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National College of Art and Design

Fine Art: Painting

The Mysteries of Love: Exploring the Meaning of Fetishism

By

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Submitted to the

Faculty of History of Art and Design and Complementary Studies

In Candidacy for the

Degree of Bachelor of Arts

1999

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Paul O'Brien and Edward Murphy for their help.

Table of Contents

List of Plates

INTRODUCTION

> The fetish was a hybrid object that sprang from the abrupt encounter of radically heterogeneous cultures during the era of mercantile capitalism and slavery. Far from being a purely phallic icon, the fetish stands at the crossroads of a crisis in social meaning. The fetish is the embodiment of social contradictions which the individual cannot resolve at a personal level, precisely because they are social contradictions, however intensely they are lived by the individual. The contradiction is displaced unto and embodied in a fetish object which is thus destined to recur with compulsive repetition. By displacing power on to the fetish and then manipulating the fetish, the individual gains symbolic control over what might otherwise be terrifying ambiguities. For this reason the fetish can be called an impassioned object. Fetishes may take a myriad of guises and erupt from a variety of social contradictions and may be seen to be structured by recurring though not necessarily universal features: contradiction, displacement, embodiment, repetition and emotional investment.

Ann McClintock: The Return of Female Fetishism and the Fiction of the Phallus – New Formations No. 19 Spring 1993

The Oxford Illustrated Dictionary defines "fetish" as an "inanimate object worshipped by primitive peoples for its supposed inherent magical powers or as a being inhabited by a spirit – anything irrationally reverenced." However, since Freud published Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality (1905) the word "fetish" has been generally accepted as referring to perverted sexual practices (in particular male sexual practices). The purpose of this thesis is to explore the possibility of dismantling the origins of the current meaning of the word, in order to examine its role in a historical, social and cultural context.

An in-depth discussion of the challenges issued by 20th century feminist art to the traditional insistence on male exclusivity in the domain of sexual fetishism is beyond the scope of this limited thesis. For many

years artists such as Kiki Smith, Cindy Sherman, Louise Bourgeois and Mary Kelly have portrayed in their work, themes that are normally private and domestic, and therefore regarded as predominantly female (primitive) and unimportant (childlike), and pushed them into the public domain. In featuring male and female body parts as fetishistic objects in their work, they have helped debunk the Freudian assumption (backed by Jacques Lacan) that women cannot be discussed in terms of fetishism – as well as inviting renewed exploration of the issue. Fetishism can thus be seen in the wider social and psychological context, in which fetishistic impulses of a non-sexual nature can be seen to play a part in the ordering of life.

Mary Kelly's detailed, obsessive Post Partum Document (1983) resonates with the Freudian understanding of the fetish used to ward off the fear of loss or lack. She uses the media of text and memorabilia, relating to her small son's babyhood, to ward off the impending "empty nest".

The first chapter will deal with the original concept of fetishism, which dates back to the Middle Ages in Europe and indeed earlier, in countries like Ireland where Sile na Gig reflected a society where the sexual power of women was fully acknowledged. By the 16th century the word "feitico" was used by Portuguese explorers trading along the West Coast of Africa to describe the mysterious objects and amulets used by the African people. At this point (in the mid-1500s) two radically heterogeneous social systems encountered each other with far reaching consequences. These two opposites formed a relationship which

evolved in a "mercantile cross cultural space of transvaluation between material objects of radically different social orders."[1]

The term 'fetishism' was coined by Charles de Brosse in his study of primitive religion (1760). Discussion of this will lead on to the era of Enlightenment in the late 1800s. Marx in 1867 introduced the term 'commodity fetishism' - reflecting the idea of primitive magic to express the central social form of the modern industrial economy. Chapter two will illustrate how Marx's interpretation of commodity fetishism is relevant today, followed by a discussion of the 1981 film Pretty Woman, featuring a prostitute (Vivienne, played by Julia Roberts) as the embodiment of a commodity.

Chapter three will consider David Lynch's film Blue Velvet (1986), in the context of Freud's theories of the Oedipus complex, the castration complex and the role of the fetish.

Ann McClintock is of the view that the sciences of man, philosophy, Marxism and psychoanalysis, took shape around the concept of the primitive fetish. Fetishes can take many forms and arise from any number of social situations. There can be personal and historical origins which usually have recurring features of 'contradiction', 'displacement' and 'embodiment'. An artist such as Edward Hopper, through his paintings of lonely lighthouses and empty rooms (1920 to 1940), reflected the contradictions and malaise which plagued America during his lifetime. The years of the depression threatened most of the

1. Pietz: The Role of the Fetish One, page 85

population with poverty and hardship, when isolation and a feeling of alienation coincided with an accelerated growth of industry. The rapid growth in production of the automobile, on the one hand, meant progress and convenience for some, and on the other hand served to remind those who could not afford the means of independent, self-powered travel, just how poor and isolated they were. Hopper's images of lighthouses can be viewed as 'fetishes' in the sense that they represented the sublimation of that contradiction for the artist. They could be understood as a symbol, both of the isolation felt by many in the midst of plenty in crowded cities, and the attempt (on Hopper's part) to resolve that contradiction, by using the image of lighthouses as a powerful fetish.

It is unlikely that Hopper intended these images to be read as 'phallic'. Viewed in the context of his other work, which usually consists of empty rooms and bars, they can be seen as a substitute for the lack of autonomy in the lives of many Americans of a certain class at the time of the Depression. By depicting a large tower, isolated at the edge of the landscape, and both emphasising its isolation, and celebrating its size, strength and symbol as a guiding light, Hopper attempted to resolve the contradiction. When photographs of the lighthouses which he painted are compared with the painted images, it is obvious that he portrayed the lighthouses as taller, narrower and more isolated (in terms of nearby dwellings) than they actually were. It appears that he was aware of the fetishistic qualities of these structures and sought to enhance the tensions created by the contradictions. It is this type of

tension or anxiety, inherent in any form of fetishization, which is the focus for the observations in this thesis.

CHAPTER 1

THE HISTORY OF THE ORIGINS OF FETISHISM

> The fetish epitomises the human ability to project value on to a material object. Repress the fact that the projection has taken place and then interpret the object as the autonomous force of that value. The process becomes invisible; as the object acquires exchange value its historical specificity drops into obscurity.
>
> Laura Mulvey: Fetishism and Curiosity BFI Publishing, London 1996

According to Ann McClintock, "the western discourse on the fetish was at least four centuries old before the phallus was singled out as its central principle".[1] In early medieval Europe, fetishism was associated with witchcraft and clerical denunciation of illicit and excessive female sexuality, (Freud subsequently associated it with a lack of female sexuality). In Ireland we have inherited the remnants of this association in the form of Sile na Gig, carvings situated in the ruins of churches and monasteries, which depict a grimacing female figure in a contorted position exposing her genitals. They relate closely to [2] William Pietz's description of early Christian witchcraft laws in Portugal, where an anti-witchcraft edict was issued by King John in 1385 forbidding the use of fetishes, devils, incantations, spells or enchantments by women. These carvings were appropriated by the Irish Christian clergy who recognized both the power and fear of women's sexuality. Though still not fully understood, these figures would appear to embody an aura of contradiction and tension which is

1. The Return of Female Fetishism and the Fiction of the Phallus – New Formations No. 19, Spring, 1993
2. Problem of the Fetish II, Res: 1987

often inherent in a fetish. They combine the blatant promise of sexuality with the terrifying threat of emasculation.

Originally, the word 'feitico' came from the Latin facere (to make) and facticium, meaning artificial, and subsequently witchcraft. The word fetishism appears to have originated in connection with European ideas of pagan practices, i.e. idolatry and witchcraft, evidenced by the images of Sile na Gig situated in Irish Christian places of worship, usually situated alongside and thereby associated with gargoyles. Fetishes gradually became associated with heathen primitive religions of non-European origin and this in turn developed into an association with primitive people. This notion was exacerbated by the exploration of the West Coast of Africa in the 16th century by Portuguese traders who would have been disturbed by the images of fetishes and amulets, and the faith in their supposedly inherent powers expressed by the Africans.[3] The Europeans did not view these fetishes as good luck amulets or practices of medieval non-Christians; instead they associated them with heathen rituals found in 'black' Africa.

Unlike its Spanish neighbour, who with the establishment of the Inquisition in 1478 made witchcraft a crime punishable by death at the stake, Portugal did not have an Inquisition. While it would have been impossible to trade with 'witches' (as interpreted by the Spanish Inquisition) the Portuguese did not hesitate to exploit West African

3. The Oxford English Dictionary mentions that the word fetish was first used in the context of "the negroes of the Guinea Coast and neighbourhood as an amulet or means of enchantment" in 1613.

'feiticaria' through trade when attempts at territorial conquest had failed.[4] These travellers were the harbingers of a nascent global economy where the very different cultures, European and African, clashed and tried to come to terms with each other's values.

