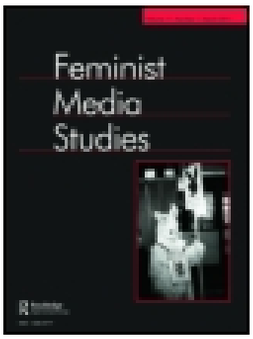

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"Anybody May look smart!": the smart aesthetic and women film stars in 1930s Hollywood

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ABSTRACT

As Maria DiBattista has shown (2003, 332), the ascendance of figures like Rosalind Russell and Katharine Hepburn during Hollywood's depression decade (1930–1939) marked the rise of a new breed of woman film star: the "smart girl." These stars were smart in two senses. Yes, they were quick-witted and quick-tongued—proto-feminist fodder for the newly egalitarian vision of (re-)marriage peddled in 1930s screwball comedy. Yet they were also smart in a new, aesthetic sense, embodying a "smart aesthetic" that marked a shift away from the formal, affective, informational and gendered logics of glamour. For contemporary commentators on 1930s Hollywood, these stars' smart mouths and their equally smart dresses were in clear accord—and, in part as a result of this apparent accord, the smart aesthetic earned a reputation as a progressive aesthetic formation that both expressed and reinforced the feminist potential of the new strain of "smart girls" on screen. This essay, however, complicates this view by at once elaborating and unpicking the links between these two registers of smartness. Through an analysis of the smart aesthetic as it emerged across coverage in 1930s fan periodicals, it contends that the smart aesthetic's progressive promise may have been more apparent than actual.

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Introduction

According to 1930s Hollywood fan journals like *Picture Play*, *Motion Picture* and *New Movie Magazine*, women stars of the new "talkies" were, quite suddenly, "smart." Rosalind Russell was "smart, chic, slim" (*Modern Screen*, February, 1936); Claudette Colbert was one of "Hollywood's smart stars" (*Screenland*, May, 1938); Katharine Hepburn had a "smart modernity" (*Screenland*, June, 1935). While the word was not an entirely novel one in the context of Hollywood fan periodicals, its usage in the 1930s more than doubled in comparison to the decade before, even after adjusting for a spike in the total number of such industry fan organs.[1] But what exactly was it to be "smart"? As a term of appraisal that oscillates tonally between "praise and patronization" (Catherine Keyser 2010, 184),

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the term "smart" is also strikingly dual in its meaning. Yes, the word can be understood in its subjective sense as a reference to mental, verbal, and practical intelligence. This is the kind of intelligence that film scholar Maria DiBattista (2003) ascribes to the "quick-witted" (159) and quick-tongued "smart girls" (332) like Russell, Hepburn, and Colbert, who achieved their cinematic apotheosis in the snappy rhythms of 1930s screwball comedy. Many contemporary periodicals celebrated the emergence of this figure, with one commentator observing that "there's a new type of girl in Hollywood today"—a girl who "uses her brains," and possesses both "intelligence" and "mental alertness" (*Motion Picture*, July, 1936). The ascendance of the word "smart" in this sense, and of the new strain of "smart stars" themselves, should come as no surprise in the context of what Broadus Mitchell (2017) dubs the "depression decade." Across the course of this decade, women working in the home had to learn to stretch household resources further than ever before, even as women turned to work outside the home in unprecedented numbers. What is important for our purposes, however, is that for many critics commenting on the rise of 1930s Hollywood's "smart girls," "smartness" understood as intelligence—whether depicted on screen, or embodied in the world—has significant progressive weight. DiBattista (2003), for example, extols the feminist virtues of this cluster of stars, casting them as "new wom[e]n" (332) who offered an "empowering model for American womanhood" (x) while "dismiss[ing] … the domestic and sexual pieties of the genteel tradition" (23).[2]

Yet in the context of 1930s Hollywood fan periodicals, the term "smart" was not always or even most often used to refer to subjective qualities like practical, mental, and verbal intelligence. Rather, the "smart" served just as often to appraise the *aesthetic*—that is to say, the formal or affective—features of an object, feature, or person. Thus, fashion editor Virginia T. Lane could ask, rhetorically, with reference to Katharine Hepburn, "What makes her so chic, so smart, so startling?" and continue, "Well, part of the answer is—clothes!" (*Modern Screen*, August, 1933) in a use of the term that only makes sense if we afford it an aesthetic meaning. Similarly, in a February 1933 article in *The New Movie Magazine* entitled "Hollywood's Latest—Doubling in Dress," actress Constance Bennett announced that readers of the periodical "have a legitimate right to feel smart and well-dressed if [their] gown is of the latest mode," in a framing that places the smart and the well-dressed in the same semiotic cluster. In these applications, intelligence is beside the point; the "smart" refers not to subjective capacities but to aesthetic properties. In the wake of the economic devastation wrought by the 1929 stock market crash, the smart—in this specifically aesthetic sense—emerged as a powerful rival to the consumer captivations of "glamour," which had risen to prominence in the 1920s, but which by the 1930s seemed to have lost some of its purchase. According to an April 1933 *Picture Play* article entitled "It's Smart to Be Smooth," for example, while "'glamorous' was once the word that expressed highest approval," the depression of the 1930s had ushered in "an era of economy," prompting calls for a "new vogue word" that would "displace … [the] 'glamorous.'" And the smart aesthetic seemed to fit the bill.

