

Chapter Title: Fetishism in Theory: Marx, Freud, Baudrillard

Book Title: Feminizing the Fetish

Book Subtitle: Psychoanalysis and Narrative Obsession in Turn-of-the Century France

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Published by: Cornell University Press. (1991)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctt207g6z5.4>

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CHAPTER 1

· Fetishism in Theory: Marx, Freud, Baudrillard

· In his discussion of commodity fetishism, Karl Marx spoke of an object's hidden value—its fetish character—as a “secret”: “Value, therefore, does not stalk about with a label describing what it is. It is value, rather, that converts every product into a social hieroglyphic. Later on, we try to decipher the hieroglyphic, to get behind the secret of our own social products; for to stamp an object of utility as a value, is just as much a social product as language.”¹ Marx's conception of the fetish as socioeconomic hieroglyphic and opaque verbal sign emerged, in the course of my writing, as curiously compatible with Freud's sense of the strangeness of fetish consciousness: a state of mind divided between the reality of noncastration and the fear of it all the same. Both enigmas, in turn, seemed to arrange themselves around a “third term.” Michel Leiris (distilling his impressions of Giacometti's neoprimitivist sculptural artifacts) identified his own embattled, Eurocentric fetishism—that mimetic “objectivized form of our desire”—with an ethnopsychiatric condition of “affective ambivalence”:

· I love Giacometti's sculpture because everything he makes is like the petrification of one of these crises, the intensity of a chance event swiftly caught and immediately frozen, the stone stele telling its tale. And there's nothing deathlike about this sculpture; on the contrary, like the

1. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling, ed. Frederick Engels (New York: Modern Library, 1906), p. 85. Further references to this work will be abbreviated *C*.

real fetishes we idolize (real fetishes, meaning those that resemble us and are objectivized forms of our desire) everything here is prodigiously alive—graciously living and strongly shaded with humor, nicely expressing that affective ambivalence, that tender sphinx we nourish, more or less secretly, at our core.²

Where the “secret” joins the “strange,” and the “strange” encounters that “affective ambivalence, that tender sphinx we nourish, more or less secretly, at our core,” is precisely the nonlocatable spot where these investigations theoretically and methodologically situate themselves.

In his chapter on fetishism and ideology in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, Jean Baudrillard characterized the term *fetishism* as almost having “a life of its own.” “Instead of functioning as a metalanguage for the magical thinking of others,” he argued, “it turns against those who use it, and surreptitiously exposes their own magical thinking.”³ Baudrillard here identifies the uncanny retroactivity of fetishism as a theory, noting its strange ability to hex the user through the haunting inevitability of a “deconstructive turn.”

Neither Marx nor Freud managed to escape the return of the repressed fetish. Freud endowed the fetish of the (castrated) maternal phallus with an animus when he wrote: “It seems rather that when the fetish comes to life, so to speak, some process has been suddenly interrupted—it reminds one of the abrupt halt made by memory in traumatic amnesias.”⁴ Marx, endeavoring in *Capital* to define the commodity fetish, lures the reader into a labyrinth of discomfiting allusions. “A commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood,” he began, only to retract: “Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties” (C 81). The same paragraph ends on an even more “fantastic” note, when an ordinary table, transformed into a commodity, “evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than ‘table-turning’” (C 82). If here the metaphor is table-turning, later the mysterious value of the fetish commodity floats before the eye like

2. Michel Leiris, “Alberto Giacometti,” *Documents* 1, no. 4 (1929): 209; trans. James Clifford in *Sulfer*, no. 15 (1986): 39.

3. Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, trans. Charles Levin (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1981), p. 90.

