

‘Unstable Surfaces: Slippery Meanings of Shiny Things’

Norwich Castle Museum: 27 June, 10am – 5pm

Nic Maffei and Tom Fisher

Introduction

It is perhaps the quality of objects’ surfaces that most clearly establish their presence and our relationship to them. The rich texture of silks, the depth of polished wood, the evenness of enamelled steel make these things hard to look at without wanting to touch them. [slide of silk/piano/bath] Light plays in particular ways on these more or less shiny surfaces and enriches our material environment. But shiny stuff is not simply a matter of sensation: the shininess of materials and objects associates them with strong cultural themes and historical epochs, and is markedly paradoxical.

Equally intriguing is the possibility that stable meanings, dependent on historically specific contexts, can be located within a seemingly unstable phenomenon. Shine implies the inner nature of some objects: people glow with health and in some cultures this is indexed in shiny skin and hair. [Shiny hair]ⁱ Shiny surfaces, whether inert or animate, may radiate because of effort applied to them [shiny steel] and, whereas the immanent shine of gold, skin or hair may be attractive, the shine of viscous, oily ‘slimy’ surfaces, which are not clearly solid or liquid, may be repellant, as Sartre noted [honey]ⁱⁱ The shine of one object may strongly connote value [monstrance] while the gloss of another may suggest cheapness and ‘glitz’ [Ratner]. In a similar way, the ‘deep’ shine of an old patinated surface speaks of the labour required to produce and maintain it [leather armchair]– it requires work and may connote leisure and status – while the temporary shininess of many consumer goods aligns precisely with the alleged instability and superficiality of postmodern culture, yet signify technological modernity [phones]. Shininess then is slippery. We think we know it, but through infinite physical variety and countless cultural contexts its meanings become multiple.

Seeking a consistent and specific language for colour, Carole Biggam identified five properties, including ‘brightness’ alongside ‘tone’, ‘hue’, ‘saturation’ and

‘transparency’. She divided brightness into ‘light-emission’, ranging from ‘dazzling’ to ‘shining-glowing’ and ‘reflectivity’, varying from ‘shiny’ to ‘lustrous-matt.’ⁱⁱⁱ This range of properties is also signalled in the countless descriptive terms used in everyday speech. [Glitter] ‘Radiant’ surfaces and objects can be glossy or lustrous, gleaming and glowing – emanating inner or reflected light. Given the right physical qualities they may glisten, glint or sparkle. Whether costly or common shiny things *shimmer*, and given their paradoxical meanings, it is only this perceptual instability that seems ever present. Likewise, Marie McGinn describes Wittgenstein’s view that in everyday language – ‘our ordinary language game’ – terms for visual phenomena of all sorts, including describing shininess or colour, are characteristically indeterminate.^{iv} The lack of precision in the language we use for the interaction of surface and light is matched by its physical instability and just as the language we have for shininess is slippery, so is our perception of it.

The ingredients of one’s experience of shininess – point of view, light and materials – are in perpetual flux. Human perception is dependent on shifting physical and mental circumstances that profoundly affect the ability to know the world. Light, whether natural or manufactured, is equally fleeting, characterised by the perpetual rise and fall of the sun, the constant movement of clouds, and the inevitable deterioration of electrical and other lighting devices. Moreover, the material properties of objects undergo constant change: they corrode, attract and release oils, transform with age, or chip or scratch.

In contrast to its inherent instability as a visual and perceptual phenomenon, it is possible to trace relationships between ideas about shininess and the location in time of things, people and culture – ideas about shininess are historically specific and conceptually stable. Also, the qualities of surfaces have connotations that imply time itself as well as historical placement in it, because shininess is often fugitive, as well as being time-consuming to achieve. Some examples from theorists and historians below outline the historical meanings of shininess across culture, space and time from pre-modern, to modern and postmodern contexts.