But what was the relationship between the "smart" aesthetic and the emerging "smart" woman as she was depicted on screen and portrayed in the magazines, and, less directly, as she emerged in the world? Sianne Ngai's contention that many aesthetic categories encompass "specific capacities for feeling and thinking as well as specific limitations on these capacities" (2012, 4) suggests that aesthetic formations like the "smart" have the capacity to feed emerging forms of subjectivity (like the

"smart" woman). In other words, for Ngai, aesthetic formations may "play to and help complete the formation" (4) of affective and cognitive postures, and, more broadly, modes of subjectivity (as Ngai notes, for example, the cute calls up "an unusually intense and yet strangely ambivalent kind of empathy," while the interesting excites interest, "a noticeably weaker or cooler version of curiosity" [7]). Did the smart aesthetic, then, provide the cosmetic and sartorial resources necessary to support and sustain the smart "new woman" extolled by DiBattista? Or is any assumption of a link between them a function of etymological accident? Many contemporary articles in the fan press sought to establish a positive relationship between these two forms of smartness, representing the smart aesthetic as both proof of and aid to the progressive practical competencies of the "smart" women navigating the vicissitudes of depression-era North America. A lavish May 1935 publicity spread in *Movie Classic*, for example, directly ascribes Carole Lombard's smart sartorial choices to her intelligence; as Lombard herself put it, "'smartness is not a matter of money … the clever girl is she who finds what colors suit her and sticks to them.'" According to this narrative, which the author of the article elaborates further, the practical competencies embodied in the act of "judgment and careful study" both enable Lombard's "'clever girl'" to achieve, and are in turn evidenced by, her "extremely smart" self-presentation. DiBattista herself suggests a positive correlation between the sartorial appeal of smart clothes and the wit and competence of the new breed of "smart stars." For DiBattista, that is, Katharine Hepburn's "sophisticated urban couture" constituted "the clothes befitting a woman who exemplified [the] admirable Emersonian self-reliance" that DiBattista identifies as the epitome of the smart and the key to its progressive quality (2003, 336). Underpinning DiBattista's vision, I suggest, is what Catherine Keyser—in the context of an account of urban American woman writers of the early twentieth century—describes as a "potent fantasy of impossible mind, body and commodity accord," woven by what she calls assumptions about the "seamless unity of wit, sex and chic" (2010, 14).

In this essay, however, I will interrogate the often-assumed link between the aesthetic and subjective registers of "smartness" dominant in 1930s Hollywood fan discourse. Noting that many contemporary critics deployed this link to sustain claims about the smart aesthetic's progressive qualities, I will ask: how solid was the connection between smartness as an aesthetic and smartness as a subjective property, respectively? How might weaknesses within this connection compromise claims about the progressive status of the smart aesthetic? In answering these questions, I will first define the smart aesthetic at a formal level, unpacking the logic of economy that underpinned the aesthetic as it converged with broader modernist mandates and the norms of the New American design. Then, I will probe the smart aesthetic's progressive credentials by considering the kinds of subjective features it seemed to call forth and, in particular, its relation to the progressive form of political subjectivity that DiBattista captures in her reference to the talkies' new crop of "smart girls." As I will show, many contemporary critics did connect these two forms of smartness, and they were not unjustified in doing so. For the smart aesthetic marks a striking shift away from glamour in terms of its presented relation to three subjective metrics in particular: affect, information, and gender norms. In this respect, the smart aesthetic embodied an upbeat, accessible, and gender-subversive style that could be said to support the "smart" woman in ways that an

aesthetic of glamour did not. But as I will also show, the relationship between smartness as a subjective quality and smartness in its aesthetic sense is far from straightforward, especially in terms of its relationship to class difference and gender norms. Ultimately, I will conclude that the smart aesthetic had a progressive promise that it didn't always fulfil.