4. Sigmund Freud, “Fetishism” (1927), in *Standard Edition* 21:149. Further references to this work will be abbreviated “F.”

an apparition. After constructing an optical analogy for the relation between man and commodity, Marx advises “recourse to the mist-enveloped regions of the religious world” (C 83). Alternately confusing and conflating appearance and reality, *Eidos* and materialism; alienation and belief, Marx, according to W. J. T. Mitchell, “disabled” his discourse through the very master tropes that gave his arguments the power to imprint themselves on the political unconscious.⁵ The *camera obscura* was his preferred figure for ideology, and fetishism his preferred figure for commodities, but the two terms were frequently “crossed,” for as Mitchell points out, both signify false images, with the former connoting an “idol of the mind” and the latter, in Francis Bacon’s wording, an “idol of the marketplace.” At some level, these idols become indistinguishable, rendering commodities dangerously interchangeable with the “true” currency of ideas. Mirroring each other as “icons” of illusion, both tropes, according to Mitchell, ultimately subvert their author’s attempt at demystification. “Ideology and fetishism,” he ascertains, “have taken a sort of revenge on Marxist criticism, insofar as it has made a fetish out of the concept of fetishism, and treated ‘ideology’ as an occasion for the elaboration of a new idealism.”⁶

Now even if we disagree with Mitchell’s conclusion that Marxist criticism has reified the elements of its own theory or allowed fetishism to masquerade as demystification, it does seem true that within contemporary discourse a kind of fetishism of fetishism is in the air. And this hypertrophic character is hardly confined to Marxist usage; it seems, as Baudrillard suggests, endemic to fetishism’s history as a metaphysical construct.

In what follows, I want to examine briefly the history of fetishism as a theory, emphasizing (1) its simultaneous critique of and implication in the very sociosymbolic phenomena that it seeks to unveil (from commodification to castration anxiety), (2) its importance as a specular meeting point for psychoanalytic and materialist discourses, and (3) its implications for a radical theoretical praxis in the domain of contemporary aesthetic production.

In the course of its etymological life from its Chaucerian prehistory to its post-Enlightenment usage in the twentieth century, the word *fetisso* and its phonological cognates have provoked a chain of

5. W. J. T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 163 in particular, but in general the entire chapter titled “The Rhetoric of Iconoclasm: Marxism, Ideology, and Fetishism,” pp. 160–208.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 163.

divergent interpretations, all generated according to the codes of a romance linguistics forced to accept the untranslatable Other into its thoroughly Western genealogy. Used in the eighteenth century by Charles de Brosses (dubbed “the little fetish” for his pains by Voltaire) to describe the idolatrous worship of material objects in “primitive” societies, the term was traced to *fatum*, signifying both fate and charm. A century later the British ethnologist Edward Tylor derived the term from a different though related root (*factitius*), comprising both the “magic arts” and the “work of art.”⁷ The Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, following Marx (fetishism of commodities as false consciousness) and Freud (the fetish as spurious, surrogate object of desire), deduced from the Latin *facere* neither charm nor beauty but rather the degraded simulacrum or false representation of things sacred, beautiful, or enchanting.⁸

Though a semantic disjunction clearly emerges each time the word *fetishism* is displaced from language to language, discipline to discipline, and culture to culture, it is precisely this process of creative mistranslation that endows the term with its value as currency of literary exchange, as verbal token. Thus the word *charme*, a favored key word of Mallarmé and Valéry commonly used to denote the incantatory power of music (*carmen*: psalm, oracle, sacred song), was seen as the carrier of an authenticated neoprimitivism, a sign linking symbolism to an exotic repertory of votive objects including the *gri-gri*, the *juju* or the *phiphob*. Like a good-luck charm or native artifact offered to the European traveler, the verbal fetish, surrounded by an aura of otherness, was aestheticized by the French poets of the turn of the century from Stéphane Mallarmé to Victor Segalen and Guillaume Apollinaire. As *fetys*, “well-made, beautiful,” the fetish emerged as a catalyst of symbolist artifice; as *fatum*, or fateful chance, it recalled the master narratives of shipwreck, solitude, and confrontation between civilized and “savage mind” from *Robinson Crusoe* to “Un coup de dés”; and as “Christs of another form, another belief, inferior Christs of obscure wishes” in Apollinaire’s poem “Zone” (1912), it became a protosurrealist icon, mediating between urban anomie and a “phantom Africa.”⁹

The literary history of fetishism may reveal a discursive pattern

7. Edward Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, 2 vols. (New York: Brentano’s, 1924), 2:143–59.

8. Giorgio Agamben, *Stanze*, trans. Yves Hersant (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1981), pp. 69–71. See also part 2, chaps. 1, 2, 3, and 5, for discussion of fetishism in Marx and Baudelaire.

