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A Note on Glamour

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That elusive concept, glamour, is more closely associated with fashionable dress than with any other aspect of Western culture. In the mid-twentieth century, it was closely associated in the public mind with cinema, especially Hollywood. Films disseminated one particular idea of what glamour was, and studio portraits and stills of the stars relied on what they wore as much as on the actors themselves.

Yet, originally, glamour meant something more than airbrushed perfection. The origins of the word lie in ancient Celtic culture. It is thought to be a corruption of “grammar” and thus associated obviously with knowledge. In turn “grammar” was related to “gramarye,” which meant occult learning or magic. The Oxford English Dictionary cites an

early eighteenth century use: "when devils, wizards or jugglers deceive the sight, they are said to cast a glamour over the eye of the spectator." The word continued to have the sense of casting a sheen, that is to say dazzling or blinding the spectator, and this led to it having the additional meaning of having a shiny and thus a hard surface.

The Scottish romantic novelist, Sir Walter Scott, is credited with having introduced the word to modern English at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but the lure of the gothic and exotic in literature actually arose earlier, for Horace Walpole inaugurated the vogue for "gothic" fiction with *The Castle of Otranto*, published in 1764, and this was followed by Ann Radcliffe's bestseller *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, published in 1794. Terry Castle argues that the rise of gothic fiction and, more widely, a gothic sensibility, should be seen as the "Other" of the Enlightenment, that is to say, it expresses the irrational, supernatural, and ineffable expelled by the reason, deism, and scientific cast of thought of official eighteenth-century culture (Castle 1995).

However, the concept of "glamour" in its modern sense certainly emerges from the Romantic Movement. Scott's historical bestsellers promoted an idealized vision of a wild, pre-modern Gaelic culture full of heroism, the supernatural, and the picturesque.

While Scott evoked the imaginative power of a culture distant in time (as did John Keats in his poem *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* and later Tennyson in his Arthurian poems), other romantic writers applied the sheen of glamour to geographically distant cultures, Byron, for example, being particularly enamored of the near East. These narratives, especially Byron's, linked beauty and emotional power with an element of the sinister or at least the doomed or damned. Costume played an important role in these literary romances, which exploited the thrill of the exotic "Other" (and there is a famous portrait of Byron himself in Greek national dress). In the later nineteenth century fashion was to play with medieval (and other period) fashions; while notions of Turkish costume influenced utopian dress.

In the field of the fine arts, the Pre-Raphaelites were devoted to their vision of the medieval and gothic, but the sinister was downplayed in favor of, for example, the idealized, glossy and otherworldly beauty of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's portraits of his lovers. G. F. Watts brought this glamour to his society portraits, depicting his female sitters, beautifully dressed, as ever pensive, even mournful beauties often standing against a mysterious and timeless garden landscape. In these paintings the sheen and gloss of glamour enhances the personality of well-known individuals.

Why should the concept of "glamour" have emerged at the dawn of the industrial age? Belief in the divine right of kings had been destroyed in the massacres and excess of the French Revolution, even as the orderly cycle of rural life was destroyed by the coming of the factory

and the great new cities. As Karl Marx famously put it, “all that is solid melts into air” to create an unprecedented world of hitherto unimagined sensation, uncertainty, and uprootedness (Marx and Engels 2002: 223). In this new world, political authority would increasingly adhere to leaders who gained ascendancy by force of personality rather than by inheritance. Often this power would be gained by illegitimate means; the weakness of the democratic procedures that developed in nineteenth-century Europe, at least, providing avenues for their own usurpation by the unscrupulous and the dazzling. The gradual decay of organized religion in the West resulted in a displacement of religious sentiment onto politics, so that heroes such as Garibaldi and (much later) Chairman Mao became iconic and virtually religious figures, the supreme example being, of course, Adolf Hitler (Burleigh 2006).

Along with the revolutionary upheavals and the rise of the Romantic Movement there emerged a phenomenon seemingly very different from industrialization and equally distant from romanticism: the dandy. George “Beau” Brummell, while he did not single-handedly invent the new regime of masculine dress, condensed it in his person and imposed it on society so successfully that its aesthetic protocols have lasted until the present time (the demise of the modern man’s suit, continually announced, never actually occurring).

