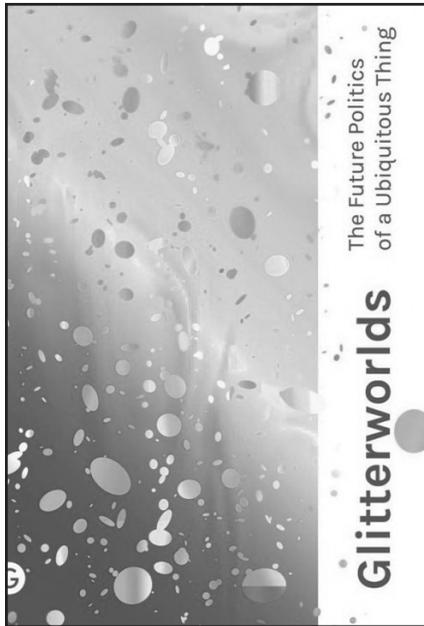


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Review of Rebeca Coleman's *Glitterworlds: The Future Politics of a Ubiquitous Thing*



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Glitter is fabulous and it fabulates.
- Coleman

Rebecca Coleman's *Glitterworlds: The Future Politics of a Ubiquitous Thing* is an attempt at "following glitter" as it moves through the world as material, commodity and media (7). Her book combines sociological methods with feminist new materialism, feminist cultural studies and object-oriented philosophy, and an attention to temporality in science and technology studies to argue that glitter creates politically radical futures as it moves across different sites and contexts of usage. Glitter is a ubiquitous constituent of a wide array of commodities, from makeup and fishing boat hulls to plywood boards and business cards,

disappearing from our view through its very ubiquity, but *Glitterworlds* draws our attention to glitter's affective and transformational power, troubling the nature/culture binary to infiltrate our art, bodies and politics. The various imaginings, activist movements, and artistic and bodily expression that glitter enables as a material are what prompt Coleman to argue that glitter is future-oriented, or always generating a "future politics," but she even goes so far as to argue that due to its imbrication in daily life, this future politics is not always recognisable as radical or progressive or even immediately effective (5). This book is an attempt to follow along with a few selected contexts or sites where glitter is involved, not all the way through a rigorous materialist account but through a largely speculative one.

For instance, Coleman does not deny that glitter pollutes, and refers to other sustained engagements with environmental pollution, plastic and human bodies, such as Stacy Alaimo's *Bodily Natures* (2010) or Jennifer Gabrys, Gay Hawkins and Mike Michal's *Accumulation: The Material Politics of Plastic* (2013). Coleman points out the existing body of work but prefers instead to attend to the extents and ways in which glitter becomes political or generates a "plurality of politics," largely understood to be ambivalent or directly empowering (48). To do so Coleman structures the text with the first two chapters being theoretical and methodological, bringing together various fields like sociology and science and technology studies to create a set of questions that she returns to in the course of the following chapters. Chapters 3-6 offer accounts of different sites where glitter becomes operational in imagining futures – a collaging workshop (Chapter 3), vagazzling and glitter-bombing (Chapter 4), two films, *Glitter* (2001) and *Precious* (2009) (Chapter 5) and lastly, glitter-bombing by LGBTQ activists (Chapter 6).

For Coleman, a key concept is the term “glitterworlds” (3-4). It refers to two senses of the word: one, to the “situations in which glitter becomes significant” (3); and two, to the particularities of glitter as a material¹ “via which worldings occur” (4). By “worlding” (emphasis mine), she means new futures, sites or situations which glitter brings into being, or gives birth to. This conception of glitter as a vibrant, living constituent of new worlds and new futures is the third sense of the term glitterworlds: the understanding of glitter as dynamic and energetic. To move freely across these sites and these worlds, Coleman builds upon a turn towards the material across various social sciences, such as from anthropologist Arjun Appadurai’s argument in *The Social Life of Things* (1986) for following the movement of commodities as they transition in and out of the commodity state, seeing things as not inert and mute but as filled with liveness. The liveness of glitter is also drawn from Jane Bennett’s theorisation of vital materialism in *Vibrant Matter* (2010), or the radical affective potential of objects that we consider nonhuman and passive. Bennett deeply influences Coleman’s sustained argument for how glitter provokes human attention and attracts human action through its latent expressivity (in Chapters 3, 4 and 5). Glitter is “vibrant matter”, argues Coleman via Bennett; it adheres to surfaces and spreads in a way that belies its immediate association with impermanence and frivolity. Glitter *lives*, Coleman argues in Chapter 1 and 2, because glitter *does*: as a thing with social potential, it is constantly in motion, constantly relational and lively.

