

The Two Secrets of the Fetish

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Abstract

Jean-Luc Nancy's text, 'The Two Secrets of the Fetish', was commissioned for the catalogue of 'Mixed Blessings', a major exhibition of the work of Guillaume Paris, hosted by the Musée d'Art moderne et contemporain de Strasbourg from February to April 2002. This text was originally published in French and appears here in an English translation. Guillaume Paris's practice is complex but often centres around the processes of transformation of an object (sublimation, reification...) within a dialectic of commodity capitalism. The context of Paris's artistic practice draws him into a broad, multi-disciplinary discursive context and for this reason he regularly commissions essays for his catalogues from a diverse range of interests and often from authors outside of a professional visual art background. It is within this context that Jean-Luc Nancy's text is positioned through an examination of the fetish, a key aspect of Marx's thinking. But here the fetish is not present in the conversation to simply diabolize commodity capitalism, as a straightforward question of détournement. The interest here is more in how to reappropriate the power of the fetish rather than simply confronting it with pious denunciation. As Nancy remarks, this situation can be likened to the difference between the satyr and the saint.

Keywords

Consumerism
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presence

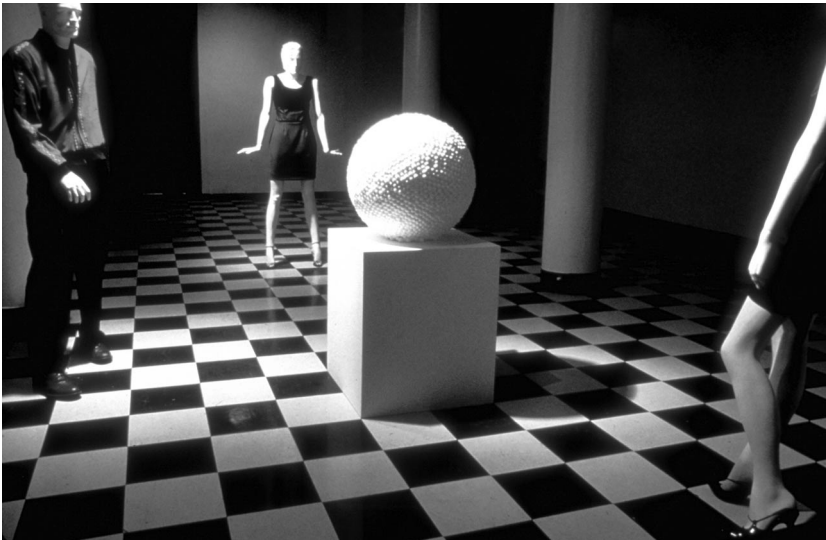
Guillaume Paris presents us with, and addresses to us, 'Mixed Blessings'. To bless is to sanctify or hallow, to call upon divine grace to intercede on behalf of something or someone. It is intended to ensure some kind of happiness or prosperity. If a blessing is mixed, or mitigated, this is because, at one and the same time, it dooms something to misfortune and dereliction, and reduces the promised grace to naught. The first reading persuades us right away that the promise of happiness is one of commodity consumerism, and that the threat has to do with the inanity of what the Situationists called the 'market-spectacular' (*spectaculaire-marchand*). If this were all that was involved, there would be nothing to write home about, or rather a harping on. (This harping on is forever with us, and criticism of the consumerism, advertising, simulacrum and virtuality veiling and dissolving the real has itself turned into a commodity of current intellectual consumption. So denunciation of the media becomes media-inspired humdrum, and it is not just the medium that's the message, to borrow MacLuhan's phrase, but rather the revelation of the secret of the medium as an absurd or manipulative secret that is itself the media message, be it announced in the media itself or in learned works which in turn mediatize knowledge and reason in their revelatory function.)

This is not all that is involved. Beneath the revelation of the secret of fetishism, an extra trick is devised and played, and the 'mixed' is more complex than it seems. There is cause to take a closer look at the mixed media of these blessings. And this prompts us to do nothing other than once more raise the issue of Marxian fetishism.