Glamour, then, starting as magic, developed into a very specific form of individualism via the dandies of the Regency period, and Byron. With the dandies it took the form of personal charisma. The individual imposes himself upon society by means not of power but of beauty and personality, unanchored and divorced from traditional social relations. The dandy, in other words, is a performance and, individual that he is, paradoxically anticipates the rise of spectacular mass culture—for eventually, “stars” replace aristocrats and princes as figures of glamour.

“Beau” Brummell was himself a middle-class upstart, who dominated the English Regency *beau monde* by force of personality. The new masculinity he constructed became the template for the nineteenth-century bourgeois businessman, but dandyism itself was more subversive. Beau Brummell appears to have been a heterosexual womanizer, but dandyism came to be associated with eroticism outside the conventions of marriage, even homosexuality. Dandyism developed into a defiant—nihilistic—political posture in France, and was most famously theorized by the poet Charles Baudelaire.

The dandy aesthetic was one of exquisite restraint, refinement, cleanliness, and renunciation, certainly in Britain, although perhaps less so in France, where dandies continued to be tempted by colorful excess. According to George Walden, the dandy continues today in new forms; in other words, the aesthetic of the dandy is basically an attitude, confined neither to a historical period nor to the minimalism of neutral colors and unostentatious cut and textiles (Walden 2002).

Above all, however, it creates a seamless perfection, as impenetrable as the carapace of a beetle. It is not surprising that this mode of being led to the idea that dandies were androgynous, asexual, and even if deviant, deviant in an opaque and hidden way.

The secret at its heart was due to the originality of Brummell: he fused the wearer and the dress. The dandy was not just a style of dressing, nor was it just a certain kind of person; it was the combination of the two, united in a stance of combined disdain, provocation, and indifference towards the world. The dandy is therefore the quintessentially glamorous individual. He—but later there would be female dandies (Steele 1993)—entered the cultural stage with a conscious or unconscious understanding that the new economic world order was destined to promote an individualism expressed in diverse forms of consumption.

Yet glamour is not about consumption in the consumer society, although the word has come to be continually misused to suggest that it is. Nor is it simply about luxury. The sociologist Georg Simmel saw how fashionable dressing sought to extend the 'force field' of the individual's personal aura, making it wider and more striking; fashion as an adjunct to power (Simmel 1971). Dress did not simply indicate power in the obvious sense of a uniform; nor was it about mere wealth. More subtly, it brought the combination of person and clothing to a pitch at which that person created glamour by means of daring departures from the conventionally well dressed, combined with an aura of defiance. Yet at the same time, this method of art as life, or one's self as a work of art, following Baudelaire (1971), was nihilistic. What was it *for*? Personal advancement must have been a motive; yet Brummell in the end—from boredom, self-destructiveness?—undid all the personal power he had acquired, ruined by debt and his quarrel with the Prince Regent. Some of the courtesans who also traded on their glamour, notably during the Second Empire period in France, were also brought down when their lives spiraled out of control whether from greed or promiscuity. One might say that in some sense they prefigure the celebrity of the late twentieth century.

Virginia Postrel finds glamour in the fifteenth-century painting of an Italian saint (Rosa *et al.* 2004: 24), but it is more helpful to anchor what is admittedly a vague and slippery concept in a material time and place. A twenty-first-century audience may find Saint Appollonia "glamorous," but the concept would have been alien to her and her society, for glamour is an essentially secular concept precisely because it usurps certain religious or spiritual features. A dandy might well think of himself as a martyr to his dress, and Baudelaire discussed this aspect of dandyism, but the only spiritual or supernatural element that enters into glamour is the extent to which it can provide a home (albeit of a kind that might seem trivial to many) for a displaced search for perfection. The religiously devout continually castigate themselves for

their failures to achieve a state of grace; and the same struggles are played out on the surface of the body by those who are dedicated to the cruel arts of fashion.

Glamour crept into the English language at the same time as industrialism provoked the reaction of the Romantic Movement with its love of gothic, because these changes were connected. The gothic served as the opposite of Enlightenment rationality, but it was also pressed into use as a critique of the iron necessities of the new world of work and the factory cities, now longing for an authenticity that seemed to have been lost in commerce and business. And this melodrama of nineteenth-century life required costuming.

