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***Helmut Newton - Fashion, Fetishism, Pornography and the nude***

*by*

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“What shocks at first; becomes commonplace in time.” (Steele, 1996, p.42)

This statement certainly appears to be true of the photographs of Helmut Newton. Newton, particularly during the 1970's, produced a body of work infamous for its sexual narratives and use of fetish props, which created uproar when first published, especially in some feminists camps where they are still deemed scandalously pornographic. Today the work of Helmut Newton is continuing to create a stir in the media, as it reports upon the apparent influence his photographic works are having on current fashion design.

It is therefore my intention, to investigate recent claims made by international designers like Jean Paul Gautier and Dolce and Gabanna, that Newton's photographs have inspired their work, and as a result current fashion trends. Alongside this, in chapter one, I will define fetishism and discuss to what extent it is influencing current fashion trends. I will also discuss the influence fetishism has exerted on women's fashion throughout history.

Newton's history, to date, has spanned three continents, and seven decades. Today he lives at 7 Avenue Saint-Roman in Monte Carlo, a home he has shared with his wife June since 1981. Newton, also enjoys spending time in Los Angeles and Hollywood, where he adores the climate. However, Newton began life on October 31st 1920 in Berlin, and was forced to flee what had become Hitler's Germany at the age of eighteen due to his Jewish background. His intended destination was Tientsin, but he ended up in Singapore - the reason for this diversion has never been explained, although it is rumoured that during this time Newton operated as a gigolo. Newton's only comment on his arrival in Singapore was “everything that has ever happened to me has been accidental and because of a women”. (Koenig, 1988, p.282).

From Singapore, Newton travelled to Australia. The war was not yet over and so he



worked from 1940-1945, as a chauffeur in the army. Eventually, he set up a small photographic studio in Melbourne where he photographed everything from portraits, to fashion photographs to weddings. It was in this studio that he first met and photographed his future wife, June. They married on May 13, 1948, a year after they first met. June, who began her working career as an actress diverted her attention towards a career in photography twenty five years ago. As a photographer June works under the name of 'Alice Springs', a reference to her native country, but also an attempt to distinguish herself from her famous husband. Yet June has always taken a keen interest in Newton's career. Lynn Barber insists that it was June "who encouraged him to explore his dark obsessions, she was the one who urged him to shoot pornography." (Barber, 1998, p.9). While Newton acknowledges June as being highly influential in his work he adamantly refutes the notion that she is his boss (Barber, 1998, p.9).

For her part June, or rather "Junie" or "Pussy" as Newton affectionately calls her, maintains that Newton's 'kinkiness' is confined entirely to his photographic work and with her he is never anything but a "pussycat" (Barber, 1998, p.13). Helmut and 'Junie' settled in Australia for seventeen years and here Newton established himself as a photographer with Australian Vogue. Then, British Vogue, interested in his work enticed him to London. However, disliking the weather and feeling restricted in his work, claiming that Britain "is not a visual society", he and June left London in 1956 and moved to Paris (Koenig, 1988, p.282). Arriving in Paris with all their belongings packed into a white Porsche, without any money, but at least appearing rich, Newton found work with French Vogue. French Vogue was to provide him with "a more hospitable outlet for his creativity and mischief" than its English counterpart (Koenig, 1988, p.282). By the early 1970's, Newton was working for American Vogue. However, in 1971, "working too hard, living too hard, smoking like a chimney, doing forty pages for American Vogue at one time" he suffered a heart attack (Newton, Koenig, 1988, p.282). His attitude to life dramatically altered after his near encounter

## *introduction*

with death, and he decided to only accept those commissions that really interested him.

There are those, despite the alledged adoration within fashion circles, who continue to claim that the only commissions that really interest Newton, are those of a pornographic nature. Therefore, in chapter two, I shall address the issue of pornography - what is pornography? is it always a negative force toward women? and, are Helmut Newton's photographs pornographic? Finally, in chapter three, following Newton's decision to stop photographing the nude, I shall discuss his approach and theory on the nude.

### Fetishism

Sigmund Freud theorises fetishism within the bounds of the Oedipus Complex and links it to the fear of castration. He considers it “an exclusively masculine perversion which consists in deriving sexual gratification from association of a female sexual object with a fetish”(Wright,1993,p.113). Richard von Krafft-Ebing, a nineteenth-century sexologist, was also of the opinion that lust is associated “with the idea of certain portions of the female person, or with certain articles of female attire.”(Steele,1996,p.11). Feminists disagree, claiming that there are cases of female fetishism. Notwithstanding claims that “collecting memorabilia is the specifically female form of fetishism”, in general, it is agreed that “female fetishism is invisible”.(Wright,1993,p.116)

If we return to the Freudian Theory and accept the fact that fetishism is linked to male fear of castration, all fetish objects can, therefore, be considered “a substitute for the mother’s missing penis”. The fetish object is often believed to be “the last thing a small boy sees before the horror of the nothing.” This is possibly why objects like shoes and underwear are the object of a fetish.(Wright,1993,p.114,&p.117)

### Fetishism and Fashion

Steele maintains that the ‘playful’ use of fetishistic themes, over the last three decades has been increasingly assimilated into fashion. But, the question remains, has fashion been influenced by fetishism before this? According to Prudence Glynn in Skin to Skin, the answer to this question is a very definite yes, as she claims that :

*Ever since man discovered that through the medium of clothes he could change the shape of the species with comparatively little discomfort, he has used this knowledge to transform ‘fashion’ into a long-running game of sexual hide and seek.*

(Glynn, 1982, p.28).



Glynn puts forward the argument that throughout history, various parts of the body have been emphasised through the medium of fashion. The most popular points of interest include the foot ( perhaps most famously emphasised in China as the 'Lotus Foot' and in western societies through high heels ) and of course the breast and waist have also enjoyed periods of emphasis in fashion. In western societies the waist has been a particular point of focus. Indeed , Glynn tells us , only three periods of fashion neglected to emphasise it ; those periods being : the late fifteenth century, the Regency Period and after World War I. Obviously interest in the breast and the waist can be attributed to primal reproductive instincts. According to Glynn, the waist is linked with virginity, but oversimplification must be avoided.

If, as we have seen, the fetishisation of an object is linked to the fear of castration, the process of emphasising a particular part of the female body through clothes is simply to direct attention away from the notion of castration which, according to Chadwick ,

*is alleviated by arresting the look on an object, the fetish ...  
Accordingly the threat of castration is subsequently allayed  
by displacing attention from the real women (whose lack is  
always perceived as potentially mutilating ) to her image with  
its illusory promise of wholeness.*

(Chadwick, 1995, p.12)

Arguably the purpose of fashion in each era , therefore, is to provide an illusion of female 'wholeness' and to provide the (male) viewer with enough areas of interest on the body to direct attention away from her 'lacking'. If we accept the implications of the notion of castration for fashion we must address the corollary issues. If the purpose of female attire is essentially for the gratification of the male viewer, then men are obviously the instigators of female fashion.





*fig.1 : design by Thierry Mugler*







*fig. 2: materials with fetish associations on the catwalk, design by Vivienne Westwood*



### Current Fashion Trends

It is, therefore, apt that Helmut Newton is frequently credited as the instigator of female fashion in this era. Leading fashion designers hail the “ master of shock photography ” as inspirational to current fashion trends (Fraser, 1993, p.33) . Even Jean Paul Gaultier maintains that “ What Helmut Newton is doing in his photographs I am doing in my clothes” (Howell, 1993, p.51). So what exactly is Jean Paul Gaultier and his contemporaries ‘doing’ in their clothes and how do their designs relate to what Helmut Newton is doing in his photographs? In 1992 , according to *‘Vogue’* , “bondage, leather, rubber....everything from a fetishist’s dream is available from Alaia, Gaultier, Montana, Versace.” (Steele, 1996, p.33) Forms of dress with established fetish meanings form the basis of many catwalk shows. Versace even named one of his collections Bondage and Thierry Mugler went so far as to name his most recent book, containing his acclaimed designs, Fashion Fetish Fantasy . A brief flick through the pages of his book leaves one in little doubt , but that this famous designer of high fashion, is most definitely inspired by fetishism (see fig.1). Fetish-inspired themes in fashion employ ‘underwear as outer wear’, corsetry and bondage and of course, it also follows that the preferred choice of materials also have fetish associations - lace, leather, rubber, its stretch jersey equivalent and fur (see fig.2 ). Inevitably what appears on the catwalk, inspires high street fashion , and eventually filters down to the masses.