In exploring one of the key aesthetic categories that defined the image of female stars of the period—and thus attending closely to what it might have meant to describe these women as smart, as opposed, say, to glamorous, dainty, or beautiful—I pursue a line of inquiry that is oddly neglected in the historiography of female film stardom. Recent historical accounts of film stardom have explored changing feminine ideals as they are registered in an evolving taxonomy of female star "types," from the "vamp" embodied by figures like Theda Bara (Gaylyn Studlar 2011) to the "daring misses" described by Jennifer Bean (2002, 10), and from the flappers of the '20s to the pinups of the 50s (Richard Dyer 2013). What critics have not explored, however, is the shifting roster of vernacular aesthetic categories that mediate the construction and reception of these types, from "daintiness," to "charm," to "smartness." The category of glamour, of course, is an exception to this rule. Yet as just one of the numerous taste terms central to the production and reception of Hollywood stars across the decade, glamour has received an outsized degree of attention that only serves to bring the neglect of other categories into relief (Patrick Keating 2017; Liz Willis-Tropea 2011; Judith Brown 2009). Moreover, as Lori Merish has suggested (1996, 187), aesthetic categories are invaluable indexes to some of the shifting ways in which stars are differently "saturated" with gendered, racialized and class-based meanings. In expanding star studies aesthetic palette, then, this article unpacks some of these different meanings. At the same time, the article makes a contribution to the diverse, interdisciplinary body of work on feminist aesthetics, which explores the gendered logic of supposedly neutral aesthetic concepts and categories, from the pretty to the cute, from the detail to the dainty, and from the surface to the sublime (Battersby 2007; Cheng 2010; Duncan 2021; Galt 2011; Schor 2007; Sianne Ngai 2012). In particular, by troubling the tight cultural fit between the smart dresser and the smart woman, I hope to interrogate a broader tendency in feminist aesthetics to treat aesthetic practices (from pantsuits to purple hair) as uncomplicated proxies for particular forms of political subjectivity.

The Smart Aesthetic: Form and Subjectivity

What was the smart aesthetic? As Ngai has shown, the formal register is the most visible and ready-to-hand way to define an aesthetic category, where aesthetic judgments are often tethered to specific sets of non-aesthetic or formal features. In these terms, "someone who succeeds in convincing me of the rightness of her judgment of an object [for example, as dowdy, whimsical or glamorous] … will have done so by getting me to perceive it as she does, and she will have done this by directing my attention" (2015, 3) to some of its formal features such as its colour, shape, size or texture. For Ngai, for example, the cute is soft, squishy and exaggeratedly simple (6); for Judith Brown, the glamorous "finds its ideal conditions in the clean (synthetic, cold, abstract) lines of high modernism" (2009, 1); for Rosalind Galt, meanwhile, the pretty is defined by the "decorative," that is to say, by a form of ornamentation that exceeds the baseline coordinates of realist image

(2011, 9). In relation to this set of expectations about the relationship between aesthetic judgment and specific non-aesthetic properties, defining the smart is no easy task. For across Hollywood fan press of the 1930's, the newly salient "smart" aesthetic does not seem tethered to *any* consistent set of non-aesthetic characteristics. In some contexts, as in a February 1936 editorial in *Modern Screen*, a shiny piece of costume jewelry proves the height of smartness, with one starlet citing "'the gold kid belt [as] a terribly smart detail'" and another identifying a "'monogrammed fob pin … gold with brown wood'" as the height of smart. Yet in a different context, namely a September 1935 paean to Carole Lombard in *Movie Classic*, the smart finds its apotheosis in a casual, understated, and more typically modern American look: "You want to be in your gayest mood—in beach clothes that are smart but not too studied. For that, [starlet] Travis suggests blue and white polka-dotted shorts." In another context still, a fashion column from the same issue of *Movie Classic*, it is "cotton lace"—a more romantic and feminine choice—that is deemed "smart anywhere and anytime" (September, 1935). In other words, it sometimes seems as if virtually *any* formal feature can be marshalled in support of the claim that something is "smart."

Yet, despite the superficial formal variations among the people, objects and phenomena deemed "smart" in an aesthetic sense, it *is* possible to detect commonalities between them. For all are characterized by a certain formal economy, marking an unusually parsimonious use of material resources such as fabric, accessories and ornament. A 1931 anthem to the "smart" sartorial habits of Hollywood stars, entitled "Let the Hollywood Stars Be Your Fashion Guides," invites "the screen's smartest women [to] advise [readers]" on their "clothes problems"—and treats plain, simple cuts as the best reflection of the economies of fabric that apparently anchor all forms of smartness (*Screenland*, April, 1931). As the author announces, "When I started out to ask what characterized a well-dressed woman, it was tremendously interesting to find that all the Hollywood girls I interviewed, authorities on clothes, had the same principle—trimness and simplicity." Similarly, a November 1932 article in *New Movie Magazine* entitled "A Youthful Approach to the Clothes Question with Constance Cummings," aimed at teaching readers how to "look smart," also preaches the virtues of simplicity, noting that "today's fashions are definitely planned for economy in materials, lines and effect." In their economy and simplicity, these smart clothes were typical of what Annemarie Strasser calls "the American design movement," which sought to give women more control over the shape and fit of ready-made fashions while "making the needs of active working women a design priority" (2008, 92). This aesthetic of economy, in turn, must be understood in the context of a modernist fashion programme that is embodied most famously by the work of Gabrielle Chanel, and that mounted a rationalising and functionalist resistance to ornament on the basis that, as Burstein (2012, 42) has put it, "the decorative aesthetic produced wasted labor, health, and capital." The smart's status as an aesthetic of economy put it in stark contrast to glamour, which is routinely framed in terms of excess, from Stephen Gundle (2009, 11), who identifies glamour with the "excessive and abundant," to Brown (2009, 63), who contends that "glamour rises out of ... excess."

