



# Fetishism and the social value of objects

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# **Fetishism and the social value of objects** <sup>1</sup>

## **Abstract:**

The idea of the fetish has a particular presence in the writings of both Marx and Freud. It implies for these two theorists of the social, a particular form of relation between human beings and objects. In the work of both the idea of the fetish involves attributing properties to objects that they do not 'really' have and that should correctly be recognised as human. While Marx's account of fetishism addresses the exchange-value of commodities at the level of the economic relations of production, it fails to deal in any detail with the use-value or consumption of commodities. In contrast Freud's concept of the fetish as a desired substitute for a suitable sex object explores how objects are desired and consumed. Drawing on both Marx and Freud, Baudrillard breaks with their analyses of fetishism as demonstrating a human relation with unreal objects. He explores the creation of value in objects through the social exchange of sign values, showing how objects are fetishised in ostentation. This paper argues that while Baudrillard breaks with the realism characteristic of Marx's and Freud's analyses of fetishism, he does not go far enough in describing the social and discursive practices in which objects are used and sometimes transformed into fetishes. It is proposed that the fetishisation of objects involves an overdetermination of their social value through a discursive negotiation of the capacities of objects that stimulates fantasy and desire for them.

## Introduction

The social sciences have, in general, shown a lack of interest in relations between human beings and the material objects in their environment. What has taken centre stage is either the human individual or the relations between humans that constitute both social interaction and social structure. Marx and Freud were both key contributors to the emerging human sciences who have exerted enormous influence. The major focus of both is on the form and antecedence of human identity and relations between humans but both have used the term 'fetishism' to begin to describe human relations with material objects; non-human things in the world with which pseudo-human relations are established.

For Marx the reality of the commodity is its representation of congealed labour through which it derives its value. In its unreal or fetishised form the commodity appears to have intrinsic value derived from its material character. The fetishised commodity represents a misconception of the origins of value - the system of ideas supporting capitalist production that Marx calls 'commodity fetishism'. For Freud the reality of shoes or undergarments is as clothes, as items worn as part of normal apparel. But the unreal or fetish form of the shoe or undergarment is, for the fetishist, an agent of sexual arousal. In Freud's work the unreal object that arouses the fetishist indicates a perversion. Its origins lie in a misconception of the lack in the female genitalia that leads to a substitute for the proper sexual object.

In the work of Marx and Freud the term 'fetishism' is used to identify a misunderstanding of the world in which properties are attributed to objects that can only correctly be attributed to human beings. The use of the term allows them to connect these misunderstandings to a pre-humanistic scheme in which spirits, sometimes residing within material objects, were treated as a significant part of the ontological order of the world. Their use of the terms 'fetish' and 'fetishism' continue a tradition of cultural critique with its origins in commentary on religious practices surrounding objects. To identify a fetish is to expose the inadequate beliefs of those who revere it for what they believe it is capable of, by pointing to the real, material, qualities of the object and identifying its presumed capacities as really residing elsewhere - in the 'true' god; in human labour; in arousal by a person of the opposite sex.

Treating fetishes as 'unreal' overlooks the importance of the object as a mediator of social value. Marx did not explore why some commodities might

be more fetishised than others. Freud conjectured on the symbolic origins of sexual fetishes but did not explore the meaning of fetishes systematically as he did dream contents. What I want to explore in this paper is how the term fetish might be used analytically, not to critique or debunk a set of ignorant beliefs or deviant perceptions, but to explore how material objects are valued in cultural contexts.

After mentioning the origins of the term 'fetishism' and how it might be defined, I shall look at how Marx and the psychoanalytic tradition have used the term critically to undermine a perspective or mode of life. Despite treating material objects as no more than they 'really' are (their concrete and material function) Marx recognised that the need for objects is in part determined culturally and Freud noted that fetishism is not always deviant but may express a 'normal' sexual interest in objects.

It is Baudrillard who begins to treat fetishism as a sign of social value; the fetish object is taken to stand for the owner's social status. Here the fetish is no longer an unreal object, believed to have properties it does not really have, but is a means of mediating social value through material culture. I will suggest that Baudrillard's use of the term fetishism can be extended to look at the way some objects are overdetermined at the level of social value.

