

Hartmut Böhme
Fetishism and Culture

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A Different Theory of Modernity

Translated by
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Translator's Note

I have attempted to track down the corresponding translations of all quotes in standard English editions where possible. Otherwise, all quotes have been translated by me, unless a translator is acknowledged in the bibliography. In very few cases, English translations exist, but were not available or accessible to me, in which case I have also translated them myself. Rarely, I have amended quotes from translations by others, usually only when text or meaning important for the argument is missing. In these cases my amendments are in square brackets. Again, in very rare cases, a German term that is particularly relevant, obscure or ambiguous has been included in square brackets to help the reader familiar with the original discourse.

Translator's footnotes have been used sparingly in the main text and only when an important additional semantic dimension would otherwise be lost. A brief comment on two important terms: the word 'thingly' may seem awkward at first, but it will soon become apparent to the reader why I have chosen this translation rather than 'material'. The adjective 'enlightened' also makes a regular appearance and, although I have chosen not to capitalise it because of its frequency, is intended to mean enlightened in the sense of a cultivated, rational, modern subject as related to the historical period of the Enlightenment, as it does in German, rather than a spiritual awakening.

As much as is possible, I have attempted to stick to the syntax and some of the punctuation of the original, for example, the frequent use of the colon and semicolon, in order to replicate the style and rhythm of Hartmut Böhme's lively prose in the best possible way, and because both are also integral to the structure of a scholarly argument. I hope that the English is nonetheless as readable as the original is.

Anna Galt

Introduction

Je sais bien... mais quand même.
(Octave Mannoni 1964, 1262)

Perhaps fetishisation provides
the key?
(Meyer 1908, 333)

1 The horseshoe

“Niels (Bohr, H.B.) closed the conversation with one of those stories he liked to tell on such occasions: ‘One of our neighbours in Tisvilde once fixed a horseshoe over the door to his house [which was meant to bring luck according to an old local superstition]. When a mutual acquaintance asked him: “But are you really superstitious? Do you honestly believe that this horseshoe will bring you luck?” he replied: “Of course not; but they say it helps even if you don’t believe in it.”’” (Heisenberg 1971, 92)

This anecdote concludes Werner Heisenberg’s account of his discussions on the relationship between “Science and Religion” with Paul Dirac, Wolfgang Pauli and Niels Bohr in the year 1927. Bohr’s comment is clearly ironic, part of a conversation between modern scientists relaxing in a Brussels hotel after a conference, discussing their relationship to God and the supernatural. Horseshoes belong to the amulet or talisman class, a sub-group of magical things, which we sometimes also call fetishes, in this instance affixed to the house as a lucky charm. However, this is already a modern misinterpretation, because fetishes, whether placed under the threshold or above the lintel, had a mainly apotropaic function: they defended against sorcery and therefore belong to the category of fetishes whose function is territorial protection. As early as 1912, Robert H. Milligan (1912, 219) observed that the superstitious belief of German peasants in the auspicious properties of horseshoes could be compared to the fetish beliefs of West African “negroes”.

But that does not concern us yet here. What is more interesting is the strange, paradoxical twist that Niels Bohr’s neighbour gives in his answer. He does not believe in fetishes; but fetishes are things that supposedly can have an effect ‘by themselves’, objectively. Regardless of the subject’s beliefs, magical powers are supposedly ‘inherent’ to them. Once again though, this is told ironically: as local lore that no one really believes in. Yet the horseshow is still hang-

ing there: so someone does believe in it then. This strange tension between non-belief and belief in the intrinsic power of things appears to me to be a characteristic of the enlightened modern subject. Octave Mannoni sums it up aptly in a phrase we will encounter more than once throughout this book: “Je sais bien... mais quand même: la croyance” – I know for certain... but yet: belief/credibility/plausibility. The horseshoe: we know for certain, but yet... We do not believe, but we act as though we do believe, and therefore believe without believing. We can therefore be ironic about ourselves, not quite certain of ourselves, without being entirely eccentric; neither completely enlightened nor completely unenlightened. And, considering this confusion, what about the things themselves? They are there – as whatever they are: rusty iron, a relic of our ancestors, junk, gifts,* things that do good, discarded functional objects having a second (symbolic) career, and so forth. It is not what the things are ‘of themselves’, ‘for themselves’ or ‘in themselves’ that matters, but instead the kind of relationships we establish to them. This view is reliable, enlightened, familiar to us. But are we really sure about it? Maybe it depends on the objects themselves after all? Are they not the very material foundation of our lives? Do they really do nothing to us? Are we not defined by them? Do they not have, as we are so fond of saying nowadays, agency? Do they merely serve us, or do we also serve them? We are modern, and that means that we dismiss these kinds of questions as an affront to our autonomous sense of self. Yet the anecdote, which clearly belongs to modernity, shows that this modernity is not always so one-sided and not without its contradictions. We are modern. That is certain. Yet it is somehow disquieting when a French sociologist of science writes a book entitled *We Have Never Been Modern*. Is it possible that both statements are true?

In this book, we will examine our premodern and our modern relationship to things, in particular to those slightly peculiar things that – possibly – have some sort of inherent power, power over us, we who know that we are the masters and the things the servants. We will investigate ‘object relations’, which in modern scientific terms means that we will analyse the positions and relationships that we adopt towards things; in other words, we will investigate ourselves. The results of this analysis of ourselves will be equally applicable to things. For objects cannot exist without in some way being the *relata* of our cognitive or practical activities. This is what we believe, but yet... In this book, we will,

* The German is *Leib-Gedinge*, which means ‘dower’ or ‘dowry’, but translates literally as ‘body things’. ‘Dower’ can also mean ‘gifts’. I have chosen this translation as gifts become important later in the book. *Gedinge* by itself also means ‘piecemeal rates’.

in a way, turn this relationship on its head. We will permit things to have agency, or worse, magic and power. Almost all ancient cultures, including ancient European cultures, believed that they did. In the economy of things, modernity is the single only break from this there has ever been in the history of the world. We have distanced ourselves from things, things that in the past were somehow articulated, obtrusive, capable of acting independently, things that shared our existence in the wild and opaque confusion of life; but we have ‘put them back’ where they belong: back into a chain of causality that does not ‘say’ anything, does not ‘mean’ anything, but instead represents a sequence of processes involved in natural events as clearly as possible so that we can control and predict them. We know that. In this way, we are left in peace by things. But are we? In this book, we will trace the long history of the process whereby European culture rid itself of the meddlesome quality of things – through enlightenment. Yet there is another parallel history to this story. It tells of a growing but muted disquiet: to our horror – we proponents of modernity and enlightenment – the terrible grimaces and spellbinding faces of things, which we thought we had left ‘out there’ among the uneducated, savage, superstitious people, have appeared again ‘in our very midst’, in the very heart of Europe. Things have acquired a dangerous power. That alone is reason enough to rethink horseshoes and to not simply leave it at an amusing, ironic anecdote.

The anecdote is also revealing in another way. Many of my friends knew the story. But each time I heard it, it was different, and no one knew exactly where it came from. What is revealing is that in many versions Niels Bohr’s neighbour disappears and the story becomes about Bohr himself. “Some other great physicist, maybe Wolfgang Pauli, once visited Bohr in his country house and saw that he had a horseshoe hanging above the door. ‘Professor!’ he said, ‘You? With a horseshoe? But you don’t believe in it, do you?’ to which Bohr replied, ‘Of course not. But you know, Herr Pauli, it’s supposed to help even if you don’t believe in it.’” That is how Harry Mulisch tells the story. Arnfrid Astel has the following laconic version: “Regarding THE HORSESHOE [sic] above his door, Niels Bohr was apparently known to explain to astonished visitors that it helped even if one didn’t believe in it.” Furthermore, the neighbour’s Danish holiday house often transforms into an alpine chalet belonging to Niels Bohr himself. And so, out of an anecdote that Bohr himself told his physicist colleagues in Brussels about an acquaintance of an acquaintance, grew a story *about* Niels Bohr, the founding father of modern physics and a representative figure of modernity itself. The stories’ meanderings and metamorphoses are in fact a typical feature of the same thing that they are also about: fetishism. Complex processes of transmission, sprinklings of quotation, obscure origins, mistaken identity and misunderstandings, hearsay and scattered dubious reports all seem to be closely linked

to fetishism ever since it first circulated throughout Europe as a word and a phenomenon. The lack of clarity too, about who is actually being spoken about in the horseshoe anecdote, who it is that is amazed, who it is that is the superstitious fetishist, is also a typical figure of the five-hundred-year-old history of the concept. Because no one knows for certain anymore whether it is ‘the Africans’ that are fetishists, or in fact the Europeans, who after all were the ones that got so worked up about African magic; whether psychoanalysis, which put all its efforts into reducing fetishism to scientific terms and causes, was in fact also a victim of fetishism; whether such a radical critic of fetishism as Marx actually produced the phenomenon he condemned in the first place. And so on. Perhaps, waiting at the end of the long history of fetishism, is something similar to the punchline at the end of the horseshoe anecdote: *we do not believe in fetishism, but yet we are fetishistic*. We know this, but yet... we cannot leave it be. If this is the case, something has to change in our modern, confident, enlightened sense of self. More clarity is needed regarding our relationship to things, and they should be assigned a much stronger position in the psychological and cultural economy than we have previously been prepared to give them. Fetishised, magical things are a part of modern culture. They have nothing to do with reprehensible primitivism, reification or perversion, shifted away from us, ‘out there’: to Africa, to superstition, to childhood, to perversions, to consumerism. It is always the other who is the fetishist – it has always been this way. But that is not how things really are.

2 Corrupt fetishism: a nineteenth-century invention

Ever since it took its place in the European languages, ‘fetishism’ has been a term used to describe a corrupt relationship to objects. From *an enlightened, secular position*, ‘fetish’ describes a thing that individuals or a collective of individuals ascribe meanings and powers to that have nothing to do with its primary qualities (in Locke’s sense). Rather, they are attributed to it in an act of projection – and in such a way that the thing both incorporates and radiates these meanings and powers for the fetishists. However, this is considered self-deception. For fetishists, as a meaningful and powerful object the fetish-thing becomes an agent to which henceforth the fetishist is bound out of respect, fear or desire. The thing therefore assumes the power to effect and generate loyalty. This obligation, caused by a pseudo-objective force, prevents the realisation that it is the fetishist himself who creates the fetish and the relationship to it. The relationship to the fetish is therefore compulsive (or anancastic, as psychologists say); it functions,

but it is a delusion; it is a consciously handled mechanism whose internal structure remains unconscious.

It is evident that such an understanding of fetishism violates important principles of the European Enlightenment and science. That is why, when it is introduced in the philosophy of Charles de Brosses in 1760, fetishism is viewed as negative (before that it had been viewed as idolatry or superstition). Apart from a few exceptions, this negative view is reinforced right across the sciences during the nineteenth century. Fetishism becomes an increasingly indeterminate catch-all term, under which everything that can be viewed as an irrational, superstitious or perverse object relationship is subsumed.

It can be argued that the nineteenth century is also *the* saeculum of things. Statistics about things show that compared to the eighteenth century, the number of available things, for example in a household, vastly increased. Industrialisation led to the proliferation of artificial things in daily use and consumption, and not just in the upper classes. Newly appearing department stores were described as cathedrals of commodities, displaying hundreds of thousands of things to bewitch the customer in an almost ritually staged presentation. Increased consumption in the towns and cities led to enormous growth in the production of artefacts, but also in waste and pollution. The average person extended the borders of his or her self into more and more object-spheres too. Stronger forms of capitalism promoted the pursuit of property, which often led to, for example, the bourgeois apartments of the *Gründerzeit*, stuffed with an almost unimaginable number of things. Never before had the thingly environment been so dense, diverse, alluring, artificial, fascinating. People collected, traded, procured, desired, exhibited, consumed, used, bought and sold, hoarded and wasted, ordered and classified, evaluated and valued things with a mania and intensity unprecedented in the history of everyday life. *Natural things*, along with their spheres and localities, receded further away from the daily experience of the dominant classes in the cities and towns, as did the lasting hold of objects whose symbolic value had endured over generations in traditional society. It was in the nineteenth century that what Jean Baudrillard (1968/1996) would analyse one hundred years later as the “system of objects” first came into being. Or to put it another way: the biomass of artificial things increased exponentially, so that every space, from private to public, became more and more densely occupied by things. The significance of this shift, not only in the quantitative but also in the qualitative relationship of people to their thingly environment on the one hand, and of artificial objects to natural things on the other, cannot be overestimated for cultural history, yet it has barely been researched. The nearest we have are Walter Benjamin’s studies (1927–40/1999), in which he endeavours to develop a physiognomy of the era out of an investigation into things.

How is such a hybrid proliferation of things possible? We must recognise that artificial things are also never just the *products* of people; taking this view assures us of our agency. Rather, the opposite is true: each thing also generates a formative force, which contains impressions, attitudes, imaginings, but also forms of use and action. In short, things do something to people (and not just the other way around). The denser the network of things surrounding people is, the sooner they will have the slightly disconcerting experience of being caught at the centre of a complex energetic field, by which, as a subject, one is also determined. We know this not only from literary accounts, ubiquitous around 1900, of things opening our eyes to an uncanny life of their own; a revelation that undermines the autonomy of the subject. We also know this from the sober analyses on the reification* of the subject in Marx or in *The Philosophy of Money* by Georg Simmel, a book which, like Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*, was published in 1900 and in its own way is a summary of the entire nineteenth century (Simmel 1900/2004). Reification and alienation, along with the objectification of and alienation from the self, are the terms that were used to account for the repercussions caused by the tremendous ascent of things. It is no surprise that it is fetishism which made these effects clearly visible.

My thesis is: the reason for fetishism's astounding career in the nineteenth century is that it was a reaction to the other, hidden side of the fundamentally altered quantitative and qualitative dynamics of the 'society of things'. It should be remembered that in the beginning fetishism was a peripheral term to describe not yet understood and, from the Christian perspective, scandalous religious practices that had been observed by missionaries, merchants and travellers among the tribal societies of Central Africa. However, by the end of the nineteenth century fetishism had not only been expanded to include all forms of "primitive culture" worldwide (Tylor 1871), but had also migrated to the very heart of European culture. What had seemed to belong to the strange alterity of primitive cultures, suddenly leapt out from behind the shadows of every part of European culture itself. *Everything* could be suspected of being a fetish and *everyone* a fetishist, regardless of whether they were religious believers, sexual perverts, psychopaths, obsessive collectors of every kind, unthinking consumers, artists obsessed with their own work, children and their "transitional objects" (Winnicott), factory-owners ruling like tyrants, dandies, bourgeois sons, or servant girls. Growing out of discourses in early religious studies and ethnology, in just a few decades fetishism became a key concept that promised to decode the *phantasmagorias of the nineteenth century*. This peculiar bottom-up

* The German is *Ver-Dinglichung*, literally 'thingification'.

career of the concept is very interesting for us. For our aim is to reconstruct the stages through which fetishism changed status: from a term used to describe the *otherness of others* to a phantasm that was employed to track down, capture, name, isolate, classify, clarify, analyse, assess and above all get rid of the frightening *otherness of ourselves*. It became less about Africa, Polynesia or the North-American Indians and more about Europe and the modern subject, about which Jean Paul once wrote so wonderfully in *Selina oder über die Unsterblichkeit der Seele* [Selina, or The Immortality of the Soul]: “But our measurements of the vast lands of the self are far too small or too narrow if we leave out the great kingdom of the unconscious, that true inner Africa.” (Jean Paul 1827/1996, 1182)

3 How to philosophise with a hammer

As a framework for interpreting European society, fetishism is an invention of the nineteenth century. As a determinant of religious, economic, consumer and sexual behaviour, fetishism soon rose to become a model for every kind of alienation in modern society. In the twentieth century, the concept soon became a fitting description of many areas of mass culture and politics. In the personality cults of totalitarian societies, in the star culture of the mass media, in fetishistic forms of fashion, souvenir, amulet, tattooing and piercing practices, in the increasingly extreme fetishisation strategies of advertising and product aesthetics, in the fetish practices of many subcultures, from the football fan club to the Internet fetish group, fetishism has spread to all levels of modern society and everyday culture.

Intellectual criticism too became contaminated by fetishism. This is first evident in Marx. The form of fetishism that exists in capitalism – or perhaps only attaches itself to it – leaves its mark on criticism in the form of strange inversions. The obscure colonial origin of the concept of fetishism implants a dangerous connection to the object in our thinking, which must however be transcended. The gesture of criticism remains under control because of the exclusion of religion. Nowhere is this more clearly recognisable than in another leading thinker of the nineteenth century: Nietzsche. His aim was to initiate a “twilight of the idols” (1888/2005) against society’s idolatrous and fetishistic practices, against its “lords of concept idolatry” (ibid., 167). Philosophy becomes iconoclasm, a “great declaration of war” (ibid., 155). It causes the “toppling of the idols”, the title of a 1985 book on Nietzsche (Rippel 1985). For Nietzsche, very much in parallel with Marx and the ethnologists and sexologists of the nineteenth century, “the world has more idols than realities”, “idols of our age” (Nietzsche 1888/2005, 155) that must be destroyed by the hammer of philosophy.

Nietzsche also informs us that German philosophy, culture and science are nothing but “crude fetishism” (ibid., 169). Reason and the self itself are fetishes. They function in a fetishistic manner, in that they project a substance onto things as if it belonged to the things themselves, although it does not. In Marx and in Nietzsche, but also later in psychoanalysis and cultural criticism, this critical vehemence becomes a movement that leads to the creation of new idols and fetishes. The power of their spell in the twentieth century may well have surpassed everything that has ever been considered the dark side of fetish in Africa. Europe is invaded by the very object of its criticism. It is precisely because fetishism becomes such a widespread concept that it is necessary to reconstruct the semantic and metaphorical meanderings of fetishism, its versatile, almost protean power, which seems inextricably bound to its African and Christian heritage. Perhaps then we can better understand why modern societies cannot do without the cohesive forces inherent to the fetish and idol cult, either practically or theoretically. If one could actually remove every form of fetishism and idolatry in modern society in one fell swoop – as critics like Nietzsche, Marx or Freud hoped to do – it would not usher in the reign of freedom, instead societies would collapse.

4 The contradictions of modernity

Modern societies view themselves as secular or post-religious societies. Key concepts associated with this model are differentiation, rational processes in administration and law, the democratisation of institutions, mechanisation and industrialisation, reflexivity and the spread of science to all spheres of life.

Associated with these are normative choices, namely for an enlightened society whose historical power is to be strengthened by the processes listed above. In contrast, the argument put forward here is that while premodern forms and institutions of magic, myth and cult, religion and festivities begin to disappear in the modern era, the energies and needs bound up within them do not. Instead they are released and now pervade all levels of modern social systems.

The initial observation that sparked this book is that while modernisation processes may provide structural integration in society, they do not offer anything substantial to identify with, which modernity provides ample evidence of. Many people, groups and subcultures have a distanced, utilitarian and correspondingly unstable relationship to modernisation. Lifeworld practices are drawn from cultural traditions that originate in premodern times and have been arbitrarily incorporated into the life economy under the auspices of modernity. This results in the frequently observed switching between heterogeneous or even contradictory patterns of action and orientation: functional efficiency at

work during the week, collective ecstasy at techno parties at the weekend; rational planning for the future one minute and the quest for dangerous thrills the next; precise economic calculation on the one hand, esoteric borrowings from foreign cultures or distant pasts on the other; participation in democratic processes and at the same time a quasi-religious merging with ‘collective bodies’. Reason provides too few pleasures for us to be able to prevent our pleasures from being irrational.

My concern here is neither with individual pathologies, nor subcultural asynchronicities, but rather with multiple contradictions on almost all levels of the social process. The mass-media star cult moves into the parliament, gnosis into the Internet; the capitalist exchange of goods, the only form of the organisation of the traffic in goods for the time being, only functions because of fabulous borrowings from the leftovers of ancient myth and fetish; sport works in forms of magical participation; festivals imitate the lost power of sacred mysteries: rites, catharsis, sublime awe; the social imaginary is populated, in film for example, with monstrosities from every era; as the media becomes increasingly technically refined, it produces more and more staged archaisms; ‘God is dead’ does not pave the way to a secular society, but rather to the awakening of countless thousands of new gods; the “disappearance of things” (Langenmaier 1993) as rubbish is closely related to the cult of ritual storage; the deconstruction of sex and gender leads to the creation of sexual hybrids. And so on.

Today, with our experience of irrationality, mass-medial and political cult practices and the syncretic explosion of the religious and of political idolatry in the twentieth century, we can no longer be certain: does modernity survive on the contradictions of itself, or vice versa, do the cult forms of traditional societies feed upon modernity itself, thereby growing even stronger – particularly in the wake of the supposed secularisation of the world? Nothing seems more wrong than the assertion that the world has been disenchanting. Fetish, idol and cult forms today – in politics, in sport, in film, in consumer goods, in fashion, etc. – teach us that the very opposite is true, namely that disenchantment in the name of rationality has led to a surge of re-enchanting energies, one which is hard to control and consequently all the more effective. It therefore seems to be true that democracy needs cults, but cults do not need democracy. This asymmetry has not been analysed in terms of a theory of Enlightenment to date. The aim of this book is to redress this balance somewhat.

Thing relations in our industrial culture really do require the foreign perspective of an ethnologist. A culture, historically without equal, that has so consistently increased the population of things can only be met with astonishment. Why do we find them so irresistible? Why do we surround ourselves with thousands of things, turning our apartments into strange cabinets of lifeless objects,

in relation to which living things are in the minority? Why this excessive collecting, this “irrepressible passion” (W. Muensterberger)? Why do we find it so hard to let go of some things, but yet dispose of others so quickly – in the rubbish bin? Why do we need more than we need? Why does a lack of objects, emptiness, frighten us so much? *Horror vacui*? What is the reason for our attachment to things? Why do our possessions surround us like fortifications? Why does a barely altered thing – a Golf V instead of a Golf IV for example – always rekindle new desire? Why do we become anxious when things are not at our disposal, when they get old, when we lose control over them, when they are reduced to mere stuff, while an object from the eighteenth century, placed in specific location, fills us with pride and joy, and even belongs to our sense of security in the self? Where does this love and desire come from, this worship and awe of things that become fetishes, of people that become idols? Why the condescending smirk at the passion of the wine-cork collector, although one hoards stamps or books oneself? Why the “mourning of perfection” (B. Wyss) when faced with the beauty of objects that will outlive us and put us to shame? Why the desire and the compulsion to mark our sex and our ego with every vestimentary thing we carry on our bodies? How are we so emotionally affected by any image that gives us a feeling of closeness to the object of our adoration – from Lady Di to the Pope, from David Beckham to Nicole Kidman? What awe overcomes us at the Nuremberg rally grounds, at monumental Stalinist architecture, at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington? What excitement exudes from the latest *haute couture* creations, a red Ferrari, from the fetishes in high-class dominatrix studios?

The list is endless. And gives one the impression that the real reason we are no longer permitted to identify anything negative in fetishism, and perhaps the reason for the desire to abolish the term altogether, is directly related to the fact that its practice has exploded in precisely the same way that the number of things has. No theory of modernity could be more wrong than one which identifies modernisation with a linear increase in rationality. In this context, Bruno Latour’s statement, “we have never been modern”, can only mean that the institutions in our society based on rational processes do not in fact possess the cohesive force that keeps the collective together and stabilises individuals. In an uncanny way, we as subjects and our culture are dependent on permanent enchantment in order to protect ourselves from dissociation, anomie and the loss of a sense of belonging.

I am convinced that it is in fact these universally proliferating fetishistic mechanisms that integrate modern societies in a rather blurry and, up until now, barely analysed way. If, however, modernity and fetishism belong together, then theories of fetishism that diagnose it as perversion, false consciousness, the commodity delusion, primitiveness or superstition, in short, as social pathology,

really must be re-examined. Criticism of the culture industry, supposedly based on a universal delusion and fetishism, is itself then merely a conspiracy theory, keeping alive the very thing it criticises. The clearly obvious licence fetishism has acquired in pop culture, in sport, in film, in fashion, in art, architecture, eating behaviour, the collector's passion, but also in politics or memorial culture – this by now factual freedom for something that was associated with the unconscious, with perversion, situated at the dirty edges of culture or in its underground, demonstrates a profound cultural change. Scholarship is simply catching up with this change.

5 Historical development

This book reconstructs the mental and cultural processes through which 'idolatry' and 'fetishism' have gradually become central categories in European culture's description of itself from biblical times to the present. Idolatry and fetishism were originally intended to explain the 'superstitious' and 'primitive' behaviour of pagan or non-European societies. Everything that seemed 'outside', 'distant', 'archaic' and therefore always 'other' and 'unenlightened' is however increasingly being discovered as being unintentionally present, part of us, close to us. The history of this discovery ("the heart of darkness" at the centre of European culture) can essentially be divided into the following stages: first, missionary and ethnographic travel literature. By transforming the concept of 'idol' it created the new term 'fetish', although there is no mention of 'fetishism' yet. The word then quickly spread from Portugal to Holland, Spain, England, France and Germany. The second stage was formed by the emerging academic disciplines of religious studies and ethnology (in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries): 'fetishism' appears here not only as a category to describe primitive cultures, but also, for the first time in this period, evidence of fetishistic practices are identified in European culture itself. This surprising turn of events then spreads to discourse in general in the second half of the nineteenth century because of two important scientific developments: firstly Marx, influenced by his in-depth knowledge of the fetish debate in religious studies, demonstrates that political economy cannot be constructed without fetishism. This transforms fetishism into a macro-category for the analysis of *the* most modern aspect of society, commodity capitalism. Secondly, with Alfred Binet and Krafft-Ebing, sexual fetishism becomes a model for perversion. This is then picked up by Freud's psychoanalysis, making fetishism a fundamental concept for the analysis of the modern (i.e. neurotic) subject. This was also preceded by the fact that fetishism had long been practiced as an aesthetic process in art. Art is itself a fetish; it op-

erates in fetishistic forms and at the same time reflects fetishism in society (Simpson 1982; Apter 1991; Ian 1993; Böhme 1998, 2001, 2003).

By 1900, religious studies and ethnology, along with art, political economy and sociology (Auguste Comte), sexology and psychoanalysis, had reached the stage when a 'theory of modernity' seemed imminent, one which could clearly only function on the basis of fetishism. 'Africa' had finally caught up with modernity. This will be discussed here by examining several patterns of political and cultural development in the twentieth century: firstly, the example of political religion, the personality cult and the architectural idolatry of Stalinism; and secondly, aspects of contemporary popular culture (feminism, youth culture, consumerism, fashion, food fetishism, etc.).

Jon Stratton is wrong when he states (1996, 16, 26–53, 87 and elsewhere) that the fetishisation of the female body started around 1850, the same time as the beginning of the huge growth in the production of commodities in capitalist countries. Though it is tempting to draw the parallel, and it certainly is true that there is evidence of strong fetishism in the portrayal of femininity in the art and literature after 1850, the fetishisation of women in Western cultures is much older and not directly linked to commodity fetishism. It is precisely when, as Stratton does, one makes a clear distinction between cultural fetishism and commodity fetishism – and it makes sense to do so – that not only the systematic, but also the historical independence of fetishism from the development of the capitalist commodity economy is revealed. Only on the basis of this distinction can one begin to investigate the alliances formed between cultural fetishism and the principle of commodification. Even today, when the market has penetrated culture in a way unprecedented in history, the ubiquitous circulation of fetishism should still not be reduced to its economic functions. Judith Williamson has already shown this in her study of *Consuming Passions* (1986a). She repeatedly draws our attention to the tactical and parodistic manoeuvre with which women in particular free their consumerist desires from the dictates of commodity fetishism while serving it at the same time, thus managing to 'trick' their own fetishisation.

The role of women in fetishism as well as women as analysts of the same subject deserves special attention. Early sexologists and psychoanalysts were of the ludicrous opinion that only men behaved in a fetishistic manner. Although Freud briefly declared all women to be fetishists, namely of clothing, in a side note from 1909, he never pursued this observation any further. Like most of his successors, for Freud, fetishism was definitively male. It is difficult to decide whether the reason for this lies in the limited vision of scientists of that time or whether the rise of female fetishism really did only begin in the early twentieth century. Women researchers have discovered forms of female fetishism in earlier

periods (see for example Apter 1991; Garber 1992). In any case, whether it ever existed or not, a gender-specific distribution of fetishistic practices can no longer be identified in today's culture. However, the fields in which fetishism is played out can certainly be divided according to gender.

The great efforts female theorists have gone to in order to free themselves from the dogmatic prescriptions of psychoanalysis, particularly Lacan's, is remarkable. However, only rarely has this been fully successful. Today though, we can safely say that the days of phallogocentric theoretical speculations, usually nothing more than machismo masquerading as theory, are over, or at least should be over. For theories of fetishism, this means that the way the cultural analyst or psychoanalyst looks at things can be a little more relaxed, more liberal and more attentive to the enormous diversity of forms that cultural fetishism takes today.

This also applies to the tradition of Marxism and cultural criticism. In this case, consumerism was never understood as anything but alienation and reification – very similar to the way that sexual fetishism was only ever viewed as perversion in the psychoanalytic tradition. The discourse on fetishism has always fundamentally been imprisoned in theory: pigeon-holed into either Christian, Marxist or psychoanalytical dogmas. Yet it was these three variants of orthodoxy that generated fetishism as deviant behaviour – as superstition, reification or perversion – in the first place. The task of this book will be to historically trace these three strands in their mistaken dogmatic approaches and, in each case, to remove from them whatever we recognise in them as arrogance, ignorance and misunderstanding. This work must be approached as a history of science if the aim is to open up new terrain for cultural analysis in future. In that sense, the spirit of the Enlightenment is also at work in this book, even if the theoretical blindness in the field of cultural fetishism is in fact rooted in it.

There is something symptomatic in this apparent contradiction: although Marxist criticism and psychoanalytic theory are criticised, they are not rejected outright. The reverse is also true of this book. It goes all the way back to biblical aniconism or Christian theological interpretations of idolatry not only to show how much the discussion of idols and fetishes has been dominated by this tradition until at least the twentieth century, but because the Hebrew Bible and Christian texts recognised something valuable, something that is still useful today for understanding magically charged objects. This applies equally to early religious studies, ethnology, Marxism and psychoanalysis, which, although it is the most recent entry into the discourse on fetish, is nonetheless already more than one hundred years old.

6 The status of theory

This book's approach is based on two different observations: firstly, that modernity can only begin to understand itself if it makes use of cognitive resources from epochs considered to be premodern. Because modernity is a radically historical era. By which I mean: powerful traditions continue to exist in it, despite having nothing to do with modernity genealogically; they nonetheless belong to its present. Although modernity locates itself in a position that opposes all of history (otherwise it would not be modern), at the same time, more than any other era, it embodies the presence of all previous historical periods (otherwise it would not exist). The maxim therefore holds true: the more we remember the past, the richer the future will be. Secondly, the classical theorists of modernity (since the Enlightenment) developed a range of analytical instruments designed exclusively for what is modern about modernity. That is why there is not even an adequate language to deal with what magic, fetishism, autonomously powerful things, idolatrous devotion, unrestrained consumption, etc. really are – beyond their theoretical banishment and pathologisation, their moral or political rejection.

From the perspective of this book, being modern is precisely not creating or upholding an opposition between reason and fetishism, but about developing a reason that allows the horseshoe to remain hanging. Being modern means living with oneself in contradiction, without having to reconcile the contradiction. A modern culture deserving of that name would consist of a differentiated view of both rationalism and self-reflection, and would not merely tolerate fetishistic practices, but develop them too. For we need them, not just in our everyday contact with things and for the experience of community on a supra-everyday level (as the 'glue' of social life), but also as an essential resource for aesthetic creativity and erotic desire. This does not mean that rationalism and fetishism will ever 'agree' with each other. Rather, culture could be both a reflexive and mediating form, which would allow us to switch between the two, to develop both, to moderate between both or to leave both (be). Culture, as an instance of observing observation, is also the art of situating: the ability to situate the different and contradictory aspects of our selves in whatever placement is agreeable to those aspects and to us, to embed them in such a way that a kind of republicanism of contradictions, an aesthetic ensemble of the heterogeneous and the incompatible, and an ethical recognition of the non-ethical would become possible.

What follows will not attempt to construct a theory from these briefly sketched principles and develop it into a macro-theory of fetishism and modernity. It is sufficient to embed the theoretical in the process of the book's argument and in

its approach to the sources. Occasionally, as the reader will surely notice, the theoretical focus will become more intense; at numerous points in each chapter. However, it is important to me to allow the theoretical to develop out of the process of investigation, out of the specific details of the sources. My aim is not to propose one more theory of modernity among or even in opposition to existing well-developed ones. What is expressed in the formidable formulation, perhaps a bit of a mouthful, of the subtitle, *A Different Theory of Modernity*, can be found above all in the process of the investigation: the way the sources are dealt with, how the chapters are structured, in the stance taken towards both renowned and perhaps more leftfield thinkers, scholars, phenomena or practices, each of which will however be treated with the respect they are due and allowed to speak in their own language. Because history's path is often a winding one and the sources are sometimes a little strange or eccentric, rather laborious work on unfamiliar material was sometimes necessary, until a new trail could be found again. But when one is working on the basis of the conviction that fetishism can no longer be excluded from any theory of modernity, or postmodernity, then one can also no longer choose the genre of 'grand narrative', stretching from the Jewish prohibition of images to the museum, and from Native American tribes to the Central African *minkisi* cults and the ritual cartographies of the aborigines – but which has nothing to do with us.

For these reasons, I also have no intention of presenting an examination of existing theories of modernity in order to delineate my own position in critical opposition to them. First of all, this book is not a sociological theory, but rather a study of the history of culture and science, one which also analyses the culture of the present on the basis of the historical past in each chapter. Furthermore, this study does not fundamentally oppose the history of theory since Kant's three great *Critiques*, with which the theory of modernity begins, continuing on with Hegel, Comte, Spencer, Simmel, Max Weber, and up until Jürgen Habermas, Niklas Luhmann, Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens. It is nonetheless striking that (almost) nothing can be found in these theorists about the cultural fields that will be investigated here. Fetishism, the practice of idolatry and the magic of things are basically excluded. "A different theory of modernity" therefore does not mean that this book is in competition with the above-mentioned theories, but that modernity is viewed from the position of a "different" field, which up until now has been neglected. One of the idiosyncrasies of the field of fetishism and magic is that their relationships to modernity are not immediately evident, and only become apparent in the process of historical analysis. And with good reason. Firstly, it quickly becomes clear that standard historical eras cannot really be applied to the subspecies of fetishism. Fetishism is much older than modernity. It has not only survived many historical eras, it is also relatively independ-

ent from and has outlasted many political regimes. It is the *longue durée* of cultures and in fact appears to be the most widespread and variable in the very era that believes it has overcome it: modernity. The specific achievements that characterise modernity, i. e. that which differentiates it from previous eras (and this is the subject of the important theorists named above), will therefore not be addressed here. The focus is instead on what modernity takes with it from previous eras and incorporates into its own structure in a new form. In this way, I hope, modernity's reflections about itself will become more differentiated and complex.

7 Fetishism, ethnology, cultural studies

Considering the book's aims, it would be inappropriate to comply with the frequent suggestions to do away with the concept of fetishism altogether, or to restrict it and only use it extremely precisely in its original sense as an ethnological term. Fetishism has never been an exclusively ethnological concept; indeed it is perhaps especially useless in the ethnological field. It is my opinion that fetishism has many roots and that it has therefore grown outwards in way that is hard to grasp in its entirety, because, as I will argue, it is actually a term used by European societies to describe themselves, and not non-European cultures. We only became aware of this, however, after a long history of detours and cumulative effects: this is what I aim to show. Once we are aware of this, then logically we must also 'Europeanise' the concept of fetishism and bring it up to date with the status quo in our culture. This does not exclude the possibility that the term may also be useful for describing tribal magical practices or for the analysis of non-European cultures characterised by cross-cultural ruptures between modernisation and traditional social forms today. Michael Taussig (1980) has shown this in his impressive investigation of South-American mine workers, although his attempt to adequately explain the definitively modern phenomenon of "state fetishism" was rather more unsuccessful, due to an over-eclectic use of theory (Taussig 1993). Using the example of the Stalin cult, I will attempt to make his ideas work.

The situation with fetishism is similar to that of totemism, which has been judged rather harshly by Claude Lévi-Strauss (1962/1963). By his time, totemism had spread rapidly throughout international ethnology (but also to Freud's psychoanalysis) and had become a kind of shibboleth of theory. Lévi-Strauss therefore made the polemic decision that he need not pay attention to *what* and *who* were being described by this term, nor *on what grounds*, but instead that he should observe *those who were using the term*: perhaps totemism could say

more about ethnologists than about the cultures they analysed. Lévi-Strauss drew the conclusion that “the mind of the scholar himself plays as large a part as the minds of the people studied; it is as though he were seeking, consciously or unconsciously, and under the guise of scientific objectivity, to make the latter – whether mental patients or so-called ‘primitives’ – more different than they really are. The vogue of hysteria and that of totemism were contemporary, arising from the same cultural conditions” (1963, 1). “Totemism is firstly the projection outside our own universe, as though by a kind of exorcism, of mental attitudes incompatible with the exigency of a discontinuity between man and nature which Christian thought held to be essential” (*ibid.*, 3). These ideas provide important clues for this book too, in that we will not deal with cultures declared to be fetishistic, but rather the discourse of those who make such declarations. I am convinced that fetishism discourse provides more insights about those who use it, than about those to whom the discourse refers. This book is therefore not a contribution to ethnological research, but rather to the history of science and its phantasms, which originate within in the conditions of European civilisation.

Quoting the American anthropologist Robert H. Lowie (1883–1957), Lévi-Strauss emphatically warns us to pay attention to “whether we are comparing cultural realities or merely figments of our logical modes of classification” (1963, 10). By and large, that is this book’s methodological guiding principle. For Lévi-Strauss’s observations on totemism also apply to the history of fetishism scholarship.

All this leads some to the conclusion that the concept of fetishism should be taken out of circulation altogether. This kind of suggestion appears for the first time around 1900. It will not be paid heed to here. The semantic sprawl and rampant disorder of the concept will not be remedied by burying it. The fetish would simply return as a ghost. Instead, the peculiar terminological confusion of fetishism will be transformed into something positive. It will be shown that there are semantic cores to the term on various different systemic levels in each of three main fields of chapters two to four (religion/ethnology – commodity fetishism – sexuality/psychoanalysis). Each of these semantic cores will be applied to cultural fields of practice and tested out. The broad spectrum of meaning and a certain claim to universality associated with the concept will undeniably be preserved; yet at the same time, I will demonstrate that, in spite of its breadth, one can most certainly work with the concept in a methodical manner and use it for the analysis of both the past and the present.

This means that certain traditional distinctions will be dispensed with. I will not follow the generally accepted belief that magic is the expression of a primitive, pre-causalistic relationship to the world to be kept strictly separate from

(more developed) religion, not to mention from the intellectualised world. Magic, as I wish to show, not only belongs to world religions like Christianity, but also to modernity and the enlightened mind. Although we think almost entirely in scientific terms nowadays, we also maintain magical relationships to things, people and symbolic icons, without being primitive because of it. Furthermore, the strict differentiation between idols and fetishes will not be upheld here. Though there are of course differences between the two, which will also be explained. However, what is important is that the mechanism through which both idols and fetishes have an effect are structurally similar, so that both often form ‘ensembles’, and also, that both are made possible by an identical “magic milieu” (Marcel Mauss). Because of this, my work will also take phenomena of idolatry into account – from the Hebrew Bible to the cult of Stalin.

Fetishes and idols are always material things; yet neither is limited to the material. What is so special about them is that they are matter that has incorporated something ‘other’ than itself into itself: meaning, symbols, forces, energies, power, spirits, ghosts, gods, etc. Their thingly aspect leads us to the question of what things actually are in the first place and how they can ‘mean’ something at all. This is almost a child’s question. Or the kind of question St Augustine stumbled upon when he asked what time is: as long as we refrain from asking, we know what it is; but as soon as we ask, we are not so sure anymore. Things are intimately familiar to us. But as soon as we want to know what they are, they become strange to us. To understand fetishes and idols and the mechanisms through which things become fetishes or idols for us, we first need to know what things are. That is why the first chapter concerns the fundamentals and is dedicated to this question. It still amazes me how sparse the research on things is. A start has of course been made in philosophical phenomenology and in (ethnological) research into everyday life; there is also the psychological study by Friedrich Heubach for example on “life as conditioned^{*} by things” (*Das bedingte Leben* 1996) or the empirically substantial study by Tilmann Habermas on “objects we love” (*Geliebte Objekte* 1996). But ultimately their focus is entirely on human beings or the socialising function of things. It is my hope that I might lay the foundations for a theory of things that could be applied far beyond the fields of fetishism and idolatry.

* The German word for ‘condition’, *Bedingung*, contains the noun ‘thing’, *Ding*.

8 A book is never alone

Any book one writes always has close relations. This book is particularly closely tied to the 2003 study by Karl-Heinz Kohl (2003). We had already heard of each other in the 1990s, and knew that we were working on similar topics. Universities are sometimes something of a Moloch. The responsibilities of my position as dean and the setting up of a *Sonderforschungsbereich* (special research group) prevented me from finishing this book for years, although the material had been prepared and had already been tested out in numerous papers. Some sections of our books are quite similar to each other, because, especially with regard to religious prehistory and older ethnography, we were working on the same or similar sources. However, fortunately, in the end our books are very different overall in terms of the focus, the style, the aims and the methodology. It is not my place, but that of the reader, to verify that. I should be permitted to say, however, that thanks to both of these books the extraordinary lack of research has been, if not remedied, at least somewhat improved: while fetishism research has flourished in the USA for more than twenty years in many disciplines – from sociology to economics, from cultural anthropology to literary studies, from women’s studies to psychoanalysis – the same cannot be said for Germany. In many respects, American but also French research were important models for this book. From France, apart the fabulous collection of essays by Jean-Bertrand Pontalis (1970) and Jean Pouillon’s book (1975), the quite recently published study by Laurent Fedi (2002) deserves mention, although it concentrates on the traditional model of the history of theory and does not extend to cultural analysis. The most ambitious general study, bringing together many extremely different African fetish practices and belief systems in one theoretical model, and based on empirical field research as well as religious studies, has been provided by the ethnologist Albert de Surgy (1995). There is nothing comparable in Germany. The work of the Italian Alfonso M. Iacono (1985a/b) is, like the book by Fedi, very philosophically orientated and concludes with a lucid chapter on Marx. Nonetheless, none of these works approach a cultural analysis of the European societies that have constructed the concept of fetishism, societies to which the concept is also more applicable than African ones. These studies are also not comparable to this book in terms of the history of science or the theory of things. In that sense, American research has proved more useful. The present volume therefore represents the attempt to at least bring German research into line with American and French research, while on the other hand also placing a stronger focus on cultural history and areas of application within cultural studies.

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I Now That's Some Thing – An Introduction to the World of Things

For things are only the boundaries of man.
(Friedrich Nietzsche)¹

1 The Bartelby effect

Let us conduct a thought experiment: imagine that things could demonstrate the Bartelby effect. That they could go on strike. But first, let us remind ourselves of Hermann Melville's story, "Bartelby the Scrivener", first published in 1853, which has experienced an astonishing renaissance in recent years.² A low-level, previously always compliant copyist in a New York lawyer's office begins, at first occasionally, then regularly and then persistently, to respond to any request to carry out tasks that are part of his job with the strange, but gently amiable answer: "I would prefer not to". Apparently with no needs himself, but permanently refusing to make himself useful in any way, he sets himself up in the office, where he then also lives, sleeping in the corner like a discarded thing, which in its unimposing obstinacy, causes extreme irritation, even distress to the self-certain minds of the lawyer and his employees. An "uncanny guest", to use E.T.A. Hoffmann's phrase. Eventually, he is disposed of in a prison, where he refuses to eat anything and is found dead one day like some unwanted thing. In his reticence, he is a tragic relic of a radical refusal of life.

Let us imagine then, that things could also do this:³ that they would prefer not to. Things would prefer not to follow our instructions. They would persist in

1 Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, book I, no. 48 (1982, 32).

2 To mention but a few: Deleuze 1998; Agamben 1999. Almost at exactly the same time in 1859 (though it had been partly published early), the novel *Oblomov* was published by Ivan Alexandrovich Goncharov. Although it is situated in a different social class – Oblomov is landowner – it is the Russian counterpart to Bartleby. From the beginning, Oblomov's life is marked by being "extinguished", gradually transforming into the famous Oblomovian disease: an apathetic lack of action and a weak drive, which became an image for an entire class.

3 Lorraine Daston opens her recently published book *Things That Talk* with the thought experiment of a world without any things at all: "an empty world as a blurry, frictionless one" – "just a kind of porridgy oneness" (2004, 9). She quickly abandons that idea, and instead pursues the loquaciousness of things. Yet in many cultures there is a clear history of a fascination with the pre-structural world, one thinks for example of the biblical *tohu wa bohu*, Hesiod's chaos,

silent refusal. Would just be there, hanging around, undemanding and unresponsive. Let us imagine that we were not subjects that ascribe characteristics and features to objects; we would not be able to say anything about things or determine any factual situations in which we could 'place' things. It would be a topsyturvy world. Or worse: we would form those sentences, but things would prefer not to comply; they would prefer not to. They would no longer be at our beck and call, would not serve us obediently, eluding all attempts to use them. Their inconspicuous condition – and this is how things have always been understood in Western philosophy, as the condition that silently always implicated our own condition – transformed into an obstinate presence, which would be increasingly uncanny. I would type on my keyboard – but no letters would appear on the screen. The mattress would refuse to accommodate my weight and just lie there, hard as rock. The radio: switched on, but silent. The vacuum cleaner would refuse to budge from its corner in the hall cupboard. The tap would not let itself be turned. The chair would refuse to stand, but would collapse on the floor under any weight. And so on.

It would be a moment of silent revolution, a "rebellion of things", as Erhart Kästner once wrote (*Der Aufstand der Dinge*, 1973), a revolt consisting of nothing more than a passive general strike by things. 'Nothing more than...': it does not take long to grasp that this would be a catastrophe of unimaginable proportions. Our lives would be over. Chaos. We would lose our unique anthropological position. For this special position always silently implied: we are the ones who know how to form sentences so that things are affected and consequently comply.

These kinds of thought experiments are necessary in order to understand that we are dependent on things in an obscure, overlooked way. Our claims to sovereignty in the realm of things (and living beings) would be finished. It is almost as if we invented physics to protect ourselves from such silent attacks on our lives: things are the way they are; they cannot be any other way, that is the law that governs them, or even their fate, in the sense that this law means that they will allow themselves to be transformed from things into stuff without any protest, as Heidegger says. All this means is that we can assume with the

Plato's chora and the pre-Socratic atomists' amorphous sea of matter (wonderfully described later in Lucretius) and their rich reception history – right up to abstract painting, which can sometimes be viewed as a world before any differentiation in things (cf. Böhme 2003). One might also think of Fra Angelico's strange amorphias, which Georges Didi-Huberman has called the "art of dissemblance" (1995, fig. 5–12) or in the peculiar defigurative particles of matter that Dürer chaotically 'throws' across his painting of the Ensisheim meteorite, known as the 'thunderstone' (Böhme 2005) – not to mention the wonderful cosmological cycle in Robert Fludd (1574–1637): 1617, starting at vol. 1.1, 26 ff.

utmost confidence that things will be compliant, insofar and as long as we respect the laws of physics. Obeying the laws of nature is the way to have command over things. This the Western principle par excellence, explicitly stated by Francis Bacon, if not earlier.⁴ But it is also the principle of technology, and, almost more fundamentally, the principle of language. To speak means to formulate things as factual circumstances, to determine them and to have them at one's command. In this way we control them, they belong to our regime.

And our regime is this: things are made into functional things by us; they are 'there' to be useful. That alone justifies their existence. If they are not useful, they are rubbish (like Bartleby in the end). Or they are things that belong to nature, which are permitted to be 'as they are' as long as they do not disturb us or they contribute to our aesthetic pleasure. As aesthetic things, they can have a kind of secondary use, as elements of a landscape, as collector's items – pretty shells, rare fossils, fleeting clouds or elegant cars – which awaken pleasure and desire. But the same rule always applies: things, whether natural things or things of utility, are dead matter, subjectless, they do not have agency, they only obey: the laws of physics and us. It is precisely as such obedient things that they form the broad foundation of our existence. And the growing kingdom of our will. Growing, because the population of things is always increasing. In the last two centuries, artefacts have multiplied immeasurably. We need and consume them so that we can live. And because we can be certain that things are not actors, that we have no reason to fear a revolt or silent refusal like Bartelby's from them, the deep-seated dependence on things we have by now found ourselves in has never even crossed our mental horizons.

Speaking about things, turning them into statements and facts and having command of them technically, creates this trust, and we could not live without it. Indeed, we describe things as objects. *Obiectum* is the thing thrown our way or presented opposite us. In this, there are echoes of the constantly renewed experience that things resist us and that it requires effort to overcome this resistance: we put work into getting things moving. This is so obvious that it seems part of our nature: to work, in order to achieve goals with and against things. But concealed beneath this certainty is yet another assumption: our trust that things will not respond to us like Bartleby. That in their dumb self-containedness, their obscure closedness, they would never 'go' so far as to make themselves 'independent', to become 'wilful', even if only in the form of silent refusal.

⁴ Georg Simmel recognised the dialectical implication of Bacon's principle early on: "Although it is true to say that we control nature to the extent that we serve it [...] the control of nature by technology is possible only at the price of being enslaved in it." (1900/2004, 482)

Yet this fundamental assumption is in no way universal or primal. We share it neither with older societies nor with contemporary cultures in which things are (have remained) 'alive', magic and animated, as though they had a life force of their own that they could use to act and possibly win power over us.

In terms of world history, it is most certainly a late achievement to have developed philosophies and technologies that are constructed to make things stay 'there', where they have been left, motionless and silent, waiting to be called by their name or used, waiting for our language and our hands. All things are potentially nameable; and they are all potentially 'ready-to-hand', as Heidegger says. This even applies to the furthest stars: they may be out of reach, but they are close enough for us to identify them, measure them, observe them. Although they are not real, they have been mentally appropriated. Protagoras' *homo mensura* formula is proven by this: *pánton chremáton metron estîn ánthropos, ton mèn ónton ós éstin, ton dè ouk ónton ós ouk estin* (Plato: *Theaetetus* 152a, Diels-Kranz 80 B1: Man is the measure of all things, of things which are, that/how they are, and of things which are not, that/how they are not).

This is early philosophical evidence of this attitude, in fact it is the beginning of autonomous philosophy at all; it is also very late evidence, because it strikes out or reverses a cultural truth that had been valid for hundreds and thousands of years, namely that things make their own fate and have their own sphere of action, in comparison to which man is ephemeral and weak. This power of things, which we grandchildren of the Greek Enlightenment and sons of early modern technology and science can no longer believe in, this power of things (and living beings) was dominant for much longer in history. For things 'live', in their own strange way. Children who treat lifeless things as though they were equal actors in their agency as a matter of course, are – well, children. They have not yet made the cut that divides the world into living and dead objects, and which opposes both these huge categories to ourselves: as objects of our knowledge and activity. Anyone who wants to grow up or any so-called 'primitive' person who wants to participate in the enlightened world must perform this cut on themselves, one which fits things into our measure of them and makes them predictable and available from the autonomous position that is our privilege as subjects and constitutes us as such. In the process, we forget that subject comes from *subiectum*, the subordinated (which we still hear in the derogatory phrase *verkommenes Subjekt**). Bartleby is a *subiectum*, in other words, nothing but an obedient servant to his superior, who becomes disturbing because he mu-

* Literally 'degenerate subject'; usually translated as 'bad lot'.

tates into an object that is not even ‘ready-to-hand’, not even a functional thing or equipment.*

2 “The rebellion of things”

Into his “Byzantine notes”, the subtitle of his book *Der Aufstand der Dinge* [The Rebellion of Things], writer and director of the Herzog August Library in Wolfenbüttel Erhart Kästner (1904–1974) wove in a series of reflections on things that sound strangely not of their time in their metaphysical, culturally critical style. On the market square in Delos, recalling the slavery of the ancient world, Kästner muses:

Might it not turn out to be a terrible mistake to believe that things, now enslaved instead of slaves, will simply endure the terror without ever retaliating? To believe that this century, woven from trickery – for research is our way of outwitting things – will survive this way? To believe that these victims of our cunning are so defenceless? That we have no resistance to fear? No Spartacus? No rebellion among these new slaves? No self-defence? When we believe the things of this world to be so dull, so dead? [...] Contempt for humans in the past, contempt for things now? Was it not contempt that let us believe that all that was needed was a little trickery and a little pressure in order to make them submit, dumb and compliant? Do we really believe that the project of calculating the world and manufacturing the world would never strike back? [...] Has the thought not yet arisen that in the future [...] a form of socialism concerned with oppressed, outcast, scrutinised and exploited things could arise? (1973, 157–158)

Kästner ponders “the *possibility of a general strike by things*”, which might consist of things turning away, closing themselves off, falling silent, withdrawing – the Bartleby effect. Kästner understands ‘withdrawing’ here literally as ‘the pulling away of things’, but also as a translation of ‘abstract’: the abstract takes the place of the withdrawn things. He sees paintings from the *peinture métaphysique* of Giorgio de Chirico (1888–1978) as a symptom of this pulling away, their dead atmosphere reminding him of “funerals for things”. “It is not God that is dead,” argues Kästner, repudiating Nietzsche’s famous aphorism (2001, 109)⁵, “but

* *Zeug* can also mean ‘stuff’, but in standard translations of Heidegger, which Böhme discusses below, it is usually rendered as ‘equipment’.

⁵ References to Nietzsche are abbreviated as [The standard German editions Böhme refers to are:] Nietzsche: KSA = Nietzsche, Friedrich: *Kritische Studienausgabe* [Critical Edition] in 14 vols, ed. by Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari. Munich 1988. Nietzsche: Werke = Nietzsche, Friedrich: *Werke* [Works] in 3 vols, ed. by Karl Schlechta. Munich 1966. [As a standard English

things; the message was muddled, there was an error in transmission, it was a false announcement. Things are dead, and it was we (that was right) who probed, strangled and killed them” (1973, 159). One can assume that Kästner, an educated man, was familiar with Francis Bacon’s description of the experiment, which implied that it was close to inquisition and torture, and also that he was familiar with Goethe’s dictum: “Nature grows dumb when subjected to torture”.⁶ Moreover, continues Kästner, the silence of things, their rebellion, is a response to our breach of contract with them, a reaction to “modernity’s madness for dominion”, by which Kästner primarily means rationalism and the natural sciences (ibid., 161, 163–166). In order to counter this, Kästner helplessly summons conservative cultural criticism, which reassures itself with the thought that things could come over to its side and plot a rebellion – to fight for the “natural rights of things”. “The belief that things can be indefinitely oppressed, without rights, will, feeling or the need to decide for themselves can only be held by someone who also believes that they have no life or power. They have both” (ibid., 160).

It is clear that Kästner uses language to bring things to life, although he wishes to avoid all “Don Quixotery”, and that he elevates them to the status of subjects, giving them rights and autonomy like those of humans. By anthropomorphising things in this way (which is no doubt a risky transgression of boundaries), he can portray the human-thing relationship as an intersubjective social relationship and assess it in terms of morals and rights. Things are not only the slaves of society, they are the modern proletariat. One can undoubtedly also read *Aufstand der Dinge* as Kästner’s attempt to create more awareness for the necessity of a criticism of the way modern man has seized power in things’ sphere of existence. He also uses old literary motifs to support his argument, for example the fairytale “Das Lumpengesindel” [The Pack of Scoundrels], Goethe’s “The Sorcerer’s Apprentice”, or stories about the “malice of objects”, like those by E.T.A. Hoffmann, whose protagonist Anselmus in “The Golden Pot” constantly finds himself up against things at the beginning of the story.⁷ The children’s book

edition of complete works is not yet fully available, English references are given in square brackets where possible.]

⁶ Krohn (1994) provides a balanced discussion of Bacon’s formulations in the *Novum Organum* (1620). Goethe’s dictum, directed against Newton, can be found in: Goethe 1998, 14. – Cf. also Plato, *The Republic* 531b and Pseudo-Virgil 1963, verses 261ff, 541ff. For more on the ancient understanding of experiment as torture, see Kornhardt 1952, 379 ff.

* The German *Lumpen* means both ‘rags’ and ‘scoundrels’ or ‘rascals’. It can also be found in the word *Lumpenproletariat*, meaning ‘underclass’.

⁷ The malice of the object is phrase from Friedrich Theodor Vischer’s (1807–1887) novel *Auch Einer. Eine Reisebekanntschaft* [Someone Too: A Travelling Acquaintance] (1879), here 1918, 21; 27. Vischer describes a number of grotesque misunderstandings that can occur with things and

Die Reise nach Tripiti [The Journey to Tripiti] by H.U. Steger (1967), on the other hand, tells of a group of broken toys who go on a journey, their numbers growing as they go: a great disfigured troop of the discarded and the tossed away, who refuse to become junk and rubbish. In Tripiti they find (or invent) a utopia, a society of things, a place where things can end their lives peacefully – without any people, for people seem incapable of respecting the broken toys’ value and individuality, which lie precisely in their imperfection. Here, ‘old’ things will be given back the dignity that all things are entitled to in Kästner’s view.⁸ Whether a rebellion of slaves or a general strike by the proletariat, whether a gang of mischief-makers (as in “Das Lumpengesindel” or “Die Bremer Stadtmusikanten” [The Town Musicians of Bremen]) or a utopian retirement home for broken old toy-pensioners: these kinds of stories always use the ancient pattern of things magically brought to life in order to reflect mankind’s questionable treatment of things by breaking with the norm. This goes all the way to Bruno Latour’s *Politics of Nature** (2004).

Still, the Swiss constitution has by now at least granted animals the right to dignity. And from the Middle Ages up until as late as the early modern period, animals were unequivocally considered legal persons. Formal legal proceedings were brought against animals and animals could be legally represented. However, it was not animal rights that were the main concern here, but instead animals as delinquents that had in some way offended the human order. Today, the legal representation of animals is being seriously discussed in discourse on ecology and law (one might also think of Erich Kästner’s 1947 *Konferenz der Tiere* [Conference of the Animals], where quite the reverse is the case and the animals rep-

that things are accused of by those affected: as if they were autonomous actors, deceitfully tripping up humans and getting up to all kinds of mischief with them whenever they can. – Vischer’s novel, very popular in his day, ensured that the phrase ‘the malice of objects’ passed into general use in German. Ludwig Wittgenstein criticised this malice of objects as a “stupid anthropomorphism” – it certainly is true that seeing one’s own clumsiness and ineptitude as the rancour of things is merely a projection. It is, however, a humourless Enlightenment solution to describe such a ubiquitous mechanism as stupid, while Vischer makes it the fulcrum of his very amusing novel.

8 In 1883, van Gogh writes to Anthon von Rappard on this subject: “Today I was at the spot where the rubbishmen bring the rubbish etc. I’ll be damned, it was lovely. [...] Tomorrow I’m going to get some interesting objects from this rubbish dump [...] That would be something for an Andersen fairytale, this collection of worn-out buckets, baskets, kettles, soldier’s cooking utensils, oilcans and wire, streetlamps and stove pipes” (cited in Scholz 1989, 16). Van Gogh rightly associates fairytales with this, and at the same time anticipates strategies for an aesthetic of rubbish that has led to the development of ‘rubbish art’ – as a criticism of consumerism – since the 1970s.

* The German title of Latour’s book translates as ‘the parliament of things’.

resent incapable humans at a world peace and future conference). One can go even further back in history: in epistles by the Ihwan as-Safa, the Brethren of Purity, from the ninth to the tenth centuries, there is a court case by the animals against representatives of the human race (Goodmann/McGregor 2009, cf. Dieterici 1861). Friedrich Dieterici, the editor of an early German edition, significantly calls this fictive trial scene a “fairytale”. With extremely convincing arguments, the animals describe mankind’s injustice, brutality, imperiousness, social inequality, egoism and lack of legitimation. Man wrongly bases his despotism over animals on a privileged position in creation and his capacity for reason. All forms of the violent oppression of animals are addressed: killing them for food, the gory hunt, their imprisonment, the suffering under the yoke of forced labour, the complete lack of respect for their feelings as living beings, the brutality of their punishment, the use of their skin, horn and fur for cloths, jewellery and machinery, their training for human entertainment, etc. The first prosecution speech ends with the following: “Instead they [mankind, H.B.] must now prove that this is their incontrovertible right over us, that they are our masters and we their servants and that any one of us who escapes is a runaway slave, rebellious and refusing to be obedient. This is all without any legitimate claim over us, without any proof or logical argument, but is based on violence and oppression alone” (Ihwan as-Safa 1990, 10). Compared to the animals, man seems far more beastly than any beast, and the animals seem more humane than humanity.

Our relationship to things is always reflected in our relationship to animals, for the thing-status of animals is established as early as Roman law, the very decree against which the animals are bringing their case in the writings of the Brethren of Purity. This status, which animals shared with women for so long, survives far into the twentieth century and forms the basis of the legality of the kinds of utilitarian practices common in the Jewish-Christian-Muslim cultural sphere: animals are things, things subject to our will, means to our ends, and when they are not, they are bad, hostile, redundant, as pests and beasts.

What can be said of animals can be equally applied to all of nature and therefore extended to include all allegedly lifeless things. Paulus Nivis’ *Judicium Iovis oder Das Gericht der Götter über den Bergbau* [Judicium Jovis or the Judgment of the Gods on Mining] from 1490 opposes such a view. This text portrays the first formal trial of mankind, accused of murdering nature. A personification of Earth heads the prosecution of *homo faber* in the presence of the highest God, Jupiter. Although man is specifically accused because of his mining activities, the case is more fundamentally about the legitimacy of human privilege, man’s dom-

ination of nature and his disregard for religious traditions that restricted the exploitation of the Earth (Niavis 1485–1490/1953).⁹

There is therefore most definitely room for allowing things a certain amount of their dignity in occidental thinking – which today is being negotiated as the possible application of constitutional rights to the natural environment. One might argue that the issue here is not individual things, but instead the whole ecosystem. But what actually are things? Are single trees things or trees in general, extremely important agents in the world’s climate? Is climate a thing? No? But a cloud is? While the wind is not? Is the emission of carbon dioxide not a feature of the thing ‘car’ and the thing ‘coal-fired power plant’ in the same way that the release of oxygen is a feature of the tree? Are things only things when they can be distinguished as a compact, self-contained unit and are not processual in nature? Would a static car be a thing then, but not a moving one that ‘consumes’ energy and influences the climate with its emissions? It is clear how quickly one gets into difficulties in modern discourse, difficulties which are glossed over with playfulness by the Brethren of Purity and in children’s books, in Erhart Kästner and in the Grimms’ fairytales. We are therefore not in a position to simply continue to accuse Kästner of essentialist metaphysics as long as it is not clear what a thing is. Indeed, it might make sense to ascribe quasi-lifelike characteristics to things, symbolically, ecologically or legally, if we could agree on a definition of things that would restrict them to single, materially compact, clearly defined objects, located in specific spatiotemporal ‘positions’. This ‘definition’ would also consist of arriving at a more reasonable place in the sociotechnical regulation of the human-thing relationship. If we allow this, cultural accounts and practices based on an understanding of things as somehow alive, now so alien to us, would not be automatically considered irrational. The same also applies to the mechanism with which individual societies or society in general fetishise things – natural things, artefacts, junk or artworks, football jerseys or little pictures of saints, money or locks of hair.

3 “The Cares of a Family Man”

Of course, the tentative restoration of the aliveness of things, which we will also assume – in order not to drive ourselves mad – are not subjects, always has another side to it. This was already somewhat evident in Kästner’s *Aufstand der Dinge* or in the trials against humanity. Even if we are nowhere near such drastic

⁹ On this cf. Bredekamp 1984; Böhme 1988.

forms of action taken by things, their animation gives rise to deep anxieties. These are perhaps most disturbingly formulated by Franz Kafka in his tiny short story, “The Cares of a Family Man” (1917).¹⁰ The narrator (the family man of the title) tells of a mysterious “creature”, “called Odradek”, sometimes referred to in the masculine, sometimes in the neuter form (he/it). This “creature” is first introduced as nothing more than a word; yet neither the Germanic nor the Slavic origin of it provide an “intelligent meaning”. This has apparently not prevented researchers from investigating the many ‘linguistic roots’ of ‘Odradek’. This is, of course, possible with any word. In the first paragraph on the ‘name’ of the thing, however, Kafka seems to want to say that words will *not* allow any conclusions to be drawn about the “creature” and the “meaning” of the thing they describe. This is followed by a description of Odradek’s appearance. It is subjunctive, cautious, conjectural, reading the “signs”; yet nothing can be gleaned from the appearance of the “creature” that would clarify it fully, indeed not even the visual attributes are certain. The strange little “creature”^{*} that seems to be ‘assembled’ from various materials (therefore heterogeneous, inorganic) – like a miniature assemblage – also refuses to be grasped on the second level, the linguistic expression of visual impressions. Once again, assigning meaning is impossible: “the whole thing looks senseless enough, yet in its own way perfectly finished.”

The third attempt is to grasp Odradek by his movement and to understand him via communication. Odradek is now no longer an ‘it’, but a ‘he’. But no sense can be made from his movements either: he lives – sometimes visible, sometimes invisible, here and there – in intermediate spaces, places of transit, in attics, stairwells, corridors, halls (Kafka’s preferred locations in general). This ‘in-between’ – one might also think of Foucault’s heterotopia or Marc Augé’s “non-place” – seems to ‘characterise’ Odradek. However, this word might already be too much. For the in-between means precisely that Odradek is “extraordinarily nimble and can never be laid hold of” and therefore can also not be ‘characterised’; unless he could be characterised by the paradox that Kafka is writing a story about this ungraspable thing and therefore gives him a linguistic ‘frame’, which Odradek constantly undermines and denies. This paradox also ultimately becomes clear in the family man’s attempt to

10 This story first appeared in the collection *Ein Landarzt. Kleine Erzählungen* [A Country Doctor: Short Stories], Munich and Leipzig, 1919. The following is not intended to be a literary interpretation. – Peter Geimer (2003, 220) also discusses this story. – For an interpretation that is still current, see Hillmann 1967.

* The standard translation is ‘creature’, though *Gebilde* means something more like ‘construct’, ‘formation’ or ‘object’.

start a communicative relationship with Odradek by addressing him "like a child". This is where the anthropomorphisation of the 'thing' begins: and he/it does actually answer, calls itself "Odradek", says it has "no fixed abode" and laughs. Speaking and laughing (I am thinking here of Helmut Plessner 1941/1970) are genuinely anthropological characteristics. Yet Odradek is not a person, and his/its laughter is also "only the kind of laughter that has no lungs behind it" – "like the rustling of fallen leaves". Is he only "as wooden as his appearance"? Even Odradek's materiality is uncertain. In the fifth part, the narrator reflects on Odradek's temporality and asks himself whether Odradek, who does not seem to trouble himself with aims and activities like all other life forms, will still be rolling down the stairs at the feet of his children's children. That Odradek is "likely to survive" the family man is an "almost painful" idea for him.¹¹

In many ways, the story of Odradek can be read as depicting our inextricable entanglement with things. Neither language nor (visual) perception, neither communication nor mental reflection help us get closer to the "creature" Odradek. He shares the neuter form with things, the material, the apersonal (the it). However, like all things that we interact with, Odradek is anthropomorphised and given person-like characteristics, without being identifiable in any way. He is 'there', he is; yet what or who he is cannot be deciphered. He seems to be an artefact, yet he does not demonstrate any characteristics of something made, and so it is unclear whether he is *physis* or *techné*, *terrigenus* or *factitius*, organic or synthetic. He is, depending on the perspective, neither one thing nor another, or sometimes one thing, then another. If anything, Odradek seems always to be whatever he is perceived as, interpreted as, verbalised as, addressed as – yet exactly this is subject to a permanent doubt, a deconstruction of any construction. He is, as already mentioned, an in-between, a neither-nor, one thing as well as another. He demonstrates characteristics of usefulness but also uselessness, of meaning and meaninglessness. His coordinates in space are equally as impossible as those in time. This distinguishes him from things that demonstrate a clear here-and-nowness, a spatiotemporal position that they occupy. And yet he is, like things, complete 'by himself', calmly centred so to speak, a "whole" and "perfectly finished", as "broken" as he may seem. He is solitary, singular, belongs to no species or category (unlike things) – in that sense he is like a work of art; and yet he is indeterminately determinate, ge-

¹¹ I am not taking into account that Odradek's homelessness is linked to Kafka's feeling of rootlessness as a Jew or is an image for the 'eternally' wandering Jew. The intertextual relationship to other Kafka texts is also deliberately not addressed here.

neric, because he is placeless and timeless, voiceless and vocal, infinitely reinterpretable, unsettling, alive and dead, incommensurable – in these ways too like a work of art.

His in-between being resembles a phantom, an apparition that has materialised, but is made of materials that are heterogeneous and indistinct, and has forms that cannot be classified. His ability to move around by himself allows him to appear alive, and yet he is a dead thing (we also say: the car moves, the airplane flies, the train drives; but is that really the case? Or are they being moved, flown, driven?). The fact that he has a name makes him resemble man, that creature of names. But we also give animals and things names, indeed, we even baptise them – for example ships. This peculiar unattainability, ungraspability, inarticulability, as concrete and as diverse in their attributes as they are, has regularly been observed about things. As clear, closed off, self-contained as they might appear to us, the more they are pure rejection and withdrawal as soon as we want to get closer to them. The closer we get to them, the further they retreat, it seems. If they had a secret, they would guard it; indeed, they themselves are a secret that conceals nothing. That is what makes them so fascinating. It is the reason why we reach out beyond ourselves to them, “inclined to speak to him”, as Kafka writes: a desire for appropriation that they constantly withdraw from, although we are supposedly the “man of the house” like the family man, powerful patriarchs. This state of being withdrawn, which is exactly what makes things appear alive to us – how could something dead escape beyond our reach? – is the reason why ultimately every relationship we establish with things ends in “cares”*: our anxiety about ourselves. Things will survive us, even if that might be as the useless rubbish that Odradek also could be. Unrelenting, wordless, they are a *memento mori* par excellence. While we must give up our being a person in death in order to become things, things, to which we lend the appearance of the person-like, retreat into their thingliness: to a universe without death. No matter how much one demolishes any thing, things always remain (particle physicists too have learned this). One cannot banish the thingly from things; it is as present in every fragment as in the finished work of art. All we can do is transform things into mental concepts. But a ‘thought thing’ is no longer a thing. In the end, Odradek too is not a thing at all, but rather a figure of language, a series of images, associations, con-

* The German *Sorge* is more clearly negative, as in ‘worries’ or ‘troubles’, than the standard translation as ‘cares’. Likewise above, *Hausvater* can also be translated as ‘the man of the house’, instead of ‘family man’.

junctions, assumptions, retractions, limitations – nothing but the movement of a text. Was Odradek a thing at all? Or just a mobile web of arbitrary signs?

Our anxiety about our own death and the fact that things will never lose their thingliness as we will lose our lives drives us to transform the universe of things into thoughts. The symbolic, which allows us to represent things, is the precondition for us being able to create virtual models with objects as thoughts. These are the preliminary models of our real, technical intervention in the world: we thereby manage to achieve a small amount of the independence from things that we aspire to; an independence one might say we have always desired. On the other hand, there is a radical resistance to the mental: we long to be things ourselves. For as long as we are material and therefore somehow part of the realm of things, we are permitted to say: we are alive. This is also where the desire for the resurrection of the flesh comes from; virtual existence, as a ghost, is infinitely sad, as the Greeks who populate Hades tell us.

Here, once again, we encounter a paradox. All of our cultural energy is put into transforming things into the immaterial so that we can grasp them symbolically and in real terms; yet at the same time, the immaterial desires to make itself material, so that it can share the deathlessness of things. For it is not the immaterial, the mind, that is eternal (as pure spirit nothing but a traceless fluttering in the universe), but the thingliness of things. Perhaps, our longing, our greed, our desire for things is nothing but the attempt to cheat death. We die, but in things we live on. We will encounter this again as a structure of fetishism. It seems that we, the enlightened, have precisely the relationship to things that we usually disapprove of, one which seems to be more rationalised than anything else: a religious one.

4 “Where a thing ends and where it begins”

It would be extremely difficult to cope with every thing being Odradek. It would mean living in an endless paradox. But do we not have a similar relationship to things? Perhaps we cannot actually rely on them at all? Do objects’ little disruptions, breakdowns, wearing out and refusal to cooperate not ultimately confirm the *grosso modo* consistent stability of things? Of course, we have to learn how to use them, which is sometimes difficult enough; of course, bitter poverty also consists of a lack of things; of course, the ‘course of things’ is regularly jammed; of course, processes repeatedly collapse, a chain of actions is broken, the flow of our activity is blocked by the resistances that inadvertently issue from things. But we have prepared for this: with repair services, technicians, techniques, products that rectify faults and unblock blockages, which replace worn-out

parts and make things work again. “How are things?”¹² Things are good (including the problems). “How are you?” – Fine.

In his short 1905 essay “Der Henkel” [The Handle],¹³ using the example of the handles of a container, Georg Simmel shows how difficult the categorical and aesthetic description of things is, even if like containers they are ‘man-made’ and made to be used, based on a clear logical pattern of how they are to be used – unlike natural objects or works of art, which coalesce into “self-sufficient unity” and are intended to be “insulated and untouchable”. In contrast, functional objects should ‘be ready to hand’. That is their “reality”, which is “completely irrelevant” to the artwork and “as it were, is consumed in it”. The handle is the thing on the container that implies how to use it, the taking of it in one’s hand, and belongs to its practical use – unlike the aesthetic form of objects. The handle is “a mediating bridge” and “a pliable joining” of the shape of the container and the hand handling it. “The principle of the handle – to mediate between the work of art and the world while it remains wholly incorporated in the art form – is finally confirmed by the fact that its counterpart, the opening or spout of the vessel, works according to an analogous principle. With the handle the world approaches the vessel; with the spout the vessel reaches out into the world.” Thus the handle is “the point of entrance for a teleology that is completely external to that form”. This teleology stems from the way it is handled, in contrast to the “breadth of symbolic relations” that the container owes to its design, its shape, but also to its social meaning. The handle and the spout are the two elements that make the container a mediating space for actions, directing the path of the liquid; they demonstrate the object’s function on the object to ensure proper handling. However, the form of the object belongs to yet another order. It positions the vessel as *aistheton*, as a perceivable thing. Its design reveals a relationship to pleasure, ‘a sensitivity to form’, the feeling of desire or aversion (Kant), which in a certain sense opposes the function. Both aspects ‘belong to’ the thing, but also to the subject that handles it and which positions itself doubly in relation to it, aesthetically and practically, emotionally and pragmatically.

This leads us once again to the problem of saying what the thing ‘vessel’ actually is. It is precisely not a self-contained entity: it is comprised of functional links with activities (as Simmel says: the “world approaches the vessel” and the vessel “reaches out into the world”). It has, as Bruno Latour would say, assem-

¹² This turn of phrase serves as Droit’s starting point (2005, 15).

¹³ Simmel, “Two Essays: The Handle, and The Ruin” (1958, 371–385). However, here I [Böhme] have cited the later version [the first version was published in 1905]: *Philosophische Kultur: Gesammelte Essays*. Berlin 1911/1983, 99–105.

bled or associated with us into a collective. The hand that grips, the lifted carafe, the wine pouring forth into a glass from its mouth, a glass held by someone else, both people at a laid table, their social situation perhaps marked as a date, in a candlelit room, the sentences exchanged during the ‘pouring’, the style of socialising marked by gestures, clothing, facial expressions: all of this forms a self-contained whole made up of things and people, signs and materials, articulations and silences, actions and attitudes. Within this whole, the two hands, the glass, the stream of wine, the carafe and the handle form a “bridge”, a transition, without which everything would fall apart. Independently of this material ensemble of things and bodies (and independently of all of the social meaning produced within it), the host pouring the wine senses, then communicates with his eyes and hands, that the elegant shape of the carafe so pleasing to the eye, with the harmoniously attached handle, is somehow uncomfortable, awkward to hold; while the woman holds the lovely old glass perfectly in her hand, which she however somehow dislikes, because she is a proponent of the ‘form follows function’ principle, and therefore does not like antique things. And so a growing sense of discord descends upon the wonderfully interconnected ensemble of bodies and things, which does not bode well for the rendezvous.¹⁴ To use Bruno Latour’s terms: the collective of things and people that are communicating here, experience, despite all their intentions, the first feelings of perplexion.

Recently, following in the footsteps of Simmel and Francis Ponge¹⁵ (without referencing them) and also of Nietzsche and Schopenhauer (who are referenced without much justification), Roger-Pol Droit has presented a few short phenomenological observations on everyday objects such as paperclips, boilers, scythes, photocopiers, spirit levels, etc. (a total of fifty things).¹⁶ These studies become literary miniatures almost unavoidably; writing about things in a non-literary style is almost impossible. Giving things a name “as bearing witness to its [the thing’s] unique existence” (Droit 2005, 10) requires engaging with their silent

14 This is a reference to the tea-pouring scene at the beginning of the story “Die Vollendung der Liebe” [The Perfecting of a Love] from 1911 (Musil 1986, 179–182). – Cf. Jakob 2004, 44 f.

15 Francis Ponge (1899–1988) is perhaps, along with Rilke, the greatest wordsmith when it comes to a poetic vision of things and their reflection in aesthetic perception. Cf. e.g. Ponge 1947; 1995; 1998 and 1986. – On Ponge cf. also: Sartre 1947.

16 Droit does not mention Vilém Flusser either, who wrote a very similar book, which I will discuss in more detail later (Flusser 1993, partly translated in Flusser 1999). – Cf. Panati 1987. Panati uses the fiction of an alphabetic lexicon to bring a large and yet ultimately inconsequential number of cultural-historical items and functional objects into an inevitably arbitrary order. He therefore relieves himself of the problem of an “order of things” and uses the liberty he has thus gained for a sometimes amusing, sometimes insightful, always incidental collection of textual miniatures, a kind of linguistic museum of everyday objects.

presence and taking them into account. It is hard not to get lost undertaking such attempts. For no matter how many or how few words one uses, no matter how accurate or imprecise, one will never be a match for the tremendous abundance and inexhaustible variety of things.¹⁷ Droit calls his book an “experiment”, the result of an irrepressible urge. Yet he knows that this experiment, unlike a story, can never be finished (and is therefore paradoxical). “To edge closer to the world of things is to strike out in the direction of silence, the out-of-self, the inorganic, the non-human. Perhaps there one might experience the joy of giving oneself the slip.” (ibid., 131) Yet this joy is ambivalent, because the author soon discovers: “this game is perhaps dangerous” (ibid., 130). How can one “contemplate each one in an aphastic silence” *and* talk about it? (ibid., 23). In other words, how can one get closer to a thing, but also remain a person? Something unpredictable happens to the author during his experiment: not only does he realise that talking about everyday things also means involuntarily talking about oneself, even if one hates the autobiographical, worse, the contours of things start to blur. Droit no longer knows “where any particular thing begins and ends”. A strange reverse effect occurs, which cannot be explained with Latour’s model of the parliamentary collective of the human and the non-human. It is “as if we overlap with things and aspects of things are buried inside us. [...] Between persons and things confusions are brewing” (ibid., 123–124). Droit no longer feels his enterprise is a controlled experiment, but instead is like an “expedition to some *terra incognita*” (ibid., 126), into the universe of things. Entering that universe means becoming a thing yourself: inhuman, speechless, dead. At the start the author had wanted to get close to the “folds” of things, in order to unfold them, to pull out the unrecognisable words pressed, squashed between their folds: to expand and reconquer the territory of language from where it has been swallowed by the aphasia of things. But Droit, having lost his confidence in his command of things and his ability to speak about them, is now on the border of self-loss. While the threat of becoming a thing (a “corpse-thing”) looms on the one hand, on the other his impression that the human world and the universe of things have absolutely nothing in common grows stronger. The third series of encounters with things intensifies this threat so much that the author fears he will kill himself; as though this would be the final epiphany on the truth of things: becoming a thing. “But the dream of entering into silence, into brute matter, and seeing the world from the viewpoint of things, carries its dangers. To fall

17 As early as 1907, Husserl correctly emphasises that the perception of things is “a process interminable in principle” (*Thing and Space* 1907/1997, 112–116).

prey to this illusion is to become dust with the dust, with no possibility of return.” (ibid., 185)

This is the turning point in Droit’s book, when he turns to a fourth series of thing descriptions under the heading of “Calm”: the encounter between flute and body that results in music; the charm of a necklace; the protection of an umbrella; the friendly emptiness of a suitcase; the animal-thing vacuum cleaner, etc. These reassurances may or may not convince. Every attempt to translate the thingliness of things into the realm of language ends with the person encountering themselves, with all of their fears and hopes, doubts and knowledge. Things are so deeply rooted in our existence that they, in their strangeness, can even convey the alphabet of the human, just as conversely the human alphabetises them. One can no less keep them away from oneself than one can fuse with them. This makes one quite cautious of the great tradition of enlightened philosophy, which rejects any form of an animating commingling with things as fetishism and reduces the totality of things down to facts, assembled in the synthesis of our confident power of judgement. However, both of these form the foundation of modernity.

5 Phenomenology of things

5.1 Edmund Husserl

It is not so easy to simply endure things, to confront them, to allow them to affect us through all of our senses, to leave them in their primal presence and not immediately incorporate them into some cycle of actions or quickly pass them by, in short, to linger with things, wanting no more than to be aware of them in a form of increased self-awareness. In the following, phenomenology is the model I will use to introduce the philosophical understanding of and approach to things. It is described by Merleau-Ponty as follows: “the only way to adjust itself to those figured enigmas, the thing and the world, whose massive being and truth teem with impossible details.” (1968, 4)¹⁸ – One could say, a little polemically, that philosophers have never been very concerned with things. Deciding what knowledge is and how it works was more important to them. At best, things cropped up in philosophy as objects of knowledge, and therefore performed for our own purposes from the outset. Since time immemorial, it has

¹⁸ ‘Impossible’ [*Inkompossibel*] means ‘incompatible’, ‘not possible at the same time’ and is a term that Merleau-Ponty takes from Leibniz’ philosophy.

been left to peasants, craftsmen and technicians to worry about the concrete qualities of things; the universal form of objects, if anything, was enough for philosophy. The precise linguistic and visual description of things has if anything been the terrain of visual art and literature, but this also only occurred relatively late: in painting since the middle of the fifteenth century and in literature since around 1800. In philosophy, it is only with Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) at the beginning of the twentieth century and after him, Martin Heidegger, that indirectly, with the rehabilitation of the lifeworld, things finally begin to be properly considered in philosophy.

Husserl's ideas are based on the assumption that as an ego, we are always already in an environment. This environment is there *on hand* for present experience. We form the reality of the world around each of us from it. In doing so, we also always envision that which is not directly present, but encircles the things we experience. Things are surrounded by “an obscurely intended horizon of indeterminate actuality”, both temporally and spatially. We do not just imagine a “world of mere things”, but also always a “world of objects with values, a world of goods, a practical world”. They form our particular ‘world horizon’, our lifeworld. The changing spontaneities of consciousness always occur in reference to this. The primary meaning of the Cartesian *cogito* therefore consists first and foremost of sheer acts of the ego, in which I envision the world (or segments of it), things and ensembles of things. “I always find myself as someone who is perceiving, objectivating in memory or in fantasy, thinking, feeling, desiring etc.” (Husserl 1982, 52–54). “No doubt about or rejection of data belonging to the natural world alters in any respect *the general positing which characterises the natural attitude*” (ibid., 57). Although it may be limited, this is a rehabilitation of the naïve world consciousness. Philosophical doubt does not change anything about the natural evidence of that which objectively exists, which I find pre-existing and in which I experience myself embedded.

However, in phenomenology this natural attitude is bracketed off and ignored – Husserl calls this process ‘epoché’. It is a disciplined restraint with regard to what is categorised as ‘real’ in the natural attitude. This epoché can exist in parallel with the “unshaken conviction of truth, even with the unshakeable conviction of evident truth” of the world encountered (ibid. 59–60). Yet the latter – the whole natural world, as it is there and available to us as a reality according to our consciousness, in other words the general thesis of the natural attitude – is “put out of action” in epoché (ibid., 60). This switching off of judgement – and this is important – also includes the sciences, which for their part usually formulate specific circumstances as fact and then present them as an incontrovertible reality. In this way, Husserl reintroduces the radical methodological

doubt from Descartes's meditations into the field of transcendental consciousness phenomenology.

