

FANTASIES OF FETISHISM: FROM DECADENCE TO THE POST-HUMAN

by Amanda Fernbach. Edinburgh Univ. Press, Edinburgh, Scotland, U.K., 2002. 239 pp., illus. Trade. ISBN: 0-7486-1616-0.

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Of all the various strands of posthuman theory to emerge over the last decade, that associated with cultural studies seems the most immediately seductive. The blending of high technology, erotica, media theory, fashion and subculture studies appeals perfectly to the preoccupations of the student mind, while at the same time providing a new opportunity to reapply the doctrines of orthodox cultural theory, such as psychoanalysis and postmodern criticism. This is very much how *Fantasies of Fetishism* sells itself: from the glossy cybersex cover to the unavoidable images of sleek erotica that punctuate the text, the book is precisely designed to elicit a predetermined response—both intellectually sanctioned and lurid, a kind of “PC Porn.” But at the same time this is a serious, broad (-minded) and coherent attempt to cast the light of cultural studies into some of those dark, not to say dank, recesses of human behavior most often confined to underground clubs and specialist websites.

Fernbach’s analysis conforms in many respects to the orthodoxies of cultural theory. She starts with Freud’s theory of fetishism and explains both its value and deficiencies in contemporary application. Calling it “classical fetishism,” she notes how the castration anxiety at the root of Freud’s theory suffers from regarding the male child as the normative model, at the same time as disavowing sexual difference. For Freud the fetish object stands as substitute for the imaginary phallus the mother has lost to the jealous father, and hence negates the essential femininity of the maternal object. Fernbach acknowledges that this theory has been now largely discredited, not least by subsequent feminist theorists, but claims that it might still serve as one of several possible kinds of fetishism that can be identified in contemporary human discourse. These other kinds of fetishism stand in contrast to the classical kind insofar as they celebrate and highlight difference

instead of disavowing it. For example, “decadent fetishism” of the kind often on display in the fetish club scene, “tends to proliferate differences. Decadent fetishism involves an identification with the Other and a fantasy of self-transformation that offers a critique, in a fashion, of hegemonic hierarchized binaries” (p. 27). These binaries—subject/object, black/white, male/female—become less determinants of “Otherness” than the basis of a simultaneous “polysexual” free-play that undermines the very order of Aristotle’s non-contradictory logic.

In a similar way, the notion is introduced of a “pre-Oedipal fetishism” in which the fetish object acts to resist the sense of individuality imposed upon the child during weaning, or as it comes to sense its separation from the mother. The deep lack caused by this separation is ameliorated by the fetish object through which a symbolic reunification is promised. Fernbach uses this theoretical tool to account for the current fetishization of technology, particularly the fantasy of bonding with machines which in themselves represent a greater whole of which one becomes part. The case of the performance artist Stelarc is used illustratively (p. 119).

The aspiration toward negation, dispersal, transformation and transcendence common to many cyborg fantasies points, as Fernbach sees it, to a further kind of fetishism—that of “matrix fetishism.” With its matriarchal etymology, it bears close relation to the unification impulse described by the pre-Oedipal fetish, and is used to account for a certain kind of posthuman ideology as proselytized by, for example, the Extropians. Here fetishism is the ultimate in transformation, the loss of constraint and “loss” itself, in which the yearning for completion, and indefinite personal extension, is expressed through a conspicuous worship of mechanical apparatus.

The project of *Fantasies of Fetishism* is both to identify a new set of theories about fetishism that seem applicable to contemporary behavior as well as to find commonality in an apparently disparate set of impulses and cultural artifacts, from the *fin de siècle* decadence of Beardsley and Wilde to techno-art and haute couture. One has to say that both aspects of the project have been successfully realized, despite the reliance upon a somewhat dated set of intellectual coordinates. This makes the book a useful bibliographical reference

in a number of disciplines, from fashion, film and technology studies to cultural theory and contemporary art history. The book itself is produced to a high standard: illustrations are generous and of good quality, and the bibliography is substantial and useful.

WRITING MACHINES

by N. Katherine Hayles. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, U.S.A., 2002. 144 pp., illus. Paper. ISBN: 0-262-58215-5.

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Anyone following the scholarship of N. Katherine Hayles since the publication of her article “Virtual Bodies and Flickering Signifiers” (1993) knows that she has been working steadily on some notable activities: first, encouraging the continued development of the art of electronic literature; and, second, building a field of study and theory of electronic textuality. Her new book, *Writing Machines*, follows the award-winning *How We Became Posthuman* (1999). While in that book she investigates embodiment and self in light of human interaction with informational technology, in *Writing Machines* she reflects her current interests by tracing materiality in light of the machines humans use to write with and the literary artifacts those machines help to produce. The result of her decade-long journey is a theory and methodology for understanding media and, ultimately, ourselves as both constructors of and beings constructed by communication media. Hence, the title of the book evokes both “inscription devices”—technologies such as the printing press and computer—and the texts that make visible “the machinery that gives their verbal constructions physical reality” (p. 26). Thus, *Writing Machines* is not just about electronic texts produced in these days of posthumanity, but also “what the print book can be in the digital age” (p. 9).

Laid out in eight chapters, the book makes its point verbally and visually. Rhetorically, it points to hard evidence concerning the material property of texts, beginning with Talan Memmott’s *Lexia to Perplexia*, an electronic literary work that, through its construction of “the user as well as the interface” (48), reveals the “digital performance” of the text (p. 61); to Tom Phillips’s *A Humument*, an artist’s book that treats text as