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The glowy: the aesthetics of transparency in postfeminist “wellness” culture

Pansy Duncan 

School of Humanities, Media and Creative Communication, Massey University, Auckland, New Zealand

ABSTRACT

Over the past ten years or so, across the physical and virtual spaces of postfeminist culture, a novel aesthetic category has quietly but insistently taken hold: the glowy. In this article, I contextualise the glowy as the archetypal aesthetic of what has become known as “wellness culture,” an outgrowth of postfeminist culture that promotes the pursuit of an optimized state of physical, mental and spiritual wellbeing. At the same time, I make an argument about the glowy that challenges one of the central assumptions of scholarship on wellness culture. This is the assumption that wellness culture marks a turn, across postfeminist culture more broadly, from “outside” to “inside,” such that new forms of psychic discipline now flourish alongside longer-standing forms of bodily discipline. Resisting this reading, I argue that the rise of the glowy reflects not a turn from the cosmetic domain to the psychic domain but a collapse of the boundaries between these two realms. To sustain this argument, I draw on wellness content from prominent international fashion and lifestyle publications *Elle* and *Vogue*, as well as from the promotional material of key wellness brands and products.

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Introduction

Over the past ten years or so, across the physical and virtual spaces of postfeminist culture (Ana Sofia Elias and Rosalind Gill 2018; Elias, Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff 2016; Rosalind Gill 2007; Sue Jackson and Tiina Vares 2015; Jessica Maddox 2021; Angela McRobbie 2009), a novel aesthetic category has quietly but insistently taken hold: the glowy. At once related to and distinct from coeval trends, such as the so-called “glass skin” aesthetic, the glowy is characterized by a “natural” sheen that sets it apart from its high-gloss cousin. Beauty tutorials on video-sharing platforms like TikTok and YouTube feature celebrities from Hailey Bieber to Gwyneth Paltrow sharing their secrets to luminous, translucent, “glowy” skin. So-called “clean eating” cookbooks, such as Amelia Freer’s *Eat. Nourish. Glow* (2015) and Madeleine Shaw’s *Get the Glow* (2015), provide dietary and nutritional tips for achieving this “lit-from-within” radiance. Skincare companies build the concept of glow into their branding, from Charlotte Tilbury’s “Wonderglow” to Pai’s “The

CONTACT Pansy Duncan  p.duncan@massey.ac.nz  School of Humanities, Media and Creative Communication, Massey University, Private Bag 102 904, Albany 0745, Aotearoa, New Zealand

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Impossible Glow.” And cosmetics brands, seemingly untroubled by the contradiction inherent in linking makeup to a lustre that supposedly emanates from within, are also in on the act. Jennifer Lopez Beauty proposes to help users achieve J-Lo’s “limitless glow;” entire ranges of products, from “illuminators” to “highlighters,” exist to deliver glow; while Chrissy Teigen’s 2017 collaboration with Becca cosmetics, which dubs itself “Endless Glow,” makes glow its guiding objective.

In this article, I contextualise the glowy as the archetypal aesthetic of what has become known as “wellness culture” (Rachel O’Neill 2020, 2021, 2024), an outgrowth of postfeminist culture that promotes the pursuit of an optimized state of physical, mental and spiritual wellbeing. At the same time, I make an argument about the glowy’s role within wellness culture that challenges a significant assumption sustaining some scholarship on that culture. This is the assumption that wellness culture marks a turn, across postfeminist culture more broadly, from “outside” to “inside,” such that new forms of psychic discipline now flourish alongside longer-standing forms of bodily discipline (Shani Orgad and Rosalind Gill 2021; Sarah Riley, Adrienne Evans and Martine Robson 2022; Rachel Wood 2024). Complicating this reading, I argue that the rise of the glowy reflects not a turn from outside to inside but a collapse of the boundaries between inside and outside, in which the body is treated as a signifier of internal states even as internal states are instrumentalized as a means to an external or cosmetic end. As I will further show, the boundary-collapsing logic of the glowy is underpinned, at a formal level, by a redefinition of skin as a visually or physically penetrable membrane, rather than an impermeable barrier. In advancing this argument, I will first define wellness culture and show how the literature has situated wellness in relation to postfeminist culture’s purported turn to the policing of psychic, dispositional or affective life. Then, I will explore how the glowy aesthetic’s unique negotiation of the boundary between inside and outside complicates this reading of wellness culture. Following this, I will turn to the work of Anna Kornbluh (2024) and Shoshana Zuboff (2018) to situate these dynamics within the broader political-economic context in which they unfold. Finally, I will show how the glowy’s liminal, boundary-crossing status is supported by a radical reimagining of the epidermis itself. Throughout, I will draw on the promotional material of key wellness brands and products, as well as wellness content produced by two of the most widely-read and widely-distributed fashion and lifestyle publications on the global stage: *Vogue* and *Elle*. In doing so, I will draw exclusively on material published in the decade between 2014 and 2024, where 2014 marks the moment at which the glowy aesthetic first gained popular purchase.