All that remains effective is something that Husserl believes is not addressed either in the natural attitude or in the sciences, the "peculiarity [...] of a new region of being never before delineated": consciousness itself and its acts, which belong to individual, human subjects. It is the experiences of consciousness – the "changing stream [of experience]" (which had also just been discovered by literature) – that must be understood: as sudden units that in principle cannot be affected by epoché. In this sense, Husserl is more concerned with the immanence of pure consciousness (ibid., 63–64). It is already becoming clear that we will not discover much more about the thingliness of things pursuing this path.¹⁹

However, Husserl works on the assumption that consciousness is always doubly *involved*^{*} with the world: it is always *someone's* consciousness, and it is always a *unique* consciousness "of that world". Yet this involvement is not discussed, because the material world is "something of an essentially different kind excluded from the essentiality proper of mental processes". Compared to pure consciousness, things are "*something alien, the otherness*", with which at the same time consciousness forms "a combined whole", an interdependent involvement. This is decisive in the sense that being able to act in the world depends on discrete things. Husserl knows that the "ultimate source" from which this interdependent involvement "feeds" is the same 'natural consciousness' where I "find a factually existing world of physical things confronting me", and where "I ascribe to myself a body in that world and now am able to assign myself a

¹⁹ This is not quite correct, in the sense that Husserl thought intensely about 'perceptual correlation' in his 1907 lectures on *Thing and Space* and certainly did not collapse the thing into the act of perception. He deals extensively with the constitution of the temporal and spatial extension of that which appears. Husserl also clearly states that things exist independently from perception, communicate themselves to perception as such and keep it stable both temporally and spatially. Space and time are however not (as in Kant) mere ways of looking at things, but instances of the extension of things themselves. The material filling of space and the material filling of time belong to things as *prima materia*. Husserl does not exactly make a great distinction between *materia prima et secunda*, because he wishes to distance himself from Locke's primary and secondary qualities (1997, 37–72). His differentiation between resting things and moving things as well as the embeddedness of thingly conditions in localities and fields, especially in the oculomotoric field are also very useful (sections 3, 4 and 5). These lectures are not strictly about epoché, but about the question of how it becomes clear to us in perception that we are dealing with things and not images, signs or phantoms. In some respects, Husserl comes back to this question in his later crisis writings of 1935 (see below).

* F. Kersten translates *Verflechtung* as 'involvement'. It can also be translated as 'interdependence' or more literally, 'interweaving'.

place there.” He calls this, “in a certain legitimate sense”, a “primal experience” (ibid., 81–82). Thus he even concedes that every consciousness is the “consciousness of the *own* presence ‘in person’ of an individual Object”, so of a thing (in the sense of a logical *individuum*). In this way, he rejects the idea that only images or signs of things exist in perception; instead the spatial thing, as something perceived and outside consciousness in space, “the world of physical things and, in it, our body, are perceptually [incessantly] there” (ibid., 83).

However, the point of the phenomenological reduction is to set aside this corporeality (of things). This simply continues a back-and-forth in European thinking that will either go on forever or should be abandoned as a fruitless dead-end. Either the consciousness gains at the expense of things or things gain at the expense of consciousness. Sometimes the thingliness of things is excluded in order to make possible a constitution theory cleansed of all material things, which constructs ‘things’ from the knowledge possessed by the subject. Elsewhere, everything subjective is excluded in order to develop generalised processes for determining facts, which are presented as the irrefutable nature of things (which subjects can therefore have absolutely no influence on). Consciousness and things are therefore as opposed to each other as mind and nature, as either-or. The early Husserl does not aim to analyse the “involvement” of things outside consciousness and consciousness itself in any more depth.

The shift away from this is first evident in what are known as the ‘crisis writings’ of 1935. Here everything to do with the lifeworld – as opposed to rational science and also Husserl’s own earlier transcendental phenomenology – is energetically reasserted. He now seeks to make the lifeworld, “concretely, in its neglected relativity”, and disparaged *doxa* (as opposed to *episteme*, *noesis*), his foundation for understanding the Heraclitean flux (Husserl 1970, 156–157). Although things are always in flux (as are we), we experience them as *the same*, despite a broad horizon of constant changes of perspective and the constant shifting and expansion of meaning. But in each case, they are the same things in their manifold sameness (ibid., 157–158). The subject, itself a part of the world it experiences, perceives, takes perspectives on, changes, recognises and, in each act of consciousness, reaches beyond the present to a continuity of (remembering) retentions and (projecting) protentions. Yet in this stream of experience, it is always the same here and now. What Husserl is now interested in is linked to the question of a correlative *a priori* between the Heraclitean flux of things and the flux of experience of the consciousness. It is therefore about exactly what he called “involvement” in 1913, the same thing he pushed aside for the sake of pure consciousness.

As we will see (in chapter 1.6), this is a fruitful approach. Husserl now emphasises the processual link between the kinaesthetic flow of the self and the acts of consciousness that are positioned in relation to representations of things in always changing correlations. There is a difference between the *field of perception*, in which the perception of a thing is incorporated into the horizon of possible perceptions, and the *field of things*, in which each thing has its own horizon. Both are realised as a particular segment “‘of’ the world, of the universe of things for possible perception” (ibid., 162). The *world* is understood here “as the universal horizon, common to all men, of actually existing things” (ibid., 164). The plural is important here: he no longer speaks of one consciousness, but of many people. The world is an intersubjective world. Both harmony and discord occur in it, and both exist on the basis of the fundamental possibility of participation, participation in both the field of perception and the field of things.

‘The’ thing itself is actually that which no one experiences as really seen, since it is always in motion, always, and for everyone, a unity for consciousness of the openly endless multiplicity of changing experiences and experienced, one’s own and those of others. The cosubjects of this experience themselves make up, for me and for one another, an openly endless horizon of human beings who are capable of meeting and then entering into actual contact with me and with one another (ibid., 164).

On this rather fluid basis, Husserl develops a “manifold typology of correlations”. This enables him to reconstruct how a given horizon of things and multiple perceiving subjects can produce relatively stable syntheses of possibly valid truths. What is crucial here is the *correlation*, which has a kind of *fundamentum in re* and a *fundamentum in societate* at the same time. The involvement in ‘being-together’, in the ‘I-you’ and in the ‘we’, and the kinaesthetic involvement with things form a “world”, in which there is a more differentiated place for humans and non-humans together. One could also say that both groups support each other and that the different types of this mutual support between subjects and things are also the object of the search for knowledge and its intentions. (We are investigating *one* type of this interactive connection between thing and subject, fetishism.) Things have an important role in this relationship: “every entity that is valid for me and every conceivable subject as existing in actuality is thus correlatively – and with essential necessity – an index of its own systematic multiplicities” (ibid., 166). Husserl thus replaces the solitary pure consciousness with an “intersubjectivity which is brought together” (ibid., 167). This results in an “intentionally overlapping [...] universal unity of synthesis” with many “levels and strata” (ibid., 168), which is never the achievement or property of a single individual. Furthermore, Husserl liberates things from their dark confinement ‘beyond consciousness’. It is this that makes them fundamentally alien and

other. Thus, using indexical evidence, things are correlated with the plurality of the consciousnesses that is intentionally targeted at those things. These consciousnesses can agree amongst each other about their perceptions, which can be interpreted from the thing indices. The inner horizon of the consciousnesses in the field of perception and the outer horizon of things in the field of things come together and enter into negotiable correlations. Identifying and testifying to these produces 'knowledge' in the first place. These 'grounds', the statement of the consciousness and of the things in a divided world, is at the same time the foundation of science, in any case for the kind of science for which the lifeworld is the ultimate meta-level.

5.2 Martin Heidegger

In his essay "The Origin of the Work of Art" (1935–1936/1978), Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) works out the nature of the existence of things insofar as all works of art are also things (cf. Porath 2002).²⁰ A work of art is always worked into some material. This is especially clear in sculpture and architecture. The first task is therefore to understand the material or 'thingly' aspect of art: what is the thingness of a thing? To answer this question, Heidegger lists three – and only these interest us here – traditional philosophical approaches to defining things: 1. Things as carriers of characteristics; 2. Things as the unity of manifold sensory perceptions; 3. Things as shaped matter. In the first approach, the thingness of the thing is the core around which properties assemble. This core corresponds to the Greek *to hypokeimenon* (the underlying); the properties are *ta symbebekota*. *Hypokeimenon* becomes the Latin *subiectum*, *hypostasis* becomes *substantia*, *symbebekos* becomes *accidens* (Heidegger 1935–1936/1978, 153–154). The substance-accident* relation corresponds to our common understanding of things: things have a substance, and this substance has properties. Primary qualities are also often differentiated from secondary ones. The latter are 'accidents', qualities which only become attached to a thing by coincidence, like the colour of wood, stone or a car. Generally qualities of a thing are part of a thing, the *hypokeimenon*, as predicates: as though things followed the structure of linguistic statements. Heidegger does not trust this, because it does not address the "inde-

²⁰ Widmer's article on this (2002) is less rewarding. Compared to his earlier ideas about the thing, his late essay "The Thing" (Heidegger 1954/2012, 5–22) does not bring us any further and is therefore not dealt with here. His long description of a jug's mode of being is reminiscent of Georg Simmel's essay about the handle.

* 'Accident' in the Aristotelian sense of a non-essential property.

pendent and self-contained character” of things (ibid., 155). For his aim is “undistorted presencing” and to “let things encounter us without mediation” (ibid., 156) (whatever that might mean). In the second approach, the thing is understood as *aistheton*, as that which we perceive with our senses. This is an attempt to bring things “into the greatest possible proximity to us” (ibid., 156). However, the thing disintegrates in our sensory perception, as it becomes completely absorbed by the subjective: a thing can only be understood as the “unity of a manifold of what is given in the senses” (ibid., 156). “In both interpretations,” writes Heidegger, “the thing vanishes” (ibid., 157).

Heidegger does not go that far in his lecture from around the same time, *Die Frage nach dem Ding* [The Question of the Thing]. He deciphers an interesting double meaning in Kant’s basic principle: “In all appearances the real that is an object of sensation has intensive magnitude, i.e., a degree” (Kant 1998a, B 207). He links the real to the Latin *res*, the object or thing, thereby revealing the double meaning of sensation [*Empfindung*], through which objects exist for us: namely, on the one hand *our* sensation of being (a “state belonging to our self”), and on the other the sensation *of something*, which is real, in other words thingly (which does not mean that the real is also factual, objective). We therefore perceive the quality of a thing (*res*) via our sensations, according to its degree (or its intensity, just as light is experienced as more or less intense). With reference to Kant, he calls this showing-itself of a thing in sensations the “reality in appearance”, which must pre-exist. In our sensory perception, the real is the “something as such”. That is why sensations are so ambiguous, because they take a “peculiar mediating and intermediary position between things and man, between object and subject.” Later in the text, he also calls this double sense the “in-between” space between man and thing, an area which we shall also pursue (Heidegger, 1962a, esp. 162, 165–166, 188). It is this in-between that will later be of interest to us in relation to fetish.

The approach corresponds to distinction between form and matter (*morphé* and *hyle*), which also originates from classical Greek philosophy: “What is constant in a thing, its consistency, lies in the fact that matter stands together with a form. The thing is formed matter.” (Heidegger 1935–1936/1978, 157) This definition seems to allow an understanding of both natural things and functional objects. Its orientation towards external appearances allows matter to become the basis of form – which is particularly useful in conventional theories of art. But it also applies to everything manufactured for use. Heidegger calls things that serve a purpose, “equipment for something”. They lack the self-sufficient presence, of which Simmel already spoke with regard to the work of art. Just like the first two interpretations of things, however, the functional, purpose-serving form that gives things their shape is also an “assault” on things, according to

Heidegger (ibid., 160). Although art is indisputably also a product like any functional object, the artistic thing has the additional characteristic of dispensing with a certain kind of reticence (speaking in Husserl's terms, one could call it a kind of epoché). If things are closed-off, alienating in their state of being forced to be nothing, then art reflects the need to produce things in which precisely this thing-structure is left *be*. Art is the means through which the thingness of things – an unformed self-containment – can become manifest; the work is the art of letting “[the thing] stand on its own, for itself, alone” (instead of assaulting it; ibid., 167).

Heidegger's attempt to differentiate between a thing, equipment and a work of art is informed by older ideas developed in *Being and Time* (1927/1996) and in the lecture *Die Frage nach dem Ding*. In *Being and Time*, he deals with things in the chapter “The Worldliness of the World” (ibid., § 14–24). Things are what are encountered on an innerworldly level, making the world known to us and activating consciousness in the first place. A worldless consciousness could not exist. By encountering things, the consciousness sets itself apart from that which it is not. This is what makes the primary differentiation between other beings encountered in the environment and the consciousness possible. This roughly corresponds to Husserl's difference between the inner and the outer horizon, the field of perception and the field of things. Both philosophers link this difference to the category ‘world’, as the horizon of all possible encounters encompassing both fields. While from there, Husserl takes a step in the direction of a phenomenology of the lifeworld, Heidegger puts ‘Being’ in its place instead. Heidegger aims to explain this with regard to both that which is being (= everything encountered on an innerworldly level) and also *Dasein* (= the human being). Many cultural theories, including some with an empirical methodology, were able to make use of Husserl's lifeworld and its phenomenological analysis. However, Heidegger attempts an ontology compared to which lifeworld practices seem like an incomplete existence wasted on the average person and where the call for the real potential of actually being falls on deaf ears. Art, on the other hand, is positioned as a superior practice in Heidegger, in which things – for example the pair of peasant's shoes painted by van Gogh – are bathed in the light of their truth, their destiny of being and therefore become a call to being for the *Dasein* (the human). Art confronts human beings with the decision to actually be able to be.

* *Das Sein* = the process of being, as opposed to the entity which is, which is translated below as ‘that which is being’ (*das Seiende*).

Beyond this ontological emphasis, Heidegger also delivers a series of sensible definitions of thingness. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger calls things that are not naturally there (the way stone, clouds, plants are ‘natural’) ‘equipment’ (ibid., § 14–18). Equipment is “something in order to...”, a means to an end, chosen by humans. Now, of course natural things can also become useful for a purpose and serve us as equipment: horses can be ridden, plants can be eaten, rivers can be used for travel by boat. In this sense, whole groups of things, even potentially the Earth itself, can be seen as equipment, as tools. In that case things are not ‘let be’ in their being, but instead are subject to a technical regime (later he says that things are ‘artificially positioned’, in the sense that technology is an artificial platform – cf. 1982): they are means to ends that are external to them.

The question as to whether it is the norm that natural things, to which living beings also belong, make each other into means, such as for food, is not dealt with any further. In organisms or in living systems composed of many entities, everything is a means to an end for everything else. That is the definition of self-organisation. In that sense, one could object to this distinction between natural things and equipment by arguing that the equipment structure (something in order to...) occurs frequently throughout nature too, in other words, is itself natural. Heidegger does not deal with this question. Instead, he is concerned with characterising equipment as that which acquires the status of being ready-to-hand in human concerns (concerns about one’s own ability to be), in other words, as an instance of human praxis.

That is why he also derives his ‘equipment’ from the Greek expression for things, *ta pragmata*. Heidegger thus emphasises that things come into play as functions or as the media of actions: the plough or the workhorse only become ‘equipment’ by being involved in a framework of actions. Many other things also belong to this framework: the farmer himself, technical skills, the soil, the weather, the agricultural tradition, the division of labour between farmer, labourer and animal, in the background perhaps religious beliefs (gods of the field), the economy, the town/country opposition, technical experts who improve the plough, etc. If thingly ‘equipment’ is characterised in Heidegger by a ‘reference to something’, by its ‘readiness to be used’ [*Bewandtnis*], but also by specific spatial qualities (such as nearness, belonging, locality), then he does not just mean that the plough or the horse refer directly to the purpose of ploughing, but in a wider sense the interlinking of practices, readiness to be used, purposes, aims, values, institutions and mental symbolic backgrounds. All these ‘consolidate’ in the material rigid link between earth, horse, plough and farmer. This thingly ensemble, a ‘core’ of the agricultural world, incorporates within it a com-

plex structure of equipment, a systematic assembly of means and ends, which, though intricate in its branchings, always appears locally concentrated.

Heidegger draws our attention to the fact that nature will always be revealed to be a part of equipment, for example, the pulling power of the horse, or tough, claggy ground as opposed to light topsoil, etc. It is not that natural things only occur with a function within a pragmatic equipment framework, instead, the 'nature of things', to the extent that they become co-actors in human activity, is discovered and revealed. The 'pulling power' of the horse does not occur in nature: wild horses do not pull anything. As soon as the horse becomes equipment, however, useful for pulling the plough, this natural potential of horses is exposed. There is also no natural difference between tough ground and light topsoil, as long as this difference is not also 'worked out of the earth' through the medium of ploughing. In this sense, the character of equipment also always exposes something of the thingliness of things. Or: the difference between tough ground and light topsoil cancels out the distinction between nature and culture, because this difference is exactly the difference between the two media, and is the association of both. The difference the farmer ascertains is the difference of the ground itself.

In the ground of *Being and Time* and its distinction between things and equipment, ideas like this do not play any role. However, they are certainly extremely relevant for cultural studies, which researches material and symbolic practices and their natural conditions. But Heidegger has absolutely no interest in the foundations of some scientific discipline. This is also evident in the lecture series, *Die Frage nach dem Ding*, from the years 1935–1936. Only in the first part does it deal with thingliness as encountered in the lifeworld (1962a, 1–41), only to then turn to Kant's analysis of the thing in *Critique of Pure Reason*.

Heidegger begins with the famous anecdote of the witty and attractive Thracian girl. The story goes that she mocked the philosopher Thales, who accidentally fell into a well because he was studying the sky, with the following: "[...] he so passionately wanted to understand the things in heaven that he failed to see the thing in front of his nose and at his feet. The same taunt," adds Plato, "is befitting to anyone who gets involved in philosophy."²¹ That philosophers tend to ignore what is right in front of them for the sake of something far off in the distance, sometimes tripping themselves up in the process, should not be interpreted as their simply passing over everyday things without any consideration for them. Rather they question these things in such a way that what seems obvious suddenly becomes utterly strange. One must trip over things to be able to

21 Plato, *Theaetetus* 174a, cited in Heidegger 1962a, 2. On this cf. also Blumenberg 1987.

ask about them at all. And it is the ostensible “malice of objects” that shifts things into a different light in the first place, enabling them to be questioned more closely. When this happens ‘things’ can look back at you as distant and strange as the stars, though it does not matter, for you have already stumbled over them and are lying in the well: this tripping up, as comical as it may seem to those who understand things without question, like the Thracian girl, is indeed a condition of philosophical questioning.

That is why Kant’s questioning of the thing, which as the ‘thing per se’ [*Ding an sich*] is given the status of an unsolvable mystery and therefore viewed as unknowable, is the stumbling block that prompts an investigation of whether and how we can know something at all, as well as what is fundamentally unknowable. This Kantian turn away from the thing to the subject and its abilities, which are the subjective conditions of any knowledge, cannot be pursued here, although it is a more appropriate line of questioning for a philosopher who has fallen down the well: it is perfectly appropriate for him to first contemplate the ‘thing per se’ and then to ask who he is in the first place, what he is doing lying in a well, and how he might climb back out again. Phenomenology is the ladder out of the well.

Heidegger does not address the crucial question of phenomenology straight away, but instead first perseveres with the readiness-to-hand of things, by which he, if you like, pays tribute to the Thracian girl. And we will follow him in this direction and not take the path of phenomenology, which is not actually concerned with things, but rather objects of knowledge – rather than objects that have been shaped to fit subjective forms of knowledge from the outset. For our main aim – figuring out the human-thing relationship that we call fetishism – is not a philosophical one. Fetishism belongs entirely to the world of the Thracian girl. It is a strange and tricky mechanism, and does in fact have more to do with tripping and stumbling. Investigating fetish means pursuing the entanglements one can often end up in with things that have gotten hold of you and will no longer let go. One is never dealing with an ‘absolute object of knowledge’ and most certainly not with the possible forms of subjective knowledge. Fetishes are always concrete things; and people who succumb to them are precisely not subjects of knowledge. There is not only a philosopher lying in the well, but entire cultural formations, to which things, people and institutions belong.

We also follow Heidegger in the sense that he separates his investigation of the thing from everything that the positivist sciences determine as ‘fact’ through experiments, observation and description. Facts are things that have already been mangled into evidence, which – in the sense of the artwork essay – are “assaulted” by our knowledge processes, have lost everything disquieting about them, have been forced to conform to our interests and, in a certain sense,

have been silenced. They are objects that have already been tamed, civilised, made obedient on the chain of subservience. Fetishes, as we will see, are not like that at all, in fact they are almost the opposite: they are uncivilised in the sense that we obey them and are chained to them. Heidegger does not deal with fetishes, which he does not mention anywhere, but instead asks what constitutes the readiness-to-hand of things. Now that is of interest to us, because fetishes are always individual and concrete.

This is also a point Heidegger takes up. A thing is always alone and always “this thing and no other” (1962a, 11). Here he is clearly refuting Leibniz’ *principium identitatis indiscernibilium*, the principle of the identity of indiscernible things. According to this, things that cannot be distinguished from each other are the same. However, Heidegger says that every thing, even an element in a series of identical things, is unique. Even things that are *exactly* the same are always unique. They have a unique position in space and time; they are always ‘this here’, in the here and now. This is what constitutes their readiness-to-hand, their being encountered as available, and provides us with the very foundation of our lives. One can therefore say, as Wittgenstein does: “Objects constitute the substance of the world. Therefore they cannot be compound.” (1922/2005, 2.021)

When in the lectures of 1935–1936 Heidegger sets about characterising things as the core (the substance) that carries properties, and when he then identifies an analogy to predicative statements (*s est p*) in this, so that the structure of things and the construction of linguistic sentences form a parallel movement, then he is in fact following a specific ontological understanding of the thing that he himself had listed as only one of three main traditional philosophical definitions of the thing in his artwork essay. The discovery of the thing and the (statement) sentence by the Greeks happen historically at the same time. Grammar appears as a parallel structure to the structure of things. Even if one does not agree with this, the conclusion Heidegger draws from it cannot be denied: that whatever qualifies as a thing for us is historical. This historicity, the change in our position on things and the corresponding change in what a thing is, will not however tempt us to ask our way back through this change all the way to an ontological origin that might tell us the secret nature of things. No, instead we will remain in the well we fell into in the “battle of Babel”, to use Kafka’s phrase, which is where one finds oneself as soon as one accepts one can never get behind this historicity. Things cannot exist beyond history; neither do they form its unchanging ground, upon which our actions are performed. Instead, things – and this seems almost trivial – are historical through and through, they have their own history, and we have our history with them, namely the history of our concepts and perceptions, in which things present themselves

to us, and above all, the history of how we ourselves are defined by things. For this reason, this study will not follow the path of developing a theory for a specific form of thingliness, namely fetishism. Rather, this study will be a *history* of fetishism in science. It will reconstruct the paths by which fetishised things themselves change their position – and to a certain extent, how they migrated from Africa to Europe, in order to determine how things present themselves to us, modern man, there.

6 Humans – things – collectives

6.1 Bruno Latour's approach

In his book, *Pandora's Hope*, Bruno Latour (born 1947) writes the following sentence: “Humans are no longer *by themselves*.” (1999, 190)²² The core of Latour's provocative thinking is in this sentence, we should therefore ask what it is supposed to mean. For it seems harmless enough. Surely people have always been *not* by themselves? They have lived in alliances with plants, animals, spirits, countless hybrids and gods; and with nature, which was not always experienced as a silent and passive counterpart, but as a lively actor: person-like or even transpersonal forces articulated themselves and acted in springs, rivers, seas, in forests, wind and weather, in the field, the mountains and the earth. Indeed, forces could even slumber in stone and matter, and suddenly make themselves heard; not to mention the fact that artefacts – lances, carriages, hammers – were in some way also not just instruments, but independent actors that occasionally did their own thing entirely. Then they were no longer ‘ready-to-hand’, but rather jumped out of the hand, like in the fairytale about the cheese that slips away from the kind-hearted, naïve Catherlieschen and runs down the hill or the pancake that jumps out of the pan and takes flight “kantapper kantapper” into the woods.²³ So what is so exciting about Latour's statement?

Latour is not talking as a religious ethnologist who studies animistic cultures, nor as a literary theorist who analyses fairytales. He is speaking as a sociologist and science studies researcher – from the very heart of the scientific, technical world. This makes the statement more exciting. People act. And our theories of action are all based on the idea that an action is a motivated and in-

²² Peter Geimer (2003, 209) made this sentence the subtitle to his article on the theory of objects.

²³ “Der Frieder und das Catherlieschen” [Frederick and Catherine] (Grimm's fairytales) and “The Thick, Fat Pancake” (traditional fairytale).

tentional act carried out by subjects, which in turn live in a matrix of intersubjective interdependencies, in which they can negotiate their interests and justify their actions. This is what it means to be “*by ourselves*”. Action is a human privilege. Its precondition and result is socialisation – and the only entities that belong to society are conscious and intentional, can take multiple courses of action, can be addressed as subjects, are persons, in short, are human. In our society – ‘by ourselves’ – animals, machines, things, infrastructure are not given any say, because they do not have a personality. Society always means *human society*. This is exactly what Latour disputes. For a long time now, or once again, we have been living in a kind of ‘crossover’ relationship with the non-human, which is involved in our actions in many different ways. Even inanimate things are, if not actors, then at least actants. In this sense, each of our actions is a complex association or a hybrid of human and non-human entities. Historically, modernity is the interlude between the old, so-called ‘premodern’ forms of establishing communal relationships among humans and things, and today’s and the future’s assemblage of material ensembles and human subjects. Modernity indulged in the gross self-misunderstanding of human autonomy, which has never existed in reality. This is why Latour (1993) so often repeats his formula that we have never been modern. What is that supposed to mean? And does it have something to do with our clear failure to understand our involvement with things? Let us examine this further.

For Latour, modernity is a phantasmagoric interlude characterised by the strict opposition between nature and society, object and subject, body-thing and mind. Modernity is a phantasm, because the main differences named above characterise the ideological self-understanding but not the praxis of modernity. This becomes particularly clear in its relationship to things and, more generally, to the non-human, under which Latour includes living entities, artefacts and machines, networks, technical infrastructure and material institutions. The cultures that according to Latour were dismissed as premodern and exotic by modernity were characterised by categorical and practical intermingling with non-human entities: this is exactly what made those cultures seem unenlightened. In contrast, modernity establishes an order in which everything is either a subject or an object, either nature or society, belonging either to things or to the mind. However, upon closer inspection this distinction turns out to be self-deception. But if this disjunction is valid as ‘enlightened’ and modernity itself identifies with the Enlightenment, then this self-identification is illusory: we believe that we are modern, but we never have been. The very thing that modernity accuses premodern cultures of, he argues, namely mixing up conceptual oppositions, in fact applies perfectly to modernity itself. Yes, the same obscene melange of human and non-human has continued to grow throughout all of

modernity. This mixing up is also typical of fetishism. That is why the very era that considers itself so decidedly anti-fetishistic is in fact the age that spread fetishism wider than ever before. It is not just older, ‘primitive’ societies or some remaining minority cultures that are fetishistic, but modernity itself. If modernity is in fact precisely that which it believes it is so radically different from, then modernity is an illusion. Perhaps this idea really is provocative. It will be examined first in a closer discussion of Latour; in later chapters, it will be shown in detail, in the scientific history of fetishism, that Latour’s critical position towards modernity is almost as old as modernity itself. It will become clear how much modernity, fighting against the ‘false magic’ of premodern and non-European cultures, was in fact subject to a kind of self-enchancement, which it remains unaware of right up until the very brink of its destruction. The difference to Latour will be that the insight that modernity is an illusion (we have never been modern) does not occur beyond modernity – in a postmodern era, in deconstruction, in a second or self-reflexive modernity that will follow the first epoch, rather it is structurally part of it. Modernity in fact means that self-enchancement and its Enlightenment belong together just as fetishisation and its criticism do.

The conceptual opposition that defines the architecture of modernity mentioned above is a myth for Latour, a myth which Europe developed out of itself as it exported its model of a sociotechnical society to all corners of the globe, a model which was presented as inevitable to other cultures. Whether the relationship between nature and society was understood as a *rupture*, as mutual *detachment* either by nature or by society, as the *conquering* of one by the other and vice versa, as *reflection*, with one side reflecting back the image of the other, as a *rivalry between the forces* of human power and natural power or as a *dialectical exchange* between the oppositions:²⁴ any form of integration between the two was always unthinkable.

According to Latour, this led to the modern bicameralist system of responsibilities and executive powers, each of which excludes the other. The natural sciences stylise their knowledge as non-historical facts of nature. Only they are permitted to talk about facts, certainly not politicians. Politics on the other hand must concern itself with the organisation of historical interests and actions, which are in turn completely insulated from the supposedly ahistorical facts of nature or the ‘dead’ artefacts of the technical. The same applies to subject and object, which have a ‘false’ relationship to each other: either the subject be-

²⁴ He develops these relations further in Latour 2002, 73 ff. [This reference is to the appendix of chapter one of the German edition; this appendix is not included in the English translation, *Politics of Nature*.]

comes objectified or the object becomes subjectified. In contrast, it is 'correct', in other words modern, to position nature as a passive source of knowledge. In this pool of knowledge, ahistorical facts wait for their entrance onto the stage of objective science, for their 'discovery', so that they may belong to the unchanging collection of positive knowledge from then on.²⁵ Gravity waits for its appearance in Newtonian physics, bacteria wait for their discovery by Pasteur and Koch, the chemical elements, which have always existed, whether unrecognised or misrecognised, wait for their christening with Lavoisier's nomenclature. Exactly the opposite happens to subjects. Enlightened subjects, without any consideration for their own nature or the nature of things, form societies based on a contingent historicity, in order to turn history into a campaign of the progressive rationalisation of nature and a complex game of dynamically developing conflicting interests for social advantage. In doing so, argues Latour, modern man (who of course does not fit into such simple categories) completely misrecognises his relationship to the non-human, which as a dumb, passive other with no language is completely unrepresented in society. Furthermore, modern man also misrecognises older cultures, which he only perceives as exotic, as based on an epistemologically unsustainable mingling of nature and culture, of subject and object, and therefore believed had to be Europeanised. This modern man that we believe we are, has, according to Latour, never existed.

6.2 Who acts?

We will try to understand this using examples from two different areas: everyday life, where we assign all actions to human subjects, and scientific knowledge, where knowledge is understood as the revelation of facts that have always previously existed. First, let us take Latour's example of speed bumps (1999, 186–190), which are used to slow down traffic on roads. They are also known as "sleeping policemen". Norms (don't drive too fast; be considerate of residents) and the monitoring of norms (the police) are replaced by bumps in the road that silently regulate the traffic. Drivers do not need to have internalised the norm 'consideration for others', indeed they do not even have to agree with it in order to behave appropriately. Usually they are merely protecting their suspension by driving slowly, trying to avoid the uncomfortable bumps with which the

²⁵ This is not just a game with theatre metaphors. A star is discovered by being invented and produced. It is similar to facts. Scientific discoveries are always also produced by that which discovers them.

speed bumps make themselves known to the driver. Who is acting here? Latour would say: the ‘collective’ made up of car, driver and speed bumps. In this collective, decisions about traffic regulations, legal norms, technical designs by engineers and the construction of these designs, construction materials, the expected habits of car drivers (protecting their suspension), uncomfortable sensations, the car’s physical reactions depending on the height of the speed bump and the speed of the car all come together. An act is created through this assembly, which is not accurately described by ‘I reduce my speed’. It is neither ‘my’ speed, nor is it an ‘I’ that is slowing it down. Much rather, the whole conglomeration of politics, norms, technical measures, material aggregates, machines and ego come together for the action ‘slowing down’. Do ‘I’ even drive the car? Everyone knows that the more I ‘activate’ my ego and its thoughts, motivations and desires in the process of driving, the worse ‘it’ will drive. A good driver drives ‘automatically’, in other words, one who ‘knows’ the car and has formed a human/non-human unit with it. I drive the car, but the car also drives: some sort of separation and some sort of fusion are taking place alternately. It is not just ‘these two’ that are driving, but further actants are also along for the ride: the conditions of the road, the road signs, laws, the police, the courts, the computer-controlled flow of traffic, the police helicopter above me that passes on information to the central traffic control office, the GPS system directing me with its electronic voice, but also: my mood, which could be aggressive or calm, my distracted attention, because the meeting I am just coming from was stressful, my pride about my new car, which makes me feel strong and sophisticated, etc. The example could be dissected almost endlessly, to the point when the entire social system could be seen to be reflected in those simple speed bumps.

We could begin endless detailed analyses. If we did, we could begin to go through all of the many thousands of things and artefacts in our environment (see above, the example of the farmer and the plough) to see how entangled our relationship to them is. That leads into a labyrinth. No, instead we will discuss the theoretical approach. Latour is not arguing that things have consciousness and intentions when he suggests they are involved in the process of action; he does not say that they are subjects with language. He is merely destabilising our anthropocentric understanding of action, which we, because we can refer to ourselves as an ‘I’, categorically only ascribe to ourselves. Actions are complex associations – an important category for Latour – of many factors, which he calls actants, because they are woven into a process that we call action. But, must we call things actants? Is it not sufficient to call them factors, which is easier to accept? Or like Friedrich Heubach (1996) to speak of a life “conditioned by

things”?’ Of the fact that things also determine us, namely as the preconditions and media of our actions? “The things in my environment are my condition.” (Flusser 1993, 9)²⁶ Does that mean that things should automatically be viewed as equal players, actors, associates of the actions of subjects, which form collectives with them? Aren’t those only metaphors?

That would be the argument from the perspective of sociological theories of action. However, in those theories the decision that things must be precluded from the concept of action has already been made, otherwise one runs the risk of becoming irrational. Of course, one could use Jakob Böhme’s phrase and say that in ‘premodern’ societies with long traditions of the doctrine of signatures of things, all things have a ‘mouth to manifestation’:²⁷ so why not speed bumps as well? But to say that things ‘have a say’ in human speech and ‘play a part’ in our actions: well, that would be unenlightened, magical, mystical, thing-metaphysical or religious. To speak of speed bumps as actants would be sloppy discourse. Yet this strict monitoring of discourse means it misses certain things. These things are what it is all about. Latour is trying to make us aware of an unnoticed asymmetry in our concept of action.

For it is unbearable for an autonomous subject’s sense of self to accept that things are in fact part of a co-authorship of our actions. Because ultimately speed bumps, toasters and subway train carriages are not held responsible for anything, at most – in accidents – their engineer is. Of course. What constitutes ‘ultimate’ responsibility for actions from a philosophical, ethical or legal perspective is never in doubt – at best things might be invoked as exonerating ‘circumstances’ in investigations into actions. These circumstances, if they include technical faults, excuse the driver. However, it is then no longer an action attributable to someone, but an accident. In that case, it can be investigated whether some action-subject is not responsible after all: perhaps the company that builds the subway trains has supplied a faulty train. Then the impersonal accident be-

* The German verb for ‘conditioned’, *bedingen*, contains the noun ‘thing’, *Ding*.

26 He also speaks of things as the “condition of our existence” (Flusser 1993, 80).

27 “[F]or by the external form of all creatures, by their instigation, inclination and desire, also by their sound, voice and speech which they utter, the hidden spirit is known; for nature has given to everything its language according to its essence and form, for out of the essence the language or sound arises, and the fiat of that essence forms the quality of the essence in the voice or virtue which it sends forth to the animals in the sound, and to the essentials in smell, virtue and form. Everything has its mouth to manifestation; and this is the language of nature, whence everything speaks out of its property, and continually manifests, declares, and sets forth itself for what is good and profitable; for each thing manifests its mother, which thus gives the essence and the will to the form.” (Jakob Böhme 1622/1969, 12.) – Cf. Bonheim 1992; Blumenberg 1983.

comes an action again, which someone is responsible for. But if this is not the case and the subway train still went off the rails, no one will make the carriage responsible: something not caused by a human is simply not an action.

From this we can conclude that modernity has a number of rational processes for differentiating between ‘actions’ and ‘events’, ‘causes’ and ‘silent thing-conditions’. Precisely this confirms Latour’s discovery that in modernity actions in the strict sense are understood as human and human only. Actions must be strictly subjective; things are excluded from them. The subject-object relation must therefore remain an opposition. Latour would not even deny that for borderline cases like the subway train accident. For in a case like that it is about processes for determining a *formal*, namely transcendental responsibility, which is the basis of any legal responsibility for an action (criminal or not). But it is different with the overwhelming number of acts executed where that is not an issue at all, but which depend on the complex interferences of material and symbolic, human and non-human factors in the formation of ‘actions’. In these situations, humans and things mingle in both chaotic and ordered swarms. However, there has almost never been a clean distinction between subject and object.

What should we make of the fact that, for example, the subway-train driver feels a sense of responsibility even though he is legally exonerated in every way? He has had a shock, he is given some time off, but the accident stays burned into his mind; even though he has been acquitted, he feels somehow guilty. It could be like this: it was ‘his’ subway train, in other words, he and the train formed an experienced unit, in which the machine, his body and his competence were ‘inseparable’, somehow fused, a combination of man and machine. This needs to be examined closer.

Anyone who steers a vehicle ‘is’ also present in the wheels. There is a bit of the self in the wheels and vice versa, a bit of the wheels in the self. Is that crazy? It is easier to grasp with the example of a bike or car: you feel the way the tyres ‘behave’ on the surface of the road. The brain might register this, but phenomenologically, it feels it at the point where the tyres and the road meet. When I see a tree, I do not see it in my brain, but in terms of perception I am ‘with the tree’ (as Merleau-Ponty has shown very clearly: 1968, 7 ff.).²⁸ Perception in-

28 “The world is what I perceive, but as soon as we examine and express its absolute proximity, it also becomes, inexplicably, irremediable distance. The ‘natural’ man holds on to both ends of the chain, thinks *at the same time* that his perception enters into the things and that it is formed this side of [sic. beyond] his body.” (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 8) – “Consciousness is *being toward the thing* through intermediary of the body” (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 140; emphasis H.B.). Consciousness and perception are truly anticipatory.

volves the perceiver and the perceived coming together in the unity of the act of perception here and now. It is not important here to separate subject and object (we do that anyway), but to pay attention phenomenologically to experiencing oneself 'there', wherever what is perceived is (while at the same time knowing one is 'here'). The extension of the ego onto its objects is even stronger in carrying out actions than it is in perceptions. The person riding a bike feeling a light vibration in their tyres is completely present with this vibration, at its location. That is what it means to 'incorporate' actions. We are also an ego in things, in and with them, and we act through them. The ego can be extended onto things. The more seamlessly this occurs, the more smoothly the action is executed. We know this from sports that involve equipment. In order to deliver the best possible performance, the competitive gymnast merges with the high bar and the elastic pole in an extremely precise manner (but only the gymnast gets points for doing so). The javelin thrower must become one with the javelin in order to get a perfect run-up to the throw and pick the best moment to release the javelin (and not catch the best moment by chance). And as the released javelin flies through the air, both the physics of the object and the thrower are fused within it; the person who throws it is also 'part' of its flight, even though he remains on the ground. The aim of the rituals of concentration that can be observed in professional athletes is precisely this 'assembling' of the self and the thing into one unit.²⁹ Latour calls this assembly the collective.

This helps explain why the subway-train driver continues to feel guilty even though he has been officially and legally absolved. He is and remains (for some time) part of the thing-man ensemble; there is a part of him in the machine and a part of the machine in him. At least he might experience it that way. This being unseparated and yet not united as one is what characterises the 'associations' between humans and things in everyday life. That is why formal responsibility (which is absolutely necessary for borderline cases) is less important than the phenomenology of interferences, mixings and mergings between the human and the non-human in actions. These are strange hybrids, but ones which do not suddenly invade everyday life like some ancient monster, but in fact are a feature of everyday life itself. Knowing this, one becomes more tolerant of constant anthropomorphisms – despite our embracing of Enlightenment principles – which are ultimately only the reverse of equally constant reifications. In terms

²⁹ Ancient magic is at work in the rituals of javelin throwers. In 1940, albeit on the basis of an inappropriate, Eurocentric symbol and projection theory, Evans-Pritchard describes Nuer warriors as follows: "A man's fighting spear (*mut*) is constantly in his hand, forming almost a part of him. [...] In a sense it is animate, for it is an extension and external symbol. [...] It is a projection of the self" (cited in Csikszentmihalyi 1993, 23–24).

of action, one might describe this as the circulating positionality of humans and things. That is the phenomenological background for what Latour calls the collective or the association of the human and the non-human.

This relationship appears symmetrical when one does not just view it from the perspective of the ego embedded in the thing in the process of an action. Things have the capacity for a kind of articulation too, making themselves noticeable and present for the ego, and therefore playing a role in controlling the action. This happens directly when, for example, the bend in the glass-fibre pole in pole vaulting can be felt in such a way that a pole vaulter can anticipate a failed attempt and abandon it in the middle of the jump, by letting themselves fall onto the mat beneath the crossbar. Nothing is seen or calculated here, instead the bend in the pole communicates to the athlete via kinaesthetic experience without any translation: “This will not be successful”. The kinaesthesia functions as a resonance of the bend in the pole and this makes itself present to the pole vaulter through his sensitivity to movement. This interaction or “involvement” (as Husserl calls it) between anthropomorphisation of the thing and reification of the subject is the very thing that makes actions successful.

If one insisted on a theory of action that depended on a strict distinction between subject and object, then we would have to label the perfect pole vaulter the worst kind of ‘premodern’, an exotic fetishist. Our judgement would be even more severe if we also considered the peculiar relationship the pole vaulter has to his equipment: it is close to magic. Latour’s basic question is this: do we want to exclude the pole vaulter from the community of enlightened subjects or would we not be better off including the glass-fibre pole in the collective of action? As most of our everyday actions are hybrids of the human and the non-human, the answer proves to be rather *perplexing*. The more radically we insist on the separation between human and thing, the more people would be excluded from our society of what we call legally adult humans; the more we are prepared to accept things into the collective, the less right we would have to dismiss the human-thing hybrid as fetishism. Instead, we would be more prepared to accept a liberal form, in which we would concede things their own space of articulation within human discourse. Things would become political. Latour – and in this sense I agree with him – sees this as an increase in democracy. “People are no longer *by themselves*.” This also means: Odradek is among us, we simply have not understood it yet. It is somehow uncanny.

Another reason to admit things, especially artefacts, into theories of action is as follows: artefacts are incorporated patterns of action.³⁰ They contain – from a

³⁰ Latour 1996 provides some lovely examples of this, see especially 15–84.

simple device like a hammer to a steelworks – scripts of how to operate them, which are specific to them. Someone fiddling around with a hammer is not performing an action; only someone who adapts to the corresponding “readiness-to-use” (Heidegger) of the hammer can perform the task ‘hammering’. The human and the hammer come to an agreement through hammering. A strange, but accurate statement. With devices or machinery, it is not recommendable to keep “at a distance the preconceptions and the assault [...] to allow [...] the thing in its thing-being, to rest in itself”, as Heidegger recommends for things in order to realise their thingliness (Heidegger 1978, 161). Leaving the hammer to itself would simply miss the point; it wants to be used and used in the right way. “It wants”, or in other words, that is its prescript. It would be absurd to split hairs over its interpretation in the name of autonomy: after all, it was a human who invented it. Would it not be better to say that it is the stone-age person who invented the hammer thousands of years ago who is performing the action as I hammer? Did someone invent it? Perhaps the ‘invention’ of this device and its use instead developed over thousands of years, until finally it was made permanent as ‘technology’? Nevertheless, let us assume that it is the hammer’s inventor who is performing the action of my hammering. But this only makes the argument that actions carried out by an ego consist of assemblies slightly more complicated. The thingliness of the hammer, as “equipment”, is realised by my using it. In the moment my hand and its movement come together with the hammer to strike something, the hammer is realised as such (regardless of the purpose of the hammering, which is external to the hammer). It is important to note that the action ‘striking’ (e. g. with a fist or with a tennis racket) is not the same as ‘striking with a hammer’. Striking something with a fist can be a straight line; striking something with a hammer in a straight line would not be successful. One’s own actions must *fit into* the “readiness-to-use” of the hammer, which means that in successful hammering, the ‘readiness-to-use’ of the thing and one’s own movement fit together properly, they are ‘assembled’ or merged as one. This is the collective.

A steelworks on the other hand contains a whole regime of scripts, in which the cooperation of materials, aggregates and humans are previously defined. They ‘interlink’. It would not make sense to subtract the material and machine operations from the human operations (this separation is however necessary for the calculation of the value of labour). The action ‘manufacturing something in the factory’ has absolutely no human subject, but is characterised instead by a Latourian collective we call ‘factory work’. Factory work is truly a hybrid of the human and non-human, without being a monster or a subject, but yet it is an action. From the Marxist perspective, the thingly aspect is also so powerful here that – as theory argues – the human subject becomes alienated from its

true nature, in other words, becomes reified; that is why factory work is so monstrous for Marx.³¹ Are things acting for themselves here, like they do in fairytales? And have they activated the humans in them like parts of a machine? And yet work is still carried out? In other words, a specific human action (other entities do not carry out work)? The definition of terms becomes problematic here, which perhaps become even more amazing when we say, following Latour: a factory is a complex collective of prescriptive elements of control, energy, raw materials, tools, machines, buildings, institutional and legal preconditions, and humans, for the controlled organisation of long series of actions, the objective of which is the production of goods. To come to the same conclusion as Latour, one need only now admit that all of these elements have a silent or manifest right to ‘representation’ in the ‘assembly’. According to this conclusion, the politics of the factory now include not only the already long-strained relations between employers and trade unions “by themselves”, but also the political representation of lifeless, but labouring things. Things are the delegates of the collective. This might perplex some human delegates. However, being perplexed is an important virtue for Latour.

6.3 Articulated things

I now wish to assess whether similar complexities exist in the field that supposedly defines the very core of modernity, namely the natural sciences, and whether these complexities might motivate us to revise our accepted notion of modernity.

First of all, we should remind ourselves that understanding scientific knowledge as the uncovering of a reality per se or as statements about ontologically fixed entities is a misinterpretation. Most science historians and constructivists agree on this. Knowledge consists of relatively reliable conclusions drawn from experimental practices, complicated arrangements of apparatus and abstract, mostly mathematically modelled forms of presentation or representation,

³¹ Chapter 3.4 will deal with this in more detail. For now it is sufficient to note that all of Marxist theory is based on the traditional opposition between subject and object: the substance and essence of man works itself out of itself and is manifested in the product – that would be the victory of the subject over the object, which is only the external form of the subject. Or the essence of man is swallowed up by the dumb substance of inanimate things – that would be the victory of the object over the subject, which is nothing but the living form of dead matter. This is a typically modern way of thinking, which regards the subject and object as a relation of opposing forces.

which in a way often actually produce the very thing they identify. In scientific knowledge, anything considered a phenomenon (as the *explicandum*) is specifically articulated. Experiments and representations (diagrams, images, calculations, collections, texts, etc.) are the forms in which the things investigated are provided access to a dimension where they can be articulated for human beings. Experiments are 'done', but in long series are adjusted and set up in such a way that things gain a form of public communicability in them. One can therefore understand these technical and symbolic procedures in two ways: they are experimental methods through which people gain access to an alien, non-human world; yet at the same time, conversely, these methods are translations through which these foreign things achieve a kind of eloquence in the human world, or to put it more generally, make their entrance (performance).

On first glance, this seems a bit strange and could be suspected of anthropomorphising things, or in epistemological terms, a naïve epistemological realism. If we want to avoid both, we must question precisely what it means when we say things come 'to speak' or 'to perform'. Do they really 'come'? What is certain is that we want something from and with things; things want nothing to do with us. This thingly ontological indifference towards humans does not mean, however, that they do not react. They demonstrate unique resistances, which force us to engage in constantly new tests, revisions and representations. In this sense, experiments are events in which, in a controlled manner, human interventions and interests intersect with the speechless resonance of things and find historical equilibriums. We call this scientific knowledge. It is objective in the sense that it has been made to agree with things, insofar as they are translated and articulated in our representations. By 'agreement', I do not mean *homologia* or *adaequatio* between thing and knowledge in advance, rather I mean that in long processes, from the very first hypotheses and failed experiments to the finite order of experiment and conclusion, a finely tuned association of phenomena (*explicandum*), apparatus, observations, notes, calculations, discourses and researchers has developed in the increasingly transparent environment of the laboratory, which together represent the collective that we rather reductively call scientific knowledge. In it, the result, the complex process of creating it is made to disappear. Science studies scholars are interested in exactly this, the "art" of the experiment³² and the "fabrication of knowledge"³³.

³² On the links between experiment and art, cf. Daston 2004; Schramm 2003; Schramm 2005; Jones/Galison 1998; Baigrie 1996.

³³ Cf. the classic study by Knorr-Cetina 1981.

Science as fabrication means that we must examine the whole ensemble (so all the elements working together) of non-human phenomena, tools, machines, architectures and human activities, concepts, imaginations, disciplines, attitudes, discourses as well as of institutions and societies. They are all part of the episteme. Making an analogy between experiment and art means revealing the unique ability that art has, identified by Heidegger in his essay, in the sphere of science. Art is the specific *human* ability to help things (whatever they may be) to make an appearance. They become manifest. Hubert Fichte once said in reference to Jean Genet that his ideal art would be to work on a stone so long that it would be completely a stone – “in words” (Fichte 1988, 15, 20 and 335; cf. Allerkamp 1991). This is as trivial as it is abstract. Trivial in the sense that any stone you pick up is completely a stone. Abstract because he is no longer talking about a stone, but a work of art, in which the stoneness is highlighted to a certain extent: “in words”. This is quite close to Heidegger: for him, art is the work that lets a thing simply be a thing. But for our purposes, that is too close to an ontology in which art is given the privileged ability to reveal being itself. There is no need to go that far, especially not when we are dealing with the question of the experiment.

First of all, it should be noted that the form in which things are represented in experiments should be connected to the form of things’ existence. Without this prerequisite, we need not bother with science or technology at all. It is not an empty requirement. Tens of thousands of years of technology and two and half thousand years of science, despite all of its wrong turns and tangents, prove this. We will not examine this much further here. I simply want to introduce the idea that experiments can be understood in analogy to works of art (but precisely not as Heidegger understood them: as oppositions). Experiments can also be torture; one extremity is confronted with another. They can also be beautiful or sublime, and be as complexly composed of heterogeneous elements as Dante’s *Divine Comedy* or Hölderlin’s poetry. Experiments are, in the best scenario, the very form in which phenomena and humans form a composition, an assembly that produces knowledge. But let us tone this pathos down to prose now.

Let us recall Bruno Latour’s question about where bacteria were before Pasteur existed and whether there were bacteria at all before bacteriology (1999, 145–173). When he answers this question with a ‘no’, he does not declare bacteria to be constructions without any reality, but rather argues that they have also not always been the scientifically proven version of themselves that bacteriology conceives them to be. The opposite is the case: whatever counts as an objective fact in bacteriology must be kept stable by various different disciplines and the constant work of research teams. However, this is not the only way that scientific

knowledge maintains its validity, things ‘play a part’ too. Neither are things a passive substance, a *hypokeimenon* merely waiting concealed beneath something else, which at some point is discovered to be exactly the thing that it is ‘of its own accord’; the reverse is also true: the thing (the phenomenon of knowledge) is not a mere construction with all of its referents solely in the closed chamber of the brain, cut off from everything ‘outside’ by an ontological chasm. If this were the case, none of the natural sciences and no technology would function – and the Thracian girl would have a good laugh. Scientific knowledge can be proven and if it cannot be proven, it is altered until it can be proven. Or it is abandoned (the history of science is a vast landscape of abandoned terrain and ruins, which were once bathed in the glory of the episteme).

In this sense, we require epistemological criticism that does not destroy the objectivity of the sciences, but instead works out the processes and experimental practices through which something can be established as objective in the first place. A good example of this, as Peter Janich has shown (2001, 70–89), is that genetic models are not *models of something*, in which the *explicans* is a perfect image of the *explicandum*, rather they are *models for something*, and thus procedural, experimental scripts of the construction, production or manipulation of artificial, epistemic things (Hans Jörg Rheinberger³⁴). One can identify three ways in which cultural factors and artefacts play a part in determining epistemological processes of forming knowledge: firstly, the level of styles of thinking, which provide the central metaphors and – in Heidegger’s sense (1938/2002) – the images of the world that determine what kinds of theory and theoretical methodologies are used in the sciences in the first place and what is considered a valid scientific fact (the mentalist approach).³⁵ Secondly, the procedures related to the apparatus and things used in the laboratories define the possibilities for new findings and therefore knowledge (the analysis of experiments). Thirdly, knowledge forms within the context of the social and communicative rules in scientific communities, competition between them for economic sustenance and recognition in society (the social constructivist approach).³⁶ That is sufficient for the first stage of the following discussion.

34 On this cf. the outstanding study by Rheinberger (1997), in which he links empirical analysis of specific experiment processes in microbiology with theoretical concepts. – In science history, this approach is demonstrated by Rheinberger/Hagner 1993.

35 An approach typical to this method of investigation and contemporaneous to Heidegger is that of Fleck 1979.

36 Examples of this method of investigation are e.g. Weingart et al 1988; *ibid.* 2000. – Beyond genetics: Elkana 1986; Knorr-Cetina 1999. – For historical studies of the social background of the development of science cf. also Zilsel, as early as 1944/2000; Böhme, G. et al 1974.

Not only Bruno Latour, but also Peter Galison (1989 and 1994) and Hans Jörg Rheinberger, for microphysics and microbiology respectively, have shown to what a surprising extent the thingly ensembles of laboratories and the operational fields of possibility technically embedded in them – in other words, the systems of experiment – not only determine the hypotheses, aims, objects and results of research, but also how they open up performative spaces for the unpredictable, the unplanned, even the coincidental and ludic. It is only through this complex that experimental systems provide the opportunity for the creation of epistemic things and new scientific knowledge. Of course, there are many epistemological parallels to approaches in empirical cultural studies or materialist ethnology in this. In science studies, researchers already speak of a typical ‘culture’, which is characterised by patterns of *reproduction* – these are the instances that maintain the stability of research processes – and by *differential events* – these are the instances in which new knowledge is created by and as a result of unexpected events. Within laboratories, specific and locally differentiated material environments are also created that maintain a peculiar balance of stability and openness. Researching these thingly environments more thoroughly – in addition to mentalist and metaphorological approaches, which decipher the formation of scientific knowledge by investigating styles of thinking – would allow us to identify forms of an artificial, material culture in the technical ensemble of, for example, a test drive (Ronell 1995).

More familiar are social constructivist approaches (the sociology of science), even if they have not yet fully arrived in the natural sciences. This approach analyses the epistemic process and the objectivity of knowledge in two different directions: firstly, scientific procedures are not only embedded, but also constituted by the social mechanisms of the scientific community. This is not some ideal community of ideal knowledge subjects immune to locality and history, but a social subsystem. As such, science is defined by local and universal rules of communication, competition, cooperation, negotiation, the determination of objectives, corporate identity, a typical habitus, symbolic and material power, even quasi-tribal rites, by fetishism, by obsession and interpretative magic, rhetoric and representations. Secondly, scientific knowledge processes are also determined and made possible by external factors like politics, the economy, industry and society. This is not a trivial observation, because this not only influences science’s economic survival, but also the dynamics and direction of its development.

All three levels have an effect in experiments. When these are successful, in other words if they create something new, they are quite astounding. They end, albeit on a more highly differentiated and reflexive level, in the same place they started: wonder. Lorraine Daston has shown this in numerous studies (1998;

2001; 2002). Wonder, curiosity, attentiveness, sustained attention to one thing, urgency and intensity, reverence and also obsession are all aesthetic feelings. The sciences thus generate their own emotional objectivity within their own field.³⁷ This formula shows that within this field, the existence of things beyond human experience, whatever that might be, can be articulated through the media of human representation and understanding. Indeed, it means that these media, namely all the procedures and apparatus required for an experiment, have been invented for no other purpose than that of allowing things to articulate themselves in such a way that we can grasp them. Things cannot speak, but they can show themselves. This showing of themselves is not addressed to humans. The show is not for us. Bridging this primal alienness, enabling an exchange and an intercourse between humans and things, is what it means to experiment. In a metaphorical (but not *only* metaphorical) sense, one could say that experiments are the form through which we allow speechless things to speak.

6.4 Fetish – factum – factish

Bruno Latour's recent books are partly written like manifestos. Messages and repetitions of the messages, again and again in different versions, are characteristic of this genre. What was stated briefly in 1991 in *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes* was later expanded into the hefty tome of *Politiques de la nature* from 1999. Latour fervently demands a new politics that is neither conservative nor socialist, neither green-ecologist nor syndicalist, neither actionist nor institutionalist, but fundamental. All of the conventional forms of politics are taken apart, insofar as they belong to a false modernity with its strict disjunctions between society and nature, between norms and facts. In the new political ecology "neither nature nor humans, but *well-articulated actors*, associations of humans and nonhuman, well-formed propositions" should make decisions (Latour 2004, 86).³⁸ He speaks of a pluriverse made up of all the entities that are to be given a voice, of an "experimental metaphysics" and a "new separation of powers" be-

³⁷ Scientists would like objectivity to be devoid of feelings, to be cool, apathetic, mechanical, automatic. Only a science that excludes people can truly be pure objectivity. But this is an illusion. Cf. Daston 2001a; Daston/Galison 1992, 81–128. The fact that objectivity is precisely not devoid of feelings makes it and therefore science one of the great adventures and creations of humanity.

³⁸ "Propositions" does not mean, as it does conventionally, statements uttered by human speakers that can be verified to be true or false, but rather suggestions that can be generated by "circulating speakers" (all possible entities) in the "collective".

tween nature and culture (neither side is hostage to the other any longer), of a republic of public things, of the end of the science war, etc. Latour becomes one of the Brethren of Purity, to whom we have already been introduced. We do not need to follow him there.

However, that does not change anything about the evidence of the findings provided by Latour in his actor-network theory and in his history of science analyses, which show that complex networks can only function on the basis of the agency of non-human entities.³⁹ It is not only possible, but necessary, to include speechless objects as agents in social systems – similar to the way that we allowed them a form of representation (and not just symbolic, mental representation) in our everyday consciousness in the previous section. This is indeed a systemic weakness of theories of modernity, to which things are always deadlier than dead.

What interests us in the context of this study, however, is that at the end of his book about *Pandora's Hope* – a search for a bridge across the chasm between subject and object – Latour discusses fetishes and idols. This is only surprising on first glance. The rift between subject and object is the basis for modernity's science war, which forces everyone to decide to be either on the side of the subject (then all knowledge is 'fabricated', constructivism) or on the side of the object (then everything is by nature a fact, realism); or to be on both sides simultaneously. For Latour, the solution for this 'modern' double-bind is "at the point of the break itself" (1999, 267), which means being neither on one side nor the other, but removing the obligation to choose.

What is the significance of this obligation to choose? According to Latour, modern man belongs to "the lengthy genealogy of idol-smashers who have made us modern" (*ibid.*, 268). Modernity is a permanent war against images, in which everything that does not comply with the rationality of facts is denounced as a fetish and must be destroyed. Facts and fetishes are complementary and belong together. Fetishes are things that unenlightened believers ascribe life, power, activity to, features which 'in truth' do not belong to them, but are merely projected onto them in a process of projective identification. According to this view, fetishism is a belief that annihilates the freedom of the subject and makes it a slave to things. To use Bourdieu's terms (1998, 95), fetishism is based on a *self-deception* and a *collective misrecognition*, which falsely recognises what is rooted in the subject's mental structures and activities in things

³⁹ Cf. the comprehensive and, for the new approach in science (and case) studies, seminal book: Latour 1984. Using the example of Pasteur and the development of bacteriology, Latour first introduces his actor-network theory here. A more recent publication is: Latour 2005. Cf. also Latour/Woolgar 1979.

themselves, as their own doing. This structure must be stopped and consequently fetishes and idols must be destroyed. The animatedness of things annihilates the subject; the destruction of fetishes allows the subject's freedom to unfold resplendently. The subject constructs its power to act on a foundation of destroyed fetishes, which, now that they are dead, have been transformed back into speechless things that can once again become 'facts' in the subject's regime of rationality.

This has been the standard attitude ever since fetishes entered European discourse. But Latour gives this a unique twist. It is not those who believe in fetishes that are the victims of self-deception – for the believer knows perfectly well that fetishes are 'fabricated' – but the anti-fetishists. The person obsessed with others' belief in fetishes is the one who feels compelled by rage to destroy them. But in fact it is their destruction that makes idols and fetishes such a threatening force with magical powers. A belief is concealed in the rage of destruction that by far surpasses the belief of the 'primitives', who form a cooperative collective with fetishes. Modern anti-fetishism fails to see that the purified facts it replaces fetishes with are in fact fetishes it has produced itself (Latour 1999, 271 ff.). By accusing the fetishist of believing in the power of things as factum, although these are supposedly only projections, the anti-fetishist deceives himself about himself. He believes that what *he* has produced is a natural fact. In one case the fetish is interpreted as a fact and in the other the fact becomes a fetish. That the fetish has a power of its own making is denied, because 'in reality' this power is fabricated; at the same time, it is denied that the fact is a fetish, because it is real. Fetishes are destroyed on the one hand, but on the other, this destruction produces facts. With his neologism *factish* [*faitiche*], a combination of the words fact and fetish (1999, 274–280), Latour does not just want to dialectically resolve these oppositions and paradoxical transpositions between fact and fetish, which are the basis of the modern campaign against fetishes and idols and with them the perennial iconoclasm,⁴⁰ but definitively put an end to them. This is an attractive promise.

Fetish and factum can be traced back to the same root: *factitius* – the artificial or made (as opposed to *terrigenus*, that which originates in the earth).⁴¹ We

⁴⁰ Cf. Latour 2001 [published in English in the following book]. – This text provides the background for the exhibition at the ZKM Karlsruhe in 2002 (see Latour/Weibel 2002). The exhibition investigated the image wars in religion and science – from the perspective that a culture without the disastrous antagonism between subject and object, abstraction and sensual concretion, rationality and fetishism, might be possible, which is the hope of Latour's Pandora.

⁴¹ From the root *facere*, to make or do. Also contained in: facsimile (*fac simile*), factitive ('effective' from *factitare*), factor, factory, factotum, manufacture, satisfaction, infection, infect,

have already seen that this corresponds to the Greek opposition between *physis* and *techné*. Both therefore, the fetish and the fact, qualify as technical. And this is what Latour wishes to reappropriate with his term factish: what is common to both. With regard to scientific modernity, Latour argues that its anti-fetishism has hidden the fact that the population of thingly hybrids involved in our actions and discourses has not only been secretly rapidly increasing, but that by now they vastly outnumber humans. The fact that all these hybrids are ‘fabricated’ does not lessen their independent potency in the world of human beings in any way. Indeed, one can only grasp the latter if one analyses the networks of distribution and interdependencies between hybrids and human subjects. However, this corresponds structurally to premodern fetishistic cultures, which give things an active role in their negotiations without any question. Although this is hidden, it takes place in the laboratories, politics and everyday life of modernity too, in fact even more so than in ‘primitive’ cultures, as actor-network theory reveals, although reason’s officious awareness does not seem to notice. Latour calls this double matrix of the destruction of premodern cultures and pre-Enlightenment consciousness on the one hand, and the simultaneous creation of countless networks of non-human and human elements connected to each other in clusters of action on the other, “creative destruction” (1999, 279). Modern man is only modern as long as the dismantling of fetish goes hand in hand with the triumphant creation of a world of facts; as long as the obliteration of the world of belief goes hand in hand with the construction of a rational universe; as long as the destruction of supposedly heteronomous nature is tantamount to the creation of a supposedly autonomous society. Because no one has identified this double matrix, it continues, fetishised and falsely seen as modernity, towards the self-destruction of anti-fetishistic modernity. The exorcism spreads the very phenomena it is supposed to fight. Modern man philosophises with a hammer, but keeps hitting his own thumb.⁴² The “reality” that Latour wishes to represent, however, is that of the factishes. It is the “world” of diversified hybrids, of articulated things, of constructed objects, which are real and have a real effect precisely for that reason, the world of networked, interdependent factish-

the German *Fazit* [conclusion], effect, perfect, prefect, defect, the German *Fasson* [form], fashion, identification, the German *Signifikat* [signified] and many more.

⁴² By using the hammer metaphor throughout, Latour creates a link to Friedrich Nietzsche: *Twilight of the Idols, or How to Philosophise with a Hammer*, [German edition:] KSA 6, 55–161. – However, in Latour’s opinion, modern theorists use their anti-fetishistic resentment like a hammer to destroy everything that is not considered very modern. In Nietzsche, the hammer is intended to destroy the idols of the (Christian) religions and the “idols of the age” of modernity.

es, in their exchange with the human world, but also in their unpredictable eventfulness and surprise. The pluriverse as utopia.

7 Lifeworld and material culture

7.1 “That the things have us, and that it is not we who have the things”

Many studies on material culture, on design, on collecting and museum culture, on our relationship to technical artefacts, on everyday culture and on the history of things, but also on material art, show that scholarship has in fact been prepared to analyse the quasi-aliveness of things and their agency for some time now. The following will examine some aspects of this discussion.

Mihaly Csikszentmihaly, for example, calls attention to the anthropocentric illusion that keeps us happy in the belief that we control things and our mental and psychic processes. This illusion causes us to overlook the fact that the reproduction of our species and of our thoughts and feelings – in light of the exponential growth of artefacts and our reliance on natural resources – is increasingly dependent on the thingly environment. Csikszentmihaly describes artefacts as a new species that is developing and reproducing according to its own logic, separate from biological evolution. The assumption of our idealistically viewed autonomy is a self-delusion and cannot even be countered with the argument that all artefacts owe their existence to the intentional acts and creative invention of human beings. For these achievements are in fact based on the historical foundation of artefacts themselves. Their development – from the axe to the hairdryer and the rocket – can be described as a technical evolution that excludes humans. Of course, things themselves do not write this history: we do, as historians. What is crucial, however, is whether we take the interaction and interdependence between both sides into account in this historiography. Because things order and stabilise the mind in both a direct and mediating manner, the history of things is a constituent part of what tends to be all too frivolously labelled mankind's history of the creation of the self in idealist cultural history. Just as we reify ourselves in things, so too are things embodied in us (Csikszentmihaly 1993).⁴³ Things are our slaves, but we are also slaves to things.

⁴³ Unfortunately, this book is not very useful in terms of theory, including the introductory essay “The Truth of Material Culture” by Jules David Prown (*ibid.*, 1–19). – Cf. Fuhrer/Josephs 1999; Siuts 1995; McCullum 1999; Spyer 1998.

One can argue, as Csikszentmihaly does, that the fetishistic mechanism was structurally entrenched in the human-thing relationship long before it took on the specific forms of commodity fetishism or sexual perversion. What is seen as scandalous about the fetish since the Enlightenment, namely that a thing can have its own autonomous effect on the structure of the ego, is the norm in an anthropology of things. A mind abandoned by all things would be trapped in the dungeon of its own hallucinations⁴⁴ and nowadays its owner would be quickly rushed off to a psychiatric hospital (in older societies the person might be lucky and be made a saint). If one views the human as a species that has, perhaps not from the beginning but at least throughout the history of culture, developed some sort of sense of self and a personal identity, one must also concede that both of these are always rather precarious and unstable. The extent to which things are not just helpful, but essential to the process of consolidating and stabilising human life, identity and the self has been grossly underestimated. Without things external to us, our self would disintegrate; it would have no borders and therefore would be null and void. Even if one posits a transcendental unity of the consciousness, what else would this be, other than a void, if it were not engaged in the vital and active synthesis of things that must be real and exist for it? The unconditional* freedom of mind would not only be empty, it would not exist (cf. Heubach 1996, 24–52).

If things are the “condition, instrument or aim of our actions” (Boesch 1983, 15),⁴⁵ then they are not merely coincidental material for the action that we subjectively ascribe to ourselves, but necessary and constitutive. Of course, as Jean Piaget in particular has shown, in the course of our socialisation during childhood we form generalised “schemata” of actions and objects. In the process, and also in language learning, we develop a contoured “image” or “scheme” of the ego that we are (Piaget 2001, 131–170).⁴⁶ The sensori-motor schemata,

⁴⁴ On hallucinations, cf. Merleau-Ponty 2012, 349–360.

* *Unbedingte*: literally, not populated with things.

⁴⁵ In the following, I am referring to Boesch 1983, 11–65.

⁴⁶ Piaget develops a model of the stages of the differentiation of sensori-motor intelligence, which results in the differentiation of the world of things at the same time. The stages are as follows: 1. The symbolic and pre-conceptual thought stage. 2. Intuitive thought stage 3. Concrete operations 4. Formal operations. Cf. Kesselring 1999, 82–84. – For a more phenomenological approach to pedagogy, cf. Langeveld 1968. – The structure of things’ appeal to us, insofar as they contain implicit scripts for action, has been used in pedagogy since Rousseau and up until the idea of “child-rearing as practical constraint” [*Sachzwang*, literally the constraints caused by things or facts], for example in Montessori school teaching (Meyer-Drawe 1999, 331f.). On the theory of education in this regard: Mollenhauer 1998; his classification of things as symbols, tools or perceptual content is, however, not very convincing.

once acquired, then come 'before' actions, which can now have intention, and objects, though not in the sense of an ahistorical transcendentalism (Kantian schematism), but rather as learned structures, which can only be modified again on the basis of new experiences or cultural contexts. In the primary development of thing, action and object schemata, Piaget identifies an evolutionary development from perceptive and sensori-motor schemata to concrete operational and formal schemata or strategies, which must always form a realised "sequence of integration" (Boesch) in order for actions involving things to be successful (cf. Kesselring 1999, 100–149). However, these schemata modify themselves in further biographic and cultural-historical stages; and they always require what Gaston Bachelard (1947–1948) aptly describes as a "univers du contre".⁴⁷ Even young children experience – in play – the material resistance of reality and testing this enables the distinction between inside and outside, ego and things, but also the recognition of their relative permanence and constancy in the first place. Strategies for action, which we later view as our anticipatory intentions, can only form when through throwing, pushing, shoving, grabbing, shaking, hitting, stroking, etc. types of objects crystallise out of the 'uniform goo' of the "univers du contre", or as Lorraine Daston says, from the "porridgy oneness". It is only from this playing around with the diffuse swirling mass of things, which communicate themselves to the playing child as distinguishable differences, that types of action can even develop into intentional strategies and be interiorised as such (Piaget 2001, 166–169; Boesch 1983, 25 ff.). The "object's own dynamic", the "adverse world" (Boesch) is indeed the condition for overcoming the primary narcissistic fusion of self and world, and for the differentiation of a praxeological field, in which the specificity of things and strategies of action can be linked with each other, either productively or unsuccessfully. What is of central importance here is avoiding a kind of secondary narcissism, which in terms of the theory of action means that the ego overestimates its contribution to the formation of actions, but at the same time underestimates the associated role that things play (the subjective turn, which also influenced Piaget and Bachelard). In such cases, the early triumphant feeling of experiencing oneself as an independent, powerful (autonomous) centre of operations is echoed on a theoretical level. In contrast, *material cultural studies* is nothing less than the attempt to focus attention on the alliances between subjects and things, and further, the ability to control actions inherent to things, especially artefacts, the dependence of the ego (also its desires, fantasies, intentions and ideas) on things and ultimately, the reification of the

⁴⁷ Cited in Boesch 1983, 25.

subject, and to include these in the history of the interdependent relations between people and their things.

The ethnologists' and folklorists' view, based on our everyday, close-knit togetherness with things, strangely fits very well with Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological theory, when he speaks of "naïve certitude of the world" and the "evidence of the world" as the clearest of all truths (1968, 54, 4 f.). The self – in terms of transcendental, Cartesian philosophy – "to which one returns is preceded by an alienated Self or a Self in ec-stasy in Being" (ibid., 51). To be ecstatic means to be with and in things. The self is not prior to things; things are prior to the self and enable it to exist. The cogito and its acts are only the region of being "least distant" (ibid., 60). Merleau-Ponty thus radically opposes the previous construction of the self as *res cogitans*. On the contrary, gaining access to things means first of all discovering oneself as "the 'nothing', the 'void', which has the capacity for receiving the plenitude of the world, or rather which needs it to bear its own emptiness." If one wants to discover what things are, one must empty them of all ideas, images, suppositions and notions that one has constructed from the self, in order to "purify my notion of the subjectivity completely": "the consciousness is without 'inhabitant'" (ibid., 52). There is no fortress in the self from which we dare to set out into the world in order to possibly conquer it. That would be a misconception, according to which the thing is 'out there', infinitely strange, and conversely, our perception is completely external to things; according to which the thing is a thing precisely because it is "in the night of identity, as pure in-itself" (ibid., 51 f.).

However, this completely contradicts the pre-reflexive, i.e. everyday, lifeworld evidence of the ego's openness towards things and vice versa: the responsive openness of things, which present themselves to being perceived. To be a thing, an object for us means that "it spreads itself out before us by its own efficacy and does so precisely because it is gathered up in itself" (ibid., 161).⁴⁸ "The thing, the pebble, the shell [...] do not have the power to exist in face of and against everything; they are only mild forces that develop their implications on condition that favourable circumstances are assembled." The thing – in all its fragility, which is also threatened by us – therefore becomes an "established position of its own" and "the thing with itself", which we allow it (ibid.). However, if we place *ourselves* as *res cogitans* (pure interiority) in opposition to the *thing* as mere *res extensa* (pure exteriority), the thing reverts to an opaque *in-itself*, robbed of its power, and the ego reverts to its impossible emptiness.

⁴⁸ It is no coincidence that this quote also appears in an exhibition organised by European ethnologists. In Kallinich/Bretthauer 2003, 18 (article by Käte Meyer-Drawe).

Conceived in these terms, both subject and object have been misunderstood – and that justifies all ethnological investigations to everyday material culture that seek to investigate the equally familiar and alien interconnectedness of the ego and the thing.

As early as 1986, Nils-Arvid Bringéus introduces us to the Scandinavian approach of viewing things as forms of behaviour, as actions or at least as the materialised translation of processes of action from an ethnic studies perspective (Bringéus 1986, 167; also 1983). This not only entails analysing things as the media of the kinds of actions that can only be carried out via these media, but as sediments of the actions performed themselves. This is of course especially true of functional objects, but also for what is known as the “socio-communicative language of things”, in which things become constitutive for the formation of the ego in the network of communication: in memory processes (memorial objects), in ritual activity (sacred objects, medals) and performances (masks, costumes), in the formation of status and distinctions (fashion, jewellery), in social exchange (gifts, presents) and for modes of communication (mobile phones). Extensions of the ego play an important role in this, such as when an apartment, a car, clothes or jewellery for example are part of the expressive environment of a person. However, this can also be reversed: things perform the ego, the ego is their performance; thus the ego also communicates through them *in absentia*. Things encase the ego, forming a fragile shell, from which I can hatch, without the ego ever disappearing from the things that encase it. This is noticeable whenever one enters an apartment one has never been in before: the ego is there, without being present; the things tell the attentive visitor something about their owner. They are capable of this in the sense that they are not just passive containers for expressions of the ego, but also repositories and performative organs of this ego, which is present therein in a different, metamorphosed form and in the specific morphology of the things themselves. If this were not the case, the ego would only be present in the naked body-ego. However, the ego is in fact least present in being naked (it would have to perform its nakedness in order to bring some ego into it). Without things, there is no ego (disregarding vocal and pathognomonic expression in face-to-face situations). What is certain in any case is that the ego is distributed over whole networks of socio-communicative thinglinesses and without these is hardly capable of taking part in open communication.

Merleau-Ponty therefore says we must understand “that the things have us, and it is not we who have the things. That the being that has been cannot stop having been. The ‘Memory of the World’. That language has us and it is not we who have language. That it is being that speaks within us and not we who speak of being” (1968, 194). Philosophically, this rotation of the axis equates to the turn

from mentalist to material approaches in cultural studies. What is important is not just rotating the axis, but understanding it as a form of interaction and interdependency that is based on the two *poles of being-in-things and the ego's being-outside-oneself*. Such a formula actually comes quite close to the 'reality' of living with things.

In this sense, things are also autonomously active responses to us. Things are the correlates of the body. Every perception is communication (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 334). This does not mean that things can be reduced to qualities of sensory perception, which we realise mentally as information or signs. Perceptions of things are also not just comprised of feelings and memories. Things would then be "ungraspable, fleeting, and always bordering on illusion" (ibid., 22). Seen in this light, things would be – in Vilém Flusser's sense – in fact "unthings" (1993, 80–89), virtual figures of signs. However, things appear *as* things in the field of perception. This is easily identifiable by the fact that we see things specifically as things and not as the space between them. "The ties that unite the thing and the embodied subject" (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 334) are therefore relevant to philosophy and cultural studies and must not be ignored. For otherwise, the world outside – and inside – would consist of nothing but virtual signs with mysterious referents. "But in fact all things are concretions of a milieu, and every explicit perception of a thing is sustained by the previous communication with a certain atmosphere" (ibid.). This could be a philosophical basis for research on material culture in cultural studies and cultural anthropology.

7.2 The evolution of functional objects?

A study typical of this research approach is Henry Petroski's *The Evolution of Useful Things* (2010; cf. Panati 1987). It is not exactly theoretically brilliant, but the wealth of detail with which it is flooded is quite informative for very different reasons. One of these is the book's form: cultural histories that are as varied as the objects they describe, theoretically weak, labyrinthine and random, but yet individually extremely revealing. For example, when Petroski writes about inconspicuous things such as the development of the paperclip, the zip, the thumbtack, etc., which – viewed in their totality – have a huge influence on our everyday lives. However if, as Petroski shows using statistics about things, the species and subspecies of functional objects far exceed the families and genera of biological evolution (and the latter is already in the millions), and the bio-mass of things – if I may use those terms – is far greater than that of natural objects, then a medium-sized book is always only going to be a

mere nutshell floating on the vast ocean of things. One must seek abstract order. And this is the book's second illuminating flaw. When he speaks about the evolution of functional objects, Petroski takes his main ideas from biology. Things have been developing for thousands of years. On the one hand, they vary their type (thus, to his amazement, Marx finds around 500 types of hammer in England in the middle of the nineteenth century).⁴⁹ On the other, new breeds of functional objects are constantly being created, which viewed in sum are like a huge cabinet of curiosities charting all of human invention, an unimaginable museum of the possible activities and performable actions that have coalesced in them. But can this really be understood as evolution? One could reconstruct things as an archive of human practices and cultures. In that case, the regulating matrix of the history of things would not be defined by 'evolution', but by heterogeneous cultures of action, of needs and desires and their history, which know no progress.

Petroski, however, assumes that things are subject to evolution, one in which there are mechanisms of selection, failed attempts and mutations, decline and dead-ends, differentiation, pluralisation and optimisation, just like in the evolution of animals and plants. At the same time, he argues that there can never be a perfect version of any functional object. All things have imperfections. Also, many 'new' things are not improvements (the 'new, improved' fork), but variations based more on the aesthetic and cultural tastes current at the time than on something's functionality. There is no teleology of the perfect fork in the history of the fork. Once a reasonably solid functional core has been developed and is, and this is important, kept historically stable, then forks only vary according to cultural standards. A fork is always at least equally as much a matter of etiquette, social distinction and table manners, as one of functional optimisation. 'Inventing' special forks for olives, oysters, gherkins, fruit, canned turtle, fish, cake or salad merely differentiates a socially distinct food culture, in which what matters is a demonstrative performance of one's own identity or class and all the various demarcations necessary for the subtle "distinction" from those who 'do not belong' to sophisticated society and must therefore be 'excluded' from it. The 'forkiness' of a fork does not gain anything in evolutionary terms. The generation of new 'species' of forks does not increase their functionality and does not wipe out earlier 'primitive' forks. With an oyster fork, what

⁴⁹ It is thus even more astonishing that around 1800, inventories of rural and even urban families included between 100 and 300 objects, and that in 1974/1975, isolated farms in Hungary possessed between 630 and 996 items, that today's department stores stock between 200,000 and 300,000 types of objects and middle class households protect the existence of tens of thousands of things (see Korff 1991; cf. also Jeggle 1983).

is much more important than its function is that by using it, one demonstrates that one is the type of person who knows what it is at all, can differentiate it from a berry fork and can use it in the ‘right’ way. Thus, a meal is always a hidden test of whether one can *use* the *many* forks provided; and one only demonstrates that one belongs to this illustrious milieu of the meal if one can give an impression of self-confident ease, as if one *had to make use of* the forks. It would therefore be appropriate to speak of forks as fetishes here: one serves them, they have the mysterious power to allocate positions, they create and stabilise a social order, they have performative, symbolic force.

With regard to their formal design, their materiality and their functional types: from the carving fork to the dessert fork, from the pitchfork to the forklift, there is a development of a set of fork types embedded in various different situations of application, but not in a ‘natural history of things’. What seems to be an organic mimesis of hand and finger functions in the fork (and the ‘forky’ in general), recedes more and more in light of the specific logic of cultural development, in which to a certain extent forks spawn new forks that develop independently from their organic basis, the hand. This is the way Ernst Kapp once thought about the development of functional objects in his philosophy of technology (1877): all technical things follow the logic of the body organs they stem from and grow out of in order to specialise, strengthen and perfect themselves outside of the body, while yet remaining within its matrix. Machines and technical devices are projected organs. This may be true of some ‘hand tools’. One can therefore, as Leroi-Gourhan does, view the entire history of technology as the exteriorisation, the making independent and outsourcing of technomorphic operations and gestures bound to the body. This means that the human has in a certain sense “exuded” its arsenal of tools over the course of evolution (Leroi-Gourhan 1993, 239; cf. Harris 1989, 25–34). But the evolutionary cord between organs and tools must tear at some point, resulting in a double liberation: the liberation of the hand *and* the liberation of technology from its biological basis. Modern technology has left all anthropomorphic associations far behind.⁵⁰ One can also view technology and the whole population of technical devices and automotoric machines as mutations of the organism *homo erectus*, who has already developed a complete, ‘organic’ technicity, a technical gesture, via the brain and the hand (Leroi-Gourhan 1993, 237–249).⁵¹

⁵⁰ According to Leroi-Gourhan, the gesture is exteriorised in the machine, memory in mechanical automated machines and the programming (of operations) in computers (1993, 238–239). However, all mimetic ‘biomorphous’ links to technical devices gradually disappear.

⁵¹ Along with Leroi-Gourhan’s anthropology of the (technical) gesture, there is also Flusser’s interesting attempt (1997) to develop a phenomenology of gesture, which seeks to decode the

But one can also argue the opposite: throughout history, people have decoded and modelled their body and its organs according to the pattern of tools and machines. In the medium of the pluralisation of technical devices, the hand's fine motor skills also vary according cultural history; but it could be lost again at some point in history, if most socially required operations are not carried out 'by hand' but by robots and machines. The aptitude and destiny of the hand is a variable of the cultural differentiation of tools and not the other way around. The hand's gesture does not produce the technical thing; instead the technical thing prefigures and differentiates the gesture. There is therefore a limit to the way the 'evolution' of artificialia follows the evolution of the organic body. At the latest in the early modern era, we begin to see the reverse: pneumatic and hydraulic machines, mechanical wheelworks, steam engines, cybernetic controls. Computers become models on the basis of which organic processes – breathing, blood circulation, movement, sensori-motor feedback, thoughts – are conceived. Technology no longer follows the dispositif of the organic body, instead this becomes, the closer to the present we get, modelled on models of technical artefacts (cf. for example Berr 1990).⁵²

The autonomisation of technical structure is the reason for the supposition that the imperative that controls the evolution of things is the principle form follows function. This is a modernist misconception from the time of the tedium of overly ornate things and interiors in the *Gründerzeit* and the subsequent turn to *Neue Sachlichkeit*, International Style and functionalism, which is equated with modernity. It is hard to disagree with Petroski that in the exorbitant diversification of object types, development is not defined by form following function. This applies at best to the 'original fork', which consists of two functional and form-giving elements: a handle and an elongation with at least two tines for lifting and spearing operations. But in his analysis of functionality, which is largely a history of inventors and inventions, Petroski identifies the principle that form in fact follows failure (2010, 22–33). This principle is not opposed to functionalism, but instead is its vehicle. The form is discovered through faults and error

signature of those operations that are linked to objects. One might recall that the Latin *gesta* or *res gesta* means 'acts' or 'deeds'. The root is *gerere*: to carry, carry on oneself, produce, generate, foster, carry out, perform (a task or job), execute, pursue (an activity), procure, steer, lead, administer, etc. – in other words, all the categories of object-related activity. Our understanding of 'gesture' today as a 'communicative hand movement' is much narrower. Leroi-Gourhan and Flusser attempt to restore the Latin understanding, which concerns the literal meaning of actions centred around things and tools.