### **Making the fetish**

Although related to the Latin word *factitius* (= made by art), the contemporary English word *fetish* seems to derive from the Portuguese word *feitiço* (= a charm, sorcery) a name for talismans in the middle ages that were often illegal or heretical (Pietz 1985: 6). The Portuguese word was used to refer to witchcraft and was part of the language of sailors in the 15th Century travelling from Portugal to the Guinea coast of West Africa (Pietz 1987: 24). The modern meaning of fetish and fetishism is generally agreed to have originated in the work of Charles de Brosses writing in 1760 who used the term to describe the religious practices of worshipping objects (Pietz 1993: 134; Simpson 1982: 127). De Brosses coined the term to refer to the worship of inanimate objects as gods, a practice that had been recorded by travellers to West Africa. It is clear that Marx read de Brosses and it is from his proto-anthropological analysis that Marx derives his 1842 definition of the term as the 'religion of the senses':

**This notion of the fetish worshipper's desire-driven delusion regarding natural objects, his blindness to the unprovidential randomness of physical events was an element in de Brosses's original theorisation of *fétichisme* as the pure condition of un-enlightenment. (Pietz 1993: 136)**

The connections between the origins of the word 'fetishism', its 'anthropological' meaning and Marx's usage are clear and documented. The connection with its use in psychoanalysis to refer to sexual fixation on an object is not so clear. According to Robert Nye, in a paper of 1882 Charcot and Magnan referred to what we have come to know as classical sexual fetishism (erotic obsessions for aprons, shoes, shoe nails) but did not use this term. In 1887 Alfred Binet, Charcot's student, used the term in a paper discussing these perversions in the context of religious fetishism (Nye 1993: 21; Gamman and Makinen 1994: 17). In 1886 Krafft Ebing had treated 'fetichism' as a pathological tendency, connected to stealing female linen, handkerchiefs and shoes. While he emphasised the criminological aspect he also connected it to sexuality (Gamman and Makinen 1994: 39). Quite how sexual fetishism is linked with the religious fetishism described by de Brosses remains unclear. However, the term fetishism seems to have taken on its broad cultural meanings by the middle of the nineteenth century so that the Shorter OED can offer as a figurative definition dating from 1837 "something irrationally revered".

There are then three fields in which the term fetishism is used that we may treat as; proto-anthropology, the analysis of the commodity form and the analysis of sexual perversion. The term seems to originate in the first of these fields and is then employed analogously in the latter two. Gamman and Makinen sum up its use in all three fields:

**Fetishism, we would argue, is by definition a displacement of meaning through synecdoche, the displacement of the object of the desire onto something else through processes of disavowal. (Gamman and Makinen 1994: 45)**

It is through the displacement of desire that an object acquires special social value, indicated by the reverence, worship or fascination with which it is treated. That desire may be for religious, economic or erotic value (the three

fields in which fetishism has been described) which then accrues in the object. What the Gamman and Makinen definition does is to suspend the realist account of fetishism by treating it as a displacement of meaning rather than a mistake or misunderstanding about the real nature of objects.

A fetish is created through the veneration or worship of an object that is attributed some power or capacity, independently of its manifestation of that capacity. However, through the very process of attribution the object may indeed manifest those powers; the specialness with which the object is treated makes it special. The fetish object will, for example, influence the lives of its human worshippers, determining some of their actions and modifying their beliefs. In this process the object is mediating the powers delegated to it by worshippers. As with all mediation, the fetish is not merely reflecting back the ideas and beliefs of its worshippers, it is transforming them or, in the language of actor-network theory, 'translating' them (Callon 1991). The power of the fetish is not reducible to its material form any more than the meaning of a word can be reduced to its material representation (its sound or graphic shape). The symbolic power of the fetish can be repeated or replicated provided that there is some basis for continuity that is recognisable to the worshipper. The graven image can be copied, the form of the animal is repeated in each example of the species, shoes can be endlessly exchanged as commodities and join countless others in a collection.

The meaning of the specific object is apparent only in a series of objects. The thing to be venerated is distinguished from those to be treated as rubbish or as mere utensils. Such distinctions are embedded within cultural codes that are emergent in sets of practices within the culture. This is precisely why the fetish object cannot be decoded by a realist perspective in any transcultural way; what is 'real' in one cultural code is 'unreal' in another. To use the term 'fetish' in a realist mode is to engage in cultural critique; it is to identify someone else's reality as an illusion, an unreality. I wish to argue that both Marx and Freud use the term fetishism in this realist mode to engage in forms of cultural critique. But there are chinks in the theoretical positions of both which permit a more reflexive position on fetishism to be drawn out.

### **Commodity fetishism**

In the **Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts** Marx uses the term 'fetish-worshippers' to describe the supporters of the monetary and mercantile system and how they looked upon private property. Following Engels, he

compares the fetishism of the mercantilists to that revealed by Luther's critique of the paganism and external religiosity of Catholicism. The objects of private property stand in for real human relations and so appear to have a power that is their own whereas the political economists' critique shows that human labour is the essence of private property. Of course Marx goes on to criticise the political economists for not identifying the contradictory essence of private property as the product of alienated labour.

Whereas in proto-anthropology the term 'fetish' referred to the cultural meanings and uses of certain objects, in Marx's account the term is used to criticise more general beliefs about capitalist culture. Nothing more specific than 'private property' in general is identified as the fetish object (although later in the **Manuscripts** Marx does specify metal money as a fetish, referring to the dazzle of its "sensuous glitter" (Marx 1975: 364)).