In addition to its primary intervention in the literature on wellness culture, this essay is in dialogue with two broader bodies of literature, each of which it proposes to build on. The first of these bodies of work is the interdisciplinary scholarship on postfeminist culture’s regulation of bodily and psychic life more broadly (Elias and Gill 2018; Elias, Gill, and Scharff 2016, Gill 2007; Jackson and Vares 2015; Maddox 2021; McRobbie 2009). While this body of scholarship yields a great many insights into postfeminist aesthetic practices, it provides fewer insights into the aesthetic categories popularly used to evaluate these practices; when it does address such categories, “beauty” and “glamour” tend to dominate the discussion, with Gill’s recent work on “the Perfect” (Rosalind Gill 2023) a notable exception to this rule. This essay, then, proposes to widen the aesthetic palette of the literature on postfeminist culture, drawing attention to one of a host of under-analysed aesthetic categories that structure it (the “snatched” and the “dreamy” are

other such categories).¹ Second, this essay contributes to scholarship associated with the so-called “aesthetic turn” in literary and cultural studies, which has sought to topple beauty from its preeminent position in our understanding of aesthetics (Timothy Aubry 2018; Rosalind Galt 2011; Patrick Jagoda 2016; Sianne Ngai 2012; Cindy Weinstein and Christopher Looby 2012). In place of beauty, scholars associated with this turn have drawn attention to a host of less prestigious aesthetic categories, from the “cute” to the “oddly satisfying,” that organize our engagement with the world in affluent Western societies (Sianne Ngai 2005; Jordan Schonig 2020). Yet by actively ignoring the role of aesthetics in postfeminist beauty and wellness cultures in favour of attention to other less “obvious” cultural spaces, from Reddit to modernist poetics, these scholars have inadvertently embedded assumptions about the primacy of “beauty” precisely where we would most benefit from its de-centering. At the same time, the “intensification” (Elias, Gill, and Scharff 2016, 1) of postfeminist culture, driven by the rise of digital media tools, forms and platforms (Elias and Gill 2018; Gill 2021; Mary McGill 2023; Ramona Mihăilă and Ludmila Braniște 2021; Mark Newall 2022; Altman Yuzhu Peng 2020), has made addressing the minor aesthetic categories that structure this culture a particularly urgent project.

Wellness culture

What is wellness culture? Initially popularized in the late 1950s by Dr Halbert L. Dunn, a physician active in U.S. public health policy, the concept of wellness involves the reinscription of health “not simply as freedom from disease, but as a kind of preternatural exuberance and luminous vitality” (see also Colleen Derkatch 2022, 3; Kaisa Tiusanen 2021, 1383; O’Neill 2021, 1284). But “wellness” is more than a concept. As promoted by celebrities such as Oprah and Gwyneth Paltrow, the concept of wellness now underpins a multi-billion-dollar industry and has yielded its own high-profile influencers, from Deliciously Ella’s Ella Mills to Lorna Jane Activewear’s Lorna Jane. This industry, in turn, spans a range of spheres, from diet and exercise to fashion, in a cultural landscape now studded with juice bars, Instagram wellness gurus, fitness trackers, natural skincare, yoga retreats, plant-based diets and mindfulness apps. However, as Rachel O’Neill has argued incisively, wellness cannot simply be understood from an industrial perspective, which would tend to treat “wellness” in terms of the bait-and-switch of commercial chicanery. Rather, it must be understood as a broad “cultural formation” that, as she puts it, “brings together a wide variety of actors whose orientations and investments cannot be assumed in advance” (O’Neill 2024, 7). On the one hand, as O’Neill notes, wellness “perpetuates already dominant understandings of health as a private good and personal responsibility” (2021, 1282), facilitating the ongoing withdrawal of the state from its commitment to social welfare. On the other hand, as O’Neill also notes, some kinds of wellness products and some forms of wellness work offer a genuine alternative to the limitations of dominant capitalist labour and consumption practices (2024, 8–11; 2021, 631–3). In what follows, then, I will treat wellness as a broad “culture” rather than simply as an industry, while also seeking to balance conflicting claims about its political implications.