As I’ve previously mentioned, Jean Paul Gaultier and his contemporaries are pointing their fashion fingers at Helmut Newton , claiming that he is largely responsible for these current fashion trends , which are allegedly inspired by sexual perversity. Newton himself claims that he, along with contemporaries like Guy Bourdin, by drastically altering how fashion was photographed and perceived visually, in turn influenced fashion design (Chadwick, 1995, p) It was necessary for them to alter how fashion was photographed ,because, the nude, shocking and attention grabbing when first employed in fashion photography in the 1960s, had lost all ability to shock by the early 1970s. It was, therefore , the responsibility of Newton and his contemporaries to





*fig.3: Store Dummies*



reinvent fashion photography , and create new tactics to shock. And shock they did , by virtue of being given a free hand by their editors in the late 60s and early 70s. Newton himself alleged : “ They let us onto the streets of Paris like wild dogs to do literally what we liked. ” (Rodriguez, 1995, p.16). Given this artistic freedom , fashion photographers at this time , in particular Helmut Newton and Guy Bourdin proceeded to shock their public , who were ill-prepared for the violent, sinister photographic works produced. It must be noted that Newton’s photography, however, never exuded the same level of violence as seen in the work of Guy Bourdin, although both photographers employed similar subject matters and narratives, bringing overtones of prostitution, lesbianism, violence and murder into fashion photography . Such themes caused a violent reaction from the public. Predictably , newspapers ran articles condemning fashion photography as having become a “ subcategory of pornography ” (Steele, 1991, p.81). On the one hand, the public could not justify photographs that were based on extreme sexual orientations (lesbianism, prostitution...), on the other hand, as Valerie Steele noted , “sexual disorientation makes for great theatre”. (Steele, 1991, p.81.) To introduce themes of dominance and submission , gender confusion and prostitution , was a clever way of creating a dramatic scene which would perform as the backdrop to fashion . Fig.3, which appeared in French Vogue during the mid 70s, is one such example . In this case two store dummies replace human models and appear to be engaged in a lesbian encounter. Model 1. lounges on a marble table , while model 2. leans over her , the strap of her dress having slipped from her shoulder to reveal one bare breast . Newton’s models frequently reveal just one bare breast , and are often dripping in diamonds and expensive jewellery , wear incredibly high stilettos , bright red lipstick and have painted nails. The overall look is one of falseness. He possibly employs store dummies instead of and as well as human models to further emphasise this sense of falseness.

Along with flashy jewellery and make-up, Newton is credited with introducing fetish items, such as whips, handcuffs and corsets into fashion photography. Such items





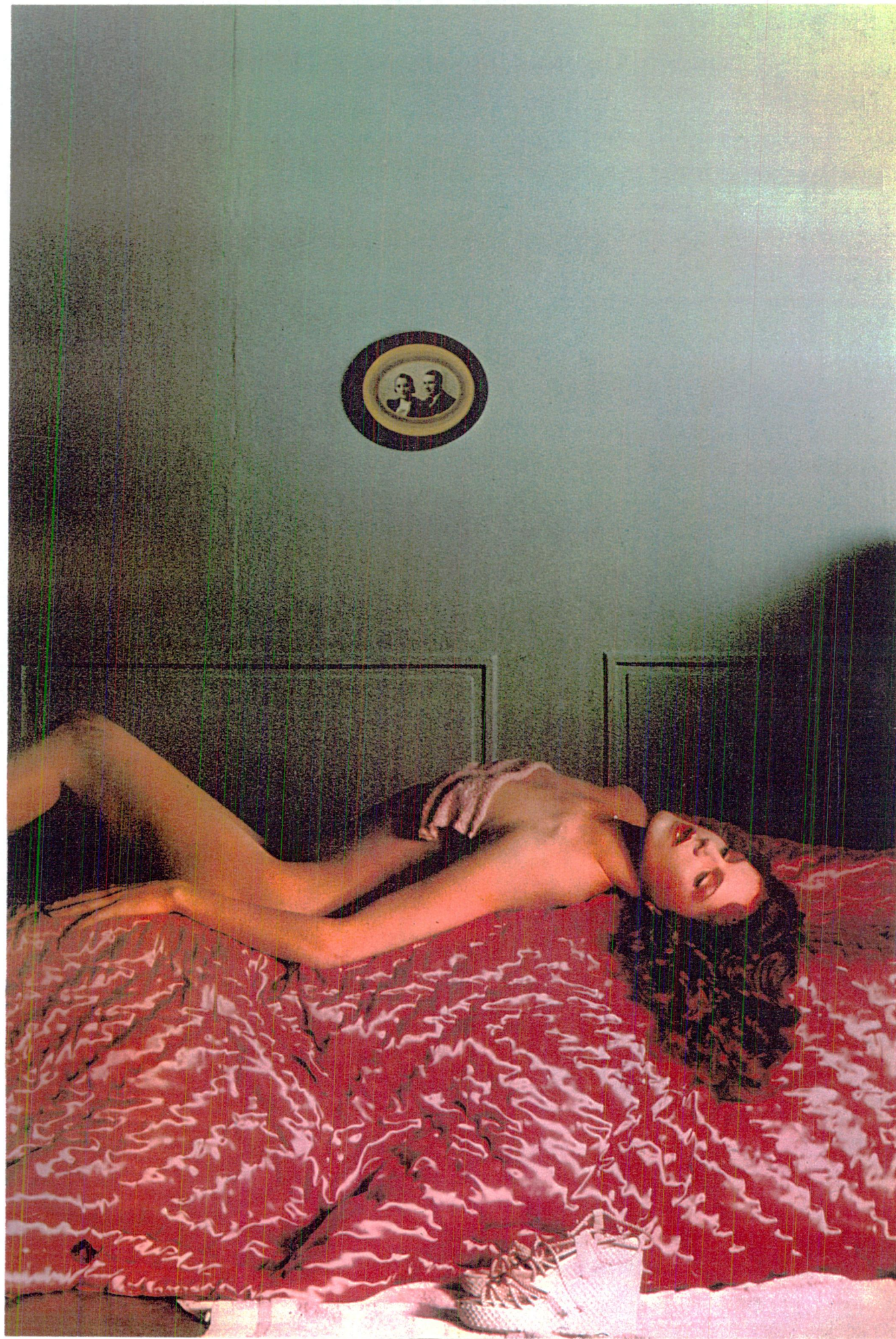
*fig.4: model and store dummy*



could only be found in sex shops - a popular destination for those seeking props for Newton's photographs. Newton adamantly refutes any argument that these items are elements of violence, claiming that "every erotic device I use goes back at least two centuries.", (Newton, *Nude Theory*, p.161). Just because every erotic device he employs can be traced back two centuries, and by incorporating them into his photographs he may be making some kind of historical reference, doesn't mean that they are automatically deemed non-violent. However, I believe, he is capable of using erotic devices without having them appear violent. For example, fig.4, which appeared in the French magazine *Qui*, shows a naked female model in a bondage shot with a store dummy. One would expect any photograph portraying a naked woman, tied from head to toe in ropes, to have definite violent overtones. However, I don't believe this to be true in this case, perhaps due to the fact that the model is smiling confidently, and, apart from being restricted somewhat by the ropes, she appears to be in a relaxed position. In regard to his use of erotic devices, Newton claims that when the fashion he is photographing is interesting enough he will concentrate on the fashion itself. But it is rare that fashion provides him with the drama and interest he requires to photograph and so he covers it up with a lot of devices - especially erotic devices (*Nude Theory*, p.162).

So was Newton responsible for introducing erotic, fetish symbolism into fashion? In order to answer this question accurately, one must first assess what else was happening in the world at this time. After all "what makes fashion so significant, perhaps as an art form, is that it reflects the times" (*Nude Theory*, p.162). And, while not wishing to in any way demean the individuality of Newton's work, his contemporaries, most notably Guy Bourdin (see fig.5), were also creating fashion photography where terror, murder and pornography was said to meet fashion. It can also be argued that, the same was true of cinema at this time, which, in the 1970s became increasingly violent and sexually explicit. Certainly by the 1980s, the prevalent delight in power, sex and violence was reflected in television. Popular soaps like \_





*fig.5: photograph by Guy Bourdin*



Dynasty and Dallas, for example, showed power, money and sex as being intrinsically linked- just as Newton portrayed in his photographs.