In the later, more famous, account of fetishism in **Capital**, Marx follows a very similar line but here the analysis is of the commodity form rather than private property. The 'real' value of a commodity is analysed as a social relation determined by the amount of labour that has gone into its production - it is nothing to do with the material form of the commodity (Marx 1976: 165). The exchange value of commodities appears to be something intrinsic to them as objects and their relationship as things. But this form of their value is illusory since the fetishised exchange establishes a fantastic relationship between things that obscures the real relationship between people - workers whose labour produces things of value to others<sup>2</sup>. The cultural forms which incorporate such 'fantasies', mistaking them for reality, are critiqued by Marx in his analysis of commodity fetishism in **Capital**.

Marx distinguishes the use-value of objects (the use they have to the human labourer) from their exchange-value (the fetishised, fantastic form of value they have as commodities). Use-values are to do with the quality of objects and are only realised in use or consumption whereas exchange values are quantifiable in terms of other commodities (Marx 1976: 126-128). As Baudrillard points out (1981: 130-4), Marx restricts his analysis of commodity fetishism to exchange-value whilst use-value remains "an abstraction" a residual category, prior to and outside the economic relations of socially assigned value, of equivalence and of quantity.

The difficulty with Marx's analysis is that it obscures the processes of consumption and the links between use-value and exchange-value. Exchange

involves consumption and judgements about the relative quality of similar goods (e.g. their fitness for purpose, their substitutability) which in turn lead to conferring social value on goods which affects the determination of economic value. These judgements are derived from the exchange of signs concerning the relative merits and capacities of goods to meet needs. They are realised as the desire for a particular object which is then expressed in the willingness, given sufficient capacity, to exchange for it. That objects might have some complex form of social value (beauty, functionality, longevity) is overlooked by Marx in order to emphasise the basis of economic value in human labour.

It seems as if Marx, especially in the first chapters of **Capital**, takes needs as biologically given and the natural, qualitative use-value of goods as the same in all societies (Sahlins 1976: 148-161)<sup>3</sup>. But Sahlins points out that in the **Grundrisse** Marx showed how consumption was part of the process by which the use-value of objects emerges:

**... the object is not an object in general, but a specific object which must be consumed in a specific manner, to be mediated in its turn by production itself. Hunger is hunger, but the hunger gratified by cooked meat eaten with a knife and fork is a different hunger from that which bolts down raw meat with the aid of hand, nail and tooth. Production thus produces not only the object but also the manner of consumption, not only objectively but also subjectively. (Marx 1973: 92)**

Marx is still describing a real basis for the use-value of objects that is a natural given - here the biological need of 'hunger'. But reality is not presented as a fixed, stable state against which fetishised forms can be distinguished. The nature of the object changes and so must its use-value in a dialectical process of production and consumption. Sahlins suggests that the absence of a theory of meaning is the reason for Marx's failure to deal adequately with the social relations of material objects; it is through their socially construed meaning that they come to have specific use-values that vary with different modes of consumption (1976: 151).

### **Sexual fetishism**

Freud follows previous usage by Binet (in a paper from 1888) of the term fetishism in discussions of sexual perversion. Fetishistic perversions were



regarded as "the degrading consequences of a weakening of morals in a profoundly vitiated society" (Charcot and Magnan quoted in Nye 1993: 21) but it was Binet who identified the 'psychic impotence' characteristic of the sexual obsession with a part of the body or inanimate objects that went with a decadent and enfeebled culture. The critique of sexual deviations and perversions by the French writers on deviation (who Matlock says called themselves *aliénistes*, 1993: 32) was, Robert Nye suggests, tied to a particularly French anxiety about the health and size of the population at the end of the nineteenth century.

Freud treats fetishism as a deviation from the 'normal' sexual aim of copulation leading to the release of sexual tension "...a satisfaction analogous to the satiation of hunger (Freud 1977a : 61). It involves a sexual overvaluation<sup>4</sup> of a substitute object, that while related to the sex object is nonetheless unsuited to the normal sexual aim. Fetish objects include parts of the body (the foot, hair) and objects which are connected to the person for whom they substitute (clothing or underclothes). Freud is quite clear that fetishism, along with other deviations in sexual aim, is not in itself indicative of neuroses or mental illness. It is only when it goes to extremes in overcoming the resistance of shame, disgust, horror or pain (he gives the examples of licking excrement or of intercourse with dead bodies) that these sorts of deviations become pathological. What he suggests is that it is normal to make additions or extensions to the normal sexual aim, substituting objects for the 'real' thing (the union of genitals):

**A certain degree of fetishism is thus habitually present in normal love, especially in those stages of it in which the normal sexual aim seems unattainable or its fulfilment prevented. (Freud 1977a: 66)**

There is only a problem with fetishism when the object substitutes completely for the real thing and when the diversity of sexual objects channelling the sex drive towards the real thing is replaced by a single sex object which is 'overvalued'.