Key for our purposes is the fact that the scholarship on wellness culture has consistently pointed to the presence of the glowy aesthetic—without, however, explicitly exploring the aesthetic or unpacking its role in the culture. O’Neill’s accounts of celebrity wellness entrepreneurs, for example, repeatedly characterise these women in terms of

glow, drawing heavily on the work of Richard Dyer, whose discussion of the “glow of white women” in his landmark book *White* (Richard Dyer 2017, 122) argues that lighting strategies in popular media culture serve to consolidate white women’s exceptional status. In a 2021 article, O’Neill (1297) goes so far as to say that “‘Glow’ is very much the *sine qua non* of the wellness aesthetic, if not its *raison d’être*,” and to establish that, while “most often afforded to White women,” neither the desire for nor achievement of this aesthetic is “restricted to this cohort.” In an earlier article, O’Neill goes even further, arguing that these women’s

luminosity at once perpetuates and reanimates what Richard Dyer terms the “glow of white women,” as they are lit up and illuminated—literally and symbolically—as embodiments of idealized femininity. The healthful radiance they emit—while no doubt achieved using many of the same camera and lighting techniques Dyer details, as well as a suite of photo-editing apps—functions as testament to their virtuous lifestyles. (2020, 629)

For O’Neill, then, wellness entrepreneurship’s enlistment of “glow” as an index of feminine virtue is part of an established tradition in modern Western visual cultures, which has used light to affirm white women’s status as avatars of an “idealized femininity” (629). Other scholars who have recognized the significance of the glowy within wellness culture include Sarah Riley, Adrienne Evans and Martine Robson, who explore the connection between wellness-oriented rhetorics of “clean eating” and “an aesthetics of ‘the glow’” (2002, 75); Bridget Conor, who installs “glow” at the heart of the “cosmic wellness culture” best embodied by the brand Goop (2023, 1273); and Colleen Derkatch, who contends that, in wellness culture, “glowy skin and shiny hair become external signals of internal health: if you are beautiful, you must be well” (2021, 178). Despite the provocative nature of the link between the glowy and wellness culture, however, glowiness’s role in wellness culture is not the object of sustained scholarly analysis.

Yet in failing to scrutinize the role of the glowy in wellness culture, wellness scholars have also failed to account for the tensions in the relationship between wellness culture and the domain of aesthetics as embodied in the glowy. Consider that, for Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant, aesthetic contemplation begins and ends at the surface of the world, and concerns not the “inner purposes” of things but the way things are “beheld from the *outside*” (Immanuel Kant 1987, 388).² By contrast, many scholars understand wellness culture as a function of a new insistence within postfeminist culture on the policing of psychic, dispositional and subjective realms. Shani Orgad and Rosalind Gill’s work on “confidence culture,” for example, installs wellness culture as part of a general “‘turn to character’” in neoliberal societies and the postfeminist culture it sustains (Shani Orgad and Rosalind Gill 2021, 17). For Orgad and Gill, alongside “love your body” discourses, self-care ideals, and mindfulness practices, wellness culture is evidence that the psychic domain is increasingly saturated by the same disciplinary forces that have long saturated the cosmetic domain (82). Similarly, addressing wellness culture’s promotion of emotional dispositions such as “positivity,” Rachel Wood positions wellness in the context of a shift that took place across women’s self-improvement practices during the COVID-19 pandemic, in which practices of “aesthetic labor” were to some extent displaced by “affective labor—the deep feeling work of generating and maintaining a disposition that aligns with the needs of capital” (2024, 82).³ Finally, Riley, Evans, and Robson (2022) identify wellness culture as part of what they call “postfeminism 2.0” (75) in which a “makeover paradigm has intensified into a ‘transformation imperative’” marked by an

equal emphasis on mental and physical self-optimization (6). In aligning wellness culture with postfeminist culture's new stress on cultivating the subjective, dispositional or psychic qualities necessary for negotiating neoliberal society, then, Orgad, Gill, Wood, Riley, Evans and Robson project a vision of wellness that seems inhospitable to the surface-oriented logic generally ascribed to aesthetics like the glowy.