As William Pietz writes, the colonial fetish was "proper to neither West African nor Christian European culture".[5] It was a hybrid object that sprang from the abrupt encounter of radically different cultures. This hybrid evolved in conjunction with the widespread growth of international capitalism and the slave trade, and was the symbolic ground on which the riddle of 'value' could be negotiated and contested. The Portuguese realized the value of the fetish for African culture and exploited it to their own ends. This led to the consequent moral and intellectual justifications for imperialism. The fetish, in terms of misunderstanding between African and European cultures, started off life as a merchandising tool before developing into a way of distinguishing the civilized world from that of a heathen, uncivilized, non-European world. By the 16th century these traders had overcome their anxiety in the face of idolatrous practices and were using African belief in the power of the fetish to their own monetary ends.

However, by 1642 the Portuguese had been ejected from West Africa by Dutch traders. The Dutch Calvinists had almost the same horror for Catholicism and its "superstitious" practices as the Portuguese had had

4. This failure was due partly to the high mortality rate from yellow fever and malaria (quinine was not discovered until the mid-19th century which necessitated reliance on something more effective than corporeal presence.
5. Pietz: The Role of the Fetish 2 Res 1987

for the fetishes of the Africans. The Portuguese came from a background steeped in belief in 'magic'. Faith in the certainty that the Eucharistic host and wine of the altar were the embodiment of Christ's body and blood was not the only 'magic'.[6]

West Africa had been regarded from ancient times as chaotic and primitive but also as a major source of gold. The gold weights, of the coastal Akan people, used in trade between the two cultures, were developed as a direct cultural response to the impact of gold-seeking traders.[7] They could also be sent as messages to remind the receiver of friendship, a debt or even as a warning. West Africans regarded these as a local version of the written letters of Europeans, and this is illustrated by the story of the gold weight in the form of a crab claw sent by a chief to his enemy, signifying that which is tenacious and crushing. The challenge inherent in the message was regarded as having more clarity than a lengthy letter. The Europeans understood the African perception of the written word as a fetish and frequently required them to swear oaths on Christian Bibles.[8]

6. Many wealthy Portuguese kept a 'linguero' with their utensils. This consisted of a 'magic' silver rod on which was suspended snakes' tongues and rare stones. These were supposed to change colour or bleed if they touched poisoned or contaminated food. In the eyes of the Dutch, Catholics and African heathens would have appeared to be quite alike in their beliefs.

7. They were often cast from small objects such as crab claws or vegetables, which were frequently worn by sick children in the hope of a cure or as protection from wild animals.

8. Wooden pillars topped with crosses (called 'padroes') were planted by the early explorers in an attempt to territorialise their Christian European codes into the African landscape, and were accepted as fetishes by the West Africans. Later made from limestone (more permanent), these would be inscribed in situ with the date of the discovery, the name of the king who ordered the expedition and that of the explorer.

A Dutch merchant, Willem Bosman, published A New and Accurate Account of the Coast of Guinea (1702) which he intended as a public announcement of his unfair dismissal (he had been chief merchant for the Dutch West Indies Company) but also as a platform for his views on the superiority of the gold trade to that of the slave trade. However, it was as a "travelogue" that it was most effective.[9] This work gained the attention of leading intellectuals, such as Newton and Locke and had a huge influence on the Enlightenment. Bosman considered the African fetish practices to be rooted primarily in commercial interest and power. His view of African fetish priests generating a social order out of chaos helped promote the Enlightenment view that in Africa "fetishes were thus the ground of social order both in the private sphere of the family and the public sphere of state and civil society".[10]

The following example is a typical 16th century traveller's tale: a wife, accused of adultery by her husband protests her innocence, and is forced to drink a fetish which would kill her if she were guilty but do no harm if she were innocent. This was regarded as an effective way of keeping wives in order. European merchants appreciated the efficacy of this method and would require Africans to take a fetish oath on beer to which had been added aloes (in order to make it less palatable).[11] To the Portuguese these fetishes, and the oaths taken in their name, were valueless and therefore not binding. The Africans were encouraged to take other 'fetish oaths' and to trade gold for what the Europeans regarded as 'worthless trifles'. Thus fetishes acquired a commercial

9. Pietz: Problem of the Fetish 3A 1988
10. Pietz: Problem of the Fetish 3A, p. 115

value which could be measured against other objects.

Gold was the main attraction for European traders and Bosman had much to say on the subject. He was unique among "travel writers" of the time in that he reported stories which were told by Africans. One example relates how God created black and white as equals, and he then offered both parties gold, or the knowledge of reading and writing. The black race, being given first choice, took gold, and the white race was left with reading and writing. God, incensed by the avarice of the black race, decreed that, forever, the white race would be their masters and use them as slaves.[12] African children were seen wearing shirts or nets made from the bark of trees. These were festooned with gold crosses, pendants, pieces of coral and shells to ward off danger, illness and misfortune. Women were seen to be semi-naked and decorated with gold and ivory ornaments twisted into their hair and wrapped around their ankles and arms. The gold weights (mentioned in an earlier paragraph) evolved out of an anxiety attached to the purity of gold. "Fetish gold" came to mean (for Europeans) gold that had been adulterated with other substances such as copper or tin. False gold was conflated with false religious values associated with fetishes. Bosman praised one tribe which could be relied on to use pure gold, unlike others who dishonestly added other substances to devalue the 'currency'. The European perception of the African woman, with gold ornaments twisted into her elaborate hairstyle, became more

11. Travellers frequently reported instances where West Africans regarded ships and their guns and other technological equipment as having anthropomorphic qualities. In the same way that they believed some of their own fetishes required food and drink on a daily basis (scraps of food were pressed into a crevice in the fetish), the West Africans believed that the portholes in the bow of the ship were eyes to see the way ahead.

12. William Pietz says "this is an interpretative reversal worthy of Freud's dream work theory". (Pietz: The Role of the Fetish 3A 1988, page 118).

preoccupied with the erotic dimension and remained ignorant of the complex symbolism involved. These women, in the eyes of Portuguese and Dutch traders, were evidence of a debauched and primitive society. The notion grew that the Africans' innate slavish attitude to fetishes justified their subsequent enslavement by Europeans. It was presumed that it was in their nature to be slaves.

With the publication in 1760 of Charles de Brosses's account of fetishism (Du Culte des Dieux Fetiches) Europeans were further encouraged to justify their exploitation of Africa. De Brosses portrayed the Africans as essentially childish, and regarded their "barbaric" religion as an ancient, uncivilised, undeveloped set of beliefs. His work allowed the discourse on fetishism to enter the intellectual realm and heralded the arrival of the Enlightenment. De Brosses regarded fetish worship as the expression of a "metaphor" natural to man, but associated it with primitive non-Europeans. In 1842 the young Karl Marx was to refer to this as "the religion of sensuous desire."

> Driven by anxiety regarding the uncertain outcome of events necessary to meet their vital needs, primitive people fixed on certain material objects associated by chance with their fears and desires, and lacking any true scientific understanding of physical causality, they personified the unknown powers of particular material objects as gods, whom they might worship and manipulate to bring about passionately desired events.

As early as the 1560s Sanches Cotan, the Spanish still life painter, in Still Life with Game, Fowl, Fruit and Vegetables displayed an

1A **Juan Sanchez Cotan**, 1602
Still Life with Game Fowl, Fruit and Vegetables

instinctive understanding of the sexual, historical and personal qualities of fetishistic objects. He lived in an age and location where the constant threat of starvation was a daily reality, in particular during the winter months. To Cotan and his contemporaries the painted image of a larder filled with lusciously depicted foods – winter root vegetables, fruit and game – would have been a powerful fetish. It would have been tempting for him to contemplate the magical qualities of this image, and to try to come to terms with the reality of what was lacking in life by creating a fetish which denied the reality of hunger. In the 1990s there are still vast numbers of humans who struggle to survive at subsistence level. This fact resonates with the power inherent in Cotan's full larder, which represents a universal 'disavowal' of deprivation.

In 1764 Emmanuel Kant [13] referred to fetishes as religious objects from African culture being objects of "debased aesthetic sensibility whose degraded sense of the beautiful lacked all sense of the sublime." Kant was influenced by De Brosses' work. The prevailing view of fetishism was that it was the direct worship of particular earthly material objects being themselves endowed with quasi-personal intentionality and divine powers capable of gratifying mundane desires. The intellectual discourse of the Enlightenment on the subject of fetishism was reflected in the conclusions of philosophers such as Kant and Hegel. They believed non-European or "other" pagan savages relied on fetishistic beliefs, which involved the "unenlightened" conviction that intentional

13. Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime

purposiveness was possible in material objects, associated by chance with the gratification of human desires. During the period of Enlightenment, "aesthetics" and "fetishism" were concepts which were new to intellectual discourse. They became, as it were, associated by the fact that they were seen to be the opposite of each other. The belief in and worship of earthly material objects - as being themselves endowed with quasi-personal intentionality and divine powers capable of gratifying desires, was seen as childish and primitive. People who held these beliefs were regarded as being unable to rise to a level of sensibility which would allow appreciation of the 'higher' values in life. The fetishes both mystified the physical world by attributing to it a human- orientated teleology, and 'reified' the social world by subjecting all capacity for moral autonomy to mechanical rituals and dogmatic beliefs.

