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Cinema and the Mind's Eye

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Fetishism and Curiosity

Cinema and the Mind's Eye

2nd Edition

Laura Mulvey

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For my son, Chad Wollen, with love and gratitude for the extent of his enthusiasms – most especially, movies and Marxist theory.

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(previous page) *AMY!* (1980), with Mary Maddox as Amy Johnson

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Fetishism and Curiosity Revisited

The Introduction to the first edition of *Fetishism and Curiosity*, written in 1995, is about certain key structures of misunderstanding that brought both Marx and Freud to apply the concept of fetishism (hitherto applied only to 'primitive' beliefs) to their own societies. Fetishisms disguise, on the one hand (Marx), the worker's labour as productive of value under capitalism and, on the other (Freud), the anxiety provoked by the maternal body perceived as castrated. These, too real, material bodies disappear into the spectacular forms of commodity fetishism and fetishised femininity. In the 1995 introduction, I turned to the idea of curiosity, the intellectual energy behind the drive to investigate and to know, as a counter to the visual excess, illusion and disguise that characterise fetishism. Curiosity invokes a spectrum of investigative activities, from a casual pleasure in decipherment, to seeing with the mind's eye, to the use of ideas that can throw light directly on these mis-understandings central to the comparative novelty of the capitalist system as well as the archaic human psyche. In this book, I suggest that feminist curiosity is specifically alerted and aroused by spectacular images of woman. The very excess of these images indicates that they conceal, or distract from, something troubling to the psyche, a mask, as it were, that, once reconfigured as a sign, reveals coded traces of repression and abjection.

The essays in *Fetishism and Curiosity* are divided into three sections. Part One deals with the Hollywood cinema of the studio system and so remains within the framework of most of my earlier writings about the cinema. Its chapters return to topics that I have considered before, such as melodrama,

Lilian Gish: 'female glamour and the development of cinema as industry fall into step' (see p. 53)

woman as spectacle and so on. In Parts Two and Three, on the other hand, I was attempting to move forward. Curiosity as a 'figure' for a feminist desire to think analytically about the fetishised female body is central to Part Two, which moves across Greek myth (Pandora), cinema (Godard) and art (Cindy Sherman). I hoped to dismantle the images of enigmatic femininity that typically produced a topographical opposition between inside and outside: an exterior (of cosmetic masquerade, seduction and artifice) concealing an interior (of abject 'stuff', bleeding and aging). I notice in retrospect the repeated use of terms such as rebus, puzzle, riddle, hieroglyph, for instance, and 'constantly searching for clues', and I visualise (in my mind's eye) the fetishised body falling apart once it has been reconfigured, out of a spatial pattern of inside/outside, the masquerade/the abject, into an enigma or a pattern that can be decoded.

In Part Three, the question of fetishism relates more allegorically to dislocations in history, and I discuss two films (*Citizen Kane* and *Xala*) in which a proliferation of fetishised 'things' have distorted and obscure political reality so that its alienated subjects can no longer comprehend or tell their own stories. Here it is the films themselves that create a 'curious' mode of spectatorship, making visible, in their own formal organisation, the symptoms that fetishism leaves in coded traces or encryptments. These films incorporate the spectator into the process of decipherment, so that narrative and cinematic images demand to be seen with 'the mind's eye'. In this section too, the essays mix questions of cinema with Greek myth, in this case Oedipus, with its emphasis on a misunderstood history and the fatal relationship between fathers and sons. The Oedipus story provides the theoretical framework for the chapter on *Blue Velvet*. In the final essay, I discuss the way that Jimmie Durham builds a deciphering mode of spectatorship into his work, creating gaps and questions that can only be addressed by critical inquiry. His art is insistently incomplete and offers a commentary on fetishism's insistence on surface, finish and polish. The objects bear witness to the lost history of the native people in the Americas that can only be rendered in fragments, through traces, memories and stories and bits of things. The violence of conquest and its aftermath could only produce the conqueror's self-justification, the construction of an illusory 'wholeness', and an investment of the national imagination in the polished 'things' of commodity fetishism.