9. See Michel Leiris, *L’Afrique fantôme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1981).

of difference, but its philosophical history deconstructs in the form of a rhetorical chiasmus. William Pietz has given us the most historically nuanced account of the philosophical fetish, which, he argues, points to the “emerging articulation of a theoretical materialism quite incompatible and in conflict with the philosophical tradition.”¹⁰ Following his scheme, one sees that from Kant (fetishism as a degraded sublime, a “trifle”) and Hegel (fetishism as a “factitious universal,” an unmediated particular) to Whitehead (“a fallacy of misplaced concreteness”) and Heidegger (an *Ereignis*, an Appropriation), fetishism has been portrayed as theoretically worthless.¹¹ As a word, it was not even admitted into the French language by the Académie Française until 1835. But it is just this quantity of negative value that ultimately enables fetishism to undermine monolithic belief structures from Christianity and Enlightenment philosophy to the “rational” laws of capitalist exchange. For example, the Portuguese trading word *fetisso* stood not just for the native idol but also for the “small wares” or trinkets that European merchants used for barter or upon which they would swear an oath to honor a commercial transaction. According to William Pietz, these trading rituals inevitably led to “a perversion of the natural processes of economic negotiation and legal contact. Desiring a clean economic interaction, seventeenth-century merchants unhappily found themselves entering into social relations and quasi-religious ceremonies that should have been irrelevant to the conduct of trade.”¹² Pietz implies that Africa perverted Western capitalism (forcing it to adopt the superstitious worship of material objects) just as European capitalists perverted indigenous economics through exploitation. One may further deduce from this historico-philosophical chiasmus two central consequences: first, that the “civilized” mimesis of “primitive” object worship was only the explicit acting out of Europe’s own (masked) commodity fetishism; and second, that almost as a result of Europe’s initial contempt for “tribal” artifacts, the exotic fetish “returned” to Continental shores,

10. William Pietz, “The Problem of the Fetish, I,” *Res* 9 (Spring 1985): 6. I am deeply indebted to William Pietz’s brilliant work on fetishism. Our discussions have nourished and influenced many of the arguments put forward in this book. This and its companion piece, “The Problem of the Fetish, II,” *Res* 13 (Spring 1987): 23–45, offer an invaluable synthesis of fetishism’s etymological ambiguities as well as its inner contradictions as a cross-disciplinary critical discourse. See also “The Problem of the Fetish IIIa,” *Res* 16 (Autumn 1988): 105–23.

11. See Pietz, “The Problem of the Fetish, I,” pp. 6–9, 14.

12. Pietz, “The Problem of the Fetish, II,” p. 45.

where it was henceforth recommodified as art. Developing these points, and insisting on the irrecoverably “savage” nature of the African *feitico*, V. Y. Mudimbe has seen the history of the aestheticization of the fetish from its “culturally neutral” origins as a curio collected by the trader-observer in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, to its gradual mystification as “strange and ugly artifact,” as an unregenerate example of Europe’s notion of African art.¹³

Pierre Loti’s *Le Roman d’un spahi* (The novel of a colonial conscript; 1881) provides an exemplary illustration of Mudimbe’s argument in its coded framing of Europe’s racist, exoticist construction of the African fetish. The novel recounts the story of a French soldier posted in Senegal who, having “gone native” (donning the Muslim fez, living with a black concubine), is rudely recalled to his European origins when his mistress secretly sells his watch in exchange for “worthless” *pacotille* (shoddy goods). Described as a crude silver watch to which he was as attached as Fatou was to her amulets, the spahi’s paternal heirloom is guarded in a “boîte aux fétiches” (fetish box), thus emphasizing the cross-cultural transference of fetishisms that has occurred. But the lesson of this episode rides on its revelation that such transferees are nothing other than a concession to barbarism. Black fetishes, in a picturesque market scene, are presented as profanations of Western sacred objects:

- Marchandes de poisson salé, marchandes de pipes, marchandes de tout;—marchandes de vieux bijoux, de vieux pagnes crasseux et pouilleux, sentant le cadavre;—de beurre de Galam pour l’entretien crépu de la chevelure;—de vieilles petites queues, coupées ou arrachées sur des têtes de négresses mortes, et pouvant resservir telles quelles, toutes tressées et gommées, toutes prêtes.

Marchandes de grigris, d’amulettes, de vieux fusils, de crottes de gazelles, de vieux *corans* annotés par les pieux marabouts du désert;—de musc, de flûtes, de vieux poignards à manche d’argent, de vieux couteaux de fer ayant ouvert des ventres,—de tam-tams, de cornes de girafes et de vieilles guitares.

- Sellers of salted fish, sellers of pipes, sellers of everything;—sellers of old jewelry, of filthy, louse-ridden loin-cloths, reeking of corpses;—of Galam butter for keeping hair kinky;—of little old tresses, cut or torn

13. V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), pp. 10–11.

from the heads of dead Negro women, ready for recycling as is, all plaited and glued together.

Sellers of gri-gris, amulets, old rifles, gazelle turd, old Korans annotated by pious marabouts of the desert;—of musk, flutes, old daggers with silver handles, old iron blades used to open up stomachs,—tam-tams, giraffe horns, and old guitars.¹⁴

This excremental mound of otherness, these “strange and ugly artifacts” pilfered from rotting corpses, confirm the age-old posture of horrified voyeurism habitually adopted by the Western tourist.

Mudimbe’s caveat against the entrenched nature of Europe’s racist vision of African fetishism notwithstanding, one can argue that a more “enlightened” representation of black commodities and votive objects could be found in what James Clifford has characterized as “ethnographic surrealism” (itself in part a reaction against the fin-de-siècle exoticist clichés of authors such as Loti): “For the Paris avant-garde, Africa (and to a lesser degree, Oceania and America) provided a reservoir of other forms and other beliefs. This suggests a second element of the ethnographic surrealist attitude, a belief that the Other (whether accessible in dreams, fetishes, or Lévy-Bruhl’s *mentalité primitive*) was a crucial object of modern research.”¹⁵ Clifford enumerates the ways in which Africa was decoded and recoded in Europe, a process effected, to a great extent, through an “artsy” appropriation of the display techniques employed in the ethnographic museum. Walter Benjamin, citing Hippolyte Taine (“L’Europe s’est déplacé pour voir des marchandises [The whole of Europe displaced itself in order to view the goods]”), has provided the most poetic evocations of these fanciful world exhibitions. A “profane glow,” he observed, “bathed” the commodity, eclectically arrayed in the marketplace, arcade, or *vitrine*.¹⁶ It

14. Pierre Loti, *Le Roman d'un spahi*, in *Pierre Loti* (Paris: Presses de la Cité, 1989), p. 334.

15. James Clifford, “On Ethnographic Surrealism,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 23 (Oct. 1981): 542.