Another name representative of the link between fetishism and fashion is Vivienne Westwood, renowned for her own personal fashion style and the part she played in instigating punk fashion. Fashion critics continually cite punk as being instrumental in introducing fetishism into fashion (Steele, 1996, p.37). Reacting against convention, Punks chose to appropriate fetish styles of dress , which were considered a forbidden discourse and redirected or undermined its meaning. Sexual clichés , such as fishnet stockings and stiletto heels were manipulated and incorporated into the punk style. Elements of the punk style exercised a strong influence on 1980s designers , in particular, and permeated their catwalk shows. As a natural trend such influences became incorporated into mainstream fashion , but modified into a more acceptable style .

Therefore , I believe , in answer to the question , can Helmut Newton be solely credited with the creation of the erotic fantasy of our age, which influenced fashion? the answer is, no. However , I believe he played a vital role in its creation , but , I feel the preceding paragraphs have shown that he must share the credit for the current trends in fashion toward the fetish. Yet the media , and other fashion designers continue to hail Newton as the instigator of all 'kinkiness' in present day fashion, claiming that " high fashion has come round to his view" (Howell, 1993, ). When the media refer to Newton's view, however , I believe that they are not simply referring to his view of a fashion linked with fetishism ,but are in fact referring to something else entirely? Fashion designer, Liza Bruce, in 1994, claimed, that in Newton's photographs from the 1970s and the 1980s, it was "the idea of the women being very strong " that excited many designers to create clothes (Steele, 1996, p.43). Newton's representation of woman became the muse of top designers. Therefore, I believe, it was the vision and





*fig.6: physically strong models*



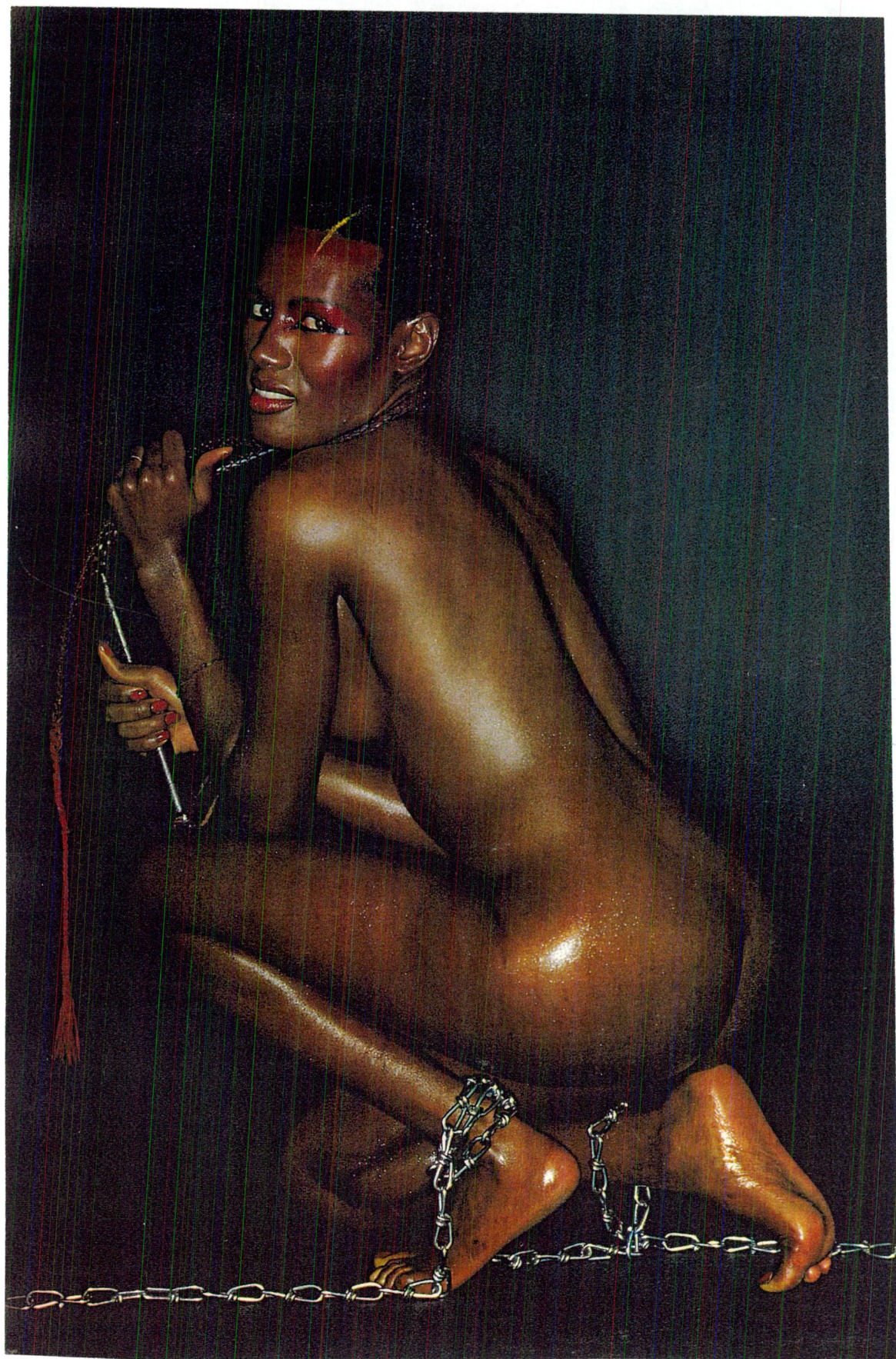
essence of woman, as seen in his work , that designers found inspirational not necessarily the fetishistic element.

So just who is Newton's woman ? While the epitome of the early 90s favoured waif-like models such as Kate Moss , Newton's type of woman is always physically strong , and for this reason , frequently referred to as Amazon(fig.6). His women are also usually white, and he has a preference for Northern European 'white' women , in particular , with the exception of English women, whose skin he considers pinkish. His delight in northern skin is highlighted in his book Nordfleisch, which roughly translates as 'Northern Meat', a title chosen from the name of a meat factory. Notwithstanding his declared adoration of women, his choice of title brought immediate charges of fascism and sexism against him. The charge of a fascism is often considered ironic, as Newton, while not a practising Jew was nevertheless forced to flee Hitler's Germany with his Jewish family during the war.

Following the release of his portrait of Grace Jones (fig.7), he was once again charged with being a facist. Photographing her naked, kneeling and in chains, Newton argued that there were " no racial or slave connotation ", that the portrait was in fact a reference to King Kong in Chains . As Rhoda Keonig points out , however , "the visitor is not convinced that portraying a black woman as a monkey is an improvement". One could be forgiven , for questioning the sincerity of Newton's claim, that he wishes to glorify woman, considering such photographs.(Koenig, 1988, p.282).

In his alleged glorification of women, he shows them to be " willing participants " in the sexual narratives of his photographs . According to Newton, himself , " there must always be a certain look of availability in the women compounded by overt aggression and self-possession"(Rodriguez, 1995, p.16). Frames from the Edge, a television





*fig.7: Grace Jones, King Kong in chains*





*fig.8: harnessed or wielding the whip*



documentary discussing Newton and his work showed a photographic shoot where he was trying to capture this mixture of aggression and self-possession. The model was wearing dangerously high stilettos on which she failed to walk in between takes. Newton positioned her towering above a roast pig and instructed her to "look dangerous, very vampy." (Newton, *Frames from the Edge*, 1988)

Renowned for his ability to charm models, Newton manages to create an atmosphere in which his models display strength, and also a sense of distance, where they appear to be in a trance-like state, yet he always has them emanate a sense of availability. It may seem paradoxical to refer to strong women as appearing available, yet in Newton's women both characteristics co-exist. I believe it is this that provides the real influence in fashion circles. For example, Gianni Versace, when defending his 1992 collection, Bondage, claimed that women are strong, correlating their liberation with the freedom to be sexually aggressive. However, critics like Holly Bruback (New Yorker's fashion columnist), as quoted by Steele, was confused as to whether or not Versace's designs exploited or empowered women - "It could go either way. Either the Versace woman is wielding the whip, or she's the one harnessed and being ridden around the room wearing a collar and a leash" (Steele, 1996, p. 164). This statement could equally be applied to the work of Helmut Newton, in particular fig. 8, where his model poses with a saddle on her back. Similarly to Versace, Newton also claims that women, as they appear in his photographs are always dominant and triumphant, yet in this photograph one might be forgiven for asking, exactly who is being dominated here? The woman in question is in an extremely servile position. However, I consider her to still be imbued with a sense of power. This feeling of power I believe, comes in part from the confident assured expression on her face. Her sense of power is also derived from her surroundings, which are completely devoid of chaos or interference, but are instead extremely neat and organised. This gives the impression that this is a planned act, where the woman is in control of the situation, although her pose would suggest otherwise.

