

Fashion, Bodies, and Objects

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It has now become commonplace to describe the evolution of twentieth-century women's fashion in terms of a gradual process of simplification that began sometime during World War I. Skirts and dresses grew shorter as it became increasingly acceptable to reveal parts of the female body in a manner that would simply have been inconceivable during the *Belle Epoque* years. Equally fashionable was the very heavy use of makeup, in a way reminiscent of the eighteenth century. No longer clothed from head to foot by deforming garments that hid their natural shape, women were instead allowed to expose parts of their body within limits. Yet, since nudity was still not deemed acceptable, these newly visible parts of the female body had somehow to be *framed*. For example, by the early twenties, lipstick was popularly used to underline women's lips, from which long cigarette holders emerged in an obvious sexual allusion. Or, when for the first time the hands that bourgeois married women had kept well hidden with gloves were revealed, male attention was drawn to them by large, heavy bracelets. Hence, social codes underwent a deep transformation from the period where the only alternatives in women's fashion were either total dissimulation of the female body or the nudity of painters' models to an era where objectified parts of the body could be displayed through a ritualized staging of what was perceived as decent and permissible. Parallelizing this trend in fashion, Surrealism participated in the typically modern artistic current characterized by a sadistic fragmentation of the female body as found, for example, in Breton's *Nadja*, Buñuel's *Un Chien andalou*, and Elsa Schiaparelli's fashion shows.¹

Sixty years later, it is interesting to note that this process of fragmentation is alive and well and has been followed by an increas-

ingly fetishistic high-fashion industry, which itself is relayed by music videos and a gigantic pornography industry. Baudelaire once remarked that beyond a certain degree of civilization nudity is not enough and that perfumes and jewelry must thus be mobilized. In other words, as modern fashion chose to follow the road of simplification, nudity consequently became an increasingly complex process that necessitated a constant vigilance in the form of an infinite re-framing of the body: women's fashion has now reached the point, for example, where the garter-belt frames female genitalia metonymically proclaiming total nudity, as do breasts that slip out of brassieres. A similar development is also taking place in recent literary trends, such as in Hervé Guibert's novels, which focus with equal fascination on certain body parts.

The starting point of this essay is the proposition that as French high fashion, music video, and literature come to share a common space in which they mutually sustain each other, they henceforth usher the objectification of the body (as a form of commodity fetishism) into a new stage by making gender differences aesthetically obsolete.

I

It would be appropriate to begin with a quotation from Andrea Dworkin's influential *Pornography* that defines objectification:

Male supremacy depends on the ability of men to view women as sexual objects, and deviations from this exercise in male power and female oblivion are discouraged. Nevertheless, objectification occurs on a massive scale with regard to inappropriate objects: males, leather, rubber, underwear, and so on. Objectification—that fixed response to the form of another that has as its inevitable consequence erection—is really a value system that has ejaculation as its inexorable, if momentary, denouement. Objectification, carried by the male not only as if it were its personal nature but as if it were nature itself, denotes who or what the male loves to hate; who or what he wants to possess, act on, conquer, define himself in opposition to; where he wants to spill his seed. The primary target of objectification is the woman. (113)

A few pages further Dworkin notes that there is little difference between objectification and fetishism and her book assigns an an-

thropological cause to the fact that women tend to be objectified and turned into fetishes (which she defines, based on the Portuguese etymology of the word, as “the made thing that most consistently provokes erection” [127]). Here Dworkin has taken the liberty to introduce a partisan meaning since she transforms a term that in the first place always carried magic and mystical connotations rather than sexual ones (Sebeok 51-53).

I will not dwell on the classical and “normative” (puritan/repressive?) readings of fetishism that define it in terms of a fear of castration and denial of gender difference (Freud); I prefer to use a broader and more neutral definition which suggests that fetishism is merely a synecdochal sign denoting an individual cathexis in a part itself standing for the totality (Sebeok 62). As women had to be put to work by late capitalism, feminism demonstrated *nolens, volens* that patriarchal values and the nuclear family had become obstacles to the modernization and expansion of the market. In what follows, I will examine the possibility that what is actually occurring is a collective cathexis, ever-changing and, today, increasingly gender neutral.