⁵² On the metamorphosis of the body into a machine and art's fascination with it: Szeemann 1975.

and the desired functions follow. This may be true of the kinds of objects that are exclusively intended to fulfil specific *technical* functions. Thus, for example, the history of surgical instruments can be described as a series of improvements resulting from the flaws of previous instruments. However, even here the aesthetic influence can be identified, so that one can also speak of a history of style in surgical instruments.⁵³

But what can we say about the differences between a Ford Model T from 1912 and a Golf V? Should all the ‘improvements’ between one model and another be viewed as incremental steps towards the ideal model of what a car should be in general? There may be millions of intermediate steps, patents, inventions and optimisations ‘between’ them, and yet, the Golf V is no more of a car than the Ford T. Both display the constituent features that make a car a car to an equal and full extent. Is the Golf V merely *another* car, but not a better one – although everything, including every single component, has been ‘improved’? It seems there is no history of progress immanent to the car. Instead, whatever we view as progress is relative to the shifting systemic conditions and (cultural) requirements we have for cars. The history of the car’s progress is itself a cultural narrative that depends on distinguishing specific technical parameters as opposed to other characteristics. Compared to an eight-cylinder Horch from the 1930s, a Golf V is a step down when it comes to the importance of acquiring status, social distinction and the feeling of luxury from a car. Indeed, in terms of exclusivity, the entire development of the car can be seen as a regression: cars have become ever more ordinary, even if they are called Ferrari. For as exclusive as such a car might be, it is still a common prisoner in the ever more total traffic system, to which it is subject in the same way as a cheap Daihatsu Cuore is. In a further shift of cultural and social references, the unemployed hobby-mechanic coasting through the streets on Sunday in a DS 19, the owner of a badge of exclusivity, makes the Ferrari driver who zooms off from the traffic lights look like an embarrassingly *nouveau riche* narcissist.⁵⁴

All of this has nothing to do with either form follows function or form follows failure, nor with the history of technical progress or *The Evolution of Useful Things*. Rather, when analysing objects in material culture, one must pay atten-

53 Leroi-Gourhan identifies the same thing for the design of spaceships or racing cars, which one would probably expect to be entirely designed around their functions. “Function and form, both adrift in time, constantly interact. An equally striking fact is that at each stage the functional solution [in nature H.B.] is concealed behind a ‘decorative’ veil – colours, appendages, disconcerting curves – similar to that thrown around manufactured objects, as though also in the human the decorative function corresponded to a nonartificial balance.” (1993, 300)

54 On the emotional, symbolic and social aspects of the car, cf. Sachs 1992.

tion to the systematic and therefore irreducible multi-functionality and polysemantics of things. In other words, things that are only and exclusively functional objects do not exist. That an object belongs to artificialia means that from the very start – so since the change from using tools to making tools – it is part of a cultural multidimensionality. It would be wrong to view the functionality of an object as its ‘substance’ and everything else as its cultural context, as ‘accident’ in the sense already described – and to therefore divide research about things into the history of technology on the one hand and material cultural studies on the other. Neither is design simply an epiphenomenon of things. This separation of the different disciplines reflects the typical distinction between primary and secondary qualities, which Heidegger already criticises.

8 The order of things

All artificialia are constructed on at least four levels: function, meaning, beauty and abundance. As they are always artificially constructed, they have borders at which they begin to dedifferentiate: in consumption, in rubbish, in ruins and in chaos. Each of these will now be discussed. However, I will not yet deal with the difference between profane and sacred objects (cf. chapters 3.2 and 3.3), an approach which is significantly indebted to Karl-Heinz Kohl (2003).

8.1 Function

Functional objects are usually explained by their function, the purpose they serve, the actions they enable. This is built into them as tacit knowledge. All technical devices are sedimented knowledge. They are silent answers to intentions, which can be realised through them. They pluralise the set of human operations that are organically possible. Device and action form a relation to each other like a fan: *one* object, an array of possibilities. Only with these objects, which are the condition of the possibility of operative chains of action, can we talk about instrumental function in the strict sense. Functional things are elements in work processes.

At the same time, most artificialia are not functional objects. A gravestone has been made, but not in order to do something *with* it. Its function is to mark the place where a dead person is buried, to make this identifiable and to delineate a site for social activity (mourning rites, memorial visits). Similar to a piece of jewellery. For this reason, I will not speak of ‘function’ here, but rather social meaning (see below), for which the gravestone provides a material

basis and a choreographic locality, while the piece of jewellery provides the centre of the impression a person gives.⁵⁵ A good example of this is the jewellery that was developed in the nineteenth century especially to be worn on occasions of mourning and memorial for the dead (Pointon 1999, 65–81).

Functional objects for carrying out work can be related to material and to symbolic operations. One can work with a plough, but also with a fountain pen. Even in cases where there is no work involved, for example when driving a train, the intention of the action (movement from A to B) is fulfilled in the sense of a logic of use: the train serves the purpose of locomotion in a structurally analogous way to a car, an airplane or a horse and carriage. Here, the functional operates on a different level to hiking boots, which serve the purpose of getting from A to B ‘on foot’. Hiking boots, although functional for hiking, do not do any work for you; they are not a pair of ‘seven-league boots’. When a path leads up steep hills, mountain boots fulfil their function, while light sandals would probably force one to turn around. They are more appropriate for a stroll along the seafront on a summer’s day.

Functional objects thus have the function of *enabling* certain tasks in the first place, making them *easier*, more *effective* or *saving* us from having to do them at all. Writing implements enable writing; mountain boots make it easier to climb mountains; the hammer makes striking something more effective; a lift spares us the work of climbing the stairs. Other objects fulfil their function by optimising the integration of certain actions in specific environments, such as rain gear or snow shoes. However the functions may be differentiated – and in view of the exponential historical growth of the field of possible operations, this differentiation is almost infinite: the material object is always a function of actions to be executed, operations, work. Composite functional objects like cars are internally complex ensembles of functions – i.e. machines – that fulfil an external function, such as saving us work.⁵⁶ Certain interface devices such as the driver’s cockpit or the seats are not functional in terms of the purpose of work-saving locomotion, but in terms of operational instruments ergonomically designed to fit the human body or sitting without becoming fatigued. But here too, the ‘in-order-to relation’ and the instrumental ends-means relation delineates and defines the thing.

55 Cf. the charming “Exkurs über den Schmuck” [Excursus on Jewellery] by Georg Simmel: 1908/1992, vol. 11, 414–421. See also: Asman 1993 und 2002, 70–86.

56 Early modern technical manuals, which mark the ascendancy of modern technical culture, are primarily concerned with saving the reader unnecessary work. At the time, these machines were still referred to as *Künste* [the arts]. Cf. Popplow 1998.

8.2 Meaning

Functional objects not only have functions, but also meaning. By this I do not mean that many functional objects are the carriers or media of meaning, like the road sign or the telephone. The former encodes permitted and prohibited actions in the form of visual signs or is an index for physical conditions (warning: bridge, bump in the road, children playing). The telephone is a device for encoding and transferring acoustic signals for the purpose of simultaneous communication regardless of physical and spatial location. That is not what I mean. Having 'meaning' means having social meaning. The social meaning of the road signs is not what their signs or indexes 'denote' (the information), but that the state views those that are part of traffic as incapable of self-regulation and makes the active participation in the system of the car dependent on specific educational standards, tests and disciplines. The social meaning of a mobile phone is not its ability to encode the human voice or mechanic buttons with letters on them, but participation in youth culture,⁵⁷ in the experience of the comfort (or the pressure) of being contactable everywhere and at all times, in being able to receive emails in a mountain chalet or pull off impressive choreographic performances with the mobile against the ear, etc.⁵⁸ In short, in the process of the negotiation of status and prestige, artificialia play a role that cannot be overestimated.

A conspicuously large number of functional objects exist primarily only to create social meaning and semantic surplus and are significant for subjects' self-fashioning. This is often more important than their use value, which becomes irrelevant. Things then become media for the enactment of the self in public and private interaction. They then have no or only incidental functions for technical operations and instead are performative objects for the extension of the ego, semantic accessories of the aura of meaning that subjects build around themselves and others in order to have their identity reflected in things and to make it identifiable. That is why things are our messengers (Kallinich/Bretthauer 2003), our mediators and bodyguards, enveloping us with an aura, a web, or sometimes also a wall of significance. Things are therefore gestures that extend ego; they belong to its physical equipment, to its semantic economy. Like attitudes, styles and habitus, the semantics of things contribute to increasing cultural and social capital. Things are the batteries and stabilisers of the power of a

⁵⁷ On the role of things in youth culture, cf. Niedenthal 2003.

⁵⁸ On mobile phone culture cf. Lehnert 1999a. – On the gesture of making a telephone call, cf. Flusser: 1997, 183–192. More generally: Ronell 1989; Münker/Roesler 2000; Selle 1997, 111–120.

person's validity, insofar as they radiate an added value of the meaning that their owner has invested in them. Here social distinction, in which things significantly contribute to the formation of social strata and classes, as Pierre Bourdieu has shown in empirical and theoretical studies, is the main purpose or rather the meaning of the objects (2010 and 1990, cf. also Korff 1991, 42ff.). With regard to this, E.E. Boesch talks of "constellations and connotations" within a cultural topography, where things become semantically loaded with corresponding "poly-functionality and polyvalence".⁵⁹ However, even that does not go far enough: meaning is not only bestowed upon things secondarily in constellations and connotations. The point is precisely that meaning is incorporated in things and therefore plays a role in their constitution. That is the source of the social power of objects.

It goes without saying that things also acquire meaning as memorial objects.⁶⁰ "There are always traces of use value and emotional value in the message that humans have enveloped and equipped things with in the course of history." (Bausinger 2003, 11; Assmann, A. 1996 und 1999). Here meaning is understood as an extra layer, a material patina. The cultural part of things is put on them like a dress, which then gradually becomes a second skin. This becoming historical and biographical of things makes them into archives of memory, in which individual people and collectives find security. This shows that things are not just dead matter beyond the reach of history but actants of the historical itself. Without this swelling of things, their semantic metamorphosis and growths, through which they can virtually become hybrids of their own selves, humanity's historical meaning would be lost, evaporated before it could be grasped. Things are, as Rilke writes in a letter to Ilse Erdmann on the 20th of March 1919, "small batteries of life force" – a phrase that Christoph Asendorf made the title of his lovely book on the history of things in the nineteenth century (1993, 192).

8.3 Aesthetics

Thirdly, all functional objects (including factories and nuclear power plants) are also aesthetic objects. From the perspective of both production and reception, they exist in the matrix of beauty. Whether intended or not, their forms have a particular shape and design and they can arouse pleasure or dislike, attraction

⁵⁹ Boesch 1983, 40–55, where there is a nice analysis of the sweeping brush.

⁶⁰ From the ethnological perspective: Kuntz 1990.

or revulsion. They exude their own atmosphere, which is perceived and experienced. This is inevitable because a fundamental aspect of cultural anthropology is that everything that exists is experienced on the scale of pleasure and aversion. This experience of things is not the bastard child of higher forms of aesthetics, but the opposite: it is a different version of the aesthetic sense rooted deep in prehistory and already evident in extremely old tools. The beauty (or ugliness) of functional objects is the root of all art. Design is not the lowly relation of art, but rather its origin and foundation. To investigate this, let us take a rather speculative digression into the Stone Age, when the interweaving of function, meaning and aesthetics can already be identified. Here, we will also find the prehistoric foundation of fetishism.

The aesthetic can be described as a cultural technique for bringing temporal and spatial order to the churning chaos of the world through, for example, the rhythmic division⁶¹ of movement or shaping of the form of things. This aesthetic order is rooted in the biological evolution of the human race. Archaeological discoveries and studies on late Stone Age cultures suggest that designed objects could have been part of an overall audio-visual process with which tribal cultures were already attempting to reach beyond the pressing present of life's necessities in order to symbolise their cosmos. In paleoanthropological terms, we can assume that the technical conquest of nature would not have been possible without the complementary construction of social memory. This too is linked to the development of aesthetic skills. Leroi-Gourhan calls this "physiological aesthetics" (1993, 282 and elsewhere). The latter is a primal form of art. "The purest art always plunges deepest; only the uppermost tip emerges from the plinth of flesh and bone, without which it would not exist" (*ibid.*, 274).

The complementarity of the technology and aesthetics of functional objects is based on the fact that the operative liberation of the hand was linked to freedom for the performative gesture (*ibid.*, 245 ff.);⁶² both are the long-term consequences of walking upright and "the paleontological consequences for the development of the cerebral apparatus" (*ibid.*, 242). The hand, indeed the entire body, is thus free to play a part in the process of generating meaning. Corporeal and linguistic communication cooperate in the construction of a mythogrammatical memory and a culture that represents the order of nature and the ethnos, while at the same time creating and maintaining it – in the form of objects and rites. One of the driving forces of culture is the fact that the human species is more

⁶¹ On the elementary ordering of actions and memory, and rhythm's function of creating the cosmos, cf. Leroi-Gourhan 1965/1993, 219–234.

⁶² On the anthropology of gesture, cf. also Flusser 1997.

dependent on learning processes than any other species. Human cultures must create traditions, i.e. engrams for memory and performative designs, in order to generate and preserve knowledge, values and orientation. Evolutionary acceleration only begins around 40,000 BC, because once the cerebral level of *Homo sapiens sapiens* was reached, a huge multiplication of technology and tools, which seem to have interacted with aesthetic and ritual practices, happens at the same time. Ever since, symbolic practice has been bound up in the functional circuit of reproduction. This is fundamental for successful survival in a nature in which man is *not* embedded – this is what marks mankind’s ‘eccentricity’ according to Helmuth Plessner. It is the nature of humanity that we can only survive *in* nature if we establish a technically effective and symbolically mediated culture of objects.

The logic of the face-hand field entails opening the sensory space for gestalt-like figurations and thus for performative acts with surplus meaning. This ultimately leads to art – dance, song, rites, shaped objects. In the field of physiological aesthetics, the hand takes the lead. This may have begun with the decoration of tools. Giving a digging stick ornamental notches or a spearhead an engraving of ducks does not apparently optimise the function of the tool in any way. Yet in the animistic world view, the adding of ornamentation and signs, and the creation of symmetry and proportion, promises an improvement to the function of the tool. Tools are not just a means to have power over a section of nature; they are also a *figure* for this power. In the beginning, art is a medium for the optimisation of actions that have a rational purpose. The aesthetic is a form of coping with existence.

The hand can thus not only produce and use digging sticks and spears, but also paint the bodies of dancers, make jewellery, draw on cave walls, skin or in sand, knock or drum out rhythms, make sacred objects – for example totems and fetishes – under whose protection and name one lives, add decoration and paintings to huts and houses or play the bone flute. The hand has therefore been able to operate in two matrices since the middle of the Stone Age: the technical matrix of operative action and the aesthetic matrix of meaningful figurations. The separation into these two matrices occurs quite late in cultural history; aesthetics and technology are in fact integrated in the field of things. The stone tools of the Levallois period, with their sophisticated chipping technique, symmetries and proportions, their centres and axes, already presuppose a human who can see what he or she wants in the raw flint and has already acquired the skills to work the idea into the material through long-term experience. This is the definition of beauty in Hegel (1975a vol. 1, 116). Art is thus not possible without technology. But the reverse is also true: functional objects created through technology are also always aesthetic.

8.4 Abundance

In his most recent book (2003), the Frankfurt ethnologist Karl-Heinz Kohl describes his arrival on the Indonesian island of Flores in 1986 with three large aluminium trunks and six suitcases designed for the tropics. With amazement, the villagers watch the foreigners fill their house with a huge number of things. Unlike the foreigners, the villagers keep their rooms relatively empty, except for a few functional items, and store their small number of belongings in a loft above the bedroom. Their things are only brought into general view on ceremonial occasions. Whatever the Europeans throw away into the rubbish pit behind the house disappears immediately: for the villagers it has not lost its value. This apparently careless treatment of such an abundance of things reawakens the villagers' old tale of how people in the West "owe their wealth to a theft committed long ago. In a nearby village, a girl had planted a tree, which instead of fruit, was laden with all the riches of the Earth. Sailors from the West had seen it sparkling from far off in the distance and had come, dug it up and then taken it back home with them" (*ibid.*, 7–8).

The wasteful abundance of the ethnologist's things must have seemed to the islanders a bit like the demonstrative wealth of the American upper class once seemed to the son of a Norwegian immigrant in a poor town in Wisconsin: *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) by Thorstein Veblen (2007; cf. Girtler 1989), which quickly became a classic of sociology, is filled by the sense of complete amazement that is caused whenever the excessive, unrestrained mass of things in industrial societies is viewed from the oblique perspective of poverty. Veblen explains that this uncanny proliferation of objects, which serve as the main medium for the self-enactment of the "leisure class", is a result of capitalism's internal dynamics, of the "competition for money" and social envy. Those who indulge themselves in the theatrical gesture of consumption appear to be saved from the biblical ignominy of work. Luxuriating in idleness is like a baptism, allowing entry into a second paradise. The insatiable greed for physical pleasure, the lust for self-enactment in consumption and the inexhaustible flow of things from the *perpetuum mobile* of the factories all come together in the baptismal bath of things. Veblen did not fail to notice the religious motives and tribal archaisms in this enormous celebration of things in the service of ostentatious prestige. Things are briefly bathed in the ephemeral glow of consumption, before they disappear into the rubbish tip.

The mythical story of the original theft that Kohl hears from the locals is also told in nineteenth- and twentieth-century industrial societies in the form of Marxist theory, for which Veblen seeks an alternative: according to Marxist theory, the belly of the leisure class is fed on whatever surplus can be squeezed from

the workers; the theatre of commodities is nothing more than the false glow of a fetishism that creates a shiny allure by increasing the use value of things. The commodity, surrounded by the aura of desires, is the golden calf around which society dances in worship. Capitalism is idolatry. We are all fetish worshippers when we consume. But for Veblen and for Werner Sombart (1913/1967), these are not attributes that only developed with capitalism, but ones which were simply made universal by it.

While Veblen focuses on the way the capitalist elite flaunted and showed off its wealth during the first wave of American industrialisation, Sombart examines the economy of extravagance and wastefulness in the European courts, with their strict ban on work, their official life of leisure and their excessive self-enactments. Here, in the courts, he sees the roots of capitalism, also in the cities and towns and the early bourgeois moguls of wealth, but above all in secularised love, which led to the ostentatious fusion of amorality and extravagance in the new career of the mistress kept in luxury – very much unlike Max Weber’s later thesis (1920) that the origins of capital accumulation and rational ways of living in the spirit of capitalism lay in the protestant ethic and its principles of self-restraint. As Sombart writes in the closing lines of his book: “And so, luxury, which itself was the legitimate child of illegitimate love, gives birth to capitalism.” (1913/1983, 194)⁶³ Mistresses, in the widest sense, are the main characters in the drama of luxury and consumption, which becomes the model of capitalism. Sombart’s interpretation is strangely similar to Veblen’s, who believes that women, as the property of men and without any independence, must celebrate leisure and consumption to the greatest extent of all, in order to demonstrate that they have been released from the ignominy of work. Women live in a paradise of terror.

My concern is not to assess the historical accuracy of these different interpretations. What is more important is that what is usually denounced as consumer fetishism in critiques of capitalism is identified by Veblen and Sombart in much older consumer cultures of luxury. That is of interest to us, because luxury and extravagance reflect the thing relation that is our main concern here: it seems that the abundance of things and their conspicuous consumption can be traced back to much older needs that are independent from the economic system in question. They are related to the fact that happiness and abundance are linked, while a lack of things leads to suffering and judgement, hardship and death, and carries the mark of an unfulfilled, reprehensible and shameful life. It is precisely

63 Cf. Purdy 1998 on the luxurious style of Goethe’s time.

the opposite of the fairytale “Hans in Luck”,⁶⁴ who by completely failing to understand the exchange value of things becomes gradually poorer, but yet, when he finally loses everything that could be considered property, is happy. Such solace for the poor and economically disadvantaged is as distant for Veblen and Sombart as the societies they investigate.

For the sole principle that applies is: “Unproductive consumption of goods is honourable” (Veblen 2007, 50). If one only consumes what is necessary to live, nothing is gained. It is a sign of a lack of prestige. That is why waste and extravagance do not just form the physiognomy of the upper classes who can afford it. The remarkable thing that history demonstrates, evident in both pre-capitalist and capitalist eras, is that the lower classes of poor peasants, day labourers and workers still always manage to find occasions to ritually, demonstratively and publicly consume despite their usually extremely meagre livelihoods – they consume way beyond their means. Potlatch is a significant one of these wasteful consumption rituals, through which the elite establish and maintain obligations and social ties under their leadership. Moreover, it belongs to what are known as the ‘primitive’ economies of power. During this gift-giving competition, the social ranks of the tribe are in a way investigated and revealed. This potlatch, which according to Marcel Mauss is one of the “customs of ‘aristocratic extravagance’” (2001, 68) and represents a paradigm of gift giving, is a first degree attempt to prove oneself; one earns a “good name” for oneself and also a respected identity (ibid., 39–41).⁶⁵ Its pre-capitalist origin shows that abundance is not an effect of commodity capitalism, but an ancient need that will always be addressed wherever there is lack. The waste and extravagance of potlatch are a grandiose performance: a masquerade of poverty, which gives the host and others the gift of a celebration of abundance, sinking themselves even deeper into poverty, which is counter-balanced by the fact that the tradition of potlatch ob-

64 From a psychoanalytical perspective, it is interesting that Hans “wants to go home to his mother” – and in the end is back “home” with a “lighter heart”, liberated from all material things. On the way home, which is a series of negative trades, Hans regresses back to the ‘naked’ infant. He sees “riding” as “a nice thing” and is happy to exchange his lump of gold, the equivalent of seven years work, for a horse. To anyone who is overcome by the sensual aspect of things, without understanding their abstract exchange value, the happiness of abundance means nothing, because he is completely under the spell of immediate wish fulfilment, or the matrix of the mother, and *his* happiness can only be found by returning to her womb (in the Brothers Grimm, 332–336).

65 The expression ‘potlatch’ goes back to the ritual celebrations of waste of the Indian tribes in the northeast of the USA; cf. Drucker/Heizer 1967; Beck 1993. – Cf. especially Godelier 1999, 56–77; 179–197; Godelier provides a convincing reinterpretation of Marcel Mauss. – Cf. also Bataille 1988–1993.

liges the receiver of the gifts to return the gesture – if they do not want to lose face (ibid., 41f.). For the wealthy, the aristocracy and the chieftains, potlatch is the stage where a kind of celebratory “war of property” is played out for the purposes of establishing social rank and hierarchies (ibid., 37–38). In all cases, whether for the rich or poor, abundance has no economic benefits: it is the social, symbolic, festive and sensual meaning inherent to it – its excess – that justifies it. Abundance is the opposite of the treasure that is to be kept for eternity, “sheer foolishness” as Marx says.⁶⁶ For abundance is there to be thrown out the window, no, it is there to be bathed in. That is the point of the conspicuous consumption of things: bathing, basking, frolicking in it.⁶⁷

It is not the same thing as permanent luxury, which however also follows the logic of an economy of extravagance, but is still a form of controlled expenditure, in which a calculated expertise in elaborate self-enactment that has been trained by manners, habitus and taste, replaces the celebration of squandering. Luxury is the art of the well-off elite. It provides the constant public enjoyment of the self-worth that can be consumed from things. It is precisely not about mere consumption, which from a certain perspective is just as tasteless and common as the unrestricted wastefulness of potlatch. The carefully selected constant level of waste characteristic of luxury makes permanent a consumption of the second order: luxury is consuming the value that is invested in the costly abundance of things itself and which one is oneself. Luxury is a form of self-consumption, without actually consuming oneself, a kind of production of the self in consumption. Since luxury is also always a duty, however, the threat of crossing the limit is always there. A person who lives beyond their means does actually gradually consume their livelihood: money and property, prestige and status – often pursued at the cost of ending up in poverty and self-destruction. The “principle of conspicuous waste” demands “an obviously futile expenditure” (Veblen 2007, 117) – for food, parties, jewellery, interior decoration, furniture, house, holidays, servants, clothes, etc. The social meaning of it is precisely this senselessness, which is ‘demonstrated’, in other words ‘exhibited’ and ‘proven’. The “symbolic pantomime” of luxury and the “[theatre of the] honorific character [of] leisure” (ibid., 35–36) are – as opposed to the ignobility of productive work with its eco-

⁶⁶ Marx, Karl: *Capital Volume I* (1990), 735. Cf. Asendorf 1993, 30–35.

⁶⁷ A ‘pervert’ of this practice of bathing in abundance is Scrooge McDuck (from Walt Disney’s Donald Duck cartoons), who regularly and self-indulgently bathes in his element: money. Swimming in piles of money is however not really ‘abundance’, because money is an abstract and homogenous medium, without sensual qualities. Only heterogeneous things can create abundance. It is typical of the capitalist Scrooge McDuck that piles of abstract money itself are the main focus of his desire.

nomical functionalism – the ideal of a lifestyle in which a deep dependence on things is inverted by wasting them. Their surfeit becomes the measure of our freedom. Freedom from things is true freedom, which is demonstrated by squandering things. It is a happiness that only beckons when the freedom to consume goods has no limit. That is luxury – proof *ad oculos omnium* that things offer themselves up to our unrestricted disposal, as if they were only waiting to be consumed. This would also mean, vice versa, that we are slaves to things. Abundance is the price we pay for our freedom.

Perhaps this was never more obvious than in the era that Sombart and Veblen mainly examine. For those who must display this abundance and luxury – women – are the performers and prisoners of abundance at the same time. Imprisoned in corsets and sumptuous dresses that banish any suspicion of having worked a day in their lives (*ibid.*, 99),⁶⁸ women are living exhibits languishing in apartments stuffed with heavy furniture, bric-a-brac, paintings, curtains, wallpaper, display cabinets, armchairs, ornaments and elaborate stucco. They are as ornately decorated as the apartments of which they are the accessories. Orgies of thingliness. “The interior of the *Gründerzeit* is mostly free of reference to the function of things, to their use value, which is often concealed as much as possible. [...] Things simply sit there, like untouchable images of the divine in an imaginary cult of boredom. They are draped in coverings or packed in little boxes, which obscure the utter equivalence of their economic and psychological indifference.” (Asendorf 1993, 133) In this uncanny domestic opulence, women provide the “services” (Veblen 2007, 119) of conspicuous leisure and consumption, of which they are both the actress and the object. “The more expensive and more obviously unproductive the women of the household are, the more creditable and the more effective for the purpose of the reputability of the household or its head will their life be” (*ibid.*). Nowhere is this more evident than in women’s fashion.

Barbara Vinken has shown this in her study of the magnificent sartorial displays of the nineteenth century, which men, in their uniform dark-coloured suits, were deprived of (apart from officers and dandies) and which was therefore all the more the domain of women. “Clothing has never more strictly divided the sexes as in the nineteenth century” (Vinken 1998a, 61). Fashion (modern fashion) was invented in this period as the art of creating a surface for the man to project and display *his* identity, namely on the medium of his living property, the wom-

⁶⁸ Veblen writes that women’s clothing was especially “contrived with this object in view”, “to impress upon the beholder [...] that the wearer does not and can not habitually engage in useful work” (2009, 118–119).

an's body. Ever since, argues Vinken, fashion has been synonymous with femininity. Women become fashionable works of art, pure performativity without reference to the flesh (in which hysteria lurks): thus this figure of woman exhibits men's economic freedom and respectability. She provides him with a beautiful face (i.e. she is his *prosopopoeia*). This is the beginning of fashion fetishism. Fashion confirms but also transgresses the above-mentioned opposition of the sexes. It produces, as Vinken says, a hyperfetishism or a fetishism of the second order (*ibid.*, 64).

Fetishism of the first order consists of the fashionable, luxuriating, consuming woman, who surrenders to the ecstasy of things, in which she performs what she is obliged to be: an object of desire, whose only desire is to be this object (someone else's): a fetish. Fashion is therefore fetishism's ancestral kingdom. The absolute artificiality of fashion expresses itself in the fetishism of clothes that produce a strange fusion between the organic body and its inorganic packaging (*ibid.*, 65–66). Hyperfetishism is when the ideal woman, who identifies with the superficiality of her clothing so much that she surrenders herself entirely, is dressed *up*, representing her husband's 'assets', his potency. "The ideal femininity embodied by the real woman therefore paradoxically signifies the man." (*ibid.*, 66) *Her* unambiguous femininity secures his manliness *for him*. The women's fashion of this time is therefore always a form of transvestism, which as such is hidden in its skirts.

In all these defining features of modern capitalism, Veblen sees "the conservation of archaic traits [in the present]" (Veblen 2007, 140 ff., 185 ff., 198 ff.). This prompts him to look at ethnological research and religious studies. We will also follow this trail in a later chapter. For now it is sufficient to note that it seems abundance is a secondary condition of the relationship to things peculiar to cultures. Without it, the fear of losing our freedom, happiness, assets/potency and self quickly overcomes us. The abundance of things seals the secret that our freedom is conditional on things [*be-dingt*]. Freedom should be unconditional. Philosophy's transcendental proof of this idea is just as much of an illusion as the spectacle of luxury, which, with the abundance that it celebrates, provides the practical evidence for the endless distance between luxury and things. Fetishisation is the mechanism whereby things are given the task of suggesting to us that we are independent. But we are not independent from things and in fact we lose that independence in precisely the moment that things appear to give us our freedom.

8.5 Dedifferentiation

The last statement has led us to that “diabolically human” (Goethe) opposition, perhaps the most difficult of problems regarding our relationship to things: the opposition between abundance and emptiness. The last section therefore also belongs under the heading of dedifferentiation, for reasons that will soon become clear.

In it, we were still working on the unspoken assumption that a thing is a discrete, collected integral of characteristics, a kind of ‘knot’ in the fabric of natural or cultural relations. Things always have a specific location in space, a place, even if they are moving. Wherever a thing is at a specific moment in time, that space cannot be occupied by another thing at the same time. Materiality is fundamental to this definition of the thing. We did not discuss the thought-thing. Ideas are not things, but rather mental images or concepts of them. We also excluded metaphorical uses of the thing. We did not address the way we speak of an adolescent girl as a ‘young thing’, or call an astounding situation a ‘crazy thing’, nor the turns of phrase ‘things are not going well’, ‘doing your own thing’ or ‘letting things slide’. Neither did we include the good things that come to those who wait in our attempt to get to the bottom of things. In our preliminary observations about things, we also left out the wider understanding of ‘object’ beyond the definition of the material occupation of a specific space. *Objects* of knowledge or scientific enquiry do not need to be things in the world. Psychoanalysis speaks of *internal objects*. The *object* of a legal process, a sermon, a lesson or a lecture* is not a thing these days either.⁶⁹ In short, we have

* In English, of course, one would in fact say the *subject* of a sermon, lesson or lecture.

⁶⁹ However, it must not be forgotten that the German *Ding* [thing] goes back to the Old High German *thing*, the assembly, meaning the ‘matter’ to be negotiated. The German *verteidigen* [to defend] also contains this link to ‘thing’ and ‘court’, for it can be traced back to Early New High German (*ver*)*tagedingen*, ‘representing someone at court’. *Jemanden dingfest machen* [lit., making someone thing-fixed] = to arrest someone, bring someone to court. *Ver/dingen* means ‘taking someone/something into service’, *sich verdingen*: ‘to hire oneself or one’s services out’. In the older sense it also means: holding an assembly, signing a contract, to litigate. The French *chose*, ‘thing’, comes from the Latin *causa*, the ‘matter in question’ in court (also reason, cause, guilt). *Causa publica, privata, forensis* is the public or private legal issue, the trial. But still, the possibility of a republic is hidden in the Latin *Ding/Sache: res publica*. And *res familiaris* is possessions, property. The word *Ding/thing* may be related to the Gothic words for time and regulation, or to the Middle Irish for ‘legal, prescribed’ and ‘lawfulness’. Etymologically speaking then, all the things we use the word ‘thing’ for today in metaphorical terms are layers of meaning it actually has. The family of words *Ding/dingen/res/thing/chose* was originally centred around social, in particular juristic interactions. From them we have inherited our understanding of ‘things’, which are now mostly understood as neutral, physical objects. This is a rather

used the conventional, limited materialistic understanding of the word ‘thing’, albeit in such a way that the usual division between subject and object was suspended as much as possible. The aim of the blurring of borders that we will now undertake is not to extend things metaphorically, but to focus on the edges where the status of material things begins to fray, dissolve, becomes questionable or threatening. These edges are the conditions of being a thing at all.

8.5.1 Last things

We die, things do not. ‘Shrouds have no pockets’. In other words, we cannot take anything with us beyond the threshold of death.⁷⁰ However, in many cultures burial objects demonstrate that there are nonetheless attempts to cross this great divide. Even the dead must still display a wealth of things; these things that characterise the dead guarantee the enduring existence of a dead person’s identity. This is already evident in Stone Age graves and reaches its apogee in the Egyptian cult of the dead: through things, the eternity of the dead triumphs. The dead Christian only takes mental baggage with him: his good and bad deeds, for which the heavenly accounting department creates a final report in the form of a judgement. For us today, death means the end of the world of things, even if it continues on without us. Yet death is surrounded by things that belong exclusively to it: ‘last things’.⁷¹ These are first and foremost actions and not things: the last rites, the last confession, the last prayer, the last will and testament, the last goodbyes, the last words, the last breath, sight and thought. The dying and their loved ones find comfort when space and time are provided for the liminal acts that represent the cultural rules for the transition from a person to a mere thing, the corpse. Death does not need any of this. Death arrives whenever and wherever it likes, regardless of our need for ‘last things’.

late and diluted definition of ‘things’ however. It indicates that language developed out of a socially-centred form of communication and that words intended to describe things and processes in the world developed fairly late or were derived from the semantics of social interaction. – When Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and others emphasise that things are ‘assembled in themselves’, or when Latour speaks of an assembly, or even a parliament of things, they are in fact referring back to older eras of the semantics of *Ding*, ‘thing’ or *chose*.

70 “If a man is rich and surpasses others in beauty / and has given proof of his strength by victory in the games / let him remember that his limbs’ clothing is mortal / and earth is the very last garment he will put on.” Eleventh Nemean Ode. In Pindar 2007, 118.

71 Scharfe 2003; Hart Nibbrig 1989; Weininger 1980; Hengstenberg 1996; Lindenberg 1996; Schulte 1997 (unfortunately with nothing on ‘last things’); Guthke 1992.

However, things are affected by death. First of all those things that are poetically referred to as the *Habseligkeiten** of the dead, in prosaic terms: possessions, *res privata*.⁷² They stay behind. We have organised their 'transition' with laws and cultural rules, made it a smooth one, truly a *translatio*. All things have a legal status, and not only because of the etymology of 'thing'. It regulates their commerce, their journeys, their metamorphoses. But this is only superficially effective. When a person, now a corpse-thing, leaves behind an empty home, one senses a strange hollowness. The world of things, so recently full of life, appears evacuated, emptied. Things sit there strangely abandoned, without a 'master'. They become frozen, grotesque gestures. A book is a book, a pipe is a pipe (Foucault 1983), a pot is a pot. But now they are a dead person's book, pipe and pot. What is that? Cathexis⁷³ still clings to them somehow. Things become 'occupied', loaded with feelings, desires, longings. The way we handle them and treat them that makes them 'part of us', 'personal', ours. They do not just 'reflect' us as their owners, but as those who handle them, as collectors and lovers, careless consumers or fetishists, as men and women of taste or ascetics. They do not just carry the traces of our use of them, but are also our character mask.

So now the dead person has left their home, while all the immortal things that had been assembled into a unified whole around the living person stand there deserted. They demand their translation. It cannot stay like this. It is spooky when a person's rooms are left unchanged for years after their death. They are temples to the dead, an attempt to preserve the dead person in his or her things, the ritual invocation of a presence that the abandoned things are supposed to stand in for. They too are 'last things', strange revenants and monuments at the same time. Usually, however, after the death of the person who owned and occupied them, the life in the things slowly seeps out of them in an unnoticeable trickle. The ensemble (Latin *insimul*: 'simultaneously', 'in similarity', the put together) disintegrates or is distributed by those who inherit it. The ensemble of things: they were, as different as they seemed, 'similar' to each other and 'similar' to the person they belonged to. It is this 'being similar by being put together' that the things now lose. Having once provided the living person with a home for his or her ego, the things themselves are now homeless.⁷⁴ They part ways; many

* 'Belongings', or literally, blessings that are owned.

72 Leaving all the things surrounding burial rituals aside: coffin, obituaries, church decoration, flowers, wreaths, mourning dress, the plants on the grave, gravestone, etc.

73 In psychoanalysis and psychology, cathexis means the 'emotional occupation of' or investment of energies in objects and/or the bond to them.

74 Kafka's Odradek, as we have seen, is one such homeless creature in a liminal zone between humans, things and rubbish.

things now head for the place that for things is what death is for a living being: the rubbish dump. There they rot or are burned. Other things are sold, transformed back into the commodity they once were before they became part of the ensemble of an ego. They become anonymous, nameless stuff, with no economic value. Maybe; for they must pass through this gate in order to find a new home. Other things are distributed among the dead person's heirs and put back 'into use'. The silverware, for example, is passed down through the generations; it is an intergenerational *res familiaris* that belongs to more than one person. Other things retain a weak auratic shadow of the dead: as long as I drive the car that belonged to my father, it remains, strangely enough, 'my father's car'. It is a bit more problematic with clothes; as a rule no one in the family wants to wear them; but giving them away is hard, because there is still so much of the dead person in his or her clothes. Somewhere, perhaps in the cellar, they await the fading of their auras, until they are eventually given to charity and finally become anonymous, dead entities, which will be resurrected somewhere in Eastern Europe or Africa. And then there are the very private things: delicate traces of illegitimate secrets and magnificent passions, for the dead person, closely guarded treasure troves of memory. Now they lie obscenely spread out before the eyes of the heirs, who suddenly forget all sense of discretion, which can damage even the best family relationships. After a briefly disturbing moment, these sacred, sordid things are sent to be united with everything that has the least value, the dirty rubbish, to be incinerated. And finally we come to the hallowed objects that are accepted into the cult of mourning and memory created by those left behind. Delicate, invisible threads lead from these things beyond into the kingdom of the dead; and sometimes the dead person, who by now is not even a thing anymore, manages a tiny reawakening, as if the hand were not just holding the handle of the lovely teapot, but as if it were somehow touching the dead person's body itself in that mysterious space between thing and death.

This is the first dedifferentiation in the relationship between humans and things in our investigation. It is highly relevant in terms of cultural history, in a way already briefly touched on above.⁷⁵ It illustrates fundamental aspects of our relationship to things. Death, which also separates us from things, shows *ex negativo* that we live in them and that they live in us. The very earliest cultural acts, the care of the dead, also include the obligation to deal with, look after and possibly heal the dramatic dedifferentiation between the dead ego and things. In death a human being becomes no different to things, while apparently lifeless

75 For more on this cf. Macho 1987 and 2001; Barloewen 1996.

things retain a piece of life. This chiasmic change in position is carried out in rituals for giving the dead some kind of continued life and the things new places. The Egyptian solution is the one of the most wonderful: in writing, in images and in the things themselves, the burial gifts, the glorious lifeworld of the dead is made eternal.⁷⁶ In our secular society, we are strangely helpless and pagan. We create museal memorials for our 'great personalities', which often have the characteristics of an Egyptian cult of the dead. Lifeworld things become fetishes of the memory of the dead person, who ultimately becomes an idol. The dead person is kept 'alive' by exhibiting the things with which he or she lived in a memorial space. Dead things become the witnesses of a life lived. Yet this remains just as precarious as all the little attempts to immortalise someone that are practiced in private with a dead person's things. For in a culture that does not believe in an afterlife, the indifference that things share with death itself can never be fully erased. The things we live in and through, and which are brought to life by us, ultimately reveal an intransigent rejection that lies in the ontological impossibility of death. That is what makes them so strange and alien: they cannot die. Yet because of this, they are also the signature of the irrevocable farewell that we must bid to the world, which is only a world because of things.

8.5.2 Melancholy and asceticism

Sometimes there are situations in which thing relations among the living resemble those in death. These are depression and melancholy on the one hand, and asceticism and meditation on the other. In the world of the depressive, things are submerged in an indifferent detachment and a hazy fog, a reflection of the fact that the gestures that bring things and people together in action have become impossible. As a sense of purpose is lost and intentions sink away in the listless brooding of depression, things themselves seem faint, as if they had retreated behind the horizon of possible actions. The cathectic link between the ego and things is severed. Everything is far away and close up at the same time. The space of depression does not have depth or perspective (cf. Tellenbach 1956). Things thus fade to grey in a flat, contourless coexistence of strange colourlessness. Neither space nor things are defined; they have all run together to form a greyish tone of indifference. Melancholy therefore does not just affect the soul, but things as well. The mind cannot focus on or orientate itself to any object. Things are as weary and fragile as the feelings of the depressive. Trapped

⁷⁶ Cf. Assmann 2005 and 1991. – On assurances of the afterlife cf. also Ariès 1976, 191–259 [cf. Ariès 1974].

under the heavy weight of the ego, things seem too difficult to deal with. The previously ready-to-hand world sinks into a diffuse existence-for-itself. Things scatter themselves in an uninterpretable just-being-there.⁷⁷ They are as alien to the ego as it is to itself.

The melancholic saves themselves from this dumb heaviness and the dull mush of things with a metaphysics that becomes the condition of the world, but which is actually the condition of *their* soul. They know that life is hurtling, on the wave of death, towards a future that will only add another skull to the “charnel-house [of history]” (Lukács 1971, 64). The ruin is therefore the true topos of the melancholic.⁷⁸ The ruin displays even the strongest of wills to build something in its transition to utter decay. What was once the expression of vigorous energies, a monument to commerce or love, the location of prayer or work, is now witness to a transformation that turns the spectacle of life into a death song. The construction plan of the house or the city is still recognizable; arches, gateposts, skeletal walls are still standing. But water is already eating away at the stone, plants cling to the cracks in walls, the wind whistles through empty windows and strange nocturnal animals creep through the rooms, which still retain traces of the human lives that were once lived there. For the melancholic, everything that is part of life has already become part of the ancient past. Nature takes back everything that the human once wrested from it. The ruin makes tangible that all human infrastructure requires constant effort and energy to maintain it. Nothing is forever; this is the relentless knowledge of the melancholic. As powerful, proud and victorious as buildings are when they are erected, there is a stronger force: that of quiet, imperceptible collapse. Knowing this is the pride of the melancholic. Saturnalian time, eating up all things, is their ally: all things will one day have been. This future perfect de-

⁷⁷ Nowhere is this more clearly depicted than in Dürer’s engraving *Melencolia I*. Cf. Böhme 1989.

⁷⁸ Cf. Benjamin 1928/1998, 177–182; Böhme 1989/2002. – For Georg Simmel, architecture is the “the most sublime victory of the spirit over nature”, a carefully planned composition of “informing spirituality that pushes upward” against the weight of matter. In building, the spirit triumphs over form, indeed even represents “the whole history of mankind” as “the gradual rise of the spirit to mastery of the spirit over [...] nature”. The ruin, however, is “nature’s revenge for the spirit’s having violated it”: “as if the artistic formation had only been an act of violence committed by the spirit to which the stone unwillingly submitted; as if it now gradually shook off this yoke bit by bit and returned once more to the independent lawfulness of its own forces.” The ruin becomes aesthetically important because in it the antagonism between the two “forces of existence [...] the struggle between above and below”, spirit and nature, are kept in a strange equilibrium. “What of art still lives in the ruin and what of nature already lives in it”, together result in a “new whole” (Simmel 1958, 379–385).

termines their gaze, which mercilessly mortifies even immortal things. This amazing achievement is a universal dedifferentiation. The nothingness the melancholic sees everywhere makes the opposition between life and death, between things and living beings, value and worthlessness, order and disorder superfluous. Their sublime indifference is recast as an ontology of things.

In contrast, meditation and asceticism are situational or habitual withdrawals of cathexis, the investment or occupation of energies in things and people. The inner world, overflowing its borders on all sides, is cleared out. The aim is a collected emptiness, a thought without thinking, which spreads through the space of the ego peacefully and calmly, then crosses its threshold and fills the world. Nowadays this is usually practiced with the aim of anchoring the ego more firmly in the self, thus enabling a more energetic contribution to the world of things. From a religious perspective, however, these are states of the surpassing of all things, a transcendence, which leaves immanence to itself, while the ego extracts itself from the web of the material world and becomes pure spirit. In asceticism, religious exercises in mastery of the body are added to this, the aim of which is to make the body a thing obedient to the spiritual imperative.⁷⁹ The scintillating temptation of the colourful world of things clamours at the edges of asceticism. Perhaps no one was a greater expert in the endless lusts that lie waiting in things than the ascetic Saint Anthony (cf. Foucault 2000). There is a heroic paradox here: the glow and shimmer of things is invoked all the more intensely as the price the ego, by rejecting it and purifying itself, must pay for its sublime triumph, which we, slaves to things, can know nothing of. Only things that become an orchestra of temptation can be recognised by the ascetic in the first place: only their magnitude reveals the magnitude of his renunciation of the world and his thingless home. Dedifferentiation in melancholy contrasts with that in asceticism: while in the former it is about the lack of difference between things collapsing into their nothingness, taking the ego with them, here it is about the lack of difference between things in the glowing embers of temptation, which the ego strips from itself in determined separation.

8.5.3 Chaos – chora – rubbish

The third form of dedifferentiation occurs not in the ego, but in things: chaos (at the beginning of the world) and rubbish (at the end of things' life stories). In

⁷⁹ On cultural differences, cf. Michaels 2004.

Hesiod,⁸⁰ chaos is the undivided, yawning abyss. One might imagine it as an empty and yet powerful, churning energetic force field without any structure, which came long before the becoming of delimitable things. The Earth is born out of this chaos, and there another chaos, dark Tartarus, is born, along with limb-loosening Eros. Chaos is a universal force in Hesiod, very close to the origin of everything, because the cosmos is seen as a chain of procreation. Gaia is not the Earth as we see it laid out before us, but rather a force that is represented by the Earth. Gaia is the elusive and immemorial force behind matter, which predates even the gods.

Plato develops his teaching of the chora, when in *Timaeus* he introduces a “difficult and dark form” of becoming, the “where” of things coming into being (cf. Böhme/Böhme 1996, 100 – 111). Plato’s question is ‘in what’ does something come into being? His answer is that this must be a “force” (*dynamis*), which is “the receptacle and in a manner the nurse of all generation” (*Timaeus* 49a). In it everything is born and everything dies, it is the “nurse of becoming”, “the receiving principle of the mother” (*Timaeus* 50d). It “is an invisible and formless being which receives all things and in some mysterious way partakes of the intelligible, and is most incomprehensible” (*Timaeus* 51a). The chora is a non-identity (not an element, not some thing) and yet makes possible all that has become; something that is prior to the separation into elements and things, and therefore prior to the world. Plato grasps this “nurse of all generation” with the mythical image of an unequally weighted vibration, filled with forces going in all directions. Plato sees himself at the very limits of the sayable here: attempting to articulate that which was before all differentiation, before the gods, before the cosmos, before the fact that *something could be there* – a powerful, vibrating to and fro, a pulsating of forces, an objectless throbbing without qualities, without which nothing comes to be. This is the matrix without concepts, in which the becoming of things begins. It is the opposite principle to reason, which operates on the chora and brings the order of things into it. In the dialogue *Philebos*, which does not speak in mythical language of the nurse of all generation, Socrates develops the primary figures of order from the infinite and non-delimitable, out of which the world of things gains contours, borders and form, and thus can appear at all in the first place. These figures are commensurability and consonance, numerous relations in which the equal and the opposed organise themselves. Homologies, proportions, accord (*symphonia*) and harmo-

⁸⁰ Chaos in Hesiod: *Theogony*, verses 116ff. Chora in Plato: *Timaeus*, 49aff. On chora cf. also Derrida 1995; Kristeva 1984, 25 – 30.

nies emerge, which order the cosmic structure of distinct and complementary things: the world of things as a beautiful musical instrument (Nicklaus 1994).

Chaos and chora are the pre-symbolic and the differenceless. Order comes from disjunction, separation, differentiation; it is the undiluted and the well-defined: and with it, creation begins, things begin, but also the symbolic and the linguistic. Chaos only engenders fear and order gives rise to that deep satisfaction which accompanied God's *opus disiunctionis*: "Behold, it was very good." It becomes clear in the biblical creation story that God's work also emerges out of the pre-symbolic, the *tohu wa bohu*.^{*} Creation is calling things out of the chaotic muddle and therefore the introduction of separation and divisions (disjunctions). The different parts of the world thus created are then authenticated by the word, and finally each life form is christened by Adam (Gen. 1: 1–2: 4a; 2: 19–20). The pre-structural form of chaos and the pre-symbolic form of language correspond to each other, just as the emergence of things that can be differentiated from each other and the appearance of differentiating words and names are related to each other. Nonetheless, chaos remains the background field of energy in the order of things, just as the expressionless pre-symbolic is retained in the order of language.

With all the respect it is due, this sublime philosophical thinking about the differenceless as a liminal zone of the undelimitable in the transition to things will now be contrasted with that other liminal zone of differenceless: the transition from well-defined things to rubbish. If the world is everything that is the case (Wittgenstein), then things will always eventually go the way of decay. We have similar categorical problems with litter, rubbish, sewage, rags, junk and scraps as with mud, rubble, dirt, shit, slime, the rotten and the putrescent. Are these things? Wittgenstein does not include things themselves in his "world", but instead merely "facts" "in logical space". Facts are defined as the "existence of a state of affairs". A state of affairs in turn "is a combination of objects (things)". In this sense, 'objects' of the kind listed above must at least be states of affairs (Wittgenstein 1921/2001, 5–6). Things must have the potential to become states of affairs; yet these are ultimately based on human judgement, they come from culture, the noetic sphere of cognition and evaluation. This only helps us further in the sense that the 'things' we call rubbish are not inherently rubbish, but become rubbish because we judge them as worthless on a scale of possible worth (use or exchange value; symbolic-aesthetic value) and then view them as rubbish. A tetra pack that has been drunk empty is still a thing, even

* The Hebrew phrase found in Genesis 1: 2 is usually translated as 'empty void' or similar; the modern German *Tohuwabohu* means 'great confusion'.

though it ends up in the rubbish. But it has served its purpose and has become worthless. With regard to mud, rotting things and similar, it is our idiosyncratic defensive reactions that make viscous, fluid aggregate states of matter that are difficult to delineate seem repulsive or disgusting. However, water and air are also quite hard to delineate and yet they are not repulsive. But is air a thing? We tend to describe it as a medium instead. We have internalised a rather indestructible schemata of things, according to which we will only spontaneously describe something with clear contours and borders, and a resistive, discrete structure as a thing. That is why we hesitate to describe a rotten cauliflower, whose phytomorphic structure has begun to dissolve into some kind of mush, as a thing. The rotten cauliflower is something, but no longer the thing ‘cauliflower’. At the same time there is something there, some matter that can be experienced by the senses, even if it is an amorphous mass, inedible, repulsive, worthless.

Ontologically, the thingly as such can never disappear. A broken cup is no longer a cup, but it is still a plurality of things: shards of the cup. In the cultural matrix, shards can bring luck, or they are swept up and disposed of: as rubbish; for the archaeologist of early history, shards are historical evidence, they are carefully preserved and may end up in a museum. Even a rotting, mushy animal carcass crawling with maggots represents the dead animal in transition to a plurality of new thinglinesses. Nature’s metabolism ensures, in compliance with the second law of thermodynamics, the continued existence of the thingly in things, an – according to historical human criteria – infinite process, cosmologically limited by the increase in entropy, which limits absolutely the metamorphoses of things into other things. But are black holes still things because they can be located and have negative mass? It is unnecessary to pursue this question now. What is important for the cultural horizon that is our focus here is that during the process of the advancing material decomposition of things a qualitative change in status occurs. We will call this dereification or dedifferentiation. It is connected to the devaluation of the cultural status of things. They are segregated from the cultural matrix and leave the universe of civilised things as rubbish.

Rubbish, even if we separate it into recyclable items, is the amorphous mass of dereified things: matter in its unseparated state. We saw above that this was also called chaos or *tohu wa bohu* (confusion and emptiness). Here we see that culture does not just define itself against the universe of things existing for themselves, i.e. against nature, but also against rubbish. Rubbish is always cultural rubbish. According to Michael Thompson, one of the few who have attempted a “theory of rubbish”, rubbish is all the worthless, negative things that are usually made invisible in culture (Thompson 1979, 13–56). Within culture’s metabolism, almost all things are always moving along the scale of sharply declining

value: moving towards rubbish on this scale at various different speeds. This is the fate of things in culture. There is no rubbish in nature.

Only very few kinds of things belong to the thingly aristocracy: their value increases with age (art works, cult objects, antiques, fetishes). Sometimes things that have no use value anymore are assigned secondary value, for example functional objects from lost cultures, such as everyday objects from the culture of the GDR. These are things that are musealised in the widest sense, whether in private or public. They are not consumed, but are aesthetically appreciated or valued as historical documents. From this we can see that art in general, but also the museum, the archive and the collection, are facilities that try to counteract our anxiety about loss (of self) and the disappearance of things in rubbish. A culture of memory means that things are protected from becoming rubbish or decaying, or are explicitly produced in order to attain an existence that eludes the logic of consumption in the rubbish process. Every form of art and memorial is a wall against the *curriculum rerum* that inevitably ends in rubbish. Musealisation (as well as every form of fetishism) stops time and is thus the opposite of things' quiet decay. Without exception, the biography of things is a declining curve towards rubbish. This curve can be flattened slightly or even temporarily reversed with intermittent peaks by investing in preservation. However, it is important to note that becoming rubbish is not necessarily associated with instant destruction. Many things are 'cleared out' because they seem dysfunctional. One might call this process that they go through the social death of things. They live out a forgotten existence buried in cupboards, basements, attics, cardboard boxes and cases. The day they are picked up again, though it may only be by chance, is the day their fate is decided. They are re-evaluated: grandfather's useless stuff becomes an antique for the grandchild; other times, it is sold off at a garage sale or similar, put back into use, or collected by a clearing out company, which – like the rag-and-bone men once did – separate the salvageable items out of the refuse from those destined for the destroying machine of the dump. In extremely rare cases, a really special thing makes its way into thing-heaven: the museum (Fehr 1996).⁸¹

For a society like ours, which generates an incomparably huge amount of rubbish due to our consumption of a massive variety of goods, rubbish becomes an urgent problem of definition. Cultures can only survive if they maintain a stable border to the rubbish they generate. It is a peculiarity of rubbish, however,

⁸¹ Doering and Hirschauer investigate the process things undergo to become exhibition pieces (1997). – "Kunst und Design im Kontext von Abfall und Recycling" [Art and Design in the Context of Rubbish and Recycling] exhibition from 21.7–30.9.2004 in Sietland (http://waste.techh.net/pictures/Re-ART-ONE/RE_ART_ONE_Catalogue.pdf, accessed on: 2.11.2005).

that although it represents the ‘outside’ of culture, it also has the spite to infest its dark corners or to creep (back) into it. That is why rubbish must be managed. Large rubbish disposal systems develop, today a presence in any apartment and every production facility. They have infiltrated public space and become a significant component of the ecology, the economy and politics. The ubiquity of refuse management indicates the ubiquity of rubbish itself. Inherent to this is a modern despair that was once at home in the ruins of melancholy. A growing amount of social energy must be invested in ‘getting rid’ of the world’s rubbish. Individual pathologies of messiness (what is known as compulsive hoarding) are an indication that rubbish could take over the culture that generated it. People who are affected by this disorder choke in their own rubbish to such an extent that the rubbish actually forces them out of their own home: the person becomes homeless, while his or her cultural space, the home, is completely filled with rubbish and becomes a chaos. These are modern tragedies, in which the nemesis that is rubbish searches us out in our own homes. The fragile systems of delimitation that culture requires to stabilise itself have collapsed. The rubbish we want to dispose of starts to invade. It conquers the space it originated from, from where it then must be removed in order to preserve cultivated space. Cultures are only conceivable as stable structured spaces. A space filled with rubbish is no longer a space; it is a pre-structural and pre-symbolic amorphia, the death of culture.

Catastrophes have similar features: floods (especially those associated with tropical cyclones) obliterate the differentiation in the world. All the things that make up social meaning are mixed up, destroyed and covered in mud. Muddiness in particular is an extreme form of the invasion of amorphous chaos in the space of order. If chora is the beginning of order, then rubbish, mud and dirt are the end of ordinal space – just as death is the terminus of time. Private compulsive hoarding or large-scale catastrophes are the extremes, but they reveal the quiet, by now ubiquitous war against rubbish. In mythical terms, rubbish is the revenge of things on our domination of them, in which we have made them serve us and consumed them.

Speaking more plainly, rubbish shows that industrial societies have been taken over by their waste. This has had two consequences. We had to develop new technical strategies for dealing with rubbish; this assumes a prior process of becoming aware of areas that were previously ‘objectless’: the nature of things that are used up, unused, useless, out of date, old, consumed, thrown out, left lying around, forgotten. (Archives can also be places of forgetting and therefore places to deposit rubbish.) This creates a new discourse to accompany the war against rubbish. In Mary Douglas we have an anthropologist, in Michael Thompson a sociologist, in Susanne Hauser a cultural studies scholar and in Aleida

Assmann a literary theorist, all of whom have presented paradigmatic attempts to allocate rubbish a systematic place in the order of things.⁸² This is futile insofar as rubbish is the anti-structure par excellence, the border or the other to every form of order. The main idea shared by all of these studies is that rubbish, as opposed to the symbolic order of culture, as opposed to the order of things and as opposed to organised memory, is a central if empty position in the theory of culture in general. In the same way that rubbish invades culture, conversely, the border of social order is also pushed further and further into the sphere of rubbish: the ideal is to have no rubbish at all anymore. But that would be an absurd utopia, in which everything is musealised in order to annihilate rubbish; a nightmarish form of the archive. Or everything dysfunctional is incessantly destroyed: that would mean an absolute loss of memory. The compromise lies somewhere between the museum and the incinerator: both are growing, the museum and archive as well as the rubbish tip and incineration plant. Their growth is an effect of the exponential growth of rubbish.

From Mary Douglas, we are already familiar with the dichotomy of purity and impurity, cleanliness and dirt, which has nothing to do with the nature of things, but instead with their location, evaluation and significance, and therefore with their position in a culture's symbolic system. Thompson develops a theory of rubbish from the analysis of commodities, society's exchange and value economics. Both use dichotomies of visibility and invisibility, attention and suppression, inclusion and exclusion to explain the socio-symbolic status of rubbish. Susanne Hauser compares early industrial societies in order to investigate the strategies with which huge, no longer used areas from the first and second phases of industrialisation – whole landscapes as rubbish: 'industrial wasteland' – are being reintegrated into sociocultural circulation. As a specialist in cultural memory, Aleida Assmann deals with the connection between memory, storage and 'data rubbish', along with the no doubt not coincidentally increasing tendency in contemporary art to integrate rubbish into the creative process, a form of aesthetic recycling (with significant signs of the fetishisation of the worthless, which is resurrected in art).⁸³

82 Douglas 2002; Thompson 1979; Hauser 2001; Assmann, A. 1999. Also: Jochum 2000. – On the link between collecting and producing art: Winzen 1997. On collecting and mnemonics: Bolzoni 1994.

83 The precarious border between producing litter and pollution and musealisation is marked as well as shifted by the collector (the same also goes for the rubbish collector, the collector-fetishist, the museum and artists who use rubbish). Cf. Breger 2002. Breger focuses her analysis on the fact that archaeological knowledge is acquired from rubbish, relics.

Walter Benjamin was quite ahead of his time in this regard, with his ideas about the rag-and-bone man and the aesthetic appreciation of the small and insignificant. Children, collectors and historians are for him examples of a productive way of handling rubbish, and he describes this in such a way that the endeavours of artists today seem somehow linked to Benjamin. He writes of *children*:

Children are particularly fond of haunting any site where things are being visibly worked on. They are irresistibly drawn by the detritus generated by building, gardening, housework, tailoring or carpentry. In waste products they recognise the face that the world of things turns directly and solely to them. In using these things, they do not so much imitate the works of adults as bring together, in the artefact produced in play, materials of widely differing kinds in a new, intuitive relationship. Children thus produce their own small world of things within the greater one (Benjamin 1924/1996, SW 1, 408).

Just as children display a creative relationship to things that to adults are merely ‘odds and ends’ (we will come across this again in fetishism discourse), they also have an unbiased relationship to idioplastic aggregates, which cause so many delineation problems in the cultivated world: mud, slush, all kinds of dirt. It has also been written that the *historian*, who studies the micrologies of life and the main events on the world stage, is the “rag-picker of history”, “finding ideas in the flotsam, the ephemeral, in rubbish that the ‘dirty current of spirit’ (Adorno) washes up on the shores”.⁸⁴ In his 1930 review of Siegfried Kracauer’s *Die Angestellten*, Benjamin presents the historian as “a rag-picker, at daybreak, picking up rags of speech and verbal scraps with his stick, and tossing them, grumbling and growling, a little drunk, into his cart, not without letting one or another of those faded cotton remnants – ‘humanity’, ‘inwardness’, or ‘absorption’ [and, one could add, system, totality, completeness] flutter derisively in the wind” (1930/1999, SW 2.1, 310). And of the *collector*, the “physiognomists of the world of things” (Benjamin 1931/1999, SW 2.2, 487), he writes: “What is decisive in collecting is that the object is detached from all its original functions to enter into the closest conceivable relation with objects of the same kind. This relation is the diametric opposite of utility, and falls into the peculiar category of completeness. [...] And for the true collector, every single thing in this system becomes an encyclopaedia of all knowledge of the epoch, the landscape, the industry, and the owner from which it comes” (Benjamin *Arcades* 1927–40/1999, 204–205). Things and all physiognomic traces that can be identified as data of mem-

⁸⁴ Ehrenspeck 1992, 65–66. On the link between relict and history, cf. Radley 1990.

ory in them, “for the true collector” add up to a “magic encyclopaedia whose quintessence is the fate of his object.” (Benjamin 1931/1999, SW 2.2, 487).⁸⁵

In light of today's avalanche of rubbish, such lovely ideas seem like romanticisms from a time when chaos could still be tamed, when the order of things still seemed intact and practical knowledge could still be gleaned from the relicts and rubbish of the thingly world. This knowledge could in turn provide a symbolic space for displaced objects, those rejected, contaminated, stray, discarded *abjects*.⁸⁶ Thus rubbish, with all its marks of damage and weariness, would be given a place in the treasury of allegorical reminiscence and memory, which would almost be equal to a redemption of things: redemption from the nemesis of their impermanence. Georg Simmel, truly a man well-disposed toward the inconspicuous, had however already diagnosed the incommensurability between a subjective culture of individuals and the objective culture of factual things in his *Philosophy of Money* from 1900. The sense of connection our grandparents experienced, with their modest arsenal of things, from which only a tiny trickle of waste flowed – this kind of close connection between people and things living together can only be regained today, in the modern capitalist world, by paying the price of artificial effort, which is particularly apparent in the fetishistic cathexis of commodities. The corollary of this private and artificially created alliance with things is the radical making indifferent of things. Things have concentrated to become a compact, impervious and at the same time abstract reality. The ego and things have moved apart in a radical way. The more powerful and illusory things become under the command of money, the more they find themselves moving on their own, barely influencable by subjects any longer. As the iridescence of the masses of commodities grows, the more the output of rubbish increases toward the unstoppable. The cathectic investment of emotional energy, the desire and passion with which collectors, artists, scientists, consumers or fetishists wrench individual things and fragments like trophies from the raging currents of goods, acquires a coincidental and abject aspect (Simmel 1900/2004, 429 ff., 446 ff.). The culture of individuals, according to Simmel, will always lag behind the accelerated development of cultivated things. The former becomes a function of the latter: as style, fashion, the pace of life, consumer fetishism, the mania for collection, the thirst for knowledge, the idolatry of the manufactured [*Werk-Idolatrie*]. “The superior power of the culture of objects over the culture of individuals is the result of the unity and autonomous self-sufficiency that the objective culture has accomplished in modern times. Production, with its

⁸⁵ Cf. Benjamin 1937/2002, SW 3, 260 – 302; more generally, Belk 1994.

⁸⁶ After a neologism coined by Julia Kristeva 1980; cf. Baum/Höltgen 2005.

technology and its achievements, seems to be a cosmos with definite and, as it were, logical determinations and developments which confront the individual in the same way that fate confronts the instability and irregularity of our will” (ibid., 469). The more matter-of-fact and impersonal things are, the more individual, but also random and fragmentary people are. This results in things becoming abstract on the one hand, and on the other, the tendency to try to overcome their indifference through fetishisation, in order to connect a thin thread to the world beyond “objectless interiority” (Thomas Mann). Individuals are threatened with becoming mere shadows of things. Yet this situation has become so extreme today, that things themselves are becoming mere shadows. This is the last stage of dedifferentiation.

9 On the disappearance of things

9.1 “Pseudoreality Prevails”⁸⁷

The last form of dedifferentiation, which borders the universe of things, is disappearance. By this I do not mean disposal, which we have already covered under the heading rubbish. In today’s discourse, which argues that the ‘end’ of all manner of things is upon us, there is in fact never any mention of rubbish. The reason for this seems to be the paradox that, on the one hand, capitalism exorbitantly increases types of things and the mass of things and on the other, sustainably devalues them. This will be dealt with comprehensively in the chapter on commodity fetishism (chapters 3.4–3.6). For now it suffices to say that the thing-commodity relation is defined by things having barely any value relation among themselves, but instead one mediated by the equivalence to monetary value. The qualitative value of things is ‘neutral’ when it comes to commodity value, which can equate fifty washing machines with one car. The unique qualities of each thing ‘disappears’ in the equivalence of the economy. Thus everything, even things that cannot be compared (a Pontormo painting, two semi-detached houses, a carpenter’s workshop with six workbenches), enter into relations and can be exchanged with each other – but only by giving up their qualitative dis-

⁸⁷ This is Robert Musil’s way of expressing the strange dedifferentiation of persons, actions, data and things in modern societies. “Seinesgleichen geschieht” [the phrase is usually translated as “pseudoreality prevails”, but literally means ‘the like of it happens’] is the corollary, in terms of the subject, of the “man without qualities” and, in terms of the object, means that we live in a world in which qualities are more linked to each other than to the things or people they are qualities of.

tinctiveness: dedifferentiation is the foundation of a society of consumption that operates via the medium of money.

The second reason for dedifferentiation is more remarkable: more and more things are being produced in the way that running shoes are. The manufacturing company is not so much selling the shoes, but instead the brand they carry, the design, lifestyle, sense of identity, fashion and sense of belonging to cultural groups that are attached to the brand and not the shoe. It is irrelevant for your half-an-hour run whether the shoes you are wearing are Nike, Adidas or Reebok. Complex aesthetic, socially distinctive, cultural-semiotic ego-styling forces make up the brand aura of the shoe and its value as a commodity. The shoe is therefore more than a functional object; it is a cultural artefact, a switch in the circuit of symbolic values, so much more than a functional device designed for the particular features of how I run. The 'running-shoeness' disappears beneath the aesthetic-semiotic associations that link the design on the shoe with completely different spheres of existence. To the extent that consumers' expertise shifts from the things themselves to their design, one can speak of a disappearance of things – at least from the perspective of cultural criticism and the criticism of consumption. If we recall Heidegger, this is based on a specific old European understanding of the thing: things have cores, around which the (primary and secondary) qualities of a thing assemble. Heidegger called this an assault that did not allow the thingness of the thing to appear to us. That is exactly the way it is with the running shoe. There must be a core, so that the qualities which define its value and yet which do not belong to it (they could also be represented by a baseball shirt) can be tacked on to it. The assault might be that, in order to be things, things must pull off a successful performance on the stage of commodity aesthetics – or they cease to exist.

The third dimension of the disappearance of things is defined by the transition to the digital information age. In digital processes, things do not even occur anymore, only signs. After the revolution in the relations between things resulting in the capitalist society of commodities, the digital revolution in the fate of things has perhaps been the most lasting. This is the reason for the swelling discourse that has supposedly identified the disappearance, not just of things, but also of space, of the subject, of the body, etc. in the last few years.

9.2 Everything disappears

It all began with the 1984/1985 exhibition "Les Immateriaux" conceived by Jean-François Lyotard (1996) in the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris. Inspired by postmodernism, digital technology and the mass media, across the world the ex-

hibition seemed like a signal that the epoch of things and bodies was over. In 1992, the Designzentrum in Munich held a conference on “The Disappearance of Things” (Langenmaier 1993). The Museum for Communication in Berlin went against the trend and held an exhibition in 2003 entitled “The Message in Things” (Kallinich/Bretthauer 2003); as did the Museum for Photography in Winterthur with its 2004 exhibition “In the Ecstasy of Things” (Seelig/Stahel 2004).⁸⁸ At the Mathildenhöhe in Darmstadt in 2005, the exhibition “In a Designer Park: Living in Artificial Worlds” took place – with a catalogue weighing eight kilos, in every sense a thing (Buchholz/Wolbert 2004).⁸⁹ Paul Virilio had already published his *Esthétique de la disparition* in 1980 and continued his prognosis of the dereification of the material world in 1984 in *L’horizon négatif*, while in 1993 he examined the reverse, the invasion of the human body by miniaturised computer machines in *L’art du moteur* (Virilio 1991).⁹⁰ Stefan Breuer (1995) diagnosed the society of disappearance in his book of the same name. For decades Jean Baudrillard has repeated in ever new versions his idea of the “agony of the real”,⁹¹ the referenceless and self-referential digital world of simulations, a reality/appearance to which the only things that gain admission are those that become an (electronically manipulable) media event; and this includes war. Radical constructivism made a furore of the total closure of the cognitive system of the human brain: all reality is only the realness of the thought that we have according to our mental capabilities (Schmidt 1992). All over the world, deconstructivism continues to attract followers with ever more elaborate figures of thought to reveal the referentiality of statements (about certain circumstances, art works, even things) as self-deception; everything that did not display a form of infinitely repeatable self-referentiality was judged to be inadequate. Hard luck for things that they do not produce any repetitive works of art; they continued to be ignored. The avant-garde theorist Peter Bürger has identified the disappearance of the subject (1998), albeit a little too late: in the earlier publication *Das Verschwinden des Subjekts* [The Disappearance of the Subject] edited by Hermann Schrödter, Hans Michael Baumgarten (1994) had already asked which subject had disappeared, in his article of the same name [“Welches Subjekt ist verschwunden?”]. Neil Postman had, however, already identified *The Disappearance of Childhood*

88 An antipode to Faber 1991.

89 The title creates an inevitable association with Peter Sloterdijk’s (2009) expression ‘the human zoo’.

90 On this cf. Forest 1991; Virilio 2005 und 1995. On the latter, the invasion of the body by miniature machines, intelligent clothing, etc., cf. Adamowsky 2002, 171–72.

91 Baudrillard 1994 [the German title is *Agonie des Realen* or ‘the agony of the real’]. Cf. Baudrillard 1993 and 1991.

due to the child-eating monster of the mass media in 1982. Telecommunications working at light speed provided even more disappearance: *Das Verschwinden der Ferne* [The Disappearance of Distance] (Decker/Weibel 1990). And if the subject, deprived of distance, disappears, the question is raised as to whether the body will also disappear (*Verschwindet der Körper?* Krämer 2002). And then there is the thesis that once the Twin Towers collapsed and were replaced by an empty 'ground zero', even "reality" disappears. This was asserted by Klaus Theweleit (2002). In 2004, the philosopher Garcia Alexander Düttmann finally made a strategy of disappearance.

In his study of art, literature, technology and sociocultural developments, Christoph Asendorf (1989) has also shown how "the slow disappearance of matter" occurred around 1900, which is exactly what Georg Simmel, as just suggested, also demonstrated for all levels of the economy, society and culture in exactly the same year, 1900. Manfred Matheis (1997), however, identified this "disappearance" one hundred years earlier – and why should the time around 1800 not in fact be the first European period in which we find non-referentiality, self-referentiality, simulation, deconstruction, fragmentation, irony, negation of the real and the artificialisation of the body? And why not the seventeenth century, which is in fact also characterised by these figures of thought? But did the *memento mori* not already imply the imminent disappearance of the existence of the world since the High Middle Ages? And what about apocalypticism, did it not become almost a strategy for the proof of the unreality of reality, which *must* be eventually made to disappear, in the first centuries after Christ? And was not the reality of appearances merely an unreal reflection for Plato, the shadow of ideas? And did Pindar not also describe mankind as the dream of a shadow?⁹² – Disappearance has always, or at least rather frequently, been on the rise. Nonetheless, it seems that in the last third of the twentieth century the Hegelian "fury of disappearance"⁹³ created a particularly hefty fever for the spirit of the age.

92 "Creatures of a day! What is man? / What is he not? He is the dream of a shadow." (Eighth Pythian Ode. In Pindar 2007, 75) – Cf. Stoichita 1997; Gombrich 1995; Belting 2000; Casati 2004; Götz 2003.

93 Right on time for the millennium, the following Philosophicum Lech publication on the Hegelian furies appeared: Liessmann 2000. Hans Magnus Enzensberger had however already published a volume of poetry entitled *Die Furie des Verschwindens* [The Fury of Disappearance] in 1980. – The relevant passage in Hegel is: "Just as the individual self-consciousness does not find itself in this universal work of absolute freedom *qua* existing substance, as little does it find itself in the deeds proper, and specific individual acts of will, performed by this substance. For the universal to pass into a deed, it must gather itself into the single unity of individuality, and put an individual consciousness in the forefront; for universal will is an actual concrete will only in a self that is single and one. Thereby, however, all other individuals are excluded from the

When the mind gets dizzy, things also start to blur and disappear. It is therefore necessary to examine this talk of the disappearance of things a little more closely.

9.3 Around 1900: fragmentation and electricity

Of course, things do not actually disappear, their cultural coordinates simply shift. In art, science, culture, in cities and in industry – as Asendorf convincingly argues – the compactness of things in terms of duration and mass disintegrates after around 1900. Impressionism dismantles objects into elements of perception; futurism and cubism dissolve things into phases of movement or divide them into form fragments that are recombined with other fragments, but without becoming a whole again: a mobile, dynamic “nervous geometry” (Asendorf 1989, 119). In photography, Eadweard Muybridge and Étienne-Jules Marey pioneered the method of chronophotography, which can also be described as divisionism, an experimental process for dividing up movement, which immediately precedes the workflow analysis of Taylorism. The sound and the image were also broken down into tiniest parts, as were information, stimuli and the electrical current; this made the medial technology that drove the mobilisation of society possible: (image) telegraphy, the telephone, chronophotography, punched cards (Hollerith machines), the cinematograph. What is significant is that things and bodies are no longer understood as static assemblies of compact mass, but rather as elements (mass points) in dynamic processes and energy fields. Einstein’s equivalence of mass and energy corresponded to the artistic and medial (in photography and cinematography) dissolution of things in the flow of movement. However, they also reflected the colossal dynamisation of capitalism, which swept through the arsenal of things and human relations sucking everything in, making it fluid, transforming it. Whatever form they took, things were streamlined (Oppeln 2004).⁹⁴ The physics of fluids and currents, and their technological

entirety of this deed, and have only a restricted share in it, so that the deed would not be a deed of real universal self-consciousness. – Universal freedom can thus produce neither a positive achievement nor a deed; there is left for it only negative action; it is merely the rage and fury of destruction [disappearance].” (*Phenomenology of Mind*, part BB/VI: “Spirit”, chapter B: “Spirit in self-estrangement: the discipline of culture and civilisation”, section III: “Absolute freedom and terror”, 604.

94 The streamline, which had already been present in the thing-dissolving aesthetics of flow in the Jugendstil movement, would soon provide the form for the first technical prototypes of the car and the train, but was also used in the design of everyday objects such as cutlery, canisters, toasters, etc.

applications for new ways of utilising space became paradigmatic: the arrival of aerodynamics and hydrodynamics and with them airplanes, improved ship building, submarines, experimental ballistics, first steps in rocket technology after the discovery of the jet force, vacuum kinetics.⁹⁵ Gas, electricity, water and the sewage system spread like arteries through the city to become a huge network of liquefied utilities, consumption and waste disposal. Flow becomes the ideal for all traffic. Later, the autobahn is built in the form of a flow line. Space was no longer the stable, homogenous, absolute Newtonian spatial container for holding things, but the correlate of movement. In physical science experiments, the physiology of perception and the nervous system were dissected as precisely (Sarasin/Tanner 1998; Sarasin 2002) as artists took apart perceived things in their work. Ernst Mach (1984) categorically opposed any form of the substantiality of things and dissolved it, along with subjects, in more or less stable, yet loosely tied together complexes of sensation.⁹⁶ Mach's famous statement "the ego is unsavable" (1984, 20) also applies to the body and to things. Thinking of things as substances is only a "useful habit" (ibid., 5). This way of thinking is replaced with "psychophysical parallelism": a fluid, functional structure of relations that resolves the opposition between the self and thing, which we have become accustomed to calling 'thing' or 'self' in places where the relations are more strongly concentrated. A vulgar metaphysical prejudice. In his dissertation on Ernst Mach from 1908, Robert Musil shows very nicely that the destruction of the concept of substance also invalidates the categories of force, causality and the thing. "In nature there is no such thing as an unchanging thing; the thing is an abstraction, a symbol for a relatively stable complex, which is yet abstracted from this existing changeability" (Musil 1984, 79). Here a dissolution of the

95 In 1883, the pioneering rocket scientist Konstantin Eduardovich Tsiolkovsky (1857–1935) invented a spaceship based on jet force and developed ideas on ways of conquering space with technology that he would later connect with thoughts on space without gravity. His ideas had a lasting influence on Kazimir Malevich and Suprematism. Tsiolkovsky links and fuses fantasies of weightlessness, a revolution in space, technical-physical constructivism and the political pathos of revolution. The motif of a "cosmic society" is directly linked to the aesthetic form principles of Suprematism. Abstraction and the lack of objects in Malevich's painting, virtually the disappearance of things, should be seen in the context of a techno-fantasy that provides the frame for a revolutionary, artificial world, freed from gravity. – Cf. Ladewig 2000.

96 This is directly based on psychotechnology and experiments in the optical analysis of movement. Robert Musil wrote his dissertation on this with Carl Stumpf at the University of Berlin: Musil 1984. – On the influence of natural science on Musil's concept of the dissolution of things and identity, cf. Kassung 2000.

reality of things can be identified, which Musil relates to the Heraclitean “panta rhei” (ibid., 89).⁹⁷

Nietzsche had already prefigured such ideas about modernity. In his criticism of metaphysics and classical mechanics, he not only negated the concept of substance, which was the foundation of the ontology of things, but also the category of causality (“fictions of causality”, KSA 13, 459 [2003, 271]). Things are inventions, fictions and projections, which result in the “attempt to humanise things”.⁹⁸ “Our ‘external world’ is the *product of fantasy*” (KSA 9, 446). “It was we who created ‘thingness’ in the first place”, in order to provide some kind of orientation in the “formless and unformulable world of the chaos of sensations” (KSA 12, 396 [2003, 161]).⁹⁹ “It is only after the model of the subject that we invented thingness and interpreted it into the hubbub of sensations.” (KSA 12, 383 [2003, 154]) The seemingly permanent has neither a subject nor an object, neither fixed atoms nor the Kantian thing-in-itself [*Ding-an-sich*], instead they are “complexes of what happens, which appear to have duration in relation to other complexes – for example due to a difference in tempo.”¹⁰⁰ Here Nietzsche is already very close to Mach’s fluid sensation complexes and the aesthetics of speed in the cities of modernity. “A thing”, comments Asendorf, “only exists

97 Cf. also Mach 1926/1984, 82. – The link between Mach, Avenarius and the impressionist aesthetics of perception has already been made by: Diersch 1973.

98 Nietzsche: KSA 3, 473 (*The Gay Science*, part III, book no. 112 [2001, 113]). – On the view of things as a fiction and projection of the ‘I’, which itself is a “fable” and which interprets characteristics it has projected into things as inherent characteristics of them, cf. KSA 6, 90–91 (*Twilight of the Idols*, “The Four Great Errors”, no. 3 [2005, 169]). – “The genesis of ‘things’ is wholly the work of imaginers, thinkers, willers, inventors. The very concept of ‘thing’ as well as its qualities. – Even ‘the subject’ is something created in this way, is a ‘thing’ like all the others: a simplification” (KSA 12, 141 [2003, 91]). Cf. also KSA 13, 257–262, 274–276 [2003, 245–248, 251–253]: criticism of the concepts of cause (ibid., 260–262), causality (ibid., 274–276 [2003, 251–253]), mechanism (ibid., 257–260 [2003, 245–247]), atoms (dispersed throughout all of the passages cited). Concepts from natural science too are only semiotic conventions (ibid., 258 [2003, 246]). This represents the beginning of the dissolution of the world of things into a self-referential system of signs. At best, things can only be described as “dynamic quanta” (KSA 13, 259 [2003, 247]), everything else is just imagined projection.

99 Cf. “The invention of the laws of numbers was made on the basis of the error, dominant even from the earliest times, that there are identical things (but in fact nothing is identical with anything else); at least that there are things (but there is no ‘thing’).” (KSA 2, 40 = *Human, All Too Human*, chapter 1, § 19 [1996, 22]). Cf. KSA 11, 57 and 12, 104: (“The properties of a thing are its effects upon other ‘things’: if we remove other ‘things’, then a thing has no properties, i.e. *there is no thing without other things*, i.e. there is no ‘thing-in-itself’.”)

100 Nietzsche: KSA 12, 384 [2003, 154]. – Cf. “The ‘external world’ affects us: the effect is telegraphed into our brain, there arranged, given shape and traced back to its cause: then the cause is *projected*, and *only then does the fact enter our consciousness*.” (KSA 11, 437 [2003, 4])

in relations, as combinations of qualities and in relation to other things: it exists in and from its conditions, there is therefore nothing ‘unconditional’.” (1989, 48)

What Nietzsche had articulated in his critique of the ontology of things and in his endorsement of an energetic and no longer mechanistic atomism (Asendorf 1989, 48 ff.), became a social reality: both economy and culture left the epoch of substance and entered a new age of functions, of mobile relations, energies, forces and networks, in which things, like bodies, were subjected to increasing speeds of circulation, exchange and penetration (Barkhoff et al. 2004). The rhythms of the large cities, industrial plants and the systems of logistics and traffic are the paradigmatic signatures of this dynamic mobilisation and dissolution.

9.4 Speed

High speed contains a paradox: we generate the speed – and yet it carries us along with it. Speed is a form of ecstasy, in which rapture and rational thinking, intoxication and awareness, losing control and being mentally present all work together. Indeed, these paradoxes can be viewed as formulae of modernity. It blurs the borders not just of subjects but also of things. For Virilio, things whooshing past at high speeds are a paradigmatic situation for the at least optical dissolution of matter in a dromoscopic ecstasy, in which the window of the vehicle becomes a “screen” on to which things are projected. The speeding car becomes a “motor-projector”, which dedifferentiates the thingliness of things (Virilio 2005, 105–110).

Nietzsche had already observed the increase in speed in culture and thought about its effects on aesthetic perception: “Sensibility unutterably more excitable (– the increase in excitability dressed in moralistic finery as the increase of *compassion* –), the abundance of disparate impressions greater than ever before: – the *cosmopolitanism* of dishes, of literatures, newspapers, forms, tastes, even landscapes, etc. The *tempo* of this influx is *prestissimo*; the impressions efface each other; one instinctively resists taking something in, taking something *deeply*, ‘digesting’ something; this results in a *weakening* of the digestive power. A kind of *adaptation* to this overload of impressions occurs: man forgets how to *act*, and *now only re-acts* to stimuli from outside. *He spends his force* partly in *appropriation*, partly in *defence*, partly in *responding*.” (KSA 12, 464 [2003, 178])

In Futurism this mobilisation was welcomed emphatically. Umberto Boccioni gleaned the beginnings of a new aesthetics from technical acceleration: “It is about finding a form that is an expression of this new absolutum; the speed that the truly modern man cannot disregard. The aspects that life has taken

on in this speed and the simultaneity resulting from it must be investigated.” (1914/1966, 209). Boccioni gives this absolutum the image of: “a wonderful spectacle: modern life; a new fever: scientific discovery” (ibid., 215). Tommaso Marinetti imagines the fusion of the neural network with the global technical network of communications, whereby the traditional form of ego is deleted and a transpersonal “wireless fantasy” is installed. Poetry is equated with the “cult of progress and speed” and almost acquires the status of floating freely in cyberspace: The poet “throws [...] huge nets of analogies over the world. In doing so, he telegraphically represents the foundation of life, which consists of analogies, i. e. with the same economic speed that the teletyper provides for journalists and war reporters for their superficial stories. This need for laconic modes of expression [...] corresponds to the laws of speed [...]” (1912/1966, 174, 170). Around 1900, this technical stimulus manifested in the body as modern nervousness; at the end of the century, we have the exteriorisation of the neural network conceived of as a global nervous system. The sceptic Odo Marquard sees in this a “tachogenous unworldliness” (1986, 76, 82ff.)¹⁰¹ (Greek: *tachos* = hurry, speed) in individuals, but also in culture in general. Like Paul Virilio, he identifies the main cause for the strange unattainability of things in the speed of technical and medial-cultural processes.

Changes in media technology also create speed: thus the printing press, for example, with its pamphlets and “image vehicles” (Aby Warburg), resulted in a massive acceleration in the circulation of knowledge and symbols compared to scriptural cultures (Giesecke 1991). Thanks to rapid printing presses and the telegraph system in the nineteenth century, information could be communicated with such speed that newspapers could be published up to five times a day. Even though dizzy spells and fainting on railway trains had only just become a thing of the past.¹⁰² Today’s real-time telecommunications and videography, which Paul Virilio has investigated, as well as experiments with nanoseconds in computers and in particle accelerators, are the results of speeds that have left the dimensions of the human body but also the dimensions of the things enabling such communication behind. As fast as the wind or an arrow or a thought...: these were the ultimate speeds in older cultures, and still depended on the weight of things. Today’s speeds, however, are transhuman and must be slowed down in the moment that they leave their inorganic system to be

¹⁰¹ Marquard is referring to the “accelerated aging of experiences” and the rise of the fictive.