I believe this comparison between the work of Helmut Newton and Gianni Versace, proves that Helmut Newton's woman , has indeed become the muse of the top fashion designers.



The word 'pornography' was first published in the Oxford Dictionary in 1857, and since then its generally accepted meaning is "...the explicit description or exhibition of sexual activity in literature, films, etc., intended to stimulate erotic rather than aesthetic or emotional feelings" (Concise Oxford Dictionary). Pornography has probably been in existence since the human form was first represented in pictorial form. However, Lynn Hunt in her book, The Invention of Pornography, claims that pornography did not emerge until much later. She maintains that "The erotic and obscene literature of the Renaissance developed an elaborate visual currency integral to the formation of pornography". The invention of print allowed for mass availability of such material which resulted in increased "enrichment of the erotic imagination". (Hunt, 1993, p.59) 1836 saw the creation of a separate section for pornography at the Bibliotheque National in Paris. Housed in what became known as the Reserve Room, one was required up until as late as 1992 to fill out a detailed form stating one's "precise reason for request" such requests were frequently denied (Hunt, 1993, p.9).

#### Helmut Newton and Pornography

Although the work of Helmut Newton was never imprisoned in the Reserve Room or it's British counterpart, the Private Case in the British Library, it is frequently labelled as pornographic by certain fractions of society. For his part, Newton, is not bothered by such a reaction, in fact he appears to revel in any strong reaction towards his work whether it is negative or positive, "actually I don't give a shit. I'm just pleased when people read things into my images because I take it that they are really looking at them" (Rodriguez, 1995, p16). Indeed, pornography, in the form of pin-up posters from his older brother's 'girlie magazines' as a young boy are said to have provided Newton with his earliest photographic inspiration. Certainly, one can argue that Newton shoots his fashion photography in a style normally only seen in pornographic works, a style redolent of voyeurism. Newton is proud to announce that he is a voyeur and even goes so far as to proclaim that "if a photographer says he is not a voyeur he is not an idiot" (Steele, 1991, p.96). Steele informs us that "Voyeurism and





*fig.9: hard-core imagery*





*fig.10: pornographic assignment*



Exhibitionism are intrinsic to fashion photography, however, in fashion photography there is a distinction as to the level of Voyeurism, or rather how it is perceived ” (Steele,1991). Steele refers to *regular* fashion photography as soft-core, which she tells us is softly and naturalistically lit. Such photographs usually depict a limited range of stereotypical poses and Romantic Narratives. The consumer of such images can *pretend* that he just happens by chance to be looking at a nearly naked person. Steele thus refers to Newton’s photographs, with his characteristic use of harsh, white light , as hard-core. Hard-core images, through their use of hard - flash call attention to the presence of the photographer, and do not afford the consumer the same level of illusion and comfort as that offered by soft - core imagery. All pretence (as offered by soft-core images) that the model is blissfully unaware that she is being watched , is completely destroyed in Newton’s work. An example of his harsh use of lighting can be seen in fig.9 , which he produced for Vogue Homme during the 70s. Such is the severity of Newton’s flash , that the model’s shadow is cast on to the wall behind her.

The fact is that Newton, regardless of whether he is shooting the fashion pages of Vogue , prefers to photograph in a manner normally reserved for pornographic assignments. Fig.10 is an example of the work he produced for the pornographic magazine Playboy in the mid 70s , and it must be argued that it is lit with exactly the same harsh white light as seen in the previous example. One may also argue that its subject matter , although perhaps more blatantly expressed , is similar to that of fig.3 which was printed in French Vogue.

Fig.10 is but one example of many, which he produced for Playboy magazine, who are reputed to have said to him that they wanted “nothing as kinky as you have in French Vogue” (Koenig, 1988, p.196,p. 282). Newton enjoyed a good working relationship with such magazines during the late sixties claiming that “at that time they were quite an adventure” (Newton, *Nude Theory*, p.153) . However, he refuses to accept any





*fig.11: metal leg brace*



pornographic assignments today. This can be attributed to the fact that Newton believes that a limited number of standardised poses , and a lack of imaginative scenarios have created a situation, where present day 'girlie magazines' have become like mail order catalogues .

Although, as I've already established, Newton produces work in a pornographic style, I'm not of the opinion that all his work is pornographic. The sole intention of pornographic material is , afterall , *to stimulate erotic rather than aesthetic or emotional feelings* in the viewer, which I do not believe to be the intention in Newton's work. However , his work continues to be brandished as pornographic. Most recently, his pictures showing women in wheelchairs and legbraces, caused outcry, when they appeared in a 1995 issue of American Vogue . He, as always, claimed that such props have a legitimate reason for being there - the photographs are about high heels, and according to Newton, the wearing of such shoes is a dangerous operation and the woman risks breaking her ankle, therefore the inclusion of ankle braces in such photographs is logical! Fig .11, shows one of the controversial photographs considered shockingly pornographic by the American public. The leg brace which Newton commissioned a doctor friend in Berlin to make is unlike regular plastic braces , and is an elaborate metal structure. The cinematic work of Erich von Stroheim is said to have been influential in this case, Newton drawing inspiration from the Neck Brace used in Von Stroheim's 'La Grande Illusion.' (Barber, 1998, p.13)

Newton began incorporating medical props into his photography following his heart-attack in 1971, and claims that the first photographs he took for himself were taken ,while he recovered in hospital at this time, while wired up to a trocardiogram (fig.12). Later portraits of Newton while in hospital, in various surgical positions, followed in 1985 and in 1986. These pictures began, what was to be labelled as Newton's 'Surgical Chic' phase.





*fig.12: self portrait during an electrocardiogram, 1973*



However genuine Newton's inspiration or alleged aims in the case of these photographs in American Vogue, the public claim otherwise. Personally, I do not find them in the least bit distasteful, However, perhaps the public's distaste arises from the fact that he uses medical devices in other photographs in a manner that is considerably less savoury. For example fig. 13, shows one of Newton's models posing in the doorway of what appears to be an office, wearing a medical neck and chest brace along with suspenders and stockings. In general, society may be somewhat sceptical of any photographs portraying surgical devices, where there is even the slightest hint of a sexual narrative, as in the case of any of Newton's work. The reason for this, I believe, is due to the fact that this theme is being employed in a sordid manner in other areas. For example, David Cronenberg's film Crash, which stars James Spader, Holly Hunter and Elias Koteas. The main protagonists in the film are shown to find sexual pleasure from the injuries received during dangerous car crashes. The statement on the cover, claims that the film depicts Autoerotism in overdrive and crashes the boundaries between sex and danger. Newton's pictures in comparison to Crash ought to appear wholesome yet each received equally negative reaction from the public .