Marx's formula, 'the fetishism of commodity', is imprinted in the most sweeping and resistant of cultural memories. It has become almost anonymous, or alternatively synonymous with the name of Marx himself, as happens to one or two rare coinages of verbal tags (cogito, categorical imperative, etc.). This privilege can only be due to one quite specific virtue. This manner of virtue consists not only in characterizing, in the fullest sense of the term (typifying or hallmarking a property or essence), but also in characterizing in such a way that the character - the imprint, or seal - is as if imprinted on the thing itself and can no longer be separated from it, or, at the very least, cannot be separated without some loss in the substance of the thing. We put it thus, in Kantian terms: the intuition presented in the word 'fetishism' is imprinted or transferred on to the concept of 'commodity' in an indelible way, and the outcome is a scheme which brings out a new image, hence a new idea. Not only the commodity as fetish in the sense that this is one of its features or one of its approaches *inter alia*, but the essence of the commodity revealed as fetish, in such a way that this latter subsists once the approach has been shifted and once the 'secret' of its 'mystical character' has been revealed (all these terms, needless to say, are in Marx).

It also goes without saying that the secret consists in the fact that the market (or exchange) value of the object (or product), which appears to be an intrinsic or immanent property thereof (parallel as such to its use value, extrinsic and altogether relative to its use in a given socio-technical context), merely covers, disguises or represses the provenance of its value, period, or value, absolutely. For this latter is nothing other than the living human labour of the producer, which the act of production incorporates in the product. But the market value diverts this incorporated creative life toward the equivalence within the exchange where the producer (the worker) is surreptitiously stripped of the share of the value that the market calculation does not exchange for the upkeep of his manpower, but rather pays into the capital account.

Our brief here is not to broach the problems associated with the assessment or appreciation of living labour in its relationship with the increase or with the creation itself of value or in relation to the extortion undergone by the value creator (the valiant, the valorizing, the living person as maker of the price, giver of the price, absolutely) in favour of the person who accumulates value in the form of the general equivalent, by making market prices based on currency. Currency is the fetish, or fixes fetishism in itself: belief in the value *per se* of the market price. Criticism of the political economy (otherwise put, in a nutshell, of economy as politics) reveals the inanity of belief, and if criticism cannot gauge the hidden and mysticized or mystified value in terms of monetary value, the principle of criticism is still just as much, if not more so, the incommensurability of the creator and the product marketed.



1 This hypothesis certainly has in its favour more than a mere beginning, and even certain developments, in several works on Marx. Here we are without any scientific claim.

Figure 1: Enhanced Being, 1991

Three dressed mannequins, naphthalene sphere, pedestal, color photograph. Clothing by fashion designer Grace Nguyen. Dimensions variable. The Great Hall Gallery, Cooper Union, New York, 1991.

Alienation cannot be gauged or measured, it is at once the principle of criticism and its aporia once you want and have to oppose measure to measure: critical measure of the fetish versus market measure by the fetish.

What, on the other hand, we should like to outline here starts out from the following hypothesis: doesn't the force of Marx's formula still have to do with a power other than the power of criticism alone, thus broached? Isn't there another energy, and another enigma, slipped into the first, adding to the revelation of the secret, even going beyond this revelation and possibly thus somewhat displacing the secret itself (precisely because it isn't measurable)?

This other power supposedly has to do with 'fetishism' itself. That is to say that precisely where we regard it first and foremost as image, it might well also play another role, going almost as far as reversing the above proposed distribution of the Kantian indices of intuition and concept. Otherwise put, perhaps the word 'fetish', with the metaphor that it entails (or the supposed metaphor - we shall duly see that it is the key issue), underpins such a strong and lasting impact of the formula because, in pronouncing it, we don't dwell on the literary transposition of the metaphor, or on the conceptual grasp of what intuition might have supported with regard to its image. But the image of the fetish subsists as fetish-image which schematizes the commodity for us, that is to say, presents it by lending it a meaning or alternatively a value of meaning which it is no longer simply possible to break down into illusory appearance and revealed reality.¹

