

The Essence of Fetishism

By Nello Barile

<http://www.Ocula.it>

A few terms can clearly evoke, at a time, such dispersed conceptions, atmospheres and practices, in time and space. Images of ancient cults, first industrialization landscapes, epistemic stirrings, personal perversions, subcultural ritualisms, pornographic fruitions, evangelizations of consumption, and in the end the triumph of a planetary aestheticism supported by the major fashion brands. That is what fetishism is about, but it deals with a semantic verbosity which outdoes the cognitive skills of individuals who have to appeal to a stereotypical form in order to reduce the complexity of the phenomenon. Even science, which usually transforms words of common use in functioning concepts, had to deal with this problematic issue, banishing it to the sphere of perversion, in terms of a value of "normality" both indefinite and relative. This was the situation until a corpus of cultural studies started to consider it as a spread phenomenon, emancipated from its previous pathological and sectorial classification.

That is why we need an Italian translation of a deep, serious, but also clear and immediate study, which can shed a light on such a versatile term and fully analyze its inmost meanings in order to shatter the pall formed by the stereotypes that surrounds this issue.

The theories which have contributed to demonize this concept are the starting point of Valerie Steele's analysis. According to Steele, Marxism and psycho-analysis – and we could add Positivism as well – have strengthened, in many different ways, a negative idea of fetishism in public general perception. Formulating a principle of sciences' classification, inscribed in the famous law of the three stages, Comte claimed that fetishism was the oldest practice of the latest stage; basically a repugnance which needed to mark out the West supremacy on the native cultures. Moreover, the term derives from the word "feiticos" (Volli, 1997), which was used during the fifteenth century by the Portuguese colonizers to indicate the practices of Guinea populations hinged around the use of inanimate objects such as tufts of hair, fragments of bones, dried bodies, etc. But it was only with the publication of De Brosses' book (1760) that the term finally entered the vocabulary of the European scientific reflection.

Afterwards, in order to stigmatize what was considered to be the most innovative phenomenon of the industrial modernity, Marx's reading has put aside the ethnographic ideal rooted in this concept: the "commodity fetishism" is the marker of a bad class conscience that does not recognize itself and therefore yields to the seductive power of commodities, in order to turn into a structured public through the regulation of spaces of consumption (Abruzzese, 1973).

By contrary, Freud indicated fetishism as determined by an opposite movement, by an act of symbolization which shielded from the castration threat, a sort of amulet, inheritance of childish fantasies on women penis in men's mind.

When we come to give a modern definition of fetishism two other dimensions which have played a key role in society, particularly in the mediatic imagery, need to be considered: eroticism and pornography. Already with Bataille's testimony, eroticism classifies itself as a ritual placed on the borderline with religion and death, or better "assenting to life up to the point of death" (Bataille, 1957, p.13). Erotic is an act of symbolization constantly referred to something else. A significant that brings desire into action, assuring the access to another Self, to a deep truth, starting from tracks of superficial indications. Erotic is always a metaphor that stirs up for the unsaid, for the undisclosed.

On the other hand pornography expresses a more analytical inclination. Avoiding any ritual in order to achieve its aim, it destroys the erotic power of the veil and keeps on seeking proof, demonstration, and action. The sexual performance is then marked by two key aspects: the immediate activation of desire and the technical efficiency of its staging (Breton, 1995). It is an almost scientist vocation which uses the technique and the video instruments to reveal what in reality is not manifest.

Pornography, in an opposite sense, adds a dimension to the space of sex, it makes the latter more real than the real – and this accounts for its absence of seduction (...). We can see it closer, we can perceive what has never been seen (...) through the effect of the anatomic zoom, the dimension of the real is abolished, the distance of the glance gives way to

an immediate and exasperated representation: that is the one of pure sex, the end of perspectival space, and therefore, that of the imaginary and of fantasy – end of the scene, end of illusion (Baudrillard, 1979, pp. 37-38).

As the subatomic physics, indeed, in order to give back an altered, alienated and, sometimes parodic, image of the sexual act, which zeros the enchanting fascination of the illusion, it distorts the object individualized at the rate of the Rutherford's tube.

If eroticism is metaphoric and pornography is analytical, we can claim fetishism is mostly metonymical (Lai, 1995). Differing from metaphor, metonymy cancels any distinction between the element and the system as a whole in which it is placed, between sign and symbol, between meaning and significant, being thereby more useful than the metaphor to explain a wide range of contemporary socio-cultural transformations (Canevacci, 2004). Metonymy is the substitution between an abstract term and a tangible act – the two of them being in a relation of causality or contiguity – and vice versa.