The glowy aesthetic and the collapse of inside and outside

How, then, should we understand the role of an aesthetic like the glowy in the context of a culture devoted, in the view of much of the scholarship, to questions of subjective experience rather than merely surface appeal? One way of interpreting the pervasive presence of the "glowy" within wellness culture would be to argue that it thwarts scholarly efforts to laminate wellness culture to the psychic realm. From this perspective, the glowy's significance to wellness culture is a sign that wellness culture is "really" about surfaces after all. This essay, however, resists this argument. Instead, it approaches the "glowy" as a cipher for the profound interpenetration of the psychic and the cosmetic in contemporary wellness culture—an interplay often overlooked in scholarly analyses. As I will show, popular accounts of the "glowy" frame the aesthetic in terms that completely collapse the categories "inside" and "outside," presenting them as mutually constitutive. These framings suggest a dynamic in which interior and exterior realms endlessly fold back into one another, revealing the inseparability of psychic and corporeal dimensions in wellness discourse.

This collapse is best embodied in the way inscriptions of the glowy in *Vogue* and *Elle* mobilize skin not as an external surface but as a signifier, whether indexical or iconic, of something beyond. They cast the glowy as a reflection of what you eat: "If you want clear skin, bright eyes and the glow of true health, you need to concentrate on what you're putting *into* your body" (Jessica Sepel 2014). They cast the glowy as a reflection of your emotional state: "acne isn't just a skin issue—it's a mental health issue" (Maria Quiles 2024). They cast the glowy as a reflection of your physical health: "The skin is an overall marker of our health" (Tatjana Freund 2022). And they cast the glowy as a reflection, more broadly, of your overall life practices, "almost like a mirror to the way you function" (Tatiana Dias 2023). In treating glow as an index of psychic, emotional and dispositional states, these accounts transform it from a purely aesthetic phenomenon into a moral signifier as part of the face's broader enlistment as a "privileged site of meaning" (Mary Ann Doane 2003, 94; see also Susan Stewart 1984). It is this relation to depth that distinguishes the glowy from adjacent aesthetics, such as the aforementioned "glass skin," as well as from older aesthetics such as "shine," which played a prominent role in the modern aesthetic of glamour (Stephen Gundle 2009, 27), and which, according to Anne Anlin Cheng, was best embodied by the "glossy lure" of the film stars of the 1920s and '30s (2011, 1024). As Dyer draws the distinction, whereas glow is a visible effusion of depth qualities, in which "the light within or from above appears to suffuse the body," shine—and, I'd argue, "glass skin"—begins and ends at the surface of the body, in the form of "light bouncing back off the surface of the skin" (Dyer 2017, 122). In this respect, while it might be tempting to draw a direct line of descent from the gleaming bodies of classical Hollywood glamour photography to the glowy beauties that populate online

media today, there are important differences between the glowy and its glossier, shinier cousins.