The "scramble for Africa" invited and encouraged a general belief in the savage, primitive and childlike notions associated with fetishism. With this scramble came a harvest which made its way back to Europe in the form of numerous products. During the sack of Benin City in 1897, bronze sculptures were taken and shipped back to Europe. These sculptures began to appear in natural history museums and curiosity shops, and almost immediately had a strong influence on many artists. In fact the art movement known as Primitivism developed as a direct result of these African carvings and statues. An aesthetic quality was perceived by artists such as Picasso whose painting, Les Demoiselles d'Avignon (1907) is a well known example in which the faces were inspired by African masks. The features of the women are particularly

crude, which makes them a good example of the immense misunderstanding existing between two civilisations, the African and the European. The influence of the "scramble for Africa" was to have a significant relevance for modernist discussions of fetishism. In the 1880s there were other developments which combined with this to shape the 20th century concept of fetishism.

In 1888 Alfred Binet published "Le Fetichisme dans l'Amour". He claimed that the same psychological mechanisms responsible for religious superstitions in primitive societies, also caused sexual perversions in civilised society. This is the first use of fetishism in a sexual sense in modern times. The facility with which Binet's description fitted in with anthropological fetishism meant that it was adopted readily by clinical psychologists such as Freud.

The industrial revolution was one of the most significant developments in the 19th century. Alongside this was the political emergence of a working class whose leaders were strongly influenced by Marx. As early as 1842 Marx had referred to "the religion of sensuous desire" - suggesting that the same logic which explained primitive fetishism could apply equally to the modern faith in political economy and its ability to create wealth and bring about resultant acquisitions such as power. Marx believed that the modern over-evaluation of magical powers inherent in a capitalist object of exchange had a deep resonance with the same reverence attached by "primitives" to inanimate, fetishised objects. As far as he was concerned they were both objects which were reverenced without due reason.

CHAPTER 2

MARX AND PRETTY WOMAN

> A commodity appears at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties.
>
> Karl Marx – Capital – Section 4 – The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secrets Thereof - 1887

The connection between fetishism and commercial relations had been ongoing for hundreds of years by the time Karl Marx, in the mid-1840s, made his first reference to the religion of "sensuous desire".[1] In 1842, in an article entitled Theft of Wood, Marx drew an analogy between the tribal fetish made of wood, and the peasants right to the wood of the forest.[2] This was developed further in 1859 when he described commodity fetishism in "A Contribution to the Critique of the Political Economy" and then more substantially in Capital Volume 1 (1867). In the chapter "The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secrets Thereof" - Marx describes how a seemingly trivial object made by industrial labour, becomes something transcendent as soon as it becomes a commodity. The mystical character of commodities does not come from their 'use value' and nor it is a distillation of the social character of men's labour in producing them. This fetishism, Marx tells us, which attaches itself to the products of labour as soon as they become

1 This was a direct comment on the reverencing of fetishes by the West Africans, as noted by the Portuguese in the 15th century.

2. Leading article in No. 179 of the "Kolnische Reitung" in Karl Marx and F. Engels' Collected Works, Vol. 1 (N.Y. Internat. 1975), 189.
Some incidents which happened in the Rhine province of Western Germany around 1842-43 (the increase in the number of people who stole wood and the intervention of the Government against these people) led Marx to conclude that the State, which purports to represent the collective interest, instead represented the interest of only one part of the society, those who own private property. Therefore, the forfeiture of individual rights to that State represented a phenomenon of alienation: the loss of rights by people to institutions which were in reality hostile to them. From The Causes of Alienation by Ernest Mandel.

commodities, is inseparable from their production. The commodities are often produced by groups of individuals, who do not come in contact with one another – that is, until they exchange the products. Therefore, the social character of the producer becomes established only with the exchange of the commodities. Marx refers to this as "material relations between persons and social relations between things".

Whenever we equate the value of different commodities we thereby equate the value of the human labour expended in their production. According to Marx "we are not aware of this nevertheless we do it". This led him to believe that objects such as commodities rule the producer instead of the reverse. The commodity now encapsulates a personality or character (and becomes fetishized) thereby replacing "the producer". Marx contended that in the middle ages in Europe serfs, landlords, laymen and clergy were all dependent on each other. Life was based on "services in kind and payment in kind" – and it was this groundwork of society which prevented the products of labour from becoming fetishized. It is possible to understand how money has evolved the "godlike" power it holds for 20th century western civilisation, when compared to Marx's image of medieval modes of subsistence. Departure from this interdependent style of labour and reward inevitably leads to the fetishization of products.

Marx came to the conclusion that not only does the fetishization of a commodity involve a disavowal of human labour, but it also means a displacement of value from the people who produce things, onto the objects themselves. The "commodity" hides the reality of human labour. He continually describes the concept of value as "hiding the real social relations". At the time he wrote Capital Marx was theorising about the consequences of the production of commodities, but he could not have predicted the consequences of consumption in the 20th century. When discussing the influence of advertising Gammon and Makinen in "Female Fetishism, a New Look" (1994) state: "Marx does not consider other possible magical attributions attaching to commodities". These magical attributes are the benefits promised as a direct consequence of purchasing an advertised product. (The acquisition of superior social status, physical beauty or enhanced sexual powers are the most common.)

Since the 1920's, the development of advertising, marketing and packaging ensured that the commodity form acquired more fetish qualities. It was not simply the embodiment of value; it could also contain other magical attributes. For example, in the late 19th century food began to be sold in small quantities in labelled packets (flour, sugar and other staples). The end result of this form of marketing could be illustrated by the 20th century joke about the small child who thinks that milk grows in bottles and that spaghetti grows on trees.

After the First World War, marketing and advertising began to draw on psychological techniques developed by clinicians such as Freud. The

industry started to feature objects represented as being associated with personal and social meanings. Nowadays anybody who possesses a television or buys a magazine is quite conscious of being told that if they buy this car, drink this product, or wear this perfume their desires will be realised. [3]

Paul Woods [4] refers to the commodity becoming a power in society. "rather than a use-value for people, it assumes a power over people, becoming a kind of god to be worshipped, sought after and possessed. And in a reverse moment, as the commodity, the thing, becomes personified, so relations between people become objectified and thing-like". By this process the concepts of "fetishism, reification and alienation" point to that significant modern psychological sense of loss: "the loss of harmony, unity, and of an organic relation to other people and to nature, and by contrast the permeation of our sense of being in the world by feelings of fracture, estrangement, and discomfort" (Woods).

Theory is usually a comment on an already existing political and social situation, referring to events that have already occurred and have influenced future actions. These are the source material which allow the theorist to form a framework within which to articulate his or her theories. The social consequences of industrial commodification (with its origins in historically proven fetishisation) provided Marx with the necessary research for his work. However, the future effects that the advertising of commodities was to have on consumers were not

3. See Appendix on page 52
4. Commodity – Critical Terms for Art History, p 263

anticipated by Marx.[5] His theories on the fetishisation of commodities can be applied to the story line of the film Pretty Woman (Marshall 1981). It is not necessary to know whether the director (Gary Marshall) intended to explore Marx's theories through the medium of Pretty Woman (or was even familiar with them). The film could be said unknowingly to confirm Marx's contention that the fetishisation of commodities (in any form) predictably results in "material relations between persons and social relations between things". In The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction (1968) Benjamin referred to "the enthronement of the commodity and the glitter of distraction around it". The character of Vivienne, the prostitute (played by Julia Roberts), in Pretty Woman illustrates the "enthronement" of the commodity/prostitute. The fact that she is a prostitute is glossed over by the glitter of her apparel: expensive clothes, limos and diamonds. The viewers are distracted from the reality of her lifestyle; after all, the diamonds are merely on loan.

The script is based on a fairytale – the poor girl is rescued from the gutter by the wealthy prince. Edward (played by Richard Gere) is a successful businessman whose personal life is empty. He is rich, good-looking and privileged but appears lost and confused, from the opening scene. He asks Vivienne for directions, and having overcome his initial shock at the realization that she is a prostitute, employs her as a companion on a temporary basis. Both characters agree that they

5. Gammon and Makinen (Fetishism – Female Fetishism, A New Look, page 214) point out that in commodity fetishism disavowal occurs not only because objects become separated from the meaning of labour power that created them but that this is exacerbated by advertising which attributes qualities and auras that are not intrinsically part of the commodity.