A quick glance at the *Haute couture* collections presented in Paris in 1991 seems to confirm that the objectification described by Dworkin has indeed contaminated the field of high fashion through “leather, rubber, underwear, and so on,” which, in my view, constitutes a commercial event that need not necessitate any sort of moral conclusion. The fact that these fashion shows are discussed and praised in the September 1991 issue of *Penthouse* would further validate Dworkin’s thesis. To the applause of the magazine, Vivienne Westwood “leads the pack” (75) with a heavy use of garter belts “[expanding] her punk origins from the boldly provocative to the baringly daring” (75). *Penthouse* even delights in the following Westwood statement, which would certainly have pleased Baudelaire: “Sexiness is the most important motive in fashion, because fashion is about being eventually naked” (76). Interestingly enough, Westwood seems to echo the Baudrillard of *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*:

Once ambivalence and the symbolic function have been liquidated, nudity again becomes one sign among others, entering into a distinctive opposition to clothing. Despite its ‘liberationist’ velleities [sic], it no longer radically opposes clothing, it is only a variant that can coexist with all the others in the systematic

process of fashion: and today one sees it everywhere acting 'in alternation.' (98)

Sandwiched between Westwood's models and Chantal Thomas' obsession with turning the inside into the outside, that is underwear into outerwear, the Chanel lines offer a curious mix of its well-known sobriety with a return to the seventies-style see-through blouse worn under a business suit.

Another example can be drawn from *Femmes* magazine (1992), a leading publication that achieved success through a mix of high fashion, superficial intellectualism, and elitist appeal to the professional woman. It regularly features expensive clothes from the best fashion designers, interviews with intellectuals and writers, as well as fiction, the latter tending to be openly erotic within the limits of bourgeois good taste. However, the code of bourgeois eroticism (as opposed to pornography) is now so blurred (not to say irrelevant) that the December-January issue of *Femmes* offers a short story in which a female narrator informs us, right from the beginning, that:

Les yeux mis-clos, la jambe lisse sous le bas fin et la jarretelle, le string à clous de strass, je guette. Mon amour, ma proie. Lui.

Eyes half closed, the leg smooth under the thin stocking and garter, the lace-studded g-string, I lie in wait. My love, my prey. Him. (57)

As for the pictorial part of *Femmes* magazine, nudity is valued, and clothes, jewels, and accessories are demoted to the secondary role of framing, calling attention to it as predicted by Baudelaire. One could well ask where the difference now lies between *Penthouse* and *Femmes*.²

On another front, the high-fashion scene also appears to be merging with that of music video; however insignificant in size, the French music video industry is much more daring than its American counterpart and has even managed to turn Lova Moor (former lead dancer at the Paris *Crazy Horse Saloon*) into a singer (that is, her otherwise rather mediocre singing performance regularly ends up in nudity). In one video, Sabrina, the Italian singer who was well appreciated in France, performs in a very tight bikini in and out of a pool. She does not even bother to lip-sync the words since the main

attraction seems to be her voluminous breasts and buttocks on which the camera obsessively focuses. Thus, if it is true that the Westwood, Chanel, and Thomas models are objectified, as Dworkin would have it, I would further add that their body parts, as well as those of Lova Moor and Sabrina, are framed and fetishized in a voyeuristic fashion that can only be compared to pornography.³ In this area, the French media undoubtedly leads the pack as it puts forth the final merging of music video, pornography, and high fashion as a new form of representation. Should it come as a surprise? Should it be blamed only on patriarchal values? And should it really be a matter of moral outrage?