Importantly, the formal economy of the smart didn't necessarily always entail a total rejection of ornament; as Driscoll (2010, 144) has shown, modernism in fashion was entirely compatible with "layers and accessories." Yet, to qualify as smart, women *did*

Figure 1. The smart aesthetic demanded an efficient and economical use of ornament.

need to use ornament economically. An August 1930 article entitled "The Swanson Fashion Parade" in *The New Movie Magazine*, for example, features Gloria Swanson "demonstrating the newest and smartest in dinner dresses. The gown is of nude satin, in which both sides of the material are used. A circular cape collar falls over one shoulder to form a fetching train." The "smartness" of the dress is a function not of an absolute refusal of ornament, but of the efficient use of fabric in the service of ornamental goals: not only does the collar double as a train, but the fabric does double duty throughout, with "both sides of the material" put to use (Figure 1). Another article, in the March 1933 edition of *Photoplay*, also celebrates the economical delivery of ornamental effects in the course of its paean to Katharine Hepburn:

> Even though Katharine Hepburn has made but one picture, she has already established herself as a young person who knows what's smart. She likes simple, dramatic things like this unusual evening coat which Howard Greer has designed for her to wear in *A Great Desire*.

The conjunction of the two words—simple and dramatic—forms the nexus of the article's vision of the smart, which celebrates "dramatic" effects achieved through "simple" means.

Jewelry and accessories played a key role in achieving these economical effects; in fact, within the formal economy of the smart aesthetic, accessories acquired an emblematic status as efficient and inexpensive means of generating the desired aesthetic effect. As the April 1931 edition of *Screenland* reported, "Gloria [Stewart] thinks that . . . accessories [are] more important than the costume itself—in fact, they all [i.e., the other stars

interviewed] think that." A September 1935 article in *Movie Classic*, tellingly entitled "Give Yourself Some New Accessories!" condenses the logic here; featuring a starlet in a white pique collar, it notes that such collars can "make any plain dress smart." While this phrasing directly *opposes* the "smart" to the "plain" (where the latter implies economy), economy nevertheless remains the smart aesthetic's guiding principle; the dress's economy lies, paradoxically, in the efficiency of the means by which economy is disguised and ornament achieved. In this sense, the "smart" follows the example of Gabrielle Chanel, whose modernist affiliations, as Driscoll emphasises, did not rest on a complete eschewal of ornament; rather, Chanel "confined ornament to what we would now recognize as 'accessories,' thus crafting a more mobile basic style with exchangeable extras" (2010, 145). Emphasising a minimum of ornament without repudiating ornament altogether, the smart constitutes a modified "functionalism" that pushes the purview of that term beyond readiness for productive or industrial labour into readiness for the kinds of aesthetic, social, and emotional labour expected of women. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the phrase "a smart touch" was ubiquitous here, capturing, as it did, the scantiness of the means necessary to sustain the smart aesthetic. The August 1931 issue of *The New Movie Magazine* informs the reader that "A silver fox cuff for one sleeve only lends a smart touch to the ensemble." Similarly, an October 1937 fashion spread in *Motion Picture* tells the reader that "a suede sash in shades of red and grey adds a *smart touch* to [starlet] Tala Birell's two-piece grey and black suit." As this suggests, then, far from incompatible with the formal economy of the smart, accessories became crucial shortcuts to its achievement.

Yet the emphasis on economy in accounts of the smart aesthetic reaches beyond the aesthetic's formal register. Given the broader socio-economic climate of the 1930s, it should come as no surprise that the term smart (in its aesthetic sense) often served to describe not the formal economy of the objects involved but the financial economy at play in their acquisition. Starlet Kay Francis, for example, advises readers that, to acquire smartness on a budget, they will need "'two or three sets of very good costume jewelry, which is inexpensive and very smart'" (*Screenland*, April, 1931). Note that she does not say "'inexpensive *but* very smart';" in other words, the two words are treated as synonymous, pointing to the positive association between smartness and frugality. An article entitled "Mlle Chic's Hollywood Fashion Tips," in the August 1938 edition of *Motion Picture*, also exemplifies this association:

> The town has gone completely daffy about jewelry . . . and earrings too. Luise Rainer was lunching not far from us, and I noticed the *clever* old-gold pendant she was wearing on her suit lapel . . . But on the way out, Luise stopped and asked how I liked her earring. And that's what it was! . . . . Don't you think you have to spend money for your dress ornaments. Maureen and I both remarked how utterly *smart* Rosalind Russell looked with her brown wool dress and gold necklace. But when Rosalind sat down she confessed just what her 'necklace' was. Yards of ordinary dime-store electric light chain—the kind you'll find hanging from any back porch light socket . . .(italics mine)

Contending that Hollywood has "gone completely daffy . . . . about jewelry . . . and earrings too," the passage identifies consumerism in general, and trends in particular, with "daffiness" and thereby suggests that mere participation in this trend, or indeed any trend, would be decidedly *un*smart. The article then proceeds to identify two women who know how to navigate that daffiness in ways that earn them the moniker "smart." On the one hand, there is Luise Rainer, whose suit lapel bears a "clever old-gold pendant" that merits

the term "clever" on the basis that it's not a pendant at all but a cunningly repurposed earring. On the other, there's Rosalind Russell, who looked "utterly smart with her brown wool dress and [a] gold necklace" that, again, earns her the aesthetic assessment "smart" by virtue of the clever pecuniary workaround it represents: far from costing the earth, it is made of "yards of ordinary dime-store electric light chain—the kind you'll find hanging from any back porch light socket." The emphasis on the process of acquisition in these accounts makes it clear that the smartness in question derives less from the things themselves than from how they've been acquired—namely, by ingeniously repurposing the inexpensive or mundane.