1. Vertigo

2. Kiss on the lips

"screw people for money". However, as the film progresses they fall in love and bring out the "best" in each other.

Edward is the embodiment of that creature which Marx did not anticipate, i.e. the consumer who is manipulated by advertising which promises the impossible. The inherent magic promised with the purchased commodity is an illusion. Edward 'purchases' a relationship which promises to be uncomplicated by emotional feelings, by virtue of the fact that Vivienne is a prostitute (a commodity) with, presumably, no feelings. However, she has advertised herself as a commodity with all its inherent promises, therefore it is inevitable that Edward will encounter the ability of a commodity to rise above its status as an object and become empowered. He will also discover the contradiction that Vivienne is a 'real' person.

Vivienne has been "commodified" by poverty and her strength lies in the fact that she can unmask the qualities that lie dormant in Edward. The raw material is already there, but is buried beneath the power of the fetishes, which are money, work, power and the commodities which follow as a consequence of the 'magic'. He remarks that he does not 'make things' - and as the film progresses he says poignantly "I miss building blocks". His final deliverance (thereby making himself a suitable partner for Vivienne) comes when he makes the momentous decision to break away from his lawyer and old habits, and team up with Mr. Morse in order to "make ships". However, the ships which they plan to build will be destroyers, which will combine their

inevitable empowered status as commodities with the potential for mass destruction. The contradictions inherent in this plan serve to remind the viewer that some objects acquire the power to destroy as soon they become commodities with exchange value.

There is a constant ambiguity connected with each commodity. Edward, with his ambiguous reactions to all of these commodities, is the ideal vehicle with which to explore them. His lawyer's new Lotus car, although an object of desire, is something that Edward is not sure he can handle, ostensibly because it has a 'stick shift'. [6] There is a certain amount of anxiety associated with this object which is imbued with a somewhat anthropomorphic quality. Philip, his lawyer, says with a note of hysteria "I love this car" and Edward reinforces this by saying "I love it too". There is a moment of confusion (when Vivienne approaches him in the car) as to whether Edward is referring to his relationship with the gear stick or his possible relationship with the prostitute. This is compounded by the obvious phallic implications of the gear stick. With reference to Marx's comments on the disorientation and alienation which occurs when objects produced by mass production become commodities, this example can be seen as a good illustration of the reversal of the natural order of things where "social relations develop between objects, and people become things". When Vivienne remarks admiringly "that's a Lotus!" her fellow prostitute, Kit, refers to it immediately as "rent". As far as she is concerned the driver of such a valuable car will pay well for their

6. American term for the gear stick of a car

3. Shopping for designer clothes

4. Diamonds on loan

5. Building blocks

6. "I'm proud of you"

services and therefore enable them to pay their rent, which is in arrears. This ambiguity introduces another recurring theme – of things being not quite what they seem. As Vivienne approaches the car Edward mutters to himself that he can "handle this". This is a multi-layered reference involving the car and the prostitute – reinforced by the camera closing in on Edward's hand fumbling with the stick shift.

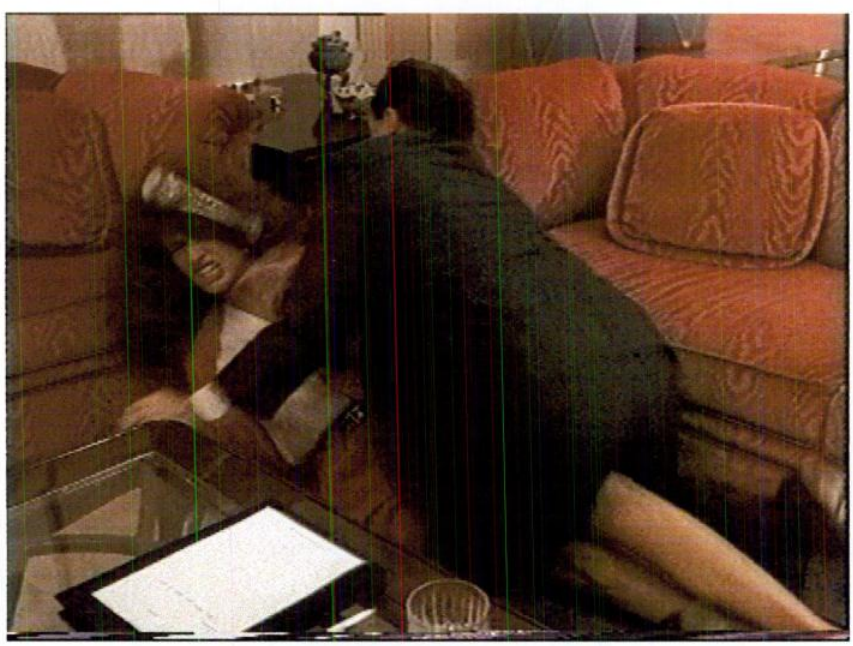
When he acquires his next commodity, Vivienne the prostitute, he refers to the car as being "temperamental" which is an intimation of how Vivienne will appear to him in due course, and is unaware that her status as commodity hides the real Vivienne. He is uncharacteristically surprised when she proves not to be a drug abuser but a "floss" user. She constantly shows him that she is a "safety girl". She reminds him to fasten his seat belt in the car, ensures healthy gums by flossing her teeth and reveals a plentiful supply of condoms. At this point there is a distinct impression that the commodity, i.e. Vivienne, has indeed become imbued with a "life of her own" and is more at ease with herself than Edward is with himself. As Vivienne points out, Edward "is a rich good looking guy who could have lots of girls for free". He does not seem to be happy with, or able to reap the benefits of the privileges that come his way, while Vivienne, the empowered commodity, has enough insight to remark with sadness that he "does not eat, does not sleep, does not drink".

The film throws up constant reminders of Edward's life being lived on a disconnected level. There are recurring hints that indicate his inability to handle commodities - as he tries to unlock his hotel room

7. Escargot – a delicacy

8. Limousines and planes

9. "We must get together later"



10. "I want some of Edward's happiness"

with a card key he mutters "I miss keys". He always stays in the penthouse suite because he knows it is the best - even though he is afraid of heights and cannot venture out on to the balcony. Although he does not drink, he knows that the correct etiquette of seduction is to order strawberries with the champagne - because they bring out the flavour of the drink. He orders everything on the breakfast menu for Vivienne but eats nothing himself. Therefore both the pleasures of food and the satisfaction of personal relationships elude him.

As their real relationship unfolds and they become "revealed" to each other, the modes of transport increase in grandeur. The limos get bigger and finally Vivienne is taken by the ultimate status symbol, the private jet, to the location of her ultimate test (culture – aesthetics) – the opera in San Francisco. At this point the commodities have almost become caricatures of what it means to be wealthy. The contradictions inherent in this event and the polo game are on many levels. "The glitter of distraction around the commodity" is quite ambiguous. She is "dressed like a lady" at polo (the Italian designer Cerruti provided the clothes for the film) but becomes disempowed by this when Edward's lawyer propositions her as a prostitute. The fact that she is not wearing her own clothes makes her feel completely vulnerable, humiliated and cheap. This is reinforced by the device of the tannoy system in the background announcing that the winner of the last chukka is a horse called "Gent's Whore". These contradictions are symptoms of a sinister underlying concept in the film. Although Vivienne is rescued by Edward from a life of poverty and prostitution, and is even saved from an attempted rape, she remains a commodity. There is a

disturbing reliance on the notion that beauty equals goodness. This leads to the idea that when something is beautiful it therefore becomes valuable – like the gold sought by 15th century travellers. Because Vivienne is the embodiment of this notion she 'deserves' the gift of diamonds, designer clothes and ultimately the 'gift' of love. As she becomes more embellished with these attributes she is admired and accepted by people who previously despised her. Vivienne's beauty/goodness needs an 'other' as contrast, and this is provided in the figure of Edward's lawyer, who is short, chubby and predictably nasty.

The layers of this particular commodity, i.e. Vivienne, are gradually peeled away to reveal the true person underneath. The first night they spend together he found her sleeping 'unmasked', without her wig. From then on whenever they appear naked together, the intimate psychological nature of their relationship becomes richer. As they both discard their clothes the relationship between 'things' falls away, the "real" beings are revealed underneath, and start to form a social relationship. Scenes which involve focusing on commodities that reflect power and wealth, (such as when Edward orders escargot for Vivienne - 'a delicacy') often involve humiliation of Vivienne and a sense of extreme discomfort on the part of Edward. Such scenes symbolise their complementary roles as victims of the fetishistic power of commodities.