II

It is believed that the term pornography originated in *Le Pornographe* (1769) by Restif de La Bretonne: a rather curious Enlightenment pamphlet in which the author justified the social utility of prostitution since Antiquity and proposed even to increase the number of prostitutes in view of his peculiar utilitarianism. However, pornography in the modern sense of the term—i.e. a standardized mass-produced commodity—emerged relatively late at the end of the nineteenth century, as is well known. Yet, as early as Restif, pornography has been linked to prostitution up to and perhaps including its emergence as the gigantic industry it is today due to the invention of the VCR. It is interesting to note that the emergence of pornography as a major market phenomenon has been contemporary with the historical trend that encourages not only women to borrow men's attire, but also men to indulge in a symmetric form of gender reversal, a fact which is often forgotten. Since the sixties men have appropriated long hair, earrings, rings, jewels, perfume, and makeup (Yonnet 346). The only logical consequence of this process would indeed be the collapse of patriarchal authority and a turn in the direction of androgyny (Cook and Kroker 21). It also follows, as Baudrillard would have it, that porn becomes no more than the paradoxical limit of the sexual.⁴ Yet, on the other hand, nudity—in its highly civilized Baudelairien form that has nothing to do with nature since it calls attention to itself in the most artificial way—appears to be the outer limit of fashion.⁵ Both phenomena converge towards a space of representation that for the moment has no name—yet it is a trend fiercely opposed, and by strange bed-fellows at that.

There is perhaps no need to dwell on the highly contradictory nature of traditional morality when it claims to address pornography. It should be recalled, however, that Judeo-Christian moralism and "family values" always accompany, in the discourse of all conservatives of the Western world, the equally strong endorsement of the market economy, thus resulting in an uneasy alliance of totalitarianism in terms of private morality and liberalism in economic matters. Assuming that the statement according to which the human body should not be treated as an object is philosophically grounded and not an ethnocentric one, it should then be recognized that, in light of acknowledged humanist values (such as the respect for the integrity of the human body), it is precisely the market economy that needs to objectify the human body, fragment it, and sell it so as to open new markets. However, a fundamental misconception usually presides over this type of thinking.

In late capitalism the necessity of profit is bound to undermine absolutely every moral value inherited from the past: if it is true, therefore, that porn is the paradoxical limit of the sexual, then it might very well be the case that trafficking in human organs is the not-so-paradoxical limit of any market economy.⁶ I will return to this in a moment. While no one would want to deny that pornography exploits women's bodies and turns them into objects, it can be argued that major league sports do so as well; this exploitation is even expanded to children gymnasts in a planetary pedophilia display, as recent Olympic games have demonstrated. As for the exploitation of men's bodies, the huge gay pornography industry (which is never mentioned), the Calvin Klein model of advertising, or, for that matter, the construction industry, play their role in objectifying the male (Christensen 36). The problem thus seems to be that the exploitation of women's bodies still shocks us while that of men's leaves us somewhat indifferent. Why? Perhaps because the views are still with us that women are pure, that sexuality is dirty, and that women should be sheltered from male lust.

As for mainstream feminism, the case appears to be more complicated. I have already mentioned the Andrea Dworkin line of thought: state (or community) moral standards should be imposed on an activity that has become a highly profitable sector of the entertainment industry, itself a major segment of advanced market economies in which nothing is supposed to restrict the free movement of goods and people. It is true that Dworkin musters what must be acknowledged as a forceful argument: to claim civil liberties (such

as free speech) to protect pornography amounts to defending a pimp's right to free speech. However, this is to assume that the porn industry is dominated by pimps, which is difficult to prove in the first place. (Or for that matter, what about the actors who pursue this type of employment? Does it make them moral monsters?) Moreover, and in absolute Kantian moral terms, what is the real difference between a pimp and, say, the CEO of a bank who is laundering money from the sale of drugs and arms as many of them do? Perhaps it is merely a matter of the capitalist division of labor, and the true alternative lies, in fact, elsewhere: either one accepts a market economy with all its consequences or one rejects it outright. Otherwise, to dream of forms of censorship that would concurrently ban what is perceived to be objectionable forms of expression yet accommodate the imperative of profit-making amounts to the naive beliefs that presided over Prohibition. It also reveals a troubling inability to criticize and take on the economic elites.

III

At the risk of offending the proponents of academic liturgies, old and new, I wish to return to the question I addressed above concerning the "trafficking in human organs" by dwelling on two cases. (This expression should be taken in both its figurative and literal senses.) The first one pertains to the field of recent French literature addressing the AIDS issue; the second case is taken from so-called skin magazines.