Although in *Fetishism and Curiosity* the concept of fetishism is by and large associated with belief, illusion and the refusal of knowledge, I was also interested in Freud's concept of disavowal and its strange psychic structure. While the psychoanalytic concept 'repression' implies that an unconscious idea has been successfully buried or transformed beyond recognition, disavowal implies that the psyche partially 'knows' what the fetish conceals. The fetishist, in Freud's locus classicus, maintains in uneasy balance two incompatible positions: he knows that the female body has no penis but, at the same time, he constructs the fetish object as a defence against this external reality. This theoretical point has an analogous relation to the disavowal of external realities within the fetishisms of mass spectacle, images of women and the social symptoms of commodity capitalism. As Christian Metz first pointed out (see my discussion below), the cinema shares the same dual structure, collecting into itself these paradoxes of knowledge and belief, reality and disavowal. While flourishing in popular culture as an industrial illusion, the cinema also attracts curiosity, the desire, that is, to 'figure out' its mechanism and unmask its illusion. Although this unmasking process is usually associated primarily with the avant-garde, it is worth remembering that Hollywood always enjoyed revealing its processes of production in the 'film within a film' genre, that its star system slips into an almost Brechtian distanciation and its conventions and repetitions are very far from the credibility demanded by a realist aesthetic.

But the occasional self-reflexivity of commercial cinema is also far from the investigative strategies that characterise avant-garde film, its concern for the machine's materiality and the reality of its mechanical process. There are particular paradoxes at stake in the process of projection: a machine for throwing light through celluloid frames onto a screen, it also manipulates the human eye, the source of the illusion of movement fundamental to the cinema's range of illusions. Disavowed as the source of the screen's eye-catching illusion, the projector stood concealed at the back of the theatre so that its clunky and noisy machinery could be invisible in inverse relationship to the visibility of the screen. Allegorically, within the structure of cinematic apparatus, the projector parallels the workers' labour power, unglamorous and invisible, concealed by the captivating qualities of the commodity as it circulates in the market. The projector (alongside, of course, the camera and the editing

table) vividly embodies the way that the cinema belonged to the machine age of cogs and wheels, of moving parts. To emphasise the truism at stake in this allegory: just as the cinema's mechanisms belonged to industrial technology, so did its standardised production of entertainment belong to industrial capitalism and its mass audience belong to the industrialised working class.

In 1995, the concept of fetishism was useful as a theory that addressed the question of disavowed materiality and reality: whether of the labour power of the workers, the anatomical reality of the maternal body or the mechanisms of the cinema. At the time, in spite of television and, from the early 1980s, VHS home viewing, the cinema itself remained the same. In 1996, as *Fetishism and Curiosity* was published, it was possible to celebrate its hundredth birthday with confidence. Looking back, however, the book's introduction gives an intuition of social and technological change while being unaware of what was to come. 1995 now seems a pivot point, at which the critical centrality of materialism, so crucial for the concept of fetishism, would itself be displaced into the past. Fleetingly, an intimation of change intrudes into the book's consciousness. In a critique of post-modern 'dematerialisations' in which meaning detaches itself from, and floats free of reference, I wrote:

> the aesthetics of post-modernism might reflect, in turn, new economic and financial structures. The problem of reference, from this angle, is not restricted to the image and aesthetics, but leads back to the economics of capitalism itself'.[1]

I go on to suggest that, as finance capitalism flourishes, and 'money makes money out of money', producing profit outside the exploitation of the labour power of the working class, 'the free -floating signifier may, itself, be a signifier of changes in the economic base.' While, earlier, disavowal had seemed a psychic mechanism that could maintain in balance illusion and the materiality of labour, by this time the infrastructure had shifted: 'the disavowal of the processes of industrial production now disguises the collapse of industrial production itself'. These tentative thoughts were clearly a response to the 'dematerialisation' of the industrial working class in the UK during the Thatcher period and were intended only to reflect on the national fate of industrial capital; commodity production was shifting elsewhere (to Asia, for example) in the reconfiguration of capitalism

under globalisation. The 'free-floating' nature of capitalism was, at the same time, assisted and aggravated by other neo-liberal policies taking off through the 1980s and 90s, such as deregulation of banking and investment and the privatisation of social services. These economic trends, from a semiotic perspective, loosen the links of reference and meaning between the workings of capitalism and society while strengthening links across its increasingly multifaceted, obscure and global structures.