Medical devices when used in photography obviously cause offense, but even those works devoid of such props are often condemned as pornographic. Once again one must assess Newton's motivations when producing such work. Frequently, I believe, his photographs are about making references to his childhood experiences. Berlin, his home as boy, is often cited by Newton as having a major influence on his work, a fact that is often noticed by those interested in his work. Philippe Garner, the first collector of Newton's work and a director at Sotheby's has even noted that "he behaves as if he were emotionally frozen at the date he left Germany" (Koenig, 1988, p.282). In fact, where ever Newton makes his home June says he is always a Berliner. In Frames from the Edge he expressed his love of the light in Berlin and the Black Forest. He claims that these regions possess a unique light particular to them, which he described as a black light that gives photographs the quality of an etching. This light only occurs when





*fig.13: surgical props*



it is cloudy, and he does not enjoy photographing in Berlin when it is sunny. Although, not apparently wishing to live there, he, allows this city or rather this city as it was when he was a child to continually inspire him. He says that there was "an air of mystery" (White Women, 1976) about the Berlin of his childhood and compares the mystery of the city to that of the stories of Schnitzler, which he pin-points as having a major influence on his work. Schnitzler's writings, Newton claims, without containing any scenes of love-making, are sensual and erotic, containing an atmosphere of heavy Austro-German sensuality (white women, 1976). I am of the belief, that much of his photographic work is about capturing on film the sense of mystery and 'Austro-German sensuality' that he finds in Schnitzler's writings. He points out that Schnitzer's writings express a form of sensuality and eroticism, without depicting the explicitness of actual sexual practices.

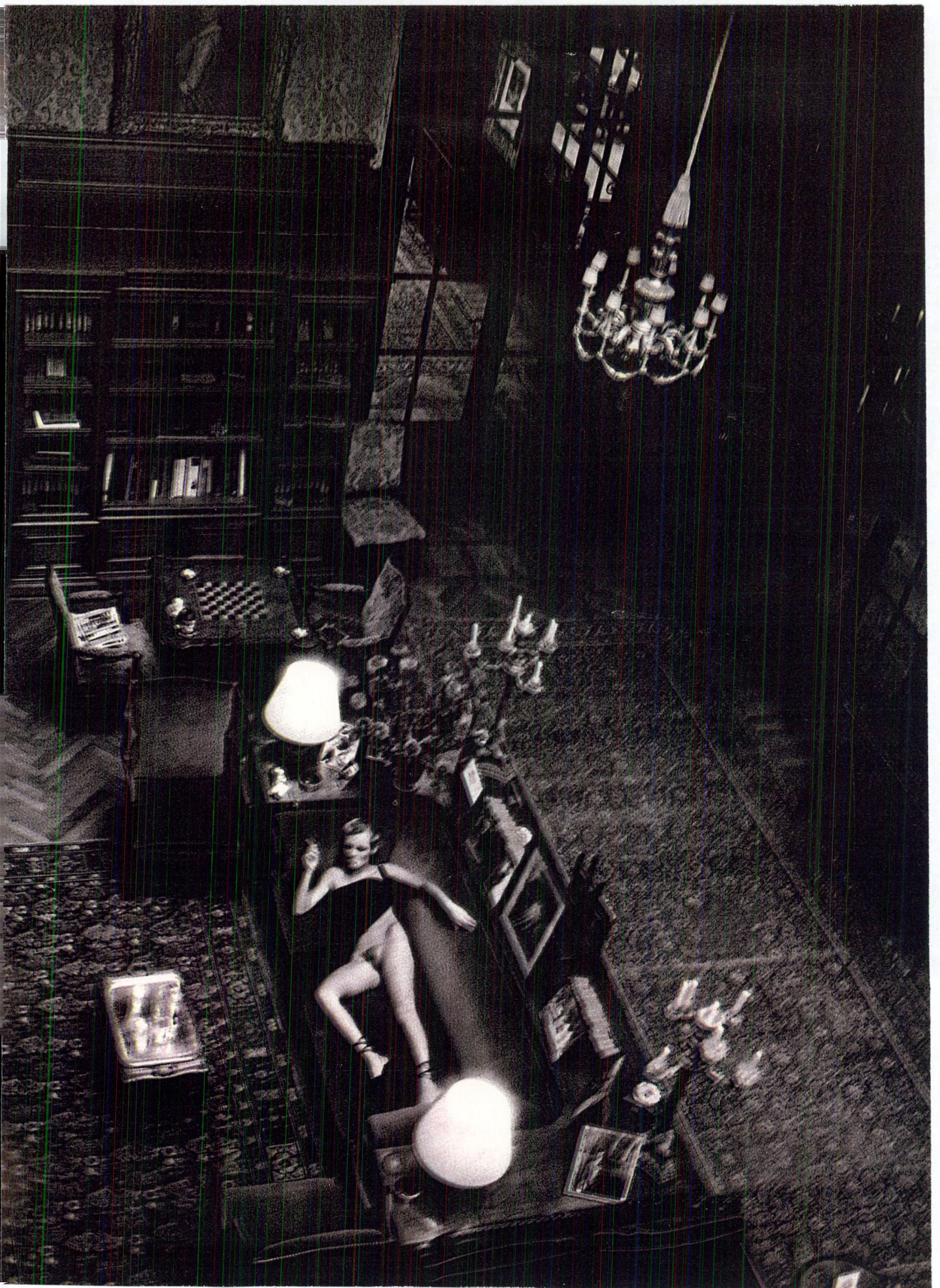
Sexual practices, however are always depicted in pornographic works. If we concede that pornography has only one aim - to arouse sexual feelings - who would be so bold as to claim that Helmut Newton's photographs had but one aim . Anyone who accuses Newton of producing pornography , does just that. Julian Rodriguez noted that "In his most potent work the intention and hence the meaning is always shrouded. In pornography this never the case". (Rodriguez, 1995, p.16). So , precisely what is Newton trying to achieve when he photographs. There are those who would argue that Newton's only aim, by photographing fashion in a pornographic manner , is to subvert fashion. William Handles with whom Newton worked at Harpers and Queen claims that in his fashion photography, Newton is "snarling at fashion looking at it with contempt. He is like restaurants that treat people badly - they're always full". (Vogue, 1988, p196). While claiming that Newton is mocking fashion through his photographs he says Newton is "one of the few photographers who really likes women". Meanwhile some feminists want Newton's head, considering him a women hater whose main objective is to degrade women. This accusation Newton dismisses as ridiculous. "I am out to glorify women because I really adore them" further to this he