¹⁰² Cf. on the first push in the acceleration in society in the nineteenth century: Schivelbusch 1993; Hoeges 1985.

translated into something that can be perceived by the senses, in order to be capable of being processed by the human mind.

In just one century, transport systems have also experienced a huge increase in speed, mobility; transport by land, air and water for masses of humans and matter. According to Virilio, the human has become a passenger, migrating like a nomad in the ephemeral non-places of transport (Virilio 2005, 58).¹⁰³ Virilio uses the term ‘dromocracy’ to describe the way humans and things have become almost like projectiles hurtling through space. It is similar in terms of life-world: one only needs to compare the amount of technology in the average home – from the microwave to the multi-media machine – with that of a family one hundred years ago in order to get a measure of the changes that have occurred in everyday life in such a short space of time. The amount of things has increased massively, but they themselves have also become more ephemeral, fast-moving and temporary.

9.5 “Super-American city”

Robert Musil has already played out many of these ideas. Germany, 1932: the experiences of Americanism and Fordism had just been processed; the new speed and masses in cities with populations of a million or more had been thoroughly studied, as had the industrial proletariat and the new social class of employees; functionalism had triumphed in all areas of modernism, including in design and architecture; the metropolis of Berlin had been analysed in detail with regard to modes of perception in big cities; on Black Friday, the world had also suffered the consequences caused by globalised market relations – in the same year, 1932, in *The Man Without Qualities*, Robert Musil developed the “obsessive day-dream” of a “super-American city”,

[...] where everyone rushes about, or stands still, with a stopwatch in hand. Air and earth form an anthill traversed, level upon level, by roads live with traffic. Air trains, ground trains, underground trains, people mailed through tubes special-delivery, and chains of cars race along horizontally, while express elevators pump masses of people vertically from one traffic level to another; at the junctions, people leap from one vehicle to the next, instantly sucked in and snatched away by the rhythm of it, which makes a syncope, a pause, a little gap of twenty seconds during which a word might be hastily exchanged with someone else. Questions and answers synchronize like meshing gears; everyone has only certain fixed tasks to do; professions are located in special area and organized by group; meals are taken on the run. Other parts of the city are centres of entertainment,

103 Also: Virilio 1978. An excellent piece of literature: Hawkes 1976.

while still others contain the towers where one finds wife, family, phonograph, and soul. Tension and relaxation, activity and love, are precisely timed and weighed on the basis of exhaustive laboratory studies. If anything goes wrong in any of these activities the whole thing is simply dropped; something else or sometimes a better way will be found or someone else will find the way one has missed; there's nothing wrong with that, while on the other hand nothing is so wasteful of the social energies as the presumption that an individual is called upon to cling for all he is worth to some specific personal goal. In a community coursed through by energies every road leads to a worthwhile goal, provided one doesn't hesitate or reflect too long. Targets are short-term; but since life is short too, results are maximised, which is all people need to be happy, because the soul is formed by what you accomplish, whereas what you desire without achieving it merely warps the soul. Happiness depends very little on what we want, but only on achieving whatever it is. Besides, zoology teaches us that a number of flawed individuals can often add up to a brilliant social unit. (Musil 2011, 26–27)¹⁰⁴

What Musil illustrates in the exaggerated form of satire as the quintessence of modernity are the functionally differentiated capital cities that had been discussed as Americanism in the 1920s, but defined urban development until the 1970s. Key aspects of this development are: the enormous growth of cities in terms of area, driven by rural exodus, population growth and deregionalisation; both horizontal and vertical expansion; the spatial separation of production, services, leisure and culture, living and habitation; tempo and speed as opposed to the slow rhythms of nature in agricultural regions; the reorganisation of cities to accommodate traffic; the dominance of the machine model, which also ruled human communication – subject to the same rhythms and laws of flow as the production system. Fordism and its principles of the division of labour, automation and rationalisation was on the rise. These principles did not just determine production and the circulation of things, but penetrated all other parts of society. In Musil, the modern city seems like a gigantic machine itself. The new centres are transport and traffic intersections, not the old squares, piazzas and marketplaces. Rationalism's penetration of the urban body becomes particularly evident in the fact that its processes are modelled in laboratory studies. It is also reflected in the deployment of the organisational sciences, which Musil had studied in the 1920s. Their effect was that there was no longer any fundamental difference between humans, machines, materials, things, processes, actions, motives and goals. All this is conceived of as a “community coursed through by energies”, as a system of energy that no longer differentiates between inorganic and organic matter, between the human and the non-human. Individuals disappear in society's production process. Attributes of the private are

104 On the following cf. Honold 1995; Gnam 1999.

placed on an equal level with elements of the general flow of energies. The individual person is dysfunctional or replaceable. Living means activating oneself as part of the flow of energy. The social body is split into local areas of function, in order to achieve functional segregation and compartmentalisation. The city's physiognomy is dominated by this topographical differentiation in function, which includes not only all of the new but also all of the old divisions: public space here, private space there, work here, leisure there, family here, pleasure there, production here, reproduction there, factory here, service there – basically the opposite of the cultural sense of identity in the regions and provinces, but also that of things from the old order. In the system, the human is a “man without qualities”, i.e. with only all of those qualities expected of him in whatever part of society he is in; but these ‘qualities’ are no longer integrated into a ‘personal identity’. The same applies to things whose qualities are functions of circulation. The domination of systems, structures and functions, of dynamics and energy, also explains why “happiness” is identified with the “maximised results”. This maximum is the evolutionary goal of the system, which is not orientated towards sense and meaning, but towards optimising its reproduction. Musil's final point is that zoology, apparently unrelated to the urban environment, can teach us these ‘cold’ truths, according to which a mass of flawed people can result in a brilliant whole. This contains the quintessence of modernism: it plays on Darwin's systemic thinking as well as the sociology of the masses,¹⁰⁵ on the privileging of the whole over the parts and the victory of systems engineering. In Musil's portrayal of the metropolis, not only individuals, but also nature and things are dedifferentiated in order to be better adapted for increased mobility and technical manipulation. Cultural regionalisms, based on traditional and early modern societies, are dissolved in a homogenous space of energies.

Globalisation replaces the local and the historical, and is formed across spatial and historical barriers through networks of technology, transport, telecommunications and the economy. The historically heterogeneous and culturally heterotopic is destroyed by the cities' insatiable appetite for more space as well as their inner segregation. The atomisation of human activities and thus the tendency towards the dissolution of the social, the historical and the regional leads, ac-

105 In the early sociology of the masses, which Musil was familiar with, it was discovered that in order to analytically understand the massive mobilisation of masses of people in large cities and industry, it was the energetic dynamics of the masses and not the ‘substance’ of people that mattered – a parallel process to the dedifferentiation of individual things in the system of the organisation of their masses. Le Bon, 1895/1960; Lohmeyer 1913; Freud, Standard Edition of the Complete Works XVIII; Geiger 1926; Riesman/Reuel/Glazer 1950; Canetti 1984; Moscovici 1981; Balibar 1994.

ording to Musil, to the dominance of the abstract over the specific. Musil's use of "super-American" implies that although this model of the city is an American invention, it has spread far beyond America and become the model of modern evolution in general; in other words, it has become a global phenomenon.

9.6 Digital networks

All the ideas that have emerged about the city since 1970 – the postmodern city, the re-aestheticisation of cities, the collage city, the fractal city, the rise of the heterotopia, the rediscovery of the regional and with it the historical, the revaluation of urban culture and the city's social structures, the birth of *quartier*-identity, ways of reading the city as a text, attempts at new forms of multi-functional or multi-cultural integration, the emphasis on difference as opposed to homogeneity, the redevelopment of the city centres, then the suburbs, whereby it is sometimes the city and then at other times the suburbs that become objects of architectural and urbanist reformulations, the discovery of nature in the city and urban ecology or trends in the opposite direction that aim to make the divide between 'countryside' and 'city' more clear again and have a qualitative focus rather than growth in terms of area – : all these reforms ultimately complete the "super-American city", or one could say, the Keynesian city. For two thirds of the twentieth century, all our efforts went into creating a city without qualities for the man without qualities, in other words, to build a functional thing-structure for the techno-economic era of modernity and, in social terms, to breed a corresponding species of humans. The last third of the century on the other hand, consisted of a hectic pluralisation of urbanist and cultural styles in order to escape functionalism.

This cannot be successful. There are two processes which make the material city become strangely porous and perhaps might even destroy it. Firstly, there is the new imperative to increasingly use data processing for all activities in urban life, so much so that if we were to experience an infocalypse, the city would immediately collapse and cease to function. Secondly, there is the construction of cyberspace, its spaceless spatiality absorbing more and more human energy every day, so that an increasing amount of our time is consumed by 'moving around' in a universe that is not of this (material) world. We spend more and more time being telepresent, but not in the mode of a space-time continuum bound to the urban environment. Both processes are typical of postmodern cities in the developed world.

The reference to the totality of the networking in the cities of the past shows, in the form of a negative, that modern urban utopias were based on the aesthetic

and the phenomenal and were therefore inaugurated by artists, architects and intellectuals. The anaesthetic of rationalism that has dominated the network structures of cities is insignificant in comparison. This is the prehistory of the “medialisation of cities” (Bannwart 1994) as well as of the cybercities developing today. The latest utopias in the city have also developed along these lines: no longer fed on modernity’s store of ideas, insofar as these are grouped around the ensemble of industries processing raw materials, but from the immaterial mind-space of electronic data. Cyberspace is the end of the urban formations that characterised modernity and is part of the ascent of the immaterial, in which real megalopolises now seem like moribund Babylons. In the immaterial cities of the data universe, things are only present as digital signs or mathematical formulae.

Nowadays, it is a fact that city administrations, the work of the police forces, transport systems, the production of public space, the processes of goods movement, transactions at stock markets and the circulation of money, the service industries, forms of information circulation, the generation of knowledge, but also forms of entertainment in advertising, film and music as well as the participation of households and people in institutions – in other words the classical functions of urban life – have all become dependent on the management systems inherent to local and international digital networks.

More and more cities were conquered. Not just by foreign invaders and their armies; certainly also by epidemics (even today), but also by the rural population, which, especially in the nineteenth century, fled to them in droves, thus creating their hybrid enormity; by railways imperiously criss-crossing the cities, regulating their topography in completely new ways; by cars, which soon dispossessed every other population (including humans) and seized every available space; by machines, which moved into households en masse and occupied spaces of production, distribution and consumption in their millions; by the hundreds and thousands of kilometres of water, gas, electricity and telephone lines, of radio, TV and finally, networked computer cables. The final conquest of the city was by the computer. The better they became, the more powerful the memory, the more complex the programmes, the more organised the databases, the more connected the system, the more completely computers sucked in every process related to cities that could be made into data and transformed every functional and management process in the administrative, social, economic and consumer life of the city. One can demand cities without atomic energy, but not ones without computers. From the perspective of the computer, cities

have become medial projections, material renunciations of the invisible world of data.¹⁰⁶

In the last few decades, a third world has developed alongside the first (nature and things) and the second (civilisation, cities), which has made these first two worlds mere substrates of the third level of existence, namely digital processes based on signs. The architectural physical appearance of cities is already being altered by this process of the relocation of the spirit of the city into the computer. Memorable symbolic landmarks of cities – palaces, industrial giants, bank palaces, bank towers, parliaments, libraries... – give way to what urbanist Martin Pawley has aptly called “stealth architecture” (1994 and 2003).

He uses the analogy of the stealth bomber, which is ‘invisible’ to radar, to describe the increasing amount of ‘representative’ architecture, the exterior of which has absolutely no communicative relation to what happens inside the building. A well-known example of this is the Reichstag in Berlin. On the outside this building’s purpose is to be a visual political symbol, while on the inside it is a highly equipped, media technology communications machine, which has nothing to do with its *Gründerzeit* shell. Pawley interprets bank towers in a similar way. Their thingly grandeur has absolutely no expressive function anymore, especially if we consider the fact that nowadays banks are actually databases and switchboards in the network. This shift in the relation between architecture and the digital world of signs is evident in, for example, the fact that the amount of money that has been invested in data processing in the new Tokyo City Hall is as high as the cost of the entire construction project. On the basis of such observations, Volker Grassmuck speaks of the “city as terminal” and the “terminal as city”. This has equally significant consequences for symbolic city structures built in stone, steel and glass, as for the architectural appearance of universities, such as when Columbia University in New York decides not to build a new library, so that it can invest the money in a virtual library instead. These kinds of examples are indicators that material cities are not only being penetrated by the ‘third’ world of data streams, but that their architectural appearance is also being fundamentally altered – or, as is currently happening in many places in Berlin, stealth architecture is favoured and thus the new relation between being (data) and stone (urban structures) is encountered nostalgically.

We live in a hot, yet despite all the nervous over-stimulation, anaesthetic society, which has developed an exotic relationship to things and a self-referential relationship to itself. Differentiating between hot and cold cultures originates from Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966, 259; cf. Jan Assmann 2002, 14f.). ‘Cold’ cultures

106 Cf. a different perspective from Vogl 2005.

focus their inventiveness, their energies and their infrastructure on stabilising relationships that have already been established, on avoiding changes that could threaten this balance and on anchoring themselves in an immemorial origin, which at the same time maintains the borders and unity of the society. 'Hot' cultures do exactly the opposite: they promote the new, find their balance in constant change, do not look back to imaginary origins to connect with, but instead look forward to what (still) remains to be discovered; they do not want a permanent here and now, but to constantly mobilise and surpass it. In modern societies, *longue durée* does not consist of the persistence of stable structures. Continuity comes solely from continuous upheaval, mobility, change. This is the real reason for the dedifferentiation of things, which, as I will argue, can now only be dealt with by fetishising them.

II Fetishism in Religion and Ethnography

What could I do? We all loved the fetishes. [...] They were magical objects. [...] The negro's objects were intercesseurs, mediums [...] I saw fetishes everywhere. I understood; I too am against everything. (Pablo Picasso to André Malraux, 1937. Cited in Phillips 1996, 28.)

1 Forbidden images and anti-idolatry

1.1 Biblical traditions

In Acts of the Apostles (19: 23–20: 1), an incredible incident is described. From 52 to 55 AD, Paul the Apostle was mainly living in Ephesus and was busy successfully spreading Christianity throughout Asia Minor. The story goes like this: the silversmiths and their workers are trying to incite a revolt against the Christians, because they believe their business in devotional objects, selling reproductions of the cult statue of Artemis, is in danger. The Christians insist that any “gods made with hands” are not gods. Because of this, complain the silversmiths, the reputation of Ephesian Artemis, worshipped all over the region, was being damaged. The gathered crowd shouts: “Great is Diana of the Ephesians!” It is clear that some kind of mass meeting is taking place in a theatre. There is a great “confusion” and, it seems, the mood of pogrom. The crowd supposedly cries out “Great is Diana of the Ephesians!” for two hours. Finally, the town clerk manages to pacify the crowd by once more affirming the most important feature of the cult image: “What man is there who knoweth not how that the city of the Ephesians is a temple-keeper of the great Diana, and of the image which fell down from Jupiter? [...] These things cannot be gainsaid.” In a most modern fashion, he then reminds the guild of silversmiths of their legal options: they can always take it to court. One could call this ‘rationality through due process’ (Niklas Luhmann), instead of a populist and volatile insurgence of the masses. It seems the crowd is dispersed without any violence. Paul leaves the city to travel to Macedonia.

An important religious opposition can be found in these formulations: “gods made with hands” and “the image [of Artemis] which fell down from Jupiter”.

* Diana is the King James Bible translation of Artemis, which is the translation cited here.

The Christians are of the view that all cult images are merely ‘artificial constructions’ and therefore emphasise – in the tradition of the anti-idolatry in the Hebrew Bible – the manufactured and material aspects of statues of gods. They are made by humans; they are material – therefore earthly and transient, and thus not divine and undeserving of worship. This applies even more to the ‘reproductions’ made by the silversmiths. The cult of statues is the worship of false gods and therefore idolatry. In contrast, the followers of Artemis emphasise the sacredness of her main cult image by arguing that it is in fact not ‘made by humans’, but fell from the heavens [i.e. from Jupiter]. There were special Greek expressions for this: *diipetés* (‘fallen from heaven’, images originating from Zeus; this word is used in Acts 19: 35) or *acheiropoieton* (‘that not made by hand’). It is precisely this principle, which the followers of Artemis claim for her cult image in order to highlight its sacredness, that the Christians later make use of when justifying or worshipping icons or even statues of Christ, Mary or the saints.

An economic conflict rumbles beneath this disagreement in Ephesus: the Christians are destroying businesses. Not just for the silversmiths, but for all of Ephesus, an important centre of the cult. The Temple of Artemis is the largest financial and banking centre in Asia Minor (the head priest is also a banker), in particular for flight capital. It is also an internationally used *asylon* and site of pilgrimage for women, which is why there is also a lively medical trade there. After all, it was none other than the financier and general Kroisos (Croesus) who re-founded the city of Ephesus in 560 BC and funded the huge Temple of Artemis, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Although it burned down in the year 356, it was later rebuilt – exactly the same as Paul would have known it. These scenes, which link religious belief, fetish cult, commodity exchange and monetary capital, might have been rather helpful to Karl Marx for further developing his critique of commodity fetishism.

Yet, we also find the same elements that were so intolerable for Paul and his young following here (and later for the Christians who came across fetish worship in Africa too): the cult around an archaic mother and fertility goddess is idolatry; furthermore, the cults of the sacrifice of bulls practised at Ephesus point to a link with the scandal that became so famous in the context of Jewish aniconism: bad memories of the worship of the golden calf were reawakened (Exod. 32: 1–6). For this so-called calf was more than likely actually a malapropism for the divine bull, which was sacrificed and revered not just in Egypt, but also in the entire Near Eastern area where Yahwism was prevalent.¹ At exactly

¹ It has been argued that the worship of the calf was a ‘miniaturised’ form of the far worse bull

the same time that Moses was on holy Mount Sinai in order to receive the twelve commandments, his brother Aaron was calling upon the women of Israel to hand in their gold earrings, which were to be smelted in order to create a cult statue of a bull. Aaron drew “a sketch with a stylus” so that the calf or bull could be cast afterwards. Even here the Hebrew Bible does not fail to pick up on the material production process, so as to expose the ridiculousness and godlessness of the idol worshipper who says of the “molten” image: “These be thy Gods, O Israel” (Exod. 32: 4, 5, 8; Deut. 8: 7–21).

One can understand Moses’ wrath when he returns with his tablets, written by God himself, and sees his people performing sacrifices and carrying around the idol. He smashes the tablets and burns (sic!) the cult figure, stamping it to dust – a true iconoclast – only to then take the dust, itself now magical and pagan, and mix it with water, which he then gives to the Israelites to drink (Exod. 32: 20). This is the rage of the anti-fetishist, which can still be felt long into the European Enlightenment. For Moses had, surrounded by an aura of light, just returned from an encounter with an abstract God who articulated himself in writing. His first and second commandment on the tablet forbade all manufacture of cult images of other gods and all worship of the same (Exod. 20: 2–6, 23; Exod. 34: 13–4, 17, 23).² And now this: his own people dancing around a lump of metal! Moses’ iconoclasm corresponds to the (albeit later) command in Deuteronomy to destroy the cult icons and idols of other religions.

God and Moses have to make a copy of the tablets so that the bond with the people of Israel, based on the foundation of imagelessness, can be inaugurated. Afterwards Moses, just like Aaron, asks his people to give up all their valuables so that all men with “cunning workmanship” might make all kinds of “cunning works”, namely the machinery of the cult, required for the worship of an image-

cult. This is doubtful, however, because a cult of calves is often mentioned in the Hebrew Bible, and older tradition has it that the erection of a bull pedestal was tolerated in Bethel, so that “for Elijah and his contemporaries”, the image of the bull at Bethel “was not a theological problem yet”. The image of the bull in Bethel, a central element in the worship of JHWH, was not criticised before Hosea (Dohmen 1987, 257, 261, 270; on the snake symbol in Temple of Jerusalem, see *ibid.*, 264 f.; see also “Exkurs: Das Kalb und der Stierkult” [Excursus on the Cult of the Calf and the Bull], *ibid.*, 147–153).

² “Though shalt not make unto thee a graven image (*pesel*), nor the likeness (*ʿmunah*) of any form that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.” (Exod. 20: 4; Deut. 5: 8) The privileged form of revelation is therefore hearing (audition). God has invisibly laid down his name “in his midst” (Isa. 29: 23), the place “which in other cults was occupied by the cultic image” (Rad, vol. 1, 183) – On Jewish aniconism cf. apart from Dohmen 1987 also Klimkeit 1984; Brumlik 1994; Rainer/Janssen 1997; Boehm 1996; Nordhofen 2001; Kohl 2003, 31–44.

less and nameless God devoid of all sensuality. For pages, in a true hymn to luxury materials, the artistry with which the liturgical base camp manufacture the God with no external appearance is described (Exod. 35: 4–40: 38). Already here then, in the Hebrew Bible, we see the deep ambivalence inscribed in imageless monotheism: the aniconic aspect of God himself can coexist with a rapturous artistic treatment of the cultic-liturgical peripheries. This always entails the risk that what is banished from religion might return to become its centre: and that is the trap of religious fetishism in Christianity itself.

Although the prohibition of images, which is essentially part of the Decalogue and the JHWH-alone movement, is a distinguishing feature of the religious atmosphere of ancient Israel, it in fact took many centuries for it to become strict dogma. Although the Sinai God's command to obey included the prohibition of false gods, it did not automatically imply the prohibition of all images. This probably started with the collision between the Nomadic cult traditions of the people of Israel, who honoured their God by ritual sacrifice, and the urban cultures of the Canaanites, who practiced the cult of the image. The practice of not worshipping images or statues here at first expresses nothing more than a conservative clinging to Nomadic traditions, marking a cultural difference, not a theological one. In the time of the early kings, one can also speak of a mainly imageless cult without any anti-idolatry. According to Christoph Dohmen, the transition from an integrative to an intolerant monolatry, so to a 'purified' JHWH belief system, occurred first in the ninth century, which – along with the prohibition of false gods – may have helped Elijah to power. In the eighth century, in Hosea, JHWH's claim to exclusivity is linked to a consistent, general aniconism, which preceded the ban on cult images, for the first time. However, even Hezekiah's reform did not lead to major opposition to images, which possibly first developed in reaction to the revival of Canaanite syncretic rites under Manasseh and were consequently expressed in Deuteronomic theology. From there, but not before the seventh century, a connection was made between the ban on images and the Decalogue, between imagelessness in their own cult and the command to destroy the images of gods not their own, and this was then recorded in the reformulation of the traditional principle in Exodus 20 and 32 (Dohmen 1987, 236–277). The Deuteronomic criticism of the image cult also influences the story of King Solomon, who is seduced by his many foreign (!) mistresses to worship heathen gods, to create cult caves and manufacture false idols (1 Kgs. 11: 1–13): here we have another important aspect, namely the link between sexual licentiousness and fetishism.³

³ It was definitely not a coincidence that Goethe, who in his poem "Great is Diana of the

A fundamental aniconism coupled with an ambivalent fascination with the power of images and holy things have therefore been inherent to Christianity since Judaism. The canonisation of the Hebrew Bible meant that all the polemic passages, which can be read as an early Pauline Christian commentary on the cult image of Ephesian Artemis and its replicas, were also included. For example, Jeremiah 10: 1–16:

For the customs of the peoples are vanity: for one cutteth the tree out of the forest, the work of the hands of the workman with the axe. They deck it with silver and gold; they fasten it with nails and with hammers, that it move not. They are like a palm tree, of turned work, and speak not: they must needs be borne, because they cannot go. [...] There is silver beaten into plates which is brought from Tarshish, and gold from Uphaz, the work of the artificer and of the hands of the goldsmith; blue and purple for their clothing; they are all the work of cunning men. [...] Every man is become brutish *and* is without knowledge; every goldsmith is put to shame by his graven image: for his molten image is falsehood, and there is no breath in them.⁴

In the Deuterocanonical text *The Book of Wisdom* (ch. 13–15), from the late first century BC, what amounts to a theological system of idolatry is developed and the disparagement of these enchanting cultural images is carried out with all the best rhetorical flourishes. The materiality of icons and idols (*manufactum*) is always the main focus, but also the observer's fixation on the appearance and beauty of things, which are viewed as lacking something decisive: life. Anything manufactured is ridiculed as helpless and hopeless – and with it its worshipper: “In dead things is their hope.” (Wis. 13: 18) This is precisely what will later be called the Pygmalion effect (or fetishism).

In his *Metamorphoses* (X, 243–297), perhaps deliberately misinterpreting an archaic cult tradition, Ovid tells the story of the misogynist Pygmalion, who makes a statuette for himself as a replacement for real women, which then casts an erotic spell on him: he adores this statue with all the signs of a cultic and sexual obsession (a parody of the *ars amatoria*). Finally, he brings Venus a bloody sacrificial bull and begs her to bring the statue he already treats like a living woman to life. Truly, “in dead things is their hope.” The goddess fulfils his wish and the inanimate doll transforms into living, pulsating flesh and warm skin beneath his burning caresses. In Europe, the Pygmalion myth virtually be-

Ephesians” explicitly placed himself in the tradition of pagan idolatry and art, owned a gouache by Daniel Hopfer the Elder (around 1470–1536) with the title *Salomo betet einen Götzen an* [Solomon Worships an Idol].

⁴ Cf. Deut. 4: 16–18; 5: 8–9; 29: 17; Lev. 19: 4; 26: 1; Isa. 40: 18–20; 41: 6–7; 44: 9–20 (very similar to Jeremiah); Judg. 6: 25–32; Ps. 115: 4–8 and elsewhere.

came a model for art, sometimes criticised as pagan idolatry and fetishism, sometimes celebrated as the very definition of the highest of all art's aims: to create works that are *alive* (Mayer/Neumann 1997; Blühm 1988). It is precisely this process of coming to life, this auratic enchantment, art's power to animate, which becomes a substantial problem (Camille 1989) for early and medieval Christianity and which is also the background for the Artemis Ephesia episode. From here, the pendulum swings away from idolatry and iconoclasm, the cult of images and aniconism, as Belting (1990), Bredekamp (1975), Schnitzler (1995), Mondzain (1996) and Beck/Bredekamp (1997) have shown.

The Temple of Artemis – like many Isis temples – was later consecrated into the Church of Mary. Later still its stone was used to build the Basilica of St John. Reusing pagan cults and their images in this way was, along with the Luke legend and the *vera icon* tradition, the third way the cult of images was smuggled into Christianity. According to that legend, Mary sat for Luke the Evangelist, who was a painter: this is the first legitimization of the Christian painting of icons (Dobschütz 1899; Belting 1990, 70 ff., 382ff.). According to the story of the *vera icon*, Jesus left an imprint of his face in Veronica's veil or *sudarium* as he suffered on his way to Golgotha: the origin of icons of Christ, which are all based on this 'true icon', an impression of Christ's face created by himself, which Veronica received (Wolf 2002; Onasch/Schnieper 1997). This is the origin of the idea of the image not made by human hand, but as a trace and index of God himself: the material contact between the object in the image and the material on which the image appears and which is its source, 'carries' the holy substance of the person represented by the image and thus makes the image holy and healing.

However, this third tradition goes back to numerous pagan legends of miracle images that appeared on their own, were found or fell from the sky: they were called *diipetes*. As we have seen, this was the view held of the cult image of Artemis Ephesia, which was itself divine because of this and therefore had the power to heal and perform miracles.⁵ *Acheiropoieton* and *non manufactum* were other expressions for these pagan idols, whose holiness came from the belief that they were not the work of human hands, not manufactured works of art, but of a divine origin. The divine is not just represented and symbolised by these images, but is really present and therefore tangibly powerful. The gods them-

⁵ It is worth noting here the procedure with which Ancient Egyptians made dead images of stone into living godheads: the so-called 'opening of the mouth ritual'. Cf. Fischer-Elfert 1998; Otto, E. 1960. – These rituals transformed the profanity of the stone into the sacred vitality of the god residing there. The first theory of statues is also hidden among the ancient Egyptian texts. This could help to understand some Greek cult image rituals and also the Pygmalion myth; cf. Assmann, A. 1997.

selves resided in their idols – and this presence was transferred from copy to copy and thus spread across space. Consecrated images are also the localised domiciles of abstract omnipresent godheads and thus holy objects. Owning images thus increased the strength and power of places and priests, who managed the local image cults. This heathen tradition, which was subsequently translated into the tradition of icons of Mary and the entire Christian cult of images, most certainly has a fraught relationship to the Mosaic aniconism and the iconoclasm of the earliest forms of Christianity. Both live on in the regular flaring up of the debate on images, which has at times become an image war and continues unabated today.

1.2 The Church Fathers

The time of the Early Church Fathers will only be briefly sketched here (regarding the prehistory of fetishism cf. Pietz 1987, 25–35, Kohl 2003, 44 ff.).⁶ In 198–199 AD, Tertullian (around 150–230 AD) writes the tract *De Idolatria* (1987, 19–72).

This well-written piece of polemic documents a fundamental mistrust, because it not only judges explicit idol worship, it also searches it out and finds it wherever it can; the worship of idols is hidden behind the mask of our entire life praxis. Tertullian therefore makes a radical break between the Christian way of life and the profane world.

“Idolatry is the chief crime of mankind, the supreme guilt of the world, the entire case put before judgement.” (Tertullian 1987, 23) Tertullian opens his tract with this unsurpassable sentence. By declaring idolatry the most common sin

⁶ Pietz, author of numerous outstanding essays on the early history of fetishism, rejects the possibility that Christian idols or anti-idolatry could be useful as a prehistory of fetishism. “The basic components of the idea of the fetish were not present in the medieval notion of the *feitiço*. The notion of the *feitiço* [...] did not raise the essential problem of the fetish: the problem of the social and personal value of material objects. It failed to do this because the logic of idolatry displaced the status of the material object to that of an image, a passive medium effecting relations between spiritual agents according to a principle of resemblance; and it displaced the power of the bodily fetish-maker to create novel spiritual states [...]” (1987, 35). According to Pietz, an idol was an “image that mattered” to the medieval theologian, yet its spiritual value was never anchored in “the material body itself”. It was always about immaterial interactions. Unlike the fetish: “the model for the fetish-idea involves the realization of novel divine power in material objects and bodily fixations within the contingency of worldly experience” (ibid.). The strict categorical distinction between idol and fetish does not however apply to the magical object-practice of the Middle Ages. Thus Pietz misses the chance to identify the close relationship between the Christian cult of images and fetishism.

and correspondingly expanding the meaning of the term, he universalises the worship of images: it includes everything and is synonymous with sin as *the* offense against God. “Thus it happens that all sins are found in idolatry and idolatry in all sins.” (ibid., 25) This is the root of idolatry’s rise to mortal sin in the Occident. It not only breaks the first commandment, it is also concealed in all other sins: everything is idolatry, because in sin we obey demons and idols. Sin is the sacrificial victim we bring to false gods. It is a form of suicide.

In this way, Tertullian attacks those who argue that idolatry is only being committed “if somebody makes a burnt offering or brings a sacrifice or organises a sacrificial banquet or makes himself guilty of certain other sacred actions or priesthoods.” This could not be more wrong. Our entire lives, insofar as they contain even the tiniest concession to the pagan and profane, are idolatrous. He is particularly strict on the “producing of idols”. There was a time when idols did not exist; they only exist since there have been sculptors and artists whose work is making cult objects. The greatest criminal is therefore the maker of idols (ibid., 25f.). These radical positions are where the Christian debate on images and its later critique of fetishism gets its volatility from (Mondzain 1996). Everything in the world, as Tertullian cites from the apocryphal Book of Enoch,⁷ can become an idol by being represented and venerated. He thus condemns astrologists, teachers, merchants, private and public feasts, jewellery, apotropaic signs on thresholds and doors, emblems and marks of worldly honours, military service and the cult of weapons, swearing on idols or asking them for salvation and of course, every form of worshipping pagan godheads: the whole arsenal of fetishes and idols. “Let us recollect that all idolatry is worship done to a human being, since it is an established fact, even among their own worshippers, that the gods of the heathens have formerly been men.” (Tertullian 1987, 58)⁸

Two centuries later, in his criticism of idol and thing worship, St Augustine (354–430) still invokes the authority of a Greek philosopher:

Socrates is said to have been somewhat bolder than the others. He swore by a dog or a stone or any other object that happened to be near him or came to hand, so to speak, when he was to take an oath. I suppose he knew how many natural objects, produced and governed by divine providence, are much better than the works of human artificers, and therefore worthier of divine honours than are the images which are worshipped in

⁷ For example, the Book of Enoch, 99: 7: “And they who worship stones, and grave images of gold and silver and wood [and stone] and clay, and those who worship impure spirits and demons, and all kinds of idols not according to knowledge, shall get no manner of help from them.” (Charles 1912).

⁸ Tertullian, like St Augustine after him, or even the earlier Roman cultural theorist Varro, all believed that the gods had developed out of the worship of dead ancestors.

the temples. Not that dogs and stones were rightly to be worshipped by wisemen; but in this way all who had intelligence might understand how sunk in superstition men are. [...] At the same time those who supposed that the visible world was the supreme God were given to realise their turpitude, for they were taught that any stone might be worshipped as a particle of God most high. (St Augustine 389–391/1953, 225–226)

The rhetorical structure of fetishism, which operates as a synecdoche (*pars pro toto*), is already precisely identified here. St Augustine quotes Plato's students as arguing apologetically that there was no irony in Socrates' provocation, but rather humility in veneration of an incomprehensible God. St Augustine also praises the platonic purification of belief in God and of the theatre in *City of God* (St Augustine, 426/1998, 318f.), because Plato opposes concretist cults: according to this "the rational soul ought not to worship as its god those things which are placed below it in the order or nature, nor ought it to exalt as gods those things above which the true god has exalted it."

As a criticism of the cult of things and idols, this is also fetish criticism *avant la lettre*. In his reflections on Hermes Trismegistus, the mythical founder of Hermeticism, St Augustine already lists all the characteristics that are also used more than a thousand years later to condemn fetish worship among African peoples:

[V]isible and tangible images are, as it were, only bodies of the gods, and certain spirits have been summoned to dwell in them who have the power to do harm or to fulfil many of the desires of those by whom divine honours and the service of worship are rendered to them. To unite, therefore, by a certain art, these invisible spirits to visible objects of corporeal matter in order to create something like animated bodies, dedicated and subject to these spirits: Hermes says that this is to make gods, and that men have indeed received this great and wondrous power of making gods. (St Augustine 426/1998, 345f.)

The Christians will later denounce African fetishes as exactly this: as 'fabrications' (*factitus*), as the invented art of "making gods" and the magical ability to unite these "with holy images and divine mysteries" (*ibid.*, 349). In contrast, Hermes Trismegistus views Egypt in a positive light, as a land filled with the divine, a temple of the godhead that has descended from heaven into it; while exactly the same thing is judged as idolatry by Augustine, just as later, in the eighteenth century, Egypt is described as the home of fetishism by Charles de Brosses. Correspondingly, it is written in the Latin *Asclepius*, cited by Augustine word for word in *The City of God*:

It exceeds the wonderment of all wonders that humans have been able to discover the divine nature and how to make it. Once ancestors [...] were unbelieving and inattentive to worship and reverence for god. But then they discovered the art of making gods. To their

discovery they added the comfortable power arising from the nature of matter. Because they could not make souls, they mixed this power in and called up the souls of demons or angels and implanted them in likenesses [...] whence the idols could have the power to do good and evil [...] Thus does man fashion his gods.⁹

Without losing anything in translation, this description can be viewed as a kind of manual for the manufacture of fetishes of all kinds, be they religious, practical everyday fetishes, sexual ones, political or commodity fetishes. Perhaps the most astonishing aspect of fetishism is that both in terms of its positive effects and the criticism of its destructive nature, from the Hebrew Bible through Christianity and the Enlightenment, all the way up to the end of the twentieth century, it is almost always described in exactly the same way. It is worth noting that the English anthropologist, Edward B. Tylor, observed this early on in reference to the Augustine passages discussed above: the modern battle against fetishism is anticipated in the Christian battle against idolatry (1871, vol. 2, 163f.).

1.3 Thomas Aquinas and Nicholas of Cusa

Thomas Aquinas

Doctor of the Church, Thomas Aquinas (1225–1275 approximately), always realistic about human beings, identifies in the enjoyment of “representational images” (Thomas Aquinas 1985, vol. 2, 408) the improper worship of the true God, the origin of idolatry and superstitious customs. The thingly, the concrete, the image and the sensual experience, in which the need for clarity is evident, also cause agitation and anomie and poison the soul (today we would express this in psychopathological terms). This craving for thingly concretion animates the material world and therefore encourages the worship of demons. This places the Church in a paradoxical position: religion, according to Thomas, needs forms of worship (*latria*, *cultus*) that encourage the fear of God (*theosebia*) and piety (*eusebia*), and imprint memories in the mind through repeated rituals; yet the liturgical scenery itself, its equipment, the decoration of churches, the images, the expensive robes and opulent interiors all keep the senses fixed on the thingly side of mass. At the same time, Thomas disagrees with radical opponents of all external forms of the communion with God in the cultus. Their purpose is not for

⁹ *Hermetica: The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius in a New Translation*. Trans. and ed. by Brian P. Copenhaver. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992. 89–90 (Latin Asclepius, chapter 37). The text is a fourth-century translation of the Greek original from the second or third century.

the sake of an already complete and perfect God, who does not need anyone to perform mass (a lovely thought!), but for our sake, because as humans we need to experience the divine with our senses. The material aspects of mass are therefore necessary, although ultimately the only important thing is inner communion with the invisible God (*ibid.*, vol. 3, 365 ff.).

This suggests that there may be traces of idolatry and fetishism at the heart of Christianity, in the mass. It is therefore likely that when the Catholic missionaries came across fetish worship in Africa, they identified and rejected exactly the same aspects that are at least ambivalent, if not display fetishistic characteristics, in their own cult. Furthermore, this may be the reason why it was the *Protestant* merchants and travellers who were reminded of ‘Catholic’ customs when they encountered African fetishism. In its ambivalence towards the cult of images and magic (miracles), Christianity seems to harbour the seed of centuries of fetishism being used as a negative term to denigrate whatever the other does (whoever the other happens to be) as superstitious, primitive, perverse, alienated, although this is actually what the denigrator deplores about themselves, arduously hides or suppresses. The seductive power of whatever is being fought against is, however, always taken for granted. Thomas Aquinas does not exclude miracles and magic, demons and the animation of statues in principle; these do exist after all. He merely wishes, in his *Summa contra Gentiles*, to bring some theological order to the confusion of the intermediate types (2001, vol. 3, book 1, ch. 98–109¹⁰), to classify miracles into different categories, to differentiate between good miracles created by God and bad ones created by demons (using black magic, *per artem nigromanticam*), and to break the influence of the latter on the human imagination and human desires (2001, vol. 3, book 2, ch. 122–123). It is no coincidence that Thomas cites Augustine’s *City of God* here, namely the passage about animated statues of gods, which is in turn a citation of Hermes Trismegistus from the Latin Asclepius writings (see above). In this cascade of quotations spanning many centuries, idolatry and fetishism, against which true and rational Christianity is summoned, are inadvertently kept alive by the very act that is meant to destroy them. Thomas contrasts the Trismegistus quote with some criticism of idols from the Old Testament, Psalm 135: 15–17: “The idols of the nations are silver and gold, the work of men’s hands. They have mouths, but they speak not, [...] neither is there any breath in their mouths.” Yet this confident sarcasm in the Hebrew

¹⁰ Aquinas, Thomas. *Summa contra gentiles*, Latin and German translation in 4 vols. Ed. and notes by Karl Albert and Paul Engelhardt; Darmstadt 2001. [English translation in 5 vols. Trans. by Anton C. Pegis et al. Notre Dame University Press, 1975.]

Bible, which one may assume is mocking the Egyptian opening of the mouth ritual, is a completely different attitude to the one found in the nitpicking theological efforts to create a clear distinction between the Church and the cult of statues and magic from the Church Fathers to Thomas Aquinas. For Thomas Aquinas has barely invoked the psalm against Hermes Trismegistus when he begins a whole chapter on magical techniques using symbols and images, the reality and effectiveness of which he never disputes, but merely classifies, in order to denounce them as evil and sinful. A deep disquiet lies buried here, one which Europe is constantly beleaguered by in its discourse on fetishism: the power of our magical relations to things is evident not just in modern Christianity, but also in enlightened modernity. In its criticism of fetishism, modernity re-enacts something Christianity had already demonstrated: those who hunt down fetishism most fervently are also those who believe in it most deeply.

Nicholas of Cusa

In his treatise, *De docta ignorantia* (1440/1979), the philosopher and theologian Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464) resolutely pursues the question of the unpronounceable name of God and, like some iconoclasts before and after him, condemns every form of the sanctification of things and images as idolatry. Nevertheless, people still worship God in all his “unfoldings”, i. e. in the natural things and artefacts of the world. They ‘make’ concrete images of God for themselves from these things and do not leave him as a “simple unity as the embodiment of all things”. In relation to the pure infinity of God, the world is a mere “unfolding of the enfolded abundance of the one unpronounceable name”. The pagans “did not perceive the unfolding as an image, but as the truth.” “That is how people began the worship of false idols...” They “worshipped God in his creations and then justified this idolatry with reason. [...] The heathens worshipped God in trees [...] in the air, in the water or in temples”. “But this kind of worship of God is idolatry, which awards to the image what only the truth is due.” In contrast, what is appropriate – and here Nicholas reveals himself to be a thinker belonging to the school of negative theology – is the “namelessness of God” alone. His teaching of ignorance (*docta ignorantia*) requires the paradox of comprehending God “by the method of incomprehension” (1440/1979, vol. 1, 105–113). A negative theology is necessary in order to cancel out the positive definitions of God, which humans will always lean towards, with negation. What is demanded is not the worship of images, statues, relics, of natural things or visions, but the gesture of negativity, which honours God precisely as abstraction; God is nothing specific, but infinite, a radical negation of all the finite forms in which we can think, understand and speak: the true God is thus more nothing

than something. In this, Nicholas reiterates the early Christian criticism of idols and does so based on a concept of God that is radically imageless, just like that of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, whom Nicholas is following here.

2 Relics and statues: magical Christian images

2.1 The relic's spell

Christianity has, however, since distanced itself from positions like these. For a strange practice soon spread across the entire Christian world, from Syria to Northern Ireland: the cult of the relic, the main focus of which is the corpse or a body part that stands in for the corpse. The cult of Christ and the veneration of saints are directly related. In most cases, a martyr was, in emulation of Christ, violently killed and subsequently canonised as a saint. Since the Christianity of Late Antiquity, the idea that only a martyr is good enough for sainthood and salvation gradually became accepted throughout Christendom. Holy wisdom was manifested in the dead body of the victim.

The graves of saints became important cult sites, where pious liturgies and sumptuous feasts were held.¹¹ People scraped off fragments of the tombstone. They opened graves and stole body parts. The body was often cut up and sent to all corners of the Christian world, so that the batteries of the martyr's healing power were distributed throughout it. Crowds of people swarmed to the graves from near and far. A web of pilgrimage routes grew all over Europe. The first maps were not centred around sites of military or economic importance, but around the saints: pieces of wood and nails from Christ's cross, teeth, feet, hair, arms, toenails, skulls, bones, fingers, clothing, any tiny scrap, things that the saint had touched, even the instruments of martyrdom. They were all channels to the force field of the saint. Between Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, Europa Christiana transformed into a huge network of hallowed body parts. A church without a relic in its altar could not be consecrated. Relics were thus at the very centre of liturgical life. Not only altars, but entire churches were built around them.

Relics were increasingly kept in elaborate reliquaries. They also had to be protected from thieves – not because of their expensive surroundings, but be-

¹¹ In relation to the following outline cf. Dinzelbacher/Bauer 1990; Bresc-Bautier 1990; Beissel 1991; Brown 1981; Angenendt 1994; Diedrichs 2000. See also Legner 1995; Leeuw 2006; Pomian 1988, 30 ff.; Kohl 2003, 46–66.

cause of the holy objects contained within. High-ranking theologians identified this new form of crime: “devotional robbery”, or grave robbery, relic theft, the desecration of the dead. Respected scholars broke saints’ teeth out of their mouths and wore them around their necks as an amulet.¹² A bustling trade with relics was established (Geary 1986). Graves were opened, body parts stolen, cut off, scraped off, even bitten off, touched and kissed, licked and stroked, wherever it was possible. There was no important corpse that was not completely exploited. Anyone who lived a holy life and knew it, bequeathed his or her own body parts to friends near and far while still alive. Moreover, saints’ graves were built in such a way that a person could crawl through them, so they could at least get close enough to touch the sarcophagus, impregnated with the miraculous aura of the dead saint. The haptic in general was extremely important: nothing was more effective than the contagious influence, the overflowing salvation of the dead saint on the living in direct contact. What Eros for death! Whoever could acquire a fragment of a saint’s corpse and wore it on the body, safely kept in a special case. Relics were carried into battle. Reliquaries were kept locked to protect the relics from believers’ constant craving to touch them. However, windows were added later, so that at least a dead limb could be touched, a bony hand, a scrap of clothing or the saint’s foot could be seen: the eye as the substitute for the sense of touch.

Not a word was uttered about the fact that these customs were merely atavisms of a half-Christian lay piety: princes, kings, abbots, priests, popes, scholars and strict theologians all took part in the hunt for fragments of a martyr. Raids for valuable relics were more than a passing concern for military campaigns and crusades. The *translatio imperii* became a *translatio reliquorum*. A huge network of dead body parts stretched from eastern Syria and Jerusalem to Rome and Northern Ireland. Skeletal remains became the centrepieces of the Christian cult, and were the media of the globalisation of Christianity at the same time.

Europe was intoxicated with the cult of corpses – and with magic. And not just on the fringes and in semi-pagan groups of heretics, but in the very heart of Christendom. Anywhere a saint’s body part was kept was a place where the saint was

¹² The etymology of ‘amulet’ is not clear. The German word first appears in the sixteenth century, although the practice is much older and common to many cultures. Some assert that ‘amulet’ originates from *molimen/molimentum*: effort, strain, force, violence, so that *a-molimentum* would be the defence against the violence or force of another; an amulet would thus be a ‘repellent’ of evil forces. Others trace the word back to the Latin *amuletum*, which occurs first in Varro and Plinius. The amulet is related to the talisman in terms of meaning. ‘Talisman’ is borrowed from the Italian and goes back to the Arabic *tilasm* and Greek *télesma* (genuine image).

‘really present’, he or she was genuinely and fully alive there. This belief is far beyond the *pars pro toto* figure or the synecdoche familiar from rhetoric (see p. 309 ff. of this book). For the fragment does not just represent the absent saint, it does not *stand in* for him or her; it *is* the dead saint, who completely and utterly, really and truly lives and acts there in the grave or reliquary. Religious customs served to siphon off this magical power in order to channel it into the living – where it would not just support pious, moral living, but also help with more worldly problems: stabbing pains in the abdomen, palpitations, stormy weather, bad harvests, business problems, miscarriages, cattle deaths, the capricious whims of neighbours, infertility – the whole inventory of everyday misery. This is the Africa in us, long before it was discovered. The cult of the saints is fundamentally a miraculous medicine based on magic and fetishism. No doubt the saints were also there to intercede with God or Christ. After all, God was too far away, too sublime, to deal directly with the petty troubles of daily business. It was therefore sensible and more efficient in holy terms to install a management level of middlemen, the dead saints, who could also take on the responsibility of an intercessory role in the important area of spiritual salvation, so as to ensure a comfortable afterlife.

The potent body parts were by no means only entrusted with pious requests. Relics were also useful for darker magic. Relics used in wars and relic amulets show that one could use the dead saints’ help to cause harm as well as for apotropaic protection. It goes without saying that the body parts were also used to fight demons and monsters of all kinds, from devils to witches, which preyed on humans. That the relics had been given ‘*virtutes*’ was just the pious way of saying that they functioned in a magical and fetishistic way – in other words, they possessed demonic forces and heathen magical powers. Edward B. Tylor thus explicitly identifies relics with fetishes (1871, vol. 2, 137–141), as did Charles Toubin (1864).

Furthermore, during the Middle Ages people began to collect relics with a passion shared by all the social strata, but pursued the most excessively by the elite. Museums did not first develop out of collections of art and curiosities, but were in fact predated by hoards of religious objects and relics (Kohl 2003, 46–64). These collections did not just serve their primary functions of magical defence and managing the afterlife, but also already that of representation, in other words display and performative staging. These are the origins of the aesthetics of exhibition and – in very real terms – the auratisation of ancillary objects and trivial things, which were placed at the centre of this glow by ceremoniously exhibiting them. The purpose of relic ceremonies was not just distributing their powers, but also the regular recharging of the sacred objects’ powerful energies. Luther’s patron, Frederick the Wise, had 18,970 pieces in his collection of relics, a massive, holy power plant that relieved visitors of a

total of 1,902,202 years of purgatory. An informative unit of currency for the value of relics. When describing the interiors of medieval and early modern churches, for example the Basilica della Santissima Annunziata in Florence, Aby Warburg speaks of “fetishistic wax-image magic” (1992, 73), which he studied – and not without distaste: hundreds of life-size wax statues of both the living and the dead along with thousands of papier-mâché *voti* filled the churches and transformed the houses of God’s word and these pious devotional images into heathen sites of fetishistic ancestor worship, making the churches into idolatrous fortresses of death (*ibid.*, 77 ff., 89 ff.). In these “pagan magical images”, Warburg identifies a “way of discharging the ineradicable, primal religious urge”, which even contaminates the *sophrosyne** and aesthetically disciplined art of portraiture. It is this double presence of the abstract word of God as well as masses of fetishes, this syncretic form of religiousness, that prompted the rulers of the time to intervene whenever the fetishes began to grow out of control and threaten the theological balance between word and image.

From today’s perspective, Europe from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance seems like a foreign continent when we look at its practice of idol and relic worship. Christianity spread a cult of the dead that led to the fetishistic and idolatrous practice of magic across Europe. The saint is by no means the “wholly other”, as Rudolf Otto (1917) puts it, but rather the medium that magically provides security in existence and the afterlife, and, like all magic, is rigorously utilitarian and manipulative in two ways: it protects from harm and supplies advantages and luck. The world is permeated by occult forces and powers that are almost impossible to imagine, a churning sea that constantly threatens life’s little ship – as Tertullian already saw it (1987, 293). Life is fundamentally fragile, Paracelsus once said. Saints, cult images and relics are instruments of magic that are agreeable to God, with a healing power based on the logic of sacrifice. This logic says that the violent death of the saints always protects the living from the evil that preys upon it. Those who live on feed upon the dead. On the one hand this creates survivor guilt, on the other it sustains an insurance pact made between the dead and the living: the latter place themselves under the protection of those who have sacrificed themselves for them, and in return they venerate them. The magical presence of the saint in such tiny fragments – the fetishistic magic – allows the entire earthly realm to be punctuated at regular intervals by points of access to salvation. This dismemberment therefore forms the basis of the salvation and restoration mechanism – no different in the Christian practice of relic worship than in the Egyptian myth of Osiris (Hermann 1956; Otto 1960;

* Greek, meaning a healthy state of mind based on moderation and self-control.

Budge 1973). The death of the other makes one's own life possible. The veneration of saints attempts to deal with this strange situation of constant debt – just as later medicine does, for it needs the dead in order to generate its knowledge from them. In the unconscious, wrote Sigmund Freud, everyone thinks they are immortal; one should also add: the unconscious happily accepts the death of the other when it is a sacrificial victim; the 'I' must pay off the debt inherent to this with the permanent worship of what has been sacrificed in our stead.

2.2 The cult of images and effigies

The practice of worshipping relics, which are clearly fetishistic, is closely linked to the question of how sculptures and statues made their way into the sanctum of churches' altars in the first place (Beck/Bredenkamp 1997). For these were, as we have seen, suspected of idolatry by the early Christians. Often enough, Christians were martyred because they refused to worship images of the emperor: the Hebrew Bible's prohibition of worshipping images became a political crime against the majesty of the emperor in the Roman Empire. This Christian abhorrence of images continued into the fourth century, when state religion was established. However, in the Eastern Church, icons and idols continued to be worshipped with sacrifices, prayers, candles and incense; one kneeled in front of them, kissed, washed and anointed them (just as had been done in Greek and oriental rituals). Beck and Bredenkamp have worked out this close connection between relics and sculpture. The relic was shrouded in mystery, it was invisible. But the urge to see the relics led to them being kept in shrines that allowed a tiny glimpse into their inner sanctum, while still preserving the secretive character. Relics were also often kept inside a sculpture. "The mystery of reliquaries, revealing a glimpse of their interior by the opening of doors, the taking out of the cult object from the cabinet's dark depths into the light of day, must have been immense." (Beck/Bredenkamp 1997, 118) The reliquary and relic statues themselves became sacred; they were "semiophores" (K. Pomian), like the famous Madonna in Essen (from around 1000), in which small receptacles for relics were built into the head, back and chest. Exactly the same thing was later observed in African ancestor fetishes, which also had little hollow spaces or containers that housed miraculous substances.¹³ *African fetishes and reliquary sculptures therefore have a surprisingly similar structure.* The Musée national des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océa-

¹³ Phillips 1996, 235–237, 244–246, 291, 317, 323 and elsewhere; Museum für Völkerkunde 1986, 67–69.

nie in Paris dedicated a very impressive exhibition to these similarities in 1999/2000 (Le Fur/Martin 1999). In her ethno-historical study of Portuguese and Spanish travel and missionary source texts about fetishes and the introduction of Christian relics between 1482 and 1787, Heide Palme (1977) provides early evidence that Christian colonial influences and African religious customs overlap in the phenomenon of fetishism. Could it be that African sculpture fetishes, damned by missionaries, can actually be traced back to Christian cult images? Perhaps African fetishism is also a reaction to Christian influences in early colonial times? What is certain is that relic and statue cults became the centre of the sacred treasure trove and therefore indirectly raised the status of visual art. However, it was precisely this that led to a Christian cult of the image, which dissident groups like the Catharists and Waldensians, the Hussites and Calvinists, and other radical reformers, fervently opposed. Yet here too, the same applies as does to all of idol and fetish criticism: "In the history of the fight against the worship of images, it seems in fact to be the iconoclasts who were the actual believers in images. Remember, the icons were not just simply destroyed, but were treated as if they were real people or saints." (Beck/Bredenkamp 1997, 123) Magical images and the power of fetishes are therefore always on both sides of the front: the believers and the enlightened, the followers and the opponents, the affirmation and the criticism. This strange bilocation of fetishism and the power of images make both almost indestructible over many centuries.

The worship of icons, the cult of images, the rise of the saint and their representation in images and relics, along with the obligatory presence of images of God, Christ and Mary in churches, were all part of the religious image's rise to power over many centuries. The integration of the power of images into the Catholic world was one of the reasons for the Church's success story. Under the aegis of the fundamental theological principle, the *deus absconditus*, and despite the influence of negative theology and iconoclastic movements, the Christian church became a gigantic image factory and a media conglomerate encompassing *urbs et orbis* – no less impressive than today's media Catholicism, from Hollywood to the Internet. For the history of the Church and culture, the power and cult of images are no less revealing than the highly elaborate art forms in written theology.

It is therefore understandable that David Freedberg (1989) writes of "the power of images" to inspire awe, fear and terror, not rational, distanced aesthetic contemplation. This magical power of images also has an effect in the political sphere. For the Christian cult of images is based very strongly on the Roman one. *Effigies, imago, simulacrum, signum, statua* are all words for cult images, in which the idea that "the image and the godhead are identical" (Daut 1975, 14; cf. Gladigow 1985/1986) is inherent. God literally *is* his image, everywhere, at all times, in a word, always. The *imago* is the imprint of a god or a person,

and thus valid, representing a person just as a signet ring or a cast mask of a face does. In the Roman death cult for people of high status and emperors, *effigies* of the dead person carried along in the *pompa funebris* also take on the function that images of the gods had, namely to show the presence of the person or god represented. *Imagines* and *effigies* are therefore not conventional pictorial signs in the modern sense.

Early modern effigies of kings (pictures, life-size figures of the dead) should therefore also be interpreted as idolatrous, even if they have a legal and constitutional status: they mark the presence of the king, dead as he may be, because they are the *corpus repraesentatum*, incorporating the entire political body during the interregnum. The effigies were dressed up, cared for and fed like the living king would have been; it does not get much more pagan than that. In 1859, Adolf Bastian describes a funeral ceremony in the African Kingdom of Congo: “While this procedure is carried out, a figure representing the ruler is placed in the palace and given food and drink everyday” (1859, 163–165). This custom had apparently existed for centuries: a clear parallel to English and French burial rituals for kings.

In these rituals, magic becomes a constitutional *corpus delicti*. The effigies postpone the death of the king until the inauguration of the new one. They guarantee the eternal permanence of the body of the king in the same way as the *Corpus Christi*. The effigies of kings are therefore descendants of the almost universal belief in a real presence inherent to images (Geiger 1932; Kantorowicz 1957; Giesey 1960; Klier 2004, 23–52). The throne is never vacant; the king never dies, says Jean Bodin (1529/1530–1596), the theorist of sovereignty. The proximity of this complete presence of the king in effigies to idolatry cannot be denied. In order to counter this suspicion, the effigies ritual was therefore based on the first Christian Emperor, Constantine. However, it is not wrong to interpret these interregnum rituals around puppet monarchs as fetishistic processes (Klier 2004, 33–52, 120–125). Here we find them at the very pinnacle of the state and not just as fake performances for the uneducated masses. Magic with effigies, robes and images in death cults and inauguration rituals are also most certainly a strategic exercise of power to prevent a break in its continuity in a liminal situation “between two periods”, in other words, between death and enthronement. Moreover, proximity to the holy substance, so close one could touch it, was healing for the people: “Le Roi te touche, Dieu te guérit!” This was the ceremonial formula for the miracle of healing that occurred in the union of the enthroned king and the people through the touching of his robes. “Holiness”, writes Richard M. Meyer, “was thought of as an auratic fluid, which saturated the clothing and gave them healing powers.” And it is precisely this that constitutes fetishism, for which Meyer provides many examples from European history (1908,

331–332). Marc Bloch (1983) reconstructs the symbolic birth of the French nation from this ritual, which, as abstract, political and constitutional as it may have been, was made present in this magical process of touching. The close link to pagan magical imagery is clearly evident in this cultural act at the highest level, just as it also is in the effigy practices in Rome and the Christian cults of relics and icons (Bloch 1983).

3 The ethnographic prehistory of fetishism

The beginning of Portuguese colonial history in Africa is generally not placed before 1470 or 1480 (Kohl 2003, 18–29). Before that, the word ‘fetish’ does not exist. It is still not certain who coined it and when. It begins as the pidgin word *fetisso*, which was without doubt created during the encounter between Portuguese and African tribes, mainly in Guinea and on the Gold Coast. For a long time the word was used along with *idol* (Latin *idolum* = phantom image, spectre, false god, statue of a deity). Fetish only gradually replaced the concept of idolatry in ethnographic discourse. The word *fetisso* is rooted in the Latin *factitius*, ‘the manufactured’ as opposed to the natural and the grown (*terrigenus*). Pliny the Elder used this opposition for the classification of objects in his *Historia Naturalis*, a modification of the Greek opposition of *physis* and *techné*. Fetishes were therefore understood as artificially produced things (it was only noticed later that natural objects and living beings could also be elevated to become fetishes). The words *feitiço*, *feitiçaria*, *feitiçeiro* develop in sixteenth century Portuguese, followed by the Spanish *fetiche* or *fechiceria*; *fehchura* (= magical production); *fehchizo* (= magical object), *fehchicero* (= magician). *Fetish/fêtiche/Fetisch* are all loanwords from Portuguese, borrowed by authors from outside the Portuguese empire, disseminated throughout the Northern European languages primarily by the Dutch. William Pietz (1988) argues that the Northern European use of the word came from a book by Willem Bosman, which was translated into many languages (1705; 1708¹⁴). Willem Bosman’s work, written in twenty-one letters, was first published in 1704 in Dutch, in 1705 in French and English, in 1708 in German and in 1752 in Italian, in some cases followed by numerous further editions: this alone indicates the wide circulation of this book by a high-ranking employee – though he was later fired – of the Dutch East India Company. Bosman’s “account has long been considered classic and authoritative”, writes Wilis, the editor of the

¹⁴ In the German translation (1708), Willem Bosman is written as Wilhelm Boßmann. This is the edition cited below. [Of course, I have cited the English version instead.]

English edition, in the foreword (Bosman 1705, xx). Bosman also partly owes his success to the “Golden Age of the Dutch Republic” (ibid., viii). In any case, both the word and the thing ‘fetish’ were widely known in eighteenth-century Europe. However, an earlier Dutch merchant, Pieter de Marees, also seems to be well-informed about fetish customs in his description of the Gold Coast (Marees 1602/1987; Museum für Völkerkunde 1986, 16). Samuel Brun from Switzerland (1613), Pieter van den Broeke (1612) from Holland, the Englishman Andrew Battell (1613), F. Capelle (1638–1641) and Olfert Dapper (1641) from the Netherlands, along with many Italians, all also wrote about African fetish customs in the seventeenth century, and in some cases were also translated numerous times (cf. Palme 1977). Wilhelm Johann Müller, born in 1633 in Hamburg, also reports with relatively little prejudice on the colonial history of Africa and the fetish practices of the indigenous peoples in his book *Die africanische auf der Guineischen Gold-Cust gelegene Landschafft Fetu* [The African Kingdom of Fetu on the Guinean Gold Coast], first published in 1673 and dedicated to the Danish King, Christian V. Müller went to Africa as a preacher with the Danish African Company in 1662, to serve in the Danish fort of Frederiks Borg. This means that long before Willem Bosman, there was already international knowledge about fetishes outside of the Iberian peninsula, including in Protestant countries, at least in the travel writing genre typical of the time (descriptions of countries, their landscapes and nature, villages and towns, secular classes, forms of government, laws, food production, festivities, domestic life and manners). In it, fetish was mostly treated under the heading of religious practice or idolatry. Apparently the idea that, at least on a linguistic level, fetishism was a phenomenon borrowed from Europe existed quite early on. Müller reports that the Africans only called their sacred objects “fitisiken” or “fetiso” when talking to white people, but that when asked, they did not know what a “fetiso” was. “From where they borrowed this name, no one actually knows” (1676, 44). This terminology problem continues up until the ethnologist A.C. Haddon, who considered the term ‘fetishism’ useless for the analysis of religion as early as 1906, and Marcel Mauss, who rejected the word ‘fetishism’ because of its Christian and colonial baggage and suggested replacing it with indigenous expressions (Mauss 1969, 244–245; Pontalis 1972, 197–198; Bonnafé 1972, 234 f.; Museum für Völkerkunde 1986, 35–37).

In his 1676 historical introduction, Wilhelm Johann Müller describes the discovery of the Gold Coast in 1470 and 1471 by the Portuguese explorers Joano de Santarèm and Pedro de Escobar. After the Reformation, increasing numbers of English, French and Dutch came to the region, and from then on, the Bight of Biafra was bitterly fought over and regularly changed colonial occupiers. The Dutch began to colonise it in 1598. In 1612, Fort Nassau was built. Along with

confessional rivalry, the many military skirmishes in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were mainly fought over the political and economic control of the Gold Coast, especially the monopoly on the slave trade, mainly the routes from the Gold Coast to Brazil. In 1642, the Dutch won control of the slave trade. Müller already estimates the number of slaves violently displaced from the Gold Coast to Brazil in the millions.

Portuguese missionaries saw, in keeping with their theological language, idolatrous – superstitious, false, demonic, devilish – practices in fetish customs and, often with the aid of violence, replaced the Africans' venerated composite objects with Christian images of saints, statues of Mary and Christ, devotional and holy objects, especially relics. As late as 1859, Adolf Bastian reports: "For a long time, Catholic missionaries were very proud of having destroyed this branch of fetish worship, that under their orders [...] Christian symbols replaced the fetishes." (79) From the very beginning, no one noticed that Christian customs were understood in exactly the same way by the Africans as pagan sacred objects, amulets and private fetishes were by the missionaries: as instruments of magic. When Johann da Silva set off for the Congo in 1490, he brought large numbers of liturgical sacred objects with him (Palme 1977, 15), which were used in the primitive churches to celebrate mass with the newly baptised. The Portuguese began burning African cult objects, considered to be magical and demonic fetishes, quite early on: they, the Catholics, were carrying out the iconoclasm that was being carried out by radical Protestant groups on Catholic cult objects and images in Europe. Worshipping fetishes was made punishable by law. The missionaries repeatedly sent for fresh supplies of sacred Christian equipment to fight the powerful fetishes of the native fetish priests with. No one recognised that fetishism is actually a syncretic effect, only brought about by the implementation of Christian idol and relic worship in the magical, religious structure of the tribal cultures. It has been proven with certainty for later centuries that what are known as mirror or nail fetishes were only created under European influences (Palme 1977). It has also been proven that, for example, Jesus was worshipped as a high-ranking clan fetish, that the crucifix was used as a magical fetish or even that images of St Anthony – of all saints! – was used as a fertility fetish, which African women wore between their legs (Museum für Völkerkunde 1986, 21 and 18). It goes without saying that profane objects, such as small gifts from the Europeans, were also incorporated into the African system of magic and were used in, among others, religious, apotropaic, magical, medicinal and prognostic practices (Museum für Völkerkunde 1986).

These curious transpositions in the very origins of fetishism can be understood as "cross-cultural encounters" (Pietz 1987, 44 f.), as the collision and peculiar mixing of the material cultures of two continents. Pietz is wrong, however,

when he views fetishism as a concept originating in European rationalism. He argues that in the eyes of the Europeans, the Africans did not possess a concept of causality and therefore saw magical powers where causal forces were at work. While the Europeans' belief was based on the idea of a fundamental supra-personality governing all material events, the Africans personified the impersonal forces of nature, according to Pietz (*ibid.*, 40). There is however no evidence of this opposition in the early eye-witness reports. It first appears in the religious criticism of the eighteenth century. Apart from that, the European entrepreneurs of the time did not possess a modern concept of causality either (which one can at best expect of travellers at the time of the Enlightenment). However, theologians had known criticism of superstitious models of causality since the Middle Ages, models that had resulted in God's realm being full of unholy, demonic or magical forces. It is precisely this superstitious model of causality (and not for example a breach of the rules of causality like those of Galileo or Newton) that was recognised in fetishism by both Catholic and Protestant Europeans. Because Pietz locates an epochal and confessional rupture between the discourses of idolatry and fetish, he is forced to deny that the fetish concept originates in the clash between Christian and pagan ideas: the concept of fetish was first formed to describe and negatively judge religious thing-customs in African tribal societies. From the eighteenth century – and here we must agree with Pietz – Northern European merchants and Protestant advocates of the Enlightenment added to this that fetishism contained both a scientifically false explanation of causes (“a superstitious misunderstanding of causality”, *ibid.*, 41) and a false concept of value. It must have scandalised the European concept of rational economic exchange that things which were mere “trinkets and trifles” (*ibid.*, 41) to them were valued extremely highly, while other things of great value seemed worthless to the Africans and were traded below their market value. Coincidence, fantasy and an unfathomable arbitrariness governed the Africans' fetishistic assessment of the value of things. The conceptualisation of Africa as the land of irrational fetishism was born as a reflex of rational trade capitalism experiencing a continent that was not ruled by technology, science, an understanding of matter as a series of mechanical relationships or rational trade principles. It is clearly evident that all these characteristics of the practice of fetishism were indeed created by the travellers of the eighteenth century in the first place; but they are certainly not the ‘origin’ of the idea of fetish.¹⁵ Pietz's source, Willem

¹⁵ “The idea of the fetish originated in a mercantile intercultural space created by the ongoing trade relations between cultures so radically different as to be mutually incomprehensible.” (Pietz 1987, 24) Earlier, he speaks of “a false understanding of natural causality” (*ibid.*, 23; cf. 39 ff.). Despite his incredible knowledge of sources, throughout his work Pietz sticks to his

Bosman, also explicitly refers to fetish worship as idolatry (Bosman 1705, 147 ff.). It would therefore be wrong to make a distinction between idols and fetishes that defines the latter as material embodiments of values and forces, while the former merely signify them. Idolatry has always described the belief in and worship of the real presence of numinous, person-like or transpersonal forces and powers in objects, and therefore cannot be opposed to fetishes. This view was already justifiably held by religious studies scholar Richard M. Meyer in 1908 (325 ff.). Only this can be the reason why the Protestants who saw African fetishism firsthand identified it with Catholic sacred equipment, images and statues. The word *feitico* may owe its existence to a “location between alien cultures” (Pietz 1987, 39), but in the process it also transformed theological discourse on idolatry by becoming linked with the colonisation of Africa and missionary work there.

What was significant in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was that although what was dismissed as fetishism may not have matched the content, it did match the structure of Christian idol worship, the practice of relic worship, the belief in miraculous statues, liturgical ceremonies with sacred instruments and so on. Oblivious, European Christians repeated the same arguments against fetish customs that had been levelled against pagan idolatry by Tertullian, St Augustine or Thomas Aquinas – but which could be just as effectively used against their own Christian cult of images.¹⁶

However, it is because of the Dutch *Protestants* that the first repercussions of fetishism were felt by Europeans themselves: the Dutch and later the English formed the polemic idea that African fetish practices were very similar to *Catholic* relic and icon customs. Ever since, ethnographers barely miss an opportunity to compare Catholic popular devotional or peasant customs in pre-Enlightenment Europe with African fetishism (Bosman 1705, 154 f.; Meiners 1806–1807, vol. 1, 178–85; Reinhard 1794, 22–34).¹⁷ In the first half of the eighteenth century at the latest, ethnographers’ accounts fused with the discourse of Enlightenment: thus the pattern was set, according to which African magic and sorcery, fetish worship and superstition were the same as Catholic rites or the supersti-

idea that fetishism as a category originates from its offence to rationality (1985, 1988, 1993). This is how he finds the link he is looking for: to Marx’s commodity fetishism; but once again, he fails to see the religious characteristics of Marx’s concept (see pp. 253–259 of this book).

16 E.B. Tylor is one of the first modern ethnologists to discuss this explicitly. The reference to Augustine: *De Civitate* VIII, 23, can be found in Tylor 1871, vol. 2, 173 f.

17 Bosman, a Protestant, recommends converting the fetish-worshippers to Catholicism, since it most resembles fetishism. On the priests using fetish worship for gaining wealth: Bosman 1705, 151 f. – Meiners (1805/1806 vol. 1, 364 ff., 400 ff.) draws many parallels between the Christian relic cult and the worship of statues on the one hand and the African ancestor cult and fetishism on the other.

tious practices of old European folk culture. The well-known Enlightenment view of priests as charlatans in criticism of religion was applied to the relationship of the power- and advantage-seeking fetish priests to their spellbound, fearful fetish followers (Müller 1676, 58 f., 70–74; Bosman 1705, 369 ff.; de Brosse 1785, 166 ff.; Meiners 1806–1807, vol. 1, 507, 513, 515 ff.): fetish priests were said to form secret brotherhoods with secret languages and arcane practices, they did not labour or work, they amassed privileges, were exploiters and charlatans, idlers, robbing their followers, they exploited reverence and were nothing but politicians pursuing power and their own interests. The argument here, which Christoph Meiners in turn takes from Constantine Francis Chassebeuf de Volney's 1787 *Voyage en Syrie et en Egypte* and applies to the African fetish priests, is one typical of the Enlightenment criticism of religion, in particular of Catholicism, but also of the secret societies formed by the ruling elites in the eighteenth century. Fetishism is a thus distorted reflection of Europe. It is seen as religion in its most unenlightened, basic and primitive form, a sort of African Catholicism and despotism rolled into one. For example, Bosman and de Brosse believe they have identified how fetish priests use magic tricks to take young girls from their parents, then making them pay for this injustice and sexually abusing the girls. The fetish becomes a manipulative instrument for exploitation, sexuality, profit and power (Bosman 1705, 369 ff.; de Brosse 1785, 73).

Applying Enlightenment thought to fetishism does not mean understanding it, but fighting and destroying it. Yet up until Hegel, Enlightenment thinkers completely overlooked the fact that they were blindly following a colonial, culturally destructive way of thinking (in that sense, they truly were unenlightened): they did not even consider that African fetishism might be a complex system of creating order, managing activity, maintaining boundaries, protection, dealing with fear, creating symbolic meaning and ritually integrating communities and individuals. Fetishism's functions of creating and maintaining social order were however clearly recognised by pre-Enlightenment authors like Wilhelm Johann Müller (1676), even if this was not always without prejudice. No society, including an enlightened and modern one, can function without these mechanisms. The aggressive criticism of fetishism contains an arrogant, culturally hegemonic tendency to misperceive Europe itself – and these traits still cling to concepts of fetishism today.

The question is: why was there so much European misrecognition of their own and foreign cultures in the first few centuries of the concept of fetish in Europe? There are numerous answers to this (related to the psychology of religion): 1. The Europeans did not see how they were perceived by the Africans, namely as those who owned the superior fetishes. 2. They projected the idolatry that was both forbidden and practiced in their own religion onto the Africans. 3. Out of

strategic interest, the magical cults that they could not understand were replaced with the Europeans' own, 'stronger' cult objects (this is already noted by Budge 1911/1973, vol. 2, 196–202). 4. Unwittingly, they therefore encouraged what they had in common with the Africans, while at the same time they hunted it down as radically different. 5. The introduction of an abstract, monotheistic God created a symbolic vacuum on the level of everyday practice, which was filled by the proliferation of fetishes, both indigenous and Catholic or syncretic. An embarrassing structural similarity to Catholicism is hidden within in the latter. Many travellers report that the Africans believed in a creator god so great that he was too sublime to take care of people's everyday troubles (Bosman 1705, 146; Museum für Völkerkunde 1986, 11). This is why concerns about illness and prosperity, about enemies and the community, about the growth of plants and animals, about work and celebrations, in other words, the management of life in general, was handed over to ancestors and demons, impersonal powers and forces, and it was the fetishes' job to communicate with these. This corresponds to the huge expansion of the material and spiritual aspects of Catholicism, and also that of its magical and superstitious middlemen. In that sense, from the very beginning, fetishism is a form of syncretism of European and African religious practices (Hirschberg 1971, 1972), a syncretism that the Europeans perceived less and less the more they had to deny it about themselves.

From the perspective of the Europeans, the worship of fetishes was also often linked to pejorative African characteristics in general: they were immoral, childish, naïve, depraved, animalistic and sensual, cruel, barbaric, bloodthirsty, fatalistic, lazy, fanatic – and these characteristics were all evident in the worship of fetishes, which was also controlled by fraudulent elites of priests and despots. This anticipates the interpretation of fetishism as a primitive, naïve, politically authoritarian, infantile, perverse worldview, an interpretation that can still be found in Marx and Freud. Fetishism becomes the quintessence of colonially ruled Africa, in which the Africans have barricaded themselves against their white rulers. Fetishism is the dark barrier that prevented or at least impeded the penetration of Africa by the white man according to his principles (cf. Museum für Völkerkunde 1986, 27f.).

4 The magical thingly quality of fetishes

Fetishes are always things, which – and this is where they overlap with idols – can also have a figural form. Fetishes always consist of two elements: 1. Spiritual potency, that is, the effective power, which (from the perspective of the white man) can be interpreted as dynamistic, magic, demonic, spiritual or manistic.

2. The material object in which that power resides (Museum für Völkerkunde 1986, 11). Certain fetishes can contain these powers ‘by themselves’; however, the manufacture of fetishes is usually associated with ceremonial consecrations, through which special experts implant the ‘power’, the ‘force’ or the ‘spirit’ into the thing, thereby acquiring its magical powers (which must then be ritually renewed). This process has been conclusively proven in the case of many religions (and for Christianity, inasmuch as consecration transforms profane objects into holy ones) and is therefore not some specifically African or primitive form of religiousness. The visible object is the shell, the container, the domicile of its powers. More precisely, in fetishism all objects are also semiophores (Pomian 1988, 51–53). They therefore always also carry secrets, because their “immanent power” remains unnameable; but they can be “activated and manipulated through offerings and sacrifices”. “Above all, fetishes serve the community – at least the chief fetishes,” but besides these, there are also an incalculably large number of private fetishes that are used to regulate the individual life cycle as well as domestic and working life. At first, fetishism was seen as a purely African phenomenon; Africa was the continent of fetishism par excellence, as Hegel said. However, since the eighteenth century, fetishism has been universalised to become a “worldwide phenomenon”, because the “dynamic worldview” expressed by it (dynamism) or “what is know as the belief in forces” can be identified all over the world (Museum für Völkerkunde 1986, 11–14).

Viewed in this way, the word fetishism really does have referents in African culture. *Nkisi*, for example, is an important term in numerous Bantu languages; *nkisi* covers substances and objects, masks and magical figures and describes both being subject to magical forces *and* actively manipulating them. *Nkisi* also denotes the power of objects in which spirits or ancestors are at work (MacGaffey 1977). There are private, family-centred and community *nkisi*. The objects often have their own life cycles, they age, their magical power grows weaker; they are kept in huts, looked after and guarded. When their powers can no longer be regenerated, they are also sometimes buried (the custom of statue burials was also fairly common in Ancient Greece). In all cases, fetishes function as the problem solvers of the village (Phillips 1996, 283).

It would therefore appear that fetishism describes a link between artificial things and dynamic forces. It is ambivalent: it protects and threatens. The dynamic effect of fetishes is numinous, or to put it another way, depends on the interpretive perspective of the European observer: they can be ancestors (manism), demons or spirits (demonism), impersonal magical powers (magic) or forces (dynamism), the general possession of some kind of soul (animism) or the potency of kinship relations (totemism). These are all European concepts, not African ones, mostly from the nineteenth century (Museum für Völkerkunde

1986, 29–30). A thing becomes a fetish as soon as the power to which one wants to connect takes up residence in the object and therefore becomes ‘manageable’. In that case, we speak of things charged with spirit or energies. Fetishes are also always the means of conducting these forces and manipulating them according to one’s own desires. Fetishes are “instruments of power in the form of things” (Dammann 1978, 18) or “thingly objectifications of sacred power” (Goldammer 1960, 62). They enlarge the spectrum of possible actions. They concentrate energies artificially extracted from the general magical flow of forces, through which they become controllable and useful. (Incidentally, for a long time the European technique has been no different: magic.) Fetishes do not just work by themselves. The force they are to circulate is first implanted in them and only then are they what they should be: powerful and potent. “The fetish is the repository of human beings’ power of desire” (Meyer 1908, 335). They can only realise their potential in what is known as the “*magical milieu*”, which should be differentiated from the profane one and where they must be located in order to become potent in the first place. MacGaffey already notes the necessity of this process of embedding fetishes, especially in complex rites (1977). Émile Durkheim (1912/1915) makes a strict distinction between magic and religion. This is not very convincing, however, because for many cultures magic is the expression of their religion and conversely, a religion without magical elements is inconceivable. The plastic character of fetishes presupposes highly developed craftsmanship, which can only be found in sedentary and advanced agrarian cultures. The fetishism that the Europeans first came into contact with is closely tied to African kingships (Museum für Völkerkunde 1986, 48–51). Fetishes can therefore be both hierophanic, a manifestation of the sacred, and kratophanic, a representation of the ruler. Common fetishes are quite easy to manage and are often worn on the body (for example in the armpit, on the arm, around the neck, etc.). At the same time, fetishism can be used in any area of tribal life required.

Fetishes are almost always composite objects. Christoph Meiners calls them “fetish-clusters”: the “*complexus* of the things that make up a composite fetish often contains artistic elements produced by humans, which is why one can view them as an intermediate form between natural and artificial fetishes” (Meiners 1806–1807, vol. 1, 157–158). We would, from the perspective of modern art, call these kinds of complex fetishes assemblages. The receptacles found in or on them have a similar role to reliquaries: horns, shells, bundles, tied fastenings, bags, little baskets, little boxes, pots, woven balls, nutshells, hooves or little sacks all serve the purpose of storing the magical substances. Nail and mirror fetishes also often conceal repositories of some kind.

The substances stored in the fetishes have magical and symbolic significance, which usually remained unknown to the white ethnographers. The mirac-

ulous ingredients are combination preparations, just like the fetishes themselves. Animal, mineral and vegetable components, odds and ends, “any old knick-knack” (as Adolf Bastian puts it in 1894, 5),¹⁸ trifles and trinkets, as English ethnographers write, expressing both their ignorance and their arrogance. The substances are prepared by experts according to arcane recipes that require grinding, pounding, crushing, cooking, roasting, etc. These formulae serve the purpose of charging the object with energy. Various different vegetable and animal matter are used: horn, hide, feathers, skin, claws, blood, internal organs, scales, beaks, teeth, whiskers, etc. Once again here we see the *pars pro toto* principle (synecdoche), which essentially is *the* fundamental structure of fetishism; for in the parts one controls (the power of) the whole. In terms of a kinship with the cult of relics, it is notable that human body parts were also used. These too were used as substitutes for the whole person. There are many accounts of the Africans’ fear of others coming into possession of their hair, nails, semen, bodily excretions or blood, and thereby winning power over them. Organs, bones, genitals, the heart or blood from powerful dead people are “relics in the true sense” (Museum für Völkerkunde 1986, 80).

In this sense, fetishism and magic belong together in that magic is the attempt to control the world (Mauss 1902–1903/2001); exactly this is the purpose of the fetish. Furthermore, they demonstrate a performative structure: they have their own agency and they use its force to realise the potential of the power inherent within them. They are therefore the thingly agents of power (Museum für Völkerkunde 1986, 35). This is why European technical devices can also be understood as fetishes. The Africans’ perception of fetishes reveals what they are by definition: the effects of power.

Magic and religion are, in my opinion wrongly, opposed in ethnology and religious studies well into the twentieth century. Religion is portrayed as a submissive relationship, while magic is portrayed as seeking an active influence on things and the events in the world (Museum für Völkerkunde 1986, 52). Playing up the manipulative aspect is often used to denigrate fetishism and magic (for example as the dark arts of witches and sorcerers or as religious charlatanism). Yet even world religions claim to have an active influence on fate, the future or even the afterlife. Sacrificial relations according to the *do ut des* principle can be

18 In Bastian’s opinion, the savage, in a state of “over-excitement”, attaches “a sudden association of ideas” to “some little thing or other” and in this “huge act of the imagination”, the fetish is created (ibid., 5). However: “When using his fetish [...] the negro does not go to a lot of trouble, seeing as he is dealing with nothing more than a weak little imp” (ibid., 7). Once again, here we see the accusation of arbitrariness and chance, as well as of a lack of respect for a supposedly holy object.

found in both fetishism and Christianity. In Africa there is no culture that does not believe in the potent charge of things, of animals, plants, people and parts of these living beings, but also stones, minerals and materials. Though there may be no concept of nature (as an abstract framing concept), all of nature is conceived of as powerfully present in each of its parts (dynamism). Amulets and talismans also demonstrate this potent charge, just as idols, relics and sacraments in Christianity or the magical objects of today's popular culture do. Thus, all things have a power and the phenomenon of fetishism is created to influence this power.

Following Tylor (1871), James G. Frazer differentiates between mimetic-sympathetic magic and contagious magic based on transmission, which works as impregnation or infection (Museum für Völkerkunde 1986, 56; in contrast Mauss 1969, vol. 1, 45–47). The first type functions on the basis of relationships of similarities, the second on the *pars pro toto* principle. Both forms are in no way only typical of ancient cultures; in Renaissance Europe they are virtually the foundation of the sciences, as Michel Foucault has shown in his book *The Order of Things* (2002, 19–50). At the same time as the discovery of fetishism in Africa, Europe was ruled by a type of episteme that is structurally analogous to African magic. This also makes a case for the argument that fetishism is a syncretic concept from the very beginning, in which European and African elements are mixed.

Similar to the way people in Renaissance Europe distinguished between black magic and white magic, Africans also have black and white sorcery, forbidden and permitted, regulated and wild magic. The destruction and burning of fetishes can also by no means only be traced back Christian missionaries, but rather is an indigenous African practice: tribal kings carry out fetish raids, because wild, uncontrollable private fetishes are a threat to the social order – a case of African iconoclasm. Clan fetishes and the fetishes of political power are exempt from these 'attacks' on fetishes. They were solely concerned with preventing the unrestrained spread of fetishes among their subjects (Museum für Völkerkunde 1986, 58 ff.). It is not historically clear whether these iconoclastic traits already existed before the arrival of white men. One way or another, the European-African encounter began at the end of the fifteenth century with the whites' iconoclasm of African sacred equipment, which was then replaced with Christian cult objects. As early as 1517, there are reports that missionaries urgently requested the introduction of church decoration and cult objects (Palme 1977, 155). The Christians systematically replaced African fetishes with Christian symbolic objects. This continued on throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

With great astonishment, travellers frequently report of how angry and disappointed Africans punished their fetishes when they did not function as they

wished: they hit them, sold them, destroyed or burned them, something completely incomprehensible to Professor Meiners in Göttingen (1806–1807, vol. 1, 179). Occasionally, used up or powerless fetishes were also apparently kept in collections. Bosman had also already reported something similar: if the fetish does not fulfil its purpose, “the new god is rejected as a useless tool” (1705, 368). Thus the Africans “make and break [their] gods daily and consequentially are the masters and inventors of what [they] sacrifice to” (ibid.). Bosman, being a Protestant, approves of his source’s statement and adds that this is also the case all over the world. Most Europeans were accustomed to the holy essence being a permanent presence in statues and relics. But here they were confronted with a custom as utilitarian as it was transitory, one which made the whole business of fetish even more confusing than it already seemed. Fetishes, as is shown here, have precisely the same features that Tertullian, St Augustine and Thomas Aquinas ascribed to idols: they are artificial constructions and reveal the transitory and finite character of all material things.

