisons to Clark Gable and actresses’ gowns are recognizable as glamorous insofar as they’re of a distinctly different era.”

In other words, for Brown, glamour is of a piece with the modernist era, which came to an end roughly during or near the conclusion of World War II.

Glamour remains relevant, though, for what it tells us about art, literature, music, design, and many other forms of cultural expression during the 1920s and ’30s. “Generally when we think about glamour we see it as a degraded value. But thinking about glamour allows us to see modernism in a new way.”

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