16. Walter Benjamin, section entitled “Taste” in addendum to “The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire,” in *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: New Left Books, 1973), p. 105. Benjamin writes: “Mass production, which aims at turning out inexpensive commodities, must be bent upon disguising bad quality. . . . The more industry progresses, the more perfect are the imitations which it throws on the market. The commodity is bathed in a profane glow.” In another section on fashion, “Grandville or the World Exhibitions,” Benjamin associates fetishism with prostitution and a kind of pornog-

was, of course, against such a view that Theodor Adorno, returning to a stricter Marxist interpretation of the fetish in commodity culture, would criticize Benjamin's arcades project. For Adorno, the concept of fetishism remained dialectical only so long as it was understood that, as he wrote in a celebrated letter to Benjamin, "the fetish character of the commodity is not a fact of consciousness; rather, it is dialectical, in the eminent sense that it produces consciousness."¹⁷ Benjamin, in formulating the dialectical image as a "dream" of collective consciousness, had, according to Adorno, both removed its potential magic and deprived it of its essential materialism. Adorno was scornful of what he called "the replica realism" of Benjamin's method, preferring to retain the fetish as a value before psychology.¹⁸

Benjamin's concept of the phantasmagoria has, however, retained its importance for critical representations of the consumerist imagination. Thus, the contemporary artist Judith Barry, whose work revolves around the visual dynamics of shopping, refers us back to the Greco-Roman tradition of exhibiting the spoils of war.¹⁹ Her question "who possesses whom?" the conquered object or the conquered spectator/subject? is clearly relevant to the analysis of the ethnographic collection, but it is also implicit in surrealist montage. In the famous surrealist journal *Documents*, Clifford sees:

- the order of an unfinished collage rather than of a unified organism. Its images, in their equalizing gloss and distancing effect, present in the same plane a Châtelet show advertisement, a Hollywood movie clip, a

raphy of death: "Fashion prescribed the ritual by which the fetish Commodity wished to be worshipped, and Grandville extended the sway of fashion over the objects of daily use as much as over the cosmos. In pursuing it to its extremes, he revealed its nature. It stands in opposition to the organic. It prostitutes the living body to the inorganic world. In relation to the living it represents the rights of the corpse. Fetishism, which succumbs to the sex-appeal of the commodity recruits this to its service" (p. 166).

17. Theodor Adorno, in *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso, 1977), p. 111.

18. Theodor Adorno, "Fetish Character in Music and Regression of Listening," in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, ed. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt (New York: Continuum, 1988), pp. 278–79. Adorno argues: "The concept of musical fetishism cannot be psychologically derived. That 'values' are consumed and draw feelings to themselves without their specific consciousness being reached by the consciousness of the consumer, is a *later* expression of their commodity character" (278–79; my emphasis).

19. Judith Barry, "Dissenting Spaces," in *Damaged Goods: Desire and the Economy of the Object* (exhibition catalog) (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1986), p. 49.

Picasso, a Giacometti, a documentary photo from colonial New Caledonia, a newspaper clip, an Eskimo mask, an old master, a musical instrument—the world's iconography and cultural forms presented as evidence, or data. Evidence of what? Evidence, one can only say, of surprising, declassified cultural orders and of an expanded range of human artistic invention. This odd museum merely documents, juxtaposes, relativizes—a perverse collection.²⁰

Though, in its display of heterogeneous objects, *Documents* (like its successor *Minotaure*) clearly perverted the classificatory codes of the museological discourse, its order of things was not necessarily as arbitrary, as purely “semiotic,” as Clifford seems to imply in this context. Picasso's paintings of African masks or Giacometti's “primitive” sculptural cages also appear (as Clifford is the first to point out) as self-conscious simulations of exotica rather than, simply, naive destabilizations of taxonomy and its institutional mystifications. Commodification, with its cynical rites of replication and reproduceability, would seem to have installed itself at the very inception of surrealism.