In 1995 I was unaware of the 'dematerialising' process that was on the point of overtaking the cinema. The existence of a new era of computer technology and a new world of the internet (e-mail messaging, in particular) were spreading into popular consciousness, but the implications of both the digital and the internet for celluloid cinema and its associated cultures were still in the future. Just as the economic infrastructure of advanced capitalist society shifted away from mass industrial production (and capitalism succeeded in diminishing the threat embodied in the potential power of organised labour) so the cinema shifted accordingly, the superstructure redefined by radical technological changes in its base, in a way that Marx would certainly have recognised.

Central to the sense of 'dematerialisation' that overtook the cinema in the late 1990s, gathering pace in the new millennium, was a sense of the loss of the physical imprint of the photographic index, dissolved, as it were, into pixels and the binary, numerical, system of digital technology. These changes banished the chemical aspect of photography that had always been part of its 'natural magic': not only did chemistry make the photograph fixed and reproducible but celluloid, a chemical product, then enabled photography to move. The aesthetic, as well as technological, aspects of these changes have been thoroughly debated and had particular significance for me later (when thinking about *Death 24 Times a Second*) and I want only to note them here in passing. By degrees, editing and, finally, exhibition lost their roots in industrial, mechanical and chemical technology. Just as cinemas have increasingly banished the film projector in favour of digital projection, viewing has also proliferated into multiple viewing platforms and, above all, online video sharing and streaming of all kinds. Francesco Casetti has discussed the significance of this shift from seeing a film on a single screen in a darkened

cinema and variable consuming of films through so many co-existing media. He points out that the concentrated act of attention characteristic of the once-off, immersive experience of the cinema has changed:

> The presence of options where once there was standard practice, the necessity of establishing rules of the game where once they were implicit, the strong connection with one's own world where once there was a separation, the widening of perspective where once the field was bounded – these are all elements that testify to how much the framework has changed.[2]

Just as Casetti associates the diffusion of attention with these post-industrial forms of cinematic consumption, so Jonathan Crary associates the concentration of attention with the emergence of a late nineteenth-century 'social, urban, psychic and industrial field'.[3]

This tidal wave of change brought by the digital age has, of course, generated cults of things (for instance, the gadgets of communications technology, shrinking in size while growing in complexity) that dramatise the new geographies of global capitalism and the new topography of technology. The shift from the mechanical to the digital brings with it an exaggeration of the mystery that Marx associated with the commodity form. In the mechanical age, the beauty of the screen image could be traced to the all too real presence of the celluloid strip, with its individual frames visible to the naked eye, each holding the physical indexical trace of the moment filmed; the shiny surface of the DVD, on the other hand, masks its own impenetrable secret. Furthermore, the very shininess of electronic products, the difficulty of comprehending their workings, embodies a new configuration of commodity fetishism, and new forms of abjection. On the one hand, the working classes of former industrial societies gradually lose the benefits gained through the struggle by unions and left political parties; on the other, the brutally exploited coltan miners, most notoriously in the Democratic Republic of Congo, produce the raw material necessary for the desirable commodities of the digital age.

These digital processes of dematerialisation have also affected the female body. The masquerade of cosmetic femininity (that I mentioned above as central to Part 2 of *Fetishism and Curiosity*) has been superseded by simulacra from which

even the fetishised female body has faded; the residual, physical intractability of the body ends up air-brushed into the ethereality of artifice. Ruth Hogben's fashion videos, for instance, subsume the models' actual bodies into geometry and digital effects as the technology celebrates its transcendent artifice and a no longer futuristic artificial femininity. The magic of CGI easily fuses with the long-standing dream of the beautiful female automaton, but now without unseemly mechanics hidden inside her. In some sense, as time and space are 'conjured up' digitally, an increasingly decorporalised femininity, exaggerated by the decomposition of movement into abstraction, might represent the ultimate achievement of the human aspiration to transform the human body into a complete illusion, a convincing but insubstantial phantasmagoria. There is nothing 'behind' the spectacle. On the other hand, even if impenetrable to the naked eye, these images still arouse the curiosity of the mind's eye, and present an urgent challenge to feminist theories of representation.