We also need to highlight similarities among fetishism and the other two terms of this issue. It shares with eroticism the inclination to hide sex, the wait that is, in this case, an end in itself, the adoration for the veil which is not interposed between the desire and the action, but it's itself an action. With pornography, instead, fetishism shares the pleasure for the fragment, for the decontextualization of the sexual act, that is not hinged around the genitals but that spots other peripheral elements or body surrogates, which are essential for the satisfaction of the instinct.

The objects of fetishism

We could even reason in terms of a metonymical channel that links the two degrees in the immediacy of the fetishistic act. Just a bidirectional channel in which a double transformation occurs. On the one hand, it overloads with symbolic values¹ marginal sexually elements of the human body or objects that can be as unusual, therefore close to the sphere of

¹ According to Freud, this act represents a point of meeting between the "normal" sex and the inverted one.

sexuality, as banal. On the other hand, it concretizes, through performative practices of its members, some layered mental categories of the imaginary that often tend to diffuse the signs of power.

On one side, we find feet, legs, hairs, etc, or corsets, shoes, high heels, zips and laces becoming the final target of the sexual act. On the other side, we have clothing related to multiple social categories, such, for instance, army, nuns, firemen etc. which reify, instead, abstracts contents in concrete situations where libido is directed to.

If the first practice can be referable to the Freudian concept of the pansexual placement of the social reality, the second one will be closer to the Marxian thought of alienation, which is why a sort of commodification of soul categories would occur. These two procedures have anticipated, much in theory as in practice, the sex appeal of the inorganic psyché out by Walter Benjamin (1962) and then got back by Perniola (1994) to indicate a way of feeling highly developed during the Nineties, which has worked on the border between nature and culture, reporting much of the neoanimism as of the process, even more radical (than the Marxian perspective), of the body commodification.

A glut of elements that people our experience and deal with conscious mind and unconscious and ancestral fears. Watching attentively, the inmost essence of fetishism is revealed when it is denoted in a negative sense and addressed to inanimate objects, such as the mutilations described by Steele: a **mentalization** of the world originated from a lack, which induces the subject to exceed the partial significant choosing another one that refers, through a chain of metonymic associations, to the primary need of the fusion with the mother (Lacan, 1972). It is a process that can also deal with the surroundings worlds in the same way as the subject gets excited only in particular places or, better, within particular states of mind (for instance, sex in elevator).

Fetishism, then, works as a switcher between the imaginary of an age and the sexual practices referred to it. Tensions, towards a whole of symbolic worlds that can be both generalist and partial, are condensed in the costume. These worlds are presented in contemporary terms through

the use of proper roles games, which make come true a series of virtual images, preserved in the common memory.

The variety of fetishist manifestations are classified through sublevels – such as “anti-conformist”, “identificationists”, “masochists” (Ibid. Cap. III) – whose just a few examples regard pathological behaviours. Thanks to the authoress, the most “bizarre” and “picturesque” manifestations and also the most awful ones, which, in rare cases, have led to the suicidal psychosis, have been considered.

Fetish as streetstyle

Since their early stage Cultural Studies have focused on the ways through which the objects and the practices of consumption constituted areas of comparison among oppositional powers. These were interpreted in terms of relations of power between a hegemonic pattern and a subcultural subalternity which defined itself in opposition to the cultural mainstream.

This theme has become ripe with Hebdige’s work (1979) that highlighted how, in particular situations, the objects can be the focus of power’s employ and its denial. So, through its symbolic power, a tube of Vaseline, a homosexuality symbol according to Jean Genet, can condense the structures of cultural alterity and social subalternity, turning into an identifiable defence against the humiliations and the blows of the jailors who imprisoned the author in a sort of “voluntary exile” which has marked the style of subcultures. Inscribing fetishism in the particular phenomenon of subcultures would be, nonetheless, restrictive. Although some extreme practices as the “*tight-lacing*” derive from the nineteenth-century spread of corsets, Steele polemizes with journalists who depicted fetishism as a constitutive aspect of the Victorian Age, highlighting how this latter was a fantasy of the early twentieth century “enthusiasts” who portrayed that era as the “golden age”.

While the “enthusiasts” had to hide their predispositions through metalanguage that rendered them mutually recognizable, still hidden from the common sanction, the street style proudly expressed the signs of deviance in order to claim their typical radical diversity. This sensitiveness

has marked all subcultures' history, in fact the distinctive elements of fetishism – from leather to brooches, from chains to fur – belong to this inheritance. Although some youth culture icons, such as Lambretta, jeans and motorcyclist boots, can fall under this meaning, it's only in the '70s that fetishism becomes a sort of manifesto, which has excessively connoted the subcultures identity.