Furthermore, the Europeans also found it hard to tolerate the peculiar combination of arbitrariness and sacredness in the creation of fetishes. Willem Bosman thus reports his source as saying:

For (said he) any of us being resolved to undertake any thing of importance, we first of all search out a god to prosper our designed undertaking; and going out of doors with this design, take the first creature that presents itself to our eyes, whether dog, cat or the most contemptible animal in the world, for our god; or perhaps instead of that any inanimate that falls in our way, whether a stone, a piece of wood, or anything else of the same nature. This new chosen god is immediately presented with an offering; which is accompanied with a solemn vow, that if he pleaseth to prosper our undertakings, for the future we will always worship and esteem him as a god. (Bosman 1705, 367–368)

This is interesting for two reasons: firstly, it shows that fetishes are not just artefacts, but can also be natural objects; secondly, the fetish is generated by something that we might call ‘meaningful coincidence’. The incidental first encounter with a thing or a living being ‘transforms’ it into a holy object in an instant. These kinds of fetishes are very different from those manufactured by human hand. Yet for the Europeans, the coincidental nature of the encounter is proof of an irrational arbitrariness that they believe governs the nature of fetish in general. One only needs to dream of a thing at night or stub one’s toe on a stone first thing in the morning and suddenly those things are fetishes (Meiners 1806–1807, vol. 1, 174). Charles de Brosses also describes the following ritual: a newborn baby is placed naked on smoothed-out bed of ashes. In the morning, the surrounding ash is inspected for animal tracks. From then on, these animals are the protective fetishes for the baby (de Brosses 1785, 31f.). This also serves as

an example of the arbitrariness inherent to fetishism that so provoked the Europeans.

These contrasts between the sacredness and destruction, between the holiness and arbitrariness of the sacred objects are reflected in the scandalous perversion of value, in that pointless and worthless things were often made taboo. Müller (1676, 49–50) describes a collection of piles of sticks. “In such piles, one finds one large, long stick, on which all kinds of rags and rubbish is hung, bast fibre, chicken bones, sheep and goat heads coloured with blood, egg shells, even old baby napkins.” This is esteemed as a “great sacred thing”. Amongst the “heirloom and house idols”, Müller finds baskets decorated with bells and ribbons: a “fitiso basket”, in which he finds “all kinds of rubbish and pointless trinkets”. Without any consideration for the taboo on touching these objects and against the wishes of the local people, Müller investigates these baskets and finds worthless lumps of earth, dried fruit and again bast fibre, chicken bones, eggshells painted red, etc. (*ibid.*, 52–53). Willem Bosman describes fetishes as wooden containers filled with earth, oil, blood, the limbs of animals and people, feathers, hair and “all sorts of excrementitious and filthy trash”. Ceremonial oaths are taken on these containers, in which pieces of the oath-taker’s hair or toenails and fingernails are also given as an offering (1705, 150–151).

Meiners describes fetish houses, in which there are baskets “which, apart from fetish images in stone, or terracotta heads and the tails of large snakes, contain stuffed owls, bits of crystal, cheekbones from large fish, bottles and shards of glass. [...] The fetishes belonging to most of these fetish sorcerers consist of wooden containers filled earth, oil and blood, with the feathers, hair and limbs of people and animals, indeed all kinds of rubbish and nonsense.” There are also bits of fabric and little balls of ash or dung, which the priests spit or blow on. “The artificial fetishes are no less diverse and strange than the natural ones. Some are so fantastical that one can neither understand how one could combine these things in such a way, nor how one could cobble together such a mass of fetishes.” (Meiners 1806–1807 vol. 1, 158–159) In one priest’s hut, he claims to have found a collection of 20,000 fetishes (*ibid.*, 173): a true ‘museum of unimaginable things’.¹⁹ The English doctor Thomas Winterbottom, similarly emphasising the chaotic confusion, but nonetheless respecting the taboo, writes in 1803: “These [grigris or fetishes] consist of pieces of rag, like streamers, attached to the end of a long pole; or a small country axe fixed upon the trunk of a tree; or the bottom of a bottle; or an old pot placed upon

¹⁹ This image is also borrowed by Tylor (1871, vol. 2, 145): “an old negro caboceer sitting amid twenty thousand fetishes in his private fetish-museum”.

the end of a stake. Sometimes the greengree is a cannon ball, or an old pewter dish laid upon the ground. But whatever it may consist of, it would give great offence to remove, or even to touch it.” (1803, 258–259) This evidence shows that it is not the economic and scientific rationalism of the Europeans that is irritated by fetishism, as Pietz argues (1987, 1988), but their traditional Christian prejudice against superstition. Added to this is outrage at the disorder of things, which to the Europeans is clearly incomprehensible and seems like nothing but junk. That this abundance of “magical ballast” might not originate in Africa but from European influences, as Hirschberg (1972, 399) believes, would have been completely inconceivable to these travellers and missionaries.

At the same time the stupendous drawing of borders and surprising amalgamations in the topography of the fetishes were encountered again and again. Willem Bosman describes a snake cult in the kingdom of Fida. Large, non-venomous snakes are kept in snake houses and brought ritual sacrifices. They are also allowed to move around the villages freely and it is strictly forbidden to injure or kill them. When some Englishmen beat a snake to death without knowing it was sacred, they are all killed. Trade contact with the English only resumes when they assure the locals never to kill a fetish snake again. Snakes are considered peaceful and friendly. They are used for ritual purposes, for example to bring on the rains during a drought (cf. very similar: Warburg 1988 on the Hopi Indians). The people believe that there is a war between the venomous and the fetish snakes, in which humans have intervened to the advantage of the fetish snakes. When a fetish snake is killed and eaten by a pig, all the pigs in the kingdom of Fida are slaughtered (Bosman 1705, 381–382; see Boßmann 1708, 462 for a copperplate engraving of the famous massacre of the pigs; cf. de Brosse 1785, 14–24). The irritation with which these stories are told makes it clear how difficult it was for the Europeans to understand the topography of fetishism and its invisible borders of taboo, and to understand what they saw as the perversion of value. In 1859, the ethnologist Bastian reports of two inadvertent breaches of the invisible spatial borders created by fetishes (1859, 50–60); yet he learns nothing from it: shortly afterwards, he once again attempts to enter the taboo zone of a fetish house and is violently prevented from doing so by the villagers. On the way back, shouting and “all kinds of indescribable sounds” can be heard coming from the direction of the fetishes: according to the Africans, these were the “expressions of the fetish’s anger” at having been disturbed (*ibid.*, 192–193).

As late as the beginning of the twentieth century, one can still find tireless repetitions of the old prejudices in Robert Hamill Nassau: “The fetich [sic] worshipper makes a clear distinction between the reverence with which he regards a certain material object and the worship he renders to the spirit for the being inhabiting it. For this reason nothing is too mean or too small or too ridiculous to

be considered fit for a spirit's *locum tenens*; for when for any reason the spirit is supposed to have gone out of that thing and definitely abandoned it, the thing itself is no longer revered, and is thrown away as useless." (1904, 75f.)²⁰ In 1909, but very much in the style of the travel writers from previous centuries, the Swiss ethnologist Rudolf Zeller also describes a "fetish pan", acquired for the Historical Museum in Bern, from the traditional land of the fetish, the Gold Coast. It was filled "with the most unusual items": fake children's bones, little sticks with hooks, dried fruit, rifle butts, little steel rods (from an umbrella), the head of a tobacco pipe, pieces of a necklace, rice-straw ribbon, rings, snail shells, strips of cotton, insect pupae cocoons, stone axe blades and some matted fibres made of dirt and hair. This thing-chaos is scientifically assessed as follows: "Nourished by the negro's rather shallow need for causality and aided by his active, but muddled imagination, the sorcerer priest finds fertile ground for what is clearly humbug." Thus, according to Zeller, it was plain sailing for "fetish priests, who often also held the political power in their hands", and their "complete nonsense" (1909, 51–61).

To summarise for now, African fetishes provoked authors of early eye-witness reports in the following different ways:

1. *In religious terms*, fetishes were consistently viewed as magical objects within a superstitious and idolatrous environment, whose power was based on the confused ideas of their devotees about the general presence of a force or spirit in all things and living beings, or on the charlatanism of the fetish priests. Variations arise in specific confessions: Catholics exclusively see fetish in Africa as superstition, while Protestant authors increasingly identify parallels between African fetishism and Catholic customs (the cults of the relic and the icon) as well as ancient European folk beliefs in magic.

2. The offensiveness of the belief in the autonomous power of the things is further exacerbated by the fact that the objects considered to be sacred offend the *aesthetic sensibilities* of the Europeans: composite fetishes and collections of fetishes with chaotic appearances in particular are described as demonstrating a shocking level of chaos and disorder, of senseless and grotesque composition, of wild materiality and profanity. The Europeans can no longer differentiate between rubbish and litter and the integral order of things; the fragments of objects become a fuzzy blur under their gaze, even if they appear to be figurally assembled into a cohesive fetish, and become an undifferentiated mishmash that triggers an aesthetic aversion.

²⁰ Nassau, a cleric, had been travelling to West Africa since the 1860s. Also cited in *Museum für Völkerkunde* 1986, 26.

3. The arbitrariness and coincidence with which the fetishes are created and then discarded, without the possibility of establishing any constant links to specific objects, is experienced as *morally* outrageous. In their relationship to fetishes, the Europeans see a reflection of the moral inconsistency they believe they observe in the Africans: inconstant emotions rule despotically, constantly swinging wildly between hostile sorcery and imperious control. In terms of *economic value*, the scandal that the Africans do not demonstrate any form of predictable rational economic exchange in the business of fetish is less the main focus, because the Europeans have always used this to their advantage: glitter in exchange for gold; trinkets in exchange for ivory. This economic asymmetry is simply seen as an expression of the stupidity of the Africans. The Europeans were much more scandalised by the fact that their own order, with its strict differentiation between holy and profane things, between taboo and that which is permitted to circulate, was not reflected in any way in the African culture of things. A constant reshuffling and transposition took place between the categories of valuable and not valuable, holy and profane, so that the topography of things must have appeared anomic, dedifferentiated, allogical and fluid to the Europeans.

4. In terms of a *theory of things*, the Europeans continually experienced disorientation and cognitive dissonance in their encounter with the African world of things. Things and their dark, convoluted relations represented a singularly wild, volatile sphere of surprise, instead of always complying with a calculability immune to disappointment and conventionalised scripts for action. No practical guidelines for handling things could be ascertained. This helplessness explains the sections, found in all of the texts, in which the “fetish clusters” are described as wild conglomerates and nonsensical jumbles of masses of objects, with no visual order whatsoever. For the observers of the time, this gave them the impression of ridiculousness and the grotesque (as an aversive reaction to protect against the loss of meaning). Today’s reader is more likely to get the impression of a surrealist aesthetic *avant la lettre*. From a certain perspective, African fetish culture, put down as primitive and simple, was in fact quite the opposite for the Europeans: hypercomplex.

5. *Psychoanalytically* one could argue (and only with the prior knowledge that fetishism will later become a ‘case’ for psychoanalysis) that the Europeans seemed to have identified what they thought was a shocking lack of superego control in the fetish-believing Africans and correspondingly an intolerable degree of external control; which is why they are viewed as ‘children’. Fetishes are projected emotions, drive impulses and affects, which, precisely because they are exteriorised and thereby reified, means that there is no consistent formation of the ego. This has the effect that in European perception fetishism cre-

ates a worldview that cancels out the reality principle and turns the exterior world into a wild stage for the id, populated with reified fragments of drives, fears and fantasies. Fetishism – and this will also become a prejudice in psychoanalysis – means being trapped in a dark world-cave with haunting dream images and spooky object formations. Because there is no systematic separation between interior and exterior in it, it lacks precisely the element that is fundamental for Europe’s early modern development: the formation of a reliable set of referentiality relations capable of dealing with reality. In contrast, as the land of fetishes, Africa becomes the epitome of a dark world of drives endlessly circling around themselves.

5 Concepts of fetishism in the Enlightenment and the early nineteenth century

5.1 Charles de Brosses: writing-desk inventions

When in 1796 August von Kotzebue allows fetish practices to appear in his sentimental, but also anti-colonial melodrama *Die Negersklaven* [The Negro Slaves],²¹ he is able to assume that fetishism is not completely unknown to the German audience anymore. He was right. Thanks to the work of Charles de Brosses (1709–1777), travel writer, historian, member of the Academy of Dijon, president of the parliament there, debater with Voltaire, contributor to the *Encyclopédie* – about whom there would be plenty of other things to say here – the term fetishism was introduced to “European letters” (Kohl 2003, 71–75). Christoph Meiners from Göttingen noted this in his *Allgemeinen kritischen Geschichte der Religionen* [General Critical History of the Religions] (1806–1807, vol. 1, 142, note). Even later for Edward B. Tylor, de Brosses is the first man to have made an ‘ism’ from the custom of fetishes (1871, vol. 2, 131–132). De Brosses’ treatise from 1760 was translated in 1785 by Christian Brandanus Hermann Pis-

21 There is an interesting scene in this play: Ada, a black slave who is being sexually persecuted by her white masters, is advised by her father Ayos to change shape, but she cries out in distress: “Should I make magic like our fetish priests?” (Kotzebue 1796/1840, 223) For protection, she wears an “amulet” with snake heads, which a fetish priest has given her in Africa. She tears it from her neck and throws it away. “Virtue is the only amulet!” (ibid., 224). She is untouched innocence itself and, as a child of nature from Africa, embodies the best European ideal of virtue, even following the Europeans in her criticism of fetishism. Ada speaks the language of the heart and must therefore reject the idea of changing shape (which is not acceptable in Europe). She is also the better European woman in that she discards the external thing that controls action, the fetish, and internalises morality as the compass for action of the soul.

torius (1763–1823). His father, the theologian Hermann Andreas Pistorius, brother-in-law of the famous Berlin upper consistorial councillor, Johann Joachim Spalding (1714–1804), appended his son's translation with a 150-page religious studies treatise – the first study of fetishism in Germany.

De Brosses had, out of religious and philosophical interest, abstracted fetishism from fetish in order to – along with “honouring the heavens” – highlight “the worship of certain earthly and material objects, fetishes, by the African negroes” as the oldest form of religion in the world. For de Brosses, fetishism is the foundation of “a general religion prevalent in all four corners of the globe” (de Brosses 1785, 4–6). Disagreeing with David Hume's *Natural History of Religion* (1757/2007), which he became aware of through Denis Diderot, de Brosses – like Schelling after him too – clings to the idea of a primal revelation of God, the memory of which has been kept alive in idolatry, fetishism and superstition.

Hume, on the other hand, constructs the process of the development of religions as one moving upwards from idolatry to theism, a line which also leads from unreason to reason. At the beginning are polytheism and idolatry, “the first and most ancient religion”. Because nature is not regular of its own accord, but instead unruly and chaotic, fear causes the savage in the fetishistic stage to be spellbound by wild, constantly turbulent nature.²² In the beginning there was therefore precisely no primal revelation of the one God, but everything was filled with “variety and uncertainty”, with “contrariety” and the “constant combat of opposite powers” (1757/2007, 38). In psychological terms, the first traces of a belief in gods were formed out of hope and fear. A lack of knowledge about causes led to the false assumption that gods and mysterious powers were the agents of nature. Here, we therefore find a criticism of early religious forms as a violation of the principle of rationality, which William Pietz made the basis of his concept of fetishism (1985, 1987, 1988). Anthropomorphism is described by Hume as a primal human instinct, out of which gods are formed: the human being represents the unknown world in the familiar structure of his own self. The purpose of anthropomorphic gods was to create something like islands of order and harmony in a world full of terrifying uncertainty. For Hume, however, minor deities could not create a systematic natural order. Thus, every natural and social matter was assigned to some special god. In Hesiod's time, there were supposedly 30,000 different deities and this confused polytheism necessarily led to a bizarre anarchy (Hume 1757/2007, 34–43).

While for Hume fetishism and polytheism are therefore the crude beginning of all religions, for de Brosses they are the oldest form of an early *corruption* of the

²² Robert H. Milligan is still of the same opinion in 1912, 225ff.

one God and furthest from an original natural religion. Fetishism is the forgetting of this origin in the One.²³ This is evolutionism in reverse: natural religion is not placed at the end, but at the beginning of history. This idea, inspired by the Bible, was obviously the reason why a critical Diderot recommended de Brosses look at David Hume; without any effect, as we can see. Clearly driven by Christian orthodoxy, de Brosses virtually turned Hume's evolutionary and deistic approach on its head. The idea of a primal monotheism, which de Brosses argues for, can still be found in the nineteenth and twentieth century, especially in the ethnology associated with missionary work, for example in G. Wagner (1899, 65–88), who views African and non-African “fetish religions” as a barbarisation of an earlier original concept of God, relics of which can still be found in fetishism (and which Wagner puts great effort into identifying wherever he can). Moreover, Wagner understands fetishism as a belief in spirits: the one God is split up into many different spirits and these manifest themselves in fetishes. The ethnologist, linguistic researcher and extremely active missionary P. Wilhelm Schmidt, founder of the journal *Anthropos* (1906–2000), took these strange ideas much further. In his twelve volume work, *Der Ursprung der Gottesidee* [The Origin of the Idea of God] (1912–1955), he builds a monument as colossal as it is foolish to the long-disproven historical idea of primal monotheism.

This dogmatic universalism is common in early comparative religious studies. It is a common consequence of too much book-learning; and de Brosses is a typical example of this. He links African fetish customs with forms of religion that are cited in passing from travelogues about South and North America, Greenland, Siberia, Arabia as well as Greek and Roman sources about Egypt. This supposedly global fetishism is the rhetorical effect of a discourse and certainly not a result attained through empirical investigation. Its aim is to provide a *single* origin for unreason: the corruption of a primal monotheism. On the other hand, however, de Brosses turns his treatise on fetishism against the Neoplatonists at the Dijon Academy of Sciences (“Platonist nonsense”, de Brosses 1785, 212). He criticises all allegorical and spiritualising hermeneutics in the field of religious studies and demands sources be taken literally and research into ritual be carried out empirically; religious studies should not be a speculative philology (*ibid.*, 200 ff.).

But this is exactly what de Brosses does himself. By compiling ancient sources with ethnographic studies from the modern age (de Brosses 1785, 45–135), he

²³ Forgetting the origin later becomes a general feature of sexual fetishism in psychoanalysis; see pp. 317–325 of this book. On Brosses, cf. the excellent sections in Iacono 1985a, 97–135; Fedi 2002, 126–144; Kohl, 71–76.

makes it possible to extend the concept of fetishism from the tribes of Central Africa to other peoples, especially in Egypt.²⁴ He defines fetishes as follows: “Things endowed with a divine power, such as oracles, pendants and talismans, or things for protection.” All of a sudden, these ubiquitous objects become elements of a religion that lasted up until the Greek and oriental mythologies (*ibid.*, 6). What is quite interesting is his classification of fetishes into different functions, still used today in ethnological studies, and his division into private fetishes and chief fetishes, which are the sacred centre of the tribe. After going through his sources, he is certain that fetishism is against reason (*ibid.*, 137). Its universality is a result of the similarity between all savages across the world, who treat things the way four-year-old children do their dolls: they bring them to life. This is the very popular Enlightenment thesis of the childlike character of uncivilised peoples (and of the maturity of the age of reason, *ibid.*, 143–144). Just as with children, the supposedly primitive peoples’ fear, longing and sensual needs lead to the animation of lifeless things and forces. This primitiveness explains the ubiquity of fetishism (*ibid.*, 153–166), but also its susceptibility to dishonest priests: these fraudulent manipulations lasted for so unbelievably long because the societies were static and morals approved by authority produce a kind of stability of prejudice, which in turn made fetishism the *longue durée* of history (*ibid.*, 153–170).

5.2 Hermann Andreas Pistorius: Protestant reactions

With these kinds of statements, de Brosses fits in with the Protestant climate of his German translator very well. In his treatise on fetishism, Pistorius follows Hume, however, when he locates the origin of religion “in the feeling of being subject to the whims of mysterious forces in visible things or of invisible beings similar to human beings”: for him, these are the two forms of fetishism at the beginning of history (Pistorius in de Brosses 1785, 243). With the introduction

²⁴ The Egyptologist E.A. Wallis Budge (1973, vol. 2, 196–202; first published 1911) argues that fetishism was definitive for religion in general in Egypt; he views Brosses’ book as a flawed misconstruction that merely continued to propagate the Portuguese missionaries’ and travellers’ errors. In his later book (1934/1988), however, Budge locates fetishism and magic in the time before the ancient Egyptian empire and thus excludes the possibility that it played a role in Pharaonic Egypt. Budge’s explanation for this is that the Egyptians had only ever worshipped spirits or gods in things (spirit-power) and tried to influence this, never the things themselves. But this does not contradict magic and fetishism, but merely shows that Budge saw fetishism as an archaic and primitive form of thing-magic.

of the category of “dependency” as the foundational feeling of all religions, Pistorius anticipates Benjamin Constant (see pp. 245–247 of this book) and Schleiermacher. What is important is that the aim of the new subject of comparative religious studies, which in the nineteenth century built a bridge between ethnology and the study of religion, was to ascertain the universal and homogeneous origins of the historical complexity of religions, in order to work out an evolutionary model based on these roots. De Brosses is the switch on the circuit that transforms the broad current of the most heterogeneous travel accounts so that all the magic, sorcery, dynamistic, totemistic and animistic practices dispersed across the globe could be subsumed under the one heading of fetishism: as the source of all primitive early stages of religion contrary to reason.

Pistorius divides religious development into three stages. They correspond more to Hume than de Brosses. *Superstition* is the “belief in the mysterious forces of objects, actions and words that appear to the senses”, which influence the weal and woe of mankind. Human beings therefore attempt to gain control of these forces. The first step is fetishism. From this, *sorcery* develops. This makes use of anthropomorphic forms. The followers of this sorcery made speculations about the cause-and-effect relationships between the invisible beings and the visible forms they appeared in, and subsequently established ritual ways of influencing these beings (Pistorius in de Brosses 1785, 246–247). In alliance with “invisible beings similar to human beings”, sorcery produces sensual effects in the world of things and people. By making the numinous beings manifest in objects, which are then fetishes, they become manageable. Fetishes are therefore tools for the manipulation of the powers contained within them for egoistic purposes. However, in this process cause and effect are never understood as elements of a mechanical nature, but as magic, in Frazer’s sense, and are manipulated using mimetic-sympathetic procedures (ibid., 249). Fetish religions do not have a professional priesthood at this stage according to Pistorius; they are not religions of worship (it is incorrect to differentiate between religions of worship and magical ones, as Frazer also later does). Deism is the third and last stage, a *natural religion of reason*, which makes an invisible and imageless God the creator of reasonable nature. Reason mistrusts any sensual appearance, the basis of savage thinking in fetishism and sorcery. Reason also opposes philosophies of the imagination in which sensual impressions and phantoms are both seen as equally ‘real’, such as fetishism. In this last stage, Protestant Pistorius places an almost ceremony-free belief in an omnipresent God, who is the abstract sum total of all forces, things and beings (ibid., 250–259). In the history of representations of fetishism, in Pistorius we have for the first time an almost purely Enlightenment position, which pleasantly distinguishes itself from the pejorative denunciations of his predecessors (and also from de Brosses).

5.3 Philipp Christian Reinhard: embodiment and representation

Originally from Cologne, but Professor of Philosophy in Moscow from 1803, Philipp Christian Reinhard (1764–1812) shares these principles in his *Abriß einer Geschichte der Entstehung und Ausbreitung der religiösen Ideen* [Outline of a History of the Origin and Spread of Religious Ideas] (1794).²⁵ He too argues not for de Brosses', but Hume's position in the question of a primal monotheism (*ibid.*, § 1–3). The “worship of the invisible causes of noticeable natural effects” (*ibid.*, § 20 ff.) and a general human need to create images (§ 28), namely in anthropomorphism, both produced fetishism as the lowest and most crude form of religion (§ 4–13, § 13). Reinhard's explanation of fetishism is already one based on religious psychology and anticipates later ideas in Edward B. Tylor, Krafft-Ebing, Binet, Waitz and Max Müller. So how does fetishism work for Reinhard?

If he requires a law of understanding, then he [the aboriginal, H.B.] thinks of a cause for an effect that he has experienced, banishes it to a visible object, and awaits more similar effects from the object. Consequently, he adds to this object something which I can only express with the words force, soul, life, and in this way, for the savage [...] the whole world is filled with spirit, everything full of sorcery, and all appearances in the physical world become nothing more than the interaction of these magical forces. (Reinhard 1794, 16 f.)

All things with any significance for primitive people become elements in a living force field: precisely this is fetishism. The fetish is a functional element in the savage mind. For Reinhard, there is a categorical difference between whether things are worshipped the way they are or for the sake of something or someone absent or dead (like relics), in which a kind of (contagious) intimate relationship is established. Anywhere where an absent being is made present, universal fetishism is also present; while on the other hand, things worshipped for their own sake represent a “state of the most extreme primitivism”, most abhorrently in Egypt and Africa (*ibid.*, 35 f.). However, he adds, even Christians worship “holy thorns, splinters and nails”, in other words relics, just like fetishes. One “cannot observe it [fetishism, H.B.] for any length of time without a feeling of discomfort or reluctance. What a stranger man can be to his dignity and his destiny” (*ibid.*, 39). He urgently needs Enlightenment!

Reinhard points out something important though: the need to create images or representations of numinous deities and for the embodiment of diffuse, but

²⁵ In his history, Reinhard only ever goes as far back as Greek mythology. He writes in the foreword that he would like to wait and see how successful his book is before he writes a second one. There is no evidence that this second volume was ever published, so we must assume Reinhard abandoned his plan.

powerful forces. With some justification, this is seen as a universal feature of human culture. The need for representability leads not only to fetishism, but also to anthropomorphism. Representability, which regulates the relationship between the visible and the invisible, perhaps makes fetishism a primitive phenomenon of early culture, but it is an inevitable one nonetheless.²⁶

5.4 Christoph Meiners: disorder and classification

Goethe, who regularly uses the term fetish in his letters after 1800 and who has given us many extraordinary scenes of fetishistic and idolatrous practice in his works (Böhme, H. 1998, 1999), seems to have learned the word from his personal acquaintance, the not very well-respected historian and philosopher, Christoph Meiners.²⁷ In his 1806–1807 *Allgemeine kritische Geschichte der Religionen* [General Critical History of the Religions], Meiners presented a study of fetishism that seems to have been read by Hegel and was most certainly thoroughly consulted by Marx. For Meiners too, fetishism is “not only the oldest, but the most widespread form of the worship of gods” (1806–1807, vol. 1: *Geschichte des Fetischismus* [History of Fetishism], 142–290; here 143). The primal monotheism thesis is rejected, along with Hume (*ibid.*, 30–40). Instead, he suggests an explanation that synthesises psychological, animistic and anthropomorphic elements. A lack of understanding for “natural causes” (*ibid.*, 16) leads to *emotions* like awe, fear, terror and sadness in the relationship with nature, because of which primitive man falsely ascribes causes to *anthropomorphic* forms (Aby Warburg still defends this argument). Meiners thus understands fetishes as the spirits residing in things. “One usually thinks of these spirits as something that lives within things and cannot be separated from that thing, and which can harm or benefit men” (*ibid.*, 144). This is an animistic interpretation of fetishism in Tylor’s sense *avant la lettre* (1871, vol. 1, 10–16). Fetishism “proves without doubt that

²⁶ Reinhard divides fetishism into three stages: thing worship, astrolatry and the worship of natural forces: “all three under the name of fetishism in the wider sense” (1794, 56–57). These forms of worship are the basis of the idea of frightening natural forces as the source of religion in general. The first form, thing worship, is the most primitive in Reinhard’s opinion, while the other two forms of fetishism are seen as already more developed. It is clear how much the idea of development and no longer the classification into different categories of object defines the perception of fetishism around 1800.

²⁷ Rather scathingly, Goethe wrote in no. 256 of his *Xenien*: “M***: Since you describe everything, why don’t you describe some good conclusions / And the machine, my friend, that’s operating you so well.” (Weimar edition of the complete works I, vol. 5.1, 243) – Nonetheless, Goethe definitely met and read Meiners numerous times between 1801 and 1812.

a lack of a proper knowledge of nature was the single only cause for polytheism". This view is influenced by Hume, whose enormous authority in Germany also reveals itself here.

It is a sign of a lack of education and primitivism to be able to make anything and everything a fetish, "sometimes the right, sometimes the left shoulder, or an animal's head, then an onion, or some bowl or cup", sometimes the earth, paternal or maternal land, the sea, rivers and springs, mountains and cliffs, stones, forests and trees, poles and pegs, bricks and heads, bones, horns, skin and fur, teeth, husks, feathers, claws, animal scales, "all kinds of junk" or "images of human-like deities" (Meiners, 140 – 157). Added to this are wooden stakes with human faces carved into them, small portable images and sculptures, idols painted on fabric and paper, felt and leather, bisexual wooden carvings, collections of the remains of slain enemies, fetishes to protect the territory in fields, entrances to houses, inner chambers, yards and stables, metal fetishes made of gold, silver and brass, with magical ingredients hidden within them, enemy weapons, sceptres, daggers, the remains of brave warriors and, eventually, various things acquired from white men, which they could not understand and therefore made into fetishes: flags, pennants, watches, images of the Virgin Mary, compass needles and so forth. Here Meiners concurs with the travel writers, who frequently bemoaned the arbitrariness and coincidental nature of fetishistic objects (*ibid.*, 158 – 172).

A problem once again emerges in Meiners that has remained unsolved since de Brosses: *if* one universalises fetishism and removes it from its local African specificity; and *if* more ethnological field research is required, which would embed fetishistic practices in their ritual contexts, then the ethnologist is faced with the problem of how to bring scientific order to this overwhelming mass of fetishistic customs strewn throughout the world. Meiners finds a solution for this that crops up again and again, and which later also defines the sexual strand of fetish research, in Krafft-Ebing for example. Meiners divides fetishes into *classes of objects*. He chooses a classification method that does not organise fetishism historically or regionally, nor by its rituals or social functions, but according to tableaux of the things or living beings worshipped. The result is a kind of *historia naturalis* in the history of religion. It is also a consequence of the rhetoric, already observed in de Brosses, of limitless *comparison*, one which casts its net over the entire world. The Enlightenment fetish researcher, lacking the ethnological tools for the analysis of a fetishism that scandalises him, creates a kind of cognitive fetish through his manic comparing and classifying, in the attempt to map the wild landscape of rampant fetishes everywhere he looks. One cannot help but be a little amused. For we can be pretty certain that nothing new will be discovered about fetishism by simply classifying all the things wor-

shipped across the globe. It is a helpless attempt, but has the advantage of at least creating the appearance of order. Meiners essentially builds a cabinet of curiosities, a natural history museum, a chamber of wonders containing fetishes sorted by classes, just as was also common practice in mineralogy, botany or zoology. Sexology will later do the same thing with perversions and types of sexual fetishism. When Meiners mentions a fetish priest who supposedly had a collection of 20,000 fetishes in his ceremonial hut (one still finds examples of these kinds of fetish huts stuffed with ‘junk’ as late as the nineteenth century),²⁸ he does not notice that the archival composition of his 150-page fetish study is structured in exactly the same way: a fetishistic collection in itself. It was Goethe who first recognised this connection between the mania for collecting and fetishism, which subconsciously spurred Meiners on in his classification madness (see pp. 283–289 of this book).

5.5 Overview of the philosophers

We have ascertained the following regarding the Age of Enlightenment: fetishism was considered a primitive cult of thingly (composite) objects or natural life forms, which did not represent gods themselves, but instead were equipped with a numinous power that could have an apotropaic or harmful magic effect. It also included amulets and talismans. Taboo objects too, later called objects possessing *mana* or *orenda*,²⁹ or more commonly totems, are also classified as fetishes. These terms – fetish, amulet, talisman, orenda, mana, totem, taboo, nkisi, juju, grigri, etc. – tell us that, although they originate from various different European, African, Indian and Polynesian cults, they were successively gathered together into a single group of ideas by European travellers. This tendency can already be found in de Brosses and persists until the beginning of the twentieth century. The cult forms of colonised peoples all over the world were homogenised. In fetishism, Enlightenment thinkers identified the traces of a once common religion that had existed across the entire globe, a deeper layer of religion “everywhere, at all times” (de Brosses). They believed they had rediscovered this form of religion, which belonged to Europe’s infantile stage, in the fetishism of the Africans and that its descendents could still be recognised in popular

²⁸ For example in Waitz 1850–1870, here: vol. 2, 174 ff., and even still in Tylor 1871, vol. 2, 145 ff.

²⁹ On the concepts of *mana* and *orenda*, which were not yet known in the eighteenth century, cf. Mauss 1902–1903/2001; 133–149; and also Beth 1927, 206–267.

forms of devotion in contemporary Christianity: a typical pattern of thought in the Enlightenment understanding of history.

In the *Real-Encyclopädie* (1820, vol. 3, 666–667), Enlightenment knowledge about fetishes is representatively summed up, with reference to de Brosses.³⁰ The entry differentiates between natural and artificial fetishes. The view that the sacralisation of worthless things and their transformation into powerful objects originates in *projections* has already found its way into the lexicon here: the “savage man [...] transfers” what makes him a living being into an inhuman object, which appears “to him as superior and more powerful [...] than himself, and in foreign entities he sees these reflections of himself and the human as divine”. This corresponds to Hume’s theory of anthropomorphism. The encyclopaedia views Greek statues of deities as the most refined form of fetishism. Thus, at the height of philhellenism (!), even Greece, *the* seminal European culture is included under the concept of fetish.

Fetishes are seen as a universal phenomenon, in which human beings worship something they have created themselves in the shape of something external and foreign to themselves. This interpretation remains formative for Marx and Freud, along with their followers. Furthermore, fetishism is not just viewed as a phenomenon belonging to exotic cultures, but as a moment in European religious history itself – and not a moment that has been left behind, but one that is re-encountered everywhere where, as the Protestant Immanuel Kant says critically about Catholicism, especially the clergy, belief in God has degenerated into “fetish-making” through the cult of the instruments of belief, which ultimately become independent from that belief (1998b, 186–187). Catholic icon and relic cults are increasingly dealt with under the heading of fetishism. This is the beginning of Africa’s retaliation in Europe. In summary, one can say that the Enlightenment saw something archaic reflected in its encounter with a feature of foreign cultures it could not understand. It not only tried to fit this into the overall prehistory of civilisation, but also began to recognise it as Europe’s own, constantly present potential – though not without a shudder.

One thing evident in all these interpretations is the overestimation of fetishism, which is neither a stage in the development of religion, nor a religion in its own right. It is precisely this overestimation (which is itself a fetishistic mechanism) that enabled fetishism to be included in the discourse of the evolutionary history of religion and in philosophical discourse. With regard to Marx – along

³⁰ Almost 100 years earlier, *Zedler’s Universal Lexikon* of 1738 (vol. 9, esp. 675) barely gives *fetisso* 15 half-lines and defines it as a “god for protection” or a “tin god”, which thingly magical objects like rings, bands, straw brooms, etc. are dedicated to – an example of primitive people’s superstition.

with de Bosses and Feuerbach – Hegel and August Comte are the most important figures in this debate.

However, the philosophers do not turn out to be any more knowledgeable than the travel writers or the writing-desk ethnographers of the eighteenth century. Quite the opposite. In his speculative *Philosophie der Offenbarung* [Philosophy of Revelation] (1841–1842/1993), Schelling mentions fetishism as part of the “ages of mythological processes”, a phase in which the primal ancestors of the gods descended to inorganic matter and then passed through it. Fetishism is the *lowest* point of this phase: “Incidentally, *fetishism is the only* remainder from the time of Cronos and is the foolish worship of inorganic matter. It is most certainly not the oldest religion. Fetishism only begins at this point.” (ibid., 220; cf. Schelling 1858/1983, vol. 1, 398–399³¹) Schelling too sees a form of fetishism at work in Ancient Greece, namely the “memory of the *lithois archaiois*” of which Pausanias gives an account: a “proven worship of raw, unhewn stone” that extended to include “birds’ claws, feathers and similar items”, a practice which Schelling sees as common to the whole “rest of humankind” in ancient times (ibid.).

In comparison to the older Schelling, Hegel has a go at African fetishism with a bit more rigour (cf. Kohl 2003, 80–85). For him Africa “is the land of gold, forever pressing in upon itself, and the land of childhood, removed from the light of self-conscious history and wrapped in the dark mantle of night” (Hegel 1975b, 174). He interprets this above all from fetishism and magic. The fetishism of the “negro” is on the lowest rung of the objectification of the spirit. The “negro” grasps neither *himself* nor the *interconnected relationships* he himself objectively creates. Fetishism is the “arbitrary manner” through which the negro “arrogates to himself a power over nature” (ibid., 179). At the same time, however, the negro makes his arbitrary control visible as something external to him, namely in “images” that depict a power which can take hold of anything “they encounter [...] whether it be an animal, a tree, a stone, or a wooden image” (ibid., 180; cf. Hegel 2007, vol. 2, 289–291; on magic: 272ff., cf. 535ff.).

31 “Even the Greeks, the Hellenes seem to have gone through this inorganic time [...] No remains of this time have endured in the rest of humankind, except for so-called fetishism, which is understood as the foolish worship of a primitive, either inorganic or at least dead body, e.g. stones, birds’ claws, feathers and similar objects. Any worship becomes foolish when *the* moment of consciousness has passed, in the sense that it was natural and necessary and therefore had a certain amount of meaning. The Hindu’s worship of his idols is also foolish. Far from regarding fetishism as the oldest religion because it seems to be the most primitive – a favourite opinion of many writers nowadays – this observation illuminates the fact that fetishism much rather originates in this moment.” (Schelling 1858/1983, vol. 1, 398–389)

The savage therefore uses these fetishes to perform magic; with them, he tries to gain “power over nature” (ibid., 273) and control it: “The ego is what works magic; but it is through *the thing itself* that I achieve mastery over the thing.” (ibid., 283, note 140) This is the first form of the necessary division between nature and spirit. The spirit’s path through nature will eventually lead to its rule. It is only in this division that the “the sensual rind around things, which separates him (= man, H.B.) from them” forms (ibid., 157). It is the beginning of the separation of subject and object and thereby the possibility of freedom and domination. The fetish is a kind of ‘intermediate thing’: it is neither entirely a subject nor entirely an object, even if it does display the first evidence of the resistance of the objective world, as well as the practical potency of the subject in it, in the form of magic. For Hegel, the idea of a rudimentary solid form, different to man, has at least been awakened and replaced pure appearance. The fetish is the first step in objectification. With it, the dialectic of subject and object can begin its ascendance, even if the objective aspect of it, the power of nature, is negated and subjective, arbitrary will misrecognised at the same time.

Both, however, confound primitive man and he therefore remains stuck in a double alienation that appears again in Marx: fetishism as alienation from the self. Hegel essentially extends Enlightenment prejudices against the “negroes” and their fetishistic practices – and yet, he does something typical for German Idealism: he builds fetishism into the dialectic of the spirit’s unfolding, which conveys its essence in stages of objectification. Fetishism is thus incorporated into the set of concepts used in the philosophy of spirit and from now on can be either understood as a primal form of the development of the self (Ludwig Feuerbach) or as a figure of alienation from the self (Karl Marx). The path to the material sociology, ethnology and psychology of the fetish custom remains, however, blocked.

5.6 Auguste Comte: the primal positivity of fetishism

The founding father of French sociology, Auguste Comte (1798–1857) is an exception in the nineteenth century, which otherwise radically discredited fetishism using scientific means (cf. Fedi 2002, 153–187; Kohl 2003, 86–91). In his six volume *Cours de philosophie positive* (1830–42), he presents fetishism as a ‘positivity’. Within his law of three stages (“lois des trois états”), he places the “état théologique”, the first phase of the successive development of world history, before the “état métaphysique” and the “état positif”. Within the first stage,

fetishism is the elementary religious and social form, even before polytheism and monotheism.³² Fetishism thus becomes the name of an epoch of world history and describes the nature and unity of humanity's primary culture (Comte 1933, 167–193). One senses the legacy of the eighteenth century in this universal history divided into epochs, but also the opposition to Hegel.

Comte identifies a “traditional need”, “the human way in which we project onto everything, by comparing all possible phenomena with those we produce ourselves, and which thus seem very familiar to us at first, because of the direct intuition that goes along with them.” (1956, 7)³³ This is an explicit definition of the mechanism of fetishistic projection for the purposes of explaining the world and the familiarisation of the unknown by means of a primal anthropomorphism. According to Comte, feelings, not the intellect, govern our lives. And because feelings are the driving force of our existence (1876, vol. 3, 67), we remain familiar with the mechanism closest to our feelings in all stages of our personal, but also our historical development – and that is fetishism. It is the birth of every civilisation. For the evolution of the individual, it is the starting point of all intellectual life (*ibid.*, 68). Scientific reason, which defines the modern age, does not in fact develop out of previous theological and metaphysical ages, but rather in opposition to them and with recourse to primordial fetishistic modes of behaviour. Although these are emotional and pre-scientific, they have the advantage of keeping humans *in* the world and not banishing them to the misty regions of transcendence. Thus, inadvertently, we repeatedly relapse into the primal logic of fetishism, especially in situations that confront us with unfamiliar realities: according to Comte, we have an in-built mechanism to form spontaneous, fantastical explanations in reaction to these situations by means of the ‘*fictitious method*’ of fetishism. However, these explanations should be seen positively insofar as they connect us to things in the internal world (*ibid.*, 70–71). Getting sidetracked from our search for causes in the external world is the original sin of polytheism. It diverts us from the path of orientating ourselves toward the things of this world. The fetishist is unscientific, no doubt; but he maintains the link between people and both inorganic and organic nature, and creates a sympathetic connection to animals and plants. In contrast, later eras radically cut us off from nature and other living beings. “Thus fetishism is theoretically superior to theologism in doctrine as well as in method, even as regards the inorganic world.” (*ibid.*, 74). For Comte then, among all forms of “fictitious synthesis”, fetishism

32 Émile Durkheim will argue that the original form of religion was totemism not fetishism, in: Durkheim 1912/2001.

33 More comprehensively: Comte 1853, vol. 3, 78–157. In English: Comte 1876, vol. 3, 65–132.

is the best, because it operates in the realm of the material world. Fetishism subordinates naked subjectivity to the primacy of materiality; and for Comte, that is as it should be.

Comte therefore turns all the interpretations we have examined so far upside down: characteristics that have previously been used to show fetishism in a negative light are now attributed to theology. He observes correctly that modern thinkers never recognised the positive achievements of fetishism. They failed to see that the ‘childish’ state involved in this thinking is not sick or insane, but normal and in fact most compatible with the most mature stage, the age of positivism. Indeed, one can clearly observe in children that fetishism is the first of all subsequent stages of development (*ibid.*, 125). Because of its spontaneous valuing of the living world, fetishism is more conducive than later forms for engendering a respectful appreciation of the natural environment – especially in comparison with the violent and destructive energies of civilised humanity (*ibid.*, 85–86). Because fetishism spontaneously assimilates things or is mimetically linked to them, it also has a direction relationship to aesthetics and art (*ibid.*, 84; 109–114). It is marked by variety, individuality and directness: it is also the first attempt to create social relationships, but before the disastrous intervention by the priestly caste.

Moreover, fetishism is also closely associated with agriculture and sedentary cultures. It creates basic partnerships, sympathetic instincts and a kind of alliance technique, through which relationships to animals and plants are made possible (*ibid.*, 87–88). Although fetishism can only integrate a relatively small number of social relationships, it demonstrates local permanence and temporal continuity. That is why it has survived until today. It is interesting that Comte determines two fundamental spatial directions of cultures: those that orientate themselves horizontally, like the fetishistic communities, and those whose direction is vertical, like religious systems with different levels of transcendence (*ibid.*, 94–95). In the ‘horizontal’ view of the world and in the practical-technical, mimetic-sympathetic, social and aesthetic ways of dealing with it, fetishism is of fundamental value for Comte.

Even if he identifies some limits of fetishism towards the end of his analysis (*ibid.*, 125–132) – e.g. the confusion of material processes and living spirit, the inability to form larger communities, its epistemic, social and political flaws – it is still obvious how much he idealises fetishism. At the same time, it is understood in very abstract terms as a part of his functionalist typology. He is almost wary of describing any fetishistic practice in detail at any point. Comte is a structural analyst and a philosopher of the ages of man. But in this regard, he can assign fetishism a fundamental place and a number of socially beneficial functions. This is made even more important for Comte by the fact that he views the

subsequent stages of poly/monotheistic theologism as errors in the preferable development towards positivism. Comte is therefore the great exception of the nineteenth century and that makes him valuable. For after him, Marx and Freud will make fetishism into a negativity par excellence for once and for all: Comte is right to be wary of this, even if his plea in favour of fetishism comes across as a little too enthusiastic.

Not without an ironic sideways glance at his neighbour, Comte once stated that any unbiased philosopher would always have a higher regard for fetishism than German Idealism. The difference, indeed the opposition between Hegel and Comte is in fact Hegel's radical exclusion of African fetishism from world historical development. Fetishist Africa is for Hegel, like de Brosses before him, the absurd blind alley of deformed spirit: in Africa "history is in fact out of the question [...] No aim or state exists whose development could be followed." (Hegel 1975b, 176). For Comte, in contrast, fetishism represents the positive starting point of all developments for humankind (cf. Pouillon 1972, 196). Marx was able to take an aspect from each thinker for his analysis of alienation based on commodity fetishism: the deciphering of an historical and thus resolvable figure of alienation, founded on projection via misrecognition; and the aspect of community, in the sense that commodity fetishism is a normal, necessary, if at the same time phantasmagorical manifestation of social relationships in capitalism. We are of course still a very long way from an understanding of what fetishism actually meant to the Africans themselves at this point – the first black African investigations of fetish cults from the perspective of the people who had the fetish and the term fetishism stolen from them first appear in the 1970s (Buakasa 1973; cf. Garnier/Fralon 1951; Doutreloux 1967; Swithenbank 1969; Surgey 1994). With Marx, fetishism finally becomes a concept belonging to white culture, a concept to which black culture was forced to give a mysterious quality and an alien form to, and one which now comes of age as the alienation at the very heart of capitalist modernity. Henceforth fetishism will fill white culture with a jittery disquiet.

6 On the path to ethnology

6.1 Max Müller: the condemnation of fetishism

In his Gifford lectures on *Anthropological Religion* (1891), the great religious studies scholar Friedrich Max Müller (1823–1900), son of the poet Wilhelm Müller, rejects Comte's ideas as "mere theory", since this theory of primal fetishism attempted to make a "small and very late tributary the main source of all religion"

(1892, 117).³⁴ The point has not yet been reached “that the ghost of fetishism has been entirely laid, but it only haunts deserted places now” (ibid., 118). Graciously, he declares: “Fetishism, however, need not be banished altogether from the history of religious thought.” (ibid., 121) Müller notes with satisfaction that Herbert Spencer (1873, 243) had also dissociated himself from the theory. Edward B. Tylor (1871) and Émile Durkheim (1912/1915) similarly reject the thesis of fetishism as the source of all religions and put animism and totemism in its place respectively.³⁵ However, in doing so they do as little to get past the unilinear evolutionism of the nineteenth century as Max Müller himself, who in turn regards both animism and totemism as theoretical fictions (Müller 1892, 121 ff., 184, 413 f.). What is interesting is that Müller views fetish theorists as fetishistic themselves – the first hint I am aware of that there might be such a thing as theory-fetishes.³⁶ Indeed, Müller says ironically that fetishism is “an extraordinary superstition – I do not mean fetishism, but the belief in fetishism as a primordial religion” (1892, 119). Later Marcel Mauss (1902–1903/2001) and today Jean Baudrillard (1981, 88–101) will similarly argue polemically against the fetishism of the fetish concept – as a phantasm of white thinking, which has little or nothing to do with the reality of primitive cultures. In 1894, Müller already views fetishism, but also totemism as overused concepts in ethnological research that explain everything and nothing. “Totemism is one of those pseudo scientific [sic] terms which have done infinite harm to the study of mythology. [...] I protested once more against the slovenly use of the term *fetish* [...]” Müller complains that “hardly any tangible object of worship can now escape the name of fetish, or any a religion the byword of fetishism”. He demands more conceptual clarity. One should not “take it for granted that religion must everywhere pass through the phases of fetishism, totemism, animism, or any other ism.” (ibid., 408–410) With the latter jibe, he is also attacking Edward B. Tylor, whose seminal book *Primitive Culture* had been published two decades before.

It is very revealing in terms of the history of science that apparently even an international authority like Müller does not succeed in limiting the use of terms

³⁴ In 1888, Edward B. Tylor opened the famous Gifford lectures.

³⁵ Along with the book *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* by Durkheim, cf. also his preliminary studies: “Sur la Totémisme”. In *Journal Sociologique* vol. 5 (1900/1901), 82–121. Exactly half a century after Durkheim believed that he had discovered a universal phenomenon in totemism, compared to which fetishism was merely a mental fiction, Claude Lévi-Strauss declared the end of totemism in *Totemism* (1962/1963): in it, despite belonging to the tradition of Durkheim and his nephew Marcel Mauss, Lévi-Strauss subjects totemism to precisely the same annihilating criticism that fetishism had previously faced.

³⁶ Although one could also point to Tylor here (1871, vol. 1, 141 f.)

and concepts that are widely accepted in the scientific community, in defining their semantics more clearly and sharply or in taking them out of circulation altogether. The opposite is in fact true. Fetishism had already firmly and widely established itself long ago, not only in religious studies and ethnology, but also in political economy and sexology. It has not been stopped even today. It is therefore entirely futile to attempt to restrict the term to specific forms of African tribal behaviour – even then fetishism was an observation made by foreigners, into which parts of the observers, in the form of projections, got mixed – or to distinct phenomena, such as sexual fetishism. All one can do is reconstruct the almost boundless career of the term itself and ask what it can tell us about our own culture, European culture.

Max Müller, however, still believed fetishism could be limited to “a very late phase of superstition” (*ibid.*, 121) or that totemism could be restricted to what it is used for by the North American Indians: as a sign to recognise members of the clan. Everything else is an unreliable, metaphorical reinterpretation (*ibid.*, 121 ff.). Nonetheless, in Müller’s own work there are both the usual limitations and generalisations. For example, he derives most of his religious phenomena from the language of comparative linguistics. He also tends toward classifying all religions according to linguistic families. For Müller, language is the oldest archive there is and in that sense also the source of all our knowledge about ancient religions (cf. 1873/1878). He is therefore a proponent of the comparative philological method in religious studies, which had already been working on making a link to ethnology for some time, in order to also analyse religion ‘in the field’, as a set of ritual behaviours. Müller’s ideas on the other hand, correspond to a type of religious studies favoured in Germany that had developed out of Romantic mythology (for example Creutzer’s and Schelling’s, whose lectures Müller had already heard in 1845 in Berlin) and comparative linguistics (cf. Hermann Usener 1876; 1912–1914). Within this model, Müller had done groundbreaking work, particularly on the extant written ‘mythologies’ from the Indian subcontinent and the Orient. However, fetishism is a phenomenon that developed out of the observation of non-writing cultures. The accusation constantly levelled at fetishism of seeing life in lifeless things – Müller calls this the “law of agency” (*ibid.*, 61 ff.), in which, because of a lack in concepts of causality, cultures posited active forces as an explanation for natural phenomena – is an “insult to human intellect” for Müller (*ibid.*, 73). This “belief in agents behind the great phenomena of nature” (*ibid.*, 181), leads to a confused “physical pantheon [of nature]” (*ibid.*, 71), which lacks the abstraction necessary to arrive at a scientific explanation for natural phenomena or to conceive of a monotheistic God. Viewing ‘simple’ religions as primitive religions, making religiousness inextricably linked to monotheism and the constant demand for scientific causality: once again

these are generalised prejudices. In Müller we thus have a typical case of someone carrying out a crusade against old prejudices in the name of new ones. This phenomenon defines almost the entire history of fetishism in the sciences.

6.2 Theodor Waitz: the confused worship of images

We owe the five volume *Anthropologie der Naturvölker* [Anthropology of Primitive Peoples] (1859–1870) to the Marburg professor and armchair-ethnologist, Theodor Waitz (1821–1864). For Waitz, anthropology occupied a very difficult position, between anatomy and physiology on the one side, which place man fully in nature, and psychology on the other, which makes him entirely a creature of the mind. Anthropology delineates its field somewhere in between: its main subject is the geographical distribution of peoples and the plurality of cultural repertoires of behaviour, under the assumption of the fundamental unity of mankind; this is where the methodologies of empirical and comparative historical anthropology emerge from. However, in practice it remains the kind of descriptive anthropology that Kant was already a proponent of. Waitz synthesises natural historical factors, climate, diet and the heredity of acquired characteristics (!) with cultural achievements, which he investigates linguistically, historically and in terms of a typology of behaviour (see 1859, vol. 1, esp. 258 ff.). In the second volume (1860), he investigates *Die Negervölker und ihre Verwandten* [The Negro Peoples and Their Relations]. It is divided into sections in the same way as all subsequent volumes. An ethno-geographic investigation is followed by a description of material culture: farming, diet, clothing, habitation, handicrafts, trade; family life; the political and legal system; religion (including fetishism); temperament and character; intellectual ability as well as information on the influence of foreign cultures. The largest ethnic groups are each dealt with under those headings: the ‘Hottentots’ (Khoi), the ‘Kaffirs’ and Kongo people, the Merina, Ethiopians, Oromo and Somali.

Waitz measures fetishism, which he – like Hegel – thinks is “Africa’s religion”, against orthodox Christian monotheism, which is why he emphasises the spiritual elements of fetish objects. Only in this way can he make a distinction between the arbitrary, material substrate and the divine essence that resides in things either ephemerally or for a longer duration of time. However, the ‘negro’, with his ‘befuddled’ imagination, fails to make this distinction, although the signs of a supreme god that also exist all over Africa are present precisely therein, waiting to be discovered (Waitz 1860, vol. 2, 167 f., 174–177). Waitz quotes a missionary, who declares with resignation “that along with God, they have thousands and thousands of other fetishes, a habit they unfortunately share

with many Christians.” (ibid., 173) It is therefore a mistake, according to Waitz, to view fetishism as highly developed. Fetishism is “the worship of idols and of all kinds of worthless stuff collected at random”, a confused “worship of images” (ibid., 183). The “negro takes the attribution of spirits to nature to the furthest extreme; but as his mind is too underdeveloped to grasp and understand the idea of a general spirit in nature, his fantasy runs wild” in the tangled topography of fetishes (ibid., 174). Fetishes are “sorts of gods” (ibid., 175), but at the same time they are utterly trivial things. “His fetish is a god to him and at the same time a mere idol, a lump of wood; it is the god itself and something blessed or occupied by the god [...], a tree, an animal, a pot, a sacrificial victim, a sacrificial altar, a priest or seer possessed by a spirit, a temple, it is the god himself and the thing granted miraculous powers, an elixir, an amulet, an auspicious or an inauspicious day [...]” (ibid., 175).³⁷ This messy, simultaneous jumble of signs and things, sometimes filled with spirit and powers, then lifeless and banal again, deeply disorients the ‘negro’, and even more so the anthropologist. Because gods and spirits can take up residence anywhere, different scales and hierarchies of value that are impossible to follow are created and the locality and temporality of these scales are different for every fetish worshipper and every tribe. Waitz has a rather interesting, but dubious account of an African’s answer to the remonstrance that a fetish spirit, who was being brought offerings of food, could not actually eat any of it: “Oh the tree is not a fetish, the fetish is the invisible spirit, but it has made its home in this tree. Of course it cannot eat our physical food, but it consumes the spiritual part of it and leaves the physical part, which we see, behind.” (ibid., 187)

6.3 Edward B. Tylor: animism and fetishism

With this rather more European than African perspective, representative of older ethnography, Waitz nonetheless provides support for the animistic interpretation of fetishism in Edward B. Tylor’s (1832–1917) *Primitive Cultures* (1871, here vol. 2, 157).³⁸ Tylor does in fact eagerly take the position that fetishism should be treated as a part of a “wider doctrine of spirits”. He synthesises his theory of animism

³⁷ Of course Waitz also provides the familiar lists to prove this chaos of things: amulets and magical tools are formed from “buttons, rings, bits of wood, metal or stone, hooves, claws, animal teeth or bones, fish scales or fins, snake heads, bird beaks, claws or feathers.” (Waitz 1869, vol. 2, 186). These ‘stuff museums’ are regularly described.

³⁸ Tylor is cited [by Böhme] from the 1873 German translation. [Here, the English original has been used.]

from worldwide evidence, and in this way, clearly sets himself apart from de Brosses, Comte and the ethnologist Fritz Schultze (1871). He develops a doctrine of spirits and souls, which he does not divide up into different regions or cultures, but assembles from findings from all over the world. He defines fetishism as “the doctrine of spirits, embodied in, or attached to, or conveying influence through, certain material objects” (1871, vol. 2, 132). Two elements therefore always come together in fetishes: spiritual potency, the *effective power*, which from the perspective of the white man can be interpreted as dynamistic, demonic, spiritual, manistic or of course animistic; and the *material carrier object* where that power resides (cf. Museum für Völkerkunde 1986, 12f.). The latter is manipulated through ceremonies, worship, sacrifices and invocations on behalf of the interests of the fetish worshipper.

The objects do not inherently contain a spirit and are not venerated or feared for this reason; rather, the condition of fetishism is *spirits taking up residence in objects*. In Tylor, the anthropomorphic conception of the soul in simple cultures becomes the foundation of a *universal animism* of the world. These floating, hovering spirits are imagined anthropomorphically, but embody their personhoods in the most inhuman of things: thus the fetish is created, which forms “a whole” from the combination of spirit and lifeless thing.

From this, Tylor derives a doctrine of possession that is seminal for medical and exorcism practices, because possession is not only found in exotic cultures, but also in European folk medicine and Christianity. It is clear that in his investigation of ‘primitive cultures’, Tylor always has ancient and modern European cultures in mind too. Both the Christian cult of relics and contemporary peasant culture are remnants of an archaic fetishism for him. Yet it is even more significant when Tylor makes reference to highly respected scholars like Leibniz or Berkeley, whose concepts of force and ideas about the power of objects, he argues, represent the rationalised remains of an ancient fetishism. The theory of the electric aura (such as in mesmerism) is also seen as the leftovers of the belief in fetishes. In this way, Tylor shifted the effects of fetishism forward to the time around 1800 and into the very pinnacles of European culture (ibid., 146–151, 156–157). Moreover, with his animism theory, Tylor interprets religious fetishism in exactly the same way that Marx had analysed commodity fetishism a few years earlier.

One successor to Tylor is Raimundo Nina Rodrigues (1900), who applies the concept of animism to fetishistic rites in Bahia, Brazil. In Germany, Tylor finds a devotee in Wilhelm Schneider (1891). For him fetishism, which he proposes to restrict to the African world of spirits, is magic with an animistic foundation: “Since according to the Negro’s thinking the spirit world is such a part of visible nature that the latter is the dwelling place of the former, any object, even the

most trivial thing can become the instrument, seat or physical incarnation of a spirit, in other words, a fetish. It is the fetish's spirit and not its body that is worshipped." (Schneider 1891, 24) "African fetishism originates from the spiritistic concept of nature." (ibid., 173) This too is a thoroughly European understanding of fetishism. Schneider sees a great fear of magical power in the African religions and identifies attempts to find effective means of repelling enemy magic everywhere. Fetishes function above all as these repellents. He also sees a reflection of man's battle with each other to survive in the competition between sacred objects and their magical powers. African religious customs are here mixed in with Social Darwinist ideas from the late nineteenth century. When Schneider, also influenced by Thomas Hobbes, goes as far as to view periods of the tribes' peaceful co-existence as a kind of war, Africa becomes a complete mirror of European ideas. One could continue further along this line of argument and straightaway declare fetishism to be a socio-pathological, schizophrenic, paranoid system of delusions, in the sense of Viktor Tausk's theory of the 'influencing machine' (1933, 519–556), in which whole communities live under the spell of dark forces, which they control and manipulate *a tergo*, and against which their own fetishes adopt a guardian and repellent function in the battle against alien spirits. This makes it clear that animism too can be made the mirror of any European ideology.

6.4 Adolf Bastian: colonialism and self-reflection

Ethnology in Germany, however, was nowhere near the kinds of overarching theories that Tylor undertook. Thus the infamous and prolific ethnologist Adolf Bastian (1826–1905) contributes numerous reports in the style of ethnographic narrative and by collecting case studies, beginning with a visit to the Congo in 1859 and ending with a research trip to Guinea in 1884, about the "highly developed fetish system" in Africa (1859, 82). In Bastian, ethnology is part of German colonial politics, under the aegis of which he travels to Africa for the first time. He himself is an obsessive collector of material cultural objects, or one could also say, an unscrupulous thief whose trophies fill ethnological museums (Kramer 1995).³⁹ Still, Bastian disagrees strongly with any form of speculative evolutionism in the study of religion and ethnology and advocates empirical, comparative ethnic psychology (ibid., 312–340), which later Wilhelm Wundt (1832–1920) will

³⁹ He describes the emergence of ethnology along with his own scientific biography in Bastian 1881.

also further develop.⁴⁰ His observations on the syncretism of fetishistic practices are also quite insightful, for example when he notes that ritual and symbolic elements of the Christian religion imported to the Congo had mixed with its practices of magic. Also a doctor of medicine, Bastian wishes to construct a psychology of “genetic development” “based on ethnology” (1868, xi) and the physiology of the nervous system. For this purpose, he uses modern science to explain the allegedly insane phenomena and irrational behaviour of Africans and other ethnic groups as a result of the deficient development of cognitive concepts, psychic projections, shadowy mental associations or “instinctive elementary thoughts” (1860, on fetishes: 11–23; 1894, vi, 50).

Religion in Africa is rooted in the “suffering of life”, in the “torture”, “pain and affliction” caused by demonic, magical enemies. This is why, according to Bastian, there is a vital interest in *theoi apotropaioi*; and these are the fetishes. Their purpose is to manage existence. Along with Feuerbach (and Hume), Bastian considers anthropomorphism the fundamental basis of all religions, especially in the form of a “personification of causality” (1884, 20). “In a certain sense, the practice of fetish can therefore include every cultural action through which one attempts [...] to establish a peaceful agreement with the invisible world [...]” (ibid., 78) Fetishism is understood as a technique for creating alliances, the attempt to pacify the superior forces of the invisible world and make them useful. “The cult is based on the stamping of contracts [...] between man and his gods”; the fetish is this stamp (1894, 13). Bastian develops a whole range of social functions derived from the link between practical needs in life and fetish worship: fetishes are used in life cycle rituals (birth, puberty, marriage, death), for the protection of property and territory, as apotropaic precautionary measures against extreme weather, bad luck and enmity, for healing and as an aid to oaths, for contractual disputes and conflicts within the political order (for example, in the investigation of dubious deaths; see also Schultze 1871, 90 ff.), as oracles and before going into battle. Although it may be unsystematically dispersed over 300 pages, this shows an ethnological interest in how fetishism functions socially, which need not be interpreted as a scandal to European ideas about things and value.

Bastian reaches an almost modern level of critical self-reflection on ethnology when he comments on the problem of translating between two cultures as follows: he says that ethnographers too often “force” their own concepts on fetishistic customs; thus “they [form] a thoroughly strange association of ideas from

⁴⁰ Wundt 1900–1920, 3rd edition 1911–1920. – Cf. Marcel Mauss’s precise analysis of the first two volumes of *Völkerpsychologie* [Ethnic Psychology] from 1908: Mauss 1969, vol. 2, 195–227.

their sources, [...] *in statu nascendi* already tailored to philosophical categories familiar to the European audience” (1859, 102). In this way, Bastian comes close to the view that fetishism is an effect made up of European prejudices forcibly proven with observations of African forms of ritual that have not been understood in the least. Then in 1884, Bastian remarks that African fetishism may be “the most primitive conception of religion”, but that “the European conception can sometimes appear even more primitive, [...] especially when it comes to getting their own house in order” (1884, 76). Bastian not only means that fetishism is still present in Europe and must make its effects felt in the minds of the ethnographers, but also that it might even originate there. It is no coincidence, he argues, that the Portuguese word *feitiço* developed in the time of the witch hunts to describe their “deceptive accessory trinkets” (ibid., 79; 1894, 14f.). The “confusion in the travelogues” has been caused by a “lack of a proper exchange of ideas between the indigenous peoples and the Europeans” (1884, 79–81). As early as 1859 he states: “In general in the Congo, an apathetic indifference toward any kind of religion prevails, whatever form it may take, when the ancient traditions are destroyed.” (1859, 162) This statement is a reflection on the Portuguese and Dutch colonial waves of Catholic and Protestant missionaries. Bastian already senses that this was associated with the destruction of culture; yet he uses its consequences to accuse the Africans of indifference. When one reads such passages in Adolf Bastian, whose often indigestible writings are the symptom of unbridled colonialism, one must admit that even today’s critics of the fetish concept, such as Wyatt MacGaffey (1977) and William Pietz (1985/1986/1988), do not in fact penetrate any deeper into the ethnologists’ egocentric perspective, a perspective which causes them to identify and persecute the very elements that are frowned upon in their own culture in the conventions of foreign cultures.

6.5 Fritz Schultze: trifles of the primitive mind

Professor of Philosophy at Dresden Fritz Schultze takes a completely different approach. In 1871, the same year Tylor published his seminal work, Schultze submitted his dissertation, *Der Fetischismus: Ein Beitrag zur Anthropologie und Religionsgeschichte*. It was translated into English as *Fetichism [sic]: A Contribution to Anthropology and the History of Religion* in 1885. Schultze’s approach is revealing because firstly, he presents a theory of “the savage mind”, the concrete expression of which is fetishism, long before Claude Lévi-Strauss does (1962/1966) and secondly, because he views fetishism as being based on an economic, cross-cultural effect, which causes the scandal of economic value, in which the

most worthless thing acquires value (he thus forms a bridge from Marx to W. Pietz). And thirdly, his work shows, in a similar way to the work of a number of English and American travellers to Africa, such as Mary H. Kingsley (1899/1965), Robert H. Nassau, Alfred Burdon Ellis, Joachim Monteiro, R.E. Dennett, E.J. Glave, W. Holman Bentley, Donald Campbell and G. Cyril Claridge, that fetishism was linked to a purported sexual depravity in Africa that offended the European sense of morality to the extreme.

Schultze's work is very ambitious. He has read the religious philosophers (de Broesses, Hume, Schelling, Hegel, Christoph Meiners, Benjamin Constant, Feuerbach, Karl Rosenkranz, Waitz, Schopenhauer, etc.) as well as countless accounts of journeys to Africa and all the other continents too. He therefore believes he is well-equipped for a definitive theory of fetishism. For Schultze, understanding fetishism means also understanding the mental processes of primitive peoples – the 'savage mind'. This is his starting-point. For the mind marks the borders of the world. The differences in the world are functions of the differences of human minds. The evolution of the mind is proportionally related to the level of difference among objects. The more differentiated the mind, the more defined the boundaries between objects. This is why he places the types of relations between objects and the object worlds that correspond to them at the start of his investigation. The Eskimos' whole world is: "ice and snow, bears and fish and – Eskimos". The world of the people of the Tierra del Fuego: "lonely places without vegetation, barren rock, birds and similar animals". The homogeneity of the environment corresponds to the primitivism of the mind. African savages are slow thinkers; their material world is therefore also dark and blurry. North American Indian hunters are however more differentiated. The monotony of objects, of activities, the sensual presence of things without any names for them and simple language form what Schultze calls (1871, 30–42) 'savage thinking' and Tylor 'primitive culture'.

For Schultze, fetishism is an archaic form of object relations. The savage mind, with its more limited capacity for logic, its lack of concentration, its homogeneity and underdeveloped differentiation of objects, inevitably results in an overestimation of objects visible to the naked eye, whether this means believing they are disproportionately powerful, valuable, fearsome or desirable. This transforms an old ethnographic misjudgement into a philosophical doctrine: merchants' and travellers' impression that Africans valued "all kinds of trinkets" extremely highly, while they did not regard things that seemed valuable to the Europeans. This creates the colonial rupture in the economy of things and the asymmetry between the exchange structures in Africa and Europe. Schultze completely fails to recognise that his concept of savage thinking is a reflex of and not a reflection by the colonial economy.

Schultze also equates the African economy of things with the economy of childhood (this too is a century-old prejudice). “It (= the child, H.B.) only values what it knows and has. These are all the little trifles that remain when all the somehow more significant objects are subtracted: little bits of cloth and thread, colourful scraps of paper, twigs and sticks, brass buttons”. The fetishism of savages and of children thus functions according to the verses by Friedrich Rückert that Schultze quotes in passing: “All kinds of little bands, / All kinds of little ribbons, / All kinds of little twine, / All kinds of little strips.” (Schultze 1871, 59–60⁴¹) “Insignificant and inconsequential” objects are adored equally by children and savages. The savage is thus on the “embryonic level of the child” (*ibid.*, 60–61).

Primitive man’s world of odds and ends has no property. Its value results from situational, sensual evaluation and not from objective exchange value, from the market, from indexing with money. At best it uses primitive exchange mechanisms (the rules of which were first recognised by Marcel Mauss, see pp. 226–241 of this book). The savage uses the most insignificant things as jewellery and especially values strange new objects like glass beads, nails and tinsel as important “treasure”. Thus a world of “knick-knacks” and “pettiness” is created as a result of the sensual mind of the native (*ibid.*, 63f.). Behind this is an unspoken mercantile perspective, which is confused by the confrontation with the African hierarchy of value. Nowhere is it more clearly recognisable that fetishism is a hiatus between the European and the African system of economic value than in Schultze. The primitive does not recognise the “true value” of things. He cannot see the arbitrariness and relativity of his own system of value at all. Savage thinking thus means being fulfilled by nothing other than the coming and going of moods. The savage transfers these moods onto objects: he experiences *things* in whatever way he experiences *himself*. Schultze calls this “the anthropopathic view of objects” (*ibid.*, 65–70). “Depending on how he himself is, feels and desires in a certain moment, he is compelled to imagine all of nature, and not just animals, but even lifeless things, as being, feeling and desiring exactly thus, in other words, he sees all of nature anthropopathically.” (*ibid.*, 70) “All of nature is like the human being” (*ibid.*, 71), individual, undefined, undifferentiated, fluctuating, temperamental, purely accidental. The sav-

⁴¹ The quote is from the poem “Die Göttin im Putzzimmer” [The Goddess in the Cleaning Cupboard], also set to music by Johann Karl Gottfried Loewe, op. 73. Rückert describes the “chaotic household” of a lover in her boudoir: a charming form of intimacy with his lover in the confusion of her accessories scattered around the room. This is definitely a case of erotic fetishism, but has nothing to do with the context in which Schultze places the verse.

age treats things as children treat dolls (ibid., 75): a comparison that comes from de Brosses.

Schultze links the Africans' mood-orientated relationships to objects with their immoral drive-orientated way of living. In this a "natural addiction to the self" and "bestly virtuosity in idleness, gluttony" triumph (ibid., 47–48). Schultze cannot grasp an Indian chieftain's criticism of his own restlessness and inability to be in the present. He pieces together a patchwork of excessive libidos from other travelogues: an image of ubiquitous perversions, sexual licentiousness, wild polygamy, widespread sexual abuse, the lack of the family bond, the failure to protect children and the elderly, the insignificance of chastity and the promiscuity and permissiveness of women. "Bestly licentiousness in the satisfaction of all physical urges. Thus is the savage and he must be so; for mental capacity, world and will are all strongly bound." (Schultze 1871, 55) Without a doubt, it is the uninhibited sexual projections of white European men that are being articulated here and not the uninhibited sexual practices of the Africans. Anthony Shelton (1995, 11 ff.) has proven that this phantasmic sexualisation of Africa also occurred with English ethnographers between 1880 and 1920. What Shelton believes is a reaction to Victorian prudishness applies equally to the sexual morality of the German *Gründerzeit*.

The arbitrariness of fetishistic object relations, which offended economic exchange principles, is linked by Schultze to the randomness in the selection of sexual partners and the allowing of drives to run wild. The promiscuity the Africans are charged with in fact has its source in Schultze's own discourse, which he too has allowed to run wild. This reflects the German, but also European colonial politics of his time, for which he provides the ideological weapons of exploitation. Without realising, he has however already fused two lines of argument that were epochal for the nineteenth century: *Marx's analysis of commodities*, according to which fetishism perverts the value of things, and the *theory of sexuality*, in which fetishism represents a perversion of the libidinous object. Both are an equally 'African' model. These types of object relations seize European man in the society of commodities and, rising up from deep within him, become the perverse hex on his sexuality. Europe becomes the prisoner of phantasmic Africa. On the other hand though, fetishism becomes the quintessence of colonially ruled Africa, in which the Africans have supposedly barricaded themselves against their white rulers.

It is therefore no coincidence that in his forays into premodern Europe, which he sees as filled with fetishistic magic practices and superstition, Schultze is occasionally troubled by the fear that the embers of fetishism could once more catch fire in modern Europe and "the noxious blaze [could] once more burst into flames": "For even today great fetishes live amongst us, and their ways and

means are the same in Europe as in Africa” (Schultze 1871, 174). We will soon see how right he is.

7 Magic and modernity

7.1 Marcel Mauss: the theory of magic

We have already noted that, in his notes on Wilhelm Wundt’s *Völkerpsychologie* [Ethnic Psychology], Marcel Mauss (1872–1950) once suggested abolishing the term fetishism and replacing it with indigenous expressions such as *nkisi*, *mana* and so on. Mauss thinks it wrong to universalise fetishism as the primitive basis of religious evolution (1969, vol. 2, 217). We have seen that it was not just Wundt who believed this, but in varying degrees also Comte and Fritz Schultze. It was the European success of de Brosses’ study (1760) that was responsible for this massive oversimplification. In Mauss’s view, the relationship to magical objects in African tribal societies was far too heterogeneous to explain with just a theory of fetishism. In contrast to the opinion of many ethnographers, as described above, the fetish is never simply a random object, but always defined by a code. That code is the code of magic and of the social milieu surrounding it (1969, vol. 2, 217). In this way, Mauss replaces the universal claim in theories of fetishism with a theory of *magic*. His criticism of Wundt is therefore very much in line with his *A General Theory of Magic*, already published in 1902–1903 (2001). Mauss therefore does not delve into the field of different fetish customs, but instead seeks to construct a solid theory with which to explain them. Fetishism becomes an element of magic. For this reason, we will now turn to Mauss’s concept of magic, while at the same time placing it in relation to Aby Warburg’s independently written fragments of a theory on magical imagery.

Mauss disagrees firstly with Frazer, who made magic “the first step in the evolution of the human mind” (2001, 16) in an evolutionist sense, and secondly with Tylor, for whom animism is a survival of lost cultures. He argues that from culture to culture magic is “on the whole everywhere the same” (*ibid.*, 19). It is also deeply rooted in European culture. The question is: if it exists, how can this kind of resistance to historical change be explained? To answer this question we must digress briefly.

In Lewis Henry Morgan’s classic of ancient historical research (*Ancient Society*, 1877), it already becomes clear that sexuality and kinship systems are some of the earliest forms of the cultural regulation of society and nature. It seemed to be evident from analyses of tribal systems of classification, festive rites and social rules that similar structures of sexual relationships and the organisation of

kinship can be found across the globe – an approach further developed by Claude Lévi-Strauss (1949), although he did not share Morgan's evolutionist outlook, which was already criticised around 1900. Sexuality is linked with cultural classifications and through these, social structures are encoded.

But even Morgan already recognised that tribal systems are not the only forms of cultural structure. He makes a distinction between two types of social organisation. *Societas* describes cultures that are structured around a centre of human relationships and which have a kinship system consisting of phratries, tribes and clans as their basis. *Civitas* on the other hand denotes a type of culture that develops a system of territorial borders and locality relations based on property rules. There are intermediate types between both, but also a qualitative jump: namely from hunter-gatherer cultures to sedentary herding, horticultural and agricultural societies. Morgan organises all of world history according to this model. The formation of societies described by *societas* has also been called totemism by other researchers, for example James G. Frazer, Robertson Smith, Baldwin Spencer, F.J. Gillen, Carl Strehlow and Émile Durkheim. This theory was largely derived from Indian and Australian cultures. A totem is the sign or emblem, often an animal, which not only classifies material culture into holy and profane things, but also defines the position of members of the clan. The totem itself is sacred, a taboo. It is not only the main focus of rites that help form and maintain the community, but also the site from which the classification of the people and living beings which belong to the clan is regulated. For Durkheim, totemism is an elementary religion and the earliest form of a consistent social structure and regime of material culture (1912/1915, 88–239; Beth 1927, 311 ff.). Magic and fetishistic rituals are given a symbolic order and social function in totemism.

In the same way that kinship forms the system of the tribe, rites produce an extensive elementary kinship to ancestors, as well as to animals, plants and rocks, often by replaying the scene of the primal act of the culture's creator. The rites are accompanied by myths and magic activities. Ernst Cassirer made a distinction here between nature myths and culture myths. While in the former it is the communication of the origin, presence and effects of natural phenomena by capturing them in images or narratives depicting an origin and genesis that is significant, cultural myths attempt to explain “the origin of human cultural assets” (1923–1929, vol. 2, 244) with the introduction of what are known as ‘activity gods’ or ‘culture-bringers’. Cultural myths are most definitely also about having an effect on nature, although they express the relationship to nature “through the medium of one's own actions” (ibid., 240): if, for example, the power of a goddess is worshipped in the ripening of the corn, then a holy “activity” is

being carried out, in which agricultural activity is transfigured into a divine sphere.

This kind of symbolic structure is part of the magical-animistic world view, the traces of which have been preserved until today. Early cultures consistently demonstrate a magical-animistic relationship to nature. This is Marcel Mauss's fundamental belief – Tylor's idea developed much further – one also shared by Durkheim (1912/1915, 48–86). Animism means that all things and living beings, as well as the world as a whole, are filled with invisible forces. This being filled with forces has nothing to do with physical causality and therefore cannot contradict it (this was the consistent error made by ethnographers since the Enlightenment). The world is pervaded by currents of this force, through which everything becomes what it is and through which everything changes. Sometimes magicians make the things, sometimes the things themselves have inherent powers with which they make themselves noticed and have an effect in the world; sometimes the things participate in higher power currents, which they conduct. In the widest sense, this magical dynamism determines what is alive in this world. Animistic cultures articulate their knowledge of the dynamism of living nature in rites, customs and mythical stories.

Everything is alive and present, as a vital or destructive force. This is what gives things, living beings and the cosmos their sacred character. The forces are there, whether hidden or manifest, they fill things and bodies. If everything has a spirit, then everything is alive, although it appears lifeless. Life overflows and emanates from everything, filling space. These forces can be impersonal and nameless, pure emanations of dynamism in whatever social or natural form they may take. These forces fill the land, wind, water, stones and plants, animals and forests, fire, things and human beings. Yet the forces can equally take on certain shapes, becoming zoomorphic, phylomorphic or hylomorphic and concentrated in the shape of animals, plants or substances. They can acquire a healing or harmful function for those who know how to use them: the magician. Magic is therefore the practical side of animism.

Unlike religious rites, which according to Mauss are public, localised, regular, obligatory and defined, magical rites are secret and mysterious, isolated, irregular, abnormal, exclusive and strange (2001, 57–58). Magical operations depend on the place, the instruments and substances used, along with the arrangements and ritual procedures to achieve their desired power. The things (fetishes) that are employed in these rites are not inherently magical. It is only in the context of a ritual setting, within a preconditioned social group that shares certain beliefs, sympathetic relationships and understands the symbolic process, that the fetishes unfold their power. What is important for Mauss is not the force

inherent to the thing or the action, but the magical code through which things and actions are constituted as magical in the first place.

Mauss, Cassirer and Beth were all convinced that bringing the formless diversity of things and living beings into an integral order was a central characteristic of the magical-animistic world. The magical world is not chaotic, as ethnographers assumed for centuries; rather it is made to conform to a certain structure. The universal law of similarities ensures that things remain themselves while at the same time representing the whole; thus the process is dominated by the part-to-whole relationship, which makes any individual thing a *pars pro toto*. Through magical practices one can connect to the whole via traces, relics, parts, individual things or living beings and use it for one's own purposes. It is in fact the *pars pro toto* relationship that extends the possibilities for human action and human beings in turn create a whole from the parts (*totum ex parte*). Magic is a proto-technical form of the manipulation of things, either in direct contact with them or even from a distance. The latter is also possible because things are never isolated, but always interwoven and existing alongside other things, or as Cassirer says, in relationships of contiguity and concrescence, of organised grown-togetherness (1923–1929, vol. 2, 50–77, 209–237), in relationships of contiguity, similarity and opposition, as Mauss says (2001, 78 ff.). These are the most significant manifestations of the magical principle of the sympathetic. In the practice of magic, participants in the ritual and the things become “sympathetic associations” (ibid., 81), brought together to form magical chains or bonds, which are woven by contagion, infection or transfer over large distances, creating human-thing collectives with their own will. Later in religious history, this layer of a morphology of forces, expressed in totemism, fetishism, the creation of idols and the first deifications, as well as more complexly in kinship structures and shared symbolic orders is covered over by a layer of anthropomorphic and individualised gods.

For Mauss, magic is the earliest form of technology there is, through which human beings can act effectively toward specific goals in both nature and culture, and therefore accumulate power. Power is the ability to affect something or someone, even against their own will, as Max Weber says: this is oldest form of magic. In this sense, the foundations of power are still magical today, especially in charismatic or ceremonial displays of power. The field in which magic can be used is limitless: people, animals, things, stars, weather, gods, illnesses, growth, harvests, births. And it can take a great variety of forms: incantations, sorcery, linguistic formulae, ritual executions, mimetic choreography, song, doing things with things, sacrifices. These are accompanied by an entire set of magical scenery, instruments used and magical things (the fetishes, magical ingredients, clothing, masks, etc.). Yet despite the unlimited fields in which

magic can be used and the variety of forms it can take, the magical code itself is limited. It does not have many symbolisms and the types of possible actions are restricted to a set of ritual prescriptions (Mauss, 2001, 62ff.).

Magic is the use of the forces that pervade the world for human purposes, including the transfer of feelings and thoughts. Magic does not work through the semiotic reference of staged elements to forces that exist behind them (transcendental forces). The practice of magic means creating extraordinary powers in the process of the magical act, which one then makes use of; it means making these forces present, no matter how absent (gods, ghosts) or ancient (ancestors) they may be; it means that there is an identification with the magical process, as strange and perhaps frightening as the practice may appear. Furthermore, magic is also always a transformation of both the participants in the magical ritual and the things involved in the procedure.

Magical power is also that which is 'expressed' or 'embodied' by things, living beings or ritual actions and which is controlled and used by experts for secret or communal purposes. This power is a substance and an effect at the same time. Around 1900, ethnologists all over the world were hot on the trail of this power-substance of a sacred nature. Mauss was not alone in assuming that there was a transcultural universal behind the various different names for it (*mana*, *orenda*, *wakanda*, *ngi lingili*, *limyensu*, etc.). According to Beth (1927, 210; cf. Greschat 1980), the equivalent word in the Bantu language is *bufungu*: it denotes the power of the fetish as the totality of all magical forces that man can extract from the parts of nature, where it is stored, and then manipulate for his own aims (Suhrbier 1998). What is known as the 'manu-tabu formula', the minimum definition of religion, is also part of the magical-animistic worldview of tribal cultures, which in one version is played out as fetishism. On this basis, fetishism can be seen as the proto-technical, thingly aspect of the magical condition of the world.

The goal of all magical and fetishistic actions as well as their associated myths is to acquire mana for oneself or to conduct the mana (Mauss 2001, 133–149; Beth 1927, 212–213). Mana has the capacity to impart some of itself to things; then one can say that the stone has mana. Although mana is not bound to anything, it still always communicates itself through manifestations, which cause awe and fear as well as the first religious acts. *Orenda* is the Iroquois and Huron word and describes an entity with specific vital functions, according to J.N.D. Hewitt, the first person to research *orenda* in 1902. *Orenda* is what makes man, animal and the power of nature inspire awe. In a storm the *orenda* is the raging, in the shy bird it is the shyness, in the prophecy it is the future, etc. One can see that *orenda* describes the character of the essence of things, but yet is always seen in relation to human experience. The *orenda* al-

lows the material and immaterial, general and particular idiosyncrasies of things to emerge. In that sense, it is similar to the inherent mana. The phrase “getting the orenda out of oneself” means making it start to work. This is the formal structure of magic.