[luminosity] In his essay *In Praise of Shadows* of 1933, the Japanese novelist, Jun’ichirō Tanizaki celebrated the antique sheen of traditional Japanese interiors in the

face of modernity's glare, his poetic language of luminosity elucidating the many meanings of shininess. Tanizaki's deeply nationalistic meditations powerfully illustrate how specific meanings of shininess are secured by time, practice and locale, 'we [the Japanese] find it hard to be really at home with things that shine and glitter. The Westerner uses silver and steel and nickel tableware, and polishes it to a fine brilliance, but we object to the practice.'

[patinated floor] Grant McCracken's discussion of patina points to the relationship between the physical and the cultural – like shininess patina is a 'physical property [...] treated as a symbolic property.' This symbolic significance changes with time and social context but is always rooted in the physicality of the object's surface. [patinated wood] McCracken repeats this point in his account, which indicates the significance for his 'patina theory' of the direct relationship between the physical and symbolic.^v He charts a historical shift from patina being a 'mainstay of social organisation' in verifying status in America and England to being supplanted by the modern 'fashion system of consumption' at the end of the eighteenth century. While patina and shine have not followed the same trajectory, the shifts in the cultural significance of patina over time, and the relationship between its significance and its material basis are to some extent mirrored in the meaning of shininess in successive epochs.^{vi}

Between Tradition and Progress

Specific features of the materiality of shininess and of the discourse it generates can be connected to the concept of modernity. At perhaps the most abstract level, the characteristics of shiny surfaces have particular relationships to the qualities of modern life upon which Baudelaire famously ruminated in 'The Painter of Modern Life', a starting point for many discussions on the culture of modernity.^{vii} The elements of pre-modern material culture that are 'essentially' shiny – gold, glass, crystal – were also rare; both their shininess and their scarcity conferring value. The maintenance of other pre-modern shiny surfaces – lacquered wood, polished leather – require the application of careful attention and labour. In contrast, modern technological innovation has given us a much larger range of materials that

independently shine – plastics, paints, self-coloured lacquered metals, plate glass and many other luminous compounds – all of which apparently require no labour for them to shine, and which are usually quite temporary. Their shine is fleeting, fugitive, fragile – characteristically modern according to Baudelaire’s formulation of modernity as ‘the transitory, the fugitive, the *contingent*.’^{viii}

This alignment between temporal shifts in the meaning of shininess and ideas of modern progress can be observed in its symbolic transformations, from pre-modern societies in which it is a carrier of spiritual significance, to modern settings where it is associated with progressive values. Bille and Sørensen (2007) in an effort to define an ‘anthropology of luminosity’ identified ‘shininess’ as a fundamental category, suggesting that ‘to fully appreciate the social life of illumination a number of sub-fields of its manifestations are important to consider, such as shadow, shininess and colour.’^{ix} Most of the shiny lightscapes that Bille and Sørensen list relate to otherworldly values associated with reflective objects, where, for example, ancestral presence is evoked through the pre-modern ‘glow’ of a gleaming artefact.

Even in modernity, however, shine is often contingent on labour where the maintenance of an individual’s ‘extended self’ in objects can comprise time-consuming work to preserve the shiny surfaces of their possessions and protect against the effects of wear, corrosion and dirt.

In his 2010 article Charles Rice shows how the maintenance rituals of boot and shoe shining can constitute domestic subjectivity through the act of caring for - rather than simply cleaning - footwear, e.g. maintaining a shiny surface through manual labour. Through looking at advice books from the late-nineteenth to early-twentieth century he observes that boots and shoes ‘emerge as new kinds of objects in households, objects belonging in a group including materially fine furniture and treasured glassware, and they are intrinsic to the new structuring of care.’^x Rice thus shows how not only a mundane object could rise in status within the constellation of domestic goods, but also how the act of cleaning can be defined as caring and thus relate to pride of ownership in an increasingly servant-less society.^{xi}