But did the smart aesthetic support or undermine the subjective features, like intelligence, that were also designated by the term smart? Certainly, the consumerist savvy dramatized in the Rosalind Russel and Luise Rainer anecdotes above serve to conflate these two registers of smartness, pointing to the extent that, in this decade, looking smart was inextricable from being smart. Indeed, the former was often cast as a proof of the latter—a sign of a practical competence in the sartorial domain that could be extrapolated to other areas of accomplishment. A July 1936 account of Rosalind Russell in *Photoplay*, "Hardworking Debutante," treats her "smart clothes" as conclusive evidence of the financial, athletic and social qualities that have already been ascribed to her in the course of the glittering paean:

> She is athletic, swims well and rides expertly. She's a joy to dance with … Both her natural wit and her incredible resourcefulness have been of great help to her in Hollywood … she's a clever business woman, and handles her own affairs … Like all the Russell girls, Rosalind loves smart clothes and wears them with great chic.

This account of Russell's physical, financial and athletic achievements ends with—as if culminating in—a celebration of her "smart" physical self-presentation, as if the latter formed the best way of certifying the former. A July 1936 article in *Motion Picture* entitled "A New Way to Men's Hearts" also treats the two species of smartness as mutually reinforcing, celebrating the "smart, glamorous stars of the screen" who also "use [their] brains." In fact, many sources suggested that, more than just reflecting the wearer's practical and verbal competence, "smart" clothes and style could actually *facilitate* the further exercise of these forms of competence by making women's labour—whether in the workplace, in the home or on the social scene—that much easier. In a February 1935 editorial in *Modern Screen*, author Adelia Bird flags a series of dresses that, as she put it, achieve "smartness" by "tempering glamour with practicality:"

> This seems to be a general feeling among Hollywood designers today … [that] they have to create styles that can be used as a guide to a stars' public as well as a foil for her individual type. In other words, you have educated Hollywood to be less glamorous and more practical about fashions.

From this point of view, the smart dovetails with a broader modernist functionalist tradition, which flourished in fashion as well as in product design and architecture, and which held that "manufactured artefacts [should be] assessed in terms of their practicality" and that "good design … resulted in the production of objects which could fulfil their function in the most efficient way possible" (Negrin 1999, 99–100).

Figure 2. "What Every Smart Girl Could Wear," which draws heavily on the testimony of then-teenage starlet Anne Shirley, exemplifies the informational style of the smart aesthetic.

These arguments for a confluence between the smart aesthetic and smartness as a subjective trait do have some basis, as I will demonstrate here across the registers of information, affect and gender norms (before going on to interrogate these same arguments). Perhaps most significant in this respect is that the epistemic style typical of fashion spreads featuring smart people, things, and objects contrasts strikingly with that typical of glamour aesthetics. As Stephen Gundle has shown, Hollywood glamour was predicated on a sense of mystery best embodied in the haughty reserve of a Greta Garbo (Gundle 2009, 87). The stylistics of glamour photography enhanced this sense of mystery through streamlined sets and moody, high-contrast studio lighting of the kind pioneered by legendary Hollywood portrait photographer George Hurrell. This image-heavy, information-light aesthetic arose in the wake of marketing studies that underscored the emotive significance of the "product image" over product information in ways that have clearly contributed to the mystification of the commodity. The smart aesthetic, however, runs against the grain of this tendency. It assumed an informational mode, framing its wares not as objects of desire that would captivate or magnetize, but as useful objects that could help and aid. A January 1936 article in *Movie Classic* entitled "What Every Smart Girl Could Wear," which draws heavily on the testimony of then-teenage starlet Anne Shirley, exemplifies the informational style of the aesthetic (Figure 2). "Young, pretty, smart-looking and possessed of excellent taste," it runs,

> Anne is a vivid source of information concerning what the smart, early 1936, girl would be wearing, especially if she adheres to two easy-to-follow rules:
>
> - Dress simply. A girl's youth is a priceless possession and should never be spoiled by over-dressing
> - Select good clothes if you would consistently look well, because youth is active and hard on clothes.