The lingering meaning of spells and witchcraft continued to be found in the idea of glamour as the dangerous secret of those outside respectable society; the *femme fatale* of the decadence and the *fin de siècle* was a manifestation of this, sometimes literally diseased and deathly (Evans 2001). And, just as the crinolines, bustles, and elaborated ornamental gowns of the mid- and late-nineteenth century respectable bourgeois and upper-class ladies signified their adherence to convention, and their sober-suited husbands their dedication to finance, so the exaggerated dress of the courtesan or stage star was essential to the creation of her more daring charisma.

It was at the *fin de siècle*, too, that Bram Stoker's *Dracula* popularized in a covert way all the fears about dangerous sexuality, syphilis, and fatal women that swirled around in a society in which traditional restraints were becoming more difficult to maintain. The torrent of vampire fictions, and, above all, the vampire films that have poured from the factories of mass culture throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty first, have proved that there is an enduring, perilous fascination in this marriage of death and sex. The forbidden and the dangerous were always saturated in glamour.

One recent exploration of glamour locates its origins in the heyday of Hollywood in the 1930s and 1940s (in spite of a nod to the linguistic origins of the word), but more especially in the boom years of postwar America. This ignores the earlier origins I have sketched above. Film-star glamour, it is argued, had connotations of "immoral" behavior and *femmes fatales*, but by the 1950s had shed its louche origins; "luxury brands and handmade apparel played an essential role in constructing the mid-century notion of glamour" (Rosa *et al.* 2004: 24).

The "vamp" of the silent cinema ("vamp" was short for vampire) gave way in the 1930s to subtler representations, the two most transcendent icons of glamour in the period being Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich. That both were of European, non-English-speaking origin was part of their allure, signifying them as "Other" from the beginning. Each also had a beauty far removed from the sultriness of Jean Harlow,

the perky charm of Virginia Mayo, or from “good sport” Katherine Hepburn. Garbo and Dietrich were neither the girl-next-door nor the “other woman,” but the strange planar sculpture of those extraordinary faces had that “mysterious blend of accessibility and distance . . . neither transparent nor opaque . . . [but] translucent,” as Virginia Postrel eloquently puts it (Rosa *et al.* 2004: 24).

Hollywood certainly made glamour into a mass commodity. The image was increasingly crucial to the amplification of glamour—Hitler was as much aware of this as Louis Mayer—but didn’t this irreversibly change, or destroy glamour in the long run? To begin with, after all, glamour was a kind of cottage industry, self-produced effort; its endless reproduction reduced once shocking and alluring styles to banality. How wise of Garbo to retire to her solitude.

For Glamour is elitist. The emotions associated with glamour include desire, fear, loss, and an acknowledgment of death. Glamour is tragic; many of the most glamorous figures achieved glamour through suffering. Glamour is the result of work and effort—artfully concealed, of course. Whether it be Beau Brummell spending hours to tie the perfect cravat, or Garbo creating not only an acting style, but, more importantly, a total persona, there is no such thing as instant glamour. Glamour depends on what is withheld, on secrecy, hints, and the hidden. In periods when sexual preferences and behavior were less openly discussed than they are today, this glamour of mystery created an aura of danger, and dangerous fascination.

The elitism of glamour sends a message that we cannot all be glamorous. We can aspire to, but will never reach the stars. The Star is there precisely to remind us of this fact, while beckoning us forward in the hope that we can somehow aspire to the pantheon s/he inhabits: glamour presents itself—disingenuously or not—as divorced from and beyond commerce. It takes itself seriously, is even humorless. And, like fashion, its whole point is its pointlessness.

From one point of view, glamour could be said to have reached a fashion high point with Christian Dior’s New Look and Balenciaga’s sculptural garments in the 1950s. The latter in particular expressed a modernist, minimalist glamour, akin to that of the dandies, perfect, sculptural, the body rigidly encased in its shell.

