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#NoFilter: Models, Glamour Labor, and the Age of the Blink

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Twiggy, the impossibly lean and girlish 1960s model, shocked the fashion system, jarring it into a shift in tone. Many women sought to do the glamour work of copying her coltish charms, heedless of the impossibility of replicating them. Unlike the elegantly exclusive dames preceding her, Twiggy was everyone’s model, her popularity spreading far beyond fashion magazines. Within months of hitting the scene, according to model historian Bridget Keenan’s account, Twiggy was everywhere:

Car stickers said FORGET OXFAM FEED TWIGGY, there were Twiggy clothes, Twiggy eyelashes, Twiggy dummies in shop windows and in Madame Tussaud’s. Twiggy was taken to Paris to comment on the collections, and her ingenuous
remarks – ‘most of Balmain’s clothes were a bit of a giggle’— were quoted by reporters who took care to reproduce her cockney accent in print. [1]

Children carried Twiggy lunchboxes and played with Twiggy paper dolls. British teens imitated her hairdo and make-up style, while adults, engaging in not-so-subtle forms of glamour labor, starved themselves to achieve a Twig-like figure to commune with the fast paced fashion, excitement of international travel, and endless youth Twiggy’s ‘look’ promised.

Twiggy’s moment is one where the public’s fascination with the fashionable image, and the requisite glamour labor to get it, flipped into overdrive. Twiggy fronted a trend toward pulling broader publics into the rhythms of fashion. She helped popularize the now ubiquitous standard of being always ready to be photographed. Famed photographer Richard Avedon observed that some women “convey the air of the time they live in,” noting how Twiggy, out in front of the lights, stripped away affectations and brought “her generation in front of the camera.” [2] His statement was prescient. Little did he know just how exposed we would all become. [3]

Social media’s current pull to be ever-ready for one’s close up has its roots in the sixties culture of exposing a “natural” vulnerability to the lens, fostered by the radical transition in visual dominance from the tightly scripted and manufactured world of cinema, to the free-
form, “live,” event-ness of television. While the mid century fashion mannequin’s carefully manufactured and powdered perfection resonated with the highly edited world of Hollywood movies, set to “wow” audiences at the Cineplex, the dawn of the television age brought the instantaneous, moving image into our living rooms, making speed and exposure into new cultural ideals. These new values erupted within the 1960s’ Youthquake, [4] creating a perfect storm that usurped the soignée, waist cinched, lady in a black silk dress and pearls. Consequently, the artificial, haute couture mannequin’s mannerisms gave way to the fresh-faced spontaneity inherent to the lit-from-within television image, typified by girls like Twiggy and Penelope Tree. Because paparazzi were often quicker than a pose, there was less time to craft a persona for the camera. The bright-lit exposure, up close and personal, intensified scrutiny of the face and the body. New demands for translucence, transparency, and a “natural” look emerged, emphasizing vulnerability. Consequently, glamour labor pressures to be model thin and lovely to look at, in the flesh, replaced specialized knowledge regarding how to construct the model ‘look’ for the camera.

This air of “calculated spontaneity” required strenuous effortlessness, foreshadowing an age when the instantaneity of Instagram belies hours of careful filtering, and many seek to pass their fictions off as fact on Facebook. [5] While it seems a quintessential sign of the times, glamour labor’s demand to be always “on” and seen everywhere has its roots in television’s endless flow of updates, images, and availability. In the digital age, live-streaming, geo-locating, bio-sensing, and selfies
amplify this already existing glamour labor, extending it beyond the exclusive realm of fashion, into the everyday. As so many of us turn to the screen to find the information we need to achieve our new look, email, blog, or tweet about what we want to buy, to be, or to achieve, we intimately engage with technologies organizing bodies in time and space. Every click builds an affective circuitry metering our engagement and potential, bringing it to market. [6] Routinely capitalizing on the body’s susceptibility for enhancement, models glamorize offering the body’s various modes of social and physical energy to be plugged in, worked out, and totally “made over,” to fit today’s ever changing standard of the glamorous ideal. [7] Models perform and promote glamour labor on the frontlines of selling a way of being in the world, which pulls bodies into productive matrixes in novel ways.