*fig.14: Villa d'Este, Lake Como, Italy, April 1975*



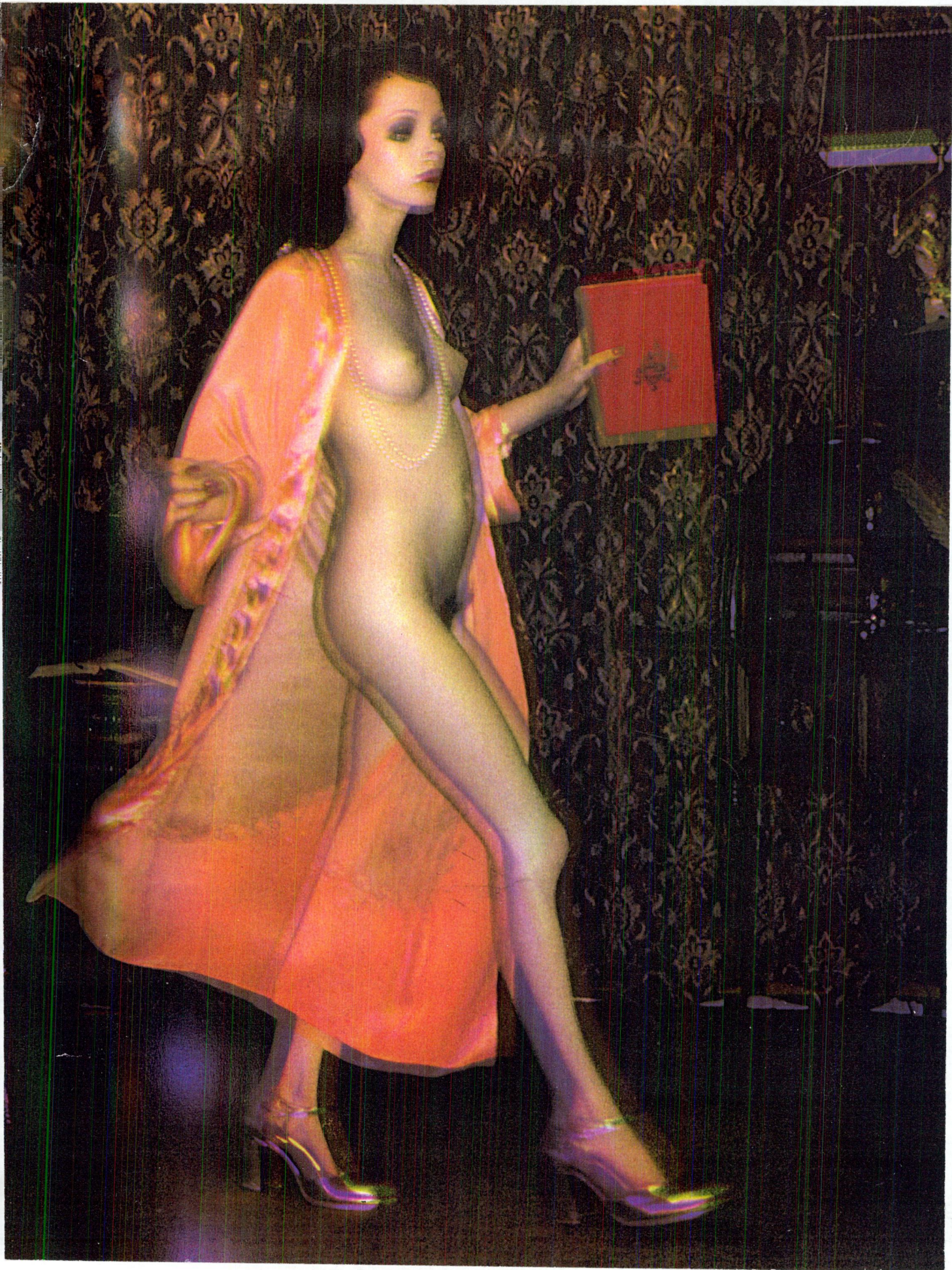


*fig.15: Roselyne relaxing, August 1975*









*fig.16:Brigitte Ariel in Oscar Wilde's room, L'Hotel Paris 1974*







adds "why would I spend my life photographing something that I hate". This statement could equally be applied to the previous accusation that Newton is 'snarling at fashion' and his photography only serves to mock it. Why would he devote so much of his time to fashion photography if indeed he hated it?

Reflecting upon his work, Newton maintains that his photography is "more a kind of document of how a certain woman of a certain class lives - or how I would like her to live." (Barber, 1998, p.11). The woman he wishes to document comes from the bourgeois class, and as the son of a Berlin button manufacturer, Newton himself would have spent his childhood living as one in this class, yet he engages in his documentation without the slightest hint of nostalgia, others would say without the slightest hint of reality.

In chapter one, I discussed who is Newton's woman, and it was decided that she is physically strong, white skinned, dominant and always has a look of availability about her. Now, exactly how he would like her to live, as portrayed in his photographs must be examined. If one considers the photographs in figs. 14, 15 and 16, one ought to get some sense of how he would like her to live. She apparently lives a life of luxury, where she can relax in a hotel sipping wine with a companion, or she can enjoy a cigarette in the privacy of her own chandeliered drawing room. She also has time to indulge her interest in literature, while naked except for an open robe, a string of pearls and silver stilettos. She dresses impeccably in beautiful and obviously expensive clothing, her make-up is glossy and always perfectly done, she wears expensive jewellery and has no qualms about revealing her body in public (fig. 14). In private she also likes to be naked or partially naked and is obviously relaxed with her body (fig 15 & 16). The suggestion that she engages in many sexual scenarios is also made in Newton's photographs.

The location of Newton's photographs are crucial in order to place Newton's woman



in her class . Palatial hotels frequently form the backdrop to Newton's elaborate scenarios, as is the case in fig.14, which was shot at Villa d'Este, near Lake Como in Italy in 1975. Fig.16 was also photographed in a palatial hotel, in fact it was taken in Oscar Wilde's room in L'Hotel Paris. His fascination with hotels apparently began as a child when he holidayed in some of Europe's fashionable palace hotels with his parents. He finds such hotels exciting and erotic, with their rich interiors. The real eroticism, for Newton, however, is derived from the idea that one is a stranger in such hotels and never at home. Coupled with this is , the knowledge that as a guest in a hotel, the bed you sleep in has been slept in before (clean sheets naturally but....) and that the walls of the bedroom you now look at have been looked at by others too. All this apparently excites Newton and for him, gives hotels a unique and wonderful feeling of mystery. This fact, in particular, is highlighted in fig.16, which as I've already stated was shot in Oscar Wilde's room. The model in fig.15, Roselyn, also posed for Newton in Napoleon's bed in 1975, further emphasising Newton's delight in the knowledge that someone else, famous in this case, has spent time in these rooms.

This particular feeling of mystery apparently eludes those constructing artificial photographic backdrops. For this reason , Newton prefers to confine his photographic sessions, for the most part, to ready made locations, like that of hotels. Newton relays one incident, whereby his editor sent him and his team on location to a volcanic island. Obviously the editor in question was of the belief that Newton should use the volcano as the backdrop to his photographs. On the third day of the assignment, Newton's editor was enraged to find that Newton had not left the hotel complex - taking all his photographs there. On his editor's instructions, Newton took his team to the volcano where a series of photographs were shot. Newton maintains that such an exercise was unnecessary and that the photographs shot at the volcano were not any more potent than those shot inside the hotel complex.

Usually extracted from what he sees everyday, Newton's locations,as I've already





*fig.17: class incongruities*



stated, are always an intrinsic part of the narrative of the photographs. His choice of setting often adds a dramatic twist. In one such case, he photographed his models embracing on a street stairway (fig.17). Steele, upon examination of the photograph declares that Newton's objective was to capture

*" The sexual dynamics of status incongruities - a wealthy woman draped in fur and jewellery grasps her chauffeur in her arms, kissing him passionately. Not only does she have public sex with a social inferior, she literally steps down into a stairwell to do so."*

(Steele, 1991, p.92).

Just as Newton finds his locations in places that are familiar to him, the same is true of his narratives. He claims that the stories his pictures depict are inspired by that which he sees around him, admittedly he twists it somewhat, but this we can assume is to heighten the drama within the picture. One could easily dismiss some of Newton's work as having no other purpose other than sexually explicitness - as is the case with pornography - but on closer examination, it is clear that this is not the case. In one such photograph, a woman is being undressed by a suited 'gentleman' (fig.18). At the time the photograph is taken, much of the woman's clothing has already been discarded - with the exception of a pair of sheer briefs with a logo of the Eiffel Tower emblazoned on the front and her knee high black boots which her 'gentleman friend' is in the process of removing. For Newton, the author of this drama, it is a genuine story, based on life. " Obviously ", Newton insists " this takes place after work.... "

He proceeds to explain how this photograph documents, how a certain class lives, or rather how he perceives them to live. The businessman in the photograph is dressed appropriately, in a blue shirt, smart suit and 'nice cuff-links' and drives a black D.S Citroen - which Newton explains is a " classic middle-class and government car in France. " Further to this, he explains that the newspaper the business-man reads - strategically placed on the seat beside his nearly undressed friend - is the establishment newspaper 'Le Monde'. Newton explains that, because the business-man has not





*fig.18: Eiffel Tower, Paris 1974*



reached the stage yet, where he takes his friend to a hotel, he undresses her in the car. According to Newton, such encounters occur all the time during the summer in the Bois de Boulogne ” (Newton, 1976)

Robert Hughes argues that Newton’s photographs are “ extremely class-ridden pictures - they say you can do an infinite number of things to people as long as they are lower-class for you to use.” There is no question, but that Newton’s photographs explore class issues and class incongruities. Nowhere in his work however, can I find evidence to validate Hughes’ claim that Newton’s work depicts abuse of power between the classes.

Another argument concerning Newton’s depiction of the classes and its links with the issue of pornography, actually has its foundations in the dialogue accompanying the photographs in his book. In which it is asserted that his images “ describe a world where money buys a particular brand of erotic liberation, where the exquisite packaging of sexual objects and erotic ideas conveys a kind of absolution on dreams that could so easily appear sordid” (White Women, 1976).

Are we to believe from this that through his photographs, Newton is of the opinion that money can buy one sexual liberation? The corollary seems to suggest that certain sexual practices, if engaged in by the lower-classes would appear wanton, but if one has money , such acts can appear normal . Or is the author of this extract, from Newton’s(own) book, claiming that Newton’s photographs are indeed pornographic and Newton is simply “ putting a glossy spin on images. ” ; previously only published in specialist magazines (Rodriguez, 1995, p.16). Which leads one to ask the question does marketing help define what is and is not pornographic? An assistant at Hamilton’s, where Newton’s work was shown seems to think so, claiming that although Newton’s work had similarities to ‘dodgy pictures’ in Soho, “ Its not been marketed like something in Soho, which I think is the difference. ” (Koenig, 1988,



p.282). So, are we to believe, that Pornography can be defined by how work is marketed?