Of course, there is nothing particularly unusual in the glowy's enlistment as a signifier of deeper or broader moral or spiritual qualities. From Plato to Friedrich Nietzsche, and from Christianity to Critical Theory, aesthetic forms have long been recruited as emblems of moral, political and spiritual states to which they are not intrinsically linked. Indeed, as philosopher Rachel Zuckert has noted of the tight cultural fit between beauty and goodness, the symbolic alignment "wherein a person's physical beauty is taken as a sign of her moral goodness . . . reaches back at least to the Greek[s]" (Rachel Zuckert 2005, 108). Plato proposes that the balance and harmony embodied by the beautiful mirrors the balance and harmony to be found within a virtuous, ethical soul (Plato 2003, 228). Nietzsche contends that true beauty reflects the pinnacle of human excellence (Nietzsche 1997, 61). Meanwhile, Augustine of Hippo (1997, 30), G. W Leibniz (1998, 36), and Simone Weil (2004, 308) assert that the beauty to be found in nature and art recall the providential and moral order of God. As Dyer has shown, glow has long been implicated in this logic, tasked with embodying "something in but not of the body, something heavenly" (Dyer 2017, 127). This effort to link beauty to moral goodness can be understood in the context of our routine reliance on aesthetic evidence to substantiate our non-aesthetic judgments—a reliance best exemplified, as Sianne Ngai notes (Sianne Ngai 2008, 778), by the Frankfurt School tradition of Marxist aesthetics, where evaluations of, say, "Beethoven over Tchaikovsky (Adorno), Mann over Kafka (Lukacs), or Mallarme over Stevens (Jameson)" are often coupled to claims about their respective relationships to the "damaged life" of capitalist modernity. In other words, there is nothing inherently novel about the tendency to read aesthetic traits metonymically or metaphorically as figures for entirely unconnected non-aesthetic traits.

Yet to survey the discourse of the glowy is to note that, even as the aesthetic register is promoted as an index of a deeper moral state, the converse is also true: spiritual, emotional and health-related ideals, from happiness to "good" diet, are routinely instrumentalized, promoted for their capacity to "spill over into" or "show up" on the surface of the body. Consider the titles of these wellness-oriented cookbooks: Amelia Freer's *Nourish and Glow, Cook. Nourish and Glow and Eat. Nourish. Glow*; Madeleine Shaw's *Get the Glow and Ready, Steady, Glow*; and Angela Liddon's *O She Glows and O She Glows Every Day*. All seven of these books identify eating as a means to a very specific cosmetic end, a form of physical radiance embodied in the term "glow." Indeed, if wellness culture instrumentalizes diet, it does the same with other qualities, from relational forms like love to affective states like gratitude and happiness. According to Tasha Nicole Smith, writing for *Elle*, "Experiencing positive emotions . . . can be regenerative and give skin a vibrant, healthy glow" (Tasha Nicole Smith 2024). As Jennifer Lopez puts it, in a (Jennifer Lopez 2022) *Vogue* beauty tutorial that purports to unlock the secret to her trademark glow,

It starts with how kind of rested and happy you are. Because you can put on all the makeup in the world, but if you're unhappy, if your skin's not healthy, you're gonna look like you just have a bunch of makeup on top of something.

What these claims reflect is less a turn "to" the psychic, than a profound entanglement of the psychic and the cosmetic, in which, even as the exterior merely "reflects" the

interior, so the interior exists merely to serve and sustain the exterior. From this perspective, analysis of wellness culture that relies on firm distinctions between psychic and cosmetic forms of regulation may fail to capture the extent to which, at this moment in postfeminist culture, the two domains have interpenetrated in historically novel ways.

But what frameworks for understanding this interpenetration would best take its measure? One useful framework is provided by Kornbluh's analysis of the rise of the imaginary in the context of what she calls "too-late capitalism" (2024, 7). According to Kornbluh (50), "in less image-abundant times" the symbolic—the realm of the "signifier"—impedes what she calls the "one-to-one equations of the imaginary," the realm of psychic experience defined by forms of identification and projection. Today, however, the relentless circulation of images, especially images of the self, leads to a "dyadic mirror liquidity of body and ego/I and other-I" (50), such that self and self-as-object, inside and outside, image and interiority, become indistinguishable. For Kornbluh, this collapse of inside and outside is not a function of individual moral failures but of a particular moment in the history of capitalism that she dubs "too-late capitalism." This is a moment marked by the "compound[ing]" of the "economic dynamics" that first took hold in the 1970s (13), namely the "post-Fordist" shift away from manufacturing and towards the creative, service, and informational industries, which trade in image, experience and affect. Other scholars have also evoked the spectacle of a collapsed subject that exists at the intersection of inside and outside and sought to situate this subject in the context of post-Fordist capitalism. Byung-Chul Han (2015), for example, describes the rise of a subject that "cannot fence itself off," that "melts into itself" and that "drowns in its borderless self-intimacy" (36), while Baudrillard (1983), in a well-known passage from his essay "The Ecstasy of Communication," details a subject characterized by "absolute proximity ... the feeling of no defense, no retreat," a mere "switching centre for all the networks of influence" (133). For Kornbluh, Han and Baudrillard, then, post-Fordist capitalism has led to a breakdown of the boundaries between cosmetic and psychic spaces; it is this breakdown, I argue, that the glowy encapsulates at an aesthetic level.