The first two chapters, “Following the Thing...” and “The Future Politics of Glitter: Plastic Hopes and Fears” do provide a survey of scholarly engagements with the double nature of plastic (and by extension, glitter), as a material imbued with endless, almost utopian mutability as well as polluting characteristics, yet the work makes glitter’s enabling and empowering nature feel like a foregone conclusion. Coleman especially credits Stacey Alaimo’s work on “trans-corporeality” in *Bodily Natures* (2010), or the permeable boundary between the natural human body and artificial things, for its usefulness in “complicat(ing) the politics of glitter” (49). She extends this consideration of trans-corporeality to glitter and makes an especially good case for the

class and gender politics of condemning glitter usage on human bodies in Chapter 4 (which deals with vagazzling and vagina glitter bombs). Despite the initial promise of *Glitterworlds* to engage with glitter’s ambivalent nature as “celebratory *and* damaging, frivolous *and* deadly, decorative *and* violent” (emphases not mine), the present work focuses almost unilaterally on sites where glitter can be re-evaluated as affirmational (44). To a certain extent, this is mitigated by Coleman’s argument that the politics of glitter are multiple, and that it lends itself to non-linear temporalities where values like radical and progressive might not be immediately apparent², but there is still a need to substantially engage with these problematic futures.

Chapter 3, “Shimmering Futures: Girls, Luminosity and Collaging as Worldmaking” is an account of Coleman’s experiences of organising a craft workshop for London schoolgirls in 2016, where collaging was used as “a methodology for engaging (with) futures” (59). When the participants were asked to create collage-images of themselves in the present and the future, glitter emerged as a medium of choice. This is significant not only for glitter’s connection to normative femininity (rivalled only by the ubiquity of pink), but because glitter partakes in the contemporary visual trope of “luminous” girlhood, as theorized by Mary Celeste Kearney, through which “female youth... are hailed by sparkle’s assurance to signify a late modern femininity associated with empowerment, visibility and independent wealth” (Kearney qtd in text, 69). Kearney is concerned with arguments of postfeminism, and Coleman also acknowledges glitter’s implication in mainstream girl’s culture, but she chooses to dwell on this concept of luminosity instead, seeing it as an empowering visual language that girls use to articulate their hopes and desires (69). Most workshop participants use glitter as a shorthand for romance and love, which is central to their imagination of a happy future self. A similar argument concerning luminosity, self-image and future happiness runs through the subsequent chapters as well, which deal with vagazzling/vagina glitter and two films featuring women of colour, respectively.

This feeds into Coleman’s argument that despite glitter’s cultural connotations as being “feminine, childish, queer,” its clear popularity in a self-describing and future-oriented artistic and

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bodily expression is testament to glitter's affective power and its vibrancy (5). Chapter 4, "Sparkle from the Inside Out" explores glitter products that modify (vagazzling) or are assimilated within the female body. As objects that are adhered to or swallowed into the body, glitter bombs/capsules and vagazzling are "trans-corporeal," partaking of both the inside and the outside, blurring the boundaries of the natural and the artificial, the body and the world outside (81). Of course, both are meant to beautify the (natural) vagina, and/or to enhance the excitement of a heterosexual encounter. While the existence of these products points to the deep cultural shame associated with women's bodies and bodily fluids, Coleman finds that the censure directed towards women who adopt these glittery enhancements is also deeply sexist and classed. From Jennifer Love Hewitt to reality TV star Amy Childs, vagazzling women are seen as the ignorant victims to a capitalist self-image, with only their poor judgement and lack of self-reflexivity being to blame. This chapter has a sustained analysis of the justifications for these body-modifying practices, which ranges from fun and sexual pleasure to self-expression, wearing one's innermost desires on the surface of the body. Coleman takes cognizance of the dangers of foreign matter on the body while staying open to the question of how glitter helps these women embody and materialise a better future for themselves, with sex, love and future happiness.