But ultimately for Mauss, the laws of magic are nothing more than empty and hollow formulations of a lack of knowledge about the law of causality, “rudiments of scientific laws” (2001, 94). Nonetheless magic forms “the unity of the whole magical system”, it is a “real whole” (*ibid.*, 107), even if it has no theoretical unity, being too undefined, polymorphic and contradictory. The elements of magic are always collective. It is social, its function is to create the community within which it is practiced and which it produces at the same time. Without the social group, magic’s sympathetic force would not be effective. Both the clan’s social structure of kinship with its collective imagination and the equally controlled and controlling power of things together form the basic code of fetishism. Never again in the twentieth century will ethnologists view fetishism as a fundamental form of religion or as the first stage of the humanity’s development toward monotheism. Magic, animism and totemism have taken over from fetishism. Its only place now was within these new paradigms or in studies on material culture, where, among other classes of object, fetishes became a type in the class of magical and sacred objects. Of course, there were nonetheless still dozens of studies written on fetishism in tribal cultures in the twentieth century; and of course the ethnological museums continued to busily collect fetishes of all kinds. But they do not go beyond field studies or manage to develop a theory of fetishism of any standing. However, this strange fading of the theoretical attractiveness of fetishism in ethnology and religious studies did not occur in other disciplines: in economics and psychoanalysis it began a new career. The reason for this was the realisation, finally, of something that had only gradually dawned on the nineteenth-century ethnographers: fetishism was above all a European phenomenon.

7.2 Aby Warburg: a theory of modernity in memory of its collapse

With Aby Warburg (1866–1929), I now intend to chart, in conclusion to this section, how a cultural studies scholar and art historian, starting out from the great art of Europe, but in pursuit of magical imagery, ended up in the deep time of ancient cultures. Warburg travelled all the way to the Hopi Indians in New Mexico in order to understand what it means to live in modern Europe, but at the same time in a magical realm. His journey to America from 1895 to 1896 at first seemed to produce no visible results, but in the long term they were radical:

through his study of Indian cultures at the Smithsonian Institute and in the field, living with Indian tribes in New Mexico, the young art historian's horizons were broadened to include cultural anthropology, ethnology and religious studies.

His ethnographic experiences in America caused a seismic shift in Warburg that simmered under the surface until the First World War and then erupted into the open. What took the form of a breakdown in his personal life was nothing less than the seismic shift and rearrangement of the intellectual tectonics of modernity. Neither the rationality laboriously gained throughout history nor the optimistic nineteenth-century ideologies of progress, which made the gap between the ancient and the barbaric seem ever wider; neither the European Enlightenment and the liberal civil society drafted by it nor the astounding progress made in science and technology; neither the spread of the urban life of the metropolis across the globe nor the massive productivity of the new industries could prevent it, indeed the opposite: they were part of the reason, if not the main reason that modern Europe was mired in a new technological war, which was more barbaric than any previous war and produced strangely archaic, mass-suggestive dispositions of experience, which made modern man seem not an age, but a step away from his "savage origins" (Walter Burkert). In Warburg's personal square – the masterpieces of European art; the Hopi Indians; the World War; his psychological and physical collapse, accompanied by many years in hospital – modernity's huge contradictions collided and its tension was released, in a manner both personal and symptomatic of the time, a modernity which during the long nineteenth century had wrapped itself in the harmless self-image of human progress and reason. This modernity now collapsed – collectively in the madness of war, privately in Warburg's own personal madness.

Warburg had been closely following the radical changes and threats for Jews in Germany and Europe very early on. His discreet but committed concern with problems facing Jews in the *Kaiserreich* was evident neither in his field studies of the Hopi nor in his other publications. This hidden tension grew as the war progressed, until Warburg was suddenly overcome by regular paranoid anxiety attacks, consisting mainly of the delusion that, as Jews, he and his family would all be executed in something similar to a pogrom. The intrapersonal connection between his "blood, heart and soul", in which the culture of the Jews, the Hanseatic bourgeoisie and the Florentines were somehow meant to enter into alliance, resulted in a very fragile ego, which collapsed under the pressure of inner fears and the savagery of the war. Hospitalised first in Hamburg, then in closed wards in Jena, without any success in treatment, it was Ludwig Binswanger, in whose sanatorium in Kreuzlingen Warburg lived from 1921, who finally managed to slowly reconstruct Warburg's identity.

In 1923, as a test of his strength, Warburg held a lecture on the Hopi Indians' snake ritual: one of the greatest ethnographic documents of the twentieth century (1923/1939). The revisit to his New Mexico journey in 1895/1896, which he turned into a lucid piece of ethnographic and religious studies scholarship, is also a textual journey back to very foundations of culture. Its dark side, made of fear and violence, had been exposed in the World War. Cultures, as Warburg sees them, create a space in which to distance themselves from a universal, primal fear through symbolic and ritual processes. Only from this distance is there a chance for the sublimating transformation of this fear into an always fragile *sophrosyne*. This theory is based on his analysis of the serpent ritual, yet at the same time it is his own story: in Kreuzlingen, Warburg had walked through the same dark zone of fear and death that he had seen with his own eyes in New Mexico. From that point, the cultivation of his ego, in which the very idea of modernity was also at stake, had to be rebuilt step by step. Warburg himself did not perceive himself as healed, but rather as “granted leave to normality by Binswanger”; a modern citizen who could never again forget his roots deep in magical, fetishistic sorcery. He never published his lecture; he did not want it to be seen as the “‘results’ of a supposedly superior knowledge [...], but rather as the desperate findings of someone searching for deliverance” (Gombrich 1970, 304), as the “horrid convulsions of a decapitated frog” (Warburg 1923/1988, 60). He described himself as a “revenant” and occasionally signed letters as “Warburg redux” (1992, 344). He knew how little time he had left (“five to seven (the end)”). Lived with the knowledge that each moment could be his last. Something he shared with modernity.

During his “Kreuzlinger passion” (M. Diers), he develops an extremely personal, explicitly political style: the “inferno” (Warburg) he experienced not only included images of terrible violence against the Jews, but also of the collapse of cultural and political order in a war, the destruction of human values, the collapse of the family, the end of reason – splinters of collective destructiveness torn loose, rising up from the inner depths of a sick man and yet at same time part of the disfigured face of the century. And that is why America, the Janus-faced land of ancient cultures and technical modernity, is of such interest.

In his late notes (from 1927, cited in Gombrich 1981, 344–347), Warburg sees himself reflected in Jacob Burckhardt (who he frequently cites in his dissertation) *and* Friedrich Nietzsche (whose influence is less obvious). For Warburg, being a historian of long-wave psychic energies, which are “absorbed” in myth and ritual, in religion, art, ethics and science, processed and added to cultural forms in order to secure an always threatened survival, meant being a “sensitive seismograph”, an “absorber of mnemonic waves”, meant suffering from “concussion” from “regions of the past”, indeed, even as a scientist, meant experiencing the

“urge to vibrate with it”. In this sense, Warburg describes both Burckhardt and Nietzsche as pathetic figures of knowledge, “martyrs of their vocation”. In truth, he is also speaking about himself and his own research agenda. For Warburg, Burckhardt succeeds in strengthening the foundations with seismographic memories while balancing identification and distance, while Nietzsche represents a specific type of thinker, who succumbs to the pathos of memory and drowns in the same blackness that Warburg himself had endured in psychiatric care. Perhaps, even more so than because of his oeuvre, Warburg is an iconic figure of the twentieth century because he absorbed both extremes of the nineteenth century, Nietzsche and Burckhardt, and consequently developed lucid ideas about psychic phenomena, which he would ultimately share with Freud: from this constellation, Warburg developed a completely new type of science. In his permanent inner turmoil, he is far more modern than the Platonising iconology of his more famous successor.

Warburg describes his paradigmatic research as an “historical psychology of human expression”. One catches a glimpse of a general theory of culture in his work, the foundations of which are defined by the principle that every cultural fact is ‘ultimately’ a psychic and at the same time embodied form of compromise on a scale of polarity between magic spells and the rational control of emotions.

The visual arts – and this includes fetishes and idols, as well as paintings and photography – are scaled between the magic spell on the one hand, i.e. their direct, overwhelming (still imageless) embodiment, and theoretical-abstract (again imageless) rationality, which no longer has any somatic reference. In the widest sense, ‘image’ not only means examples of the visual arts, but also physical figures of movement, social rituals and habitus, coded forms of the mastery of emotions, etc. This brings cultural studies closer to ethnology.

Warburg’s thinking is based on two supra-historical poles: ecstatic, emotional surges of fear, overwhelming happiness and possession on the one hand, and the emotionally neutralised abstraction of an apathetic reason on the other. The space between them defines the breadth in which a culture, an age or a person oscillates. In this intermediate space between magic and mathematics, between fetish and abstract signs, “a clear-headed mental space” opens up (1992, 267): the space of the symbolic.

The persistent power of magic and myth in the modern age means that “culture” must be understood as a process of interference between opposing dynamic forces and within it the figures of both a pathetic and a distancing *sophrosyne* can be secured. For this reason, Warburg is ultimately a tragedian of history. In this sense, he is more closely related to Nietzsche and Walter Benjamin than to Ernst Cassirer or Erwin Panofsky: *Sophrosyne* means finding an attitude, a style, a distance (= a symbol) in unavoidable defeat.

His teacher Hermann Usener had attempted to deduce the meaning of myths from the etymological traces of names; Warburg goes in the opposite direction: it is not names, but images and within them the visual rhetoric of bodily expression and dynamics – the “*pathos formulae*” – which tell us about the sensual and emotional-energetic distribution of cultures and religions. Instead of etymological chains of language, Warburg uses images and symbols to trace the winding paths of cultural geography. According to this model, the Hopi Indians of New Mexico are no more distant from modern Europe than the Greeks – or the fetish worshippers of the Congo. Warburg thus makes visual culture an important field in the study of religion for the first time. Both Usener and Warburg are also heirs to Eduard Meyer and his emancipation of religious studies from theology. However, it is Warburg and his research on religious phenomena that forms a complement to the Jewish and the Christian primacy of the word by focussing on the layers of far deeper reaching visual practice, cult forms and lifestyles hidden behind it. In this way, he gets closer to uncovering the precise details of the syncretic intersections of religious forms and life-defining rituals. Warburg was therefore a participant in the anthropological turn in religious studies of his own accord and without any influence from English (Cambridge School, J.A. Harrison, J.G. Frazer, W.R. Smith) or French forerunners (D.D. Fustel de Coulanges, É. Durkheim, M. Mauss), nor from open-minded German ethnologists and scholars of religion (like Heymann Steinthal or Moritz Lazarus for example). In particular, he made a major contribution to demonstrating the link between visual culture, magic and religion.

Warburg’s main aim is to expose the power and the internal logic of the visual arts. This sensitises him to cult, ritual, fetishism and magic. Warburg is of course also part of the Jewish tradition, according to which the spirit cannot be represented and at best can be suggested from a great distance; this is connected to aniconism. It is precisely this background that allowed Warburg to develop a sense for the magic of images. He neither denounces it as idolatry (Judaism, Christianity), nor as the diluted mode of the spirit (platonism).

The centrally important role of fear in the (philosophical) anthropology and cultural theory between Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Tito Vignoli and Freud, and up until Heidegger is well known. Fear is the minor key to the optimistic ideas of progress and the evolutionism of the nineteenth century. Warburg knew this already. Fear is a fundamental reflex and for Warburg, the primal situation in cultural anthropological terms, on which all cultural achievements are ultimately based. Culture and religion are ways of processing fear (in this he opposes Durkheim, who instead tends toward viewing a “happy confidence” as the source of religions; 1912/1915, 224). For Warburg, man originally found himself in a chaotic world, in which anything moving independently of him caused him fear: War-

burg calls this “the phobic reflex” (Gombrich 1970, 298). When, prompted by Usener, he became aware of Tino Vignoli’s *Mito e Scienza* (1879), reading it was only a confirmation of his lifelong conviction that the phobic was a fundamental aspect of the human being. Onto- and phylogenetically, it comes from “being a child”, that “unfathomable catastrophe of separating one creature from another. The abstract mental space between the subject and object is based on the experience of the severed umbilical cord.” (Gombrich 1970, 298; see p. 366 ff. of this book) This primary separation makes every non-self something alien and this engenders fear (Gombrich 1970, 104).

The three types of reaction to this situation are embodiment, design and abstraction. Their corresponding semiotic types are: *fetish/totem – image/symbol – sign/number*. The *fetish* is the objectification of the stimulus (projective identification) that has come from the phobic reflex, or the direct incorporation of the emotions (inverse embodiment). This corresponds to a reification of the self without any distance and an absolute “entification” (Vignoli) of the object, i.e. its magical animation. The abstract *sign* (word sign, number, etc.) on the other hand, constitutes the ideal, typical sphere of distanced reflexivity, self-referential semiotic processes without any need to make links with referents in reality, and also the abstract world of mathematics. The oscillation scale extends between these two poles of the *image* and the *symbol*. Images and symbols are both a performative act of the ego, in which it expresses fear *and* gives the fear-causing object a shape. They are distancing forms and expressive gestures, enabling thought without abstraction, they are reflexive without the reflex of magic, mimetic without mimicry of the process, signifying without losing contact with whatever is denoted. In contrast, fetishes and totems, like every other magical thing, banish the subject, thereby destroying distance. Thus reactions to them are reflexes, mimetic, a form of mimicry, and lead to the blurring of the boundaries between the ego and the thing. From a psychological perspective, the representational function of images and symbols is a compromise and a means of protection: “By being replaced with an image, the oppressive stimulus is objectified and controlled as an object.” (Gombrich 1970, 297) Warburg therefore also speaks of visual art as “stores of energy”: they are containers and transformers of powerful emotional surges, they give them a form and maintain distance; thus they are also reservoirs and batteries of the life force, literally ‘still lifes’, which, in art, wake people up and open their eyes without hurting them. “You are alive, but cannot hurt me.” (ibid., 98) This is the formula for the mysterious life of images, which would overwhelm the ego in their absolutely direct form. “By distancing things, producing space, we think – I! When we are together, assimilated, we are matter – nothing.” (Warburg 1892, cited in Kany 1987, 147). The first sentence describes the process of creating distancing images of the frightening

object, in which the ego and its mental space (*sophrosyne*) is produced; the second sentence describes almost inversely the ego merged with things through identification, which is thereby reified and thus disintegrates. Symbols and visual images, especially the arts, are media that provide the security that “everything alive”, “everything that is assumed to be hostile, moving and predatory” (Gombrich 1970, 104) is transformed into “joy about that which is alive but not dangerous” (*ibid.*, 108). In “A Lecture on Serpent Ritual”, Warburg studies this ability of the symbol to create distance and the transformation of things into images in great detail.

The fetish and the totem on the other hand describe early cultural objects on the border between the destructive presence of the object and “a phobic reflex”. They largely correspond to Usener’s “momentary gods”: “When we have the momentary sense of a thing in front of us, the awareness of our direct proximity with a god, this state that we find ourselves in, of the power that overcomes us, equal to the value and power of a god, then the *momentary god* has been felt and created.” (Usener 1876, 280) The creation of momentary gods and fetishes was also emphasised by Meyer and linked to the idea that “lifeless things” in fact “have life everywhere” and that the cult of material objects “was widespread all over the world” (1908, 322, 329, 333). Fetishes and totems are thus created by magic identification. In the process, “the scope is defined” (Gombrich 1970, 105, 297) and the object’s primary “cause assigned” (*ibid.*, 94–98, 296–297; cf. Warburg 1923/1988, 291); and this is the ground in which all cultural codes are rooted. At the same time all living energy is absorbed by magical things without the human perceiving any traces of his or her activity there. That is why fetishes and totems are cult objects. They are, unlike the feared object, a localisation of forces in the overwhelming field of stimuli – objects belonging to “primitive culture” in other words – and this localisation gives them an outline, yet at the cost of selflessness. Fetish and totem are, according to Warburg, the beginning of ritual containment and the reification of the fear-arousing object in the (artistic) image. Yet images will always contain the trace of fetishism or totemism. Images are cultic and later cultural signifiers.

This theory of images is an attempt to locate the pattern of processing that is a typical feature of religions for Warburg on an aesthetic-symbolic axis. The phobic reflex, along with totem and fetish, is the image form characteristic of *magical animistic cults*. The wide scale between symbol and art on which the image can exist contains the spectrum between *polytheistic mythical religions* and *icon-worshipping monotheism*. In the transition to the rational, abstract use of signs, this is followed by secular art, which reclaims the mental space from mythical identification and “unpeels” the form of *humanity*. The nameless and *imageless God* in the Jewish tradition is beyond the image, as is the concept and the math-

emational sign, but it is also beyond feelings and bodies, beyond space and time and therefore, although a product of culture, beyond it too.

The late Warburg sees a tragic trait in scientific abstraction and technical industrialisation: the forces that once freed mankind from its direct entanglement in material dynamics, now once again result in the loss of the self on a higher level. Georg Simmel also conceived of the “tragedy of culture” in a similar way (1911/1997, 55–74). Culturally pessimistic, Warburg sees image space and corporeal space disappearing in the second nature of technological society. The ego loses itself to the inorganic, technical space and the devotional and mental space, which our capacity to create images has built up over centuries, is destroyed in the telecommunications media of the “age of the machine”: this is the tragedy of the modern age (Gombrich 1970, 297–301; Warburg 1923/1939, 292). It escapes the ancient magic spell by creating a new spell, a new magic, a new fetishism with the captivating sorcery of its technological objects. Thus modernity repeats and transforms ancient history; magic remains, as Mauss argued, the same. “But precisely”, writes Benjamin very similarly, “the modern, *la modernité*, is always citing primal history. Here, this occurs through the ambiguity peculiar to the social relations and products of this epoch. Ambiguity is the manifest imaging of dialectic, the law of dialectics at a standstill. This standstill is utopia and the dialectical image, therefore, dream image. Such an image is afforded by the commodity per se: as fetish.” (1927–40/1999, 10) The technological and industrial modern age creates a phantasmagoria in its world of objects, which not only takes on the characteristics of a dream, but also of fetishism. This also brings the breadth of oscillation between magical fetish and abstract sign that was the condition of mental space for Warburg to a standstill. Technological and media-saturated modernity now only generates images as fetishes: they extend the spell that the arrival of modernity supposedly helped us to escape. We will soon see that this kind of culturally pessimistic interpretation is no longer viable for today’s fetish culture (see pp. 262–279 of this book).

Against the background sketched above, Warburg’s historical investigations on image culture are always also case studies of religious history and expressions of his cultural pessimism. This makes it easier to understand why Warburg tends toward a cartographic method (cultural mapping), which neglects the dimension of historical time: he conceives culture as a force field of psychic energy, the vectors of which swing back and forth within a supra-historical range of frequencies, forming temporary knots of cultural elements with the most varied of provenances. Fetishism is one of these knots; it has not been left behind for once and for all, it is also ahead of us. It is not our inescapable fate, yet it cannot be destroyed. Warburg’s many drawings of cultural geography generate the suggestive image of dynamic cultural force fields existing alongside each other on a

spatial line of development. What Warburg was trying to highlight was “the problem of cultural exchange” (Galitz et al 1995, 187). He shows that a Christian royal palace has murals containing late Hellenistic, Roman, Indian, Babylonian, Egyptian, Persian, Arabic, Spanish and Jewish cultural elements: what seems to be a unified (Christian) example of imagery disintegrates into a patchwork of (pagan) cultures.

“European culture as evidence of this interaction” is therefore a syncretic culture for Warburg, “a process in which we [...] should seek neither friend nor foe, but instead symptoms of an oscillation of the soul between distant opposing poles, yet coherent within itself: from cult practices to mathematical contemplation – and back.” (1932, 565) It is about the “psychology of the deep connection between different cultural movements” (ibid., 564), which no longer follows the single line of evolutionism, but decodes the possible combinations of magic and mathematics throughout history.

Europe is a figure of cultural exchange, of migration and interference processes. It has no ‘origin’ that can guarantee unity and homogeneity in this difference. Precisely in the periods of change that Warburg had a preference for researching (he calls them “critical epochs of transition”; 1932, 179), Europe reveals itself – to use Claude Lévi-Strauss’ distinction between hot and cold cultures – as a ‘hot’ dynamic, syncretic culture. This does not mean, however, that Warburg undervalues modernisation. Rather, it is his fundamental anthropological convictions (“eternal Indians”, “indestructibility of primitive man”) and his insight about the syncretism of an ‘originally closed’, misunderstanding Europe, that make Warburg’s writing a *mimesis of the object that he himself constructs*. This topological, structural method is the structure of the ‘dangerous object’ of his research.

Compared to historically resistant syncretism with its eternal (reoccurring) dangerous fascination with magic, demonism and mythology, there is no linear development towards emancipation, but only *ethical attitudes*, *transitory model solutions* or even once again, *mythical narratives*. The *attitude* is the *sophrosyne*, the developmental logic of which is neither historically nor personally guaranteed, but instead must be wrested from the spell of paganism “again and again”. The *transitory solutions* are the symbolic structures found in history that exhibit a balance between receding pathetic energies and reflexive distance, as demonstrated for Warburg by points of confluence like Athens or the Renaissance. And *mythical narratives* are the kinds told at the end of “A Lecture on Serpent Ritual” by Warburg, inspired by a photograph of Indian children in modern dress in front of the dark mouth of a cave, of the ancient fantasy about the “mouths of caves” (H. Blumenberg): ‘history’ and ‘culture’ are the way ‘out of the darkness into the light’, the “development from drive-orientated, magical

proximity to mental distancing” (1923/1988, 57).^{*} This mythical dream image can no less be given up than magic and fetishism can be overcome. – To demonstrate this, I will now turn to an example that comes from the time of Warburg’s breakdown, the First World War. It shows that Warburg’s mental delusions had an equal counterpart in madness on a collective level. It is the beginning of the fetishisation of politics.

8 Nail fetish pilgrimage: magic and politics

In extant ethnographic accounts, there is frequent mention of what are known as ‘nail fetishes’, which seem to have made a particular impression on the white men writing about them. Even today, they still play a role in the visual arts, though they may be transformed, made strange or ironic (for example by the artists Pascale Marthine Tayou from Cameroon; Mutsuo Hirano from Japan; the Germans Günther Uecker and Daniel Klawitter). As with mirror fetishes, the case here is clear: these fetish figures, completely covered with nails or spikes, usually in the shape of a person but occasionally an animal and of considerable height (up to one metre), cannot have existed before the Europeans for the simple reason that Africans did not have access to iron nails, nor indeed to mirrors. Nail fetishes are therefore an unmistakable example of cultural interference, because objects from the European culture of things were assimilated into the magical or animistic system of African fetish customs and granted magical significance there. These nail fetishes occurred mainly in the Congo area and were usually called *nkisi* (plural *minkisi*). They belong to the extensive paraphernalia of magical rituals. They handle transactions and communication between the visible and the invisible, the present and the absent. But they are not simply the media of these transactions, but also ‘powerful symbols’, agents that can act autonomously, use force and have effects over large distances. It is no coincidence that they often have proper names. They do not just threaten punishment, retribution, injury or death, they execute them too. Even if their role is monitoring social norms entirely in the interests of social integration, their power usually makes them menacing and fearsome. They have executive responsibilities within the tribe (the breaking of oaths, theft, breaches of contract) and beyond the tribe above all the function of aggression.

^{*} I have used my own translation here as the W.F. Mainland translation leaves out some key passages.

The German ethnologist R. Visser (1906/1907, 52–63) describes the ritual construction of a nail fetish: first the new ‘n’kissi’ (this is what he calls the nkisi) is carved from a freshly felled tree. A corpse repeatedly rubbed with red dye is required for the ritual initiation of the n’kissi; fabric ancestors are wrapped around the genitals. Later the dye is transferred to the body of the n’kissi and the fabric bandages to its genitals. Usually, there is a box with bits of mirror or glass in the belly of the n’kissi. Sometimes it contains poisonous or medicinal substances. Then nails and iron spikes are ritually hammered into the body of the n’kissi. Because the n’kissi has feelings, this is extremely painful for him and awakens his need for vengeance against wrongdoers: hammering in a nail means gaining malevolent powers over the enemy. If someone who is the target of this black magic wishes to remove the nail from the body of the fetish, he must pay a lot of money. Hammering in a nail, however, is very cheap. If the person does not pay, they will die. One has to be constantly on one’s guard in order to protect oneself from harm, i.e. paying for the removal of the nails hammered in to harm one’s person. Hammering in the nails is called *jikomeande*.

Visser describes a nail ceremony in a village square. The priest gets himself into a ritual ecstasy with dancing, drumming and alcohol, and then swears misfortune on the wrongdoer while driving the nails in, thus causing the person pain. As a representative of an unknown evildoer, the fetish is also often insulted and spat on. The price for the ritual of pulling out a nail is one male goat. The goat is killed and the blood from its cut throat smeared on the n’kissi. The goat is then eaten by the village community in a ritual feast. The nail fetish is then wrapped in blankets and the next morning the malevolent magical nail has fallen out by itself.

According to Visser, the n’kissi are objects of fear rather than worship and are used in the power struggles of the community. An interesting point we will return to later is the connection between black magic and economics. Schneider (1891, 180) tells us that the ceremonial hammering in of the nails is also used when looking for a thief, when loyalty is sought in trade agreements, for the strengthening of oaths and for predicting the future. Josef F. Thiel also emphasises the nail fetish’s function in revenge campaigns, the punishment of delinquents who threaten the social order and also for protection from witches. The nail fetishes also work as independent agents, like automatic weapons, as a form of black magic. The driving in of the nail activates its magical, aggressive powers and directs them toward the enemy. This process is magically identical to the destruction of the opponent. Because of the magic of similarity, the black magic gets to work in exactly the same place on the body of the enemy as the place where the nail was hammered into the fetish (Museum für Völkerkunde 1986, 144–148).

Nina Slawski (1980, 10) believes that nail fetishes were influenced by Christianity; firstly by crucifixes (the nails from the crucifix were the most valuable of all relics) and secondly, by the custom of hurting or even killing someone using an effigy to represent them (piercing portraits). However, the idea that African piercing customs (scar ornaments) can be traced back to misunderstood Christian predecessors is definitely wrong. The models for nail fetishes usually suggested are Christian images of martyrs, especially images of Saint Sebastian's body completely pierced with arrows, but also other martyred saints: the Virgin Mary penetrated by swords, the saviour nailed to the cross by his hands and feet. These kinds of images, votive tablets and small sculptures had been popular with Catholic missionaries in Central Africa for centuries (Shelton 1995, 20 f.). Bassani (1977) also believes that Christian effigies were the inspiration for African nail fetishes.

In his book, Anthony Shelton documents a double-page spread from *The Illustrated London News* from the 25th of December 1915: an image of a Congolese nail fetish is placed opposite a photograph of a twelve-metre high statue of Hindenburg, covered in millions of nails. The caption reads: "German Counterpart of Westafrican [sic] Nail-Driving Fetish-Worship: Hindenburg, Berlin". Of course this is wartime propaganda: the culture of poets and thinkers? In truth, the Germans were no better than the 'Congo negroes', "Germany – a civilisation of Negroid Africa" (Shelton 1995, 24–25). What had happened?

The art historian Michael Diers (1993, 113–137) has described this wave of 'nail men', which started in Vienna and rolled across the German Empire in just two years between 1914 and 1915: a "statue mania" that aimed to arouse the people's fighting spirit and provide proof of their willingness for self-sacrifice. Citizens hammered large nails into wooden statues placed in all the larger towns on town squares and market squares in exchange for a donation (to fund the war effort). The martial sculptures with their millions of nails, covering them in a kind of nail armour, became cult objects to which one made a pilgrimage and, accompanied by ritual oaths of devotion, made a financial offering for the war, in order to have one's own nail driven in among the others. A mythical collective. The 'nail Hindenburg' documented in the English photograph stood in front of the Reichstag, weighed 26 tonnes and rested on a further nail plinth of an estimated 30 tonnes (ibid., 126). The majority of the repertoire of motifs was taken from German folklore: along with contemporary heroes like Bismarck, Tirpitz and Hindenburg, Roland, Siegfried, St George, Henry the Lion, etc. all featured as models for the "nail statue frenzy". Diers speaks of a "nail cult" and "nail sacrifices" and tells us that although the wave of nail men receded after the war, there were attempts to revive them during National Socialism and in the GDR. For our purposes, Diers' most significant discovery is an article in *Klad-*

deradatsch entitled “Fetishdienst” [“Fetish Worship”] which in turn was hawked from an article from Rome: in it, the nail statues are portrayed as “proof of German barbarism”; Germany was on the level of the “Congo negroes”, “who drove nails from the shoes of missionaries they had eaten into their fetish idols with childish devotion and joy”. The Germans, “mad for the worship of false idols”, were in fact, according to the article, only concealing their “terrible fear and desperation” in the face of looming defeat in the war.

Now in Diers’s opinion the parallels with African nail fetishes were merely a misunderstanding. But if there is a parallel, it is nonetheless significant. The fact that ‘nail trees’ are a tradition belonging to ancient German legal customs does not refute the parallel to fetishism, but instead proves it: the mythical *Weltennagel* (nail of the worlds), the legally symbolic “Stock im Eisen” (staff in iron) and the nail as the emblem of the guilds are all European magical symbol-things too – just like African fetishes. But much more than this even, the aggressive nail fetishes, whose aim was taking revenge on their enemies and destroying them, and their role in sacrificial and loyalty rituals, most certainly represent a clear parallel to the German nail statues. It is also significant that the nailing ceremonies in both Germany and the Congo were associated with a sacrificial donation. Monstrous idols such as the nail Hindenburg fulfil literally what were described as Africa’s ‘chief’ or ‘communal fetishes’. Just like these chief fetishes, the German nail men were incorporated into sacrificial rituals and served the purpose of the apotropaic banishment of fear and symbolic revenge; they strengthened the communal ties of the people during the war and German military will. It is not important whether German war propaganda consciously imitated African nail fetishes; and it almost certainly did not. What is important is the structural similarity. What had been described by white ethnologists in Africa as magical superstition became part of the ideology of war in Germany, in the middle of the first modern technical war, and could not be more mythical or magical. The mythical elements were the heroic characters that had been taken from folklore and sculpted into cult figures; but what was magical was the ritual of the nails. In it, citizens ‘hammered’ themselves ‘into’ the symbolic collective body of the people in a “magical communal act” (Mauss 1969, vol. 1, 164). The individuals ‘sacrificed’ themselves (symbolically in the money donated and materially in the ‘disappearance’ of the single nail in the nail-armour) in order to create a collective whole from the ‘parts’: this is what Mauss calls the magical mechanism of *totum ex parte* (ibid., 97). In the army of a million nails, the people fuse into an army of millions in the war. Collective states of excitement, fear and anticipation in the war formed the social milieu that made the ritual magical act of erecting national idols and the self-sacrifice of hammering in the nails at all possible. This is social synthesis based on magic and fetishism. The nail men are idols

of magical mass suggestion, which, once initiated, seemed to operate by themselves as ‘automatically’ as the war effort was supposed to be.

English and Italian anti-German propaganda enjoyed the chance to ridicule the Germans’ African fetish worship. Its writers probably had not read Jean Paul’s *Selina*, where he writes of “the great kingdom of the unconscious, that true inner Africa”.⁴² Germany’s English enemies could also have pointed to Francis Bacon and his *Novum Organum* and argued that the Germans had succumbed to all four forms of false idols at once: they let themselves be duped by idols of the tribe (*idola tribus*) in that, forgetting all sense, they make them proportionately equal to their mythical counterparts; they are trapped by idols of the cave (*idola specus*), in the sense that they shut themselves away in the enclave of their ideologies and traditions; they follow the idols of the market (*idola fori*), because they trust propaganda’s distorted communication blindly; they worship the idols of the theatre (*idola theatri*) in that they surrender to rhetoric, dogma, false doctrines and schools (Bacon 1620/2000, 39–51).

Nail fetishes, which can be seen as European-African hybrids one way or another, had in a sense returned to Europe. The fetishism that had a socially integrative and therefore a (regulative) political function in Africa – especially the nail fetishes – had entered the European stage. Although the German nail men – compared to the reality of war – were a relatively insignificant phenomenon, they nonetheless demonstrate that fetishism – after its reappearance in the economy (Marx), in psychoanalysis (Freud) and in Christianity – had also become common practice as a political symbolic mechanism.

9 Political idolatry

9.1 Fetishes, idols, power

The very minimum connection between politics, cults and fetishism is that politics cannot function without cults and cults cannot function without idols and fetishes. In politics, cults and mass cultures, idols are extraordinary, exceptional, transcendental or at least transcending objects in the form of a person. Fetishes are things with agency and important carriers of meaning that are worshipped and defended, but are not necessarily anthropomorphous. Together idols and fetishes can form theatrical or statuary political ensembles, which are usually part of rituals. We have already seen that images of emperors functioned as political

⁴² Cited in Lütkehaus 1989, here 8f.

idols in Rome. When a sword and *globus cruciger* join them in late imperial imagery of the emperor, they too have a fetishistic function. It would be an underestimation to describe the sword and *globus cruciger* as allegorical attributes. As things, they are also magical objects that give the person who possesses them energy and significance. Furthermore, they are ‘communal fetishes’, insofar as they strengthen the *communitas*, the unity of the empire and the pugnacity of the complex political empire based on justice. They are objects with the highest levels of energy and at the same time, the highest significance: that is what characterises them as fetishes. There is nothing functional about the *globus cruciger* and the sword. Yet within the constellation of the imperial regalia and imperial crown (with the protrusion on the brow side), set within the “magical milieu” of ceremonies, which bring together the community of the empire both actually and symbolically, these things give the ruler his aura. They do not create real, material power, which is based on military and institutionalised networks of dependency, they *perform* power. Performance is not just re-presentation. It does not refer to prior meanings, but always produces them itself. The performance of power is an important generator of itself and its eternal endurance.

However, it is important to distinguish between power that is merely displayed or symbolised and the performance of power. Performing power means exercising it *in actu*, unfolding it in a process and making it present to the senses and the mind. In order for the *globus cruciger* and sword to perform something, they must ‘mean’ something – ‘just world domination’; yet this meaning is not a sufficient condition of the performance. What is sufficient is when the meaning is placed in a scene or made theatrical; it then becomes an element in a ritual. We are therefore dealing with ‘signifiers with agency’, theatrical symbols which make manifest what they mean. They are meanings realised *in actu*. That is what I mean when I speak of fetishes or idols as objects with agency.

These ‘meanings’ must be culturally coded and equipped with a high level of general appeal and binding force, and must be easily recognisable. Of course, a sexual fetishist can carry out private rituals with a fetish of the highest level of significance. However, in political fetishism the above conditions must be fulfilled; for political fetishism is about the *public* exercise of *power*, which – because it performs itself in idols and fetishes – ‘grips’ its audience, ‘absorbs’ them and ‘brings them together’ to form a communal group. For this, the “magical milieu” as Marcel Mauss called it, is necessary. Only then have the prerequisites been met for a thing, a statue or a person to become a fetish or an idol ‘before the eyes’ of the audience, the court, the masses or the party convention. Becoming an idol or a fetish means undergoing a transformation. The person who has mutated into the ‘leader’ is an idol, not as a private person, not even as a function of the state, but as the medium of a transpersonal charisma. With an intense level

of energetic presence, the idol merges with the crowds of participants in a ritual process – no matter how extraordinary and untouchable the idol may be.

All fetishes and idols therefore need a magical milieu, a scene in which to be embedded and a situational presence. They then become an event that grips the addressees and wrenches them out of their ordinary daily life and thus, in a certain sense, makes them 'ec-static'. In the participatory experience of the fetish or idol, one 'steps beyond' the borders of one's private, social class, functional or professional existence into the sphere of an all-encompassing, higher, more powerful or holy existence unfolding in the here and now. It is not about agreeing to such an experience 'of one's own free will' or resisting it. The power of fetishes and idols is precisely that they can overcome any resistance with an energetic force and emotionally gripping sense of duty, sweeping everyone along in a kind of wave. 'Theatrical symbols' are not perceived, decoded, interpreted and recognised from a distanced position. They bewitch, they impress, they fascinate, they draw people toward them, absorb them even, they overwhelm and enchant. As soon as one is overwhelmed, overcome, bewitched, one has 'understood'. 'Understanding' theatrical symbols, which fetishes and idols are, does not occur in cognitive acts of decoding, but in direct involvement in the process. Performing the process is the realisation of meaning. This is what makes fetishes and idols so interesting for political power. In this participatory experience of a fetishistic and idolatrous situation, what is forgotten is precisely what modernity has been dependent on since the Enlightenment: namely the capacity for maintaining distance to the self and self-reflection. However, this forgetting is usually not experienced as loss, but as abundance. Instead of cold reflection, one experiences a flood of emotions: veneration, elation, fortification, great respect, the sublime, the relish of self-abandon, but also fear, awe, shock – all linked with somatic reactions that are experienced as vitalising and thrilling.

The hermeneutic and iconological interpretation of a miraculous statue of the Virgin Mary or a coronation ritual may produce scientific papers, but does not have the power to create 'meanings' for their own sake, which are precisely not semiotically encoded, but theatrically revealed. One has to be a believer of the cult of Mary or an identifying subject of a coronation ceremony to partake in the process with one's body and experience what it is actually about: immersion, being submerged in a scene in which one becomes part of a community, a crowd, a structured communal body. It goes without saying that science always tries to maintain distance when it observes. But it makes a world of difference whether one is observing and interpreting or taking part and experiencing. Fetishes and idols belong to the class of signifiatory aggregates made for the perspective of the participant and not the observer. This implies methodological problems for science, which can however be solved by shifting the focus of ob-

servation away from the ‘semiotic text’ and towards ‘staged performativity’, from the meaning ‘hidden behind’ the signs to the emergence of an event (Fischer-Lichte 2008).

Political cults – in monarchies, dictatorships and democracies – are thus set up to create the communal body performatively, to form homogeneous masses and to focus on a symbolic centre (idol), which is deconventionalised and therefore experienced as unquestionable, exceptional, singular, supra-individual, powerful and often redemptive or cathartic, in irrefutable sensual evidence and irresistible power. The relationship to the idol is always asymmetrical: it has the active power, the agency, while the participant is passive, a medial element through which the energies flow and through which he or she is made ‘one’ with everyone else, or to put it negatively, bound to them.

Seen from the perspective of fetishes, idols and rituals, the concept of representation therefore changes. So what do we mean then, when we say that the emperor represents ‘just global domination’ or the Palace of the Soviets the ‘victory and achievements of communism’? The referring back of representation implies that the political programme is temporary, but here any discussion of it is precluded and it is therefore dogmatic. The staged representation of (political or religious) idols is the strict opposite of the argumentative examination of validity and is instead the manifested validation of an unquestionable agenda of meaning. ‘Manifestation’ is a translation of the second part of the word ‘representation’. That which has already been affirmed is made present: unquestionable authority, sanctity, power, the leader. Political idolatry, which can definitely be described as a dangerous form of representation, but one which pervades all epochs, is about the dynamic aspect of power, which does not ‘mean’ anything, but is experienced *in actu*, as an overwhelming force.

9.2 The cult of Stalin und Stalinist architecture

In the analysis that follows, I have chosen the cult of Stalin simply because it is a particularly clear case of a political cult and political idolatry in general. We could equally deal with Hitler, Speer and Nazi architecture. The structures of political cults tend to be very similar. Although they differ according to cultural context, form of government, the epoch and the theatrical style dominant in that place or time, the structures are relatively stable. This is because secular states consistently adopted elements from religious idolatry and fetishism, but also from techniques of ruler representation in sacro-cultural forms of state – for example from Egyptian pharaoh rituals or the Roman cult of the emperor, who later became an example for the Caesarist attitudes of Napoleon, Mussolini

and Hitler. It is not only symbols and articulations of pathos that have long and winding paths, as Aby Warburg investigated, but also ways of controlling emotion for the purposes of stabilising power or enforcing political dogma. The relative arbitrariness of the example is, even though this conceals methodological traps, also permitted because my aim here is not the historical analysis of a specific type of political cult, but of the structural field in which idols, fetishes and their infrastructure (architecture, etc.) play a performative role in securing power. The aim is to shed light on relatively constant historical patterns, which in the case of ‘totalitarian’ representation can even float between traditional religious systems and modern state dictatorships.

The era of Stalin lends itself to this aim because it is a closed historical epoch. It demonstrates the characteristic mixture of technical-industrial modernity, secular politics and mythical, religious cults that is seminal and typical for the cultification of states in twentieth century. We will look at well-known phenomena in order to show that idolatrous forms from premodern cultures can still be constitutive in the middle of the modern age, even if we are dealing with a state with its own unique friction between industrial modernisation and backward agriculture. Walter Benjamin has also discussed this aestheticisation of politics and the politicisation of aesthetics in the twentieth century. Both played a significant role not only in the Soviet Union, but also in Germany, as well as in France, Italy and Spain. Artists stepped out of the cultural enclaves (or were ordered to come out) where they had been imprisoned in Tsarist Russia. The soviet avantgarde – Russian Futurism, Cubism, Suprematism, but also film and architecture – did not just want to be an expression of the revolutionary process, but wanted to shape it too. They shared this with many other artistic movements in Europe, for example in Germany, France, Spain and Italy. Out of this goal of politicising artistic content and form arose the additional desire to shape social reality itself using the arts. This was a risky game and the arts subsequently lost most of their independence after the Stalinist dictatorship was established. My analysis will however restrict itself to the specific example of Soviet architecture and representations of the Stalinist state implemented in stone.

In the 1930s, the concept of socialist realism also became an obligation in architecture. It had a “very specific, uniform artistic style”, “which shaped and deeply affected all other aspects of social life, so that the era of Stalin developed its own form of aesthetic expression” (Noever 1994, 16; Groys 2011). This uniformity did however contain an abundance of different currents and internal contradictions. Leading architect Karo Halabyan (1897–1959), who built the Red Army Theatre and was chairman of the Association of Architects, published the article “Against Formalism, Schematism and Eclecticism” in 1936, which participated in the turn against the avantgarde that had taken place under Stalin. This included

opposition to functionalist constructivism. At the same time though, Halabyan demands a more intense analysis of modern technology, because “our entire culture” depends on “highly developed technology” (1936, cited in Noever 1994, 22), i.e. precisely the same sector in which functionalism and constructivism had found fitting expression. Halabyan also polemically attacks eclecticism, yet at the same time he highlights examples from classical art and cultural heritage and demands the “synthesis of the arts”: how could eclecticism be avoided then? In turn, formalism, with its obligation to constant aesthetic innovation, is rejected as bourgeois and anti-socialist; yet at the same time, Stalinist architectural offices were to become “creative laboratories” (*ibid.*, 24) with high levels of originality, rational planning and low cost estimates – without paying any homage to constructivism. All architectural styles from history considered progressive are prescribed, but at the same time schematism, “the blind imitation of classicism”, must be avoided; one is not permitted to “follow the classical canon” and there may be no mishmash of styles (*ibid.*, 23) of the kind supposedly identifiable everywhere. The new aesthetic is against “façade-ism” (Groys 2003, 111), against ornamentation and “supermonumentalism” – yet Le Corbusier’s functional buildings are harshly criticised. The new Moscow should precisely not orientate itself toward functional modernism, but instead be a representative expression of victorious socialism. Construction should be based on a human scale, yet the buildings planned are gigantomaniac. An underground train is planned – one of the first big objectives of the building planning policy of the 1930s – but the metro should “prevent the feeling that one is under the ground” (Halabyan 1936, cited in Noever 1994, 23f.). In the same way, nature is seen “as an essential element of the architectural ensemble” (*ibid.*, 22); indeed, working in tune with nature is a regulating principle, in contrast to the way capitalist architecture makes an enemy of nature; yet at the same time, the domination of nature and technical supremacy is the primary goal of socialist development. The construction method should make use of “national forms” – in other words, it should not follow Modernism’s International Style; and yet traditional references to the Russian architecture from the time of the Tsars are rejected and the new Moscow should not only become the capital of Russia, but also of the Socialist International everywhere – a modern metropolis.

In this way, all architects during the 1930s moved in a precarious field of paradoxes, a minefield of political and aesthetic doctrines, where it was extremely risky to build anything at all, because it was inevitable that some architectural principles would be broken: any building realised proved to be lacking in some valid principle or another. Boris Groys has shown that these contradictions are “the entire inner mystery of Stalinist totalitarianism” (2011; here 2003, 113). A and not-A are always both valid at the same time, because their simultaneity is

seen as a dynamic contradiction, as the driving force in the “law of unity and the battle of opposites” (ibid., 112). With Stalin, this conception of dialectical materialism takes a dangerous turn in the 1930s, in that it is the party and above all Stalin himself who have absorbed and contain all conceivable oppositions in themselves. The structure of contradiction becomes a trap, a double bind. Holding on to the coherence of one style – whether constructivism or classicism or technicism or monumentalism, etc. – is now a form of individualistic one-sidedness, an insistence on specificity, which could quickly cost one one’s job or even head. The individual architectural or art work should contain a maximum of inconsistency – it was precisely in this way that it proved itself to be alive, historically powerful, representative. “The perfect building”, writes Noever (1994, 19), “had to be absolute, total, all-encompassing. It had to unite all oppositions within itself. It had to appear highly individual and take everything that has ever happened in the history of architecture into account. It had to be completely modern, i.e. of its time, but at the same time maintain a sense of continuity with classicism. It had to serve the people’s everyday requirements and at the same time inspire a celebratory and extraordinary feeling in them.” An architect had to, like Stalin himself in a way, be able to construct the “total, absolute, indistinguishable and indescribable” (ibid., 29). This is an impossible project and therefore an extremely dangerous one. “Every building had to be functional, but not functionalist, inspired by classical architecture, but not classicist, highly individual, but not individualistic, monumental, but in human proportions, decorative, but simple, it should use anything valuable that has ever existed in human history, but should not be built eclectically.” (ibid., 20) This is a fantasy of an impossible and precisely therefore obligatory building, uniting everyone and everything in it, unachievable and unrealisable, a homologous structure to Stalin himself. Stalinist architecture’s task was to construct Stalin; it is a monument of him. Groys calls this “the total artwork of Stalin”.^{*} Architecture becomes the stone idol of the great father.

We have now left the sphere of profane construction work and reached a religious sphere within it. Absolute totality, which architecture was to realise in stone and brick, is a figure of the divine. Only the divine can synthesise historically irreconcilable contradictions in one living unity. This is what the figure of Stalin himself achieves, who as the charismatic leader is both a person in historical reality and a figure already beyond history, reconciling all of history and therefore all contradictions within him. This is not only the beginning of Stalin’s cultification as a divine leader and saviour, but also of the idolisation of a form

* Charles Rougle’s translation of Groys’ title is *The Total Art of Stalinism*.

of architecture that is the stone expression of the totalitarian dialectic. This process begins in 1929 with the start of the implementation of the first five-year plan; with the first cult celebration of Stalin for his fiftieth birthday on the 21st of December 1929; with Trotsky's exile in 1928 and his deportation in 1929; with the Central Committee's May 1930 resolution on the "reorganisation of the old way of life" (which aimed for total penetration into society and life); with the construction of Lenin's Mausoleum on Red Square in 1930, with which the cult of the dead was initiated (Tumarkin 1983) – a decisive element in all soteriological religions and cults of state. This transition from socialist revolution to idolatrous dictatorship continued with the plans for the Palace of the Soviets in 1931, which was to be the Soviet Union's main architectural sacred object, towering gigantically over all other public buildings. At the same time, the annihilation of all opposition and internal party cleansing began – a mythical, cathartic process that had absolutely no rational reasoning related to political power behind it. Instead its purpose was the creation of a 'pure' communal body with a godlike leader at the apex. Once culture was under the total control of the state (from 1934) and the resolution on the "final, irrevocable victory of socialism in the USSR and the fortification of the proletarian dictatorship on all sides" had been passed at the Seventh World Congress of the Comintern on the 20th of August 1935, a temporary end point had been reached.

This was basically a declaration of the end of history. Suddenly, one finds oneself in post-history, now, today. In that sense, the years after 1929 and their transition to total dictatorship are also a concealed religious turn: the last judgement had begun, the eternal future lay before everyone's eyes. Architecture was to express this: under the mantle of victorious communism and the leader-idol, the present of all times had been reached – the eschaton; and *that is why* Stalinist architecture had to *perform* the utterly paradoxical, the total and the absolute. It is exactly at this moment, 1935, that the "General Plan for the Reconstruction of Moscow" (drawn up in collaboration with Stalin) is completed – a prospectus for a city that had already arrived in the future (it is a parallel to Hitler and Speer's construction fantasy for the new imperial capital Germania, which was to replace Berlin). The Soviet Union presented itself in precisely this way in the architecture pavilion of the World Fair in Paris in 1937 – directly opposite the pavilion for Hitler's Germany: the two giants of totalitarian architectural aesthetics, Boris Iofan (1891–1976) and Albert Speer, thus stood facing each other at this world exposition. In 1935, the point at which architectural design coincides with communist eschatology has been reached. They both therefore incorporate the same idolatrous and cultic characteristics as the unmistakable physiognomy of the Stalinist era.

9.3 Stalin the idol

Every cult needs a centre. That centre is Stalin, power itself, reified. His power is so huge that he can make infallible decisions about architectural planning and economic processes, about establishing new industries and genocides, in other words, about everyone and everything. As a judge, he possesses irrevocable power over life and death, heaven and hell. As symptoms of this transformation of Stalin into a cult figure and divine idol, we will examine some – of course official – memoirs by high-ranking architects, before we turn to Stalinist architecture itself. Viktor Vesnin, for example, writes in 1934: “Stalin never uses superfluous words, or clichés, or contrived expressions. Instead everything he says, every sentence, impresses itself upon you like a formula, like a call for a certain kind of behaviour, a concrete act.” (Vesnin cited in Noever 1994, 26) – Stalin “decided [all questions] with his unique simplicity and brilliant vision”; he demonstrated “astoundingly profound thinking”: “Every remark from our leader and every question he asked went to the very heart of the matter and showed us the way [...]” (Gel’frejch in Noever 1994, 25) “With lively yet sophisticated language, deeply impressive because of its profound simplicity, Iosif Vissarionovich did not just give us instructions as to how to reconstruct the capital, he also taught us how to plan, design and build in the first place.” (Vesnin in Noever 1994, 25) – “In his speech, Iosif Vissarionovich gave us guidelines [...] all with the greatest simplicity and most convincing clarity.” (Cernysev in Noever 1994, 26) “Comrade Stalin’s simple, clear speech, with a few jokes thrown in too, became our manifesto [...]” (Baburov in Noever 1994, 27) His “lecture [was...] structured in the most clear and simple way, which is typical of his manner of expressing himself.” (Shchusev in Noever 1994, 27) Stalin’s status as god and man is shown in the fact that his speech is anti-rhetorical; and precisely for this reason, he is the greatest rhetorician. After the architect Vesnin had been abroad, he writes of how speakers there “play games and create illusions [...] with their fancy ways of talking. Unlike Stalin. He uses simple words, but every word sticks with you. It gets you in the heart, sears itself into your memory like a bright image and remains an indelible impression of his wisdom, clarity and succinctness.” (Vesnin in Noever 1994, 26) Stalin’s speech and demeanour thus becomes the living embodiment of “truthfulness”, one of the most significant pieces of vocabulary around 1935, even though the political system had in fact degenerated into lies and murder some time ago. Because Stalin’s speech is truth itself, whatever he says unmasks all rhetorical trickery (of the decadent West); it has no sophistry, no artistry and is therefore the highest form of art, the pure expression of his sublime being.

For the architects, this being becomes the epiphany of opposites, in which proximity and distance, up and down, merge into one. The memoirs are filled with hymn-like apostrophes: “Exceptional complexity and astonishing simplicity [...] True greatness and extraordinary modesty [...] Heroic courage and amazing humanity and warm-heartedness [...] This is the impression given to anyone who is lucky enough to meet Stalin at least once in their lives.” (Vesnin in Noever 1994, 26) These attributes of being so close to the people and yet supremely sublime are the stereotypical formulae in the genre of leader praise. They reflect the “unity of oppositions”, in other words totality, which is inherent to Stalin as the leader figure. Because for every A he is also a not-A, there is nothing beyond his being; he can therefore have no opponent. And if they do exist, they demonstrate or represent something that Stalin already is or represents anyway – but he also represents their opposite, thus revealing the obstinate one-sidedness of his dissenters, who must therefore be eliminated.

For the rhetorical production of the totality of the leader is murderous. If the *coincidentia oppositorum* becomes embodied in the being of the leader, there can no longer be any opposition to him. This means that a godly structure is established on Earth – and on Earth, the consequence of this is murder. The more alive the god-man is, who truly and intrinsically carries all possible qualities within him, the more dead everything around him is. Like Satan and God, the opposition fails to recognise that they have always already been a part of Stalin and that they are one with him: they therefore pass the sentence on themselves. Either one is part of Stalin or one is not. Stalin is therefore an extraordinary everyday person, who unites diametrical opposites within him and demonstrates divine traits, especially expressed in his unrhetorical, charismatic speech. Yet there are more characteristics that mark him as a cult figure.

More than anything else, it is his auratic charisma. Stalin’s public appearance is an event, in which the individual is obliterated and becomes part of a collective body. “Comrade Stalin begins to speak, and instantly, there is complete silence. Excited and making an effort not to miss a single word from the great teacher, the participants in the meeting listened to Comrade Stalin’s speech.” (Vesnin in Noever 1994, 25) “His critical comments and instructions [...] inspired us and showed us the right direction for the whole next phase of our work.” (Gel’frejch in Noever 1994, 25) Sergej Cernysev, head architect in Moscow from 1934–1941 and who designed Moscow University with Lev Radnev, writes: “One immediately felt the concentrated, serious atmosphere.” “Comrade Stalin began to speak. He spoke quietly. The participants in the meeting stood up and crowded around Iosif Vissarionovich, listened to him attentively and did not let themselves miss a single word.” (Cernysev in Noever 1994, 26) “Comrade Stalin’s [...] speech became our manifesto, according to which we will fight for the

socialist regeneration of the cities, it became a manifesto for our work in planning and building in general.” (Baburov in Noever 1994, 27)

A professional meeting with construction experts; discussions; Stalin makes a contribution – and suddenly one is transported to another world. It is no longer about specific arguments and content – not a word of that – but rather the speech act as such becomes significant. To speak is to act, and it shapes and forms further actions. Stalin’s speaking immediately forms a two-sided structure: authoritative infallibility on the one side and a following that forms a community on the other. The speech gives the assembly a new direction, it is their manifesto. It seems that without Stalin the architects would have no idea what construction is about. By forging a homogenous collective body from the heterogeneous mass of architects with his public appearance – and that is the effect that an idol has – Stalin provides an objective and orientation for each individual and for the collective: he not only constitutes a homogenous, but a structured and targeted collective body.

There is an interesting detail from a meeting in which the Palace of the Soviets was being discussed. It is known that Stalin was not only aiming for the “largest building of our age” (Gel’frejch in Noever 1994, 25), but that he also wanted to surpass the tallest building in the world, the Empire State Building. He wanted a 75 metre high statue of Lenin at the pinnacle of the gigantic building. In the meeting, Stalin bent Lenin’s arm (in a modelling clay model), which had been stretched victoriously toward the sky, 90 degrees downwards, in order to turn the vertical gesture of triumph into a horizontal gesture of instruction: *that* is the way it must be (ibid.). This is a correction based on firm instinct, which corresponds to the dynamic of ruling power in Stalin’s era. The incontrovertible victory of socialism, ending all history, has been declared – the vertical gesture; but this gesture would in fact have the effect of immobilisation, which would cripple its equally valid opposite: namely the total mobilisation of all forces in order realise the socialist life. Once again A and non-A, being and becoming, apply at the same time. Socialism has won and will exist for all eternity from now on; and socialism is a becoming, it needs to be led in a particular direction and focus on a leader.

It seems Stalin’s public appearances were experienced by the architects in this double matrix. On the one hand he is the magic centre, towards which everything is focused, or even mesmerised. Stalin is the mythical heroic centre and the magnetic point around which all manpower crowds densely in order to be close to him. This is the event of the pure presence of the idol. And on the other hand, Stalin is a mobilising giver of direction, who wrenches his followers out of their anomic and lethargic stasis into a future he has opened for them. Once they are

orientated towards this future, the sluggish bodies of the masses are mobilised and charged with energy. This is no different with Hitler or Mussolini.

For those deeply moved by the idol's greatness, the leader Stalin represents a formative epiphany that changes the course of their lives, or at least becomes an indelible memory. "Meeting the leader moved me very deeply, enriched me and filled me with enthusiasm for my future work" (Gel'frejch in Noever 1994, 25) "[...] and each time I met the leader, it made a deep impression in my memory", writes Viktor Vesnin, and adds, "You think about something like that for the rest of your life" (ibid., 25). "With our unforgettable impressions of this historic convention, we left the Kremlin", writes Sergej Cerysev (ibid., 26). – "This day burns brightly in my memory, because I [...] saw and heard the great Stalin speak in such close proximity." (Baburov, ibid., 27)

These formulations describe a religious experience of awakening, under the spell of a charismatic idol. Collective bodies and fetishised consciousness are always modelled in all three tenses: in the experience of a cultural event in which the participant is permitted a celebratory and "mystical participation" beyond everyday experience (Lévy-Bruhl), the *present* dominates. Here, the mechanism of projective identification and narcissistic merging is in operation. They are experiences of inspiring ecstasy from the position of the ego's weakness, of feeling small and fearful, feelings which are stripped away in the exultation of identification and fulfilment experienced through the leader. One experiences and receives 'grace' (charisma) – almost certainly with the background knowledge that one could potentially be destroyed by the same person whose greatness one is merging with in ecstasy. Annihilation is always the unspoken reverse of ecstatic identification.

With the collective energies now pointing in a new direction, their programming and consolidation towards a 'not yet', the cult of the idol reaches into the *future*. In the process, the future loses its darkness and uncertainty. The identification with or participation in the idol is reforged into a highly saturated motivation, which can to a certain extent replace the order-and-obey structure. This magical motivation leads to the programmed automation of series of actions.

In the indelible impression left in the memory, the idol acquires the mythical dimension of the *past*, no matter how short his leadership happens to be. The idolatrous enchantment of memory fills the self with the sense of an 'always has been' for an unfathomable depth of time, much longer than historical time. The remembered event may have happened yesterday – nonetheless, the idol sinks deep into time immemorial. It replaces secular history. In that sense, the cultic appearance of the leader-idol is always an attack on all other periods of time. Future, past and present merge into one, all the tenses collapse into one another. This is the epiphany of the eternal presence of the leader. It is

no different with Stalin than with Hitler or other despotic leaders of the past. De-modalised time is sacred time; however, sacred time is no longer occupied by God or some indeterminate supernatural power, but by a god-man in the form of a political leader.

9.4 Charismatic leadership

The quasi-religious form of leadership practiced here can be understood in more detail with Max Weber. He defines domination as the “probability of obeying a definite command” (Weber 1922/2004, 133; cf. 1922/1978, 212–301, here 212). Wherever this probability is politically stable, a kind of permanent legitimacy of the command is established. Weber differentiates between three forms of domination: the traditional, the legal or bureaucratic and the charismatic. *Legal (or rational) domination* reproduces itself via authority legitimised by law and through institutionalised administrative apparatuses, which practice objective domination according to specific rules. Bureaucracy is “technically the purest type of legal rule” (1922/2004, 134; 1922/1978, 220 ff.). It also exists in modern dictatorships. However, in those cases it is rather a necessary background to the exercise of power, not its essential core. Using bureaucracy, weapons factories, the *Reichschrifttumskammer*, the enforced collectivisation of agriculture, traffic systems, concentration camps and gulags can all be organised with the same precision and reliability, but not the elusive evidence of loyalty that was so typical of the Hitler-Stalin era. In that case, loyalty was more important than legitimacy. Bureaucratic domination has no central cult and no idolatry and is therefore a means for dictatorships, but not an end.

Traditional domination is practiced “based on the belief in the sanctity of orders and powers of rule (*Herrengewalten*) which have existed since time immemorial” (Weber 1922/2004, 135; 1922/1978, 226 ff.). One obeys out of habitual devotion; the rulers control age-old traditions; their relationship to their subjects is patriarchal and derives from personal dependencies. What is important is not functionality, objectivity and competence, but loyalty and devotedness, privileges and tradition. Hitler and Stalin both also made use of these mechanisms in their dictatorships. However, because these were regimes without an historical past, they could never fully rely on these continuity-creating mechanisms. Furthermore, they fervently opposed precisely those forms of traditional domination that still persisted from Tsarism and Wilhelminism.

Charismatic domination functions via the emotional surrender to the personality of a ruler with “magical capabilities, prophecies or heroism, spiritual power or oratorical power” (Weber 1922/2004, 138–139; 1922/1978, 241 ff.). The “search

for what is continuously new, that which is beyond the mundane, for novelty and [...] emotional suggestibility (*Hingenommenheit*)” is the source of charismatic power. The charismatic alliance has no traditionally passed down bureaucracy and does not consist of subjects possessing guaranteed privileges from ancient times. Instead it is a “community or a following” centred around a “leader”. Followers belonging to the inner circle around the leader are selected because of their devotion and loyalty, not because of their expertise, competence or social status. Charismatic power is thus relatively unstable. The charisma must therefore constantly renew and legitimise itself. It is totally dependent on the following believing in it. This belief is largely based on irrational, imaginary and magical mechanisms and is therefore hard to predict.⁴³ These informal and unstable aspects mean that mechanisms for eternalising the domination are required, for example, permanent revolution: the extraordinary must be constantly renewed, the old must be outdone, otherwise the charisma begins to wear out and age in a strange way. This is why cults are necessary: they continuously recreate the origin of the ‘movement’, the initial moment of the revolution, the death of early heroes, in order to reaffirm the current leader in these staged media as an extraordinary, magical power and to bind their following to them once more. Turning charisma into something mundane by normalising it is considered extremely dangerous. For this reason it requires festive burials, uplifting rituals, a climax of symbolic events. Moreover, it must be ensured that the charisma is ‘transported’, both spatially and temporally. Cults and rites serve to mark the passing of time and to distribute ‘messages’, ‘missions’, ‘representatives’ throughout the realm of domination; the purpose of this is the magical translation of the charisma embodied by the leader into space and throughout time. One particular problem is the transfer of charisma to lower-ranking ‘great figures’, or even more problematic, to successors, because there is no such thing as inherited charisma. Stalin’s dictatorship tried to solve this by setting up a cult of the dead around Lenin. By holding an annual ritual of the dead dedicated to those who died in the Beer Hall Putsch on the 9th of November in Munich, National Socialism sacralised the Nazi movement, although in this case, its model was the central Christian dogma of the resurrection, with the important difference that a soterio-

⁴³ Kershaw (1987) also points out how the masses assembled around charismatic leaders are threatened by destruction when ‘success’ cannot be stabilised. When failures occur, ‘scapegoats’ are constructed to secure this stability. The Nazis used the Jews for this, not only because in the Manichean worldview of the Nazis, the goodness and purity of the German race needed an opposite, but also because whenever things went wrong, the ‘guilty’ parties were already identified and thus the Nazi’s own guilt complexes and paranoia could be warded off with paranoid world conspiracy fantasies (this is also an aspect of political religion; cf. Faber 1997).

logical religion was transformed into a religion of obedience that demanded the complete subjugation of the individual to the will of the Führer (Ueberhorst 1989; Behrenbeck 1996; Ley/Schoeps 1997; Bärsch 1998). The argument is not that the Nazi regime was a bastardisation of Christianity, but that it wanted to be its destroyer and conqueror in the history of the world. The political goal of this was to establish cohesive forces that affected the masses and that would weld the German people into a religiously integrated collective of devotion and obedience.

The Soviet Union established its charismatic domination without a modern bureaucracy on the basis of a toppled traditional power and had barely any competent expert elites or stable structures of traditional devotion to depend on. In these kinds of situations the massive reinforcement of two mutually supporting elements is required: terror and charisma. In this way, the dictatorships of Stalin and Hitler resemble each other strongly (cf. Lepsius 1993, 95–118; Breuer 1994, 84–109, 144–175; Soboth 2000; Herbst 2000; Petersen 2000). Why do terror and charisma complement each other so well? The following created by the charismatic leader might be anti-authoritarian toward the traditional form of domination that has been toppled (Tsarism) or the domination of bureaucracy (Weimar Republic), however, the relationship of the leader to his following is still authoritarian, despite having no tradition and being unstable, and therefore needs reinforcement. Thus this form of power is almost obsessively driven by the will to create inclusive communal bodies, to absorb everything into itself and homogenise everything, in other words, to exclude and kill enemies of the people, ethnic foreigners and dissidents. For charismatic collective groups do not have an outside – apart from enemies. That is why they are so aggressive. Terror is – like charisma itself – a form of the social synthesis of the social body. The problem in modern dictatorships is that they do not create spiritual followings or religious communities *within* existing states, instead the victorious charismatic leader controls the entire state. The charisma therefore has to become an extension of an entire society. This kind of inclusion totalises charisma and forces it to completely penetrate the entire state and all of society – and that is terror.

Charisma is not inherently totalitarian. But it cannot avoid becoming totalitarian once it fuses with the state: that is precisely when figures such as Stalin, Hitler and Mao, who simultaneously embody charisma and the state, are created. This is always a political catastrophe. Fundamentally, this kind of total synthesis is impossible. For it is an essential characteristic of charisma that it only integrates communal groups as defined against those not participating in the charisma. Thus, once the extension of the state and the extension of charisma occur at the same time, charisma in state-form will necessarily develop features of terror. Logically, it would therefore follow that the Stalinist terror began at the same time Stalin's personality was established as a political idol.

It is now easier to understand why forms of cult and idolatry were pushed after 1929. The cult provided the tool to continuously regenerate the charisma that kept society 'glued together' and synthesised. The charisma was artificially produced through terror as the reverse side of the cohesion. Terror generates fear, charisma generates reverence. Both emotions are closely linked in the psychology of power: out of fear of becoming a victim of terror, one escapes into reverence, and in turn one becomes a participant in the destructive power that wears the mask of the political idol. *Charisma is the masquerade of terror, just as terror maintains charisma.* The age-old complicity between fear and worship is fundamental to modern dictatorships as a psychologically binding agent.

There is something else to add to this. Charismatic followings are eschatological communal groups, whose eschaton is concentrated in the central idol. In the idol, the eschaton that has yet to occur is always already present. The Soviet Union's eschaton consisted of the idea that socialism would become the reality of the proletarian masses, which had become identical with society as a whole: classlessness. With the cult of the dead around the Lenin Mausoleum, Stalin created a holy ritual, through which Lenin's charisma could be transferred to him by celebrating the death of the old leader at the same time as the immortality of his idea, which Stalin now carried into the future. The Lenin cult was nothing but the masquerade of the Stalin cult. Yet as part of his leadership, Stalin was faced with the complex task of uniting completely heterogeneous social forces and symbolic traditions. The cult of his personality, inaugurated at the same time as the cult of the dead around Lenin, was to be the magical medium that would synthesise all oppositions into the unified whole of a classless society. The idolisation of his personality embodied both the socialist utopia that had already been achieved and its approaching future, which he would bring about.

Once again, this demonstrates the paradox of the Stalinist personality cult: he had to represent what had already been accomplished, while at the same time embodying something transcendental, futuristic, utopian. Nothing could be more false than equating socialist realism, the artistic doctrine of Stalin's era, with mimetic realism: it was not reality that was to be portrayed, but the socialism that had already been achieved in the struggle with historical contradictions – yet at the same time, it should show the 'trend', the coming totality, the promise of which should already be present 'in our midst', in the eschatological leader-idol. Stalin and his architecture's tenses are the past (we did it) and the future (we will do it). The presence of the divine demiurge Stalin, centre of the world and creator of worlds in one, guarantees the utopian future that will become the irresistible and heavenly present. There will then be no more enemies (except

perhaps in death or in hell, the gulag). World history, to adapt Schiller's phrase, will have revealed itself as the final judgement.⁴⁴ This tribunal has already begun in the severe and irrevocable judgements passed by Comrade Stalin, just as he has made us all into the building blocks of a new aeon: in this new age, a peaceful communal life of affluence and happiness rules, without any internal or external threats or enemies, without the bitter sacrificial victims of the present, without the heavy burden of life, without death even, for socialism lives forever. Stalin's famous expression: "Life is getting easier, comrades. Life is looking brighter" describes exactly this dawning of a new time in the middle of the old one. For this reason, the architecture was to express joy more than anything, celebration, the momentum towards the future (Noever 1994, 42). What Stalin was aiming for was a reversal within the psychic economy: from the melancholia of oppressive Russian history to the cheerful future of socialist society, which with him, had already begun.

9.5 The Palace of the Soviets

This idea was to have its truly idolatrous expression in the Palace of the Soviets (Noever 1994, 151–169). In the 1930s in Moscow, Leningrad and other large cities, massive urban changes were undertaken in order to embody the new aeon in built structures: magisterial, magnificent squares, majestic buildings for the government and administration, the Red Army, for theatre and culture (Gestwa 2002). On the one hand, elements from various regional architectural styles were adopted (to express the multiplicity of the Soviet Union), but on the other, architecture was dominated by a consistent neo-classicist style (to symbolise unity). In the latter, the Stalin era was to be expressed with the same timeless immortality as the supra-historical validity that was ascribed to classicism itself. Peter Noever (1994, 119) speaks of a "fetishisation of public buildings". This means that the buildings themselves were intended to be magical objects of the Soviet state and people, talismans and amulets on the body politic. Like fetishes, the huge buildings offer the promise of security and certainty for the future (fetishes also always manipulate time). They represent the invincibility of the state and protect it from the fear that at the same time is also aroused by their enormous, overpowering dimensions: they have both an apotropaic and

⁴⁴ Schiller's poem "Resignation. Eine Phantasie" (1786) contains the following line: "World history is the final judgement" (*Die Horen*, vol. 3, p. 7). These thoughts are picked up by Hegel in his *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right* § 340 (2008, 315). Cf. also Vondung 1980, 70 ff.

fear-inspiring function at once. Like fetishes, they must also embody and convey strength and power. The palaces of the Soviet Union are huge energy-boosters and dynamos of the collective body. Fetishes strengthen the integrity of the community and the body, or the subject. In this way too, in architectural gestures of oath, the palaces secure the fragile integrity of Soviet society. Furthermore, fetishes are thingly means of power, or the media of domination: by fetishising public buildings, the absolute impossibility of resisting Stalin's rule was portrayed using a rhetoric of stone.

With these fetishes of strength, one must also always remember their opposite: collapse and disintegration, fear and death, powerlessness and weakness, disorientation and exhaustion. These states are the 'inner enemy' that must be defeated. These oppositions are in fact still an issue in the grand memorial complex and memorial rituals that were – one might say, in the best Stalinist style – performed in Stalingrad in 1963/1967 by a team of thirty sculptors led by Yevgeny Viktorovich Vuchetich (Arnold 1998, 95–107). On huge grounds containing large sculptures and memorials, they carry out a mythologisation of memory, reinforced by marches, fire displays, speeches and mass choreographies. An 85-metre statue is erected in the middle of the Volga-side slope of the Mamayev Kurgan mound. Entitled *The Motherland Calls*, the statue has her sword raised, thrusting forward into the sky, her hair and robes fluttering in the wind: a singular sculptural call to arms. In the areal around the monumental statue, a naked, muscular warrior with a Kalashnikov in his hand rises up out of rough-hewn stone that has been positioned in a pool, the warrior still waist-deep in the rock: the Soviet Heros, son of the Motherland. This is a typical symbolic fusion: here, the martial primal mother, who spurs on and provides protection for her manly, phallic son Heros, which he in turn provides for her. It corresponds to war posters from 1941: the motherland is portrayed as "Mother Russia" and a peasant woman, personifying the call to the soldiers to defend the soil of their motherland and their women. Now in 1963/1967, after the victorious battle has been fought, this battle cry is transformed into an aggressive, martial triumph, in which mother and son are merged. The supreme father Stalin and the colossal statue of Lenin planned, which at 75 metres was to be the crowning glory of the Palace of the Soviets, 400 metres above the ground, seem absent. But this only appears so. For beside Mother Russia, who symbolises her soil from the Western border to the Bering Strait as well as the mythical bodies of all mothers, Stalin the supreme father of the people was always present. Mother Russia and Father Stalin formed the caring parental couple, to whom the people were intimately close to in a reverent, loving and grateful relationship, although not without fear and trembling: for staged in this monumental way, they had both a threatening martiality, a lofty distance and an awe-inspiring sublime

quality that unleashed the heroic and the godly within them. Together they are the symbolic version of an archaic set of parents, who can and must demand endless sacrifice from the people, because only this will prevent the body of the divine earth-mother being hacked to pieces and ensure the survival of the children, who had been born from that same body, for all eternity. To describe this dense, monumentalised symbolic language as ‘socialist realism’ is misleading; for it is precisely the real that is blanked out here. The closed world of these deeply hermeneutic symbolic figures operates instead on a fantastical, but also traumatic level: the idols provide an image for the collective unconscious, the terror of one of the very worst dictatorships and wars that a people have ever had to suffer.

This jump forward to the 1960s is permissible for the reason that the competitions and plans for the Palace of the Soviets spanned over thirty years of the post-war period. The palace was to be the symbolic centre of the socialist world. It was never built – and therefore remains nothing but evidence of the fantasies of Stalin’s era: and this makes the palace even more informative. The first all-union competition took place in 1931. More closed competitions followed in 1932 and 1933. In 1934, Boris Iofan’s architectural vision was approved by the Central Committee, after the crowning colossal statue of Lenin had already been decided on. The planned overall height was 415 metres. Construction began in 1937; in 1939 the foundations were laid on the site of the former Cathedral of Christ the Saviour: a sacred place, for this church commemorated the victory over Napoleon (Noever 1994, 32). In 1941, building work was stopped because of the war. Then in 1956, a new competition was held. At the end of the 1960s, the same time as the erection of the Stalingrad memorial, all work was stopped.

With his promotion of the gigantomanic architecture of power, for which the Palace of the Soviets was meant to provide the paradigm, Stalin followed in the footsteps of all despots and absolutist rulers, who have always known that unconditional claims to power must be translated into the visual language of built space. This was no different with Hitler and Speer. This also explains the borrowed quotes from architecture of power from the past, especially Rome, the Renaissance and classicism. All Soviet architecture came under the spell of Stalin’s will to power, who was preparing to immortalise himself in idols of stone.

One example of the architectural realisation of a Soviet fetish is the Central Red Army Theatre, built by Karo Halabyan and Vassily Simbircev between 1934 and 1940. Its extremely impractical basic design was the five-pointed red star that was emblazoned on every uniform, every collar patch or epaulette, every uniform cap, and was never absent from any army flag, barracks, tank, ship

or airplane. The red star is the most important fetishistic emblem for the military might of the revolution and the Soviet Union (like the Nazi swastika). It was worn on the body, just as seventeenth-century Africans had worn their fetishes on their bodies or the citizens of modernity their amulets (Knuf 1984). The red star was also a fetish on the body corporate of the army, an emblem of their victories. This is most certainly not exclusive to the Soviet Union, because the military has always paid homage to some special insignia-fetish. And so the gigantic theatre building was cast in the shape of a gigantic red star, a building which could hold thousands of Red Army soldiers. To a certain extent, one entered the body of the fetish, the same fetish one wore on one's body. This is quite a brilliant idea, one which plays with the mythical body of the army – the corps – a collective body that every soldier was a part of, in a very clever way. The star formed and uniformed the body of soldiers and then inserted it into the macro-body of the star-shaped theatre, which in turn was only a figure of the overall body of the army. In this sense, the theatre is one of the few examples realised that demonstrates how the mythical body corporate of the Soviet Union was produced, confirmed, immortalised and made holy through architecture. It is a vast monument to the idolatrous architecture of the Stalin era on Commune Square, a *corpus mysticum* in the middle of the atheist metropolis Moscow. The theatre is a fetish of the military totalitarianism into which the revolution had transformed.

In the architectural drawings for the Palace of the Soviets, there are endless masses of people on the huge squares in front of it, marching like ants: beneath the colossal Lenin's gesture of triumph or discipline at unreachable heights, which the palace served as a pedestal for, the people are converted in a machine. The marching square belonged to the palace: it was necessary for the fabrication of the geometricised masses. The masses make their idols, the idols make the masses. In the Palace of Soviets, it is in fact always about two bodies: the marching body of the masses, extending horizontally as far as the eye can see, hours and hours of parading past Stalin's eyes and the dead eyes of Lenin; and the body of power, pointing vertically up to the sky. The stony monumentality of the palace freezes into the immobile and statuary which, correspondingly, was to be represented by the masses flowing by: the total supremacy of violence, all-penetrating, surpassing all limits, exceeding every dimension, omnipotent; a violence which is meant to be the violence of the people, but who turn themselves into utter nothingness as they march by, to become the sacrificial victim of an idol. For the body politic formed into blocks of marching people is in fact 'empty', nothing but a container that receives the triumphant will of the leader and choreographs it. In its march past the leader, the people enact its own nothingness, which becomes everything, in the sense that as a formed mass, the peo-

ple receive the almighty will of the ruler and make it flow in a regular pattern. The meaning of the palace and the parade square consists of nothing else than the people utterly subjecting itself to a will and preparing itself for sacrifice in order to ensure the realisation of the claim to eternity by the regime embodied in the stone. An individual person is nothing before this mountain of palace, yet all together, the people are also nothing. Each person becomes the expression of this unending violence in idolatrous form.

One tries to imagine it for oneself – standing in a huge open space, in the sights of this colossus of power, in front of vast, wide steps, which when climbed make one realise how tiny one is; the endless corridors of columns, already making clear at the base that one is entering a sublime temple, a sacralised place of the cultic worship of the profane forces of violence, which adopts and supersedes the oldest fantasies and architectural forms of power; the countless staggered circles above and below, narrowing slowly towards the massive tower at the top (who does not think of Babel?). At a dizzy height, almost no longer visible, in Lenin's pointing finger, in the greatest image of a leader of all times, the tower ends and does not end, for it already seems to break through the boundary to transcendence. And below, in the inner chambers, after wandering through colossal entrance halls, past rows of columns, icons of Soviet heroes, huge ornaments, friezes, allegorical groups of figures, the whole thing an excess of marble, suddenly a window opens up to the sky, like in the Pantheon, allowing the eye an unlimited view upwards and flooding the hall with natural light. Finally, one reaches the heart of the building: the Hall of the Soviets, for 21,000 people, capped by an enormous dome covered with heroic scenes of the socialist victory; and then from a huge distance, no, coming from all sides, the great words of Comrade Stalin, powerfully echoing through the domed hall. Could we be more than an element inserted into the constructed body, the body politic, the voice of the leader? One feels oneself melting away in sublime awe of a greatness that permits nothing other than a complete submission of the self and identification with its idol – or death. Vast symphonies of fear and vulnerability pass through the tiny body of the self in tremors. The body's trembling can only be escaped by transforming this fear into the wholehearted worship of this superhuman giant: part of the masses of countless others who form a collective body, through which gigantic waves of archaic devotion and collective paranoia pass. Would one, amidst this machine of subjugation, still be an enlightened, autonomous, critically thinking citizen, maintaining the distance of the observer?

The many draft drawings of the Palace of Soviets usually adopt a very low perspective in order to make at least something of the overwhelming aesthetic of this building tangible. It is evident, once we have taken our distance again and are no longer emphatically 'submerged' in the palace, that the will to

power and architectural fantasies mutually support each other in it. In the 1930s, the entire artistic discipline of architecture was placed in the service of Stalin's self-deification. This is paradigmatic, for it was no different in the other disciplines, especially film. The idolatry of architecture and the cultification of the leader are part of the political theology of the twentieth century. Archaic strategies of magical enchantment begin to serve profane political power, which gives itself a grandiose, sublime and, in terms of architecture, extremely modern face. It does not mask its excess, but instead makes the murderous background of the system felt. The Palace of the Soviets and the gulags belong together just as the grounds of the Nuremberg Rallies belong to Auschwitz.

It is not about the humanisation of God, as in Christianity – and this is what makes such a huge difference, despite Christianity's cult of images and relics – but about the deification of a human; it is not about the humanisation of the conditions of living, but the production of a mythical communal body, although it is one controlled with modern technology; it is not about immanence, but about the idol's pseudo-transcendence; it is not about political participation (which was the idea behind councils after all), but cultic devotion and automated obedience. Religion is dead – long live idolatry. Making this a form of state is one strategy of total domination. The individual is designated the position of tininess, at the borders of which looms elimination. There is no other possibility than to be a *sub-iectum* (thrown under, or subjugated) and no chance of being a subject in the face of idolised power. In the public rituals of the merging of the masses with the leader-idol, on a subconscious level, the worship of the leader exists together with the consent to one's own death. More than at any other time, the acceptance of the death of all those who resist this devotion, those who are 'outsiders', is also performed here: whether they be enemies, critics, dissidents, people of other races or those who think differently or have different beliefs. The architecture of power is the alphabet with which the first commandment is written into visual memory: I am the Lord your God, and thou shalt have no other gods before me. Because this is written in the letters of representation built in stone, it is, in the middle of the twentieth century – whether in Moscow or Berlin – idolatry, one which surpasses everything that was described with this word in the Hebrew Bible. The idolatrous architecture of power is always also an invisible site of sacrifice, where the blood of the 'other' flows. Merging with the leader is a mechanism with which to divert death away from oneself and toward the others as sacrificial victims.

The fetishisation of consciousness and the idolatry of the architecture of power turn precisely this form of rescuing oneself into a political strategy. Turning power into a cult is *eo ipso* murderous. It inevitably cries for the blood of sacrifice. It consists of equally secret and unmistakable proportions of the radiant

sublimity of representational buildings and the murderousness of the idols transformed into cult figures within them. Fetishism, far from still being merely a model of superstition or perversion, has here taken on the task of silencing our shared knowledge of the murderousness of the regime by bewitching us with the choreographies of power. *We know, and yet...* we take part, and even if we do not, we remain silent. This and not terrorism or globalisation is the real threat to democracy. In its name and in the name of the never-ending Enlightenment, there is therefore a limit, when the liberality with which fetishism is treated, evident everywhere and also advocated by this book, begins to contradict itself: the moment it becomes part of the practice of power.

III Commodity Fetishism

This is the mythology of capital.
(Maurice Godelier 1999, 71)

1 Introduction

This chapter is about things that are gifts or commodities. The main focus will be the discovery of commodity fetishism. Gifts or commodities do not only have to be things; skills or services, animals or people, ideas or speech acts, festivities, ceremonies, spiritual salvation and so on, can also be given as a gift or sold. Anything that becomes a gift or a commodity is always also something other than just that. Becoming a gift or a commodity does not add any constitutive qualities to things, services or living beings. Rather, gifts and commodities are social and/or economic mechanisms through which objects are mobilised and 'put into circulation'. The form of this commerce is exchange or trade. Exchange – in gifts or commodities – is, as far back into the past as we know about, the oldest or at least one of the oldest forms of contract in and between cultural communal groups. Religion, the law, art and the economy do not necessarily need to be functionally differentiated like in modern societies for it to occur. In societies with so-called 'primitive economies' – perhaps it is better if we call them proto-economies instead – they are in fact inseparably interwoven. Unlike in modernity where it seems that the economic system operates according to its own set of rules – independent from religion, law, morals or emotions. Non-economic norms or conventions are at best viewed as marginal conditions or as factors whose amount of influence simply needs to be calculated economically; conversely, economic processes are powerful defining factors for values, world-views and politics. At the same time, these represent 'environments' for the system of economy, conceived of as autonomous, which function according to fundamentally different codes. However, between the economy and its environments there are also relationships, influences, interactions, networks of traffic and exchange, but also the transfer and the dissemination of parts or entire sections. These links are particularly close between, for example, the economic and the political system. However, that is not the focus of this chapter. Neither is the focus on what Niklas Luhmann calls the interpenetration of systems: according to this view, consciousness and communication interpenetrate each other in the sense that one cannot exist without the other. Commodity fet-

ishism does not deal with this either. From the perspective of Luhmann, commodity fetishism is more likely to be a ‘re-entry mechanism’. In the science system, which is characterised by the code true/false, this fundamental difference can itself be addressed (recurrence), for example when it is introduced into the science sector as epistemology in order to operate like a feedback loop in it.

It seems tempting to argue that fetishism works in the same way. But why? Fetishism is a religious mechanism translated into the economy, but which nonetheless still operates according to its own logic within the economy. As a religious thing, fetish processes with the code ‘immanence/transcendence’. It therefore regulates the behaviour of its believers, who live in this world, in such a way that a constant commerce with transcendentals (spirits, transpersonal forces, gods, etc.) can be carried out and channelled toward salvation. If, as Marx does, a concept like this is implemented in the analysis of commodities (although it is claimed that it is used to describe the economic situation), then consequently, according to Luhmann, the fetish operates in the code ‘paying/not paying’: it becomes a mechanism for increasing the value of the commodity, through which the relation of ‘desire to purchase’ and ‘ability to pay’ is shifted in favour of the commodity vendor. This is how one would argue following Luhmann. The question is whether the “theological quirks” that caused Marx so much trouble in his analysis of the commodity have been dealt with. They have not.