Yet if, for Kornbluh, Baudrillard and Han, the post-Fordist political economy is at the root of inside-outside boundary-collapse, Zuboff's account of "surveillance capitalism" suggests that post-Fordist societies *actively exploit* this same boundary-collapse (2018). In the process, Zuboff provides further insight into the purchase of the glowy aesthetic today. According to Zuboff, surveillance capitalism is a new "economic order" (2) or market logic; enlisting, but not co-extensive with, technologies such as platforms, machine intelligence and algorithms, it subordinates traditional priorities, like the production of goods and services, to the creation of a "new global architecture of behavioral modification" (2). In this context, the collapsing boundaries between inside and outside described by Kornbluh, Baudrillard and Han are instrumental rather than incidental. For, as Zuboff shows, the technologies of surveillance capitalism routinely reach deep into the "dark continent of [our] inner li[ves]," in order to generate data about our "intentions and motives, meanings and needs, preferences and desires, moods and emotions" (255), where the ultimate goal is to use this data to monitor, predict, and shape users' behaviour. At the core of surveillance capitalism, then, is an "extractive operation" (10) animated by the calculated and ceaseless violation of boundaries between inside and outside, between inner life and observable behaviors. As an aesthetic in which the boundaries

between inside and outside have eroded, with each term instrumentalized in the service of each other, the glowy is uniquely at home in this context.

Glowiness as form: transparency and permeability

According to Ngai, acts of aesthetic judgment often appeal to the perceived form of their objects (for example, their shape, texture, colour and size) in an effort to justify or defend what are ultimately subjective judgments (Ngai 2010, 779). It should come as no surprise, then, that the glowy's affordances to the mechanisms of post-Fordist capitalism in general, and surveillance capitalism in particular, are reflected in the formal qualities to which popular accounts of the aesthetic make repeated reference. More specifically, accounts of the glowy aesthetic project a vision of skin not as an opaque, impervious surface that separates inside and outside but as visually and/or physically penetrable. To address the trope of physical penetrability first, many contributors to glowiness discourse celebrate skin that is permeable, spongelike, and capable of "absorbing" treatments and products (Sandy Ong 2024). For example, in the course of a "get ready with me" video on the *Vogue* France YouTube channel, model and influencer Hailey Rhode Bieber praises one treatment not just for its capacity to "soak right into the skin" itself, a process reliant on her skin's existing permeability, but for its capacity to engender further permeability (Hayley Rhode Bieber 2023). As she enthuses, the glazing milk—marketed by her self-named brand Rhode—"really helps all of my other products sink in." For Bieber, then, skin permeability is both a reality she has achieved, if only tenuously, and an ideal to which she has to commit through appropriate skincare. Others working in this space also promote treatments that heighten the porous, absorptive qualities of the skin. Writing for US *Vogue*, for example, beauty editor Kiana Murden celebrates the "Medicube Age-R Booster-H," which supposedly "works by generating electro-passageways through electrical stimulation, allowing ... products to penetrate the skin more deeply" (Kiana Murden 2023). In the process, she claims, they "increase skin permeability by 490%, allowing for better product absorption, amplifying the benefits of your skin care and helping skin become healthier and more glowy." Exfoliation is also purported to help skincare treatments seep through the epidermis. As Murden notes in a 2024 article for the same publication, "Exfoliating before any hydration allows removal of any dead skin cells, lets the serums and moisturizers really penetrate the skin's surface, and allows products to do their thing" (Murden 2024). These texts, then, embed an image of skin as a pervious membrane that—at least potentially—serves not as a barrier to keep out contaminants but as a sponge to absorb nutrients into the dermis, hypodermis and beyond. Not coincidentally, the imagined porousness of this surface lends itself to the extractive logics described by Zuboff (2018, 255), in which "an ever-more-complex extraction architecture reaches both further and deeper into new territories of human experience" (175) in order to mine it for data about our emotions, beliefs and desires.