Illness as a literary topos is certainly nothing new in French literature. As found in the works of Maupassant, Catherine Pozzi, and many others, the preceding *fin de siècle* produced a literature of illness, with its stories of syphilis, tuberculosis, and the like. In the twentieth century the topos found new terrain first by exploring the illness of cancer, and more recently that of AIDS (see for example the works of Hervé Guibert). However, what differentiates these two *fin de siècle* literatures is that now, with Guibert for example, the distinction between the inside and the outside of the body collapses, giving obscenity a totally new meaning.⁷ Whereas the state of medical technology did not allow Maupassant to "travel" into the body of the tuberculosis patients he depicted, Guibert, in books such as *Le Protocole compassionnel* (1991), is given free rein to turn organs into literary objects. The reversibility of the inside/outside of the body provided by medical imagery allows the writer to make his

blood, throat, or stomach the real characters of his later books, carrying voyeurism (but also, to some degree, exhibitionism) to an extreme that would have been unthinkable only a few years ago.⁸ With Guibert the narrative voice stands as the only and increasingly weak unifying center of a series of organs which seem to drift away and take on a life of their own. It is indeed both sad and symptomatic that only with this unprecedented display of the inside of his fragmented and deteriorating body would Guibert reach the fame he yearned for as a writer, as he himself admitted. Does Guibert's work, then, cater to a segment of this growing cultural market which feeds on the objectification of the body ever since the advent of Surrealism?⁹ If this is indeed the case, as I am suggesting, *New Look* magazine also leads the pack. As one can well imagine, while competition among French skin magazines is very keen, in its September 1992 issue *New Look* managed to outdo its competitors with the tale of the "Japanese cannibal."

As the reader may recall, a particularly gruesome story made the headlines in France in 1981: that of a Japanese student named Issei Sagawa who killed a young Dutch woman in Paris that year. Not only did he kill the young woman but he also dismembered her before proceeding to cannibalize the parts. The monstrosity of the crime led French psychiatrists to pronounce Sagawa insane, and he was sent back to Japan. Upon returning to his native land, he started a successful career as a producer of pornographic videos while appearing regularly on a popular television program. Since then, and having become a celebrity and well-off businessman, Sagawa easily grants public interviews of the kind printed in the September issue of *New Look*. (The Rolling Stones even wrote a song about him.) Of concern here is less the questionable taste of *New Look* in publishing this interview than the way in which the magazine chose to introduce its twelve-page Sagawa report. The story is placed just after a review of the latest Jean-Paul Gaultier metallic hats collection, in which every object seems to grow out of the model's head in the great surrealist tradition. In other words, Gaultier turns the model into a receptacle of another object:

1. A crown holding stars representing the European Community flag.
2. A crown-shaped ash-tray holding real cigars.
3. A bird-cage.
4. An assortment of hand-mirrors, brushes, and blow-driers.

5. Five rolls of toilet paper held by flexible steel water-pipes.
6. A crown holding a mini-bar. (60-65)

As for the Sagawa article, it comprises, among other things, a rather accommodative short biography that goes well beyond what I believe to be the usual desire or "shock value" to draw the reader's attention. For example, we are told that:

He killed to eat the flesh of his victim and precisely the sexual parts: the breasts, buttocks, clitoris, and anus. (73)

He also photographed the breasts in the frying pan and on the plate before eating them. (76)

As far as Sagawa's psychological motivations are concerned, we are treated to a confusing array of interpretations that draw on psychoanalysis, legal categories, and psychiatry (e.g. incurable dementia, fetishism, orgiastic sexual frenzy, organic perversion of an alienating sort) which say, in fact, very little if anything at all. While Sagawa continues his multiple careers (he is also a painter), let us now extrapolate a few conclusions from this unusual issue of *New Look*.

The conventional definitions of fetishism, such as those promoted by psychoanalysis or feminism (Dworkin), appear to be increasingly powerless as tools when it comes to describing "reality" (virtual or otherwise). Voyeurism (not Guibert's but ours) has now grown to such proportions that it includes not only the objectification of the exterior of the body but also that of the whole organism: the inside of the body has also become the outside. Parts of the body are photographed by Sagawa before ingesting them or recombining them in a painting: one of these paintings (perhaps inspired by Man Ray's *La Prière*) has replaced a woman's anus with an open mouth, all of this sitting on a plate (*New Look* 76). What seems to be at work is a merging of high fashion and pornography (as underlined earlier with *Femmes* and *Penthouse*) that also invades *New Look* since Jean-Paul Gaultier and Sagawa are given what could be called equal attention.