My thesis is much rather that – in this translation of religious fetishism into the economy – the code ‘immanence/transcendence’ is both translated and not translated into ‘having/not having’. The religious is not fully translated into economic logic, or to put it more pointedly, it cannot and should not be translated. If this were true, then we would have a case of the interpenetration of two systems and the problem of the “theological quirks” would be a valid one. This has implications: certain economic phenomena, like commodity fetishism, cannot be fully analysed in terms of the economic code (paying/not paying). The consequence with greater ramifications is: one cannot only characterise the process of modernisation, as Luhmann does, as a process of functional differentiation, because elements and structures belonging to older economies and other systems (e.g. religions) form a layer over or beneath the economic code. My thesis goes even further: this is not a state of ‘impure’ modernity, which *still* happens to be dragging the remnants of older cultures along with it, has *not yet completed* the implementation of functional differentiation or simply demonstrates *asynchronicities*. Rather, we want to show that modernity is necessarily characterised by contradictions, precisely so it can process them effectively: the economy works so successfully because it does not just function according to paying/not paying, but also according to immanence/transcendence. Commodity fetish-

ism will reveal itself to be the driving force in the process whereby the willingness to pay is not restricted by the rationality of *not being able to pay*, but rather by the desire and the longing to fuse with the commodity's semantics of promise – and *to want to pay for that*. While the act of purchase is a matter regulated by the code paying/not paying, the dynamics of purchase is driven by the aura of the commodity, which processes in the binaries of desire/non-desire, participation/non-participation, happiness/unhappiness, beauty/non-beauty, meaning/non-meaning, one almost wants to say: being/non-being. None of these binaries originate from the economic system. Desire, happiness, participation, beauty, meaning, being: these are also the qualities that the commodity, insofar as it is a fetish, incorporates as suggestions, even though they are beyond the limits of the commodity. This is what defines the strange double status of the commodity as fetish, in that it can unite thing and symbol, immanence and transcendence *uno loco*. In the following I will argue, while covering ground beyond these paradoxes, that fetishism has a transcendental-economic function, as I call it, for the economic system.

According to Luhmann, this cannot exist, at least not in the relation between religion and economy. Religion is always an environment for the economy; elements of the former can only be found as 'glitches' or 'faults' in the latter and are entirely processed in the code of the economy. But precisely this is not true. For fetishism is not the environment, but the heartland of the economy. One cannot, and Marx already recognised this, assume a situation of fully functioning differentiation in the analysis of the commodity economy. By doing so, one ignores history and with it the phenomenon that is our central concern here: with phenomena as ancient as the exchange of gifts and commodities, historical structures can survive even if they seem to have passed into history or, as is the case with the process of differentiation, sub-systematically divided into segments. What I mean to say is: in our analysis of modernity, we should expect many more impure mixed states, contradictory connections and opaque syncretisms. We will see that, regarding fetishism, not only religious, but also cathetic-emotional, sexual and perceptual-aesthetic elements are involved, moreover, elements that operate according to the code *conscious/unconscious*, and finally, those that dedifferentiate the difference between the *human/non-human* (thingly). Of course, these binaries do not play any role at all in Luhmann, because they do not contribute anything to his systems theory; but they exist and they constitute phenomena, in this case economic ones. Following Luhmann's argument, however, one could say that one of the achievements of social systems is that they communicate across their different environments and therefore reintroduce the system/environment binary into the system. This is achieved by self-referentiality and self-observation. This is a 're-entry': self-reflexivity can only exist

where the system/environment binary is introduced self-referentially into the process of the system's internal communication (Luhmann 1995, 473). In what follows, we will attempt this, but not using concepts from systems theory, for the reasons stated above. Our objective is to increase self-reflexivity not through differentiation but its opposite, through the analysis of inevitable dedifferentiation.

2 The exchange of gifts and sacred things (Marcel Mauss, Maurice Godelier)

In his famous study *The Gift* (2002) from 1925, Mauss investigates how the exchange of gifts works using examples from American Indian and Polynesian tribal culture, but also ancient Roman, Indian and Germanic sources. His research is particularly indebted to Bronislaw Malinowski, who had recently published his investigations of *kula*, a complex system of the circulation of gifts and goods across great distances in the Pacific Trobriand Islands, in 1922 (Malinowski 1922/2002). Mauss is especially interested in the development of rights and obligations out of the spirit of the gift and the reciprocated gift. He describes the regime of gift exchange, the paradigm of which is potlatch, as a "system of total services" (2002, 7, 8, 10 ff., 48 f.), because it encompasses all the members, families and clans belonging to archaic societies, integrates religious, economic, social and contractual dimensions and therefore is the most important force of collective cohesion in the cultures studied. The exchange of gifts, especially in the competitive gift-giving of elite groups, generates social identity, rank and hierarchy, and therefore the power structure, but also the symbolic order in cultures. It would therefore be completely wrong, according to Mauss, to speak of a 'natural economy'. Even a proto-economy, which does not differentiate between merchants, markets and money yet,¹ is a complex form of cultural organisation. Continuous circulation, the eternal flow of things, which is the way they are organised in the interchanging obligations of gift exchange, is precisely the form in which archaic cultures constitute themselves as such.

Mauss identifies three forms of obligation: anyone who wants to 'make a name' for himself or keep it and thereby maintain or strengthen his standing and his position is obligated to give gifts. Accepting gifts given is also an obliga-

¹ Of course, archaic societies have early forms of money (shell money or the copper plates of the American Indians of the North-West described by Mauss), yet these units of value are nonetheless not a universal medium for creating equivalent exchange value. (On proto-money, cf. Mauss 2002, 57 ff.; also: Sedillot 1992; Róheim 1977; Laum 1924; Desmonde 1978.)

tion on the part of the recipient – punishment for this is ‘losing face’ (Mauss 2002, 54). The third obligation, which fascinates Mauss the most, is the obligation to reciprocate. It is only this third obligation, and this is the central point, that makes the unilinear system of gifts a system of endless circulation. Mauss’ fundamental question is: where does the obligation to give back come from? What is the performative force in the gesture of the gift that makes it necessary to reciprocate?

Before we pursue this question in more detail, a fourth obligation besides these three horizontal or intersubjectively effective obligations should be mentioned, which is vertical to the others: the obligation to give gifts to the gods, spirits or the dead (ibid., 18–24). Because it is they who truly own the world anyway, all value originates from them. By acknowledging them with gifts (which we can also call sacrifices or offerings), two things are managed at once: firstly, the gift is the giving back of things to those whom they actually belonged to originally, that is, the repayment of a debt. One gives to the gods because one is indebted to them. But secondly, the gift obliges the gods or ancestors to share their wealth according to the reciprocity of obligations. Giving the gods what is already theirs perpetuates the cycle of the creation and repayment of debts and helps to secure and enlarge the wealth of goods that ‘really’ belong to them. It is a paradoxical balance and that balance forms the imaginary of the culture. The gifts to the gods affirm the unbridgeable hierarchy, based on debts, between the gods or ancestors and human beings; at the same time, human beings ensure a share in the source that belongs to the gods or ancestors, which is also the source of all wealth. This parade of gifts is reminiscent of the cunning with which Prometheus arranged animal sacrifice so that the less valuable parts were given to the god as burnt offerings, while the more valuable parts were reserved for the humans’ meal (on this see Böhme, H. 2002). One does not just give in order to receive (*do ut des*), but also to keep what one does not originally own or is not originally entitled to. Of course, one pays for this ‘taking advantage’ in the gift or the sacrifice with obligation/indebtedness.

This vertical cycle of things is understood by Mauss as a symbolic, mythical and imaginary expression of the horizontal circulation of gifts. “In reality this symbol of social life – the permanence of influence over the things exchanged – serves merely to reflect somewhat directly the manner in which the subgroups in these segmented societies, archaic in type and constantly enmeshed, feel that they [*owe each other everything*].”^{*} (Mauss 2002, 42–43; emphasis H.B.) By giving

* W.D. Halls’ translation is “feel that they are everything to each other”, which leaves out the notion of debt.

– and today giving seems to us to be a strangely risky, even destructive act – “by giving one is giving oneself, and if one gives oneself, it is because one ‘owes’ oneself – one’s person and one’s goods – to others” (ibid., 59). Yet precisely because of this one preserves face, acquires a name and forces the other into a debt which gives power over them. How is this to be understood?

The three forms of obligation guarantee an alternating interdependence, both intersubjective and intercollective. It appears to establish a kind of reciprocity. However, as Mauss already notes, the fact that gift exchange, especially in potlatch, takes the form of rivalry, competition and battle would contradict this (Polanyi 1979, 317–345). The symmetry of obligation is broken by the asymmetry of potlatch. For the aim of potlatch is to execute overwhelming force on the recipient and to thereby secure positions of power for oneself. The ideal, according to Godelier, in reference to a passing remark by Mauss, would be to give in such a way that it could not be reciprocated; then the power that is produced in potlatch itself would be total, circulation would be broken.² He who can only receive can also be commanded. He remains stuck in the debt that was created when he received the gift, becomes faceless and nameless, becomes a thing, which can be passively fed into the traffic of trade.

Having, giving, receiving, the whole circulation of things and goods, are therefore controlled by *agon*. In the gift competition, the giver permanently places the receiver in debt. Social cohesion is thus constructed on a hidden foundation of debt. Mauss therefore uncovers a phenomenon he barely takes note of himself, something which J.A. Schumpeter calls “creative destruction”. By this Schumpeter meant the paradoxical principle that regulates the economic process, according to which destruction becomes one with the creation of (new) structures, just as vice versa, every creation of value implies destruction (2010, 71–76, 116–127). This appears to be a fundamental paradox that reaches way beyond the economy and controls social, governmental, political and artistic processes (Bredekamp 2000). It already structures the ostentatious acts of the destruction of wealth and valuable goods in potlatch (Mauss 2002, 7, 8, 10f., 12, 47–50, 53ff.): destruction is the means through which social order, hierarchies, power, but also symbolic order is produced. One does not destroy someone else’s wealth, however, but one’s own: in the potlatch of gifts, one wastes it, divests oneself of it, destroys it, going as far as “pure destruction” (ibid., 53). The giver can only “prove his good fortune by spending it and sharing it out, humiliating others by placing them ‘in the shadow of his name’” (Mauss cited in Godelier 1999, 58). Excessive spending and destruction are the powerful gestures with

² Godelier 1999, 58, with reference to Mauss 2002, 151, note 201.

which the order of societies with archaic economies, which sucks everyone and everything into its circulation, is constituted.

It is immediately recognisable that a culture operating only in this way would very quickly collapse. Its basis, circulation, which links all individuals in the unity of the tribe or clan, would be destroyed if the momentum of destructive spending were not kept in check and turned into a stabilising mechanism. This is indeed what happens. The cultures investigated by Mauss (and Malinowski or Godelier) prove to be extremely stable because an anti-entropy has to a certain extent been built into the processes of the destruction of value in them. This is firstly the third obligation in the form of the reciprocation of the gift; secondly, Mauss believes he has discovered another kind of magical fortifier that is linked to his earlier and not so developed theory of magic. Namely that the things given away are autonomously acting agents that keep the circulation going by themselves; things have an active role in the contract (Mauss 2002, 31; one also thinks of Bruno Latour here). They therefore have the character of fetishes. What forces the recipient to return the gift is not only the obligation to give, but also the magical substance inherent to things, which steers things (which can accrue additional value 'out there', like compound interest) onto the path back to the original giver. The thing received is not lifeless, but rather it 'wants' to go back. This magical power is *hau*, *mana* or *orenda*. Mauss defines magic as "automatic efficacy. At the same time as being a material substance which can be localised, it is also spiritual. It works at a distance and also through a direct connection, if not by contact. It is mobile and fluid without having to stir itself. It is impersonal and at the same time clothed in personal forms. It is divisible yet whole." (2001, 144)

This thing-force, with its irreconcilable, paradoxical characteristics (which, as we shall see, also apply to fetishes) – its autonomous activity – guarantees that the circle is closed (the gifts return richly charged, so to speak) and can therefore be reopened again: circulation is made continuous. What Mauss calls magic here could also be called 'the effective imaginary'. Godelier comments: "In societies dominated by the obligation to give [...], objects seem ultimately to take the place of persons, objects behave like subjects" (1999, 71). Things and people swap places, thereby replacing real forces with imaginary ones. A delusional entity, so to speak, grows out of this, a layer of imagination that governs the real. Something intangible is at work in the circulating thing and that is what one might call the 'spirit' of that which has been withdrawn, stopped, the source of wealth and abundance, the sacred things that do not circulate. Valuable things made mobile in trade substitute the things that do not circulate because they are directly linked to the gods, the dead and the spirits and are therefore sacred.

We have now reached the final and most important level, which ensures that the trade cycle, despite all the spending and destruction, is kept going forever. As Godelier notes, Mauss did not in fact assess and theoretically follow up his own discovery. This is the observation – also important for commodity fetishism – that in societies based on gift giving, there must always also be exclusive objects that stay put, as opposed to the objects that circulate. They are excluded from exchange, the withdrawn centre, to which everything stands in relation: the inalienable, which is the sacred. Mauss calls them “sacra”. They are equated with the giver, the spirit of the clan, the founding heroes, the origin, and can therefore be kept back and guarded. These sacra have a name, their own personality, the ability to procreate and power, for example the power of attraction, which causes the valuable, wasted things to drift back to the giver, thus increasing his wealth (2002, 55–56). These magical things (we may confidently call them fetishes) are a ‘total social fact’ – just as the exchange of gifts represents ‘total services’. The sacra are the reference point for all processes of social exchange and the generation of value. The myths of dreamtime circle around them.

“The object remains immovable within the clan, holding the clan in place, connected to the sun and to its ancestors; what is *detached* from the object, what is alienable, giveable, even exchangeable is not its powers, which remain attached, but the effects of these powers, which can be divided, shared, exchanged, added to others, complementing them (or made to attack others opposing them). [...] So where do sacred objects stand? *Between two types of gift*, but without being giveable.” (Godelier 1999, 121–122)³ Sacred things (fetishes) are therefore not only power, efficacy and the point of attraction for all movement, but also that which makes these possible and mediates them. They concentrate the entire economy of gift exchange, keep it together (both symbolically and materially in the sense of hoarded treasure; Mauss 2002, 55–56) and keep it moving without taking part in it. In this sense, they represent the clan’s secret: “Ultimately, the sacred must always remain secret, indecipherable, must only hint at a meaning which lies beyond all possibility of expression and representation.” (Godelier 1999, 123) All legitimacy comes from them and this legitimacy is equally imaginary and tangible, equally manifest and unconscious, equally symbolic and real. “The imaginary past of the origin of things is still present, because it has become the foundation of the cosmic and social order, an invisible reality,

³ These sacred things “like human or supernatural persons, [...] acquire a name, an identity, a history, and powers. The vast majority of these trade objects initially characterised by mysterious origins and possessing an exchange value will circulate as substitutes for persons, living [...] or dead [...], or serve as instruments in the reproduction of the social, kinship and power relations [...]” (Godelier 1999, 168).

but one which is co-present in the present. [...] When a supernatural origin is imagined for the social sphere, the social becomes sacred, and society is legitimised as it stands.” (ibid., 124)

In this sense the imaginary is the condition that makes the construction of social reality and the proto-economy of the tribe possible. The latter is the immanent sphere of the exchange of objects through which everyone communicates with each other; yet this can only be made possible and lasting in a reliable, namely contractual form under the precondition of the transcendental sphere, which those things that can never enter the circulation of exchange are the embodiment of. It is this relation that gave Marx so many theological problems to think about in relation to commodity fetishism – and which is at the same time his most significant insight into modernity. “All of these realities which are theoretically withheld from gift-giving and exchange constitute the mental and ideological basis of the power relations, the political-religious relations, which obtain, on the one hand, between the sexes and, on the other, between clans, and which are relations of domination.” (ibid., 145)

By preserving a balance between the destructive, wasteful spending of tradable goods and the retention of sacred things, one acquires a ‘name’ and ‘position’ in the context of the ancestors and the origins of the society. The fetish-like *sacra* are always also substitutes for persons and at the same time enable the reproduction of social relations. Between the two opposing poles of the exchange of gifts and the reservation of the non-exchangeable, the clan produces self-referentiality, continuity and circulation, anchorage in the origins and the mobilisation of all things and living beings in a culture (ibid., 168). When things are both the surface for projection and the embodiment of social, religious and economic relations in this way, it is typically called fetishism. Godelier does not explicitly discuss fetishism (but cf. Godelier 1972 and 1973), but he does discuss its structure when he says that things made sacred by this equally projective and reifying process should be described as “the imaginary kernels and the symbols of the real relations” of the members of the tribe (Godelier 1999, 169). Those things endowed with the forces to become independent appear to the tribe members as an impenetrable power (with their own agency), simultaneously alien and familiar. They are the *doppelgangers* of the ancestors and the gods, but at the same time fantastical, unrecognised and therefore unconscious *doppelgangers* of the members of the tribe, who invest their own energy into the gifts and the sacred objects. Although Godelier asserts that society produces itself through these imaginary processes while at the same time becoming self-referential, he cannot hide his Marxist background when he feels the need to comment critically that what is happening here is that “real humans no longer appear as actors and authors, in part, of themselves, but as acted upon. Man’s replication of him-

self is accompanied by an alteration, by an *occultation* of reality and an *inversion* of the relationship between cause and effect” (ibid., 171). This is a typical pattern of the Enlightenment critique of religion and Marxist critique of ideology as we will encounter it in relation to fetishism.

According to it, myths and sacred things legitimise society as it is. As the source of society, man is never viewed as an active object, but always as a powerless one, which is produced, received and owed in debt. For Godelier, this is the root of the collective unconscious. This is characterised by the disappearance of real people and their replacement by imaginary beings, gods, things, numinous powers, fetishes. This also explains why – from a Marxist and a psychoanalytic perspective – the genesis of fetishes always has to remain repressed: although it is immanent, it presents itself as having a supernatural origin in an extraordinary entity. It is as though society (and the individual) needs “the opacity in order to produce and reproduce itself” (ibid., 173). It is in dark dreamtime that fetishes are born; yet they pay with the false currency of the dream, as Mauss says (2001, 155).

According to Godelier, the retrograde sanctification of origins so that they are no longer recognisable as human also always affirms the law, social order, power, rulers, castes and classes. With this robust, critical move, Godelier can connect the proto-economy of tribal culture to the developed commodity economy of capitalism: “But the two worlds, the world of gifts and that of commodities, are in fact comparable. To the fetichism [sic] of the objects given corresponds that of commodities, and to the fetichism of sacred objects corresponds that of money functioning as capital, as value endowed with its own power to engender value, as money capable of engendering money. This is the mythology of capital.” (1999, 70–71) We will not share this view here. Godelier does not find opaque cultures; rather he obscures his own insights – in the name of Enlightenment. He does the same thing in the chapter on the hubris of obligation/debt that he sees beginning to take over humanity – as a false religious inheritance. He sums up his subtle interpretation of the *myth of Old Afeke* in New Guinea with an almost classic universalisation: “From the outset mankind is therefore indebted to the powers that fashioned man and bequeathed him the world he lives in, and this debt is ineffaceable” (ibid., 185; cf. Godelier 1986, 160–161). Man can never give back what he has been given; the gift of the world and the order of things is so sublime that it cannot be reciprocated: this is the ideal of the gift to which there is no response; it thus creates subjection. It is so superior to the receiver that it creates a wall of power that no one can scale. The religions of the world provide example of this. In the sacrifice and worship of sacred things, one freely consents to agree with power, to which the debt owed can never be repaid (the effects of this are still evident in the political rituals of

twentieth century dictatorships). Sacrifice is therefore ultimately not based on a symmetrical contract, but on the hopeless debt and subordination of those who make the sacrifice. According to Godelier, Thomas Aquinas sums it up best: “Whatever man renders to God is due, yet it cannot be equal, as though man rendered to God as much as he owes Him.”⁴ It is critical that we stop equating religion and debt or guilt in this way. For this reason Godelier is also against sacrifice, the exchange of gifts and fetishism and hangs all his Enlightenment hopes on the dates 1945 and 1989: acts of liberation – beyond false enchantment (Godelier 1999, 200–210).

3 Inalienable things

Godelier’s argument that in all societies the circulation of gifts and commodities can only function if there is also a stockpile of inalienable things raises the following question: which things cannot be exchanged in our society? Things without any value (rubbish, junk); however, these are not a condition for entry into circulation, but its limits. Intimate things that are inalienable to an individual, such as personally meaningful jewellery, mementos, symbolically valuable heirlooms, talismans, trophies of travel and so forth are also withheld from the traffic of goods. Fetishes and collectors’ items too, both public and private, where they are part of a collection or the object of obsession, are kept out of the circulation of commodities and gifts. They are jealously guarded and protected. Works in a museum, the valuable contents of archives and sacred objects are equally inalienable.

Of course there are always exceptions. Collections or parts of them – perhaps in emergency situations – can be sold. The contents of archives can be put on the market after political transformation (one thinks of 1989, when e.g. large parts of the GDR’s archives relating to cultural policy appeared on the market). When a religion begins to fade into history, many once holy cult objects are ‘released’ and newly encoded – as works of art, monuments, rubbish, raw materials –whereby they are temporarily or permanently reintroduced to circulation or musealised.⁵ Many personal-sacred objects lose their taboo character once

4 *Summa Theologiae*. Secunda secundae Summae theologiae a questione LVII ad quaestionem CXXII. Rome 1897, 197 (qu. 80). (Cited in Godelier 1999, 198.)

5 An example of this is the material culture of Ancient Greece and Rome: in Christianity’s new value system, ‘pagan’ monuments and artefacts became worthless, they decayed, were ruined, were filled with rubbish. Marble statues were rejected as idols, downgraded to raw materials and burned to make bricks. A fundamental change in the hierarchies of cultural value within

their owner has died. It is not important for Godelier's thesis whether it is *always the same* group of objects that are 'forever' inalienable, but that there are objects which must be withdrawn from circulation *at all*. The argument against this – equally fundamental – is that potentially any object can become a gift or a commodity. However, when inalienable things with a fetishistic character are reintegrated into the trade cycle, it is never through normalised market or gift mechanisms, but through raids, wars, catastrophes, crime or, as already mentioned, large-scale revolutions in cultural worldviews and hierarchies of value. These are 'events' that invalidate or partly negate the symbolic order valid at the time so that objects from the 'sacred stock' of a culture or a person can once again acquire trade value. This thesis therefore states that two opposing universalisms must exist *at the same time* and that they are therefore *complementary*: it is equally a feature of culture that anything and everything (even people, for example in the trade in women or slaves⁶) can become objects in the circulation of commodities or gifts and vice versa: the reason anything can become a commodity or gift is precisely because some things cannot be sold or given as a gift or it is prohibited to do so. Is there a link between these two antagonistic principles? What is the link? Why is it so mysterious? How is it connected to fetishism? We will make our way toward possible answers by detour, namely the question: what do inalienable things have in common?

Christianity was necessary so that relics, manuscripts, engraved gemstones, sarcophagi, statues, temples, etc. could begin a new career. Michael Thompson's thesis that the transformation of things into rubbish is necessary for them to embark on a second career of value fits perfectly here. In the process, objects radically change their status: cult images mutate into works of art, worthless manuscripts become extremely important conveyers of cultural inheritance, ruined temples become protected sites visited by tourists, archaeologists and lovers, worthless coins become highly prized collectors' items, sarcophagi become famous museum pieces. New elites of experts, archivists, archaeologists, philologists and historians form around the remains of extant, or at least fragments of, 'antiquities', out of which the modern sciences are created: the sciences are thus essentially institutions for the ennoblement of rubbish. They produce frames of value and discourse, within which the previously worthless ancient objects become the centre of an historical confirmation of later cultures' sense of their own identity. The antique objects are both fed back into the circulation of commodities, insofar as they experience unforeseen jumps in value as traded objects, and are re-sacralised and auratised under new conditions using methods of fetishising immobilisation – in the beginning in collections, later in museums. Antique statues in particular became the centre of the modern religion of art; the temples became quasi-religious sites of pilgrimage for history-worshipping travellers. The history of depictions of the gods is paradigmatic: from a religious cult image (presence of the deity) via rubbish (anti-idolatry) to an aesthetic cult object (the fetishised ideal of art).

⁶ Favours, banquets, services, children, dances and festivities can also be exchanged (cf. Mauss 2002, 7).

They have always been or were at some point (*in illo tempore*) taken out of the circulation of commodities. They are then immobilised, resisting time and its tragic flow. They concentrate and conserve time. For this reason alone they are beneficial. As things they always occupy a place, but this place is transformed by their presence: wherever they are becomes a treasure trove, a holy place, a place of riches, a hiding place, a *secretum*, a domestic enclave. They therefore create constancy, both spatially and temporally, and embody value. This value cannot in fact be determined relative to other values by the culture or person in question; it cannot be paid for, rather it is incomparable and therefore absolute. These kinds of relationless values do not just function economically, but also symbolically. Being symbolic and working symbolically means being dysfunctional (things have no instrumental-rational use value) and non-economic (they have no exchange value). Priceless paintings, holy objects or memorial objects belong to the very 'substance' of a city, an owner, a culture; they form their thingly, symbolic core of identity. It should be noted, however, that they are not just symbols; it would be wrong to view sacred or museal objects only as semi-otic ensembles with a high level of recognition. They are that too; but what is centrally important is that they 1. are thingly, 2. are embedded in specific places (museums, churches, private collections, etc.), which make them valuable as ceremonial exhibition pieces, whereby they 3. become the centre of a radiating auratic glow, which makes them 4. objects that are exceptionally valued, venerated or worshipped. It is much more freely admitted that this is the case in religious cultures than the fact that it is no different in capitalist societies. For capitalist societies are, according to their own understanding of themselves, characterised precisely by the fact that 'substance' has been replaced with 'function', the sacred with the profane, unique auratic things by mass-produced products. However, I am arguing that spheres of substance, of the sacred, of the aura must be created in capitalism too, so that the principle of the commodity and with it desubstantialisation, profanisation and de-auratisation can acquire the excessiveness that typically characterises modernity. *Nothing has any 'substance' in the capitalist commodity market because some things are nothing but substance.* One could call this the paradoxical condition of the capitalist economy, one which capitalism shares with the trade and gift economies of so-called tribal culture and premodern economies.

There is, according to this argument, a 'profound' connection between the increase in consumption, the decrease of things' lifespan and the increase in rubbish, in other words between the rapid growth in the speed of circulation of things on the one hand, and the deterritorialisation, conservation and sacralisation of things on the other. But why is this the case? Is it possible that the speed with which everything is made a commodity, circulated and then worn

out engenders: fear? Or is it the other way around: is it only the holding onto and immobilisation of select things in a zone of the inalienable that enables uninhibited circulation in the first place? Are these objects made sacred, these silent breeders of significance, supposed to protect us from some kind of painful disappointment? Do they satisfy our secret desire for immortality? Are they a form of apotropaic magic against injuries that we receive in the rapid turnaround of the circulation of commodities? Are they sedatives against anger, desperation, depression, which secretly also fulfil those who ride the waves of the market?

In the complementarity of circulation and inalienability lies one of the biggest riddles not just of the modern economy. This riddle is linked to fetishism. However, it is different to the secret of commodity fetishism as Marx investigates it. For we must distinguish between fetishism that works as a drive for the circulation of commodities by giving the commodity-things the sheen of added value, boosting consumption and implanting desires in it. We will examine this in more detail later (see pp. 262–279 of this book). The other type of fetishism, the one we are concerned with here, is prior to the circulation of commodities. It is the mechanism whereby things are abstracted out of circulation or prevented from entering it. In that sense, it produces the ‘outside’ as opposed to the ‘inside’ of circulation. It is a fetishism that makes certain things into impossible, completely unique things, which must be withheld so that ‘we’ can have a persona on the stage of the traffic in goods at all. The type of fetishism that creates this ‘outside’ is transcendental in relation to the circulation of commodities and therefore also to commodity fetishism. It is the condition of their existence.

This ‘outside’ should not be understood as an economic reserve, even if in older economies, for example, the relationship between the gold reserve and circulating money looks similar to the relationship between what we call outside and inside (Godelier 1999, 27f.). If there are no contingency reserves, circulation is not stable. But this is simply an internal economic mechanism. It serves to control, regulate and make continuous the flow of trade activity. This kind of ‘reserve’ can be liquidated at any time. The ‘outside’ created by the fetishisation of certain things on the other hand, cannot be liquidated ‘for any price’, because circulation as such would then collapse. This can however happen in wars or catastrophes, in which people or collectives are completely exposed, so that they not only forfeit their inalienable things, but with them also their identity and their ability to act. In a situation like this, being embedded in space and time collapses into the chain of ancestors and the depths of history, and finally, the horizon of expectation for the future also disappears. When there is no ‘other’ to circulation anymore, circulation itself collapses.

The kind of fetishism we are talking about here could be called transcendental economic fetishism. It ensures that there are zones, spheres, places, ‘stock-

piles', in which things embody an invincibility that allows us to 'gamble' with our selves and our remaining values. Fetishes of the first order play the helpful other. They are the good objects in whose protection we place ourselves. Nonetheless, it is clear that no grand art collection, no crown jewels, no collection of relics, no holy instrument of cult, no weird or wonderful collection of any kind, no talisman, no closely guarded memento, no matter how 'outside' they are, can protect us from a fall from grace into namelessness, from downfall and (social) death. And yet without these things, which through all kinds of rites are given an almost hyperreal ontological status that differentiates them from all other things – without them, the gift, trade and therefore the circulation of things would not be possible. This 'outside' of trade, which is what gives things their mobility and is an absolute necessity for social and economic development, contains more "theological quirks" than those that Marx investigates under the heading of commodity fetishism. And if they are not theological quirks, then they are at least, as we will see with Freud and his successors, metapsychological ones.

What is certain is that immobilised, inalienable things cannot disappoint. They are. They remain. They show themselves. They show us – we, who either directly (as their owners) or indirectly (as museum or temple visitors e.g.) count them as our as 'assets' – that we belong to existence. We are not made of ourselves. Perhaps this is our deepest anthropological humiliation: that we can only be sure of our existence through the medium of things. Yet this precarious belonging to existence becomes even more insecure when we ourselves become part of the traffic in commodities. We are no longer unique, but a series. The immobilised things, however, are there, they are beautiful, they are deeply moving, they have an inexplicable, inestimable value. They have mystery, which consists of nothing other than the resistance with which they withdraw from circulation. This 'strength' makes them special, singular. They anchor us in the depths of time. Historical collections especially have the mythical function of anchoring a collective group in time, a time that comes and goes, but which knows no permanence itself. A time that carries us with it, ages us, kills us. Things that we buy are immediately consumed. If they are valuable, like a car, we actually feel how our happiness, enthusiasm, expectations and our pride fades away with the disappearing radiance of the commodity as its value melts away. The moment when we accept fresh things into our environs and they begin to embody us, or vice versa: we incorporate ourselves into them, they begin to age and become worthless. Because there a part of us is in them, their constant fading reminds us of our own death. Having our grandmother's Biedermeier chair, which she inherited from her own grandmother, links us to the genealogy of our background, even though we only own the chair because our grandmother died. Such things carry something beyond time and beyond

death. Because the dead person – in our culture – cannot take his possessions with him, his “magical dower”* (Mauss 2002, 56) has the chance to reach us and to continue to carry the traces of the dead – thus linking our life to the chain of ancestors *in illo tempore*. We belong to this chain. It does not have to be a chair; a collection of stamps is just as good, or a football star’s jersey that I caught when he threw it into the crowd, the dried flowers from a bunch given to me by a lover who is long dead, the ring on my finger that I would never give up to anyone, a broken metal comb from the ground in Auschwitz, a lock of hair from a one-year-old child who is now studying far away, an icon from Santiago di Compostella, a shell from Tahiti.

These are not floating signifiers, “[inherently] devoid of meaning and thus susceptible of receiving any meaning at all, their sole function is to fill a gap between signifier and signified”, as Lévi-Strauss (1987, 55–56) remarks critically of Mauss. Rather they are, as Godelier correctly emphasises, “signifiers full of signification”, the “*visible synthesis* of everything a society wants to present *and* to conceal concerning itself” (1999, 174). From a rhetorical perspective they are ‘real symbols’, from a psychological one: ego-things or, as Godelier aptly calls them: “person-things” (ibid., 169). We will call these things, which by their very nature cannot be given away, exchanged or commodified without the threat of the ego or a collective self being lost, fetishes of the first order. They are the historical and systematic basis of commodity fetishism.

We need them, because unlike the members of the tribal cultures that Marcel Mauss studied, we can no longer believe that the things that are sacred to us possess their own life force, which continues to make its effects felt after they have been given away: as though they had some kind of natural will (the *mana* or *hau*) to go back to where they came from: back to us.⁷ If this were the case – Lévi-Strauss believes that Mauss let himself be fooled by his indigenous sources regarding magical *mana* (1989, 47f.)⁸ – then we could easily give away or sell everything we own without losing ourselves. But this is a contradiction in Mauss

* The German term is ‘Leib-Gedinge’, which can also be more literally translated as ‘body-things’.

⁷ One must not forget the fact that this view is close to the Aristotelian theory of movement, which was dominant in Europe until at least around 1600: all things strive ‘by their own nature’ (*kata physin*) to return to their place of origin; they must be made (*para physin*) to move away from it by force. It is therefore ‘natural’ – later it will be called ‘natural magic’ – that things, after having gone through the cycle of gifts or exchange, return to the place they came from ‘of their own accord’. Mauss calls this ‘natural tendency’ *mana* or *hau*, in the Aristotelian tradition it is called the *virtus* of things. Cf. Mauss 2002, 13–16.

⁸ Lévi-Strauss believes the magic that makes valuable objects return to their owners is a “subjective illusion of ethnographers, and sometimes also of indigenous people” (1987, 49).

himself. For why would there have to be inalienable things if they were always certain to return by magic? If things are guarded and hoarded in secret ways like fetishes, then it proves that there is in fact no 'natural' guarantee for the return of circulating things. That is why we need intimate things that never enter the cycle, in order to protect the self. All things that fulfil this function are fetishes of the first order.

These things are there, unspoken, at times forgotten, safely stored nearby, without us needing to take note of them: they are the primary links to this world and the beyond of the past (the origin, where we come from). Just as it is almost impossible to imagine human beings who do not call some special, de-territorialised things, though they may be insignificant, their own, so it is also impossible to imagine a culture that does not invent places where they can gather the things that provide collective cohesion, whether they be temples or churches, museums or archives. These places are beyond trade, reproduction through work and material metabolism.

It is only because these places and immobile things exist that I can dare to buy a car or give someone a present. Yet as a BMW driver, I belong to the class of BMW drivers (which is telling enough for analysts of social distinctions like Pierre Bourdieu). This may be satisfying as long as the car is new and one can afford to lose a lot of money with it day by day. This is how fetishism of the second order works, which is subject to laws of value loss. It goes without saying that the beautiful new car is an ego-prosthesis and occasionally even an ego-substitute. These fetishes' flaw is their instability. Their narcissistic value wears out and the ego, which wants to hold onto itself, must extract itself from the aging thing again, in order to prevent itself from aging with the thing. Once the car is old, it no longer provides any extra status or identity support. A new car has to be bought; and so the circulation of commodities continues. Fetishised commodities must acquire the sheen of fetishism of the first order, because it is only then that the commodities can fulfil the promise of being "person-things". The latter are also the *figurae* of commodities. But the thing's loss of value as a commodity also erodes its fetish value. It ceases to have an effect; the narcissistic charade falls apart. That is why fetishes of the first order must exist.

Take the Biedermeier chair, which cost nothing because it was inherited, or cost very little because you found it at a flea market thirty years ago and it has been a 'faithful companion' ever since. It is close to the ego, it has become an intimate thing. It embodies the ego, just as vice versa the ego has reified itself in it. If the BMW were thirty years old, in other words rubbish in Thompson's sense, but had been kept in good shape with a bit of investment and was now a rarity, then it could begin a new career of value, economically and cathetical-

ly. It would then become a fetish of the first order. A carefully maintained, looked-after thing, to which devotion and love is due, on which somehow the stability of the ego is dependent, a thing that requires sacrifices (devotion, maintenance, investment), kept under protective covers in its own home and only taken out for a drive occasionally: a ritual more than a prosaic journey, a celebration of the ego.

Fetishes like the lock of hair or the football jersey, works of art in the museum and relics of memory, the vintage BMW or the Biedermeier chair are all very similar. Because they are not subject to commodity exchange and the logic of functional use, they can work as resonating bodies of our expectations and desires, they can become the accessories of the ego, they can conserve time and provide guarantees against decay: through their authenticity, their originality, their uniqueness. They are unique in a world of series and copies. The rationale of commodity equivalence, according to which the most different of things can be exchanged for each other, no longer applies to them. The unique thing is incomparable, incommensurable, relationless. It has become a symbolic thing – beyond trade, the gift and the commodity. Although anything can become a commodity and everything might once have been a commodity, the moment when a thing is given the status of inalienability – in a collection, in a museum, in a church, as a private possession – its ontological structure transubstantiates. It is no longer a commodity, no longer a useful thing, it is – beyond the religious sense – sacred. The owner might not believe in God, but he believes in his incomparable object, the household god. Fetishes and inalienable things are the Penates of modernity; no matter where they are – in a glass cabinet in an apartment or in the halls of a museum.

In this sense, things that are withheld are also highly individualised. They have the traits that we worry about having ourselves: are we individuals at all, incomparable, valuable, valued subjects? Things taken out of the traffic in commodities demonstrate why we have a justifiable doubt regarding ourselves: without question, they naturally radiate the aura of the precious and indivisible. Are these things perhaps more individual than ourselves? One way or the other, they are counterphobic reactions to the experience that human beings are not only consumers, but have themselves become commodities, functional components in organisations and systems that they have no control over, faceless creatures in an unsubstantial society, which turns over its commodities as quickly as the human beings of which they consist. In that sense, these eminent things, charged with energies and radiance, are a necessary and *therefore* inalienable support system for our own individuality. A person can only be an individual (indivisible) if he or she could be as unquestionably identical as the *inalienable* things are to us. For it is precisely the modern age which has taught us that

as individuals we should constantly view ourselves as commodified, reified, used, feel used up. From Schiller and Hegel to Marx and Lukács, Heidegger and Adorno thinkers have used the ideas of alienation and reification, and been concerned with reclaiming authenticity or the ‘real truth’. But beneath this movement of the spirit through its forms of alienation, there is another current: its goal is not to rescue itself from reification, but in fact to search out this kind of reification, whereby the things in which we are externalised give us back our self, strengthened, stable, radiant. If the spirit is fetishised in one camp, in the other the things ‘outside’ are. Both belong to the imaginary of modernity. Things that are sacred to us are meant to protect us from becoming things of the second order, whose fate is nothing but their usability and externality, while sacred things demonstrate the same essential structure and indivisible dignity that we ourselves long for. And this is the very same thing, according to the other argument, that the spirit is supposed to provide.

4 The discovery of commodity fetishism in Karl Marx

4.1 Mystifications of criticism?

At the beginning of the film *Metropolis* (1925/1926) by Fritz Lang (1890 – 1976), the protagonist sees a gigantic machine in the underground industrial factories, in which, faithfully following Marx, the workers toil in a back-breaking rhythm as mere “appendages of the machine”. As the protagonist watches, the technical machinery transforms into a vision in which the grimace of a superhuman demon gradually emerges from the ever more terrifying metal form, which then swallows the workers.⁹ This negative side of capitalism, which as a technical-medial spell sucks in and destroys masses of workers as elements of itself, as living feed for the generation of unimaginable luxury for the leisure class that live above ground – this negativity is like the icon of a gruesome, archaic idol, a projection of the fear, servitude and suffering of the human. Maria, the

⁹ This corresponds to Marx’s statement: “Capital [...] pumps out surplus labour from the worker.” (1991 vol. 3, 959) The metaphor of the pump, a “perennial pumping-machine” (ibid., 960) for the profit-generating machinery of production is frequently used by Marx: Fritz Lang gave it an image. [Where an English translation is not available,] references to Marx are abbreviated as: MEW + volume number = standard edition, published by the Institute for Marxism-Leninism at the Central Committee of the SED, Berlin 1962ff. MEGA + division + volume number = the Marx and Engels complete works, published by the International Marx Engels Foundation. Berlin 1991ff.

android, corresponds to this idol. She is a deceptive duplication of the human female protagonist, an angel of empathy with the masses forced into slavery. The double, the android, becomes the fetishised cult object that mesmerises the workers and is worshipped by them, giving them even more certain false hope for liberation and channelling it into maintaining the stability of the production and social systems. This double image of a disguised evil demon and a visible idol promising happiness reproduces the double structure of *tremendum* and *fascinans*, which not long before (1917) Rudolf Otto (1958) had identified as the ambivalent pattern of primal religious experience, especially of the sacred. Fritz Lang thus uses patterns of archaic forms of religion as the foundation for his filmic dystopia of modern capitalism: in such a way that it seems the magic spell of ancient history is repeating itself in capitalist society. Demonic possession, idolatry and the worship of idols, archaic fear and the submissive surrender to higher powers, cultification and ritual sacrifice all form the deep structure of class antagonism and capitalist production in the film. Modern society is a machine driven by elementary religious energies.

Émile Zola had already written about the reverse of production, consumption, in his 1883 novel *Au Bonheur des Dames*. He describes the thrumming attraction of the department store, which in the eyes of the consumers becomes a living machine:

Watching, Denise had the impression of a machine working at high pressure, its thunderous power extending even into the displays. [...] People were looking at them, women who had stopped and were pressing one another against the panes, a whole crowd brutalised by greed. And, in this passion sweeping along the street, the clothing materials came to life: lace shivered, fell back and hid the depths of the shop behind a disturbing veil of mystery; even the lengths of cloth, thick, square-cut, exhaled tempting breaths, while the coats on the dummies threw out their chests, endowing them with souls, and the great velvet overcoat swelled, warm and supple, as though across living shoulders with a beating breast and swaying hips. But if the building exuded the warmth of a factory, it was chiefly because of the commerce inside it and the jostling around the counters that one could sense behind its walls. Here, there was the continuous purring of a machine at work, the customers shovelled in, heaped in front of the displays and dazzled by the goods, before being hurled against the cash desks. And it was all organised and regulated with mechanical precision, a whole nation of women caught up in the power and logic of the turning cogs. (Zola 1883/1983, 16)

It was Marx who delivered the keywords for this kind of metaphorical, but also religious, mythological and machine imagery, and who – starting out from a critique of religion inspired by Feuerbach – by examining the rational forms of modern society discovered fetish in its hidden depths. The critique of political economy will remain dominated by this gesture of revealing some kind of reli-

gious spell: as late as in *Capital* (written from 1850, published 1867–1962 in German), Marx is concerned with tearing off the masks that hide the demons of capital, with the disenchantment of fetishes, the uncovering of idols, the disclosure of superstition, the exposure of totemic cults, and not those performed by savage cultures in prehistoric times, but those that supposedly characterise today's modern capitalism. The pathos of truth in Marx remains the pathos of the critic of religion unmasking the truth. Because fetishism is no longer a primitive form of religion in Africa, but strikes at the heart of European modernity, the analysis of capital is forced to be more than just a positivist science in the sense of Auguste Comte. As a result of commodity fetishism, Marx sees himself faced with the “necessity of constructing reality against appearances”: “There is a rupture in capitalism between the way things *appear* and their *real* or *actual meanings*.” (Jhally 1987, 28 and 26) This rupture between ‘being’ and ‘appearance’ makes the gesture of uncovering the most important form of analysis, which therefore converges with criticism. This influences Marx so strongly that he portrays society as fetishistic to the very core. But could it be that this fetish character is in fact *produced* by the gesture that simultaneously *reveals* it? Do the pathos of criticism *and* the magic of the criticised perhaps reinforce each other in a ritual cycle? Does the emancipated consciousness display traits of the fetishism that it reveals? Is there therefore an *uncomfortable* link to the object, one which is in fact supposed to be eliminated and surpassed in the analysis? The fetishistic energy that dwells within criticised capitalism, or perhaps is only appended to it, leaves a lasting stamp on criticism, according to this thesis, with the result that fetishism, idolatry and the cultification of appearance in fact continues even more unabated in the opposing power of communism than before it had been magically cast into its opposite, capitalism. This strange power of attraction that the fetish concept has for precisely those that have reason to fear it will now be examined.

The aim is not to provide another exegesis of commodity fetishism in defence of some orthodoxy (cf. Iacono 1985a, 183–235; Fedi 2002, 281–296; Kohl 2003, 91–98). Neither is it about proving Marx's concept of fetish wrong – how can one disprove metaphors? The intention is much rather to work out the core of whatever made it a “lucky moment” in intellectual history when Marx introduced this resonant, theatrical and creative concept of fetishism into the analysis of capital. A lucky moment: by this I mean that something took place in a moment that had very much been prepared for, but which was still startling and unexpected; furthermore, that a kind of radical shift occurred in time, separating it into before and afterwards. This turn can be characterised by the fact that *after* this fusion of the analysis of capital and the metaphor of fetish, we can probably never speak about the process of modernisation and ra-

tionalisation again without taking account of the forms of irrationality also produced within it. It is this aspect that creates a parallel between the passages about commodity fetishism with regard to the analysis of society and another founding father of modernity, namely Sigmund Freud, and his discovery of the deep structures of the subject. Both processes are linked to ethnology in the sense that Marx's fetish concept and Freudian psychoanalysis can also be viewed as stages in the discovery of the alien in our own culture. It will become apparent that it is no coincidence that the overlaps between the theory of capital, psychoanalysis and ethnology developed around an originally religious concept, fetishism. I am therefore not interested in proving Marx wrong, or vice versa, rescuing him. Instead I am concerned with the fruitfulness of that "lucky moment" when several systematically separated levels fused like a flash of inspiration, perhaps enabling us to better understand the reality in which we live. This bolt of lightening, which took the form of the famous chapter I.4 of the first volume of *Capital*, has a prehistory, however, which I will examine first of all.¹⁰

4.2 The slow discovery of fetishism in Marx

We have already seen that the concept of fetishism had found its way into the European languages through ethnographic surveys, philosophy and literature long before Marx. We find the first traces of it in Marx in 1842. During his time in Bonn, in connection with a joint publication with Bruno Bauer about Hegel's philosophy of religion already planned in 1841, but then abandoned, he was working extensively on Christian art and religious studies scholarship. This resulted in two other, also abandoned and not extant projects: "On Christian Art" and "On Religion and Art with Special Reference to Christian Art" (MECW vol. 1, 385). For this he created a comprehensive excerpt notebook entitled *Bonn 1842* (MEGA IV, vol. I.1, 289–376), in which the genesis of his concept of fetishism can be retraced. There was a concentrated phase of study between

10 In no way do we follow Derrida's book about the *Specters of Marx* (1994), which very rightly emphasises that it is once again necessary to read Marx, but at the same time develops an interpretation that ends in a "Marxian spectrology" (219): as though Marx's main efforts were developing a theory in which the spectral in reality acquires a sort of transcendental status, which Marx wants to critically destroy, but which Derrida would like to deconstruct 'spectropoetically', which he does in such a way that an irresolvable paradox between the spectral and the real character of the commodity (and at the same time also the world) is the result. In concrete terms, the book is as sprawling and unproductive as it is astute and imaginative, and Derrida avoids examining the problem in closer detail, which would be a very lengthy undertaking.

April and June 1842, during which Marx read a series of works on art history and the history of religion. This is when he first encountered fetishism, but he also picked up on the connection between fetishism and Christian relic art. Marx probably first read *Ideen zur Kunst-Mythologie* [Ideas on Art Mythology] by the head inspector of the museums of antiquity in Dresden, Karl August Böttiger (Leipzig 1826). In Böttiger he would have been able to find a reference to Charles de Brosses' book *Ueber den Dienst der Fetischgötter oder Vergleichung der alten Religion Egyptens mit der heutigen Religion Nigritens* [On the Worship of Fetish Gods, or a Comparison of the Ancient Religion of Egypt with the Modern Religion of the Nigrites] (French 1760; German 1785). However, Böttiger also refers to the Göttingen professor Christoph Meiners' *Allgemeine kritische Geschichte der Religionen* [General Critical History of the Religions] (Hannover 1806/1807) and to the popular book *De la religion, considérée dans sa source, ses formes et ses développements* (Paris 1826–1831) by the writer Benjamin Constant. Meiners and Constant both make frequent use of de Brosses' work. Both are also quoted in Marx's notebook, along with de Brosses. However, in his excerpts from Meiners, Marx leaves out precisely the parts about fetishism that are more or less taken verbatim from de Brosses (MEGA IV, vol. I.2, 828). Then in his de Brosses excerpts, he marks the passage that recounts the indigenous Cubans' opinion that the gold the Spaniards were so mad for was a fetish.

"The savages of Cuba regarded gold as a fetish of the Spaniards. They celebrated a feast in its honour, sang in a circle around it, and then threw it into the sea."¹¹ In this way they believed they would be rid of the Spanish along with the gold. Marx also uses this exquisite find in his essay on the "Debates on the Law on Thefts of Wood" (*Rheinische Zeitung*, 3rd of November 1842).¹² Already in this first encounter with the fetish concept, for Marx it is the Europeans who are the real fetishists. This 'Europeanising' of fetishism is the first clue that for Marx fetishism was not interesting as a phenomenon that belonged to foreign cultures, but as a polemic tool for attacking contemporary capitalist societies.

Earlier, on the 10th of May 1842, also in the *Rheinische Zeitung*, Marx wrote publicly about fetishism for the first time, in a polemic article against restrictions

11 MEGA IV, vol. I.1, 322 = de Brosses 1785, 36f. – Masahide Ishizuka notes that de Brosses got this anecdote from Herrera: *Historia general de las Indias Occidentales* (1601–1615), who in turn had it from Las Casas: *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies* (1583) (Ishizuka 1995, 53). – The anecdote is also retold by Tylor in Herrera's version (1871, vol. 2, 141f.). However, in Tylor's opinion the story is too good to be true. – Cf. Marquardsen 1983, 21ff.

12 MECW vol. 1, 224–263, here 263. His point is that the "savages of Cuba" would have "regarded wood as the Rhinelanders' fetish".

on the freedom of the press.¹³ Not long after, Karl Heinrich Hermes (Marx does not hesitate to use his last name to mock him) indirectly calls for the censorship of Left Hegelians in the name of the Christian religion, which must form the “foundation of the state”, in the right-wing *Kölnische Zeitung*. Marx immediately takes up the glove (on the 10th of July 1842) in the *Rheinische Zeitung*. In order to strengthen his argument for the civilising effects of religion, according to Marx Hermes asserts that fetishism, even its “crudest form”, did “to some extent raise man above his sensuous desires”. Marx retorts: “‘Fetishism’ indeed! [...] Fetishism is so far from raising man above his sensuous desires that, on the contrary, it is ‘*the religion of sensuous desire*’. Fantasy arising from desire deceives the fetish-worshipper into believing that an ‘inanimate object’ will give up its natural character in order to comply with his desires. Hence the crude desire of the fetish-worshipper *smashes* the fetish when it ceases to be its most obedient servant.” (MECW, vol. 1, 189) Here too, Marx is indirectly referring to de Brosses. With regard to commodity fetishism, it is interesting that Marx sees the fetish as a response to desires and discredits fetishism in general as a crude, archaic form with which human beings make things serviceable to them religiously and practically. This pejorative understanding will define the concept of commodity fetishism for many years to come.

In Benjamin Constant (1767–1830), Marx was able to identify a foundation for religious object relations in the emotions. This then becomes important for the cathexis of things and commodities. For Constant, fetishism is “the religious service in a primitive state”, “religious feeling in its earliest form”, supported by idols and fetishes (Constant 1824, 302 and 304). In the bond to idols and fetishes, the first forms of contract, obligation (oaths, hospitality), “taboos” and therefore “a form of community” develop (ibid., 310–316). These are the first effects of a general law of morals anchored in feeling (which in Constant is the principle that controls the historical development of religion from its primitive to its most highly developed forms). “The savage’s fetish seems to us to be a trivial and ridiculous fantasy, and yet the savages are lucky to have the fetish for

13 MECW vol. 1, 147. The somewhat cryptic remark is as follows: “Of course, the province has the right, under prescribed conditions, to create these gods for itself, but as soon as they are created, it must, like a fetish worshipper, forget that these gods are its own handiwork”. What he means is: the provinces took advantage of the fact that it could elect itself assemblies of the estates (“gods”), which then amassed censorship privileges. Marx is trying to say that this process functions fetishistically: from thereon it is ‘forgotten’ that the state newspapers are ‘made’, ‘deployed’ (“gods of their own handiwork”) and not unquestionable authorities of a higher order (“gods”). This is the first evidence that political authorities can function like idols and fetishes in ‘primitive’ cultures.

their moral improvement, for their future education” (ibid., 318). All religions are rooted in the emotions (ibid., 5 ff.) and are first objectified in the fetish. That is why the natives worship objects, which for them have their own agency and are alive, mysterious and unknown. “For the savage everything is unknown. His religious feeling is applied to anything he encounters.” (ibid., 253 f.) “Surrounded in this way by powerful and active objects that have a constant influence on his fate, he worships those objects that have the most powerful effect on his imagination. Chance decides on this.” (ibid., 255)¹⁴ This arbitrariness in the connection to the object regularly underlined by Constant – again and again derided by ethnographers because one is cast under the spell of random things – is central for commodity fetishism: because commodity fetishism is not about the relationship to things, but to their appearance as commodities on the market, it requires a free-floating attraction to random, enchanting objects encountered by chance. Thus, in Constant and in Marx, the fetish is a medium for fulfilling the needs of human beings and manipulating them, insofar as the object “acts, as man himself would act” (ibid., 280 and 278). “The fetish is a self-serving and greedy creation, bound to a weaker and, like the fetish, self-serving creature. [...] The fetish demands payment for the protection it provides.” (ibid., 292) Here too we see a link between the projection of desires, religious salvation and economy (payment), like in Marx or Mauss. “The worship of fetishes” is the search for advantages and the satisfaction of desires in one. One cannot therefore own enough fetishes, even if that might be “many thousands” (ibid., 297 and 299).

Marx draws conclusions from this for his analysis of economy first of all on the level of hoarding treasure: “Nature no more produces money than it does bankers or a rate of exchange. But since in bourgeois production, wealth as a fetish must be crystallised in a particular substance, gold and silver are its appropriate embodiment. Gold and silver are not by nature money, but money consists by its nature of gold and silver.” (MECW 29, 387)

In *Capital*, Marx interprets the relationship between white culture and gold the same way that the “savages of Cuba” understand the Spanish addiction to gold, namely as fetishism: “Modern society, which already in its infancy had pulled Plutus by the hair of his head from the bowels of the earth, greets gold as its Holy Grail, as the glittering incarnation of its innermost principle of life.” (1991 vol. 1, 230) Worshipping gold as a fetish is historically the earliest

¹⁴ Also: “Now it is one animal, stone or tree and then another.” (Constant 1824, 265) – “Above the fetishes and physical deities that produce, invoke and destroy the needs of the moment, there floats an indeterminate, mysterious concept, which is not very useful for everyday life.” (ibid., 266–267)

form of hoarding: “The hoarder therefore sacrifices the lusts of his flesh to the fetish of gold.” (ibid., 231) Today it is said: “The almighty dollar, the object of universal adoration.” (Paul Samuelson)

At this point, we can therefore summarise: Marx’s star witness for the historical religious phenomena of fetishism is without doubt de Brosses. Clearly Willem Bosman’s book on Guinea (1704), which, as William Pietz (1988) has shown, became paradigmatic for the Enlightenment conception of Africa, no longer played any role for Marx, nor did it for the nineteenth century in general. De Brosses is the star witness of all portrayals of fetishism until around 1850. Furthermore: Marx made himself familiar with fetishism as part of his study of Christian and classical art (K.A. Böttiger, F.K. v. Rumohr, J.J. Grund), which is why in Marxian thinking it is permitted to make links between fetishism and the Christian cult of the image, but especially the cult of relics, as well as to idols of all kinds. By 1842, Marx had already turned fetishism into a political metaphor: the roots of his later incorporation of fetishism into the sphere of political economy are therefore in his time in Bonn. From Benjamin Constant, Marx seems to have taken the idea that fetishes originate directly from our needs, serve to fulfil them and therefore bind fetish-worshippers’ affective energies to them (MEGA IV, I.1, 342–367) – an idea that is still evident in *Capital*. Here too fetishism is a form – an alienated form – of emotional connection to an object of desire. This connection of individuals’ or collective groups’ desire to a fetish is a nineteenth-century discovery (previously there was no mention of this): it is no coincidence that the next step is Alfred Binet’s creation of “sexual fetishism” in 1887, whereby the concept’s third career begins via Freud – after its career in religious studies and ethnology, and then in Marxism and sociology.

4.3 From Marx’s early writings to *Capital*

“Religion,” writes Marx in 1844 in *Critique of Hegel’s ‘Philosophy of Right’*, “is, in fact, the self-consciousness and self-esteem of man who has either not yet gained himself or has lost himself again. [...] It is the fantastic realisation of the human being because the human being has attained no true reality.” (1970, 131) Religion is the symbolic form of man’s practical capabilities and *other* assets, namely wealth. Religion is a *fantastic* figure, because it represents the “natural powers” of human beings as non-human, as godly, alien and not as man’s own, moreover it represents them not only as external to man, but as superior. For the Left Hegelian philosophers of emancipation, the goal is to decode the phantasmagorical projections of human powers and relationships, and to

pull them back down from the heaven of symbols to the earth of social interaction: thereby making figures of self-alienation into figures of self-realisation.

What is interesting about the young Marx's approach is that he does not just describe religion as a symbolic form that *still* dominates and should be disenchanting, but as one that can *once again* become the dominant expression of modernity. Religion is therefore not only a symbolic form we have passed by in world history, but a permanent potentiality of consciousness. Thus, in *The Holy Family*, Marx can call Ludwig Feuerbach the "revealer" of the "true mystery" of religion, with which the critique of religious alienation becomes definitive (on this cf. Reichelt 1984). At the same time, however, it is also true that *modern* economic alienation inherits its bewitching power *from* past religious forms of self-alienation. Figures of religious mystification therefore *reappear* in a profane, functionally differentiated society of work, no longer in the heaven of symbols, but, which makes the whole thing more complicated, in the deep structures of production and commodity exchange itself.

One could say that *Marx views enlightened modern society as a covertly religious society, or indeed, turns it into one*. This is the door through which the fetish concept enters social analysis. At the same time, a double jump into another type of discourse takes place: namely from the *exegesis* of religious fetish via socio-economic *analysis* to the symbolic *interpretation* of society. The concept of fetish also acquires a new status in the process: it changes from a *descriptive term*, which describes the evident ritual forms of so-called primitive societies (as in Comte), into a *metaphor*, which polemically exposes the hidden deep structures of modern capitalism. The concept of religion is made profane and at the same time generalised by Marx for the purposes of a critique of society. However, this turns modern society into a religious monstrosity: capitalism inverts the sphere in which man externalises and realises himself into its opposite, so that the objectivity produced by man himself no longer appears to be his realisation, but becomes independent as a force against him and is his master rather than the other way around. These are the most important ideas from the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*.

From this point on, modern cultural criticism takes alienation and the abstraction of living conditions as its starting point, the "tragedy of culture" (Simmel 1911/1997). In 1907, Simmel formulates the frightening aspect of the object making itself independent from the subject, but still from the perspective of early gift and commodity exchange cultures: "It is as though the first awareness of the object as such produced a feeling of anxiety, as if a part of the self had become detached. This also explains the mythological and fetishistic interpretation of the object – an interpretation that, on the one hand, hypostasises this anxiety and makes it comprehensible to primitive man, and on the other hand

assuages it by humanising the object and thus reconciling it with man's subjectivity." (1900/2004, 95). According to Simmel, "sacred forms" are born out of this frightening aspect of the first commodity exchange in which the object goes its own way, as a kind of transcendental "supra-subjectivity", as a "peace treaty". In this magical context, objective thing relations must be embedded in commodity exchange so that they do not only appear as something threatening (ibid., 96 and 97). Marx generalises this situation and turns it into the theory of alienation, Lukács into the theory of reification (1923/1971).¹⁵

This structure is given the term fetishism by Marx. Only through fetishism does 'alienation' become *energetically* saturated and acquire its socially cohesive force, its *fascinans*. It is well known that Marx locates the cause for this in the conditions of production, in the division of labour, in private property, in commodity exchange and in the "visible god" (MECW vol. 3, 324)¹⁶ of money, which dominates all relationships and subjects them to its abstract logic. The young Marx had already presented his findings based on this as the four forms of alienation (*The German Ideology* 1845/1846): the alienation from work, the alienation from the product of the work, the alienation from fellow workers and the alienation from the self. This does not need to be explained in any more detail.¹⁷ However, if this alienation were clearly evident, then it would be experienced and known as such, and there would be no reason to cast off its yoke in order to realise a free society. No one willingly remains in an alienation they have become aware of. It is the *fetish* that first lends alienation its *tremendum* and *fascinans*, its simultaneously frightening and attractive power, its saturation with socially cohesive energy. That is why the *Critique of Political Economy*, which has a scientific agenda, must link itself to the critique of religion, that is why analysis and rhetoric must fuse and discourse must be charged with polemic energy, and that is why ultimately the "weapon of criticism" must join the "criticism of the weapon": the explosive power of the argu-

15 Maffesoli (1993), along with Simmel, criticises these kinds of approaches, which only view the "object" as significant in relation to the reification of the subject. For Maffesoli the object is also the condition of a relationship to the world, of community, of aesthetics.

16 This is a quote from Shakespeare about the power of money: "O thou sweet king-killer, and dear divorce / 'Twixt natural son and sire! thou bright defiler / Of Hymen's purest bed! thou valiant Mars! / Thou ever young, fresh, loved and delicate wooer / Whose blush doth thaw the consecrated snow / That lies on Dian's lap! Thou *visible God!* / That solder'st *close impossibilities*, / And makest them kiss! That speak'st with every tongue, / To every purpose! O thou touch of hearts! / Think, thy slave man rebels, and by thy virtue / Set them into confounding odds, that beasts / May have the world in empire!" (*Timon of Athens*, act IV, scene 4; cited in MECW vol. 3, 324)

17 Cf. the classic studies by Popitz 1968 and Israel 1971.

ment must be joined by the explosive power of revolutionary violence, which tears the bewitching power of fetishism to shreds. Karl Korsch therefore rightly calls the chapter on fetish “the kernel of the Marxian critique of political economy” (1971, 101). Marx’s succinct formulation of it is as follows:

The mysterious character of the commodity-form therefore consists simply in the fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men’s own labour as objective characteristics of the products labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things. Hence it also reflects the social relation of the producers to the sum total of labour as a social relation, existing between objects. (1991 vol. 1, 164–165)

This statement is made in the famous section “The Fetishism of the Commodity and Its Secret” in the first volume of *Capital* (1867).

4.4 The fetishism of the commodity and its secret

In his deployment of the term ‘fetish’, Marx makes use of its semantic fluctuations already inscribed in its origins in the Portuguese *feitiço* and the Latin *factitius*, and their double sense of ‘magical’ and ‘artificially manufactured’. Products produced by society – *factitii* – become ‘fetishes’ because the artificial and therefore profane in them is made to disappear. They have the appearance of self-sufficiency, something nature-like and non-human, in which neither the individual nor society can recognise itself. *The power invested in things is reflected back as the power of things*. Things acquire the physiognomy of a fetish as a result of the capitalist mode of production and commodity exchange, by being transformed from products into commodities, making their use value disappear in their exchange value. They are severed from people and acquire their own form of mobility, which inserts itself as an impenetrable layer between the subject and whatever he or she requires to live.¹⁸ “The movement through which this process has been mediated vanishes in its own result, leaving no trace behind.” (1991 vol. 1, 187)¹⁹ The commodity thus becomes, as Georg Simmel demonstrates

¹⁸ Malinowski, Mauss and Godelier have shown that this is similarly the case for the proto-economies of tribal cultures (cf. chapter 3.2 of this book).

¹⁹ The quote in context: “What appears to happen is not that a particular commodity becomes money because all other commodities express their values in it, but, on the contrary, that all other commodities universally express their values in a particular commodity because it is money. The movement through which this process has been mediated vanishes in its own result, leaving no trace behind. Without any initiative on their part, the commodities find their own value-configuration ready to hand, in the form of a physical commodity existing outside but also

with jewellery (1908/1992, 414–421), the centre of a radiance that casts a spell on the subject so that he no longer recognises the signature of his own activity in the commodity. The fetish gives the product a mask of strangeness, which determines its magic and its aura as a commodity (Stallybrass 1998).

Marx thus makes some revealing changes to the idea of African fetish customs. In the cults described by de Brosses, profane things, as Marx knew, could in fact only become fetishes through ritual actions, i.e. the divine energy had to be implanted in them. When they no longer worked, the fetishes were destroyed or discarded, which travellers from Catholic countries, who were accustomed to the eternal presence of the divine in relics, found surprising or even shocking. Sometimes it was even possible to ritually remove the godly energy from the fetishes. The fetishes were always transitory, bound to a place and dependent on the manipulation of the ‘fetish worshipper’ – only then did they acquire their powers. Marx on the other hand elevates the fetish to a systemic mechanism. He universalises its power by completely divorcing it from the fetishist – who in fact magically extended his power through the fetish and was not, as in Marx, deprived of it.

Of course Marx was also familiar with this kind of fetish worship: he represents it as money, which for him is a universal fetish. Money is the universal medium of social intercourse and trade (at the same time a meta-fetish that *transforms* things into commodities and commodities into fetishes). For the money-owner, as he already writes in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, money becomes a “visible god”, a “divine power”, the scope of which can determine the entire breadth of the ego, a magical multiplication of the finiteness of the subject, which is why the subject worships money like a fetish, like an idol.²⁰ In *Capital*, Marx thus adopts and cites Columbus’ magical vision, emblematic of the ideology of the early colonial ‘gold rush’: “Gold is a wonderful thing! Its owner is master of all he desires. Gold can even enable souls to enter Paradise.” (1991 vol. 1, 229) In the *Manuscripts of 1844*, he writes: “The extent of the power of money is the extent of my power.” (MECW vol. 3, 324) In *Capital*, he

alongside them. The physical object, gold or silver in its crude state, becomes, immediately on its emergence from the bowels of the earth, the direct incarnation of all human labour. Hence the magic of money. Men are henceforth related to each other in their social process of production in a purely atomistic way. Their own relations of production therefore assume a material shape which is independent of their control and their conscious individual action. This situation is manifested first by the fact that the products of men’s labour universally take on the form of commodities. The riddle of the money fetish is therefore the riddle of commodity fetish, now become visible and dazzling to our eyes.” (Marx 1991, vol. 1, 187)

²⁰ MECW vol. 3, 322–325, here 324 (cf. Marx, Karl: *Die Frühschriften*, ed. by Siegfried Landshut; Stuttgart 1968, 298–301), cf. also *Capital* vol. 1, 227 ff.

produces supporting evidence from Sophocles' *Antigone* and Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens*. He had already cited the latter in 1844 (MECW vol. 3, 324 f.) and added a passage from Goethe's *Faust I* (verses 1820–1827).²¹ Through money, he concludes, a “transformation of all human and natural properties into their contraries” takes place, which represents the “alienated ability of mankind”. Due to its universal mediating and transformative capabilities, money is “the truly creative power” (MECW vol. 3, 325). It makes the imaginary and the virtual real, and the real into a fiction of desires. This “transformative power” of money is the most significant mechanism of commodity fetishism.

This corresponds to the origin of money in the sacred, in sacrificial and ritual cults that can be observed in many cultures (see e.g. Géza Róheim, Karl Polanyi²²). Compared to the “unceasing turnover of money, in the function it performs of a *perpetuum mobile* of circulation” (1991 vol. 1, 227), because of its “natural form” as a precious metal, gold has two special functions: it is a monetary unit of measurement and the reserve of the commodity-gold cycle; and in hoarding it is “an end in itself”, the pure fetish of the hoarded, as a result of which the circulating money is “petrified”, in other words “immobilised” and therefore the “series of metamorphoses” of the commodity is interrupted (ibid., 227–228). According to Marx, this form of gold fetishism is a trait of older economies, where the gold taken out of circulation functions as a reserve, a natural counterweight to the sphere of circulation: the “metallic natural form” of gold is therefore fetish and idol and at the same time the “universal equivalent form of all other commodities” (ibid., 230). In the fetish chapter of *Capital*, the fetish indeed not only displays the circulating, transitory, polymorphous and polytheistic form of its African origins, but is also given the relic's immunity to time and the abstract and homogenous, to a certain extent monotheistic and Catholic, in other words, universal form of a system.

This is also why Marx dismisses a *semiotic* theory of the commodity equivalence of money and gold as the “kind of explanation in favour during the eighteenth century”:²³ this reduced money to a “mere symbol” and correspondingly

²¹ *Faust II* would have been more interesting for Marx, in which Goethe deals with the transition from the natural form of gold to the paper form of money (“paper ghosts of coins”, v. 6198) in a way not dissimilar to Marx's analyses in *Capital*, especially with regard to the relationship of the Earth's immobile precious metal treasures, gold reserves, metal money and paper signs (*Faust II*, Act I, esp. vs 4890–5064, 5987–6202; see also: Schlaffer 1981). On the Shakespeare quotes in Marx cf. Derrida 1994, who bases his entire book on them.

²² Cf. Róheim 1997, 152–245 and 227–245; Polanyi 1979, 346–369. See also Harsch 1995, 99 ff. – On the origins of money from the gift see: Mauss 2002, 42 ff., 57 ff.

²³ Marx is referring to de Forbonnais, Montesquieu, Le Trosne and Hegel, all of whom he references in *Capital* vol. 1, 185, note 11.

the commodity form becomes an “arbitrary product of human reflection”, in order “at least temporarily, to remove the appearance of strangeness from the mysterious shapes assumed by human relations whose origins they were unable to decipher.” (1991 vol. 1, 186) An exclusively semiotic theory of commodities and money fails to explain the “magic of money” (ibid., 187). Nonetheless, Marx’s theory of money is already very close to modern semiotics, especially the ideas of self-referentiality, normalisation and autopoiesis.

It is not gold that is a pure symbol for Marx, but money, especially paper money: “Paper money is a symbol of gold, a symbol of money.” (ibid., 225) “The commodity which functions as a measure of value and therefore also as the medium of circulation, either in its own body or through a representative, is money.” (ibid., 227) The explanation Marx provides for the replacement of its natural form by the semiosis of the money-sign is its increased fungibility in the C – M – C and the M – C – M circulation.²⁴ All it needs to do is “lead a symbolic existence”: “Its functional existence so to speak absorbs its material existence. Since it is a transiently objectified reflection of the prices of commodities, it serves only as a symbol of itself, and can therefore be replaced by another symbol.” (ibid., 226)

This semiotic abstraction from gold, whose fetishistic character is more easily identifiable, to paper money is what makes fetishism a “secret” in developed money societies in the first place. For Marx, money is the universal medium of circulation and the “form of appearance of the value of commodities” (1991 vol. 1, 184), through which everything communicates with everything else, i.e. it can be made relative to, measured against and therefore exchanged with everything else. The function of money is therefore “to represent [commodity] values as magnitudes of the same denomination, qualitatively equal, and quantitatively comparable” (ibid. 188). Commodity value is radically abstracted from the natural materiality of the value and the things – and that is what makes it so opaque. For what is ‘represented’ here and at the same time made to disappear in the representation is not only the material qualities of the things (their natural value, their use value) and the amount of labour invested in the manufacture of the artefacts (labour value), but also the relations between people that have formed during production and exchange (society). Things, like people (productive forces), circulate in the medium of money as mere commodity values, which are assigned their token of value, the price, by people.

²⁴ C – M – C means the transformation from (c)ommodity – (m)oney – (c)ommodity; M – C – M means the transformation from money into commodities into money typical of developed monetary systems: the commodity (which is already a transformed thing) is now merely an “objectified reflection”, a brief stopover in the far more important circulation of money.

The symbol of money is therefore a symbol that represents a value but which also makes the processes involved in generating the value invisible; it represents and conceals at the same time. It creates its own world of circulation (the traffic of commodities), which is almost completely disconnected from the material world of people and things, and instead only measures them against and exchanges them with each other as abstract commodity values. This increasingly abstract form of transformation is consistently described by Marx with the expression “metamorphosis” (1991 vol. 1, 198), a mythical expression that is supposed to illustrate the ‘amazing’ transformation of humans and things into commodities, commodities into other commodities, commodities into money, and money into mere value-symbol operations. “The universality of money is dynamic, insofar as it constantly increases the degree of its own abstraction, leaves all materiality behind and is always on the verge of passing into a form of pure notation.” (Blumenberg 2001, 177)

A hammer, a pair of trousers, a loaf of bread can by nature be passed from person to person. But this in fact does not happen. For every thing or product can only be mobilised by being transformed into something that by nature it is not. As something transformed in this way, as commodity value, it must also take a spectral journey through another world, in order to be able to complete the physical movement from person to person, from place to place. This spaceless journey through metamorphoses and medial mediation is the process from which fetishism is born. It is the absolute change of a thing’s form. A thing is objectified in the commodity value of a thing as itself, but only by disappearing as thing and being absorbed into the medium of money and being set in motion in the traffic of goods.²⁵ Thus “a very trivial thing [...] changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness”, and the commodity this produces is “abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties [quirks]” (1991 vol. 1, 163).

This was different in economies that had their general reference in gold and silver, for “immediately on [their] emergence from the bowels of the earth,” they are “the direct incarnation of all human labour” (ibid., 187). This ‘immediacy’ with which precious metals embody labour in archaic economies is not the same as the immediacy identified by de Brosses and Comte, in which anything at all can make the magical forces manifest in fetishism. In capitalism on the other hand, it is not clearly visible that the “fetishism which attaches itself to

²⁵ Karel Kosik (1976, 110 ff.) takes a nice approach when he reads the three volumes of *Capital* as an economic journey epic, in the sense that Marx is concerned with the “odyssey” of the commodity through the routes and stages of its circulation.

* Ben Fowkes translates “Mucken” as “niceties”, but “quirks” is a closer translation.

the products of labour” (ibid., 165) is the altered form of the interactions carried out between human beings. The things transformed into commodities do not speak (ibid.); instead they are articulated in the scale of equivalence, in the code of money. “The riddle of the money fetish is therefore the riddle of commodity fetish, now become visible and dazzling to our eyes.” (ibid., 187) A skirt is not the concrete product of the work of a particular tailor, but rather acts as a spectral but quantitatively precise value on the market. Commodity fetishism is the mechanism that gives this transformation the appearance of necessity, which places the commodity in an aura of self-sufficiency and which generates the sheen of wish-fulfilment by its performance on the market.

In contrast to the high level of arbitrariness in African fetishism, Marx reinforces this magical power of the commodity fetish wherever he can – including by using Christological and Eucharistic metaphors like “incarnation” and “transubstantiation” (1991 vol. 1, 187, 197, 203, 230), mythical formulas like “metamorphosis” or “hieroglyphic” (ibid., 198 ff., 167), superstitious phrases like “magic and necromancy” (ibid., 169) or qualitative jumps like the “leap taken by value from the body of the commodity into the body of the gold” (ibid., 200²⁶) to describe the commodity-money-commodity circulation. For this reason, the money form does not merely display the value of the commodity in the manner of conventional semiosis, but is the “reflection thrown upon” a product (ibid., 184) by commodity exchange. This is precisely what defines its “false semblance”, which is appended to commodities like a “social property inherent to its nature” (ibid., 187).

4.5 The fetishisation of fetishism in Marx

Along with money/gold fetishism and the fetishism of the circulation of commodities (C– M– C’; M– C– M’), in the third volume of *Capital* Marx develops another form of fetishism, namely that of “money that produces more money” or “interest-bearing capital”. It is the “most superficial and fetishised form” of the relations of capital (= M – M’, 1991 vol. 3, 515). Indeed, Marx mobilises his entire repertoire of rhetoric in order to stylise capital as a living, self-reproducing and self-propagating power: it is a mystical and mythical living energy. He does this so as to even more radically reveal the numinous as mere appearance. “Capital appears as a mysterious and self-creating source of interest – the source of its own increase.” In the pure form of “interest-bearing capital”, which

²⁶ Marx also calls this the “commodity’s *salto mortale*” (1991 vol. 1, 200).

is not even a reification, but instead the Pygmalion-like animation of dead aggregate into a living, self-reproducing, organic substance, Marx sees an “automatic fetish” that produces interest as naturally as a pear tree produces pears or as innately it grows (ibid., 516). In order to pointedly portray this strange superlative of fetishism, Marx pulls out all the rhetorical stops.

This “fetish character of capital”, its “pure fetish form”, the “representation of this capital fetish” demonstrate completely irreconcilable definitions, which are described in the following. The fetish is the pure form and the “original and general formula” – and therefore something ideal like the Platonic idea. Yet at the same time it is a “thing”, or inorganic matter. It is a something that “no longer bears any marks of its origin”, in other words, does not show any traces of the organic. It is an automaton, a machine, and a wondrous *perpetuum mobile*, a productive self-running machine that never loses any momentum – which Marx himself repudiates again later with his statement on the law of falling rates of profit (1991 vol. 3, 522). But then the fetish is an analogue of the organism again, at least of plants: reproductive, teleological, growing, that is, an autopoietic routine process. It is analogous to desire and to Eros: “The money’s body is now by love possessed”, Marx quotes from Goethe’s *Faust*,²⁷ as money, money is a “money generator” and thus fulfils the “the hoarder’s most fervent wish”. In the interest process, “the product of past labour” is even “pregnant in and of itself with a portion of present or future living surplus labour” and therefore represents the sexual union of the living and the dead. Money that begets money therefore behaves according to the scheme of an *élan vital*, but is nonetheless something dead; this is what defines its revenant quality, its zombie-like nature. It is a hybrid between a *factitius* – “pure automaton” (ibid., 523) – and a *secretum naturae generativae*: through “the inherent secret quality”, it “creates” surplus value.²⁸ It is a “Moloch” – a demonic machine, like in Fritz Lang.

27 Goethe: *Faust I*, vs 2132–2149. A strange allusion: it is from the bawdy song sung by the drunken guests in Auerbach’s tavern about a poisoned rat, whose terrified jumping about looked as though “its body were now by love possessed”. – If any sense can be interpreted into this quote, it would be: Marx interpreted the hyperactivity of interest-bearing capital as a sign of its death struggle. The pseudo-aliveness of capitalism only masks its death throes; although this fits with Marx’s conviction that capitalism would inevitably die out, it is nonetheless once again a naturalisation, i. e. the production of false appearance.

28 The formulation “an inherent secret quality” gives away an alchemical origin: it is the translation of *occultae qualitates*, which is what the alchemist attempts to use in order to create gold, the elixir, artificial life or to achieve immortality. By using these kinds of allusions, Marx indirectly declares capitalism to be a form of alchemy – thereby turning his analysis into kind of *philosophia occulta*. – Cf.: “Circulation becomes the great social retort into which everything is

It is clear that with these hybrid metaphors fluctuating between the living and the dead, Marx generates the “representation” and the “semblance” of the relations of capital in the first place. He explains this process by using examples from Luther, Richard Price, Adam Müller and others on compound interest, thus making others and not himself responsible for this conceptual sorcery on capital relations (ibid., 518–522). And it is precisely this process of the reversal and inversion of relations that he describes with the term “fetishism”. In Marx, ‘fetish’ is *the metaphor of the metaphors of capital*, its symbolic form par excellence. As Hans Blumenberg has argued (1960), one can describe ‘fetish’ in Marx as an absolute metaphor: unavoidable, not transferable to the conceptual, universal for at least one culture, self-referential and referring to nothing but itself. ‘Fetish’ is the metaphorical formula for the spellbinding and mysterious, impenetrable and all-absorbing appearance of capitalism that swings between naturalness and machinery, godliness and matter. One could also say: ‘fetish’ is the formula for the totality of all semiotic processes in which the process of capital articulates and represents itself. Fetishism works like the emperor’s new clothes: it forms a robe of signs with which the process of capital covers the naked materiality of the exploitative process of labour in order to function in reality and to be plausible in people’s minds. ‘Fetish’ is the formula of “substitution” [*quidproquo*] (1991 vol. 1, 148); it therefore corresponds to the rhetorical figure of the synecdoche, through which one thing is taken for another, transformed into another or can be substituted for another. Fetishism is the mechanism of a transformation of everything into something that is not this everything but at the same time is. The ‘fetish’ therefore becomes the formula for a universal metamorphosis whereby “the bewitched, distorted, and upside-down world” is created, “haunted by Monsieur le Capital and Madame la Terre, who are at the same time social characters and mere things” (1991 vol. 3, 966; 969). This is what is written at the very end of *Capital*, where Marx describes fetishism with the metaphors of the medieval topsy-turvy world, the carnival, and with the metaphysics of the *theatrum mundi* and ghost stories.²⁹

thrown, to come out again as the money crystal. Nothing is immune from this alchemy, the bones of the saints cannot withstand it [...].” (Marx 1991 vol. 1, 229) Elsewhere capital becomes an undead vampire: “Capital is dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks.” (ibid., 342)

²⁹ Maurice Godelier, who applies almost all the *loci classici* of fetishism to Marx, remains too stuck in Marxist orthodoxy to discover anything more in fetishism than the irrational and mystical in capitalism, which must be rationally revealed (Godelier 1972, 293–314). This also applies to his economic study (1973).

All these rhetorical formulae show that on the level of commodity/money fetishism, the critique of political economy turns into a semiological theory of the overall process of capitalist society, as William Pietz (1993) has rightly noted. One could also say: *Capital* should be reread with a focus on its rhetorics, as Thomas Keenan has proposed, even if he fails to do so himself, although Jean Baudrillard had already paved the way for him (Keenan 1993).³⁰ One can also definitely emphasise the theatrical and performative aspects of the capital process. Still, fetishism (and most certainly not capital) is not merely a rhetorical concept, neither can it be indiscriminately translated into a semiological theory, as was attempted in deconstructivism (Derrida 1994). If one understands fetishism as an absolute metaphor that provides the framework for the ‘rewriting’ of the totality of all processes in modern capitalism so that they appear ‘inverted’ – just as Büchner’s Lenz wishes to “walk on his head” or just as the carnivalisation of all things always makes things appear as the antipodes of themselves – then one can assert: insofar as signs are fetishising, they transform the reality of capitalism – that is the “mystery of the commodity”. Signs are not just the false appearance of reality which would reveal the truth if one could only destroy this layer of appearance. Rather, signs have occupied existence; the fetish occupies reality. Putting relations back on their feet, as Marx attempts to do, cannot therefore mean turning the inversion that takes place in fetishism back around – in an act of double negation, as Left Hegelian criticism likes to do. This would merely be a fetishisation of one’s own critical theory, were one to assume that one could evade the fetishistic process, get behind it, uncover it, unmask it – and could thereby reach ‘reality’. Yet it is precisely in this sense that Marx made himself an exorcist and an anti-priest – he thus proves to be an anti-fetishist in Pouillon’s sense, who “perhaps believes in fetishes more than anyone else” (1972, 201).

30 Cf. Baudrillard 1981. – Keenan’s ‘reading’ is not very successful, because he arbitrarily twists Marx for his own ends in the name of deconstructivism. Commodity fetishism cannot however be reduced to mere rhetorical and linguistic effects. Use value, which is constitutively part of a thing, is for Keenan merely a placeholder for rhetorical substitutions. Keenan conjures away the materiality of things, as well as their social contexts, in order to assert an autonomously operating layer of difference without any references. He therefore misses precisely the “spectral objectivity” of the commodity. Keenan is a symptom of what he discusses: by making a mysteriously rhetorical, self-referential process of signification out of commodity exchange, he succumbs to the fetishism he is supposed to be analysing. He transforms what Marx attempted to analyse back into a monstrous process. This fetish worship can also be identified in the reverent way in which citations are dealt with by the great contemporary thinkers (Paul de Man, Derrida, Spivak, Luce Irigaray, Benjamin, Puttenham, etc.).

4.6 Beyond Marx

It is only through fetishisation that commodities become a “very strange thing”, “abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties [quirks]”; their character is “mysterious”, “mystical” and “enigmatic” (1991 vol. 1, 164). Phrases like “the whole mystery of commodities” and “magic and necromancy” are used (ibid., 169). It is Marx himself who takes flight into “the misty realm of religion” (ibid., 165) in order to find an analogy for the circulation of commodities. The question is: why does he do this?

Two answers present themselves: firstly, it is notable that Marx follows his analysis of commodity exchange in the fetish chapter with an economic Robinsonade that climaxes with a utopian “association of free men” (ibid., 171). Why? The archaising idyll of free production, natural trade and cooperative, peaceful relationships serves as a foil against which the modern society of commodities acquires its reputation as a dark magical spell in the first place.³¹ The *positively* hypostasised archaism of a *primal communism* of extremely reduced complexity forms the background for the *negatively* hypostasised archaism of *capitalism* with its hugely increased complexity, which produces the strange false appearance of fetishism. “Industrial pathology” (ibid., 484–485), as Marx expresses it, therefore occurs during modernity’s transformation into an evil and alienated archaic period, while a utopian archaic period provides the healthy image of a liberated society. This is a culturally critical, Romantic and – not to be overlooked – apocalyptic inheritance. As in all cultural criticism, the aim is to destroy the negative, the sick and the false through a confrontation with its polar opposite image of the positive, the healthy and the truth. What is always overlooked is that this dualistic form of criticism produces the criticised aspects in the first place *and* must preserve them, because otherwise it no longer has an object of criticism. This behaves very similarly to the “halved Enlightenment” (Habermas) that remains shackled to the object that it intends to shed light on.