Hilton Kramer, meanwhile claims that it is not the marketing that distinguishes it from pornography, explaining that current acceptance of Newton's work is due to society's decaying standards. Newton's work, according to Kramer, was once: "considered to be pornographic or scandalous, outside the limits of respectable taste, but so decayed are those standards that he can be considered almost mainstream."

(Koenig, 1988, p.282)

Newton, however, is of the opinion that "the threshold for ruffling the public is probably lower than it was 25 years ago" (Newton, Rodriguez, 1995, p.16). In the early 1960s and 1970s, Newton and his contemporaries produced work for French Vogue. Which is considered daring today, especially in America, where, Newton considers "political correctness is a sickness" and uses every opportunity to express his disbelief at how conservative he considers American society to be (Newton, Rodriguez, 1995, p.16). However, he welcomes censorship stating "that it is not very interesting to work in a totally permissive society - it's much more interesting, creatively, to have a sort of framework." (Newton, Barber, 1998, p.12). Much of Newton's inspiration seems, in fact, to come from his interest in exploring the boundaries of art and good taste - both words he refers to as 'dirty words'.

While Newton appears to defend Censorship, The feminist camp is currently in debate on the subject. Pro-Censorship feminists claim that pornography is a dangerous threat to women. Defining pornography as any "Materials that are 'degrading' or dehumanising' to women", they claim that "porn is the theory, rape is the practise" (Strossen, 1995, p.19), (Hunt, 1993, p.35). Anti-Censorship feminists, however, adamantly argue that the anti-pornography definition of pornography is such,



that any material relating to human sexuality can be deemed pornographic. Strossen declares

*We adamantly oppose any effort to restrict sexual speech, not only because it would violate our cherished First Amendment freedoms - our freedoms to eat, think, speak, sing, write, paint, dance, dream, photograph, film and fantasise as we wish - but also because it would undermine our equality, our status, our dignity and our autonomy. ” (Strossen, 1995, p.14)*

She goes on to argue that throughout history, in all cultures where women's sexuality has been suppressed, so too has their equality.

Strossen claims that the word pornography is so loosely used, in American society, in particular, that an AIDS clinic was inhibited by the authorities in their attempt to advertise safe-sex. Strossen continues her argument, giving numerous examples of sexual harassment cases, where even glances and looks, it seems, can be interpreted as a threat to women, and by current pro-censorship definition, therefore are pornographic. So are we to live in a pro-censorship society where even glances and looks can be deemed pornographic, and sexual expression is to be repressed?

Personally, I believe, that pro-censorship camps need to re-define their definition of pornography, because at present, it encompasses all sexual expression. They should return to their dictionaries, where it is stated, plainly, in black and white, that the word pornography means to stimulate erotic feelings, something I consider outside the abilities of a glance.

At present considering the fact that safe-sex campaigns and certain human glances are deemed pornographic by pro-censorship groups, it is hardly surprising that Helmut Newton's photographs are also frequently labelled as pornographic. However, if one judges his work against the dictionary definition, I do not believe that Newton's work



*pornography*

can be considered pornographic ,as I believe his aims and objectives are not to arouse sexual feelings.



“I now have a strong reaction against the exposed female body”, states Newton.

At the age of seventy-five, the photographer has now decided that he has photographed too many naked women. Declaring that he has shot enough nudes to last a lifetime, he now desires to photograph women clothed from head to foot, believing that it will be a challenge to work under such constraints. (McClure, 1998).

A surprising decision, it would first appear, from the man whose name has been synonymous with the exposure of female flesh, for over thirty years. However, those close to Newton ought to know his low threshold for boredom and remember that for Newton, the purpose of his photography has always been to challenge himself. Once he was tired of doing bondage inspired fashion photography in the early 1980s, feeling himself unable to bring anything fresh to the subject he just stopped - as appears to be the case here. Newton believes that it is imperative that a photographer continually changes and evolves.

He began his evolution towards his notorious career of photographing female nudity, by photographing, what he refers to, as clothed nudes, where the body was only partially revealed (fig.19). The Nude in its classic sense, only became serious for him much later. While allegedly adoring women, Newton fails to remember a model's face. Frames from the Edge records one such occurrence, whereby Newton was interviewing a model for one of his shoots. The model had worked previously for him, yet he failed to recognise her, until she showed him her portfolio, containing the work he had produced with her. Newton himself refers to models as a commodity, and one of his reasons for continuing to work as a commercial photographer, is because, it allows him access to large numbers of women. He prefers, as previously stated, Amazonian women, greatly disliking fashionable ‘waif’ like models. His preferred models have big backs and narrow waists. He finds imperfections attractive, and his models are, he believes, the antithesis of models used in ‘girlie magazines’. The





*fig.19: clothed nude*









*fig.20:Charlotte Rampling at the Hotel Nord-Pinus, Arles 1973*



model's personality is also of major importance to the photographer who likes to photograph "women who appear to know something of life" (White Women, 1976). While this statement would appear to contradict his earlier statement that models are a commodity, Newton maintains that he only enjoys photographing those he has a reaction to - that is, those he loves, admires or hates. However, it is often argued that models in Newton's photographs lose all sense of their own identity, becoming Newton's personas. Whether or not this is true, those who have posed for him consider him absolutely charming, and he is never short of famous women wishing to have their portraits taken. He has photographed Elizabeth Taylor and Paloma Picasso to name but two.

Regardless of whether he loves (as he claims) or hates the women he photographs, he denies that he would ever mock women. He considers the female nude to be stripped of everything and at her most vulnerable. In this one instance, it must be agreed, female nudity does not make women appear vulnerable and helpless - Newton's nudes are always shown to be dominant and empowered. This may be due, in part, to the fact that Newton's models are not vulnerable, as he maintains that his models "can give themselves completely to the camera, knowing that nothing ugly can be shown" (Newton, *Nude Theory*, p.153).

Naturalness in Newton's world is considered ugly; he once declared everything beautiful to be false and by this logic described astro-turf as the most beautiful grass. Newton's world, as depicted in his photographs is glossy and artificial in appearance. His photographs often bear a close resemblance to that of a fantasy film-still, as though the protagonists were caught in mid-action on a glossy Hollywood film. Those, like Charlotte Rampling, as seen in fig.20, for example, who have been photographed by Newton often regard him as something of a still movie director. Certainly, if one considers the elaborate narratives and props incorporated in each of Newton's photographs, one could not but agree. In this example of Charlotte Rampling, taken in