It now appears that sexuality cannot remain an area miraculously protected from broad economic trends based on commodity fetishism, fragmentation, and the unavoidable discarding of traditional morality that now blocks the expansion of the market. Yet,

following Pierre Bourdieu, what could be called “cultural arbitrariness” is still with us and it is safe to assume that this will remain the case for a long time to come.¹⁰ It might, however, be drifting and opening new spaces where gender differences play an increasingly secondary role as the commodity keeps reordering all identities and integrities on a planetary scale, turning them into a proliferation of fragmented objects for sale. Commodity fetishism is very much like the sacred described by the anthropological tradition. It travels relentlessly from one point to another, it is unstable in its investments, and it can potentially break apart almost anything. Current trends clearly show that the human body, male or female, will not escape this process: as patriarchal values and the female body they identified disappear, they are replaced by androgyny, general commodity fetishism, and a uni-(bi-)sexual body made up of parts/objects that can be combined and recombined endlessly on a high fashion/video/pornography/literature scale.

Notes

1. I have dealt more extensively with this issue in my “Discours de la mode des années trente aux années quatre-vingt-dix,” *Contemporary French Civilization*, special issue on “Discourses and Sex,” 16.2 (1992).

2. In her excellent essay Diana Fuss writes: “Even the covers of magazines like *Vogue*, *Elle*, *Glamour*, or in this case *Cosmopolitan*, could be mistaken for the covers of some skin magazines commercially produced and marketed for consumption by heterosexual men” (714). However, I can only disagree with Fuss’s argument because it implicitly endorses the metaphysics of psychological *depth* while displaying moralizing undertones.

3. I am assuming here that elitist attempts to distinguish between eroticism and pornography rely on the usual oppositions (high/low, refined/vulgar, subtle/heavy etc.) that structure bourgeois taste.

4. “Porn is only the paradoxical limit of the sexual: realistic exacerbation, maniacal obsession with the real—this is ‘obscenity,’ etymologically and in all senses. But isn’t the sexual itself already forced materialization? Isn’t the advent of sexuality already part of the Western *réaliste*, of the obsession proper to our culture to institute and to instrumentalize all things?” (*Oublier Foucault* 29). All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

5. To some extent our aesthetics is still indebted to Baudelaire but also to Gustave Moreau, who created combinations of nudity, jewelry, and gender ambiguity which still have "currency."

6. "Discourses of God, freedom and family, of the unique spiritual essence of the individual, retain much of their traditional force, but come also to have something of an implausible ring to them, in a social order where the highest value is clearly profit" (Eagleton 375).

7. "In sexuality as in art the idea of progress is absurd. On the other hand, obscenity, like transience, is of the order of progress. And it progresses inevitably because it is no longer of the order of sexual desire, but of the frenzy of the image . . . it is in this promiscuity, in this ubiquity of images, in this *viral contamination* of things by images that reside the transience and the obscenity of our culture" ("Au-delà du vrai et du faux" 179, my emphasis).

8. "Doctor Oskar placed a thin black tube into my mouth . . . he looked into the tube's eyepiece and proposed to Doctor Nacier to come and see for himself, he said: 'There is no longer anything, no candidiasis in the esophagus, no ulcer in the stomach, all is clean and proper.' I then regretted not having looked myself" (Guibert 63). "Each time I am my own voyeur, the experimental filmmaker"(104).

9. I am not suggesting by any means that this would have been a "conscious" strategy on Guibert's part, but rather the encounter of a *dispositio* and a certain state of the literary field. See Bourdieu, *Les Règles de l'art*.

10. "Through the masculinization of masculine bodies and the feminization of feminine bodies, a somatization of cultural arbitrariness operates, that is a durable construction of the unconscious" (*Réponses* 147).

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