* * *

In the process of thinking about the question of fetishisms within the dematerialised structures of cinema, its spectatorships and femininity, I have turned to my own story, and to the way that my relationship to cinema has changed over the last fifty years: 1995 pivots backward to my early cinephilia of the 1960s and 70s and also forward to its return in a new and unfamiliar guise, with interactive digital spectatorship, in the 2000s. As Thomas Elsaesser recalls in his eloquent evocation of British cinephilia of the 1960s,[4] British movie-going experience of the 1960s followed the line of *Cahiers du cinéma* and its critics' positive and enthusiastic response to the new Hollywood releases as they appeared in Paris during the 1950s. These critics were, of course, also interested in other directors, other cinemas and the history of cinema (as seen, for instance, in the Henri Langlois programming at the Paris Cinémathèque) but this encounter with Hollywood was their defining critical characteristic and most indelible legacy. There was a time lag between the period in which the films were released and reviewed in Paris and when I actually saw them a few years later.[5] Differences between the French and English cultural *milieux* can account for this gap in time. But it was during those few years in the early 1960s

that the old Hollywood studio system of vertically integrated production, distribution and exhibition to all intents and purposes ceased functioning. Although David Bordwell suggests that it was 'somewhat arbitrary' to end *Classical Hollywood Cinema* in 1960, he also gives more than convincing reasons why the system that had flourished for so long closed with the decade.[6]

There is also a poignant logic to the way that this early, Hollywood-directed, cinephilia or film fandom flourished as the industry fell into decline. Using the term more loosely than the Marxist or Freudian concepts I have drawn on so far, this mode of filmgoing could be understood as fetishistic, set apart from a 'normal' leisure time activity. In the first instance, it shared the fetishistic aspects of collecting. Special and precious film objects, the films of favourite Hollywood directors, were acquired with difficulty and connoisseurship and invested with special value. As Hollywood cinema was not valued by the prevailing cultural standards, quite the contrary, cinephilia had an added sense of perversity. Then, the process of fetishistic collecting could exaggeratedly enact the 'one off' aspect of film exhibition (mentioned by Casetti), very often involving a journey to the outskirts of London by cinephiliac connoisseurs for a Sunday-only film screening. The 'disavowal' of projection could be dangerously near to collapse in these screenings: the old prints showed the marks of their long journey to the lowest level of film distribution, and the run-down cinemas, soon to become bingo halls, had seen no recent investment in either the theatres in which we watched or the proficiency of their projectors.

Intrinsic to this love was an investment in cinematic style, of the kind analysed by Christian Metz in his discussion of film fetishism. But there was also something about the Hollywood aesthetic that appealed to fetishistic attachment. This was a cinema in which repetition was of the essence: the repetition inherent in the star system and in generic storytelling, often characterised, for instance, by rule-driven gender roles and the primitive ethics of the good against the bad, de-psychologised character typage and the formulae of folk stories. But there was something else at stake in this cinema: due to the crisis in the studio system, Hollywood of the 1950s might be called a 'late' cinema. Many of its directors and stars, like the system they worked within, were aging. Even the younger generation of directors (Samuel Fuller, Bud Boetticher or Nicholas Ray, for instance) had little or no future.

Formulaic narratives were realised by brilliant visual storytellers, often with literally a lifetime of experience, some born before the cinema itself, many growing up alongside it. Furthermore, indigenous American talent had been enormously augmented by the exiles from fascist Germany, France, Hungary and other parts of Europe. These aging directors worked in the most sophisticated production set-up in the world with their skills matched by the skills of the technicians who had at their disposal the very best equipment: cranes, tracks, dollies... and colour. Although many of the aesthetic characteristics of Hollywood cinema can be seen across its history, the speedy spread of television during the 1950s had pushed the industry into desperate technological innovation. Wide screen and colour differentiated it from its rival medium. Many of the great films of the time had something of the darkness (in spite of Technicolor) that Edward Said associated with 'late style'. In *Le Mépris,* Godard's portrait of Fritz Lang dramatises his sense of the ending of this cinematic era and the eclipse of its heroes.