The sexual fetish is then a symbolic substitute that has an analogous or metonymical association with the normal sex object (e.g. fur as a fetish is a symbolic substitute for a woman's pubic hair - Freud 1977a: 68). In his paper of 1927 on **Fetishism** Freud suggests that the fetish is a substitute for the lack of a penis in the little boy's mother. The boy child who is later to be a

fetishist disavows the discovery fearing that if she has been castrated then he might be too. However, the disavowal is not an effective denial; the boy child has retained his belief that women have a penis but he has also given it up (Freud 1977b: 353). The contradiction is resolved by the belief that the woman does have a penis but it is no longer the same; something has been appointed as its substitute - the fetish. Freud says that it is not possible to unravel the associative origins of a particular fetish with any certainty though they are likely to lie in the frozen memory of the moment of discovering the lack. The last thing seen before the realisation that the mother is not phallic becomes a symbolic substitute for the phallus that is not there (shoes, fur, velvet, underclothing) (Freud 1977b: 354-355).

It seems as if the fetish is only available as a sex object for men but Jann Matlock points to the connection between cross dressing by women and clothing fetishes (1993). Elizabeth Grosz follows the line, suggested by Freud, that in pampering herself, what the narcissistic woman does is to treat her whole body it as if it were a phallus thereby fetishising it (Grosz 1993 - a similar point is made by Baudrillard 1993: 107-110). However, the lesbian lover, suggests Grosz, like the fetishist disavows women's castration, but this is her own castration not that of her mother. And also like the fetishist, the lesbian takes as a substitute for the phallus, an object outside her own body; the body of her lover. Gamman and Makinen (1994) argue that the traditional psychoanalytic account of fetishism androcentrically focuses the articulation of desire on the penis and its lack. Using an account of sexual fetishism modified through Kleinian theory, they propose a less gendered and genitaled account of fetishism that incorporates oral and other gratifications whilst retaining the disavowal of the fetishist. This enables them to extend the use of the term fetishism to include pathological and non-pathological relations with clothes and food that express an ambivalence about identity but provide a source of real gratification (1994: 111). Their gendered but balanced account of different mechanisms of adult perversity explains how sexual fetishism occurs predominantly - but not exclusively - in men, eating obsessions and the obsessive consumption of style are predominantly but not exclusively female fetishes.

Deprived of its phallocentrism the psychoanalytic account of fetishism focuses on the dynamics of human desire for objects substitute or 'stand in' for something human. Freud, and Binet before him, both recognised that desire for objects is a normal part of human existence. Fetishism might be born of a

frustration or confusion of normal desire, a sublimation or redirection of sexual needs, but this is almost characteristic of the human condition. It is neither pathological nor in itself destructive of human social being<sup>5</sup>.

### **Semiotic fetishism**

A recurrent theme in Jean Baudrillard's work is the relationship between the social subject and the object. To begin with the object is material and distinct from the subject but as his theory develops, the object becomes progressively more enmeshed with the subject, as inscription on the body and later as a social object that incorporates subject positions, ideas as well as material form. This theoretical development goes against Marx's clear distinction between subject and object that asserts the primacy of the human subject. For Baudrillard the fetish is the site of a merging or confusion of subject and object and, especially in the later work, the object seems to be primary.

In his early work Baudrillard criticises Marx's analysis of commodity fetishism, arguing that use-value is a fetishised social relation just as much as exchange-value (1981: 131). The object that is to become a commodity, available for exchange, must be valued according to a code of functionality which orders both human subjects and material objects (1981: 130-4). Use-value is not an inherent property of the object nor functionality reflective of innate human needs or desires. For Baudrillard the 'object', the thing that has a use is "nothing but the different types of relations and significations that converge, contradict themselves and twist around it" (1981: 63). The object of consumption does not exist in relation to pure, natural, asocial, human needs but is produced as a sign in a system of relations of difference with other objects. The process of consumption Baudrillard understands not as the realisation of objective needs or of economic exchange but as the social exchange of signs and values (1981: 75).

Baudrillard describes objects as signs in a code of signifiatory value can be manipulated between the two registers of functionality and ostentation (Veblen's conspicuous consumption). Both registers can be part of the same object so the useless gadget combines "pure gratuitousness under a cover of functionality, pure waste under a cover of practicality" (Baudrillard 1981: 32). Now, it is the extent to which an object demonstrates ostentation, a sign of value that accrues to the possessor of the object that turns the object into a fetish.

The television set that is broken but retains its prestige value in a culture in which hardly anybody can afford a television is an example of the "pure fetish" (1981: 55). But in western culture it is in the ritual that surrounds the object, the routines and practices of watching the television that give it its fetish character (1981: 56). The television functions as a machine that mediates communications but it is also an object that is consumed in itself, signifying membership of the community as a "token of recognition, of integration, of social legitimacy" (1981: 54). The 'worship' of the television set is through "systematic, non-selective viewing" and the "apparent passivity of long hours of viewing" that actually hides a "laborious patience" (1981: 55). The television takes up a place in our homes, requires a reorganisation of other objects that inhabit them and demands a certain level of commitment in return for the minimal level of social status it confers. Objects like the television have a sign value that is in excess of their functional capacities. Each object "... finds meaning with other objects, in difference, according to a hierarchical code of significations" (Baudrillard 1981: 64).