With efficient aplomb, like a pharmacist dispensing medicine or a chef listing the ingredients of a soup, the author breaks down a range of techniques for achieving the aesthetic. The use of bullet points, a presentational style more typical of professional exposition than fashion editorial, reflects the article's confidence that the smart is a formula to be mastered rather than a mysterious essence to be admired. In this sense, far from mystifying its means of production, the smart explicitly enumerates them, while claiming to appeal not to the readers' emotions but to their judgment. And the informational voice of the article is only cemented by the photographs that accompany it. Whereas glamour photography mandated "deep shadows" (Keating 2017, 119), these shots were clearly lit, with minimal shading or contrast, as if intended to elucidate rather than captivate. Whereas glamour photography usually focused on a single, enchanting image, "What Every Smart Girl Could Wear" features an itemized catalogue of images. And whereas glamour photographs were often cropped or close-up, Shirley's entire body is visible in every one of these pictures, promising a full visual inventory of the details that make up her "smart" appearance. The epistemic style of the smart aesthetic, then, tended to an egalitarianism and accessibility that can be clearly distinguished from that of glamour, which tended to opacity and exclusion.

If the smart aesthetic's epistemic dimension seemed to support the connection between the smart aesthetic and the smart as practice, so too did its affective dimension. Key here was a peppy, chipper tone that was congenial to practical and professional achievement—what DiBattista, describing the smart, "fast-talking dames" of 1930s screwball comedy, calls their "happy boldness" (20). This affective mode, typical of the smart, stood in stark contrast to the affective posture typical of glamour, which locked both the bearer and viewer of glamour into a captivated relation to consumer culture, even as it veered between impassivity and enthrallment. The glamorous subject herself, of course, telegraphs an inhuman emotional reserve or inscrutability that Willis-Tropea defines in terms of a "cool, untouchable quality" (2011, 270) and that Brown defines in terms of "cool indifference" (2009, 113). The viewer of glamour, meanwhile, is "dazzle[d] or seduce[d]" (Gundle 2009, 5), "captivate[d]" (5), the subject of "magnetic influence" (179)—a framing that suggests forms of engagement, whether at the box office or at the department store, that are driven primarily by unreason. Again, the smart marks a seemingly progressive departure from this controversial cultural style, both in terms of the affect that the smart aesthetic modelled and in terms of the affect that it induced. For the "smartest" stars exude a breezy, waspy vigour and snappy good cheer. In "What Every Smart Girl Could Wear," for example, Anne Shirley emerges as an "alert, active young modern" for whom "life is one grand thrill," and where she isn't smiling broadly, she registers as enthusiastic and animated. Whereas glamour seemed to visit misery even, and perhaps especially,

upon those who successfully embodied it, the smart was as uplifting an experience to its aspirants as it was to its avatars.

There is yet another level on which we might link the smart aesthetic to some of the features attributed to the smart woman: for both pose a challenge to what were by all accounts relatively constraining heteronormative rubrics of feminine self-presentations. Indeed, one article warns its readers that *excessive* aesthetic smartness could compromise more traditionally heteronormative forms of feminine sex appeal. When "you have a new beau," announces a fashion editorial in *Movie Classic*, "for once, you don't care a whoop about being smart … You want to be downright pretty!" (September, 1935). In this account, the smart aesthetic sits in opposition to the pretty, perhaps because the economy at the heart of the smart aesthetic rejects what Williams (1989, 39) describes as the role of the "superfluous detail" in more heteronormative forms of feminine sex appeal. Certainly, *Movie Classic*'s polarization of smartness and prettiness was not unusual. A *Photoplay* article about Katharine Hepburn, who came to epitomize the smart aesthetic, cites "eminent psychologist" William J. Fielding's contention that "'If Katharine Hepburn had been pretty as a child, I don't believe she would ever have become famous';" for Fielding, Hepburn's achievements—including, one assumes, her smart sartorial style—are "'a compensation for her plainness" (January, 1934). As a sometime-threat to norms of "pretty[ness]," the smart aesthetic was also at odds with glamour, which, by many accounts, reinforced conventional heteronormative beauty norms. According to Willis-Tropea, as "reworked by studio publicists and commercial advertisers over the course of the 1930s," glamour had come in large part to support "hegemonic versions of femininity" (Willis-Tropea 2008, viii) —the same "versions of femininity" that the smart aesthetic challenged.

"Watch[ing] the sales very carefully:" querying the promise of the smart aesthetic

Thus far in this essay, I have sought to unpack some plausible arguments in favour of the idea that the smart aesthetic sustained the progressive forms of modern feminine subjectivity that DiBattista captures in her reference to new breed of "smart girls" that peopled the talkies in the 1930s. As I have shown, as a turn away from glamour in terms of its manifest relation to affective display, epistemic access, and gender presentation, the smart aesthetic could be said to support the smart stars' personae in ways that the glamorous did not. However, in what follows, I wish to complicate this reading of the smart in order to suggest that the relation between the two registers of the word smart in this period may be more ambiguous than might initially be supposed. First, while promising egalitarianism and accessibility through its formal economy and its informational mode, the smart aesthetic also had the capacity to naturalize existing social inequities by mystifying the source of class-based aesthetic distinctions. Second, while purporting to challenge traditional gender norms, it also had the potential to consolidate them through the sheer quantity of "aesthetic labour" it demanded of women.