In spite of the proliferation of layers of commodities, it becomes impossible to mask the real social relationship underlying their "business deal". Vivienne is taken to the opera, a grand affair in San

Francisco. Edward has already demonstrated his genuine connection with music - which is also one of the benefits available to the leisured wealthy classes (it requires money and leisure time to acquire this skill and the ability to develop aesthetic appreciation). He descends to the ground floor of the hotel in order to 'perform' on the piano – the ground floor being a metaphor for 'real life', with the inference that only in 'real life' can people be 'real'. He is an accomplished player but is unable to perform unless with strangers, which hints at his inability to perform on other levels also – perhaps in sexual and personal relationships. The act of making love to Vivienne on the piano could anticipate consummation of their relationship - not alone on a sexual level. He wishes to see if she can be enlightened by the experience of opera, and thereby rise above her 'primitive' origins - where she was unable to appreciate the aestheticism of the cultured things in life.

As is often the case with Gary Marshall, there are a number of levels operating around the same core idea. The opera they attend is Verdi's La Traviata – the story of a passionate affair between a woman of unsuitable origins and a wealthy young man, whose parents wish him to marry a bride of their choosing and make frantic efforts to entice the unsuitable woman away from their son. In many respects the story in the opera anticipates the intimate relationship which is starting to blossom between Vivienne and Edward. It is only at the very end of the film - as the aria from La Traviata plays in the background – that Vivienne is saved by Edward. She unknowingly plays the heroine in the cliched story line of the 'princess in the tower' rescued by the knight.

The influence of 'McCarthyism' still cast a shadow over Hollywood in 1981 and the conservative political climate ensured that a film, which blatantly endorsed leftist politics, would be unlikely to succeed. Therefore there is a constant 'holding back' from portraying the realistic ending to be expected from such a fairytale. The disempowerment of the individual, which Marx has shown to be a direct consequence of the fetishisation of commodities, is constantly disavowed. Edward is seen in a cosy father/son embrace with Mr. Morse with whom he is going to build destroyers, and the opera ends in tragedy for the lovers, which implies that other performances exist only as dreams.

The contradictions in the last scene are highlighted by the reappearance of the 'jester' who continues his song from the opening sequence of the film "Welcome to Hollywood, its all a dream". This song confirms the assertion by Vivienne's friend, Kit, that "the only girl whose dream ever came true was Cindafuckinrella".

CHAPTER 3

FREUD AND BLUE VELVET

> So Dr. Froyd asked me, what I seem to dream about. So I told him I never really dream about anything. I mean I use my brains so much during the day that at night they do not seem to do anything but rest. So Dr. Froyd was very surprised at a girl who did not dream about anything. So then he asked me all about my life. I mean he is very sympathetic, and he seems to know how to draw a girl out a lot. I mean I told things I really would not put in my diary. So then he seemed very intreeged at a girl who always seemed to do everything she wanted to.
>
> Anita Loos
> Gentlemen Prefer Blondes (Jonathan Cape, London 1926, page 121)

In the Problem of the Fetish I William Pietz says that "The coming into being of the concept of the fetish was necessarily in conjunction with the emergent articulation of the ideology of the commodity form". The discourse from "The Mist Enveloped Regions of the Religious World" enabled Marx to develop his theories on the fetishisation of commodities. However, it was Sigmund Freud's use of this reference to inform his studies in clinical psychoanalysis which ensured that the word "fetish" is understood to this day by most people to refer to "perverted male sexual practice".

This chapter will focus on an interpretation of David Lynch's film Blue Velvet (1986), using Freud's theories of psychoanalysis as the key. In particular it will refer to Freud's writings on "fetishism", "the oedipus complex", "castration complex", the interpretation of dreams and the connection between these and the "primal fantasies" involving the "romance of the family".Charles Bernheimer states in his essay

"Fetishism and Decadence" [1] "The historical roots of Freud's theories in the decadent soil of fin de siecle France is often overlooked". France had gone from undisputed primacy under Napoleon I to complete defeat in 1870 by Prussia. Belittled by the subsequent unity of Germany and Italy and the expansion of Great Britain, France also experienced the problem of a slow rate of economic growth.

The population growth in France was also much slower than in Germany, and an increased anxiety emerged about continued "dismemberment" by its more fertile neighbours. [2] Indeed, between the 1880s and the 1890's, some years had featured more deaths than births. Rates of alcoholism, crime and venereal disease were increasing. This was a patriarchal age in the extreme, and as men were expected to take responsibility for reproduction, male impotence was regarded as the main cause of childless marriages. There was a general medical view that any deviation from reproductive sexual activity actually threatened the national welfare. French psychiatry developed the modern concept of fetishistic perversion against this background. It is possible for those of us living at the end of the 20th century to understand how threatening the debate on women's emancipation, and the growth of the suffrage movement would have appeared to a male-dominated society. The result would have been a defensive reaction to reinforce the insistence on male dominance.

1. Fetishism as Cultural Discourse Ed – Apter and Pietz 1993

Alfred Binet, in 1887, initially used the term fetishism in a sexual context in Fetishisme dans l'Amour, published in the prestigious "Revue Philosophique". He set the whole problem of fetishism against a background of cultural crisis and exhaustion. It is worth noting that along with other French psychiatrists he regarded homosexuality as a fetish. There was a prevailing notion that sexual preoccupations of individuals are often in inverse ratio to their sexual powers. The implication was that 'nations that perished through sterility are noted for their licentiousness'. It was against this background that Sigmund Freud wrote his Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality (1905). Other nations were less concerned than France about the evil, biological consequences of non-procreative sexual activity. Freud demanded more tolerance for homosexuals, claiming that homosexuality was an innate condition which required sympathy and treatment, which placed him in the position of 'sexual reformer'. At the same time he agreed with French psychiatrists that male impotence was the key causal agent in the creation of sexual deviations. In the section on fetishism he stated that "no other variation on the sexual instinct that borders on the pathological can lay so much claim to our interest as does this one". He refers to the over- evaluation of the love object that refuses to restrict itself to "union of the genitals".

In later years Freud regarded the fetish as a substitute for the "dreaded loss of penis in men" associated with the castration complex.[3] The

2. Robert Nye – Medical Origins of Sexual Fetishism, Fetishism as Cultural Discourse, 1993, p.p. 13-30
3. From Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality (1905) to the late essay Fetishism (1927) and the related fragment Splitting of the Ego in the Process of Defence (1938) Freud returned continually to the problem of the fetish.

universal drama of the "Family Romance", within which the child (primarily male) reaches maturity, was his main interest. This is called the 'Oedipus complex' in reference to the Greek tragedy in which the hero (unknowingly) kills his father and marries his mother. According to Freud this is the secret desire of all small boys. Up to the age of about three a small boy regards himself and his mother as a single unit joined together. At about this age his horrified gaze falls on his mother's genitals and he realises that she lacks a penis. He surmises that this is as a result of castration. During the preceding couple of years he has regarded the father as a rival who he secretly wishes to kill and replace as his mother's lover. Now, however, the fear of castration by the father (as punishment and revenge) is so strong that his unconscious "disavows" the sight of female genitals and their difference. Instead, he convinces himself that his mother has a penis.

As he matures the boy represses his sexual desire for his mother and also the desire to kill his father, as he learns to communicate linguistically and follow social rules rather than the spontaneous impulses of his passions. With the onset of puberty, according to Freud, comes the possibility of the "splitting of the ego" - when the sexual urges reawaken the infantile sexual crisis of the fear of castration, and the loss of the mother's penis. As this is unacceptable to the mature consciousness, it is pushed back into the unconscious emotional part of the mind. The fetish object thus becomes the symbolic substitute for the disavowed mother's penis that the fetishist knows does not exist, but actually unconsciously believes in. The

phallus is "a fixated structure of domination aimed at gratifying the desires of men at the expense of women, that is enacted through artworks which orient themselves to an ecstatic gaze, which is that of a male subject who takes pleasure in women as mere visible objects".[4] According to Freud, sexual fetishism originates in the voyeuristic glare of the small boy's eye at the absence of the mother's phallus. This is followed swiftly by the retreat of the eye to the fetish that fills in that absence. In Freudian psychoanalysis the fetish is often seen to be fur/velvet/underlinen/lace as these are usually the objects nearest to the mother's genital area, when first seen by the young boy.

When discussing fantasies, Freud based his theories on the premise that the same meaning/context was present both in the fantasy of dreams while sleeping, and the conscious interpretation of them when awake. However, he did note a difference between primal fantasies and secondary imaginary fantasies. According to Freud there are three primal fantasies. The first is the fantasy of the "primal scene" involving the creation of the child in the parent's lovemaking - this usually involves the wounding or rape of the mother by the father. The second fantasy concerns seduction in which the child wants to seduce the parent - usually the mother by the son. The third one is the fantasy of castration - usually involving the castration of the son by the father. These three fantasies, according to Freud, can interrelate and overlap, but all three involve the figure of the powerful father. The seduction of the infant by the mother is central to the pre-oedipal period, so it also plays a part in the seduction fantasy. Behind these three primal

4. Pietz – Critical Terms for Art History, Chapter 15, page 197

fantasies lies the drama of the oedipal crisis.