By the 1970s these films were fading rapidly into the past and were no longer part of a 'living' cinema, replaced by New Waves and, as time passed, beginning to achieve cultural respectability and to be recycled in specialised retrospectives. Early in the 1970s my fetishistic love for Hollywood cinema and my investment in the connoisseurship of moviegoing was rendered 'old' not only by the decline of the system and passing time, but also by feminism. At least on the face of it, my relationship with cinema began to shift towards investigation and curiosity. However, the transition was not so simple. As Christian Metz points out, the film fetishist and the film theorist are two sides of the same coin: the film fetishist's pleasure in 'technology', his or her 'film buff' accumulation of expertise, tips over into the domain of theory. He says 'interest in the equipment and technique is the privileged representative of *love for cinema*.'[7] Following Freud, he points out that the process of disavowal always includes awareness of what is disavowed: it has knowledge value. He says:

> Indeed the equipment is not just physical it also has discursive imprints, its extensions within the very text of the film. Here is revealed the specific movement of theory: when it shifts from a fascination with the equipment to a study of the different codes that this equipment authorises.

To love it, he goes on to say, is to question it:

> Initially an undivided passion, entirely occupied in preserving the cinema as a good object (imaginary passion, passion for the imaginary), it subsequently splits into two divergent and reconverging desires one of which looks at the other: this is the theoretical break, and like all breaks it is a link: that of theory with its object.[8]

Following Metz, I would argue that, however radical my break with the Hollywood cinema, it was my love of that cinema that enabled its analysis and the same Hollywood cinema became the source material for my feminist critique. From another direction, in the UK, as indeed elsewhere, film culture gathered its forces into a different kind of movement, one that opened new horizons of possibility to create a political cinema and political film theory. This active and 'de-fetishised' love for cinema could return home at last, as attention turned towards its reinvention through avant-garde films and the new ways of thinking they generated. In the films I made with Peter Wollen during this period, a residual reference to Hollywood persisted, if only in a negation of its cinematic, narrative and anthropomorphic conventions.

By 1995, VHS had introduced the interactive relationship between film and spectator that would have increasing significance for me over the next decade and a half as I paused, slowed down and replayed VHS tapes. It was then that I began to find myself turning back to the Hollywood films I had loved, finding that I had spent, so to speak, fifty years in the 1950s. This renewed interest and pleasure in Hollywood cinema of the 1950s involves the fragmentation and breaking down of narrative linearity and the gradual materialisation of 'the film within the film' through the repetition and stilling of certain sequences. These sequences turn on seconds, moments that take on disproportionate importance, a flash of understanding that had previously lain invisible for decades. While this form of spectatorship grew out of traditional textual analysis, it was also symptomatic of the new online film culture of the clip and the remix[9]. The concepts I evolved for this later form of spectatorship (in my 2006 book *Death 24 Times a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image*) the fetishistic ('possessive') and the theoretical ('pensive'), while differing in their structures of desire, are essentially inseparable and thus descended from Metz's

inextricably linked love of cinema and its theorisation. I have been uncertain as to whether my return to Hollywood of the 1950s is one of sentiment, or rather a fetishistic repetition of this constitutive moment of my film history, or whether it is a tribute to the cinematic power of that 'late style', the concentrated energy of a system of representation that was on the verge of vanishing forever. A graphic control of the cinematic apparatus combined with flourishes of imagination and wit characterises the period style and fuses with a *mode* of performance in front of the camera that Hollywood stardom had always nurtured but remains specific to, even determined by, that particular *mode* of production. After so long, these films seem to hold, within their celluloid coils, meanings and emotions that they are now able and ready to surrender.

In the idea of the remix, past and present are separate but fused, as the 'then' is, as it were, rediscovered through the 'now' of the reworking. But the material also undergoes a rearrangement so that its hidden thought can be revealed. Both these processes depend on montage. Giorgio Agamben points out:

> There are two transcendental conditions of montage: repetition and stoppage. Debord did not invent them, but he brought them to light; he exhibited the transcendentals as such. And Godard went on to do the same in his *Histoires*. There is no need to shoot film any more, just to repeat and stop.[10]

And he goes on:

> that cinema, or at least a certain kind of cinema, is a prolonged hesitation between image and meaning. It is not a matter of a chronological pause, but rather a power of stoppage that works on the image itself and pulls it away from narrative power to exhibit it as such.[11]