Yet it was also in the 1950s that glamour began its retreat in the face of celebrity. As consumerism revived after the deprivations of war and the years of austerity, figures such as Princess Margaret, younger sister of the British queen, and the entertainer Liberace aspired to glamour but perhaps achieved celebrity. At the end of the decade, the Kennedys reasserted glamour as an adjunct to power, and the 1960s were more glamorous years than those that had preceded them. The youth music and drug culture had plenty of glamour and tragedy. In Britain the “Moors murderers,” Ian Brady and Myra Hindley, equally aspired

to the glamour of evil—Jeff Nuttall in his account of the decade's counterculture, *Bomb Culture*, certainly saw them as expressing the darkest aspect of the Sixties mood (Nuttall 1970), arguing that they fell (only just) “the wrong side” of the excess of the period and its fascination with “going too far.”

The authors of *Glamour* (Rosa *et al.* 2004: *passim*) see mid-century luxury as formative of glamour and align it with erotic and tactile excess as an antidote to modernism (see also Evans 2003: 111–38, who concurs in relating glamour to luxury and celebrity). At this time, the word glamour, as well as referring to Hollywood and the consumer society, was routinely used as a euphemism for (very) soft porn, the “glamour model” or “glamour photo” being essentially a “scantly clad” pin-up, or her image.¹ Glamour was beginning to be eaten away by vulgarity. For a time it had a symbiotic relationship with the mass media, but eventually the mass media invented celebrity as its democratic alternative.

Today “glamour and celebrity” are routinely yoked together, as though they meant the same thing. Yet, actually, they are polar opposites. Celebrity is all about touch; glamour is untouchable.

Celebrity is open, shameless, vulgar, in-your-face, *nouveau riche*. The feelings elicited by celebrity have more to do with envy, malice, greed, and *Schadenfreude* than with longing, admiration or aspiration. Glamour might elicit hero worship or sadness, celebrity is about horror and excitement—more infantile responses. A celebrity may be someone such as the actor Hugh Grant, whose talent and good looks were tainted by a sordid, yet somehow ridiculous scandal; he was caught with his pants down and so was revealed to have feet (or perhaps nether regions) of clay. Indeed some celebrities are *all* feet of clay. On the other hand, celebrity is democratic; anyone can become a celebrity. And celebrity does contain an element of Rabelaisian humor. Celebrity is *Hello!* to glamour's *Vogue* (although today *Vogue* too has become a celebrity magazine). It depends on total exposure—shameless self-exposure, which divests even quite grotesque acts and “perversions” of any element of genuine danger.

This contrast could be formulated more theoretically. Several fashion theorists have drawn our attention to the increasingly angst-ridden relationship of body and dress. Alexander Warwick and Dani Cavallaro discuss dress as a putative boundary between body and outside world, but fashion continually breaches this boundary, creating an ambivalence and ambiguity about what is seen and what is concealed. The partnership between body and dress is “baffling” and “if the body itself is only uncertainly defined, dress reinforces the fluidity of its frame by raising the ... question: where does the body end and dress begin?” (Warwick and Cavallaro 1998: xvii). These authors draw on Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection. The object consists of aspects of our earliest and most

primitive emotions, and as the infant grows these must be cast away as unacceptable—impossible to assimilate into the maturing ego; however, residues of these early, primitive impulses remain, the abject can never be wholly erased, but remains as “above all the ambiguous, the in-between, that which defies boundaries [and represents] ... disorder, it is a resistance to unity ... and is fundamentally what disturbs identity, system and order” (p. xvi).

The perfection of the dandy or the New Look was an attempt utterly to banish the abject.

Rebecca Arnold has reviewed recent fashions for decadence, “heroin chic,” underwear as outerwear and the cult of brutality and excess, pointing out that (Arnold 2001: 125):

Fashion is no longer concerned with producing only images of perfection that smooth out the reality of the body and the harshness of western capitalist culture. It now encompasses references to death and decay, uncertainty and yearning, in its allusions to the detritus of the city, illuminating the shifting moralities of contemporary existence.

This is another way of approaching the contrast between glamour and what has displaced it.

A similar move might be seen in the work of Cindy Sherman, from her earlier “Untitled” pastiche film stills with young women clad in uncluttered early-1960s chic, to later images of broken bodies lapped in filth and decay. Tracy Emin, whose art is the ultimate example of the aesthetic of the self-revealing abject, has modeled luxury gowns for Vivienne Westwood, reemphasizing the contemporary relationship between fashion and celebrity. Striking as Emin looked in these images, they did not represent a display of perfection, but rather played on the contrast between the triumphant evening dress and what the viewer knows about the life of the model—on one occasion she was photographed as she drunkenly fell over in the gutter as she emerged from a celebrity party in a wonderful couture dress.