Anne McClintock reminds us that in the Freudian scenario fetishising is the norm for males - not females. Women for Freud can be fetishists only if they are lesbians and in this instance Freud insists that their real desire is to be a man. The Freudian theories on the oedipus complex, the castration complex and the primal scene refer almost exclusively to the male. "The significance of the factor of sexual evaluation can be best studied in men, for their erotic life alone has become accessible to research. That of women – partly owing to the stunting effect of civilised conditions and partly owing to their conventional secretiveness and insincerity – is still veiled in an impenetrable obscurity."[5] As long as the child averts his eyes from the mutilated woman and keeps the fetish in view, he is looking at his "token of triumph" and his safeguard against the threat of castration. "The over evaluation of the surrogate object compensates for the under evaluation of the woman's genitals." According to Freud, 'woman' is merely associated with "a lack of penis" - whereas the boy has to grow through the oedipal stage and experience the threat of castration before going on to maturity and disavowal – a girl's task is merely to see "in a flash" that she is 'lacking'.

The Oedipal drama enacted in Blue Velvet (David Lynch – 1986) is the public fantasy about a private dream which involves the representation

5. Freud: Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality

of the primal fantasies.[6] The loose framework of the film can be referred to as a modern fairytale. Jeffrey Beaumont (Kyle Maclachlan) undergoes a hellish journey, which starts with his homecoming from college to support his family after his father is mysteriously stricken down with a brain haemorrhage. Returning from a hospital visit to his father, Jeffrey finds a human ear in a field, which he brings to the police. He is unable to resist investigating this mystery with the help of Sandy (Laura Dern), the detective's sweet and naive daughter. He discovers that a night club singer, Dorothy Valance (Isabella Rossellini) is somehow involved. Jeffrey breaks into her apartment and enters a world of darkness – in more ways than one. Her husband and son have been kidnapped by the sadistic psychopath Frank (Denis Hopper).

This narrative concerns a young man's rite-of-passage from adolescence to maturity. The usual infantile oedipal desires and conflicts are confronted and resolved by the hero's victory over the villain/father. This hybrid form is brought about by the hero's fascination with the netherworld relating to both the detective genre and film noir. In psychoanalysis, "sublimation" means the process of making sense of one form of experience by diverting it metaphorically into the terms of another. In Blue Velvet the narrative is a metaphor for Jeffrey's struggle to emerge from the chrysalis of adolescence and its attendant oedipal struggle.

This film is an excellent vehicle for the portrayal of the method by which cinema, with its ability to render visible the invisible, and

6. Barbara Creed - A Journey through Blue Velvet – New Formations, Winter 88

conjure up meanings outside the precision of language, can delve into the invisible workings of the human mind. The viewer is presented with a detective story in small town America. However, as the drama unfolds, it is obvious that "a netherworld" exists alongside this. As Laura Mulvey says: [7] "The critic does not have to "read in" "or read against the grain" as both generic and psychoanalytical references are clearly marked". David Lynch's interests in surrealism and psychoanalysis are brought together effectively in this "detective story". We can relish the often humorous and playful "messing up" of the almost sacred psychoanalytic texts. Psychoanalytic theory is played out on the screen and "played about with" by David Lynch.

From the very beginning it is obvious that this is a 'tongue in cheek' detective story. There is a sinister implication that things are not quite what they seem. As the film starts, the crushed velvet on which the credits are superimposed takes on the appearance of the bark of a tree. The film is set in the saccharine All-American town, Lumberton, with picket fences, bright yellow tulips and red red roses. A fire truck rolls slowly past with a relaxed fireman, smiling and waving slowly. This is not how you would expect to see a fire truck or a fireman, and this parody of a suburban idyll begins to crumble. Jeffrey's mother is always seen indoors as is also his 'real' oedipal mother, Dorothy (to be clarified later in this chapter). Dorothy's apartment is so dark that it is hard to make out the furniture at times, and it is always suffused with a red glowing light and a pervasive atmosphere of suffocating plushness.

7. Netherworlds and the Unconscious: Oedipus and Blue Velvet – Fetishism and Curiosity, London B.F.I. 1996

11. The look

12. "Don't look at me or I'll kill you"

There is a womb-like quality to this location which is obvious. Jeffrey's father is disposed of almost immediately and we see him incapacitated, unable to speak in a hospital bed, leaving space for the development of Jeffrey's relationship with his 'real' oedipal father.

The fairytale of two innocent young children entering the dark wood and finding the haunted castle (Dorothy's apartment), moves from a Norman Rockwell world of perfect, twee, small-town America, to an Edward Hopper world of empty rooms and night time bars. In this parody of family life - Jeffrey's parents are depicted as shadowy creatures. It is soon obvious that his 'real' parents are Frank and Dorothy. Blue Velvet is so openly playing on the Freudian stories that interpretation is almost redundant. Jeffrey as the infantile voyeur sneaks into his parents' bedroom and hides in the cupboard, and when the parents come back he sees more than he bargained for. This voyeurism is at the heart of the film – illustrated by Sandy's comment to Jeffrey "I don't know if you are a detective or a pervert". The scene of the brutal rape and subjugation of Dorothy in her apartment by Frank - viewed voyeuristically by Jeffrey, not only plays out the oedipal drama of the "family romance" of psychoanalysis - but turns it on its head. The three characters - Jeffrey, Frank and Dorothy - play the parts of pre-oedipal infant, castrated mother, and villain/powerful father. However, Lynch has them swap roles in a flurry of violence, fear, anxiety and last but not least, comic horror.

Dorothy plays the role of a seductive woman as the performer who sings the song Blue Velvet every evening in the nightclub (watched in

secret by Jeffrey). While hiding in her apartment Jeffrey overhears Dorothy's telephone conversation, which is ambiguous and difficult to understand. She makes comments such as "Mommy loves you" followed very quickly by "Yes sir", both said in fearful tones. When she finds Jeffrey hiding in her cupboard she becomes an aggressive wielder of the castrating knife, and shows her determination to satiate her own desires by victimising Jeffrey, and forcing him to undress. It is only when Frank arrives and we witness the horrific combination of violence, eroticism, fetishistic obsession and infantile reactions, that we realize she had been playing Frank's part as the male aggressor. Frank assumes a manic combination of roles which interchange at bewildering speed between the pre-oedipal infant, and the violent aggressive father/lover.

On one level Jeffrey's journey leads from adolescence to manhood in the guise of a detective solving a mystery, exposing evil and bringing the perpetrators to justice. There are elements of film noir and the detective genre throughout the narrative – in particular the scene where Sandy emerges from the darkness and Jeffrey begins to plan a campaign of sleuthing. At another level his journey leads him to the oedipal unconscious, to confront incestuous desire and Frank, the villainous father figure. Blue Velvet is a crime thriller with a touch of the surreal about it. There is a Hitchcockian touch of 'menace in the ordinary' which reveals something hidden under apparent reality. Jeffrey is driven by a voyeuristic impulse (this is where cinema is the perfect medium) with the camera as a constant voyeur. The sense of surrealism is constantly reinforced by Sandy and Jeffrey when they say

from time to time "It's a strange world" or "Why are there men like Frank in the world?". Gavin Miller (filmmaker), interviewed in Moving Pictures – Arena, made the comment that in many ways Blue Velvet resembles a cartoon; the images are bold, flat with poster- like strokes. The image of Jeffrey and Sandy sitting outside a church - framed against a background of stained glass windows with church organ music playing inside - is permeated with an unreal atmosphere. The words they say appear almost in the form of bubbles springing from their mouths. Jeffrey - "You're a neat girl". Sandy - "You're a neat guy". The sinister atmosphere is heightened when he says he must go to Dorothy's apartment because "I am seeing something that's always being hidden".

Most of these scenes combine a tinge of terror with the distinct tension of comedy. Although it is obviously a tongue-in-cheek parody of the primal scene (as explained in psychoanalysis), at the same time there is a taut thread of seriousness running through the narrative on a number of levels. Playful visual touches, such as the presence of the plants known as "mother-in-laws tongue" in both Dorothy's apartment and Sandy's parents' home, are fun to take note of. The implication of these house-plants in Dorothy's case is that not only does she function some of the time as a pre-oedipal mother figure to both Frank and Jeffrey, but that she could also play the part of mother-in-law. In this Freudian comedy there are moments of real terror and anxiety. Jeffrey actually finds himself in the position most frequently occupied by the female object. He is threatened with castration not only by Dorothy but also by Frank and his cronies, who constantly wave knives in front

13. Blue Velvet

14. Mother and father

of his face, making comments like "Here to-day, gone to-morrow" - an obvious threat of castration.