The provenance of the image chosen by Marx is evident: he was acquainted with a narrative whereby, in the Caribbean, the gold of the conquerors had become a fetish for the natives. So this fetishization was at

- 2 Karl Marx, *Œuvres*, vol. 3, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Paris: Gallimard, 1963–77, p. 204.
- 3 *ibid.*, p. 213.
- 4 He sometimes uses the word ‘idol’, for example, *op. cit.*, vol. 3, p. 237, and vol. 2, p. 97.
- 5 *op. cit.*, vol. 1, p. 46. We should not forget, even if we can’t dwell on it here, that the falseness of idols is often linked in the Bible with the presence of them on metals or precious wood, gems and ivory.
- 6 *op. cit.*, vol. 1, p. 1640.
- 7 *op. cit.*, vol. 2, p. 412.
- 8 *op. cit.*, vol. 2, p. 644.

once parallel and symmetrical with the fetishization of the commodity: the currency of the Europeans became a fetish when the natives understood its virtue among the conquerors, a power whose nature seemed either mysterious or numinous and supernatural to them. This reading of Marx dates back to his years as a student, and to a marked interest he had in the analysis of religious forms (in particular, from the standpoint that concerns us here, for an eighteenth-century work titled *Du culte des dieux fétiches* [*On The Cult of Fetish Gods*], by Charles de Brosses). For Marx, fetishism represented, first and foremost, and in accordance with his readings, the most ‘puerile’ form of the ‘religion of sensual appetites’ in which ‘the fetishist imagines that an “inanimate object” might lose its natural character in order to give the nod to his covetous desires.’²

For Marx, the task of philosophy from then on was to ‘shatter the hieroglyphic envelope’³ in which religions swathe the truth of the world. Talking at a later date about ‘fetishism’, he announced the destruction of his illusion by the denunciation of its phoney, artificial character. The fetish is supremely phoney - and quintessentially too, according to the etymology of the word, coined in Portuguese from *feitiço*, meaning ‘artificial’. The ‘fetishes’ of native people were, for the conquerors, false gods. Which is to say, idols in the monotheistic sense of the term. Marx was keen to topple market idols⁴ the way Moses had toppled the golden calf. Gold and silver are ‘crystallizations’⁵ of monetary abstraction, and this is how they come to be ‘fetishes’ - whence the magic of money. But in this way ‘the enigma of money-fetishism is merely the enigma of commodity-fetishism: the secret, henceforward, is dazzlingly clear.’⁶

So what is also involved henceforth is the ‘fetishism of the political economy’,⁷ since this is based on the belief that the market form is the actual appearance or embodiment of the product. (We should note that, nowadays, the language of commerce uses the word ‘product’ for a reality - object or service - which synthesizes the Marxist concepts of product and commodity. The accent is shifted from metal currency to electronic currency, and, in the final analysis, it is production that is directly fetishized.) ‘In this way’, Marx wrote, ‘the fetishism that hallmarks the bourgeois economy finds its fulfilment. It turns the social, economic character, which is imprinted on things in the process of social production, into a natural character of these things issuing from their material nature.’⁸

But does the revealed secret show production stripped bare? Is the creation of value presented as such? In other words, does living humankind at work become visible, other than as the idea of an incommensurable measure? The person who pulls down idols promises, by definition, the truth of a god that no presentation can either ensure or saturate. It is invariably a negative theology that unmasks examples of idolatry. So, at the same time as it confirms the transcendence and authority of the true god, the divine super-essence does not appear on its own behalf.

The secret revealed is called the ‘secret revealed’ and the ‘fetish demystified’ - but saying this still does not show the truth of production, or rather of the producer in person or as subject, and his unique and community



Figure 2: The Gift, 2002. Wax, display case. Hand: 93/4 x 51/2 x 4 in. (25 x 14 x 10 cm).

existence, the way Marx at times sketches the forthcoming picture. But we should acknowledge that if the living producer (natural, not artificial: the non-manufactured manufacturer) were to appear in person, he would offer his figure, his true presence. He would present himself and he would be presented to us. The fact is that what theology and philosophy hold against the idol is presence as a presentation of truth.