The first issue, I contend, arose from the linguistic proximity between smartness in the aesthetic sense (i.e., well dressed) and smartness in its subjective sense (i.e., intelligence),

with many commentators exploiting the polysemy of the term "smart" to cast the former as a function of the latter. As Royer, the "famous Fox fashion designer," put it in a June 1935 issue of *Movie Classic*, "'You don't have to be wealthy … All you need is intelligence. If you are smart, you can look smart.'" This account serves to naturalize and legitimize class distinctions by characterizing the sartorial and cosmetic choices embodied by the smart aesthetic as an index of an ostensibly hardwired quality like intelligence, rather than as what Pierre Bourdieu calls a "marker of class"—a crystallization of economic, cultural, and social capital (1984, 2). And *Movie Classic* was far from alone in doing so; a similar rhetorical gesture animates a January 1930 edition of *Talking Screen*, which sees Gloria Swanson trace the sources of what she calls "'true smartness'" to "'intelligen[ce]':"

> I love the American girl … She has the best opportunity for true smartness … She absorbs everything. She is fearless and intelligent. Her mind is like a sponge, drawing in, making things her own.

The effort to braid together these two quite different registers of smartness is also at play in a November 1929 article in *Photoplay Magazine*, which quotes fashion designer and retailer Howard Greer's account of the connection between what the author of the article alternately calls "intelligence" (or "smartness" in the subjective sense) and being "cleverly clothed." "'It's intelligence,' said Greer;" the intelligent women "'tries to make herself attractive. She learns to stand and sit well. She acquires poise and charm and she is, therefore, willing to be chic.'" At stake here is what Bill Brown calls "an impossible account of the role of nature, not nurture" (2003, 145) in the selection and acquisition of sartorial goods. For there was only so much that intelligence could do for the self-presentation of depression-era American women where they lacked both the cash to spend and the cultural capital to know where to spend it. In so mystifying the source of aesthetic (and thus cultural and social) distinctions between women, then, the smart aesthetic threatened to break the progressive promise embodied in the figure of the "smart woman."

But there is a further reason to question facile assumptions about the relationship between the smart aesthetic and the "smart girls" on screen. Yes, the formal aspects of the smart aesthetic challenged traditional heteronormative gender norms (in the sense that its inherent economy pushed against the inherent excess of prettiness). Yet the aesthetic also had the capacity to re-consolidate traditional heteronormative gender roles by virtue of the sheer quantity of (heavily gendered) "aesthetic labour" the woman consumer was incited to devote to its construction. In referring to "aesthetic labour," I draw on a term that Ana Elias, Rosalind Gill, and Christina Scharff have coined to capture the "work … involved in presenting the self," work that is mandated of women in particular (2021, 5). Elias, Gill, and Scharff, of course, situate "aesthetic labour" in the context of neoliberalism, and their work is shaped by scholarship that has sought to articulate the changing nature of work in post-Fordist economies through concepts like affective labour (Hardt 1999), immaterial labour (Lazzarato 1996), and emotional labour (Hochschild 2012). Yet women's involvement in "aesthetic labour" cannot be historically circumscribed to neoliberalism, or even to the longer history of post-Fordist capitalism. Indeed, feminist historians of women and consumer culture have identified a similar phenomenon at play in earlier stages of North American consumer culture. Exemplary of this body of scholarship is Kathy Peiss's

Hope in a Jar (Peiss 1999, 180), which attends to the "hard work" and "adroit skill" at play in cosmetic practices like "making up" across the early twentieth century, and Susan Porter Benson's *Counter Cultures* (Benson 1986, 79), which shows how the woman fashion consumer of the same period emerged as an "efficient purchasing agent." While, as both Porter and Peiss note, this aesthetic labour opened up new pleasures and possibilities for women, other scholars of aesthetic labour have underscored the extent to which it also burdens women with expectations that can be "frankly exhausting" (Dosekun 2017, 177) and "oppressive" (Donaghue 2017, 239). In this respect (and appropriately expanded beyond the purview of neoliberalism), the concept of "aesthetic labour" provides a valuable framework for understanding the gendered work involved in curating the smart aesthetic.

All aesthetic practices take work, of course. Yet because of its above-described links to the financial economies of scrimping, saving, and repurposing, the smart aesthetic was unique in its explicit aestheticization of work *as part and parcel of the aesthetic itself*—with important implications, I suggest, for the gender roles modelled in 1930s Hollywood. Certainly, the aesthetic labour involved in acquiring and maintaining the smart aesthetic was the bread and butter of fan journal commentary on the aesthetic. An April 1931 article in *Screenland* entitled "Let the Hollywood Stars Be Your Fashion Guides" is exemplary here. By inviting "the screen's smartest women [to] advise you here on your clothes problems," it turns dressing into a "problem" that requires a solution—a strikingly time-intensive and energy-intensive one. According to the author, a woman

> should watch the sales very carefully and do all her shopping then, when she will get the best goods at reduced rates. A wise thing to do is to watch the stores, pick out what she wants, and wait for the sales to buy it. Usually she can find the identical article. In this way she may not be a leader of fashion but she will always be beautifully gowned. It is better to save a bit each week for this emergency that [sic] to wait until you simply must have an outfit.