In 1909 Freud published a paper "On the Genesis of Fetishism" in which he linked fetishism to repression of the drive to 'look' (the scopic drive). In the pre-oedipal scenario the boy needs to avert his gaze from the problem of the mother's mutilation, and take refuge in the nearest visual substitute (fur, velvet or lace). This is a constant theme in Blue Velvet where Frank is presented as the male "hysteric". Having cut a piece of velvet from Dorothy's robe (this implies castration of the mother/Dorothy), he then uses it as an umbilical cord by putting it into his own mouth at one end and Dorothy's mouth at the other. He is seen fondling this fetish in the nightclub, as Dorothy sings the song Blue Velvet. At the height of sexual excitement he constantly shouts at Dorothy "Don't fucking look at me". The voyeuristic aspects of the film are reinforced in particular in the scenes in Dorothy's womblike apartment – always bathed in red light, while camera shots emphasize the 'hiding' and 'looking' of Jeffrey as Dorothy shouts at him "Don't look at me, don't touch me or I'll kill you".

The primal scene as birth is played out against a background of sinister music and howling wind. The scene being enacted is interrupted, from time to time, with an image of flickering flame. This howling wind and flickering flame recur throughout the narrative, usually when the basest instincts of Frank, Dorothy or Jeffrey are being displayed. [8]

8. This is where cinema has the edge over other forms of expression in that it is the ideal medium with which to render the invisible visible and to visualise more successfully than language – multi-layered levels of narrative.

When Jeffrey returns to Dorothy's apartment, he finds her sexual advances irresistible. We know he has descended to the netherworld and come face to face with his own monster when we hear the howling wind and see the flickering flame as he strikes Dorothy. Later, as he sits in his clean white sunlit bedroom weeping with remorse, it is obvious that he is disturbed by his actions. However, as always, there is a sinister undertone – the ornament hanging from the wall in his bedroom appears to be a fetish object (of a primitive nature). This fetish is in the form of a gaping mouth with lots of teeth – a reference to primitive or ancient "vagina dentata". This fetish, with its implications of inherent magical and anthropomorphic powers, serves as a reminder that the threat from Dorothy as castrating mother is an ever-present one. Jeffrey may have left the netherworld of her apartment with its associations of criminal violence and kidnap, but part of this world has insinuated itself into his squeaky clean bedroom.

As Jeffrey undertakes his oedipal 'detective' journey, he is forced by David Lynch to crack the usual codes of the Freudian insistence on fetishism remaining solely a male preserve. In the brutal apartment scene with Dorothy and Frank, all three interchange their roles in the enactment of the primal scene. Dorothy changes from vulnerable mother, being brutalised by the villain father (Frank), to the active castrating mother seducing her oedipal son (Jeffrey). Jeffrey changes from the infantile voyeur in the cupboard, (witnessing his parents "love making") to a situation that quite obviously disturbs him, when Dorothy

encourages him to abuse her aggressively in the same way that Frank does.

The strength of Blue Velvet lies in its refusal on the part of the characters to "play straight" versions of their roles in the Freudian romance of the family. Lumberton, on the surface, is a world that appears to have a place for everything and everything in its place - but as soon as the dark world of evil and criminal life is entered, the natural order of things is turned on its head.[9] It is difficult for the viewer to identify with any of the three characters as they constantly "change position". There is a disturbing suggestion that women can find pleasure in pain – as witnessed by Dorothy's enigmatic smile when she is struck by Frank. Towards the end of the film Dorothy says repeatedly "I have his disease in me" which refers to the earlier scene in which she begged Jeffrey to strike her. She has been infected with Frank's "disease", which is violence. Jeffrey slips from voyeur to masochistic victim (usually the female role) in a flash.

Although it appears as if the acts of violence are aimed at Dorothy, Jeffrey in fact is repeatedly physically abused throughout the film. The brothel keeper, Ben (B. Stockwell) viciously punches him, and Frank abuses him in a scene which is a parody of sadistic/sexual violence. This scene is particularly disturbing, not alone because of the aspect of violence, but also

9. This is how David Lynch debunks the Freudian insistence on the notion that the role of aggressor/voyeur/subject belongs solely in the male domain – and that the role of object of desire/victim/bearer of the lack is exclusively female.

as a result of the surprising comment by Frank to Jeffrey – "You are a lot like me". As Frank always displays violent psychopathic, barely sentient qualities that hardly qualify him as human, (in contrast to Jeffrey who is a gentle character) this is indeed surprising. However, at this point it is possible to regard him as an 'innocent', with no control over his emotions, but at the same time in possession of a strong instinctive quality. The pre-oedipal child with its socially unacceptable desires, which dominates Frank's personality, recognizes and acknowledges something similar in Jeffrey. In this sense Dorothy is "mother to both of them".

The severed ear found by Jeffrey is not only a reference to the child listening to the sounds of his parents, but it is also another reminder of an implied threat of castration which pervades the narrative.[10] The camera's journey into the recess of the ear to, as it were, deeper labyrinthine subterranean places, promotes an uneasy atmosphere of foreboding. This burrowing beneath the surface is evidenced in the surreal image of the camera travelling underground to witness the cannibalistic battle between insects - accompanied by disturbing sounds of a furious struggle. The notion of a journey into the depths of the body, the criminal underworld, the unconscious, or the womb is reinforced frequently throughout the film. There are constant references to the question as to whether this is a dream or reality.

10. According to Freud, the 'primal scene' is constructed by the child, not just on the basis of what "he or she sees" but also in relation to what is heard (Barbara Creed: A Journey Through Blue Velvet – New Formations).

Freud, in The Interpretation of Dreams, asserted that "during the narration of a dream, or during its analysis a fragment of the dream – content which had seemed to have been forgotten re-emerges. This fragment which has been rescued from oblivion invariably affords us the best and most direct access to the meaning of the dream. And that, in all probability, must have been the only reason for its having been forgotten, that is, for its having been once more suppressed." Sandy constantly refers to dreams as being either good or bad. She relates her dream of a flock of robins (representing the blinding light of love) landing on earth and making everything "alright". This scene has a dreamlike quality in itself, as robins do not travel in flocks, and far from being an ideal symbol of 'blinding love' are very territorial. Despite their appealing appearance robins are vicious in the way they repel rivals in their own world. Not only is Sandy impossibly blond and pink - her whole world is blond, pink, fluffy and pastel. To emphasise this when we see her in her bedroom on her pastel telephone, the camera voyeuristically focuses with a lingering shot on a pair of fluffy, pink hair curlers. There is an underlying suggestion that the "happy ever after" blinding love of Sandy's desires is not possible. It is a dream in itself.

As the camera retreats from the recesses of Jeffrey's ear - this time in one of the final shots of the film - his dream is disturbed and he awakes to the sounds of cosy domestic harmony. In Freudian terms the reference to the "fragment" of the 'dream content being rescued from oblivion' is clear. The vision of the robin chewing the bug could be a somewhat playful reference as to how the 'fragment of the dream'

15. "The blinding light of love"

16. "Mommy loves you"

affords the best access to the meaning of the dream. The almost forgotten image of battling insects (in the opening sequences of the film) jostles with the struggling insect in its death throes in the mouth of the supposedly 'real' robin – bringing the "blinding light of love". Confusion reigns - in spite of the fact that, according to the rules of the Freudian game, Jeffrey has fulfilled his destiny, and travelled the journey safely from his pre-oedipal origin. Having vanquished the father/villain he can now take his place in the mature world, but there is an uneasy sense that all is not as it should be. There are no heroes in the Freudian drama. The robin is not real and the sense of relief engendered by the idyllic image of Dorothy reunited with her small son Donny is disturbed by another almost forgotten "fragment". The safe feeling that 'all is right in the world' is shattered by the realization that Dorothy, even in her private domestic space – is wearing the wig which she normally wears while performing in the "Show club". The struggle continues – all is not quite what it seems.

CONCLUSION

The main focus of this thesis was to explore the possibility of dismantling the origins of the current meaning of fetishism in order to examine its role in a historical, social and cultural context. The tensions and contradictions inherent in any form of fetishism ensure that a conclusion will be difficult. However, a study of the combined historical (Chapter 1) philosophical (Chapter 2) and psychological (Chapter 3) aspects of the "problem" leads to the only conclusion possible, which is that to fetishise is an instinctive coping mechanism which is universal.[1] This can occur when a lack of understanding and love creates a longing ("loss") in an individual, which can never be satisfied. This longing is frequently displaced onto addictions, of which there are many forms. "By displacing power onto the fetish, and then manipulating it, the individual gains symbolic control over what might otherwise be terrifying ambiguities" (Anne McClintock). This fetish can take the form of drugs, alcohol, power (with its flip side, fear of loss of control) or 'workalcoholism' which can be used as a substitute for life.