**What is glamour labor?**

Glamour labor is both the body work to manage appearance in person and the online image work to create and maintain one’s “cool” quotient—how hooked up, tuned in, and “in the know” one is. Glamour labor is thus dual pronged, involving both embodied and virtual aspects of working on one’s image. Its physical mode is the high maintenance of stylish self-presentation by working to achieve a body and “look” that fits the current fashion. Its virtual mode involves the effort to keep up with the trends, by reading fashion magazines, watching awards shows, and expending energy to stay keyed into
what’s happening now, in terms of styles, desirable brands, and how to get them.

Some have called this work on the body “aesthetic labor,” to look and behave like an image defined by one’s employer. [8] The virtual aspects of glamour labor echo “immaterial labor,” work to produce the informational and cultural aspects of a product. Immaterial labor’s value depends in part on networked connections and circulating reputations within a community of workers for whom work and play are not clearly defined. [9] Glamour labor’s endless possibilities also incite pressures similarly felt by cultural workers in fashion design, advertising, publishing, software production, photography, and other forms of cultural production, where scholars have noted pressure to be available 24/7 for work. [10] The key difference is, when life, work, and body management bleed together, glamour labor better describes the work to both project a fashionable image, and to be that image in the flesh.

To track the evolution of glamour labor within changing imaging technologies, I consulted advice from the top, aimed at those seeking to enter the inner sanctum of bodily perfection represented by the fashion model. Exploring modeling “how to” books, from the 1960s to the present day, revealed a clear shift. Modeling, presented as a specialized practice, suitable only for a select few, changed to something everyone could and should try, to do your glamour labor, to be your best self. In this transition, model experts’ advice marking barriers to entry morphed into instructions on how to do it, with
all comers welcome, just so long as they were willing to work hard enough.

The “closed-door” language is clearly evident in 1950s modeling star Candy Jones’ how-to book. Jones claimed a model’s “vital statistics,” were key. [11] Any applicant in the field had to be certain of her measurements “and be able to rattle them off with the sureness with which she can recite her address, zip code, and phone number.” [12] Slimness was paramount—“I’ve never heard of a waistline too small”—and for “high fashion work,” the model “should have no fanny to speak of,” and her hips “should be sort of nonexistent.” [13] For Jones, modeling clearly wasn’t for everyone. The right proportions were a start, but so was the courage to try to make it in a very difficult, discriminating world.

Early discussions of entry requirements for modeling like Jones’ painted modeling as an either/or proposition (either you had [or could fake] the right proportions, or not). In ensuing decades, the tone changed. While would-be models in 1964 were cautioned, “…if you are a size 14 and always will be, don’t make yourself sick by dieting. Think about another career,” [14] by the 1970s, model manuals advocated for behavior modification to “take off the excess weight, by going on a diet,” or “exercising it away.” [15] In the cinematic age, the ideal body was treated as a mechanized system of predictable outputs, something that could be girdled and waist cinched into submission. The television age moved the ideal toward one of a body open to technological manipulation. In the quest to be the ideal
in the flesh, without the help of foundation garments to create the desired silhouette, diet pills, exercise machines, mood enhancers, and plastic surgery came into play, as tools better suited to achieving the fashionable ideal.

The idea that any body not meeting the standards could be fixed, coupled with tightening entry requirements, caused a strange thing to happen in modeling. While bodily manipulation is nothing new, this high tech, scientifically oriented approach was a break from what had come before. What’s more, with these new tools at hand, in the 1970s and 80s, changing discourses of women’s rights, increased acceptance of bodily display, and relaxing sexual mores, helped modeling become more popular, widening the pool of aspirants. At the same time, management grew pickier. Consequently, it seemed two opposite forces were at work. While the boundaries for entry became ever more narrow, tightening requirements met the idea that looks mattered less than energy. As television’s dominance gradually gave way to digitization, the power of projection, spark, and attitude, grew within the affective economics of the age of the blink. [16]

In her 1978 model guide, for instance, model agent Nina Blanchard cautioned that you can’t train to become a model: “a girl either has the qualifications to start with or she doesn’t.” [17] Yet, a few pages later, Blanchard extemporized, while “certain basics must exist,” more important is “attitude.” The model

must be all things to all people, a canvas for the makeup
artist, a mannequin for the editor, a robot for the whims of the photographer, and the projection of the fantasies of the reader.