In the early seventies the glam emerged rocking the public opinion asserting a series of androgynous subjects that played with the idea of extraterrestrial, meant as a sign of radical alterity, like it was for Bowie's Ziggy Stardust. Its supporters wore strongly theatrical dresses which have deeply influenced designers such as Thierry Mugler (Goreman, 2001).

Denying the pop and spectacular mood of fetishism, the punk, as a "distorted effect" of previous subcultures, has got back some elements of glam's fetishism. The use of Borroughsian cut up in fashion language, the punk has produced a reluctant style which juxtaposed heterogeneous elements, both aulic and decayed. Among its many declinations, a Bondage sensitiveness for strings, studs and chains which express an erotic appeal of a sadomasochist mould for the use of power and devotion, that back then left his mark on creatives such as Karl Lagerfeld and photographers like Helmut Newton (Steele, 2000). An aesthetics, which dethroned the signs of power instead of denying them.

This original root was developed by the post-punk in different ways. Employing the neoromantic imaginary of the night shaped by dark lady, vampire and nightly creatures costumes through the totalizing use of black which, insists on death's erotic charm, it answered to the nihilism and the spleen of that specific youth. Showing a provoking and promiscuous sexual image with sharp irony, the psychobilly has remixed the stylistics degeneration of punk with rock' n' roll roots, through bands such as The Cramps. The pervs Polhemus, 1994) strongly concerned in creating an extreme look which winks to the new materials used in the '60s fashion – especially PVC – perform in dedicated nights such as the one of Skin two in Soho. Watching attentively, the dilution of the idea of fetishism, in everyday practice, corresponds to the dissolution of the subcultural physical boundaries. It is then claiming an aesthetic practice of a spontaneous or forced alterity, unhooked from the other elements that are coherently

related to the subcultural homological universe, which can easily be drawn out from that symbolic system to get to the mainstream's surface. That is how fetishism, starting from being an initial sign of personal perversion, turned into a symbol of subaltern diversity, which exceeds its boundaries and is absorbed by cultural industry, specifically by photography, cinema, advertising and fashion.

Fetish as mainstream

Cultural studies have recently constituted, through highly specialized research fields, several readings within which fashion studies have developed a contemporary sensitiveness, as "an integral part of the urban cultural studies, that states their strong compromise with the actuality of class, race and gender issues" (Colaiacomo, 2002, p.15). Authors like Valerisìe Steele, Richard Matin, Harold Koda, Margeret Wilson, Ted Polhemus, Diane Crane have studied in depth a theme which frequently questioned the relation between subculture and fashion. The interpretation of fashion phenomena as deformed reflection of the genuine ideas spontaneously born on the street has been deeply influenced by the heritage of Cultural Studies. That's why compared to the so called fetish fashion, which since the '80s was successful on the catwalks, the so called Bubbling Up mechanism seems to fit (Polhemus, 1994) and to describe the spread of the trends from narrow, emarginated and subaltern contexts towards the core of the production system. Even in some fetishists' testimonies of the early twentieth century we find the strong value of cultural authenticity that marked off this trend that referred to the rhetorical popular culture in order to reach its authenticity that was the source for its legitimatìon. This practice was even more marginalised, turning itself into a sort of sectarian cult, when with the beginning of the new century some Haute Couture's diktat imposed themselves – such as the Poiret neoclassical style that banned the corsets in 1907. since then fashion has sporadically sponged on this imaginary. From Ferragamo's shoes to the New Look which in its own way gave new birth to the "vitino di vespa". And even more in the sixties modernism, when new materials, from vinyl to PVC imposed an

appeal to the artificial which turned into catwomen suits, inspired by the serial *The Avengers*, or into Rabanne's metal dresses which represented " a real ode to the lack of comfort" (Kamitsis, 1998, p.19). but the methodical integration of the fetish into the logics of the system occurred as soon as the street styles, which interpreted and treasured these aesthetics, totally come to the surface of the mainstream and bring them into the creative processes of fashion companies. Designers following the trend of punk began in the eighties to create collections marked by this trend. Mugler brought to the extreme that relation between fetishism and street styles, working mainly on the bikers devoted to their bikes. Gaultier, beside the famous girdle designed for Madonna, insisted in many occasions on the ideal of the amazon in which the designer sees the "spirit of a resolution without prejudice and of an aggressive volitionality (...) that attacks and unsaddles Achilles of the West from his own functions of captive fighter" (Semeraro, 2002-2003). A project of reification of epic and mythological categories, filtered through the imaginary of youth rebellion in order to get a new meaning. Even Versace did not escape from this trend, creating a pair of gladiators' boots for women that seal "a return to the Roman age and the romance, to a world where women overcome men's power" (Martin, 1997, p.6). A process which in the nineties involves both Prada's suits and the design of new brands such as Extè, that from luxury prêt à porter falls back to less exclusive segments of the market through the always more loyal "translation" of the original creation of the **ready-to-wear** fashion companies. To the extent where fashion as a whole becomes fetishism, thanks to a process of functionalization of deviance (Barile, 2001) which transformed this way of feeling into a key element of contemporary imaginary.