Needless to say, he insists that these two (repetition and stoppage) can never be separated but form a single system. Although Debord worked before the digital age, and Godard on the threshold of its arrival, these aspirations have been generalised by the new technology and Hollywood cinema has become a source of knowledge where once it was an embodiment of belief. Reworking films into re-arranged fragments enhances and makes visible processes of perception,

defamiliarising the familiar. To return to Hollywood films of the studio system exaggerates the process, all the more effectively and precisely because the films are themselves familiar but can, uncannily, be transformed, by stoppage and repetition, to allow the image (once possessed) to become thoughtful (pensive). As fetishisms reconfigure in the new contexts of changed technological and economic systems, it seems appropriate to allow the spirit of 'slow history' (in the spirit of 'slow food') to emerge out of film's transformed materiality. The stopping, repeating and indeed the slowing, of the cinema of the past achieves this both actually and metaphorically. Vivian Sobchack sums up this slowness:

> Unlike the 'freeze frame' and against the increasing accelerations of cinematic and social life, the operations of slow motion visibly and sensually interrogate those accelerations in what seems a 'revelation' – not of immobility or stillness but the essential movement of movement itself. Furthermore, this revelation of the essence of movement emerges correlatively with an extended sense of time – precisely what today we feel we lack.[12]

* * *

As I looked back on the time when I edited the essays together and chose to collect them under the title *Fetishism and Curiosity*, I remembered some aspects of the historical context that had influenced me. In the early 1990s, I was increasingly concerned about the contemporary tendency to dismiss the Enlightenment and its tenets of rationality just at the moment when religions were returning to haunt culture and politics. Confused by the many other political and economic shifts and changes and unprepared for this phenomenon, it seemed to me as though 'belief' was seeping back into political and social life while aspirations associated with a utopian desire for 'knowledge' were slipping into obscurity. At the same time, the triumph of neo-liberal economics, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the defeat of developing nations' attempts to control their own resources paradoxically summoned up, in Jacques Derrida's words 'the spectres of Marx', not only his commitment to economic and social equality and his analyses of capitalism but his understanding of religion's adverse contribution to human history. The new advances of capitalism, the eclipse of socialism (as a political project)

went, it seemed not uncoincidentally, side by side with the rise of religions. Often, First World intellectuals felt obliged to tolerate the return of religion in the Second and Third Worlds as a matter of 'identity', although, more often than not, the intellectuals of these cultures struggled to hold on to secularism and the socialist aspirations that usually went with it; simultaneously religion also returned heavily to the populist, conservative politics of the United States. *Fetishism and Curiosity* never directly addresses the question of religion, nor does it mention its usual contribution to the oppression of women, but I remembered my background thoughts when I found this quotation from Jimmie Durham in a recent article by Anders Kreuger:

> I don't want to consciously put things in my work that are from my background. But I don't want to take them out either. I just want to be an intellectual and I happen to be a Cherokee... I want to think about art. I want art to be part of humanity's thinking process, not humanity's 'feeling' process. We already have enough emotions, enough feeling, but we don't have enough thoughts.[13]

I would like to end this 2012 foreword by repeating the last few sentences of the 1995 introduction:

> To look back at the aesthetics of disavowal in Hollywood cinema is, still, an attempt to rearticulate those black holes of political repression, class and woman, in the Symbolic Order. But it is also an attempt to return to consider the relationship between cause and effect in the social Imaginary at a time when the relation between representation and historical events becomes increasingly dislocated. Spectacle proliferates in contemporary capitalist communication systems. At the same time the reality of history in the form of war, starvation, poverty and racism (as an ever-escalating symptom of the persistence of the irrational in human thought) demands analysis with an urgency that contemporary theory cannot ignore.

In spite of the changes that I have tried to trace in this new foreword, this demand seems even more intense today.

Laura Mulvey
November 2012

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Marilyn Monroe: 'an irridescent glamour that had a special relationship with the camera itself' (see p. 60)

Chapter 7 has been adapted from my book *Citizen Kane* (BFI Film Classics; London: BFI Publishing, 1992, 2012).
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Preface

The essays in this collection were written over the last five years. Although they are presented in thematic groupings rather than in the strictly chronological order of their writing, the sequence roughly corresponds to shifts in my ideas or, rather, to the inflection of my preoccupations. The Introduction represents an attempt to give an overview of the notions of fetishism deployed throughout the book. While writing most of these essays, I thought of fetishism as a psychological and social structure that disavowed knowledge in favour of belief. At the same time, I was interested in considering curiosity, a desire to know, as a counterpoint to the blind-spots of fetishism. By degrees, I came to realise that the psychoanalytic concept of fetishism, because it could maintain knowledge and belief simultaneously, was more open to processes of decoding than other symptoms of unconsciousness. Its symptoms appear reified as things that attract the gaze but also provoke curiosity. Rather than seeing fetishism and curiosity as irreconcilably polarised, I tried to find a more dialectical relation between them.