The model must be beautiful, but here they have upped the ante. Now she must also have the right “projection, vitality, and intelligence… assets easy to recognize, but impossible to describe.” [18] This mention of projection highlights an apparent paradox, emergent in model manuals from the 1970s and 80s onward. Strict diet, constant vigilance, and the struggle for weight loss were well and good, but emphasis on this new quality was increasingly undeniable.

In the 1980s, tightened control took the form of daily or weekly weigh-ins and measurements, even as model managers kept their eyes peeled for that unique look that could make all the difference in the field. Some model manuals put the ideal requirements front and center, in narrowly defined statistics: “Women should be between 5’7” and 5’ 9” and wear a perfect size 6, 8, or 9.” [19] Accordingly, “curves are not assets in fashion modeling.” [20] The variety of body shapes and types evident in early modeling had fallen away, and a set of very narrowly defined statistics solidified into a classic female fashion type. A 1984 manual was succinct; the girl who could model was “5ft 7in to 5ft 11in, with well-defined bone structure, wide set eyes, long legs, and a perfectly proportioned” body. [21] As the 90s approached, the reigning standards grew even narrower: “Are you 5ft8 in or taller? Do you weigh 110-120lb? Do you measure 34B-24-34? Do you wear a size 6-8?” Apparently, if you answered yes to these
questions, “perhaps you could become a print fashion and/or runway model.” [22] The desired frame was growing taller and leaner, and fitting the standard increasingly necessary; “Excess weight” could “turn an agent off immediately.” [23]

Yet, projection was also just as high on the list for this 1983 guide, claiming any aspiring model must of course “satisfy the same physical requirements as the fashion-show model... considerably slimmer than the average female--since the camera adds about ten pounds.” [24] Physique was no longer enough, however; she also must have “camera charisma,” e.g., “the ability to project her personality through the camera.” [25] Similarly, a mid 80s manual admonished aspirants to the field, “you must be trim” and if “you are overweight, the pounds must come off.” [26] At the same time, the a model agent gushed that the best models “just RADIATE personality that comes through the camera and is imprinted indelibly on film.” [27] In other testimony, professionals looked for “personality” and “projection,” [28] a theme that appeared in later manuals as well.

The affective economics of fashion heated up in the digitized age of the blink. We live in a moment characterized both by speed and a veritable explosion in the availability of information, moving faster than the human ability to process it. Part of this speed comes from the fact that digitization transforms everything into a common language. [29] The unifying language of ones and zeroes smooths out barriers that formerly slowed information’s trajectory, speeding it up and compressing it. In the transition from the television to
the internet age, images began to flood our lives at such a velocity and magnitude, they created what sociologist Herbert Simon has called a “poverty of attention.”\[^{30}\] This epidemic of overwhelmed attention spans demanded a new “structure of attention,” described by social theorist Nigel Thrift as focusing on “those actions which go on in small spaces and times, actions which involve qualities like anticipation, improvisation, and intuition.”\[^{31}\] Photography, cinema, television, and the internet shaped these structures, altering the speed and quality of our perceptions, thereby creating different modes of visibility, or imaging regimes.\[^{32}\] Inspired by journalist Malcolm Gladwell’s turn of phrase, I’ve dubbed the current moment the regime of the ‘blink.’

Leading up to the blink regime, photography enframed the body and gave its image new value; cinema offered the possibility of editing it to perfection for the camera’s unblinking gaze; and television blurred the space between image and world, as the glance of television usurped the cinematic gaze. In the fully mediatized age of the blink, a series of “highways of imitation/suggestion” proliferated, as more data and images provided more distractions, links to click, or ideas to pursue, creating a suggestible crowd whose attention shifts as quickly as the sylvan flashes of a school of fish.\[^{33}\] This “networked jumpiness,” flits from one image to the next with little time for conscious reflection, and at times, without registering what you actually see.\[^{34}\]

As an affective industry, fashion traffics in the moods, feelings, and
predispositions that sweep everyone into their wake, and then, just as suddenly, are gone. It is as mercurial and unpredictable as the weather. This uncertainty pushed contemporary modeling professionals toward adhering more tightly to “model” standards, while keeping an eye out for the unusual or quirky look that might be the next big thing. The growing value of the unpredictable solidified the idea that everyone should, “Be a model or just look like one,” as the outbreak of the internet saw invitation-only fashion shows live streaming to the general public and supermodels becoming household names. Modeling became “the life,” outside which one could never step, as the cable networked, suddenly ubiquitous, media followed the new model celebrities’ every move.