If physical penetrability is one epidermal ideal sustaining the boundary-collapse at the heart of glowy aesthetics, visual penetrability is another, which is to say that the discourse of the glowy routinely celebrates transparency as an aspirational ideal. Subject to particular censure in the context of inscriptions of the glowy is anything that draws attention to the epidermis itself, from acne, whiteheads and blackheads, to "dark circles" under the eyes, "dull skin" and visible pores. Stubbornly resistant to visual penetration, these

blemishes obscure the inner radiance that the glowy aesthetic purports to reveal. The best skin, in other words, is invisible skin, skin that vanishes in the act of communicating the incandescence within. Thus, a *Vogue* India article deploring the opacity-producing effects of sugar and stress: “Chomped down on sugar? Hello, acne! Stressing out way too much? Nice seeing you, dark circles!” (Dias 2023). This ideal of epidermal transparency is best encapsulated by a new ambivalence about cosmetics, which, unlike skincare, explicitly seek to cover the skin. Against cosmetics, the transparency ideal mandates the “makeup-free” look favoured by the so-called “no makeup movement,” which proposes that people who use makeup are “misrepresent[ing] their true self” (Rosanna K., Smith, Elham Yazdani, Pengyuan Wang, Saber Soleymani, and Lan Anh N. Ton 2022, 325; see also A Samper, L. W Yang, M. E Daniels, E Fischer and L Lee 2018). In the context of this movement, where it can’t be washed off and wiped away, makeup should be “natural,” “minimal” or “barely there,” eliding itself in a bid to achieve a level of transparency congenial to the aesthetics of glow. Thus, according to a *Vogue* article purporting to help readers acquire “youthful, lit-from-within skin at all times,” “the more support, and the less masking [skin] over with products, the better” (Emma Strenner 2018). Once again, a connection to Zuboff’s account of surveillance capitalism is fitting. If, as our discussion of porousness emphasised, the mechanisms of surveillance capitalism violate boundaries by seeking to reach into the deepest recesses of the psyche, they also violate boundaries by seeking to bring these parts of the psyche to the surface as “visible, knowable, [and] shareable” information (2018, 270); the logic of transparency directly feeds this endeavour.

The role of transparency in sustaining the glowy aesthetic is worth dwelling on in further detail. This is both because transparency is on higher rotation across discourses of the glowy than permeability, and because, unlike permeability, transparency features heavily in existing scholarship. Drawing, in part, on this existing scholarship, how might we evaluate the role of transparency in relation to the glowy aesthetic? The concept of transparency has received sustained scrutiny in political theory, from Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s guidelines for civil servants to Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon and contemporary frameworks of governance (Clare Birchall 2011, 2021; Ida Koivisto 2022). In this context, transparency is generally treated as a normative ideal in which epistemic access to the machinery of government serves to promote accountability, reduce corruption, and enhance trust in institutions (although this literature also raises concerns about its limits [Birchall 2021]). However, the vision of transparency that dominates glowiness discourse diverges from the vision of transparency common in political theory—a divergence that helps underscore the liminal logic this essay has sought to ascribe to the glowy aesthetic. In the context of political theory, the moral considerations arising from the presence or absence of transparency are quite separate from the moral considerations arising from those issues that one is either being transparent or opaque about. From this perspective, a person, institution or society could conceivably choose to be “transparent” even about relatively problematic practices, or, conversely, opaque about a perfectly *un*-problematic practices.

By contrast, in the context of glowiness discourse, transparency and opacity are imagined as *effects* of the moral qualities they reveal and conceal, respectively. From this perspective, if someone eats “clean, whole” foods, has a rigorous skincare regime, and exercises regularly, their skin will achieve transparency, thus “revealing” an irrepressible internal glow. Conversely, if they don’t commit to glow-inducing dietary, skincare and

exercise practices, their skin will turn opaque, cloudy and dull. In this respect, the account of skin offered by Lopez, in the 2022 *Vogue* beauty tutorial described above, is oddly anachronistic. As Lopez announces, “you can’t cover it up, that’s the thing—you can’t cover it up, how you feel on the inside, how you take care of yourself, people see that.” The anachronism of this representation of glowiness lies in its inscription of epidermal transparency as a window through which to evaluate an internal state rather than as a symptom of that state. Conversely, in postfeminist wellness culture—and in keeping with Han’s, Baudrillard’s, Kornbluh’s and Zuboff’s accounts of the collapsed boundaries at the heart of “too-late capitalism”—the aesthetic of transparency is represented as an effect of the moral qualities it purports to reveal. In the face of the irradiating force of the glowy, then, the minimal gap between the inside and the outside sustained by older, political theory accounts of transparency falls entirely away, as the outside becomes an effect of the inside it is supposed to disclose, and as the moral and aesthetic converge.