It was the late Princess Diana who precipitated the final transformation of glamour into celebrity. She appeared at the start of the 1980s as the very spirit of distant glamour, while at the same time representing the conspicuous consumption of that decade, when the rich grew richer and the poor more desperate. To right-wing triumphalism was added the emergence of the AIDS pandemic, an apocalyptic scenario in which gay men—who had so recently emerged from their closet to create a raucously sexual subculture of hedonism and disco—were immediately struck down by what seemed like an Old Testament revenge. “Inconspicuous consumption” (Lipovetksy 1994) was not yet even a gleam in the eye

of the future; the Eighties was an age of extravagant display (Silverman 1986).

Along with these rather traditional forms of consumer madness, a different underground culture emerged. Gay culture—enamored of celebrity in one version—also took glamour to the wilder edges of danger. In the 1960s, Andy Warhol and his friends had invented new definitions of glamour and consumption at the Factory in Manhattan. This counter-culture displayed not the madness of untrammelled wealth, but the glamour of madness itself. Drag queens on acid, debutantes, outcasts and artists manqué, or not so manqué, dared one another to see how far over the edge they could go. Incandescent moments of crystal meth individualism were worth the price of suicide and psychosis. In any case, perhaps the ultimate drug was simply that: unbridled individualism, swallowed neat. And the attention of an audience: the Factory merged audience and actor to create the sublime experience of a self without boundaries, an ultimate freedom, filmed in movies that lasted for eight hours and in which nothing happened except the spiraling display of excess personality. The shimmering powder of glamour transformed the marginalized and rejected into stars in a parallel universe.

By 1980 the Factory was long gone. But on the Lower East Side the sublime glamour of the outcast continued. A new generation of the lost and self destructive was being memorialized by Nan Goldin in her throbbing colored photographs, all bleeding red, engorged pink, and bruised purple and blue.

Nan Goldin (Goldin *et al.* 1996) photographed her friends. They, like the Factory crowd, were women and men for whom the cruel, yawning gap between artistic aspiration and fame was more often than not filled with addiction and sexual transgression, to which was now added disease: an Eighties glamour verged on the abject. Goldin recorded the semen stains of exhausted sex and her own face bruised by a violent lover. Glamour was becoming infected by self-exposure. These were the martyrs of consumer culture, gorily displaying their wounds, but tragic as their destinies might be, Goldin transforms their suffering into art. Their wounds—and hers—are as clearly made into an aesthetic spectacle as the religious painting of medieval times and the Renaissance in which Saint Sebastian elegantly endures his arrows or Saint Catherine is beautifully broken on the wheel. So here, perhaps, after all, there is a point of comparison with Saint Appollonia.

In 1980s-Britain meanwhile, the club culture of the New Romantics provided an ambiance for similar displays of life as art. Boy George, John Galliano, Steve Strange, Marilyn, and, above all, Leigh Bowery, the culture's high priest, costumed their (then) poverty in costumes that defied nature and biology to create a wholly artificial self, Bowery, a massive Australian, going far beyond gender, let alone mere drag, to transform his being into a parody of glamour that astonished with its effrontery.

At first glance, the aesthetic confrontations of the 1980s might seem to have little to do with Princess Diana. She inhabited a rarefied realm of *haute couture* and royal visitations. Of course, this performance of royalty was (and is) as much a spectacle as Leigh Bowery and Boy George, but the association of Princess Diana's elegance with the British royal family gave it a special aura, and placed it slightly apart. Ironically, the Princess was to play a major part in the dismantling of that special royal-family aura, but in the first years of her marriage, in her initial role as (almost) reigning beauty and ultimate icon of conventional "glamour," Princess Diana lived a life far removed from the Lower East Side or the Camden Town, London, squats of the New Romantics. In 1985, when she took the Reaganocracy by storm on her visit with Prince Charles to the United States, she seemed wholly at one with the glitz of the period. There was nothing, then, to link the Princess with the demi-monde of a rebellious avant-garde on either side of the Atlantic. She was a vision of remote perfection, heightened by the fluctuating mystique of the British royal family, who are always viewed through the double lens of the ordinary/extraordinary. She made the other royals look dowdy, yet the fact that she was royal herself added to the glamour in which herself was arrayed.