In parallel, and apparently in contradiction, to this intimate register of caring for the shine of possessions, through the late nineteenth and early twentieth century new

shiny materials became available for mass consumption. These were employed to express values associated with modernity including, progress, speed, hygiene and efficiency. In many homes such values were more often materialized in the gleaming taps of kitchens and bathrooms than those of dining and front rooms where the warm sheen of wood furnishings predominated.^{xii} Outside the home a populist, progressive shine in the first decades of the twentieth century was exemplified by American diners, the iconic roadside restaurants, which made great use of sparkling materials in the interiors, including tile, Vitrolite (an opaque coloured glass), Monel Metal (a nickel copper alloy), aluminum and stainless steel, all of which were deployed to indicate clean food and speedy service.^{xiii}

From Modern to Postmodern Shine

At the dawn of postmodernity in 1966, the historian Reyner Banham penned , ‘All that Glitters is not Stainless’, a comment on the mass production of gleam. Here Banham celebrated a world where those of limited means could access a previously unobtainable universe of gleaming goods. While Banham took an anti-elitist stance, attempting to speak for the consuming masses, his contemporaries decried the proliferation of shiny things. In 1960 the architectural historian William Jordy associated glitz with throwaway culture writing: ‘The pervasive consumption ethic of our society...encourages a slickness, shininess, and thinness in our buildings. The glittering package of the merchandiser has become the norm for building... Never before have so many buildings so closely approached the metallic wrapped prune box or the automobile bumper...’^{xiv} Banham’s text was surely a retort to such lamentations. For Banham the shiny plastic ‘chrome’ trim on his Mini Cooper automobile became an affirmative symbol of the knowing postmodern consumer. Speaking to an establishment audience suspicious of glitz, he argued that the pioneers of modernism, including Le Corbusier and Walter Gropius, had significantly embraced and democratized the ‘glitter’ that modernity made possible, from buildings and cities to works of engineering and the shiny plastics of consumer goods. Ascribing this shimmering modernism to both a fundamental desire of the human heart and the capabilities of modern industry, he noted the paradoxical relationship the design ‘establishment’ had to it. Pointing to a split between the Pop Art

generation and the pioneer modernists, Banham celebrated the former whose '[b]eady little eyes...can tell stainless from spray chrome at fifty paces and prefer the latter because it is more jokey...' suggesting that they favored brilliant irony to the illumination of the soul.^{xv} Here Banham lauded the fake shine of faux chrome as more authentic simply for the opportunity it provided for ironic consumption. Banham's twentieth century consumer was no dupe, but a savvy player ironically enjoying a glossy surfaces of the material world.

Referring to the tradition of photorealist painting the art historian Dieter Roelstraete in 2010 wrote that such painting's 'rendition of shiny, glossy, and glassy surfaces'^{xvi} whether 'reflecting telephone booths', 'glitzy diners' or 'flickering skin' should not be associated with Frederic Jameson's notion of postmodern 'depthlessness'.^{xvii} For Roelstraete, the photorealists were not emotionless cynics but revolutionaries who depicted the dignity of service industry workers and celebrated their places of labour in a kind of 1970s Socialist Realism, finding deep authenticity in the fleeting surfaces of the capitalist landscape.^{xviii}

Conclusion

We argue that shininess is a paradoxical phenomenon: despite its perceptual and linguistic slipperiness, when placed in specific historical context it can be conceptually pinned down, though often momentarily. Light, surface, and perception act in concert, both betraying objects' physicality while suggesting their cultural significance.

Shine is a consequence of a multitude of lighting conditions and surfaces - its varieties are innumerable. Activated by the play of light, its effects range from dazzling gloss to lustrous matt played out on diverse surfaces, from aged and pitted aluminium building panels to buffed and polished leather. Both elusive and allusive, the contingent nature of shininess seems to refuse elucidation. However, when understood in historically specific contexts luminous things may become conceptually stable.