It is the system of objects as sign values and their exchange that Baudrillard terms "consummativity" (1981: 83), a dynamic of capitalist society that he juxtaposes to productivity. Consummativity is the system of needs for objects imposed on individual consumers - it includes their need for choice. Needs cannot be derived from a humanistic notion of the free, unalienated, asocial individual driven by craving or pleasure or even by some essential needs. Consumer needs are mobilised within individuals by the "strategy of desire" (1981: 85), an ideological effect of the social system achieved through the generalised exchange of signs. It is through the circulation of objects as signs that the quality or use-value of objects is distinguished.

Baudrillard takes Marx to task for using the metaphor of fetishism to avoid an analysis of the ideological labour involved in consumption<sup>6</sup>. Taking up the psychoanalytic use of fetishism as a refusal of sex differences "a perverse *structure* that perhaps underlies all desire" (1981: 90), Baudrillard points out that the fetish object involves a fetishism of the signifier, a passion for the code. The fetishism of commodities as objects is the fascination and worship of the system of differences, the code of signs that the object or good represents. The system of objects as signs is continually shifting emphasis from one term to another so that, unlike the perverse desire of the sexual fetishist, the perverse desire of the commodity fetishist is constantly being

redirected. In describing how the beauty of the body is fetishised, Baudrillard points out that a model of beauty is constructed so that...

**It is the sign in this beauty, the mark (makeup, symmetry, or calculated asymmetry, etc.) which fascinates; it is the artifact that is the object of desire.**  
**(Baudrillard 1981: 94)**

The make-up of 'beauty', of the erotic body, is a process of 'marking it' through ornamentation, jewellery, perfume or through 'cutting it up' into partial objects (feet, hair, breasts, buttocks etc.). This work produces the body as a series of signs, creates it as an object with a signifiatory value.

For Baudrillard the shift from the exchange of symbolic value to the exchange of sign value is characteristic of modernity and "properly constitutes the ideological process" (1981: 98). The symbolic object had a direct if ambivalent relationship with the person; in the Aztec and Egyptian cultures the sun provided life-giving heat and light but was worshipped because it could also take life away. In modern cultures the object as a sign is exchangeable in a series with other signs (the vacation sun, the sun-lamp, the gym) in an ideological system (the healthy body) through which they can be fetishised. Within this exchange of sign values, fetishism is the "fascination" felt both by individuals and by the culture as a whole with those signs that have been positively valorised.

In modern culture fetishism articulates the subject in and through the object world as signs are read and exchanged. This is not a fetishism of symbolic exchange, of lived and felt relationships with objects, based on ritual, worship and subjugation to the power of objects. In modern cultures the merging of subject and object happens on the surface of the body as it is inscribed with visible marks that transform its meaning, inserting the consequent subject/object into the circulation of signs.

Many of the issues raised in the essay "Fetishism and Ideology: The Semiological Reduction" ([1972]1981) are reprised in "The Body: The Mass Grave of Signs" ([1976] 1993). Baudrillard looks again at how the marking of the body achieves a merging of subject and object but via fetishism because there is a "symbolic articulation of lack" (1993: 101). He lists a series of objects that inscribe the surface form of the body including: "the stripper's G-string, bracelets, necklaces, rings, belts, jewels and chains" (1993: 101).

While overlapping the list of fetishising devices in the earlier essay (1981: 94) the objects here are theorised, following Lacan, as 'bars' that both divide up the surface of the body and semiologically separate the signifier from the signified. The bar "erects" the body or body part into a sign of that which is lacking - the phallus. Even material that overlays the surface of the body, lipstick for example<sup>7</sup>, has the effect of inserting the body into the exchange of signs of a phallic (sexual) order. In modern society the signs are read in relation to the subject identity that they overlay so that:

**[t]he subject is no longer eliminated in the exchange, it speculates. The subject, not the savage, is enmeshed in fetishism; through the investment [*faire-valoir*] of its body, it is the subject that is fetishised by the law of value. (Baudrillard 1993: 107)**

The fetishisation of the body through makeup and adornment creates a seductive sexuality that is not grounded in real sexuality. It is no more than a sign or simulacra, a circulation of meaning through which the subject is transformed by sign objects into a fetishised object. It is this obsession with signs and "the reduction of political economy, sexuality and eventually all material and social reality to sign play" that leads Kellner to brand Baudrillard himself a "sign fetishist" (Kellner 1989: 100; 199).