This is thus also what, in terms of theology and philosophy, invariably keeps art at a distance, be this distance intended as hostile or else attentive, reproachful or respectful. Everything here revolves discreetly around art, its artifice and its false gods: art and production, production as art or art as presentation of the living producer. It is an artificial presentation, deceitful in relation to this life that is so natural and yet social life and production of society itself.

It is precisely here that the word 'fetish' might well have a fetish character insinuated beneath its critical (or critico-onto-theological) function. When we say 'commodity fetishism' we are announcing a demystification. But because there is not (as yet) any presence that can stand in for the presence of the fetish (and can there be?), it is important to anticipate the disillusion of demystification. Accordingly, the fascinating character and the sparkle of the fetish continue to adhere to its own denunciation. The secret is out, but the word 'fetish' still harbours an unrevealed secret: the very presence of the thing, called commodity or product, which is paid for in cash or by credit card, which is worshipped or used, the very thing, the thing advanced in the strange element of presence in itself and *per se*.

(Let us imagine the very obscure relationship that is formed between the conquerors, intrigued by gods that are so puerile but so present, so precious - present because they are precious, precious because they are present - and the conquered, subjugated and enthralled by the yellow metal that is so visibly-invisibly powerful among those mighty invaders. God for god, sparkle for sparkle, mystique for mystique, dizziness of precious pres-

ences and their adorations, execrations, consecrations and exorcisms. The word fetish expresses all this through what is henceforward its double entry, one by way of the false, the other by way of the true.)

(So the word 'fetish' itself becomes fetishized, and the same goes for all the words which express the false, the fake, the flashy, the dazzling, the artifice, and invariably ending up as the simulacrum of art - albeit the most sober and the most secret, albeit the art of the secret of art, great art with neither measure nor market, neither artifice nor religion.)

Behind the revealed secret there lurks another, and it is craftier (one which is perhaps never to be absolutely revealed): the secret of presence in general, which is possibly never exempt from fetishism, in other words, from the force of desire whereby I strive toward this presence to see it, touch it and taste of it, henceforth at least because 'presence' does not designate the inert being of what is (has been) put there and is not even there, nor there, nor beyond, but put just any old where.

But the fetish is the being-there of a desire, of an expectation and an imminence, of a power and its premonition, of a force buried in form and exhumed by it. Whether we approach it from the angle of magic and psychoanalysis, or from the angle of the celebratory and almost incantatory use of the word by Marx, the fetish becomes a double secret: the secret that critical analysis reveals as the poor monetary secret, and the secret that subsists in the intensity of a presence in so much as, as a presence, it precisely keeps its secret, and in so much as its presence is in this keeping. The fact is that it is enough to fix your gaze, even on a product or currency, it is enough that there be intensity of gaze (and this is not its intentionality: on the contrary, it is what differs from phenomenological intentionality and what makes it differ), it is enough that there be its in-tension instead of its intention, for the enigma of this second secret to be in turn revealed, that is, that it becomes ever more enigmatic.

Not: 'Why is there something and not nothing?' but: 'How is there something?' or, alternatively: not only how a product is presented, but how a presence is produced. What is the power of the present, of presenting, of being-present? What power does the product have and what power does it, in its turn, wield? Dealing with this intractable enigma equals desire, its tension. The transaction is attempted by the god or the currency.

The fetish is better named than might appear. It is false, made, fabricated: it is produced. It is the production of desire based on the double genitive: produced by desire, producing desire, and in particular that of presence. We know only too well that there are beings: this is a pure matter of knowing. But what we desire is that they should come and present themselves and then present themselves to the point of touching us, that just one of them or each one of them - and myself one of them - should touch us just for a single instant with its uniqueness, with its unique value. We strive toward it as we do to the flip side of death, which puts on the reverse key, it, too, unique, of erasure in absence.