In a catalog essay for a show of contemporary art entitled “Damaged Goods,” Hal Foster encourages us to see the scattered masks and cult figurines of avant-garde art and surrealism not as arbitrary signifiers but rather as “magical commodities” containing the repressed promise of a utopian cathexis between the work of art and society, between the artist and the viewer-consumer. “Was the (primitive object's) attraction,” he queries, “not, in part, its suggestiveness that (1) modern art might (re)claim a ritual function or cult value, and (2) the modern artist, made marginal in the bureaucratic world of late capitalism, might (re)gain a shamanistic centrality to society?” Asserting that “(dis)agreeable objects,” from the mask to the Duchampian readymade, “demonstrated allegorically that the work of art in capitalist society cannot escape the status of the commodity,” Foster, one may infer, wants to preclude the possibility of salvaging fetishism as a modern aesthetic.²¹ But without falling into the trap of mystically reauthenticating “fallen,” alienated neoprimitivism, we do perhaps find a place for modern fetishism in its artistic and theoretical definition of an ironic simulacrum. According to this line of reasoning, the fetish, in its relays between Africa and Europe, has escaped becoming altogether

20. Clifford, “On Ethnographic Surrealism,” p. 552.

21. Hal Foster, “(Dis)agreeable Objects,” in *Damaged Goods*, p. 13.

ossified, reified, or as Foster has put it, “fetishized”—its “difference disavowed.”

In the twentieth century, I suggest, the concept of fetishism (despite “damaging” criticism) has gone from being negatively to positively valorized in a number of ways. If Kant, Marx, and Freud gave it infelicitous ascriptions, then Georges Bataille and fellow members of the Collège de Sociologie, intent on shattering the complacencies of bourgeois civilization, recuperated fetishism as a form of transgressive idolatry. Strengthening its status as a perversion (more than the surrealists ever dared) Bataille and Michel Leiris transformed fetishism, along with a host of other de-repressed pathologies, into a “good” theoretical praxis. Leiris, who according to Clifford renewed the Real by seeing “‘facts’ as performances, tropic productions, or heightened cut-out elements (fetishes),” fabricated what he called “true fetishism” out of a kind of self-reflexive, narcissistic “thingification”: “In the domain of art we seldom find any object (paintings or sculptures) able in some measure to respond to the needs of this true fetishism, which is really the *loving* love of ourselves projected from the inside out and clothed in a solid carapace, thus trapping it within the bounds of a precise thing and situating it, rather like a piece of furniture for our use, in the vast foreign room called space.”²² Leiris’s turn of phrase, “the *loving* love of ourselves,” itself placed, like a freestanding object in an uncannily “foreign” space of the subject, denotes the schizoid, liminal eroticism of this “cut-out, true fetishism.” Bataille would generate a comparable sense of the profane with the ironic invention of a spectator-fetishist whose look is displaced or implicated within a phobic narrative. In his *Histoire de l’oeil* (*Story of the Eye*) he anticipated a number of postmodern narrators all perversely “scopic”: Michel Tournier’s *The Fetishist*, Patrick Süskind’s *Perfume*, Julian Barnes’s *Flaubert’s Parrot*, Paul West’s *Rat Man of Paris*, and Bruce Chatwin’s *Utz*, to mention just a few. In each of these novels, fetishism is generated through the quest for trophies, themselves ironically exposed as magical commodities.

Let us take as our most extended example Tournier’s fetishist, depicted in the short story of the same title. Like a bloodhound, he tracks, expropriates, and triumphantly worries his spoils—a lady’s handkerchief, a bra, or best of all, a garter belt: “I had my

22. James Clifford, “The Topological Realism of Michel Leiris,” in *Sulfur*, no. 15 (1986): 11; Leiris, “Alberto Giacometti,” p. 38.

trophy. . . I brandished my garter belt like a red Indian flaunting his paleface's scalp."²³ On the surface, one fetish object is as good as another, but upon closer inspection we learn that these feminine undergarments function symbolically as mystical "icons" of capital. As *une femme chiffrée* ("a numbered woman") appraised with all her measurements—bust, waist, hips—the Fetishist's wife, through a series of subtle permutations, is transformed into her masculine counterpart as money value: "I was burning old, torn, dirty, mutilated bills—but the most important thing about them was that they had been softened" (T 203).²⁴ Here, the gender conversion from female to male fetish object parallels the conversion of sexual into commodity fetishes. If the Fetishist performs a traditional Freudian substitution when he "deceives" his wife with another woman's bra ("Yes, all right, I *was* being unfaithful to her with Francine, with a bra as proxy" [T 208]), he, in effect, deceives the bra, with a host of commodity idols: "The slips, the panty hose, the stockings, the panties, the chemisettes . . . I bought, and bought, and in less than two hours we didn't have a sou left" (T 208). Finally, the Fetishist's orgy of spending simulates the libidinal expenditure psychoanalytically associated with phallic substitution and points to paradigms of "economimesis" and "metafetishism," or fetishism *en abyme*, within Tournier's short story.²⁵