The account of the body as a fetishised commodity, shows how monopoly capitalism not only exploits the productivity of the body as labour power, alienating it through the commodification of labour, but also exploits the 'consummativity' of the body, reifying it through marking its sexuality. However, Baudrillard does not comment on the (at least partially) gendered distinction between the fetishised body as labour power and the fetishised body of made-up beauty. As he turns away from Marx's political economic analysis, Baudrillard responds to the anthropological writings of Mauss and Bataille where in the pre-modern symbolic form of exchange between subject and object, devices such as tattooing insert the whole body into a symbolic exchange in which it can be possessed or dispossessed. What he seems to disapprove of is the overwriting of the real body and its sexuality by material signs in modernity and his critique harks back to the irreversibility of a material culture based on symbolic exchange.

But Baudrillard shifts ground again in later work investing the object itself with the capacity to reverse the determinacy between subject and object. In

**Seduction** (1990a) and **Fatal Strategies** (1990b), now more under the influence of Caillois and Canetti, he explores capacity of the object to "seduce" the subject, to reduce the determinative effect of the social and to lead the subject into the indeterminate realm of chance and the vertiginous, spinning body. Determination, the process of causality, even in the material world, is called into question:

**The reaction to this new state of things has not been a resigned abandonment of old values but rather a mad overdetermination, an exacerbation of these values of reference, function, finality and causality. (Baudrillard 1990b: 11)**

Whereas production was the irreversible, modern process of dominance of subject over object relations, seduction emerges as the reversible, postmodern mode of relationship between subject and object. The result is not the emergence of something new but an excess of the old values; in the face of indeterminacy, overdetermination becomes "hyperdetermination" (Baudrillard 1990b: 12). The fetish becomes for Baudrillard a representative of the power of the object to determine the subject, to reverse causality (Baudrillard 1990b: 114).

The prime case of the fetish is the work of art - an object which has consciously and intentionally been made by a subject investing subjective capacity in the object. This is the 'absolute commodity', that for Baudrillard following Baudelaire, is beyond function and cannot be reduced to exchange or use-value. It becomes detached from its production to become foreign, itself beyond determination but nonetheless still determining human subjects "it glows with a veritable seduction that comes from elsewhere" (1990b: 118).

There are four problems with Baudrillard's analysis of social relations with objects and with fetishes in particular. Firstly, objects seem to have only two social dimensions; function and ostentation. As I shall suggest below there are a number of forms of social relations with objects that could lead to fetishisation. Secondly, Baudrillard treats the consumption of objects simply in terms of the exchange of signs without exploring the relation between sign value and practical use value. Thirdly, it is not clear in his analysis to what extent all commodities are fetishes and, if they are, whether they have the same fetish quality. After 1972 the only fetish he discusses in any detail is the fetishised female body. Fourthly, and this is also characteristic of his work

after 1972, the source of sign value is progressively disconnected from social practices until it becomes 'hyperdetermined'. At this point he is no longer interested in the fetishisation of material objects in the mundane practices of everyday life.

### **Fetishism and the consumption of objects**

As they identify fetish objects, Marx and Freud engage in a modernist form of auto-cultural critique that supersedes the critique of alien cultures and religions. They discover the displacement of real human relations by unreal objects in the secular culture of the nineteenth century by alienation and fetishism. Their critique aims for the liberation of human nature from the bonds of a culture in which some are free but others are either oppressed or repressed, by showing what human life would be like without the inversions of fetishism. For Marx there is a biological 'need' for material objects that underlies the processes of production, consumption and exchange. For Freud the underlying normal sexual aim is a different form of hunger, the biological, sexual 'need' that is manifest as desire which may be redirected towards objects in sexual fetishism. A sublimated erotic desire for objects is then a means by which they attain special social value.

Everyday life in capitalism involves a set of relationships with objects that enable us to do what we do. This is the largely unexplicated use-value of objects, their capacity to fulfil our needs. Contemporary commentators on commodity fetishism (Geras 1976; Godelier 1977; Wells 1981; Jhally 1987) recognise that the objects of commodity fetishism have relations with human beings but they do not analyse what they are. In the **Grundrisse** Marx recognised that need and consumption were produced and this is developed by Baudrillard who incorporates Freud's notion of desire into the relations between individuals and objects<sup>8</sup>. 'Need' is a product of the circulation of signs and objects at the ideological rather than the economic level. This provides a way of understanding how the fetish works as an object in everyday life without leading to neuroses<sup>9</sup> but it does not explore the social practices in which objects are consumed and fetishised.