The features of contradiction, displacement, embodiment, repetition and emotional embodiment have been cyclical elements in the religious beliefs of all peoples. Both cultures discussed in Chapter 1 exhibited a partial understanding of each others rituals and fetishes in the 15th century, which suggests that the impulse has always been part of what it is to be human. The nail-studded power figures of Africa and the

crucifixion of Christ on the Cross connect in a way that suggests an ancient universal impulse. Cults of relics and saints were accepted by the early Christian church along with the ancient ritual of pinning ex-votos (small copies of injured limbs cast in silver or tin) to images or statues of saints in the hope of a cure – these are still in practice today. The tradition of carrying relics of saints (usually a bone or a limb) in procession through towns and villages is a regular occurrence on feastdays. These relics are always associated with "miraculous" powers to heal, and have not alone stood the test of time, but have survived "negative critical forces" (Chapter 1) such as those voiced during the Enlightenment.

Gregory the Great referred to the educational value of frescoes in churches as the "books of the illiterate poor". The paucity of visual images in poor isolated rural areas ensured the effective role played by these frescoes in the maintenance of social order. These images offered the promise of heaven or hell and can be seen in both the Sistine Chapel and in small, crumbling peasant churches. In the context of contemporary life, these frescoes can be seen as an early form of advertising. In the same way that primitive fetish priests were seen to orchestrate a kind of order out of chaos, the advertising industry functions as a 20th century form of fetish priesthood. Equipped with a well-researched understanding of how fetishism works from a commercial and psychological point of view, the industry has formulated marketing strategies which manipulate deep-seated human desires in order to make a profit.

1. In the animal world, a ewe will adopt an orphaned lamb if it is wrapped in the skin of her own deceased offspring.

Although Marx did not anticipate the power that was to be exerted by advertising on the consumer, and Freud made the mistake of attributing fetishistic impulses of a sexual nature exclusively to males, it was the advertising industry's appropriation of the mechanisms which combine commodity and sexual fetishism (Chapter 2 and Chapter 3) which have allowed it to develop the power to exert an unacceptable level of control over people's lives. However, the contradictions inherent in all forms of fetishisation ensure that not everybody is manipulated 'all of the time'. There will always be people like the surrealist Fernand Leger, [2] who will detect the manipulative aspects of advertising.

This thesis concludes with a quote from Marcel Proust [3] (the 'master of the fetish') which illustrates the conclusion that to fetishise is a universal impulse always driven by the same mechanism.

I would turn to and fro between the prayer-desk and the stamped velvet armchairs, each one always draped in its crocheted antimacassar, while the fire, baking like a pie the appetising smells with which the air of the room was thickly clotted, which the dewy and sunny freshness of the morning had already "raised" and started to "set", puffed them and glazed them and fluted them and swelled them into an invisible though not impalpable country cake, an immense puff-pastry, in which, barely waiting to savor the crustier, more delicate, more respectable, but also drier smells of the cupboard, the chest-of-drawers, and the patterned wall-paper I always returned with an unconfessed gluttony to bury myself in the nondescript, resinous, dull, indigestible, and fruity smell of the flowered quilt.

2 See Appendix for details.

3 Marcel Proust: Swann's Way, London, Penguin, 1997

APPENDIX

The type of marketing strategy that launched the 1955 promotion of the well-known figure Barbie, is based on research which proved that not only is it possible to bring about the embodiment of 'things' but also to make people appear 'thing-like'. When this was combined with the manipulation of fetishistic sexual impulses inherent in both sexes the result was a powerful marketing tool. The culmination of this type of research was products such as Barbie, who reaped huge profits for her makers Mattel. An adult toy for children, Barbie was based on a German soft porn doll who started life as a two dimensional gold digger in a cartoon strip (Bild Zeitung 1952), and graduated to a three-dimensional version which was promoted as a toy for the dashboard of a car, or as an ideal gift for men to give to their girlfriends.

Always promoted as a real person and never referred to as a doll, this fetish/person and that of Pretty Woman (Chapter 2) was anticipated in 1950 by the surrealist Fernand Leger, who used a discarded shop mannequin to produce what must have been the first music video. Featuring "the girl with the prefabricated heart" who "grows up untouched by human hand" and sends away for a "mail order male direct from Yale" – the short film epitomises the contradictions inherent in any fetish. Although they are separated by nearly fifty years, the music video featuring the Barbie Song produced by the English band Aqua (1998) – exhibit the same level of irony.[1]

1. CD Rom containing both film clips on the inside of the back cover.

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FILM AND VIDEO

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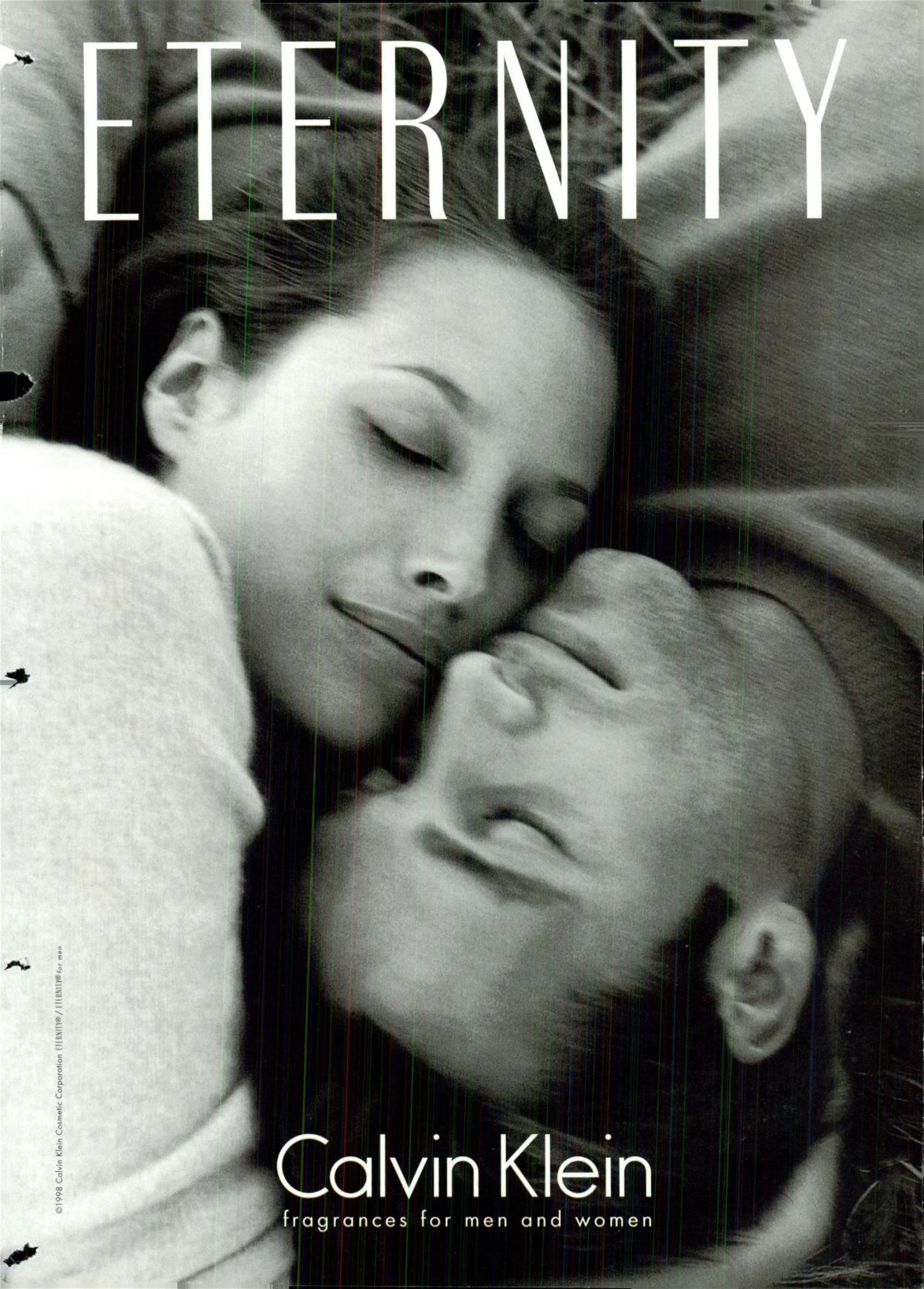
Pretty Woman
Director, Gary Marshal, 1981

*"Barbie Girl",
The Aqua Diary: The Official Aquarium in the Home Video
Band, Aqua, 1998

*"The Girl with the Prefabricated Heart"
Director: Fernand Leger (Dreams that Money can Buy, 1930)
Source: Arena, BBC London, 1987

* CD ROM enclosed (Macintosh compatible)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