Throughout Tournier's fiction, sexual desire is collapsed into the erotic *frisson* provoked by the commodity. In his novel *La Goutte d'or*, a title that refers to the Algerian quarter of Paris north of the Boulevard Montmartre, the attraction to material items subsumes the attraction to a real-life object of desire. After a young Maghrebian named Idriss sells a polyethylene cast of his body to the Parisian department store Chez Tati, he is urged by one of the salesmen to simulate himself as a commodity.

23. Michel Tournier, "The Fetishist," in *The Fetishist*, trans. Barbara Wright (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1984), p. 209. Further references to this work will be abbreviated T.

24. Tournier inadvertently raises the question of fetishism and gender when his fetishist classifies his objects of obsession according to criteria of sexual difference: "Women are delicate, soft, perfumed lingerie. Men are a wallet swollen with secret things and silky, sweetsmelling bills" (T 205).

25. Jacques Derrida, "Economimesis," in *Mimesis des articulations*, ed. Jacques Derrida et al. (Paris: Flammarion, 1975). Derrida evokes a mimetic and infinitely specular chain of representations that refer in themselves to a libidinal economy of representation. See, in particular, pp. 66–71.

- Et dans un mois une vingtaine d'Idriss, qui se ressembleront comme des frères jumeaux, vont peupler mes vitrines et mes étalages intérieurs. Alors, à ce propos, j'ai une idée que je voudrais vous soumettre. Voilà: supposez que vous appreniez à faire l'automate? On vous habille comme les autres mannequins, vos frères jumeaux. On vous maquille pour que votre visage, vos cheveux, vos mains aient l'air faux, si vous voyez ce que je veux dire. Et vous, raide comme un piquet dans la vitrine, vous accomplissez quelques gestes anguleux et saccadés. Ça c'est déjà fait, notez-le bien. Le succès est assuré. Matin et soir, c'est l'attroupelement devant la vitrine.
- And in a month's time, twenty Idrisses, each resembling the other like twin brothers, will populate my shop windows and display cases. And now, on this subject, I have an idea that I'd like to try out on you. It goes like this: suppose you learn how to do the automaton number? We'll dress you up like the other mannequins, your twin brothers. We'll make you up so that your face, your hair, and your hands will seem fake, if you see what I mean. And you, stiff as a rail in the window, you'll perform a few angular, spasmodic gestures. It's been done before, mind you. A guaranteed success. From morning to night, it's a mob scene in front of the store window.²⁶

Transmogrified into a capitalist lure that magnetizes the rapacious look of the potential customer, Idriss personifies the famous Marxist chiasmus of double alienation, by which “people and things exchange semblances: social relations take on the character of object relations, and commodities assume the active agency of people.”²⁷

Tournier's agents of commodification—ogres, tourists, admen, and filmmakers—certainly discredit fetishism as a culturally constructed perversion and seem to follow the received interpretation of fetishism as a negative effect of commodification. But if we take the description of Idriss at one step removed, that is, as an illustration of the ironic play of simulacra, we might begin to define a kind of critical fetishism, an aesthetic of fetishization that reflexively exposes the commodity as an impostor value. In the mirror reflection of a thousand, identical department-store mannequins, one can extract a political critique of the alienated, colonized, North African self. In this sense, fetishism “buys back” its political redemption. Though Idriss may be prostituted, frozen, and reified, his dead stare (Medusa's head) gives back to consumer society the