It is somewhere between the subject and object that the fetish emerges;

**... the interesting thing about a fetish ... is that it is never clear ... whether it is really an object or whether it is part of the self. A fetish ... can be thought of as existing in a**



**free space between the subject and the object. (Levin  
1984: 42)**

Before exploring the fetish quality of objects it is useful to sketch the more mundane features of consumption, the sociological form of human relationships with material objects. Consumption involves four modes of human relations with material objects. Firstly a physical relation that is to do with shape, colour, texture, strength, flexibility and possible movements (think of getting on a bus). It is this that distinguishes material objects from other cultural objects (such as kinship systems, myths). The physical properties of material objects lead to a set of limitations on their capacities (the top speed of the bus, the number of people who can get on) thereby articulating the uses by subjects. But, secondly, objects are used within cultural practices that also specify and constrain their use (bus time tables, regulations on numbers of passengers). Thirdly, objects are signs in themselves that locate the object within cultural parameters including time and space (as a London bus from the 1960-70s). Fourthly, the object may provide a surface for linguistic or quasi-linguistic texts to play across (the advertisement on the side of the bus). It is through these different modes of interaction that subjects realise the capacities of material objects. Obviously some objects are experienced more through one mode than another and the orientation of the subject will affect the mode (buses are largely experienced by passengers in a physical mode; car drivers experience them more as signs or surfaces for messages).

It is in the process of consumption, which refers not merely to the purchase of objects but to the use, enjoyment and disposal of the capacities of those objects (Miller 1987: 190-191), that a relationship between human subjects and material objects is established. The human subject derives the benefit of various 'capacities' when s/he interacts with material objects that enhance her/his capacity in a number of ways:<sup>10</sup>.

1. **Function** The object extends or enhances the human physical action of its user<sup>11</sup>; e.g. as a tool the car actually transports its user.
2. **Ostension** The object signifies the social group membership of its user: e.g. the distinction of a tiara, the clan identification of a football scarf.
3. **Sexuality** The object arouses its user or others or both, as a sign from a code indicating sexual action, identity and interest, through

bodily display, sensuality or substitution; e.g. the wearing of tights or tight-fitting jeans.

4. **Knowledge** The object delivers knowledge to its user by storing simple information or a synthetic understanding of some aspect of the world; e.g. book or any other complex textual object.
5. **Aesthetics** The beauty or form of the object directly moves the emotions of users by representing pure values; e.g. the 'object d'art'.
6. **Mediation** The object enables or enhances communications between humans; e.g. a telephone; the decorative item that is a talking point; the heirloom that links generations.

Many objects will deliver more than one of these six capacities in different degrees. The capacities of objects are not a consequence of the object's material form but emerge in the social and material milieu in which it is consumed - no doubt the list would be refined and extended through empirical study.

Now, the fetish quality of an object is the reverence or the fascination for it that arises out of its capacities but is expressed over and beyond its simple consumption. This fetish quality is attested through ritualistic practices that celebrate or revere the object, a class of objects, items from a 'known' producer or even the brand name of a range of products. These ritualistic practices will involve expressing desire for the object and fantasising about its capacities prior to its consumption. The object itself becomes a sign for these fantasised and desired capacities so that its use or enjoyment can re-stimulate the play of fantasy and desire. Unlike sexual fetishism where the fantasy is usually personal, the fetishism of consumption involves the social negotiation and sharing of the value of the object so the ritualistic practices that fetishise objects will involve discursive action related to the object and its capacities. Expressing desire for and approval of the object and its capacities, celebrating the object, revering it, setting it apart, displaying it, extolling and exalting its capacities, eulogising it, enthusiastic use of it, are the sorts of practices that fetishise objects. The cumulative effect of these practices amount to an overdetermination<sup>12</sup> of the social value of the object in that it is not merely consumed (exchanged and used) but in addition the object or

class of objects can be enjoyed at the level of imagination (fantasy and desire).

One way that social value is overdetermined is through the demonstration of excess capacity in the object which cannot be used other than as a sign of value. An example would be the car that has an excess of power; the power cannot actually be used on the road but driving the car allows it to act as a sign of that power. The excess in capacity of the object is one way of marking the reverence with which it is treated; a photograph of a leader, whether massively blown up or merely given pride of place on the wall is made into a fetish by the reverence for its value that exceeds its mediative capacity. Excess of capacity suggests a latent capacity of the object to deliver human qualities (love, power, authority, sexuality, security, status, intellect, exoticism). The overdetermination of sign value focuses on these 'human' capacities so that the object can substitute for these qualities in human lives. Provided that others (a group large and coherent enough to secure the meaning of the object as a sign) recognise the extended capacities of the fetish object, they will also recognise the accrual of these capacities to those associated with it. So, the powerful car makes its driver powerful, the revered photograph confers authority on the national leader. It is not then the simple capacity of the object that indicates its fetish character but what it means as a sign of social value. Identifying the fetish is not a matter of judging true or real capacities in the object but recognising the multiple sources of positive valuation that overdetermine its value. It is the cumulative effect of these multiple sources that approve excess capacity and interpret its significance.