The future-orientation of glitter and its centrality to the visual vocabulary of female empowerment is then taken up in Chapter 5 through the study of two very different films, *Precious* (2009) and Mariah Carey's *Glitter* (2001). Scenes of transformation and fantasy are accompanied by glitter itself, or by glittering objects, reinforcing the luminosity of aspirational femininity, and a better future. In *Precious*, glitter features in fantasy sequences where she imagines being free of her abusive parents and traumatic childhood; the chapter surveys a debate between black media scholars around *Precious*' aspirations towards normalcy being steeped in heteronormative whiteness, but finds that it is also possible to read these glittery scenes as promising "rest and relief," gesturing towards the end of the film where *Precious* does come to find community and love (123).

A key argument in the book concerns the future-orientation of glitter as a storytelling and

fabricating medium that functions as a tool to think with – if we think with glitter, we can think alternative politics. Glitter "sets off" or fabulates multiple futures (55). Fabulation, Coleman argues via Deleuze, is the act of storytelling as a constitutive process in the making of a people or a community; fabulation is necessarily political, because fabulation is hopeful (51-53). Comparing it to the concept of Afro-fabulation and the necessity of imagining a better future *in media res*, before it truly comes to exist, Coleman follows another thread of glitter's future politics – its role in LGBTQ activism through "glitter-bombing". Though appearing in Chapter 6, the "sparkly showers" that rain down on homophobic politicians and public figures is thematically connected to the first three chapters of the book through the idea of manifesting the self and the community through fabulation. Coleman follows the slippage between glitter's *fabulousness* and *fabulation* from the aesthetic of camp as a way of making oneself conspicuously visible. Such politics would be minimized if one were to think of glitter purely as plastic waste; for the queer community, the way that glitter *persists* on the person of the offending politician signals the LGBTQ community's political persistence. This chapter also has an interesting account of the approval towards glitter-bombing from the mainstream press as a less violent and more celebratory mode of protest, which begs the question of whether, for the popular media, the involvement of glitter manages and mitigates what would otherwise be seen as dangerously political?

Through the glitter-laden films, cultural practices and political strategies/performances Coleman analyses, she succeeds in opening up a consideration of glitter as an agential, affective force that doesn't only aid escapist fantasy, but fabulates futures and political hope. Towards the end of her introduction, Coleman refers to this interdisciplinary collage of approaches as an act of "scholarly imagination", a way of examining a thing like glitter in all its material glory, being attentive and open to its enchanting potential, and yet retaining critical distance from the capitalist imperatives of commodification. The question is not, can glitter free us, being enmeshed as it is in industrial practice? Rather, Coleman demonstrates, we can use glitter to think through

the ways in which objects help us imagine a future and “alternative futures that may or may not be politics that is different from dominant ideology, understood in terms of [capitalist] progress” (9).

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Notes

1 Coleman here references Isobel Armstrong’s coinage of the term ‘glassworlds’ to understand the Victorians’ fascination with glass as the material with which to imagine modernity and the future in her 2008 book *Victorian Glassworlds Glass Culture and the Imagination 1830-1880*. Coleman also points to Sarah Kember’s 2016 re-evaluation of glass as a ubiquitous material that also functions as media; glass’ immateriality and transparency being key to its association with technology and intelligence (in *iMedia. The Gendering of Objects, Environments and Smart Materials*).

2 “...the project this book proposes is that it is necessary to consider an array of futures, and future politics that glitter may generate, exploring how glitter as a plastic does not always easily fit into arguments that center on fear and dystopian futures. At the same time that dystopian futures exist as possible or plausible, the utopianism with which plastic was greeted and the positive affects that glitter may evoke are also evident” (Coleman 2020, 45)