The manuals from the late 1990s into the 2000s exhibit a paradoxical mix between an “anything goes” market with room for all types and an increasingly rigid limit on points of entry, where it seemed that the bottom limit of model sizing had been reached. This 1999 guide was quite stern: “Weight is critical. You cannot weigh more than 115 pounds, and that should be on the tallest frame. Most of the models weigh around 110 to 115. Your weight has to stay consistent.”[35] Proportions were also mentioned explicitly; “you must not have any bulges or even any visible bumps. Long and slender is the guide. Arms, legs, torso, and neck should be as lean as the proverbial race horse.”[36] As per modeling’s new emphasis, this guide also pointed out “the more projection a model has, the better the look of that person will be remembered, and that’s what will make the hourly rate skyrocket.”[37] A model agent interviewed in 2004 noted the these two extremes,
saying, “during most recent seasons, all my designers want Size 0 to Size 2 models...the girls were still just as tall, but they were tiny. They had to fit in the sample clothes, and they had to look good.” [38] At the same time, this primer also asserted, “personality might be your most important business skill in the modeling industry,” pointing out that models who will “make” it, not only have the right look, but have the right sense of “energy” about them. [39]

In the all-images-all-the-time brave new world of the internet and social media that characterize the age of the blink, image-makers’ efforts to get noticed absolutely had to hit the mark, but the mark was a ever more elusive. As the super-networked public’s jumpiness increased, the measures taken in the face of this affective volatility, to ensure the marketability of a model’s image, became draconian. Affective volatility became newly valuable in the digitized age of the blink not only in the form of projection, but also in terms of the body’s physical potential to change. While photo retouching has been a given in fashion photography, after the 1990s, Photoshop took off, and pixilated thighs were shaved thinner, splotches erased, and pores, under-eye-circles, and wayward hairs magically disappeared.

Despite the fact that fashionable images of extreme slenderness and pore-less perfection could be achieved only through technological manipulation, this new digital unreal created a tension between the fashion images in circulation and the real people they supposedly represented, resulting in an even stronger push for models to seek to embody an increasingly impossible ‘look.’ As one model agent told
then top model of the aughts Coco Rocha when she weighed just 108 pounds, “you need to lose more weight. The look this year is anorexic. We don’t want you to be anorexic, we just want you to look it.” [40]

This trend toward the digital unreal flowed from the nascent biopolitical forces within the rising regime of the blink, which organized publics into potentially lucrative makeovers-in-the-making. Would-be models were encouraged to think of their bodies as something to be ever more thoroughly managed, a change impacting many women (and certainly some men too) who felt pressure to resemble those models by going to the gym, getting plastic surgery, and buying make-up that leaves them “pixel protected.” These selfie-induced pressures epitomize glamour labor’s spread into new domains, as the mobile phone camera became the paradigmatic example of the ubiquitous photography that characterizes our moment. [41]

From Twiggy’s era onward, the pull on populations to enter the rhythms of fashion amplified, as did the idea that everyone should do their glamour labor, to be ready for their close-up, while marshaling their energy to project the right image at all times. Leaving its specialized character behind, the idea that everyone should try to fit the model norm came into full flower in the digital age. This shift in attitude, from thinking that there are various types of bodies, and there isn’t much to be done about it, to the thought that anyone can be beautiful or fashionable if they just work hard enough, is clearly evident in the language of model manuals between the mid 1960s to the 1980s. Correspondingly, the increased attention to personality,
energy, and projection, denotes the keen emphasis on ineffable qualities demanded by the newly competitive world of imaging inaugurated by the digital regime of the blink.