In order to grasp the meaning of the shift of particular expressive forms from the street to the catwalk, we need to add a third component to the former mentioned dynamics of the metonymical channel. The transformation of the imaginary contexts into objects provided with a sexual appeal and vice versa, the sexual symbolization of trivial elements is put into a symbolic and economic exchange that is mostly expressed through the brand concept. The brand is a device which at same time supplies a soul addition (Semprini, 19995) to the everyday life objects and

assures the communicative coherence through which a whole of abstract meanings, sourced from the imaginary, can be spread through clothes and mostly accessories. It is thereby true claiming that the brand reinvents the contexts socially created by life forms within its fields (Codeluppi, 1994), but it is also true that it can be conceived as a contraction, as a an imaginary wrinkling which modifies it, getting back to it. The power of brand is the drive of the socialization of the fetish aesthetics that proves how the major firms and the international brands use of the fetish stylistic elements is far more complex than the "Bubbling Up" pattern could explain.

In the end, this book achieves a work of transitive valorization in the research fields that it deals with. Analysing the psycho-analytical research results from von Krafft-Ebing to Freud, it underlines their limits, as far as they consider fetishism as a phenomenon related to narrow groups or to particular kinds of subjects. Secondly, widening this category to a larger domain of objects and practices, it highlights its cultural value in western modernity (that is how we get back to the initial Comtian paradox of distinction: fetishism is at the same time estrangement from the primitive and a marker line of the modern). Thirdly, discovering the drive of the normalization and spread of fetishists practices in the relation between fashion and subcultural styles, it gives an extraordinary social relevance to these fields of cultural production.

Abruzzese, A., 1973, *Forme estetiche e società di massa*, Venezia, Marsilio

Barile, N., 2001, "Communifashion", in Abruzzese, A., e Barile N., a cura, *Communifashion. Sulla moda, della comunicazione*, Roma, Sossella

Barile, N., 2005, *Manuale di sociologia, comunicazione e cultura della moda*, Vol. II, Roma, Meltemi

Bataille G., 1957, *L'erotisme*, Paris, Le Editions de minuit, trad. it., 1991, *L'erotismo*, Milano, ES

Baudrillard, J., 1979, *De la séduction*, Paris, Galilée, trad. it, 1997, *Della seduzione*, Milano, SE

Benjamin, W., 1962, *Angelus novus*, Torino, Einaudi

- Breton, P., 1992, *L'utopie de la communication*, Paris, Editions La Découverte, trad. it., *L'utopia della comunicazione*, Torino, UTET
- De Brosses, C. *Del culto degli dei feticci o parallelo della antica religione d'Egitto con l'attuale versione dei negri*,
- Calefato P., 1999b, *Moda, corpo, mito*, Roma, Castelvecchi
- Canevacci, M., *Sincretismi*, Genova, Costa&Nolan, 2004
- Colaiacomo, P., 2002, "Introduzione" a, P. Colaiacomo, V. Caratozzolo, *mercanti di stile*, Roma, Editori riuniti
- Codeluppi, V., 2004, "introduzione" a, Barile, N., *Fenomenologia del consumo globale*, Roma, Edizioni interculturali
- Goreman, P., *The look*, 2001, Sanctuary Publishing Limited, London, trad. it., 2001, *Look. Avventure della moda nel pop-rock*, Roma, Arcana
- Kamistis, L., 1998, *Paco Rabanne*, Firenze, Octavo-Franco Contini Editore
- Lacan, J., 1972, *Scritti*, Torino, Einaudi
- Lai, G. P., 1995, "Feticcio e feticismo", in *Rivista di sessuologia*, Vol. 15, n. 3, luglio-settembre
- Martin, R., 1997, *Versace*, Firenze, Octavo – Franco Cantini Editore
- Polhemus, T., 1994, *Streetstyle. From sidewalk to catwalk*, London, Thames and Hudson
- Semeraro, A., "Regine cannibali, passioni scomunicanti" in *Quaderno di comunicazione*, anno III, 2002-2003, n. 3
- Semprini, A., 1995, *La marque*, Paris, Press Univesitaire de France, trad it., 2003, *La marca*, Milano, Lupetti
- Steele, V., 1997, *Fetish: Fashion, Sex and Power*, Oxford University Press Inc.
- Steele, V., 2000, *Fifty Years of Fashion: New Look to Now*, Yale University Press
- Volli, U., 1997, *Fascino. Feticismo e altre idolatrie*, Milano, Feltrinelli