From the beginning, however, there were signs that she might transgress the boundaries that guarded her special status, particularly when in the early years of her marriage she made a gesture that was to bring her closer, symbolically at least, to that other society of outcasts and deviants. On a visit to the AIDS ward of a London hospital, she shook hands with an infected patient *without wearing gloves*. Ironically, this gesture, so personal and democratic, also evoked echoes of the ancient magical belief that the monarch's touch can cure incurable illness. This gave her gesture—albeit subliminally—a special significance and almost divine quality, yet at the same time it was a departure from the rigidities of royal protocol and gave notice that she was not going to conform. Hers was the same compassion that Nan Goldin's audience saw in the Lower East Side photographs, a genuine love for the suffering and afflicted, an immersion in their reality. This single gesture might be said to have marked the moment at which the suggestion of magic—with the divine touch—brought her glamour to its highest point; and yet simultaneously the moment at which the shock of the gesture—and its empathy with suffering—tipped her towards celebrity.

As her marriage unraveled the process of Princess Diana's transformation from icon of glamour to suffering celebrity gathered pace. The famous television interview, the stories of bulimia, of bizarre relationships, of the unkindness of her in-laws, fulfilled all the requirements of the celebrity life: that every scrap of dirty linen be washed in public, that the celebrity is a figure to be knocked off her pedestal, that celebrity suffering is actually a baby's howl of Me! Me! Me!

The role played by fashion in celebrity culture is very different from its role in the creation of glamour. In celebrity culture, conspicuous consumption rules. Fashion departs finally from any pretension towards art or even beauty and becomes largely a matter of branding, money, megaphoned sex appeal, and labels. Today, "glamour" merely "alludes to a potent combination of sex appeal, luxury, celebrity and wealth" (Rosa *et al.* 2004: 25).

This moves "glamour" so far from its original meaning as to become meaningless. Caroline Evans has written of the "dark glamour" of Alexander McQueen's catwalk shows in the last years of the twentieth century, which resurrected a different, truer meaning for glamour (Evans 2001), but, in general, celebrity has more to do with competitive conformity than individualism. Everyone must join the queue for a Birkin bag, and if you cannot afford an original, there will be plenty of copies at every price range.

The latest example of the way in which fashion has been suffocated by celebrity is the way in which the scramble for status symbols turned Roland Mouret's "Galaxy" dress into a must-have for every film star. With its Fifties allure, square-cut portrait neckline, tight-fitting body, and below-the-knee hem, it was a pastiche of a postwar Hollywood look; but instead of each individual film star arrayed in a green, blue, black or plaid check version, you see only the dress—the women are virtually interchangeable. This is the polar opposite of glamour, of an age when a fashionable woman would rather die than be seen in a dress identical with anyone else's. Now there is no individuality; the story of the dress was not even about the women wearing it; it was about Mouret's abrupt departure from his label, having fallen out with his backers.

The avant-garde designer Hussein Chalayan has bemoaned the symbiosis of fashion and celebrity, saying that it should not be like that. Unfortunately, as he acknowledged, it is. However, he is right that celebrity has essentially nothing to do with fashion and certainly nothing to do with glamour. Celebrity itself is mass manufactured, whereas Brummell had no stylists or PR personnel to promote his "image." It was for this reason that it was original and that he was able to create a fashion that, with rather minor changes, has lasted for two centuries.

Glamour is primarily an attribute of an individual. It is an *appearance*, including the supernatural, magical sense of that word—as in apparition. The appearance of glamour resides, though, or is created in combination with dress, hair, scent, and even *mise en scène*. Its end result is the sheen, the mask of perfection, the untouchability and numinous power of the *icon*.

Celebrity deconstructs all this, displays everything in bits, the inside, the mess, the clothes apart from the person, the naked greed, the genuine suffering, the painful excess. The celebrity is desperate for our attention.

That is why she can never be glamorous. For true glamour is expressed in Garbo's pose of icy indifference, so let her have the last word: "I want to be alone."

Note

1. When I undertook a word search in the British Library catalog the great majority of titles that came up were of this kind—photographic volumes of posed, semi-clad "glamour models."

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