*fig.21 & 22: double portrait-clothed and unclothed*





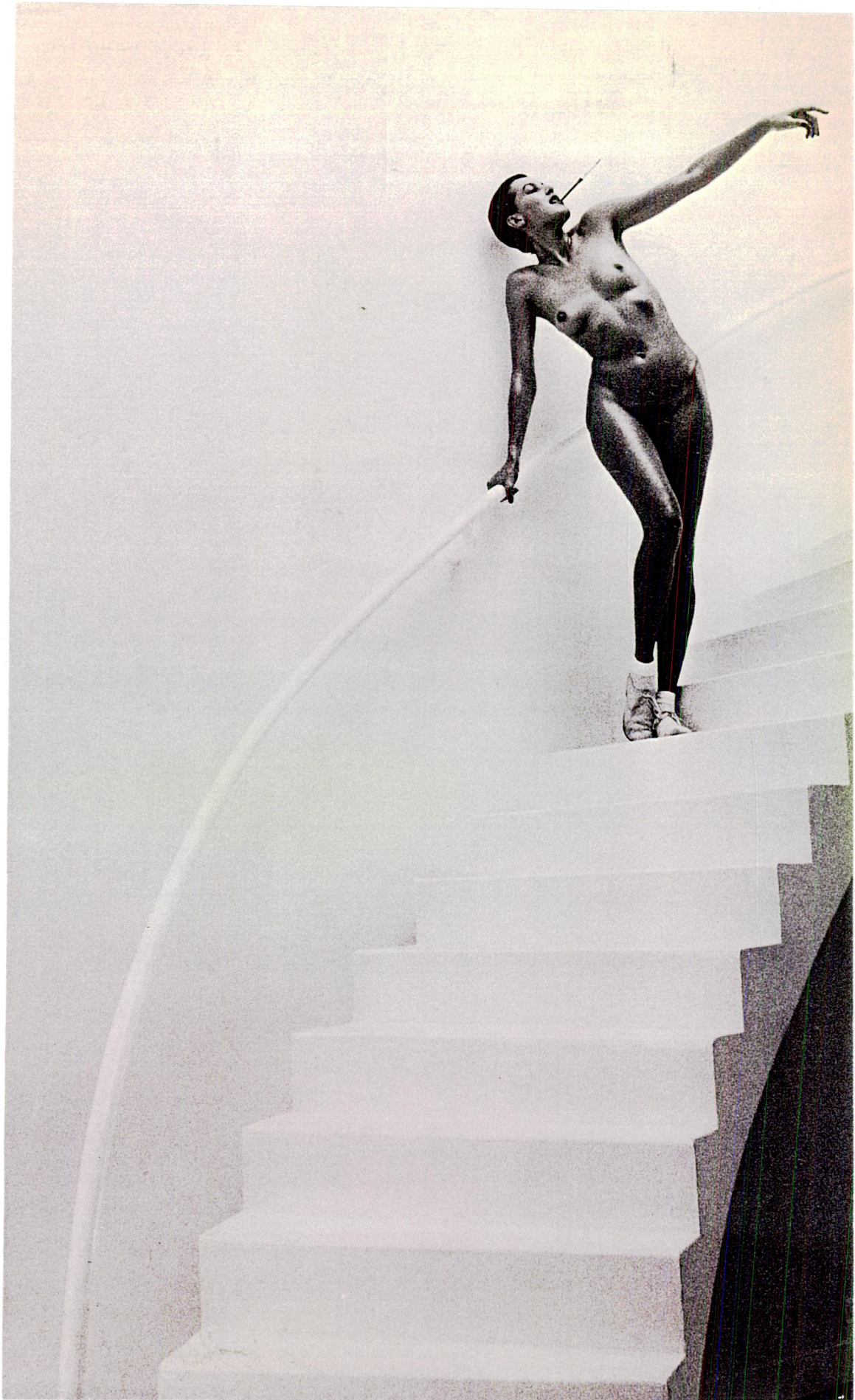


1973, she is shown relaxing in the lush surroundings of Hotel Nord-Pinus. One would not expect to find a nude women sitting on the table of such a hotel sipping wine. Yet, Newton's nudes frequently appear in public places, always looking as confident as though they were dressed from head to toe in Versace. As pointed out in Georgina Howell's article, those bodies demand clothes. In fact, Newton claims that much of his delight in female nudity arose from his interest in photographing women nude doing exactly what they would be doing if clothed. His interest in the clothed women versus the nude was highlighted in a series of double portraits he produced during the early 80s (fig.21 & fig.22). In both fig.21 and fig.22 the models' poses, make-up, hair and shoes remain constant, the only alteration between shots being the clothes or the absense of them.

As part of this theme, Newton frequently positions his models in what can be considered classic fashion poses, inspiration often coming from Vargo's fashion plates, as is the case in fig.23. However, this pose along with some of the more extravagant poses Newton employs, could easily appear dated if his models were clothed. However, "This" he maintains "is not satire of fashion photography. Not at all. It's a consciousness within myself" (Newton, *Nude Theory*, p.158).

The model in fig.23 wears flat shoes, this is highly unusual for a Newton nude. In general, he prefers to shoot his models wearing stilettos, as can be seen in the previous examples. High heeled shoes, according to Newton give extra definition to the muscles in a woman's leg. Also a women wearing stilettos stands differently to that of a woman wearing flat shoes. Fig.23, was taken as part of a series of photographs, for the book Nude Theory, in which Newton photographed this model over a period of a day. In this excercise he used the changing light in the studio along with shoes to indicate the passing of time. The flat shoes in fig.23 were employed to convey that it was early in the day, while the stilettos worn by the model later in the excercise indicated that it





*fig.23: classic fashion pose*



was evening. Newton uses these devices just as movie makers use costume in their films.

When dealing with the nude, the skin, however, is naturally the most important element of costume, and Newton insists that any segment of revealed flesh be covered in a cream, giving the skin an artificial polished appearance. This act helps him achieve his overall look of 'falseness'. Further to this, when photographing in colour, it is usual for the master of fantasy to add blue light to counteract the warm colours he dislikes. The 'falseness' extends, of course, to the poses of the nude, which Newton insists, must be controlled, believing that too many ugly things may occur - shoulder blades protruding, for example. He also states that it is not "a question of whether or not the model looks natural. Women often get themselves into positions that I don't think are natural at all, but they do it." (Newton, *Nude Theory*)

While attempting to control the nude, Newton also tries to achieve a sense of voyeurism. However, he claims that "the trouble with a very controlled nude is that it is not voyeuristic anymore. The immediacy is lost" (Newton, *Nude Theory*, p.162). He believes the ideal nude to be erotic, and its eroticism is, evidently, derived from the illusion that the moment is forbidden and secret. As a natural progression from this, he claims to delight in those moments considered private in a woman's life, for example, as she looks at herself in the mirror, unaware of any onlooker (fig.24). The woman in fig.24 scrutinises herself in a hand mirror, high above the Parisian traffic, seemingly oblivious to the photographer's presence.

Such a theme immediately brings the work of the painter, Degas to mind. Degas' paintings were preoccupied with the images of women bathing and dressing - private moments. Newton, however, does not cite Degas as inspirational, rather the paparazzi photographs taken of Jackie Kennedy Onassis during the 1970s. Declaring photojournalism in this case to have achieved the ultimate coup in voyeurism, he





*fig.24: a private moment*



believes "the perfect picture is a controlled snapshot that does not look as if it is controlled or contrived. " (Newton, Nude Theory , p.162)

Now that Newton has decided to move away from nudity into the realms of the clothed, one wonders whether he will attempt to have his models pose as though naked just as though clothed. One also pauses to wonder what private clothed moments Newton will attempt to capture as a snapshot!



There is no escaping the fact that fashion over the past three decades has been influenced by fetishism. However fetishism throughout history, it seems, has been intrinsically linked with fashion. Historically, fashion has been employed to emphasise certain parts of the female anatomy. It is suggested that such an act alleviates the fear of male castration.

Newton along with his contemporaries in the 70s drastically changed how fashion was viewed in photography. They therefore exerted a certain level of influence upon fashion designers. Newton, however, cannot take sole credit for the current cult status fetishism is enjoying in the international fashion arena. He must, instead, share the credit with contemporaries like Guy Bourdin, and also with 1970s film makers and 1980s punks, to name but a few.

Nevertheless, I believe that claims that Newton's work is proving inspirational in fashion circles can be substantiated, as Newton's woman has become the muse of fashion designers in the 1990s. His photographs portray a woman who is liberated, strong and free to be sexually aggressive, exactly the type of woman who would feel comfortable wearing any of the designs featured on the international catwalks.

Newton's work is often deemed pornographic as a result of its narratives and the poses this sexually aggressive woman finds herself in. Much of his opposition has its origins in America. This is hardly surprising, if one considers that there have been cases in America where safe-sex campaigns and certain glances have been brandished as pornographic. The aim of all pornographic material is to stimulate sexual feelings. While Newton produces work in a style reminiscent of that of pornography, and has produced work for pornographic magazines, his work, I believe, is not about arousing sexual feelings. Therefore it can not be regarded as pornographic. He considers his photography to be a documentation of a type of woman from the bourgeois class and how he fantasises her to live. Appropriately his photographs mimic fantasy film stills



### *conclusion*

and are extremely glossy and posed in nature. His choice of location is also crucial to the overall plot in all of his photographs and Platial hotels frequently form the backdrop to his elaborate scenarios.

He rejoices in all things false, something he extends into his photography of the nude - applying cream to make the skin appear polished, insisting that she always wear glossy make-up and in most cases stiletto heels. One of his prime concerns when photographing the nude is that she appear exactly the same as she would if wearing clothes.

As Newton closes the chapter on the female nude and embarks on a new quest to photograph women dressed from head to toe, one looks forward to seeing what new shock tactics the master of shock has in store.



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