Advertising, critical commentary, discussions of product development, reports of consumer testing, as well as evaluations of objects in interpersonal exchanges have not only created a market for commodities but have also defined modes of consumption. Public use of an object displays its capacities to others who might then desire to use the same or similar objects. It is through these practices that objects become fascinating, acquire a 'special status', and become revered or worshipped for how they might enhance human capacities. The process of fetishisation of consumption is much the same for a work of art as it is for a style of trainer or a motor car. In this largely discursive context objects are not merely sanctified by the claims of producers, commentators and critics, they are subject to a negotiation of their capacities, of their usefulness to users. It is from the discursive context that

desire for objects emerges; to know what one wants one first has to know what it is and what it might do.

### **Conclusions**

Baudrillard supplements Marx's commodity fetishism by beginning to analyse the fetishism of use-value and the social impact of consummativity. He incorporates Freud's displacement of erotic value on to objects to understand the desire for objects, expressed in the circulation of signs that makes up the field of consummativity. But Baudrillard's later analysis becomes concerned with the indeterminate causality of the hyperreal. This analysis has the advantage of not reducing to a distinction between the 'real' object and the fetish but it leaves him unable to analyse the complexity of lived human relations with objects and to describe the source of their social value. In continuing Baudrillard's early move towards the social and away from the human, towards the semiotic and away from the real, I have begun to explore the way the use and capacities of material objects can lead to fascination and reverence.

The term fetishism can refer to the relative quality of desire and fascination for an object that is not intrinsic but is nonetheless part of it. The reverence shown for its capacities supplements its material form, showing what it means how it is valued in its cultural context. A classic example is a perfume with very low production value but a high fetish value that is created by a series of signs attached to the object through advertising, packaging, personal approval and recommendation that are themselves human products that communicate value. The reverence for the object is founded in its capacities to change a person's smell (function), to declare their membership of a particular social group (ostension), to express their sexual identity and arouse others' sexual interest (sexuality), to demonstrate their understanding of what aromas are pleasing (knowledge) to explore the beauty of scent (aesthetics) and to communicate though this valuation of capacities with others (mediation). As these capacities are identified and extolled, many times over, the perfume becomes progressively fetishised.

The fetish quality of cars, works of art, mobile 'phones, shirts and Italian food is not an intrinsic or stable quality of the object. It is assigned through cultural mediations, a circulation of signs, including the objects themselves. It is realised though a worshipful consumption of the objects in which reverence is displayed through desire for and an enthusiastic use of the object's capacities.

The fetishistic quality of objects varies over time and place and between different groups of people<sup>13</sup>. This is a fetishism of objects that does not distinguish their unreality from an essential material, natural or normal reality but recognises, at both the material and semiotic levels, the fetish as a cultural production, a work of humans that is as real as anything can be.

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was presented to the BSA conference on Sexualities in Social Context, 28-31st March 1994.

<sup>2</sup> As Himmelweit and Mohun (1981) point out, the notion of value here is dependent on the process of exchange, rather than of production. Objects are associated with an exchange value only when they enter the market and are priced either in terms of quantities of other products or in terms of money. While concrete labour produces the object it is valued in the market place as socially necessary labour time (Himmelweit and Mohun 1981: 233).

<sup>3</sup> See for example, Marx's account of those things that have not been fetishised, things that have a use-value but no exchange-value (1976: 131).

<sup>4</sup> By 'overvaluation' Freud is referring to the tendency for the sexual aim to extend beyond the genitals to the whole body and indeed mind of the sex object - he suggests that it is rare for this deviation not to occur (Freud 1977a: 62-63).

<sup>5</sup> Freud apparently said; "...half of humanity must be classed among the clothes fetishists. All women, that is, are clothes fetishists." See Rose 1988: 156.

<sup>6</sup> Kellner takes Baudrillard to task for his limited reading of Marx (1989: 36-39). He points out that in a number of places Marx does offer a more socio-historical account of needs and their place in consumption. See above p. 9.

<sup>7</sup> It is clear that much of Baudrillard's interest in the fetishism of commodities and the fetishistic effect of makeup comes from Baudelaire whom he mentions (1981: 95), quotes a large section from "In Praise of Cosmetics" from **The Painter of Modern Life** (1990a: 93) and refers to again (1990b: 116 fn).

<sup>8</sup> Even punning on the 'investissement' of the individual in an object - both an investment in the economic sense and a cathexis in the psychoanalytic sense. (Baudrillard 1981: 63 fn3).

<sup>9</sup> As Grosz remarks "the fetishist remains the most satisfied and contented of all perverts (the fetishist rarely if ever seeks analysis for fetishistic behaviour - the fetish never complains!)" (1993: 114).

<sup>10</sup> A similar account of the different levels on which an object can be apprehended is offered for different purposes by Eco (1977: 276).

<sup>11</sup> 'Users' are humans who have a career in which their experience of using objects in a variety of ways common to their culture moulds their identity as users. My thanks to Graeme Gilloch for a number of helpful comments, including pointing out that users cannot be taken as given.

<sup>12</sup> i.e. value is represented many times over - see Freud 1976: 389.

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<sup>13</sup> See Kellner's critical discussion of Baudrillard's early work - 1989: 27-32.

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