ⁱ Michael Rowlands describes the value put on oiled and shiny skin as a sign of health associated with personal worth among West Africans, 'Skin that is dry and flaky is a sign of ill health, of old age and approaching death.' (p. 161) The body is presented as a 'highly polished machine.' (p. 161) 'The Material Culture of Success: Ideals and Life Cycles in Cameroon', in J. Friedman (ed.) *Consumption and Identity*, Routledge, London, 1994, pp. 147-167, p. 162.

ⁱⁱ J-P. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: an Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, Methuen, London, 1957 (1943).

ⁱⁱⁱ C. Biggam, 'The Ambiguity of Brightness (with special reference to Old English) and a new model for color description in semantics,' *Anthropology of Color: Interdisciplinary Multilevel Modeling*, R. E. Maclaury, G. V. Paramei, D. Dedrick, (ed.s), John Benjamin Publishing Company, Amsterdam, 2007, pp. 171-188, p. 183.

^{iv} M. McGinn, 'Wittgenstein's Remarks on Colour', *Philosophy*, vol. 66, no. 258, pp. 435-354

^v Grant McCracken *Culture and Consumption: new approaches to the symbolic character of consumer goods and activities*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1988, pp. 31-43, p. 32 and p. 36. For McCracken, this means that the symbolism of a patinated object works not as a Saussurean sign, but as a Peircean 'icon' – directly demonstrating the age of an item, and hence verifying the length of time it has been possessed and its owner's status.

^{vi} Patinated surfaces are usually not shiny, though they may result from efforts to maintain shine, on leather for instance.

^{vii} C. Baudelaire, *The painter of modern life Selected writings on art and artists*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1972 (1848).

^{viii} *Ibid.*, p. 403

^{ix} *Ibid.*, p. 266.

^x C. Rice, 'On Historical versus Material Objects, or, What It Means to Care Rather Than Simply to Clean', *Interiors*, Berg, London, vol. 1, no.s 1-2, pp. 19-28, p. 26, 2010. See also Grace Lees-Maffei, 'From Service to Self-Service: Advice Literature as Design Discourse, 1920-1970', *Journal of Design History*, vol. 14, no. 3, 2001, pp. 187-206.

^{xi} The social meaning of sparkling things is explored in Marcia Pointon's *Brilliant Effects: A Cultural History of Gem Stones and Jewellery*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2009. Just as the shiny work boots that Rice describes beam with working class pride, precious jewels radiate conspicuous leisure.

^{xii} C. Edwards, 'Aluminium Furniture, 1886-1986: The Changing Applications and Reception of a Modern Material', *The Journal of Design History*, vol. 14, no. 3, 2001, pp. 207-225.

^{xiii} R. J. S. Gutman, 'Diner Design: Overlooked Sophistication', *Perspecta*, Yale School of Architecture, New Haven, CT, no. 15, 1975, pp. 41-53.

^{xiv} W. H. Jordy, 'Humanism in Contemporary Architecture: Tough- and Tender-Minded', *Journal of Architectural Education*, Blackwell Publishing, vol. 15, no. 2, Summer, 1960, pp. 3-10, p. 6.

^{xv} Banham, p. 159.

^{xvi} D. Roelstraete, 'Modernism, Postmodernism and Gleam: On the Photorealist Work Ethic', *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context, and Enquiry*, University of Chicago Press, no. 24, Summer, 2010, pp. 5-15. See for example the exhibition Shiny, 2006, Wexner Center, which included numerous pieces of gleaming art, such as Andy Warhol's floating, helium-filled Silver Clouds and Jeff Koons's 10-foot-tall, stainless steel Balloon Dog. <http://wexarts.org/exhibitions/shiny>. On the 'ungraspable opacity' and 'pure lucidity' of the contents of the show, see Stephen Melville, "'Twice Untitled' and Other Shows", *Journal of Visual Culture*, Sage, London, vol. 8, no. 103, 2009, p. 113.

^{xvii} Roelstraete, p. 6.

^{xviii} Roelstraete, pp. 6, 8.