The spectacle of watching, selecting, waiting and saving—and doing all "very carefully"—suggests the remarkable outlay of aesthetic labour that the smart aesthetic mandated of those who aspired to it. And to the extent that aesthetic labour forms a crucial component of traditional feminine gender roles (Lindsey 2015), the pursuit of the smart aesthetic, I suggest, had the capacity to embed those roles further. The above-cited article "A Youthful Approach to the Clothes Question with Constance Cummings" also emphasizes the cognitive and physical labour that the smart extracted (*New Movie Magazine*, November, 1932). As Cummings herself put it,

> anybody in the regular walks of life going the rounds of social activities … may look smart most inexpensively, if she puts thought and time on her dress problem … any girl may be smartly dressed for any occasion if she studies the many available fashion notes, so that she may know what lines are smart, the little touches which give any gown distinction, and the color tones needed in accessories.

Despite the gestures toward egalitarianism crystallized in the claims that "'*anybody* … may look smart most inexpensively,'" this passage sets a high bar for the achievement of the smart aesthetic, emphasising the "'thought and time'" that must be invested in what the author calls "the dress problem." And in so demanding women's "'thought and time,'" the smart aesthetic may have further entrenched traditional feminine gender roles, in which cosmetic and sartorial self-presentation played a crucial part.

Conclusion

The "depression decade" of the 1930s marked the rise, in Hollywood, of a coterie of "smart" stars like Rosalind Russell and Katharine Hepburn, whose verbal and practical intelligence was a perfect fit for the screwball comedy's "redefined relations[hip] between the genders" (Lent 1994, 314). Yet if these stars were smart in the subjective sense, they were also smart in the aesthetic sense. Indeed, they became avatars of an emerging smart aesthetic that, popularized in the Hollywood fan press, rejected the formal as well as the affective, informational and gendered style of glamour. For many commentators, both historically and today, these stars' smart cosmetic and sartorial stylings dovetailed nearly with their equally smart way of talking and acting. In part as a result of this seemingly natural conjunction, the smart aesthetic has acquired a reputation as a uniquely progressive aesthetic, both expressing and reinforcing the savvy self-possession of the new breed of women on screen. This essay, however, has sought to complicate this view, at once elaborating and unpicking the links between these two related but not entirely synonymous registers of smartness. Yes, the smart aesthetic marked a shift away from the formal excess, epistemic opacity, emotional negativity and gender normativity of glamour. In the process, it emerged as an accessible, upbeat and potentially gender-subversive aesthetic that promised to support the expression of new forms of political subjectivity embodied in the figure of the "smart girl."

Yet, as I have shown, the relationship between the smart aesthetic and the cluster of subjective qualities associated with DiBattista's "smart girls" was ambiguous. Not only did the smart aesthetic help naturalize the very class distinctions it purported to help break down, it also had the potential to re-consolidate women's instalment in traditional gender roles, thanks to the degree of aesthetic labour it demanded of woman fans. In arguing this, I have unsettled the claim that the smart aesthetic has consistently sustained the progressive agenda crystallized in the "smart woman" as an emergent political subjectivity in 1930s Hollywood. More broadly, I have sought to challenge overly simplistic assumptions about the relationship between aesthetic presentation and political subjectivity. At the same time, however, I don't wish to downplay the progressive value of the smart over and against contemporaneous Hollywood aesthetic constellations. The 1940s saw the return of glamour and its tendency to aestheticize epistemic opacity; Hollywood films of this period less often celebrated powerful and well-spoken women than it articulated them through the aberrant figure of the *femme fatale*, who rose to prominence with *film noir* hits like *Rebecca* (Hitchcock, 1940), *Leave Her to Heaven* (Stahl, 1945), *Double Indemnity* (Wilder, 1944), and *The Maltese Falcon* (Huston, 1941). In view of these later developments, the 1930s still stands as something of a beacon of progressive gender representation, peopled by stars whose smart sartorial and cosmetic stylings at least partially supported the verbal and professional competence with which they were also associated.

Notes

1. Between 1920 and 1930, there were just 11,427 uses of the word in the trade and fan periodicals covered by Project Media History, whose catalogue spans everything from *Photoplay* to *the Journal of the Society of Motion Picture Engineers*. In contrast, in the 1930s,

there were 25,342 uses of this word: it had doubled. By the 1940s, it had almost halved again, with 16,761 instances of the term.

2. The 1930s was far from a feminist utopia, of course: if the depression pushed many women into the workforce, it also, and at the same time, engendered what Hapke (1995, xvi) calls a "breadline climate" that was exploited by a range of conservative voices to attack "women wage-earners." In response, however, advocates for women's rights championed women's capacities to "make [their] contribution to the highest good in any way that seems to [them] the best" (Agnes MacPhail, quoted in Hobbs 1993, 221), whether this involved work outside or inside the home.

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