Conclusion

Treating the glowy as the guiding aesthetic of postfeminist wellness culture, this essay has advanced an argument about the glowy’s role within this culture. In particular, it has sought to complicate one of the key premises of scholarship on wellness culture, namely, that the rise of “wellness” reflects a turn, within postfeminist culture more broadly, to the regulation of women’s psychic, subjective and emotional life (Orgad and Gill 2021; Riley, Evans, and Robson 2022; Wood 2024). Interrogating this account, I have argued that the glowy entails not a turn from outside to inside but something of a breakdown of the boundaries between inside and outside, in which the body is treated as an index of psychic or emotional or behavioral tendencies, even as psychic, emotional or behavioral tendencies are treated as a means to a cosmetic end. As I have further shown, this logic of boundary collapse can be understood both as a function of post-Fordist capitalism and as a strategy within Zuboff’s surveillance capitalism. As I have ultimately demonstrated, the glowy’s logic of dissolving boundaries is reflected formally in a reimagining of skin not as an opaque protective barrier but as a membrane that can be visually or physically penetrated. These arguments have important implications for theories of postfeminist culture and of wellness culture within it. At a surface level, they reveal the significance of a critically neglected but popularly established aesthetic category to the wellness field, while describing the discursive logics through which this aesthetic operates. At a deeper level, they may prompt us to reconsider the nature of the social field against which we map wellness culture.

Yet the significance of this essay may lie less in its theoretical claims than in its methodological example, and thus in the case it makes for attending to the aesthetic categories that shape postfeminist culture today. As I noted in the introduction, despite the proliferation of aesthetic categories in postfeminist culture, especially in the age of TikTok, these categories have not always received sustained scholarly analysis, even in the context of scholarship in which “aesthetics” is a guiding rubric (Elias and Gill 2018). Is this because such categories are perceived as trivial and transient, more likely to distract from than draw attention to the social structures, practices and logics they evaluate (Ngai 2010, 950)? If so, this essay has shown that, far from masking the social landscape of which wellness culture is a part, aesthetic

categories help reveal it. While many studies of postfeminist culture explore logics of surveillance (Elias and Gill 2018; Gill 2019), their implications for the enduring inside/outside binary that structures many accounts of wellness culture have tended to go underexplored. Attention to the glowy, however, brings these implications into sharp relief. For Ngai (2010, 954), the illuminating power of vernacular aesthetic categories is a function of the fact they are, to a large extent, unmediated by the internal mechanics of restricted fields of cultural production, and thus are more capable of “index[ing] states of the social world and struggles in the field of power more directly” than are individual texts, genres and movements. If nothing else, I hope this essay helps establish the relevance of these claims for the study of postfeminist culture and the social and subjective structures that sustain it.

Notes

1. The “dreamy” uses soft-focus photography, gentle motion effects, dreamlike filters and relaxing background music to produce a soft, ethereal look, while the “snatched” emphasizes sharp, sculpted, highly contoured features, often focusing on the jawline and cheekbones.
2. Italics mine.
3. These scholarly narratives about the logic and purview of wellness culture dovetail with narratives emerging from wellness culture itself, which also laminates wellness to the psychic rather than cosmetic domain.

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Notes on contributor

Pansy Duncan is a senior lecturer in the Media Studies programme at Massey University, Auckland, where she writes on the history and politics of film and media aesthetics. She is the author of three books: *The Emotional Life of Postmodern Film* (Routledge, 2016); *Screening the Posthuman* (Oxford University Press, 2023), with Missy Molloy and Claire Henry; and *The Natural History of Film Form* (Edinburgh University Press, 2025). She is currently completing a book on the minor aesthetic categories that mediated the construction and reception of Hollywood film stars in the studio era (the sultry, the charming, the dainty and the smart).

ORCID

Pansy Duncan  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5493-2984>

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