26. Michel Tournier, *La Goutte d'or* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985), pp. 219–20.

27. Marx as paraphrased by Foster, “(Dis)agreeable Objects,” p. 13.

very alienation that consumer society has inflicted on him. This form of doubled fetishization clearly has implications for contemporary aesthetic production. What creates the inherently doubled status of the fetish, to go back to Freudian theory, is the original paradigm of the ersatz phallus. Thus Freud writes in his 1927 essay on fetishism:

- When I now disclose that the fetish is a penis-substitute I shall certainly arouse disappointment; so I hasten to add that it is not a substitute for any chance penis, but for a particular quite special penis that has been extremely important in early childhood but was afterwards lost. That is to say: it should normally have been given up, but the purpose of the fetish precisely is to preserve it from being lost. To put it plainly: the fetish is a substitute for the woman's (mother's) phallus which the little boy once believed in and does not wish to forego—we know why. ("F" 203)

Freud's formulation employs, interestingly enough, a language of undecidability, as if by way of reinforcing the attitude of avowal and disavowal that he wishes to emphasize in his characterization of the fetishist. Caught between specular absences, Freud's fetishist seems to operate entirely in the realm of the simulacrum, generating a copy or surrogate phallus for an original that never was there in the first place. The Lacanian reformulation of this paradigm pictures the fetishist-subject caught between "having" and "being" a maternal phallus that he or she can ultimately never possess, thus vacillating between illusory mastery on the one hand, and phantasms of lack or the permanently barred subject position on the other.

What emerges as particularly relevant here for an aesthetic critique is the uneasy mixture of credulity and disbelief that typifies the fetishist's attitude to the object-simulacrum. Repressing the (hypothetically posited) existence of the maternal penis, he deflects his gaze to the nearest, most convenient substitute, as in the classic scenario of boy and mother: "Thus the foot or shoe owes its attraction as a fetish, or part of it, to the circumstance that the inquisitive boy used to peer up the woman's legs toward her genitals. Velvet and fur reproduce—as has long been suspected—the sight of the pubic hair which ought to have revealed the longed-for penis; the underlinen so often adopted as a fetish reproduces the scene of undressing; the last moment in which the

woman could still be regarded as phallic” (“F” 201). Expressions such as “ought to have revealed the longed-for penis,” or “the last moment in which the woman could still be regarded as phallic,” inject a subtle note of sympathy on the part of the analyst for the boy’s suspension of disbelief. Freud’s rhetoric, in other words, encourages us to believe with the boy in the existence of an original phallic woman, and in the viability of the fetish as a substitute for the female phallus that has been lost. But such mistaken perceptions are only partially allowed to subsist. “It is not true that the child emerges from his experience of seeing the female parts with an unchanged belief in the woman having a phallus,” Freud writes. “He retains this belief but he also gives it up” (“F” 200). In other words, though he knows that feet, underwear, and velvet constitute nothing but a false or simulated phallus, the Freudian fetishist continues to regard them as real *nonetheless*: in the words of Octave Mannoni, “je sais bien, mais quand même [I know, but nonetheless].”²⁸ With true psychic ingenuity, or perhaps through the assistance of “magical thinking,” the fetishist manages to hold the simulated original in a state of ironic suspension adjacent to the real and the facsimile. As Freud would have it, this hexed state of mind is a “compromise”: “during the conflict between the deadweight of the unwelcome perception and the force of the opposite wish, a compromise is constructed” (“F” 200). In this way, fetishism emerges as an ever-shifting form of specular mimesis, an ambiguous state that demystifies and falsifies at the same time, or that reveals its own techniques of masquerade while putting into doubt any fixed referent.

28. The title of Octave Mannoni’s seminal essay illustrates the Freudian paradigm of *dénégation*, or negative affirmation, whereby “I do not deny” qualifies as the repressed version of “I affirm”; see “Je sais bien, mais quand même,” in *Clefs pour l’Imaginaire* (Paris: Seuil, 1969), pp. 9–33.