The fetish is not an idol and does not issue from religion. But it is value, sense, desire not for presence but as presence, presentation of the being of



Figure 3: Jour de Fête, Centre Georges Pompidou, 2000.

Foreground: Angel Inc., 1994.

Cement, pump, milk (100 liters). 71 x 391/4 x 391/4 in. (180 x 100 x 100 cm).

Background: Untitled, 1989–91.

Taxidermied doves. 153/4 x 8 x 4 in. (40 x 20 x 10 cm).

the being, gentle and rending, impossible to barter, far too pricey, without equivalence and without divine prevalence. Its withdrawn sparkle shines forth in the double depth of every evaluation, of every value, desire to come up with a price without either haggling or worshipping, with lost funds. The Latin word *pretium* (whose sonorous syllables can be heard in precious) is likened by linguists to *interpretes*. The relationship can work both ways: either the 'interpretation' derives from market value, or else market value derives from hermeneutics, and this latter is nothing other than the transmission and announcement of what precedes all sense and all value, the infinite price of the incredible presence.

- 9 We thus came back to an observation by Heidegger on 'the fetish and fates' (*Sein und Zeit*), commented by Werner Hamacher in 'Peut-être la question', in *Les fins de l'homme*, Paris: Galilée, 1981, p. 345 ff.



Figure 4: Infinite Justice, 2003.

Painted resin, clothing, silkscreen on vinyl, painted wood, thermoformed polyethylene.

185 x 125 x 36 cm.

In Priceless, Galerie Nelson, Paris, 2003.

The fetish is presence brought together in its sign, presence gathered up as a sign, brought to it.⁹ So it also validates the sign as presence, signifying itself as present without signifying anything else. A presence which acts as a sign and a sign which acts as a presence, a twofold artifice within the tracery of which is embedded - a pebble wrapped in a reed, a doll with shell eyes, a rosary of sequins, a cloth impregnated with aroma, a lock of hair, a packet of detergent, a moth-ball, a piece of coloured jelly, the imminence of the strange: a pure sign, a pure present, the uncanny familiar of the power of nothing. How are we to deal with this? God or currency attempt the transaction. But when you don't fiddle, you remain faced with the uncompromising: this is sometimes called art, or thought. It's better not to fetishize any name.

Guillaume Paris's work informs and juggles with this discreet and very convoluted thought stolen from the fetish. It informs the double structure of the commodity: on the one hand, the secret which, today, has been long since aired (everyone knows it, which certainly did not stop it from functioning, albeit by way of a great vigilance and ingeniousness on the part of the makers of fetishes), on the other hand the desire for value or alternatively value as desire, a sign striving toward nothing. Between the two, it mingles certain openly religious commodities, or certain forms of religiosity that are openly commodified, one or two poor forms of magic in a quest for effects that are like the other side of this desire. You might think you're re-

seeing the well-known scene: in Renaissance Italy, a street preacher is not listened to by anyone, because, a bit further on, everyone is thronging around a puppet show. So the preacher brandishes his crucifix and starts shouting, 'Ecco il vero Pulcinella! [Here's the real Punchinello!]' But what if what he was saying were truer than it might seem? If the desire were always the desire of the real Punchinello in the sense where this would be ... truth itself, not revealed as a derisory secret, but really showing itself as the farce in which the will for truth consists (or the will for value, and first and last meaning) - and this itself being truth, truth not wished for, not regarded as sacred, not fetishized, but shaken like a joyous and disconcerting fetish. As Nietzsche said, 'The clown and the saint are the two most interesting human types,' but he ended up choosing: 'As a disciple of Dionysus, I would rather be a satyr than a saint.' Satyrs, Punchinellos (little Neapolitan chickens), fetishes: all so many manifestations of this, that there is nothing to reveal, but also this: that revealing nothing is the secret, the very art of art or life.

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