The cinema is the main, but not the only, cultural area under consideration in this book. And my ideas are explicitly influenced by feminism, even if issues of femininity are not, for instance in the last few chapters, obviously under discussion.[1] More and more, I have tried to bring together questions of history with the theories that have formed my way of thinking. Part One is about Hollywood cinema of the studio system and so remains within the framework of most of my earlier writing about cinema. The chapters in Part One very obviously go back over ground that I have covered before, such as the Hollywood melodrama, Douglas Sirk, woman as spectacle in Hollywood

cinema, and so on. But here I have also attempted to provide a historical dimension to my discussion of these familiar topics.

My use of the term 'history' here is too monolithic. Chapter 1, 'Americanitis', is explicitly autobiographical and traces the imbrication of my intellectual development with successive waves of British film theory. Chapter 3 is only a 'sketch towards a mapping' of familiar questions of spectatorship and femininity onto a more historical framework. It suggests that, while the iconography 'woman as spectacle' persists throughout the Hollywood cinema, the meaning and address of the icon may alter significantly according to inflections within the social, economic and even political dimensions.

My new concern with questions of history is partly a grateful response to the research into the history of the Hollywood industry that is taking place, primarily in the United States. However, I can only respond to, rather than participate in, these important discoveries and, even more importantly, nuances given to our understanding of film history. As my work with film theory only very gradually acquired an academic context, I have remained an 'essayist' and, I would say with no intended self-denigration, a dilettante. This book reflects the strengths and the weaknesses of my intellectual formation, and I hope that it will be read in this light.

In the process of editing these essays, most of which have been published previously in more or less different forms, I found that certain themes kept recurring almost to the point of repetition. I have left the repetitions, particularly in Part Two, seeing them as a thread of ideas which, as they accumulate, bear witness to a struggle to articulate images of femininity which I find both fascinating and difficult. In this section, I shift from the deciphering spectator, who is not so distantly related to Barthes's 'reader' and who responds to the semiotic regime developed so particularly by Hollywood, towards the 'rebus' of the fetishised female body. I found that I returned over and over again to the way that this body materialises as an imaginary spatial relation, a phantasmatic topography. Julia Kristeva's perception of the abject body, particularly as reformulated in Barbara Creed's work on the horror film, helped me to find a figure for the space into which the fetish collapses.

Part Three examines two films which explicitly refuse to displace abjection onto a fetishised female figure while carefully working through the

psychic process of disavowal from a male point of view. I argue that through this refusal, the films demand a spectator who deciphers *politically,* as the refusal of fetishism is linked, in both cases analysed, to recognisable political crises. In *Citizen Kane,* Susan quite simply cannot sustain the status of fetish object, but after her attempted suicide she equally simply refuses to be 'abject'. Susan's behaviour is, in Freud's terms, normal. She leaves Kane to bear the burden of his own fetishism and abjection. Similarly in *Xala,* when the Western fetish objects collapse around El Hadji, the film inexorably and almost unbearably returns to the male body in the final scene of ritualised abjection. But no political solution, or even context, is available to *Blue Velvet,* the subject of Chapter 9 and one of the most darkly revealing films of the all-American psyche trapped in the excess of its own success.

'Postscript' on the artist Jimmie Durham closes the book in order to provide a reverse image of the Introduction. It was with relief that I found myself absorbed in a work of cultural production that made full use of irony as an aspect of oppositional art. Irony dismantles the surface certainties of fetishism and it dispels abjection as daylight does a vampire. The state of abjection is essentially anti-intellectual, beyond thought, and is related to the state of cultural breakdown experienced by colonised people. Durham's use of irony breaks both the binary opposition of colonised and coloniser and the negative aesthetics of the twentieth-century avant-garde so that his art opens up a dialectic which, once again, demands an active, ironic, spectator.