As digitization facilitated the rise of fashion and popularized amateur fashion in the blogosphere, the street has become the runway for many living in urban centers. Consequently, “the life” promoted by models’ glamour labor, of constant self-promotion and fashioning, has become something few can escape within the rise of social media culture. The actions of so many who now diet and exercise, wear step counting and heart monitoring devices to not only be fit, but to look like models in pictures and in the flesh, drive bodily economies capitalizing on the body’s capacity to grow soft or build muscle, offering up the flesh itself to gridding for market value. Tweeting about or posting one’s latest physical accomplishments, posting a selfie of one’s newly enhanced butt, slimmed waist, or latest outfit, pulls one’s bodily potential and connectivity into metering and regulation, an availability which facilitates capital’s constant expansion. At the same time, the very act of posting puts one’s glamour quotient on the line, rising and falling by the metrics of likes, hearts, influence scores, and views. Keeping the quotient high becomes a sort of compulsion, the glamour labor to stay visible and relevant—to matter. While this compulsion for visibility seems recent, its roots can be traced to the popularization of fashion culture in the 1960s within the expanding networks of television, whose immediacy extended the ever-elusive goals of being “in,” “now,” and “happening” to a more general public (as per Andy Warhol’s visionary quip that in
the future, everyone would be “famous for fifteen minutes”). Models have long worked hard to appear as though they live the fabulously fashion-y lifestyle for the camera. In so doing, they show us we need to be both entrepreneurs of You, Inc., producing your image for the camera, but also to optimize our physical selves, to be your best self in the flesh, thus feeding market imperatives driving entanglements with technology capitalizing on both bodily vitality and the capacity for connection. As such, glamour labor practices are multiplying in the social media driven age of the blink, practices which, in the proliferation of selfie-obsessed, #nofilter cultures, show no sign of abating.


[3] When I say “we,” I mean residents of developed countries in the northern hemisphere for the decades prior to the 1990s. After the 1990s, I use “we” to refer to anyone engaging in social media or online access to images.

[4] A moment in the mid 1960s in which teenagers’ tastes toppled the old guard’s grip on trends in fashion, music, and cultural mores. This movement spiraled out from its epicenter in London (The Beatles, Mary Quant, and their ilk), eventually achieving global influence.


[6] Ultimately I am thinking about affect both in terms of the space of encounter and the space of enhancement by technologies that tap into bodily vitality to profit from their mutability.


Jones, p. 47.

Jones, p. 49.


In my forthcoming book *This Year’s Model: Fashion, Media, and the Making of Glamour* (NYU Press, 2015), I explicate how each imaging regime affects the bodily ideal, from the long gaze of cinema, to the glance of television, to the blink of the digital age, in which attention spans are stretched to the limit, and capturing the fickle public eye is a lightning flash affair.


Blanchard, 1978, p. 205. The notion that the model must be a robot for whims is particularly notable, as it connotes the model’s role as a kind of conduit for affect.


Ibid.


[32] A reigning regime or “pictorial order” is comprised of commonly accepted modes of perception, and styles or norms of image presentation and imaging techniques. Gilbert-Rolfe, J. (1999) *Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime*. New York: Allworth Press, 179. See also, post-structuralist feminist Patricia Clough’s notion that the dominant mode of imaging and the dominant forms of power are connected within a specific “regime of representation” that enforces particular social and cultural practices, as discussed in Clough, P. & Halley, J. (eds.) (2007) *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social* Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 16. Within what David Harvey has famously called a “time-space compression,” of the digital age, we find “processes that so revolutionize the objective qualities of space and time that we are forced to alter, sometimes in quite radical ways, how we represent the world to ourselves.” Harvey (1992). *The Condition of Postmodernity*, New York; Wiley, 240. For further discussion see, Virilio, P. (1994). *The Vision Machine*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 63, regarding the “logistics of the image” that “have evolved through different periods of propagation,” from the formal logic of painting that ended in the 18th century, to the dialectical logic of photography and film, the “frame of the 19th century,” to the paradoxical logic which begins with video recording and continues into today’s computer graphics and technology, moving through a shift from representation, to presentation, to virtualities.


[36] Ibid.

[37] Gearhart, Opportunities, 117.


[41] Thanks go to Nathan Jurgensen for this phrasing.