

the exoskeleton of glamour essay by matilda lin berke

An exoskeleton is the outer covering of a body: typically rigid but not always, composed of calcium carbonate (a constituent element of limestone and marble) or chitin (a complex network of sugars). It functions as both structure and interface: the essential form, the mode of protection, and the signaling mechanism by which a creature encounters the world. Think of the shell of the snail, the carapace of the beetle, or the armor of the crab. There are all kinds of functional and decorative containers. Glamour is an exoskeleton for the extravagant human self: a framework, a tectonic shell built from the inside out. Like its parallel biological forms, it defines the soft flesh it surrounds and protects.

Though some exoskeletons are routinely shed, others grow via the addition of consecutive layers: the accretive experience of the subject. The lips of geisha are painted increasingly red in direct correlation with age, though the rest of their make-up fades as they mature into seasoned *geiko*. Geisha traditionally entertained by candlelight; their iconic *oshiroi* (white powder) was designed for poetic atmospheric conditions that maximize elegance, charm, and beauty. To achieve the ceramic quality upon which *oshiroi* depends, geisha pave over their pores with malleable wax, effectively sealing off the skin below. The soft resultant surface is then shaped and embellished like a vase. These matte porcelain faces – ubiquitous among *maiko*, apprentices learning to embody the image of their art and profession – function as glamorous exoskeletons.

As organisms adapt inside their environments, exoskeletal building blocks evolve alongside their world. The shells become stronger. In John Galliano's Spring/Summer 2024 Margiela presentation, the make-up artist Pat McGrath conceptually extended *oshiroi* into the contemporary cosmopolitan ideal of “glass skin.” Instead of using wax as a base – which softens in response to warmth – McGrath painted the faces of the models before lacquering them, freezing their features in place as more extreme, doll-like living objects beneath flawless, vitrified carapaces.

Glamour is often an uncomfortable garment. In the glossy, paranoid, rapacious 1980s, think of the character from the film *American Psycho* (2000), Patrick Bateman, sealed inside competitive corporate masculinity – tailored triangular Italian suits and a meticulous “wellness” regimen that makes him as smooth as the walls of his office. Or remember, in *Heathers* (1988), apex predator Heather Chandler spitting at her post-blowjob reflection in the mirror. In Chandler's high school environment, her powdered face and her blouse buttoned to the top beneath the clean lines of a plaid blazer produce an impenetrable, tanklike armor. In a new ecosystem dominated by powerful men, her exoskeleton wilts into a sweetheart neckline; she is exposed.

Not that naked skin is inherently unglamorous. Consider the faces of reality TV stars, tech billionaires, or prominent talking heads: high performers in brutal, hostile, accelerationist climates. When enhanced surgically or otherwise – the taut vinylic “expression” of a Kardashian or the implacable androidal sheen of a Silicon Valley “biohacker” – skin itself hardens. In survivalist arenas of martial specialization, shells become bombshells: less expressive, more plastic, ballistic, often lethal. Here the exoskeleton functions as a display of power, a warning signal. These are glamorous, technologically optimized super-predators.

Before there were androids, there were machine girls. Before there were machine girls, there were the chimeras of ancient myth.

Thierry Mugler intimately understood this lineage of hybrid forms: the glamorous exoskeleton flaunts itself across all of his signature exaggerated silhouettes. Corsetry is the most literal application of external boning. Mugler's Spring 1997 models stalked the runway as metallic insects with geisha-like faces partially hidden under gauzes, fringed headpieces, and goggles suggestive of bug eyes, car headlights, or the designer's own motorcycle bustier from his “*Les Cowboys*” collection (Spring 1992).

The animated *Ghost in the Shell* (1995) similarly anticipates fusion with advanced digital technologies; while the eponymous “ghost” and “shell” represent the mind and body, the film deconstructs this dichotomy as it applies to androids, cyborgs, and unmodified humans alike. Though Major Motoko Kusanagi's memories could be as synthetic as the rest of her, our hero is a presumably organic consciousness housed in a human-shaped robot. Her anatomy is optimized for military enforcement (and, to some extent, viewing pleasure); her glamorous exoskeleton – shell, weapon, and protective illusion – renders her almost completely untouchable. When she engages her thermo-optical camouflage capacity, she blends into the texture of her city. Major Kusanagi is destroyed at the end of the film. Her new shell, the mechanical android body of a young girl, houses a hybrid of her original spirit (the ineffable sum of her individual experiences and principles) and the “consciousness” of her erstwhile AI enemy. She becomes her own cyborg child. Her exoskeleton has adapted to mirror her biological imperative to win.

For the endoskeletal subject, the glamorous exoskeleton appears like a mask. Of course, the exoskeleton is more than a mechanism of control, communication, or camouflage; the ossified skin, the beautified face, or the costume – these are but specific types of the form. The shell is a repository informatic matrix, a system of engaging edges, the outline where a creature meets the external conditions of ecology and history. It is fundamentally oppositional to the rapid economy of copies and convenience. Encased in the armor of glamour is the ghost of the self, the true interior spirit – of you.

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