One implicit assumption running through the collection is that economic relations are changing in the world today. This is not to imply that apocalyptic change will convulse the world with the coming of the millennium. Quite clearly, however, the communications and entertainment industries, gathering momentum for over a century, have come to play a central part in late capitalist economies. With these considerations in mind, Marx returns onto the agenda of cultural criticism with renewed, and significantly altered, force, particularly the Marx who said: 'The hand-mill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steammill, society with the industrial capitalist. The same men who establish their social relations in conformity with their material productivity, produce also principles, ideas and categories, in conformity with their social relations.'[2]

This Marx would no doubt have reflected with interest on the Rupert Murdoch phenomenon. For most of my intellectual life, such simple correlations would have fallen into the category of vulgar Marxism. Nowadays, the gap of determination between economic structures and culture seems to be narrowing.

This book, however, is not about the future and hardly even the present. The fetishisms in this book meet on the cinema screen, which for quite some time has not been a dominant mode of cultural production or the leading entertainment industry. Two broad themes recur within the more explicit topics under discussion. First of all, I am interested in understanding the ideologies and mode of address that belong to 'the societies of the spectacle' as structures of the psyche. Quite simply, if a society's collective consciousness includes its sexuality, it must also contain an element of collective unconsciousness. In order to avoid the connotations that belong to the concept 'collective unconscious', I have preferred to use the term 'social unconscious' (or sometimes 'collective fantasy'). I have not built on the Freudian aspect of Althusser's theory of ideology, but concentrated rather on the way that feminist theory has constructed collective fantasy into a 'symptomology' through an analysis of popular culture, particularly the cinema. Sexuality moulds these symptoms in two ways. On an overt level, twentieth-century commodity culture has flaunted sex. On another level, such erotic images disavow those aspects of a society's sexuality that are hidden and disturbing. In this sense, the obvious discourse of sexuality appears as a symptom, literally, in the case of the cinema, screening its repressions.

Although the 'screen' metaphor is temptingly evocative, it is important to remember that symptoms only emerge into the world transformed by displacement and condensation. The images that then appear, on the screen for instance, are coded. The second theme of the book revolves around the way curiosity might be transformed into a political process of deciphering images. And these images call out for the help of psychoanalytic theory to decipher them. My use of psychoanalytic theory is not sophisticated and is more in the spirit of 'dollar-book Freud' than 'Lacanian Freud'. It corresponds, that is, to the inscription of psychic elements into the works of popular culture that I analyse and it attempts to 'make visible' rather than to 'read in'. However, the

process of reading is also one of enjoyment and excitement and, I think, relates closely to 'pleasures of the mind's eye', such as the riddles that Oedipus contemptuously dismissed when he defeated the Sphinx. My interest in a deciphering reading that appeals to curiosity also leads back to the cinema. The cinema combines word and image in the manner of a rebus and all cinema spectatorship has to be, to some extent, a decoding of meaning. Hollywood cinema, most of all, encrypts meanings into its formal properties, most particularly, of course, through a highly stylised use of *mise en scène*.

My approach to cinema is directed at its 'curious' nature, not at its 'realist' nature. Rather than its ability to reflect the world, I am interested in its ability to materialise both fantasy and the fantastic. The cinema is, therefore, phantasmagoria, illusion and a symptom of the social unconscious. It is precisely these elements that are fun to decipher, for any audience: for the detached 'Brechtian' spectator as well as for the feminist critic. In this book I have concentrated particularly on the forms of encryptment that affect images of femininity and fetishism.

Returning to fetishism: it is the most semiotic of perversions. It does not want its forms to be overlooked but to be gloried in. This is, of course, a ruse to distract the eye and the mind from something that needs to be covered up. And this is also its weakness. The more the fetish exhibits itself, the more the presence of a traumatic past event is signified. The 'presence' can only be understood through a process of decoding because the 'covered' material has necessarily been distorted into the symptom. The fetish is on the cusp of consciousness, acknowledging its own processes of concealment and signalling the presence of, if not the ultimate meaning of, a historical event. The fetish is a metaphor for the displacement of meaning behind representation in history, but fetishisms are also integral to the very process of the displacement of meaning behind representation. My interest here is to argue that the real world exists within its representations. Just as simulacra seem to be poised to take over the world, it is all the more important to attempt to decipher them.

The Gulf War did happen, in spite of what Baudrillard may claim.[3] Its picturing at the time, and the way its picturing was staged on television, are integral parts of its historical truth as well as being symptomatic of world