

Ambrogia Cereda

Louise J. Kaplan, Falsi idoli. Le culture del feti-
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Book reviews

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This book does not merely deal about the phenomenon of fetishism (or fetish practices) but carries out a psychoanalytical reflection upon the so-called “fetishist strategies.” The author situates herself at the cutting edge of contemporary psychoanalytic thought and, founding her theory on a many years’ experience as a psychoanalyst, she underlines the difference between fetishism and the more complex and invisible fetishist strategies by moving from the analysis of a famous Freudian essay, *Fetishism*.

In this perspective, the fetishist strategy is firstly defined as a mechanism that individuals use to approach many phenomena that they experience in their everyday life, but it generally remains an unrevealed structure of behaviour to their eyes and to the eyes of the scholars. Besides, this strategy belongs to the majority of the social and political structures regulating the history of mankind since its very beginning, as it is actually contained in the human mind. The description of the mechanism is then arranged by means of as a series of examples explaining how the different principles organizing the fetishist strategy give the death drive an erotic connotation and mask the whole object of desire. This is the starting point for the analysis and the criticism of the cultures of fetishism: the fetishist strategy represents indeed a consistent part of the cultural discourse, a hidden feature of many material objects that seize our attention in our ordinary life. Therefore the analysis is referred to many fields of our contemporary culture, and it is carried out unravelling the different principles contained in a series of phenomena, portrayed in each chapter. They are heterogeneous cases ranging from footbinding, typical practice of body modification of the traditional Chinese and Japanese culture, [ch. 3]; the use of the female body in filmmaking [ch. 4]; the inscription of the skin in traditional cultures and among young women in a contemporary urban context [ch. 5]; having an iPod, or a Blackberry [ch. 8]; to the completion of biographies [ch. 6]; the psychoanalytic training [ch. 7], and the celebration of the artificial intelligence [ch. 9], but they all seem to share the common function of creating a psychological protection enacted to tame, subdue and, generally, murder human vitalities.

This is the basic material for the application of Kaplan’s thesis about the fetishist strategy and in her argumentation, she demonstrates it by exposing the five principles supporting it, which are strictly interconnected. They are often coupled and compounded in a unique phenomenon and they replace spiritual values with material objects. Moreover, one can be derived from the other one and operates on a specific level. At the first level they consist on transforming an immaterial representation of someone or something in a tangible and material thing or individual, this operation allows a subject to exert control upon it or him/her. To explain this part of the process the author draws a parallelism with the Marxian theory of the Capital, in which chapter 10 is dedicated to the criticism of ‘the progress’, whose effect mainly consists in endowing the material strength with an intellectual life and obfuscating the human vitality with a material strength. This is especially expressed by the culture of reality shows, where individuals

are rendered stereotyped representations through the commoditization of their identity and personality. From this principle the second one is derived as a variation: the creative urge can be domesticated in order to repress unknown energies, perceived as dangerous, so that the individual can feel appeased. This principle, organizing many phenomena, is contained in the production of clothing as well as in the training of the psychologists.

In this theoretical frame, even the attention for details appears as a part of the fetishist strategy that draws the attention to safe elements of a person, practice, or object concealing other aspects deemed as frightening and uncontrollable. In their extreme version some sexual perversions (i. e. necrophilia) are run by this principle, because they tend to dehumanize and mortify the other person's desiring body perceived as a threat.

The fourth principle is derived from this assessment and is defined by the effort of estranging the individuals from their object of desire: the silicon-based body of the robots gives a strong image of this process, in which the potential threat (i. e. life) is replaced with something similar (i.e. artificial life) less scaring and unpredictable.

In this way the death drive takes an erotic hue and draws a mask on the skin, this is the fifth principle of the fetishist strategy that is revealed by the female body in the motion-picture industry, where the desire for destruction of some protagonists in famous movies, like *Thelma and Louise* by Ridley Scott, is even pictured as a ceremony of general renewal.

The aim of the work is reached in demonstrating how, in a technology-driven world, an understanding of the fetishism strategy can help individuals escaping from the sterility to which our contemporary culture seems devoted. This is to be understood neither as a criticism of the global culture, because that is not the origin of the fetishist strategy, nor a utopian return to the primal purity, because technology, consumption, narration can't be refused or eradicated from contemporary society. It is instead a suggestion that also takes into account the influence of the many faces of the cultures of fetishism onto the scholars of many disciplines and the academic world in general: every individual is exposed to this influence, and can reproduce it or use it unconsciously.

Therefore the final chapter underlines the difficulty of escaping the fetishist culture: simply providing efficient models of behaviour might appear as a useless repetition of the strategy it tends to deconstruct. An ultimate solution to the problem is then replaced with a proposal to the readers to preserve their feature of human beings, which is meant for Kaplan to preserve dialogue as the very basis of all human relationships.

This dialogical relationship is pictured as different from the mother-child model of listening and welcoming embrace, and it is expressed as an exhortation to move and face the uncertainty of contemporary living.

To sum up, this book can provide some useful materials to the work of psychologists and psychoanalysts, offering them not only an interesting point of observation to illuminate the twilight zone between individual strategies of behaviours and pathologies (i. e. depression, anxiety, violent acts, homicidal tendencies, DSHS, delicate self harm syndrome) in our contemporary scenario, but it also gives to sociologists and cultural analysts a series of good starting points that can produce an interdisciplinary compre-

hension of the institutionalization of some social trends in the practices of consumption, and cultural production, and the development of specific social policies.

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