Secondly, the fetishistic sorcery that has capitalism in its grip means that no reform, but only a revolution can break the spell cast on society. This is why the analysis of capital must become a discourse of revelation – in one hand are the scientific tools of political economy, in the other the archaic image of a free, healthy human society. Magical, fetishistic relations cannot be reformed, but can only be stripped off in one go. There is only the option of the sudden leap

³¹ It is worth mentioning that Daniel Defoe’s Robison Crusoe is a typical protestant, in that he burns a fetish-like idol belonging to the natives on his island: this makes him suitable to serve as a model for non-fetishistic commerce in Marx (cf. Simpson 1982, 4–9).

out of capitalism. Bewitched society needs an auto-da-fé; the fetishism of relations demands revolution. The “second nature” that human beings have developed by virtue of their productive ability is given a dangerous false appearance by fetishism and this false appearance must not only be theoretically deciphered, but also destroyed in practical terms.

This idea is what has made Marx so influential. In terms of his rational core, the history of his influence reaches all the way from the grand study of *History and Class Consciousness* by Georg Lukács³² to the sociological analysis of ubiquitous commodity aesthetics and forms of sociopathology today.³³ The studies of economic and social rationalisation by Max Weber (1922/1978 and 1922/2004) or the depiction of “objective culture” in the *Soziologie* (1908/1992) of Georg Simmel and in his *Philosophy of Money* (1900/2004) are unthinkable without Marx’s analysis of commodities. On the other hand, the reason the communist states succumbed even more extremely to fetishism and idolatry and therefore demonstrate such terrible similarities to the fascist states in Western Europe is because, with the revolution behind them, they believed they had undergone a catharsis that for once and for all would make them immune to all fetishism, all cultification, all sorcery of the mind. Like every other form of irrationalism, fetishism cannot however be cast off like a yoke or destroyed in one fell swoop like a delusion. It is precisely because Marx is right in his thinking that modern society is structurally under the spell of archaic forms that it is also true that the destruction of that spell is even less likely to be successful if it is violently exorcised. One cannot destroy fetishism, but is even more so subject to it the more one identifies it in others and not in oneself, in other cultures, other societies, other classes, other groups. The tricky thing about fetishism, which unfortunately for his successors Marx did not understand, is namely that the more one pursues it critically in the other, the stronger it becomes in oneself. The fetishism of the other is usually a projected form of one’s own fetishism. How colonised peo-

32 In particular Karel Kosik (1976), who analyses society’s fetish character under the heading of “the pseudoconcrete”.

33 Haug 1986 and 1987; Jhally 1987; Grasskamp 2000. – There are many promising titles that do not prove to be very useful such as e.g. Bukow 1984. Without a real knowledge of fetishism, or a proper understanding of the ethnological, Marxist and psychoanalytic concepts of fetishism, Bukow applies functionalist models to everyday situations, in which anything can become a fetish: small children’s toys, cars, flags, amulets belonging to people or associations, film stars, jewellery, etc. – In contrast, the rather short book by Haug, obligatory reading for the ‘68 generation, is still very readable, because his approach to the “aesthetic promise of use value” (1986, 17) is still very helpful for the analysis of advertising and the false appearance of commodities. However, Haug almost completely neglects the phenomenon of fetishisation. Bongard 1964, on the other hand, is not useful at all.

ples, ethnic minorities, cultural foreigners and sexual outsiders have been treated in the past is bloody proof of this.

5 Reification and the culture industry

For a whole century, Marxism actually failed to understand what Marx had left to them in his theory of commodity fetishism. Furthermore, the concept of sexual fetishism was proposed quite soon after in the succeeding work of Binet and Freud, and with it the possibility of linking commodity fetishism with desire, the unconscious and the imaginary of society and the individual. Fusing Marx's analyses based on the economy with the psychological aspect of consumption was certainly a viable option. Although links were made between Marxism and psychoanalysis in the SexPol movement (see p. 333) from the 1920s onwards, the fetishistic relationships that bonded consumers to commodities remained completely unaccounted for. There are reasons for this.

Marxist theory orientates itself toward the workers' movement and therefore towards the contradiction between the relations of production and productive resources. In general, it was the production of goods and not their consumption that was the main focus. On the one hand there was an interest in exposing the exploitation associated with the capitalist organisation of production, while at the same time encouraging a political revolution of production in the interest of the workers. Fetishism belongs mainly to the phraseology used to castigate the class enemy, the bourgeois; one never had anything to do with it oneself. Moreover, Marx's early writings (e.g. *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*), where he developed his theory of alienation and presented it as a part of his theory of commodity fetishism, was unpublished for many decades; because they were heterodox, they were also not widely read and only schematically applied to the alienation of the producer from the product, of the producers from each other and of the means of production. Consumption remained a blind spot in Marxist thinking. This was no doubt linked with the fact that for the proletarian masses in the nineteenth century, it was not endless floods of commodities that were the norm, but rather basic survival under conditions of scarcity. This also applies to the communist countries that formed between the Russian Revolution and 1989. They were and remained societies that struggled with want and poverty, and thus theories like those by Veblen about the conspicuous consumption of the leisure class would have sounded like bourgeois mockery. The revolution of the commodity that has taken place since the big world exhibitions and since the founding of the "cathedrals of commodities", the huge department stores in the metropolises of Europe and the USA, since the last

third of the nineteenth century did not therefore become a topic in Marxist theory. Consumer fetishism was unknown. The chapter “The Culture Industry” in *Dialectic of the Enlightenment* (1944) by Horkheimer and Adorno – not coincidentally written in the USA – was essentially the first attempt at a critical representation of cultural fetishism in an advanced mass society – albeit hardly using the concept of fetish at all. What nonetheless connects Horkheimer and Adorno’s approach to theories of fetishism is the gesture of Enlightenment with which consumerism and the culture industry is denounced as a universal delusion. This is even more surprising since it is the Enlightenment – as a continuous process of rationalisation from the ancient world to the present – that Horkheimer and Adorno argue is the cause of this delusion, which has increasingly obfuscated the minds of the masses the more they progressed in the name of an irresistible rationalism. However, even the Marxist-inspired culture industry chapter had little impact within Marxism until the student movement of the late 1960s.

Georg Lukács’ book, first published in 1923, *History and Class Consciousness* had a similar fate. In the Stalinist era it was largely repressed and, although he did not quite renounce it during his orthodox years, he did portray it as a phase he had by then left behind. It contains a general theory of reification inspired by the young Marx, in particular in the chapter “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat” (1971, 83–222). However, he merely takes commodity fetishism as his starting point, in order to then identify forms of reification in the law, the sciences, art, philosophy and above all, history. We need not go into this further here. For Lukács “commodity fetishism is a *specific* problem of our age, the age of modern capitalism” which is “able to influence the *total* outer and inner life of society” (ibid., 84). That everything and everyone *must* become a commodity in order to participate in society’s circulation – whether in the form of work, trade, traffic, communication, consumption – is owed to the principle of the metastructure of the commodity, which becomes “constitutive of that society” and its “universal structuring principle”: “The commodity can only be understood in its undistorted essence when it becomes the universal category of society as a whole.” (ibid., 85–86) Let us tone these sweeping generalisations down a notch.

In developed capitalist industry systems, qualitative displacements and separations increase: 1. The product is ‘distanced’ from the producer (who now only carries out minute tasks in his or her work); 2. The process of labour is ‘distanced’ from the producer (who can have absolutely no overview of the overall process of production); 3. The co-producer is ‘distanced’ from the producer (they are spatially separated, because they are dispersed throughout the ‘machine’ and are structurally differentiated in function); 4. Finally, the working self is separated from the private self (consumer). The latter has two causes: almost every-

thing I need here and now is not produced by me here and now (rather others produce it elsewhere). Because I do not produce anything I need, I understand little or nothing of the products offered to me as commodities. The four forms of alienation and the two reasons for the fourth form create intransparent dependencies, which inevitably develop, according to both Marx and Lukács, when knowledge of the genesis (production) of things and their transformation into commodities on the market is hidden. The results are as follows: if someone needs something, they must go and buy it on the market as a private person. That turns the person into a consumer. Relationships to things can only be formed via their being provided as commodities. By the same token, all things (products) that are to be realised as exchange values must ‘enter the market’ and ‘make an entrance’ there. This creates the *performance or theatricality of commodities*. Commodities must be ‘exhibited’. Together the alienation in production and the mechanism of commodity exchange produce *commodity fetishism*.

This consists of several ‘*misrecognitions*’ or ‘*distortions*’: 1. As a consumer I am forced to orientate myself toward the performance of the commodity (while only being able to perceive the distorted use value of the thing that appears as a commodity). 2. I can only form a relationship with the ‘thing’ if I appropriate it as a commodity (as long as I have money) and in doing so misrecognise that I am ‘actually’ entering into a relationship with ‘other people’ (with its producers). I buy Nike shoes and fail to recognise that by doing so I have an indirect relationship to workers in the Philippines. 3. I know that somehow, but still... I buy them. “Je sais bien, mais quand-même” (Mannoni 1964; see p. 324 f. of this book). For Marx, this “but still” is a *compulsion* that is practiced *structurally* by commodity exchange societies, so that the “I know that...” is usually repressed. 4. The commodity fetish is a thing disguised as a commodity. The fetish is the false appearance of a *promise of use value*, which is staged by its theatrical form. This appearance is what gives the fetish its power of magnetic attraction. Because it mesmerises and entices, this false appearance is hard to penetrate. (One would have to get outside of the system commodity exchange – but how?) 5. Because the fetish is always a *substitution* or a *stand-in*, which at the same time *denies* something, the question is: what does the commodity fetish stand in for? What does it deny? It *stands in for* (usually) the image of a world that fulfils all our needs, a world that is always ‘full’, ‘rich’, ‘fantastic’ and ‘beautiful’ (and we are a part of it). This is what defines the *aura* of the commodity fetish: the commodity fetish beckons with the promise of participation in a land of milk and honey (all versions of it). The commodity is therefore the code for a utopia. That is its systematically produced *illusion*. What it *denies* is the fragmentation, the many divisions, separations, losses, struggles, humiliations, aches, burdens and disappointments that one experiences in the capitalist

society of commodity exchange (the disillusioned world). The commodity denies the non-utopia, prosaic reality. Today's enlightened customer stands on both sides of the fence: they are disillusioned and under the illusion of commodities at the same time, they have uncovered the illusion and yet they deny the disillusion: this is the commodity fetish's typical structure of *compromise*.

According to the view of the reformist Marxist philosopher, Karel Kosik, who builds on the work of the young Lukács, this constitutes the world of the "pseudoconcrete": "The collection of phenomena that crowd the everyday environment and the routine atmosphere of human life, and which penetrate the consciousness of acting individuals with a regularity, immediacy and self-evidence that lend them a semblance of autonomy and naturalness, constitute the world of the *pseudoconcrete*." (Kosik 1976, 2) It is immersed in the "chiaroscuro of truth and deceit". "In the world of the pseudoconcrete, the phenomenal aspect of the thing, in which the thing reveals and conceals itself, is considered to be properly the essence, and the distinction between the phenomenon and the essence *disappears*." (ibid., 2–3) The "destruction of the pseudoconcrete, i.e. of fetishist and fictitious objectivity of the phenomenon" (ibid., 7ff.; here 30) becomes the task of the dialectical method. It analyses what Marx called "the religion of everyday life" (1991 vol. 3, 969).

This concept leads back to the portrayal of commodity fetishism in Lukács' theory of reification (cf. Fedi 2002, 33–99). Fetishism appears here as a "law unto itself, alien to human beings," for the movement of goods. Its context is "*objectively*" a "world of [prefabricated] objects and [thing] relations", which confront human beings as "invisible forces that generate their own powers". "*Subjectively*" fetishism works because "a man's activity becomes estranged from himself, it turns into a commodity," which he must offer as a product and sell. This turns his subjective asset, his labour, into a commodity, which is subject to the same "non-human objectivity" (Lukács 1971, 87) as each thing that has been transformed into a commodity, which must take on a "phantom objectivity" (ibid., 83) in the network of exchanges in order to become mobile at all. It is clear that Lukács, following in Marx's footsteps, uses fetishism to describe exactly the same false compulsion that was believed to be the manipulative power of African fetishism. The worker is only 'free' in the sense that he freely relinquishes his freedom to a system that treats his individuality and those of other people as formally equal – just as heterogeneous things are made homogenous and therefore predictable on the market (ibid., 88–89). Production and product disappear into the commodity without a trace, and the commodity's unit of calculation is disconnected from the material unit of the thing or the existential unit of the human being. This disconnection in turn sets the commodity 'free' in order for it to achieve its own performance on the market: designed by

designers, advertisers, product managers, it acquires what today is coolly but also correctly referred to as “product or brand personality”.³⁴ This idea goes back to the father of German marketing studies, Hans Domizlaff, who wrote in 1939 (!): “One can also talk about the face of an item on the market. If one changes the face only slightly, then the item immediately appears strange and people begin to criticise it. [...] A brand has a face just like a person.” (91–92)³⁵ This anthropomorphisation, which also conceives of the brand as an “organism of ideas”, serves to build up quasi-personal relationships to the commodity like trust, credibility, security, but nowadays also: identification, affective-erotic fixations, optimism, etc. This exactly meets the characteristics that define fetishism. In this sense, a large amount of marketing is concerned with nothing less than turning commodities into fetishes and helping them to behave that way on the market.

This transformation of the commodity into a personality with its own agency, although it may be artificially implemented, is understood as reification in the Marxist concept of commodity fetishism. The more effectively the commodity is mystified into a quasi-person, the more, conversely, people are transformed into things. According to Lukács, this leads not to the dissolution of the commodity’s product character, but to the human being “becom[ing] less and less active and more and more *contemplative*” (1971, 89). In the world of commodities there is no other form of relation than buying and selling, or rejecting both; but there can be no active intervention in the system of commodities itself (equally, there can be none in the system of production). The only activity possible is the act of consumption. From a statistical point of view, it is no doubt only one of the market’s many regulatory mechanisms, but it cannot be reflected as the subjective consciousness of the power to act. The power of the consumer is a power that is not felt by the consumers themselves. ‘Contemplative’ therefore means finding oneself in the position of being emotionally affected, spoken to or attracted by commodities, in other words, in a position where the pathic dominates and activity is limited to selection and purchasing decisions. This makes the consumer, like the worker who sells his labour, into a “spectator” of his own self in a proc-

34 E.g. Dichtl/Eggers 1996, 189. The brand personality “possesses, just like a person’s personality, an unmistakable profile [...] and conveys competence, a sense of responsibility and the security that they can be depended upon to the consumer” (ibid.).

35 On this cf. Leitherer 2001; Hellmann 2003 (chapter: “Die Marke als Persönlichkeit” [The Brand as Personality]). Thanks to Holm Friebe for bringing my attention to this. – Today’s opposite tendency, namely to market no-name products that are successful among groups of consumers critical of consumerism, but which of course still function according to capitalist terms, even internationally, is analysed by Klein 2000. – More generally: Jhally 1987.

ess that he or she confronts in isolation and which he or she experiences as being unable to influence (ibid., 90f.). Lukács interprets this as the ‘necessary illusion’ that masks production (ibid., 92); it is also the false appearance in which the commodity makes an entrance. Lukács summarises in his typically complex style: “In them the relations between men that lie hidden in the immediate commodity relation, as well as the relations between men and the objects that should really gratify their needs, have faded to the point where they can be neither recognised nor conceived. For that very reason the reified mind has come to regard them as the true representatives of his societal existence.” (ibid., 93)

This reified consciousness is fetishised consciousness. This means two things: one appears to have a direct relationship with the ‘commodity personalities’ (although they are dead things); and the human relations concealed in the exchange of commodities are not experienced at all, as if they were dead (although they are living people). This reversal, through which things are experienced as living forces and humans as mere objects, was always criticised as a form of primitive animism in African fetishism. Lukács too is concerned with destroying the bewitching power of commodity fetishism that reifies the consciousness and animates things; he believes that fetishism should be transformed into political class consciousness in the proletariat. The practical implementation of this is the revolutionary act (Lukács 1971, 169 – 171). Because the consciousness of the worker is “the self-consciousness of the commodity”, the “self-revelation of [...] capitalist society” will take place in it (ibid., 168). Or so Lukács hopes. Thus he continues Marx’s enlightening metaphors of revelation and the task of tearing off the mask of the commodity is once again assigned to the revolutionary proletariat. By becoming aware of himself as a commodity, the worker is immediately autonomous and at the same time universally revolutionary: it “becomes possible to recognise the fetish character of *every commodity* based on the commodity character of labour power” (ibid., 169f.). The revolution will destroy fetishism. That is its goal. But history has proven the opposite: commodity fetishism was not destroyed but repressed (and with it the human desire to consume); (political) idols were not overthrown but turned into cult figures. There is no lesson about fetishism more powerful than this one: by believing it had been destroyed in the revolution, it was merely suppressed in the collective unconscious and gods more terrible than those that were believed to have been banished were created. It was modernity’s most bitter hour.

In their chapter on the culture industry, Horkheimer and Adorno are most certainly free of this illusion. In the middle of the war (1942–1944), exposed to the American entertainment industry on the one hand, which transformed every cultural gesture into stereotyped mass products, a big culture shock for the German emigrants, and the perfection of Nazi propaganda on the other,

which seamlessly penetrated mass consciousness, the two critical theorists developed their ideas about the consciousness industry. They argue that it completely usurps all of life's emotions and transforms these into the uniformity of the monopoly and the march of domination. The statement "culture today is infecting everything with sameness" becomes the doctrine of cultural criticism (Horkheimer/Adorno 2002, 94). The illusion of commodity fetishism does not just affect products, but people themselves are entirely in its grip. If workers were mere appendages of the machinery in Marx, in the culture industry consumers become compliant appendages of the entertainment media and the business of amusement. Consumers are the lotus-eaters³⁶ of modernity, who in the drugged numbness of consumerism savour and suffer the memoryless dissolution of their selves in equal measure.

The general and the particular collapse into one false identity. "Only because individuals are none but mere intersections of universal tendencies, is it possible to reabsorb them smoothly into the universal." (ibid., 125) The contradictions between the general and the particular that the Left Hegelian Marx had kept open, so as not to darken the prospects for a revolutionary liberation, are reduced to the universal model of a "gigantic economic machinery" (ibid., 100) by Horkheimer and Adorno. Every social development is seen as the increase and improvement in the techniques of deception, which eliminate the unique and the individual (Adorno calls it the non-identical as opposed to a false identity into which people and things are forced by Enlightenment and the principle of the commodity). The manipulation that has supposedly always been a feature of fetishism has now, after having conquered the sphere of production, gone on to conquer politics and culture, and therefore also the spirit. Society is transformed into an impenetrable monolith of a mass deception that human beings are doubly subjected to: as workers they are robbed of their earnings and as consumers they are cheated of their desires. The result of fetishism is not that resistance against cultural-industrial domination grows, but instead the willingness with which we submit to it. A person is identified by how successfully they are deluded (ibid., 106). "Everyone must show that they identify wholeheartedly with the power which beats them" (ibid., 124). In the practiced custom of cultural fetishes, trained to the point of being an automatic reaction, one is also liberated from the burden of individuation (ibid., 100; 126). Ubiquitous, unfettered amusement and repetitive distraction, now a categorical imperative, are the fetishes of a culture that "has sardonically

³⁶ Horkheimer/Adorno 2002, 49 (in "Excursus I: Odysseus or the Myth of the Enlightenment", the authors mention the legendary lotus-eaters from Homer's epic).

realised man's species being" (ibid., 116). This degenerates into a fungible example of a universal, which subsumes everything individual and non-identical in standardised products. Today this is called "normalising optimisation" (Bublitz 2005, 59ff). "The totality of the culture industry" (Horkheimer/Adorno 2002, 108) triumphs in the fully fetishised consciousness of the masses. The violence of the apparatus becomes one with people's needs. Hidden beneath this, unrecognised and unconscious, is the fear of exclusion. The barbarism of cultural-industrial fetishism threatens to exclude as an outsider anyone who does not allow themselves to be enchanted by it,³⁷ that is, to make them a *barbaros*. Real art becomes the radical outside of society, the negation of its negation. By doing so it seeks to withdraw its fetishisation from capital's logic of total exploitation. For the cycle of consumption threatens to suck in even the most resistant of art: "For consumers the use value of art, its essence, is a fetish, and the fetish – the social valuation which they mistake for the merit of works of art – becomes its only use value, the only quality they enjoy. In this way the commodity character of art disintegrates just as it is fully realised." (ibid., 128) Because of this, the modern rationality of production, which has now taken possession of culture, returns to the archaic: the "idolisation of the existing order and of the power" that had always made fetishes so uncanny for their critics. In the universalisation of fetishism, which Horkheimer and Adorno themselves in fact produce in the first place, the deceit that defines it has become the world order.

This kind of totalisation of the culture industry's manipulative powers is merciless. In the double sense: merciless towards human beings; they voluntarily subject themselves to a power which in their lust for consumption grows even stronger. And, in terms of consumption, the two authors reproduce the same disastrous mythology of power that we have already seen on the level of production and political control in Fritz Lang's film *Metropolis*. The delusion becomes universal in the fetishised consciousness of the masses. Through it, the entertainment industry infests even the most hidden folds of desires, of imagination, of feelings and the unconscious, in order to bring them into line. The dullness of the senses, which Horkheimer and Adorno attribute to the mass products of the culture industry, is extended to the dullness of people, who unknowingly celebrate their own subjection as they amuse themselves. Moreover, the asceticism that is imposed on authentic art and its adepts (even if they are called Adorno) is also merciless: it is only 'authentic' to the extent that it resists any exploitation, refuses every seduction, spites any communicative connection and, unmoved, watches the apocalypse of industrialised desires in the triumph of its own

37 Horkheimer/Adorno 2002, 105 (citing Tocqueville).

self-petrification. In this world view, having empathy with the desires and suffering of the masses, however they have been manipulated, is considered a theoretical sin. “The Culture Industry” reads like a steady rhythmical litany, always discovering the same thing in every phenomenon – jazz, radio, film, advertising, lifestyle, everyday consumption: the corruption of real culture in monocapitalism, which as “a civil society totalitarianism” (Joachim Hirsch) represents a parallel to the terrible dictatorships of the twentieth century disguised as democracy. The text is an incitement to iconoclasm, a full-scale attack on the idolatry and fetishism that dominate stardom and the mass media, advertising language, fashion and popular music in equal measure.

If every difference is erased in this way, theory must also eventually succumb to the very thing it is fighting against. Fetishism takes hold of its critics. Not by seducing the two authors into some kind of lustful entrancement with a Hollywood film for example, but through the language of theory itself, which supposedly protects them from these kinds of temptations like an apotropaic spell. Anyone who uses language as a bastion against ubiquitous fetishism inevitably falls prey to it themselves. This begins with the fact that the fetishistic spell, which is supposed to originate in the cultural-industrial monopolies, is in fact produced by the very language that analyses it and ends with the fact that theory and authentic art, to the extent that they rely on figures of negation, ultimately become the fetish of anti-fetishism.

6 Consumer culture and fetishism

Of course, no one seriously doubts that the volatile dynamics of an economy of desires is at work in modern consumer societies, an economy which uses fetishism as the force with which to bind the subject to the commodity. In this regard, W.F. Haug’s argument still applies today (1971/1986). Yet, particularly in research on popular and youth culture, the voices seeking to differentiate the monolithic concept of culture in Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s interpretation have multiplied. This began with the empirical studies carried out at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS).³⁸ These studies investigated styles and attitudes in youth subcultures, which of course also used fetishistic mechanisms, but in a way which subversively turned them against mass culture in a kind of

³⁸ E.g. Willis 1977; 1978 and 1990. – In terms of the history of science: Lindner 2000. – Lutter/Reisenleitner 1998, 22–39; *ibid.* 2000.

iconic and symbolic charade. As early as 1979, Dick Hebdige³⁹ showed that the thesis of the culture industry's omnipotent hegemony needed to be examined more closely from the perspective of subcultures like punk, which is interpreted as a kind of war of symbols against dominant culture. However, it was already clear to Hebdige (1988, 17–41) that despite their anti-bourgeois and anti-capitalist aggression, subcultures like punk could only be a counterweight to the culture industry for specific historical moments – before it was discovered, appropriated and commodified, from *haute couture* to the music industry. The fetishes that punk used inevitably changed their semantic position when during the course of their bottom-up career they suddenly became fetishes in the 1976/1977 punk collection by Vivienne Westwood, or when punk groups became the objects of a voyeuristic curiosity as exotic tribes and thus contributed to the urban attractiveness of certain cities – tolerated by their erstwhile opponents, the government and the police. At one point, scuffles with the police and the authorities almost became winking performances given to an audience that was itself already wearing punk outfits adorned with fetishistic accessories to art exhibition openings.

In this way, subcultures, the countercultural styles of minorities and the subversive forms of expression of ethnic groups arriving into the metropolises in a steady stream were repeatedly appropriated by hegemonial discourse and particularly by the cultural practice of the majority. This could be proof of the thesis of the culture industry⁴⁰ if one were to restrict oneself to individual subcultural phenomena (New Orleans jazz or rock 'n' roll or punk or rap). However, it does not hold up when one takes in a wider historical range, because it quickly becomes apparent that, however specific it might be, the conflict between subculture and hegemonial culture is here to stay and is characterised by sheer inexhaustible mobility. Yet those that subscribe to the thesis of manipulation could respond even to this by arguing that today's culture industry no longer tries to level out contradictions, but instead utilises them as fuel for its accelerated circulation. Tom Holert and Mark Terkessidis (1996) are entirely correct when they speak of the "mainstream of minorities" in their book published in the mid-nineties. Nothing makes this clearer than youth and ethnic cultures and the way they are invented in the no-man's-land of heterotopic zones, discovered by scouts, adapted by designers and music producers and then inculcated into mainstream culture as hyped attitudes with very short shelf-lives. The mainstream constantly helps itself to the fetishistic and idolatrous inventions developed in minorities as

³⁹ Cf. the overall late-Marxist overview in Hinz 1998, 49–64.

⁴⁰ For an overview of the debate on the culture industry thesis, see Gurk 1996.

styles of defiant self-expression and subversive group identity. It seems the fate of counterculture is merely to provide fresh sources of energy for the mainstream. Of course the culture industry and its economic imperative to exploit everything come into play here. And of course manipulative strategies of the social control of rebellion and opposition can be identified in it. For the culture industry has not grown any smaller since Horkheimer and Adorno's time, but bigger, not cruder but more refined, not weaker but more powerful. But it also cannot be overlooked that in the long run, as a result of this, the monolithic exclusivity of Western culture has completely changed. Culture has been fragmented and pluralised like never before, it has truly become a "patchwork of minorities" (Deleuze). Of course, its parameters are still set by the economy (culture is what must be purchasable); its local and global dissemination, its circulation and hybridities, its constantly changing inclusions and exclusions. However, milieus and habitus develop according to their own logic, non-linear, unpredictable, chaotic – as uncontrollable as the internet.

Ever since fetishism freed itself from the murky recesses of sexual perversion and remoulded itself as a universal model of creativity for cultural production, it has been one of the main mechanisms of cultural synthesis. It is the manoeuvre through which the object of desire is no longer locked away in the off-limits areas of private collections or clubs, but exactly the opposite: it has become a parade of exposure, the generation of collective connections and communication, and the wide dispersal of stimulating forces. These form a network via stars, styles, accessories, things and gestures. They embody the social unconscious and imaginary. They are the switches, the knots via which cultures' symbolic exchange branches out and is made fluid. Fetishes have (once again) become transitory, polymorphous and dynamic, no longer capturing *one* type of desire in *one* object, but rather, on the contrary, creatively unleashing all possible cathectic investments and affective stimuli, which acquire concentrated symbolic forms in fetishes. It is perhaps a dangerous imperative that anything that wants to be culturally perceived must take on a fetishistic form – from the perspective of economy, durability, the suspension of needs, in other words, from the Enlightenment perspective; but in it also lies the creative heart of culture, which is by no means homogenous, sublime and pure anymore, but instead a 'land of a thousand fetishes'. The Africa in us.

However, there are also other 'typical' characteristics in the cultural fetishism of consumerism: the fetish obscures and denies its origin; it deceives about who and what it represents; it makes it unclear what is so captivating about it; it virtualises the power of imagination; it is fundamentally amoral; it is creative, but not reflexive. In this sense, one can read the fusion of culture and fetishism as a symptom of a society in which fetishism serves to create

the illusion of mass consciousness, whether one sees this as the expression of the “society of spectacle” (Guy Debord 1967) or an anti-Enlightenment society of control in a Foucauldian mould. There is plenty of evidence for this assumption (which once again supports the culture industry thesis). Yet there is also plenty of evidence against it: the widespread distribution of fetishes and idols brings about their disenchantment; their transitory nature reduces compulsion and strengthens the playful character of culture; integration into the capitalist economy devalues their sacredness; their performativity encourages their subversive use; their circulation makes them part of public communication; their manifest visibility makes them open for reflection. Fetishism has become a matter of choice, multi-optional, carnivalesque, and in that sense also democratic. In this way, fetishes increase society’s unconscious, but at the same time make it public and fundamentally enable it to be critically reflected upon. The relationship between the unconscious and the conscious mind is more relaxed and more playful in this culture of the mass circulation of fetishes than it ever was during the age when society was neurotically torn between Enlightenment and repression.

If we wanted to fight and destroy fetishism today, we would have to destroy the culture in which and from which we live along with it. Today, we must learn to differentiate between *commodity fetishism* and *cultural fetishism*, and ensure that both theoretically and methodically we do not reduce the latter to the former.⁴¹ Under the conditions of today’s capitalism, the goal should not be getting rid of fetishism, but establishing a new relationship to it. Indications of this new relationship can perhaps already be identified in the reflected culture of play (Adamowsky 2000). Why is that the case? In the shadow of Marx, fetishism was unilaterally attributed to the capitalist economy, so that it became exhausted as a factor in the production of surplus value and the alienation of both producers and consumers. Culture was opposed to the economy and fetishism was occupied by the economy, meaning that authentic cultural products could be anything as long as they were not fetishistic and exploitable. They had to be the inaccessible transcendentals of the economy. However, this was not a fruitful opposition. Consumption, even in communism, its hostaged form, is never solely the economic data of commodity exchange, but is always already culture itself. It is not just monetary values that circulate in the commodity, but also always meanings, symbols, attitudes, patterns of identification and above all desires, feelings and fantasies. Although they must be bought – and that alone is enough to disgust the cultural critics: buying feelings, fantasies, identities! – a wide range of

41 Here I follow the categorical difference defined in Stratton 1996, 25–57.

possible uses is opened up by their appropriation, which can be realised by the consumer in specific ways and used actively, even creatively. Fetishes, idols and icons of consumption may be cultural-industrial products subject to capitalist exploitation; but at the same time they are symbolic switches of cultural practices, meanings, imaginings that are not economically calculable, but must instead be investigated and interpreted with cultural analysis (Fiske 2011, 3 ff.).⁴²

John Fiske therefore rightly speaks of “popular productivity”, which cannot be strategically planned and conversely forces the economy to ceaselessly test its products, modify them, reinvent them, pluralise them and keep them mobile in order to remain ‘at the level’ of the floating desires that will be realised in consumption. Needs and fantasies are in no way exclusively and unilaterally determined by the horizon of commodities to which they are linked – if that were the case new products would not flop all the time, which happens at a rate of 80 per cent. Instead, also conversely, the horizon of commodities increases alongside the horizon of the self-differentiating and pluralising culture of desires. In this new type of cultural research in the 1980s and 1990s, pop idol Madonna was a frequently investigated paradigm.⁴³ Ann Brooks (1997) for example, used Madonna to show that research into fetishism and idols today must include the study of mass media and popular culture. On the one hand, Madonna was portrayed as a product of the culture industry, stylists and music promoters without autonomy, whose idolisation was used to manipulate her young fans, who equally lacked autonomy. This supported Horkheimer and Adorno’s thesis: economic exploitation and ideologisation (the woman as an object of desire for the patriarchal sex). On the other hand though, with all her videos, concerts, photos, posters, media reports, fanzines, films and labels, her unique outfits and looks, jewellery and makeup, which became travesties of herself, with her body language choreographies and of course also her music, Madonna at least provided counter-images to the conventional patterns of patriarchal sexuality for millions of young female fans to fervently identify with, even if they could not quite be liberated from it. The Madonna business and Madonna culture were related in both a complementary and an antagonistic way, and this was reinforced by her parodistic staging of her own identity, her aggressive female narcissism, the bricolage form of her videos, the self-referential staging of her image as an image, the stark contrasts between conformity and rebellion, whore and saint (Madonna). If one wanted to study what a modern idol is and how it func-

⁴² Published first as: *Reading the Popular*. Boston 1989.

⁴³ Fiske 2011, 77–107. – An overview of American research on Madonna is provided by Brooks 1997, 147–162, 199–204; Gamman/Makinen 1994, 182ff.; Williamson 1986b, 46–47; Miklitsch 1998, 99–138; Bechdolf 2000.

tions in a thoroughly fetishised setting, one could hardly find a more striking a figure than Madonna.

Take the video for “Express Yourself” for example, in which Madonna imitates the dance moves and self-groping of slightly androgynous Michael Jackson: styled in both a feminine and a masculine way, she grabs her groin, where supposedly there is nothing, but perhaps there is – this is an “empowered transvestism”, which parodistically plays with the sexual fetishes of patriarchal culture, for Marjorie Garber (1990, 56) even an ironic staging of the Lacanian triad of the being, having and seeming of the phallus. It is no coincidence it caused a scandal. In the music video “Material Girl” too, a sophisticated remake of the song “Diamonds Are a Girl’s Best Friend” by Marilyn Monroe (from the film *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*), Madonna gives a performance that transforms the stereotypical patterns of the masculine and the feminine, of sexist and fetishist sexuality, of money and power, into a quick-as-lightening game of deception and the recasting of roles, of subversion and parodies. It most definitely cleverly twists and teases out the economic conditions under which she herself works – and at least makes them readable for the audience (Fiske 2011, 95–106; Williamson 1986b, 46–47). To doggedly insist on the culture industry thesis here would be ridiculous. In fact the opposite is true: this is a game that plays with and critically reflects upon the symbolic order fetishes of gender, sex and culture. The game contains a semantic surplus and therefore provides the audience with stimulating experiences and opportunities to reflect – beyond any economic reducibility and yet within a sector of capital thoroughly dominated by mass media. One can therefore come to the following overall conclusion for consumer fetishism: “The conditions of production of any cultural system are not the same as, and do not predetermine, the conditions of its use and its consumption.” (Fiske 2011, 19)

Lorraine Gamman and Merja Mäkinen (1994) have also argued, with good reason, that since the 1970s, cultural fetishism has increasingly emerged from its sexual and economic enclave to become the mainstream of popular culture (all over the globe: one only need look at youth culture in Japan or Korea). In consumption and advertising, music and fashion, film and the star cult, fetishism has become particularly interesting with regard to questions about gender, particularly because new forms of consumerism, light-hearted and excessive in equal measure, were specifically addressed to young adult women and young people in general. The still unstable, sometimes subversive, sometimes experimental positioning of adolescents and young adults in the gender order provides a unique opportunity to connect with fetishistic travesties and performative games of identification. Especially through the eroticisation of fashion, makeup and jewellery, of the pop cult and music, advertising and film, design and self-

fashioning, fetishism moved into culture – but always within the framework of commodity fetishism. Via bottom-up processes, fetishistic expressions of subcultures and their styles of behaviour (S/M, fetish scene, transvestism, lesbians, the queer and drag scene, female crossdressers, voguing) suddenly experienced an unexpected explosion, reaching the heights of *haute couture* and Hollywood, and then trickling back down and spreading into mass culture and its icons. Most importantly, fetishism has gone through a fundamental cultural transformation from a perversion to an almost universally prevalent and public practice with the power to determine culture itself (see pp. 375–386 of this book).

What happens in culture, but also in boutiques and shopping malls, when buying a car or in music clubs can no longer be grasped as the Marxian opposition between use value and exchange value, out of which commodity fetishism drew its explosive power. Consumption is no longer the manipulated appendage of the commodity, through which people's basic needs for food, clothing and things are exploited. Although this continues to function, commodities today, if we talk about them as fetishes, are not merely disguises for the real relations of production, but “metaphor[s] in fact” (Gamman/Makinen 1994, 33). Being ‘thingly metaphors’ or real symbols, as we called them, also means more than concealing the exchange value and exaggerating the use value, in other words, deception. Under the conditions of consumer society, fetishism constitutes the commodity much rather as a *thing* that is *simultaneously* a multiple fabric of visual but also auditory, tactile, olfactory, taste and semantic *representations*.

Of course, not all sensory dimensions are always involved; different senses play a role in food fetishism for example (*ibid.*, 145 ff.), than do in a fetish for clothing (Steele 1996). These representations belong to the essence of the commodity-thing, as its sensual look-and-feel, its atmospheric radiance, its inherent meaning. However, they do not determine it, but rather are a model of experiences and meaning that can be modified by consumers as they wish – just as texts are formal and semantic model of possibilities that readers interpret in different ways. What reading is in relation to the text, so the performativity of the desire to buy is in relation to the commodity. One could also say: the speech act, which generates an intelligible sentence out of the grammatical and semantic universe of possible sentences combined with a singular speech intention, corresponds to the act of consumption, which generates a singular act of purchase out of the universe of commodities, which is also the encoded archive of all of culture's possible actions, combined with the individual intention to buy. This starts long before the jingle of money and the commodity changes owners: desires are awoken or stimulated while strolling through the mall, weaving narcissistically through the flood of alluring things calling out from everywhere, the visual

and tactile checking of the products on offer, the associated fantasies of their use. And the lust for shopping does not just end with allocating the commodity a place in the private world of things and the consumer's cultures of use, however free or conventional it may be. Émile Zola already showed this masterfully in 1883, in the first department store novel of world literature, *Au Bonheur des Dames*, particularly highlighting the manipulative features of the new form of commodity fetishism (cf. Vinken 1995, 247–267). The entire process can be described as the theatre, the performance praxis of the commodity, in other words as its performativity, which represents an aesthetic 'in-between' between the commodity economy and consumer culture. In the act of purchase, differentiated sensual and meaning-generating experiences are had, the quality of which depends on the system of values, the sensual culture, the codes of desire and the imagination of the consumer, just as much as on the theatrical qualities of the temple of commodities or the commodities themselves. What happens in this 'in-between' realm, which is conditioned by money (paying/not paying), but self-sufficiently produces signs and meanings, emotions, desires and fantasies, is an open process that some view as the theatre of war between the commodity industry and consumers, and others as a semiotic scene played out between organised purchase-stimuli and autonomous consumer tactics, as "the very arena in which culture is fought over and licked into shape." (Douglas/Isherwood, cited in Fiske 2011, 24)

One of the most important forms of this is fetishism. Because of its fluid erotic appeal, which charges almost all commodities with desirability and transforms them into magical magnets of attraction, it is a centrally important integration mechanism in a society where political and social institutions no longer demonstrate strong enough powers of persuasion and therefore keeps the loyalty of the masses and their emotional bonds stable. Economic strategies and tactics of consumption, the inexhaustibility of commodities and the insatiable appetite of desire exist in a permanent relationship of tension expressed by commodity fetishes. It is always disputable whether these are capital's powerful tools of manipulation or floating projections of a general public acting according to its moods and desires – or both at the same time. All the unique different types of consumer are part of the world of the commodity, where they celebrate their triumphs and suffer their defeats: gangs of young people hanging around in malls without buying anything; poor people sheltering from the cold; shoplifters, about three quarters of a million of whom are caught every year (with a possible real figure of between 70 and 95 per cent); women, who thanks to video surveillance feel neither cooped up at home nor in danger on the street; sophisticated customers seeking out high-quality items; practiced bargain hunters who hunt down their commodities and bring them home like trophies; shop-

ping junkies who inject themselves with their daily dose of purchasing pleasure; consumption bulimics who fill their apartments with masses of unnecessary things in a form of oral assimilation compulsion; consumer ascetics who buy very few selected goods with a proud awareness of their resistance to seduction; querulants who believe unrealistically they are in an entitled position, who negotiate, haggle, complain and exchange purchases with an indignant, anguished pleasure; professionals who make purchase decisions so speedily that their feet barely touch the ground; procrastinators who, after endless trying, suddenly enjoy a climax or a pull out in a disappointing *interruptus*; etc., etc.⁴⁴ A fully comprehensive typology of consumers would give us a complete picture of our society. And for each type there is a corresponding type of fetish, which encompasses the object classes that demonstrate the highest possible narcissistic and libidinal economy level of satisfaction. Andreas Knapp has already constructed a sort of typology of the non-functional reasons for buying commodities (1996, 193–206) and it is no coincidence that he uses theorists from around 1900 like Thorstein Veblen or Georg Simmel to do so. A typology of consumers would thus need to be combined with the arsenal of consumer motives, based on which one could then get closer to a typology of consuming acts.

What is certain is that fetishistic consumer culture is both the main support structure of commerce and the main area where society's emotional energies are expressed. It has therefore long been the most important cohesive force in modern industrial societies. To dismiss this as conformism at best satisfies the cultural critic's mind, but does not get us much further. All the social strata are involved, not least because it is simply not possible *not* to consume. It therefore must be about differentiating styles of consumption. Because this is the case, consumption generates culture and has become a growing "mass culture on the dimension of social order", which is based less on legitimacy, justice, democratic participation and rational arguments, and more on attractiveness (Schrage 2003, 66). Fetishistic consumption becomes a way of forming the structure of social relationships, which is not only a decisive factor in socialisation for individuals, but is the level on which they decide whether they feel emotionally and practically a part of society or excluded by it. The problem for a society organised in this way is ensuring that the gap between the constantly growing but also expensive range of commodities on offer and the expectations, wants and fantasies, which equally constantly exceed possibility and cannot be fulfilled because of financial restrictions, does not grow too large, for that leads either to a

⁴⁴ On this, see also the very entertaining but overall analytically weak book by Grasskamp, 2000.

loss of mass cohesion or to a crisis of consumption and therefore economic crises. Fetishistic mechanisms are useful for exactly this problem, namely preventing such gaps from opening up, because they maintain a high level of commodity circulation and a high level of cohesive attraction. In a way, fetishes curb the insatiable appetite that cannot be satisfied, the pleonexia (Schrage 2003, 70) of consumption, because fetishes that we assimilate and make 'our own' have a high capacity to satisfy, keep satisfaction relatively stable, make it a little more autonomous, indeed, they even have a supportive and protective function for the ego that balances out the narcissistic sense of self-esteem. This prevents the rhythm of satisfaction and disappointment from becoming too extreme. On the other hand, another specific trait of cultural fetishism is that consumer fetishes are transitory, mobile, erratic, that they get used up and replaced by new ones, so that what was criticised by early psychoanalysts as the fetishist's 'perverse' autarky is avoided and as a result, the fetishes do not stand in the way of the constant expansion of commodity circulation but rather intensify it. In this way, fetishism 'magically' mediates between the market's horizon of expectation and that of a mass public hungry for experiences. It creates a tableau in which, to a certain extent, conscious and unconscious longing for identification shakes hands with market interests.

7 Inalienable things: collections, museums, memory

In winter 2004/2005, The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, which has its own Costume Institute, held an exhibition called "WILD: Fashion Untamed". The theme was the fusion of animals and human beings in fashion, mainly from after 1945, but also in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. The exhibition exclusively showed *haute couture*: Dior, Saint-Laurent, Westwood, Galliano, Gaultier, Yamamoto, Thierry Mugler, Versace, Rei Kawakubo, etc.; mostly women's dresses, coats and hats, and barely any suits or accessories for men. The clothes were exhibited in underground, black rooms, in which glass cases reaching the ceiling had been built for the elegant mannequins in their animal garments behind the glass, lit by spotlights and elevated so that one had to look up to them. This alone has the character of fetishisation. Bebop jazz plays quietly. There are lots of visitors, though they can barely see each other, whispering voices, a voyeuristic hush. It is a kind of Platonic cave of the metamorphosis of the female body.

In the altar-like glass cabinets, the clothes, worn by beautiful mannequins, are arranged by animal: snakes, birds, predatory cats, spiders, used as material or as a motif; luxury furs of all kinds, leather skins and feathers. We have walked

down into the dark space of fantasies, where the borders between animals and women are blurred and an unruly hybrid creature is created. The fetishisation of women as animalistic in nature has never been made so clear as here. It is a metamorphosis of the body, which becomes an animal or vice versa: the animal that speaks out of the woman, wrapping her essence in the shell of her dress. Fashion melts the two together and this creates the fetish; alluring darkness, mysterious animality, archaic gestures paired with exclusive glamour and elegant design, which plays with our fear and attraction to the nature of animals: *fashion untamed*. It does not matter that they are mannequins. The artificial bodies become carriers of the animalising signifiers: this also applies to the living body of the woman who actually wears these dresses. These surfaces, the gowns and garments, are the medium of a fetishistic epiphany. Women's bodies (like cars) as fetishes of branding. A feast for the eyes. A depersonalised, erotically shimmering intoxication fills the numinous rooms, in which the mostly female visitors can barely be made out. A lot of the exhibits come from sexual subculture: the fetish scene, dominatrix studios, vaudeville, clubs. One is reminded of the vamps and *femme fatales* who were often associated with animals and wild nature in the novels and paintings of the nineteenth century. As a matter of fact, reproductions from the history of art can be found at the base of the cases, as though art had invented the animalisation of the woman's body. *Haute couture* appears as a continuation of art history and subculture at the same time. Frequent references to film stars who wore the dresses. Dazed, one climbs back up the stairs and finds oneself in the middle of the Egyptian section of one of the most important museums in the world.

The world of commodities, especially fashion, functions fetishistically. But we are in a museum, which transforms this fetishism one more time and exhibits it. However, this is not a reproduction; the phantasmagoria of fashion has become untouchable, dead bodies and dead garments lit up brightly behind glass. Their *noli me tangere* applies just as strongly to them as to the twenty-fifth dynasty golden ram amulet from around 700 BC or Paolo Veronese's *Mars and Venus* painting from 1570 in the storeys above. The New York stock exchange, where the most important financial trends of the global market are steered, itself designed as a neoclassical temple, just as vice versa ancient temples were also often banks (for example the Temple of Artemis Ephesia), is only a couple of miles away. The "scape of flows", as Manuel Castells calls the global circulation of information, commodities, goods and finances he has analysed, is concentrated here; and this is also where the quiet rooms of untouchable, eternal things from all cultures of the world and all periods of history are located. Two places that seem to complement each other – structurally the same relationship we identified between inalienable objects and the things, goods and serv-

ices circulating in the gift exchange system of proto-economies (cf. p. 226 of this book). To conclude this chapter, we will once again turn our attention to this opposition.

“Modern secular societies are not without their own special tribal idols and their own brands of fetishism.” (Masters 1982, 107) This statement was written in a 1982 collection of essays on fetishism in mass culture that attempted to take fetishism out of its psychopathological, sexual and religious-ethnological peripheral position and argue that it is a culturally and sociopsychologically inevitable phenomenon of modern capitalist culture on all of its levels. Up until that point, fetishism was not a public practice, but instead an illegitimate and hidden one that avoided broad daylight. Today it is endemically widespread and the “lifeblood of society” (Browne 1982, 2f.). The Metropolitan Museum restaged this illegitimate darkness around the origin of fetishism in order to simultaneously present it in the light of the public eye – and to aesthetically distance it. The animalistic fetishisation of the woman’s body belongs to the sinister and shadowy parts of the gender order and is at the same time the highly artificial pattern in which *haute couture* operates – and therefore the stars and idols of culture too. Gamman and Makinen elaborate: fetishism is a “a highly creative compromise which, through its doing-and-undoing oscillation, enables the subject to cope with unconscious menace, while still allowing the gratification of pleasure on the plane of the real (not denied or repressed as in sublimation or hysteria)” (1994, 111). This is also true of the Metropolitan exhibition. The animalisation of the woman’s body contains exactly this oscillation: an unconscious threat (of a fantasy of female sexuality) and the exposed desire in the game played with this threat appear on the same stage and enter into a compromise, which is the fetish. The topographies of psychic energies are blurred together: in the *underground*, dark exhibition cave, one is in the *inner world* of unconscious fantasies and at the same time in the *external world* of a public, elegant transvestism/travesty (Vinken 1998a), in which the ambivalence between unconscious desire and unconscious threat is playfully enacted and come to terms with. The fetishism of the dresses consists of nothing other than maintaining this ambivalence; we do not have to entirely surrender to the allure or the fear of the animalistic, overwhelming power of female sexuality, but instead can be satisfied by visual lust in a protected cultural environment (fashion, the museum).

Musealisation is important in this process. What circulates in society as desire and fear is immobilised and exterritorialised: fetishism functions here aesthetically and not as it does ‘outside’, economically, religiously, sexually or in consumerism. Let us remind ourselves of Immanuel Kant’s most important definition of the beautiful in *Critique of the Power of Judgement* (§ 1–5), in which the condition of perception and reflection on the beautiful is a distancing from every

possible use of the perceived object. No interests of a practical or epistemic kind should get mixed up in the aesthetic experience, so that the subject, in the presence of the thing being looked at, becomes exclusively aware of his or her own perception in the matrix of pleasure and displeasure (and not of permitted/forbidden, true/false) and “feels itself” (Kant, 2000, 89). The aesthetic object is structurally protected by the *noli me tangere* in order to exclusively be the correlate of acts of perception. In this rapturous distancing from every practical use or touch, and from all social circulation, by ‘locking up’ the aesthetic object, it unavoidably becomes a fetish: 1. An object of devotion to its extraordinary, exceptional attraction. 2. An object of ambivalence that oscillates between the suspended desire for appropriation and the fear of its superior, spellbinding, magnetic quality. 3. An object of lust we are protected from by the glass in the display case, just as the object is protected from us.

This glass, which separates us from the object and is also present in museums even when it is not present, makes all the difference. Things behind glass can only be looked at; they therefore give us the opportunity to remain composed in ourselves: feeling ourselves in the presence of the thing that is separated from us. Kant locates the glass in the mind of the subject: as a disinterested liking or, in terms of the object, as a lack of purpose or aim. What this means is: in the aesthetic gaze, we do not consider the useful qualities of the thing (what could we use it for?) or its knowability (its position in the conceptual order of the intellect). We simply allow our feelings to move gently between pleasure and displeasure, and at most can share and communicate this with and to others. The museum is the traditional location of this gaze and it is no coincidence that at the time Kant was developing his aesthetic, the victory march of the museum was also already underway (Kohl 2003, 225–60; Hauser 2001, 87–99). Museums separated themselves from the courtly and ecclesiastical order and became facilities where modern society made valuable collectable items on the one hand unavailable and, on the other, freely accessible to the aesthetic gaze and to public communication. For these purposes, the objects were fetishised; i.e. in the museum they were: almost completely off limits for commodity circulation, withdrawn from practical utilisation and presented in a way fitting for the dominant cultural idea of distance, the aesthetic eye (while at the same time shutting down the other senses, especially that of touch). These operations unavoidably transform anything and everything into fetishes of the gaze.

We can see the difference to the forms of fetish in consumerism discussed above. The fetish concept could be applied like a shibboleth to almost all phenomena of use that are somehow ritualistic (the performance of the commodity) and have something to do with the worship, desire and fantasies of things or persons, or their vestimentary or thingly apparatuses. The exhibition “Wild: Fashion

Untamed”, in contrast, is interesting because the fetishes and idols of consumption change their ontological status by being translated into the museum. They are transferred from the fleeting circulation of commodities, glamour and conspicuous consumption into the sphere of the untouchable and inalienable, which in modern societies traditionally contains art works and in proto-economic cultures “inalienable and sacred things”. The fetishistic mechanism is doubled, so to speak, but not in the sense that superfetishes of consumption are created, but rather that things are taken out of what we have called “fetishism of the first order”. My argument is that museums (including museums of the everyday, of work, of technology, of traditional customs) and collections (including private ones) have this function. Museums are the places where modern society suspends the unconsciously and automatically operating universal fetishism of the commodity by doubling it, thereby making it manifest and enabling us to experience it aesthetically and cognitively reflect upon it. Museums make and expose the fetishes that we allow to control us outside the museum, without being able or permitted to realise that it is always in fact we ourselves who make these fetishes that control us. This complex link is staged by the museums in such a way that the fetishistic mechanism is presented interrupted, ‘behind glass walls’ and can thus be ‘viewed’ as such; it does not function economically, but aesthetically, without entering into any other form of commerce than that of signs and communication. The unconditional distance coupled with the preservation of the fetish’s performance transforms it into an untouchable element of an experience that the observer can only have with himself or herself. Insofar as museal things are fetishes of the first order, the Metropolitan Museum is in fact the counterplace of the Wall Street stock exchange.

In order to shed light on the structural opposition between the spaces of the inalienable and the spaces of circulation for modernity as well, we will once again return to the time around 1800. Goethe will provide us with an example to help us better understand what the function of spaces of the inalienable is in the phenomenon of the collection: it will become apparent that its function is *memory* and that this is the prerequisite of *reflexivity*. ‘Fetishism of the first order’ plays a significant role in this. We will then examine this phenomenon one more time in expanded cultural historical terms.

The aim here is of course not to portray ‘Goethe as a collector’.⁴⁵ The issue is solely the link between collecting and fetishism, which both have an important place in the culture of memory. In the piece “The Collector and his Circle” (1799), Goethe introduces a series of collectors who are all driven by fetishistic mecha-

45 Asman has already done this, in 1997, 119–177, and before her Trunz 1972, 13–61.

nisms. For example, realist paintings are painted in order to testify to the timeless presence of persons or things; yet these paintings all too often become documents of the transience of life and the disappearance of things. Some collectors are obsessed with small-format portraits of family and friends, while others insist on “life-size images” that portray people as though “in a mirror” (Goethe 1980, 34).⁴⁶ All the members of the family are painted with an “unbelievable fidelity”, as though the aim were to save a *vera icon* of each person (“a picture [...] full of nature and truth” *ibid.*, 35) for the kingdom of immortality. Even household objects are immortalised for eternity in paintings; no person is painted without things illustrating their character around them. Wax sculptures are also copied from plaster casts of living persons and given wigs and dressing gowns so that they appear as a “phantom” (*ibid.*, 37). Others collect portrait medallions, which are worn on the body like apotropaic fetishes (Asman 1997, 119–177). Collectors are hounded by a hidden *panic* about *decay over time*, which consumes everything. Collections are *fortifications* against conflicts in the family, contracts between generations, palliatives against the passing of time, magical substitutes of the absent and fetishes against death, medicine against a fear that seems to spread in secret. This threatening reverse of object relations, and this is my argument, is also the foundation of modern consumerism.

I will now present a striking case. A woman dies; her husband paints her lying in her coffin. Afterwards, he paints pictures of her belongings. “He often made little still-lives [sic] of her various effects which he carefully preserved. These he finished very precisely and presented them to [his dearest friends].”^{*} (Goethe 1980, 37) Mourning⁴⁷ is replaced with the process of saving the dead woman and everything she has touched in a *fetishistic image*. Just as in many African fetish practices, here the image fetish has the function of maintaining communication with the dead. Fetishes are also ways of coping with death. Even when she was alive, the painter painted his wife and daughter twice a year; this alone is a form of *death cult* of the living. Now the paintings become fully part of this cult of the dead. They are *memoria* transformed into still lifes, memories as *nature morte*, and supposedly banish the pain of separation with their silent presence. The painter collects his wife’s things in his paintings like relics. In doing so, he withdraws these things from daily use; they thereby leave the realm of the profane and enter into the realm of the sacred and magical. The painter lives on and yet remains connected to his dead wife in two forms of

⁴⁶ The references are to the current best edition of the text [which Böhme cites]: Goethe 1997.

^{*} The translator of Goethe’s account has “the friends he had made on his travels”, which is incorrect.

⁴⁷ Cf. Asman 1997, 132f., 152–154, who draws attention to this aspect.

time: one profane and historic, the other standing still and ritualised. Coping with this fear of separation and death is one of the most significant quasi-religious functions of fetishism: “The fetish itself – a photograph, a lock of hair, or whatever is chosen – becomes invested with presence, and so symbolically ‘stands in’ for absence or loss in the same way that the religious totem, for many people, represents a material presence of god.” (Gamman/Makinen 1994, 27)

In Goethe too, the painter’s painting-fetishes have an underlying relationship to death. “[...] And the last still-life that he painted consisted of objects that belonged to her, and which, chosen and arranged in a strange way, hinted at transitoriness and separation, and at permanence and reunion.” (Goethe 1980, 37) This seems to be a classical *vanitas* still life and yet it displays the paradoxical attempt of the painter to concentrate fully on the presence of the things, although he can only paint them as loss: in order to just manage to save them from this loss by fixing their transience. To do this, each thing must be turned into a fetish.

The second example of the passion for collecting and fetishism is taken from *Wilhelm Meister’s Journeyman Years*. During his travels, Wilhelm comes across a nameless collector who does not collect art works, antiques or paintings, but everyday objects, which he auratises:

Here you see how long something can last, and indeed one must see such things, as a counterbalance to all that is replaced and changes so rapidly in this world. This teakettle served my parents, and was a witness to our evening family gatherings; this copper fire screen still protects me from the fire which these massive fire tongs stir up, and thus it is with everything. [...] Loving attention to one’s possessions makes a man rich, in that he builds up a treasury of memories out of neutral things. I once knew a young man who, upon parting from the girl he loved, stole a pin of hers, fastened his neckcloth with it everyday, and brought this treasured and protected treasure back from a long journey of many years duration. (Goethe 1989, 195)

In order to understand primordial fetishes, we need to remember the following: 1. The collector justifiably emphasises the equal value of things that are fetishised. The value of the fetish is independent of the use value and the exchange value of something. 2. Things are only made valuable through a magical *allocation of meaning*, in one case for the collector’s concern with tradition and in the other for the lover’s erotic desire. 3. In Winnicott’s sense,⁴⁸ fetishes are *objects of transition* that help us cope with separation, here in one case to effect the ‘transition’ between the generations, which becomes necessary due to the

⁴⁸ Cf. Winnicott 1953, 88–97, as well as pp. 348–350 of this book.

death of the parents; on the other, to ‘bridge’ the separation between the two lovers. 4. In both cases, the fetishes function as a way of stopping decay over time: fetishised things form a ‘treasure of memories’, which is not inherent to these things, but rather ‘accumulates on’ them. This accumulation ‘on’ things generates *symbolic capital*, which is present like a halo around them: this is their ‘significance’ for the collector, through which he becomes ‘rich’ without being a rich man. 5. The collector and the lover both see that the ‘memory’ is more alive the more intensely they are connected with things and little *daily rituals* – thus the daily fastening of the “neckcloth” with his girlfriend’s pin. The ghost of memory is delicate, sensitive, ephemeral, because time, in the form of forgetting, constantly works against remembering. Things that once belonged to the *other* are therefore the best aids for remembering this *other*: that is what gives them their function as a fetish.

The collector lives in a house of *memorial signs*, an island not only in the blaze that destroyed the city, but also in the currents of time. This is an early form of a museum of the everyday. The collector struggles against the ‘coming and going’ of things with all his might. Wilhelm objects: “Despite all this [...] you will grant that there is no resisting the changes time brings about.” (Goethe 1989, 196) Fires, earthquakes, the passing of time – all of these, says the collector, are occurrences in nature. But he is a kind of *bringer of culture* in his lifelong battle against decay and for the eternal preservation of his inventory: “‘To be sure,’ the old man said, ‘but he who holds out the longest has also achieved something’.” (ibid.) Collecting and fetishism are always conservative; they function as curators of time.

Nonetheless, collections guarantee the thing they fight for as little as fetishes do: eternity. Still, through them and beyond them there is a kind of ‘contract between the generations’, which secures the inventory of the self against its own ruin beyond the threshold of death itself: “Indeed we are capable of preserving and securing things even beyond our own existence.” (ibid.) The collector’s house is a bulwark against death. Through the careful *archiving* of things, he secures the continuum of time, which death, like any loss, tears violently apart.⁴⁹ A collection magically attracts what it lacks and what belongs to it. The collection is not only an archive of memories, but also a magnetic field that captures floating things and signs and immobilises them, puts them in order and presents them clearly. That is why every collection “increase[s]” in such a “remarkable

⁴⁹ Jean Baudrillard works out this idea in his chapter “Collecting” (1996, 91–114).

fashion” (ibid.).⁵⁰ Although every collection is always incomplete, always a patchwork just “as things are for allegory from the beginning”, the collector never yields in the “struggle against dispersion”; for he is “right from the start, struck by the confusion, by the scatter, in which the things of the world are found.” (Benjamin 1927–1940/1999, 211) This is what defines the size and at the same time the futility and the passion of each collection.

The third example makes the connection between collection and time even clearer. It comes from Goethe’s autobiography *Truth and Poetry*:

To obviate this, I accustomed myself, in the first place, with everything that I possessed, to call to mind with pleasure how I came by it, from whom I received it, whether it was by way of present, exchange or purchase, or in any other manner. I have accustomed myself, in showing my collections, to mention the persons by whose means I obtained each article, nay, even to do justice to the occasion, to the accident, to the remotest cause and coincidence, by which things that are dear and of value to me have become mine. That which surrounds us thus receives a life; we see in it a spiritual combination, full of love, reminding us of its origin; and, by thus making past circumstance present to us, our momentary existence is elevated and enriched, the originators of the gifts rise repeatedly before the imagination, we connect with their image a pleasing remembrance, ingratitude becomes impossible and a return, on occasion, becomes easy and desirable. At the same time, we are led to the consideration of that which is not a possession palpable to the senses, and we love to recapitulate to whom our higher endowments are to be ascribed, and whence they take their date. (Goethe 1848, 355–356)

The theme here is the inconspicuous daily life of memory, which is not about significant events, nor about random associations. Goethe much rather describes a *culture of memory*, ritual practices through which he converts that which threatens to decay into a regular remembrance. Collections play an important role in this. For collections are the arsenals of the memory. The things that the collector gathers and puts into order around him are “dear and of value”. This ‘investment’ in things (cathexis) is what makes the collector often seem eccentric and sometimes foolish to an outsider. The *auratisation* and *memorial impregnation of things* transforms them from dead objects into living carriers of memory. The environment that surrounds the collector like a robe therefore “receives a life”. This *animation* is achieved through practiced rituals. The collector attaches invisible traces of the thing’s origin to it, which point to the people and the cir-

⁵⁰ Walter Benjamin also observes this: “But this is the way things are for the great collector. They strike him. How he himself pursues and encounters them, what changes in the ensemble of items are effected by a newly supervening item – all this shows him his affairs in constant flux.” (1927–1940/1999, 205) This is why the collector is an allegorist of time and of dream life (ibid., 205–206).

cumstances through which he became the owner of that item. This generates the ‘surplus value’ of memory. The interaction between things and memory produces a *historicity* of the thing itself, which adheres to it, but also a historicity of the social fabric in which they were positioned.

However insignificant things might be, as part of the collection they are more than just themselves. They ‘acquire’ a place in the series and chains, ideas and affinities, constellations and connections where they are located. They are thus no longer individual things, but ‘collector’s items’. This alone is a surplus value that things gain the moment they become elements placed in an ensemble. Whenever the collector ‘shows’ his things, he uses the “occasion” to remind himself where the things originated from. It is not just “his object but also [...] its entire past” that is important to the collector (Benjamin 1927–1940/1999, 207). In the orchestrated scene of ‘showing’, of talking, looking, touching, turning over, swapping, story telling; beneath this *exoteric* layer formed by accepted etiquette in the hospitable culture of collectors, is an *esoteric* layer of memorial. The objects are not only collector’s items, but become *media* too: they are the material ‘mediators’ of memory. As Goethe writes, “the originators of the gifts rise repeatedly before the imagination”. They are therefore the media of making present, of imagination. Thus things that appear dead acquire “a life”, through which the present moment is “elevated and enriched”. This exactly is the museum’s function.

The interweaving of equal parts of origin and commemoration on the backs of things is articulated in the formulation: “*do justice to*”. It expresses that the justice in remembering is neither an active nor a passive process, but both at the same time, a medium – in the sense of the modal of action in the Greek language; in the sense of balancing origin and commemoration, of ‘creating’ and ‘letting go’, of performance and event; and in the sense of the interweaving of the past and present moment envisioned in the mind. Media are defined by the effect whereby the imagined seems to appear from outside “before the imagination”. Media produce *objective fantasies*. In this sense, all memory that is not the pure memorising of data is a medial event. In this case, the collector’s things. Which means: collections and museums are the media of memory.

Only when things go through a double metamorphosis – from a functional object to a collector’s item and from a collector’s item to a medium of memory – does the collector experience its *justification*. Things are taken out of the category of “possession[s] palpable to the senses” and become the signs and media of the (imaginary) exchange between the collector and the giver, whoever it might have been who ‘gave’: accident, coincidence or a person. Collections only become ‘justified’ if they also exhibit that they are never simply acquisi-

tions, but also always gifts. Collections are “present [gifts], exchange and purchase” all at the same time.

What I am describing here is an *ideal* of how relationships to things should be: we fabricate a kind of *dignity* of things, by not taking them into our possession, but into our *care*. We offer them a backdrop for their appearance, where they become capable of mediating the past to us; just as they will later leave us again to continue weaving this web of memory somewhere else for someone else. We lend them an aura, which they then give to us. Goethe calls this ‘exchange’ justice.

The difference to fetishism of the second order, which governs consumption, is clearly recognisable here. It too is a medium, a battery of “life”, of forces, of the invisible and that which has passed. However, in its case the fetishised thing is not something taken into care, but an imperiously conquered and possessed thing. It too performs magic “before the imagination”; yet in such a way that the images of desire are only reflected back narcissistically. The collector is therefore only collecting himself, the things are an assembly of him, his harem and his thesaurus (Baudrillard 1996, 91ff.). The fetishism of consumption can only speak by silencing the past. The past must be silent in order for fetishism to work. The fetishist is not *permitted* to remember the trace of the fetish’s origin that sticks to it and constitutes it as such in the first place. The fetish “recapitulates” something forgotten – the original object of desire; yet this *must* remain opaque to the fetishist. Anyone who truly remembers what the commodity fetish represents in hidden form destroys it. For its foundation is fear, which must be repressed.

Everyday and consumer fetishism attaches desire to an endless chain of moments in time, to the trophies of things. We hunt things down so they can be swallowed by our insatiable desires, all the while remaining exposed to an anxiety that is born in the black hole of forgetting. The barriers to remembering that exist for the fetishist seal away the past and drive the fetishist into the jungle of all the things they do not yet have, but must have. This makes all things the same. The fetishistic consumer loses all sense of distinction (that is why they ‘have no taste’ for the rulers of the commodity regime). For them, things coagulate into a mass of the already assimilated, into an army of trophies that they exhibit in the name of their triumphant passion.

The collector and the museum on the other hand individualise and physiognomise things. By placing them under a taboo, they turn these things into gateways to the memories of the past, which is then supposed to reappear in the exhibited things. Compared to the modernity of thing-consumption, this seems like an archaic gesture. Collecting, according to Benjamin, means “receiving things into our space. We don’t displace our beings into theirs; they step into our

life” (1927–1940/1999, 206). Things in a collection then no longer obey the “fetish character of the commodity” but instead become “allegories”, parts of a “magic encyclopaedia” (ibid., 207). This ‘stepping in’ of things and the associated unfolding silent loquaciousness is closed off to the consumer and sexual fetishist. It would kill his passion. He needs the constant buzz of moving on to ever new conquests, although he does not notice the compulsive repetitiveness of them. Butterflies, stones, garters, locks of hair, portraits, paintings, leather lingerie, cameos, high-heeled shoes, silhouettes, feathers, shrunken heads, incunabula, old books, postcards, bras – it does not matter: the fetishist collects endless varieties of whatever his passion is and the more excessively he appropriates things, the more unrelentingly it bars his way to the representative whole that collectors and museums orientate themselves towards. Collections and museums want to be the media of “life”, the animation of the dead and the gone, which the present must remember in order not to be overwhelmed by them, while the fetishist’s trophies merely become “sad tropes”, too quickly spoiled signs of a never understood passion. That is why along with something sad, something restless clings to consumer fetishism, which distorts anything that reflects its origin. In contrast, the collection and the museum create a public space for fetishism to unfold. They thereby acquire the medial and magical power inherent to the fetish and use it for a culture of mentally reflected upon visual experiences and a culture of memory. The consumer and sexual fetish is however a circle that isolates the fetishist who has fallen prey to it and increasingly encloses them in social isolation the more they throw themselves lustfully into the endless current of circulation. Collections and museums, on the other hand, are a form that provides the silent appearance of things a stage, so that memory can become physiognomic through them and perhaps begin to articulate itself. Where possible, a culture of telling stories, communicative exchange and reportage, observation and recapitulation follows on from their form of showing. They are image and thought spaces. Inalienable things interrupt the *circulation of commodity exchange* in order to provide space for the *circulation of communication* and mental reflection. In a modern age that has intensified the circulation of commodities according to the laws of capitalist exploitation like no other epoch before, this makes them necessary counterpoints of reflexivity, a reflexivity that is no less unassailable than the circulation of commodities itself.

My aim here is not a history of collections and museums (on that cf. Grote 1994; Pomian 1994; Korff/Roth 1990; Fliedl 1997). Nonetheless, as Krzysztof Pomian has argued (1988), it should be remembered that sacred collections have always created an extraordinary world in opposition to the sphere of the profane, “from which all utility seems to be banished forever” (ibid., 14). A “confident contempt” for utility dominates the collection (ibid., 28). This makes collec-

tors' items very similar to holy things and works of art. A collection – no matter what type it is: the spoils of war, collections of relics, ecclesiastical and royal treasures, cabinets of curiosity, the museum – is a site of cult worship par excellence. The question is what general social function it fulfils in this role.

Pomian (1988) identifies burial objects as the oldest form of collections. They have been withdrawn from use in this world forever. A mystery is therefore created around graves, in order to protect them from looting and desecration. Burial objects are gifts for the dead, which are given up in exchange for their protection. The gifts should be viewed by the dead person as their property. “Because they had been made sacred for eternity, under no circumstances could they enter circulation again.” (ibid., 24) Instead the collection regulates the relationship and the communication between the living and the dead, this world and the next, the visible and the invisible. In this process, virtual contemplators are presupposed for the thing-gifts, a kind of audience. This turns burial objects and sacrificial offerings into exhibited collections. For Pomian, “the gathering and above all the manufacture of objects to represent the invisible [are signs] of the emergence of culture in the proper sense of the word” (ibid., 49). This is interesting for cultural theory insofar as, since the Neolithic age, the invisible has been represented by a group of special objects. On the one hand they are materially present, and on the other they are charged with invisible forces, spirits and powers from the beyond, in other words, they are magic. This means that the world of visible objects is divided into different sections: into functional objects (designed for work or consumption), into what Pomian calls “semiophores, objects without any use” (ibid., 49–51) and finally into the class of significant objects that are assigned value because of their nature, like precious metals, shells, feathers, etc.; man-made artefacts with aura like jewellery or later, works of art also belong to this class of objects. Rubbish does not belong to any of these categories (but through ritual procedures, semiophores can once again be generated from rubbish, e.g. relics, rarities⁵¹ or rubbish art; cf. Fehr 1996). The things that Pomian describes with the term “semiophores” are particularly interesting for us here: things that are the vessels of meaning. Semiophores (which we may also call fetishes or idols) are those culturally exceptional objects that enable, ensure and protect “communication between two worlds” (cf. Benjamin 1927–40/1999, 204), a kind of commerce between the spheres, because they have been removed from exchange, trade, work, consumption and more generally, time.

⁵¹ Benjamin examines this metamorphosis, whereby “poor, worthless things” are given value again, in Charles Dickens’ novel *The Old Curiosity Shop*: “Yet Dickens recognised that the possibility of transition and dialectical rescue was inherent to this world of things, this lost, rejected world [...]” (Benjamin 1927–1940/1999, 208)

This classification of things and the symbolic function of semiophores seem to be an almost unvarying cultural phenomenon and superhistorical structure. It is also valid for capitalist societies, which for this reason have made museums the “cult sites of the modern age” (Kohl 2003, 225 ff.). The other side of this is the global “scape of flows”, which was mythologised in film in Lang’s *Metropolis* and expressed in its early urban form, the department store, “a women’s paradise” (Émile Zola).⁵² Modern society is the machinery of a continuously accelerating circulation that swallows up more and more. This voraciousness, which was portrayed very early on by Zola in France and Robert Saudek with his novel *Dämon Berlin* [Demon Berlin] (ca. 1919) in Germany, contains a dynamic that is equally creative and destructive. We have seen that Schumpeter called this “creative destruction” and Benjamin “creative disorder” (1927–1940/1999, 211). However, an underlying fear of failure and loss, separation and downfall rumbles within this, should we not succeed in remaining valid and mobile, and in riding the waves of circulation, perhaps with the narcissistic grandiosity of the futurists. In museums and (private) collections the fear of collapse and destructive pathos are given a counterpart. People, groups, cities and states create spaces for the symbolic reassurance of themselves, for whom “dower [body-things]” (Mauss), “person-things” (Godelier), public group fetishes and sacred objects belonging to cities and states represent the foundation of identity (or are supposed to). As much as the objects in a collection are made visible in this process, they nonetheless serve the commerce with the invisible, with the personal and collective symbolic order, with cultural memory, with our origin in the growing kingdom of the dead and the past, which we cannot comprehend; they help us cope with our secret and sinister fantasies and nightmares, assure us of our values and goals, which are also so difficult to grasp, indeed they are the belief system of a culture, which the culture also needs when the gods are dead. Collections are the exterior appearance of the interior of a culture. And yet, there is a subtle sense of mourning that cannot be dispelled about collections and museums, which long ago became the machines of cultural consumption, a mourning which grows out of the tension between the immortalised things that we see and may contemplate, and our savage consumption of commodities, human beings and resources. Fetishism and the cult form of the collection, which envelop the collected things in aura and meaning, are the attempt to artificially, ritually construct permanence in spite of passing time, and a focus which allows mental reflection in spite of fragmenting space. The collection

52 Cf. Göhre 1907, 99 ff.; Sombart 1928; Stürzebecher 1979; Strohmeyer 1980; Colze 1989; Frei 1984; Gerlach 1988; Wolschke 2001.

seeks “the liberation of things from the drudgery of being useful” (Benjamin 1927–1940/1999, 209); that is their utopia and futility at the same time. “It is the deepest enchantment of the collector to enclose the particular item in a magic circle, where, as a last shudder runs through it (the shudder of being acquired), it turns to stone. Everything remembered, everything thought, everything conscious, becomes socle, frame, pedestal, seal of his possession.” (ibid., 205) With this last sentence, Benjamin has grasped the transition from the act of collecting to the collection and the museum. By erasing the traces of “drudgery” in things, the collection exposes in them the invisible traces of memory and reflection that can be read from them.

We are familiar with attacks on the museum and the fetishising worship of the old since the modern age, the futurist call for the bombing of Venice (“War is beautiful”, Marinetti), the contempt for Nike of Samothrace compared to a racing car (Marinetti 1966, 26). We have heard about the “relentless destruction of aura” (Benjamin 1936/1999, 231) in modern industrial societies based on serial production and reproducibility, which have destroyed “its basis in cult” (ibid., 220). We know about the repeated censure of the power of museums or Boris Groys’ assertion (1994, 1977) that collections generate the art they collect in the first place and not the other way around: that new works of art must conquer collections with great effort. The power of the art market is criticised, which has made museums, galleries and collectors subject to the harsh conditions of economics too. Yet it remains significant that even works of art that circulate the globe as commodities do this above all to get some distance from this traffic, although of course they also do it to generate profits – they do so in order to stop moving somewhere, to give us a sense of calm. For despite the disturbances, irritations and dissonances that they represent, they can only unfold into artworks if they have a quiet and calm space where nothing happens apart from them showing and making it possible to experience these disturbances, irritations and dissonances. Moreover, in spite of all these attacks, museums have continued to grow and spread across the world and the most significant new buildings among them are the jewels of contemporary architecture (Newhouse 2007). What is the purpose of all of it?

One cannot say for certain. But I believe that the more societies become dominated by neoliberal globalisation and digital immateriality, the more they need these zones where time has stood still, in which things – from an old European agricultural butter churn to a Pollock painting, from the Palaeolithic skull fragment to a Formula One racing car, from Art Nouveau tableware to Egyptian burial objects – retain a sphere of timelessness, which is opposed to the sphere of exchange, encircled by the *noli me tangere* of the museum’s order. Collected things are the transcendentals of modernity, the age which assumed it could do

without transcendence. In his essay “The Thing” (1954/2012, 5–22), Heidegger wrote that we live in an age in which both proximity and distance are being destroyed by space- and time-reducing transport and media technology, because as a result, everything “washes together” to form a uniform tone. Things withdrawn from our access in collections, in contrast, are removed to a distance from us, however near they may seem: this is what defines ‘aura’ according to Walter Benjamin (1936/1999, 216). Modernity, the age of mechanical reproduction, has however in no way lost the experience of aura. Through the strategy of collecting and museums, aura has in fact been strengthened – we are no less believing than medieval religious society. Fetishising things by assimilating them into collections is the desperate attempt to artificially ‘reconstruct’ aura now that its religious foundation has been lost. Aura is itself an artefact, but nonetheless not unauratic as a result. This helps us recognise retrospectively that in the premodern era too, the holy and the auratic were also always ‘fabricated’ (*factitius*) through sanctification, rites, processes of charging things with powers and symbolic operations. The aura had to be ‘maintained’ and ‘renewed’ in order not to lose or forget its power and significance. These characteristics apply equally to traditional fetish and idol worship. In sacro-cultural societies, ‘transcendence’ also had to be regularly generated and verified by experts. The transcendental is never something that is already transcendental by itself, but rather the *belief* must first be produced *that* it is. Museums and collections in modernity are therefore institutions for providing and securing transcendence. Like religions, they have very simple but fundamental functions that are very difficult to transfer elsewhere: they must ensure that there are extraordinary, imperishable values worth worshipping; that the fear of separation, destruction and death is given a significant and self-evident counterweight in immortal things; that there is a transpersonal connection between the generations that remains unbroken from ancient times into the future; that sense, meaning and identity are maintained in the cycle of the consumption of goods and signs; that things that are opposed or hostile to each other can coexist; that happiness is possible. Furthermore: fetishes and idols once again have the same functions. The apartments that fans fill with pictures, trophies, drawings of Madonna or Ronaldo; the cellars that collectors of model railways or mocca cups make into cult sites for their passion; the shelves and albums that lovers of first editions from the seventeenth century or stamps from a Pacific archipelago fill with them; the treasure chests where fetishists keep their booty of blood-red women’s shoes – all of these places are places of salvation and healing. Modernity does not seek salvation any less than any epoch before it. The transcendence it creates is not a sphere that floats above things, but one which takes a form and becomes powerful in and through them: this is what gives them their transcendental, fetishistic char-

acter, which is generated in collections or, conversely, through which the cult character of collections is produced.

Finally, the expansion of museums and collections today is proportionally related to the disappearance of things (Hauser 2001, 99–116). Removing things from the cycle of producing and consuming is the same as the fetishistic mechanism. In that sense, musealised objects inevitably display the structure of the fetish. When we collect things now that were still in use very recently, or turn what was just recently a factory into a museum, it is an indication of the acceleration of aging, yet in a certain sense also: the increasing speed of the aestheticisation of even those things that will become, or already are, rubbish. The more ephemeral things become in the one-way street from production to consumption and then rubbish, the bigger the need for conservation, immortalisation, preservation, restoration, exhibition gets, in short: the need for memory and its locus, the museum. The museum (of things, of everyday life, of technology) thus locates itself outside the economy. It serves to auratise things of utility, of consumption or the specially selected. Museums strive to work against rubbish. They follow the economy of the treasury. They accumulate disused, unproductive capital. They are sites of the memory of things, which disappear in order to counteract the fetishistic capitalisation of memory and implement strategies of saving the otherwise lost, which is then collected and assembled as symbolic capital. The museum as “cultural archive” (Boris Groys) is a space of sad farewells that we do not want to forget.

IV Fetishism, Sexuality and Psychoanalysis

A fetish is a story masquerading as an object.
(Robert J. Stoller 1985, 155)

1 Sexology and its mythical fathers

If you ask someone today what fetishism means to them, they will generally reply with answers that point to the area of sexual fetishism. However, in the history of science, this is in fact the most recently discovered addition to fetishism. Sexual fetishism's career first began in the 1880s, although the phenomenon of sexual fetishises and idols is ancient and, at least in literature, was already fully developed in the age when Portuguese missionaries in Africa lifted religious fetishism out of its terminological baptismal bath: the Renaissance (Böhme 2001). It can certainly be said that the conceptualisation of sexual fetishism happens strangely late. No doubt this is mainly linked to the fact that it was only in the 1880s that a science of sexuality really began to emerge in the first place. It is, however, more than just a coincidence that fetishism was conceived as a perversion precisely in the decade that in fashion history has been called "the most fetishistic decade in the history of Western costume": corset historian, David Kunzle, even speaks of "fashion and fetishism as one" (1982, 1).

In general, early sexologists and psychoanalysts, that is Sigmund Freud and his circle, were familiar with at least some religious studies and ethnographic research on fetishism. Fetishism was influenced by this in various ways: within the spectrum of sexual behaviour it appears 1. as an analogue to the worship of sacred objects in religion, especially the cult of relics (Binet, for example, argues this); 2. sexual fetishism is 'fundamentalised' in a similar way to religious fetishism: while religious fetishism often appears as the oldest stage of religion in general, and, in the 'higher stages of development' of civilisation, as the resilient core that is superstition, sexual fetishism is understood as the sexual aberration still most closely related to 'normal behaviour', out of which the whole range of perversions grows; 3. in sexology too, the collection and classification phase precedes the aetiological and therefore theory-led one (the latter occurs for the first time in psychoanalysis).

In the field of sexuality, fetishism is constructed as the paradigm of all perversions. Today it is clear that the sexological treatment of fetishism was stimulated and accompanied by various literary descriptions from Rousseau, Goethe, Balzac, Goncourt, Huysmans, Maupassant and Flaubert to Oscar Wilde, Sacher-

Masoch and Hofmannsthal (to say nothing of libertine and pornographic literature). Simpson (1982), Apter (1991), Garber (1992) and Ian (1993) have all shown this. Michel Foucault calls fetishism in this period a “model perversion”, which “served as the guiding thread for analysing all other deviations. In it one could clearly perceive the way in which the instinct became fastened to an object in accordance with an individual’s historical adherence and biological inadequacy” (1990, vol. 1, 154). In an exemplary fashion, fetishism demonstrates a refusal of the dictate to procreate and thus the perversion of the norm of marriage. The overestimation of the fetishised object, which belongs to the periphery of a person – like a shoe, a garter, hair, etc. – although the person themselves is not desired at all, is historically related to the fetishistic exterior of things that separated itself from use value in the world of commodities. Ultimately, the narcissistic fusion of the fetishist with their object represents an antisocial autarky, because it undermines the socialising function of sex with an equally archaic and infantile self-sufficiency. Just as the ethnologists saw African fetishism as unproductive, childish, primitive and worthless, doctors and psychologists in the late nineteenth century used the same attributes to construct sexual fetishism as perverse in the name of the bourgeois family. For the new biopolitics (Michel Foucault) that scientifically isolates and objectifies life in order to plan it, manage it and shape it strategically, for a biopolitics that sought to hunt down unproductive, degenerate, decadent and perverse sex from out of life’s dark corners, classify and rehabilitate it, fetishism is a subversion of biological responsibility, the responsibility that makes every person an individual and a (little) body politic in the first place.

The main forms of sex are not however discovered by sexology and psychoanalysis, but are instead descendents of libertine literature. The history of science is therefore preceded by a tableau of figures that one could in fact call the founding fathers of the modern discourse on sexuality: de Sade, Casanova, Don Juan, Sacher-Masoch and the anonymous Victorian, ‘Walter’.¹ This literature laid open the language of sex, without which its scientific discourse would have been unthinkable. However, this genealogy means that a great many phantasms have persisted in scholarship. The science of sexuality thus remained under the mythical spell of the very object it intended to analyse for an entire century. That ‘spell’ is the phallus, which also represents the symbolic counterpart to castration. Towards the end of the twentieth century, due to developments that are

¹ The first complete German translation of Walter’s writing is: *Walter* (anonymous) 1997. The English text was first published 1888–1892. The chronicles begin somewhere between 1825 and 1830. – Cf. Marcus 1966, 77–196.

partly taking place in science and partly in culture, this syndrome is (slowly) beginning to disappear. It is this long path that we wish to retrace.

The protagonist in Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's novel *Venus in Furs* (1870) displays all the traits of fetishism with a masochistic foundation. The dominatrix Wanda's 'equipment' is just as important to her submission-craving lover as her appearance: the expensive furs, white powder, Atlas silk, marble-white skin, muslin fabrics, red hair, green eyes, exotic slippers and the all-important set of whips, certain positions, such as placing her foot on her lover, her misty-eyed, intense stare, a range of accessories for her clothing, the lighting in the space, the bedroom, bathroom or dungeon furniture: all these thingly ensembles become extensions of the idol's body and therefore the fetishes that can represent it.² Masks, uniforms, fetishes, clothing, jewellery and accessories are all independently acting objects on the instinctual stage.³ Added to these is an abundance of expensive fetishes belonging to educated culture, which ennoble the couple's style and alleviates the latent shame they feel for the frowned-upon obsession that they pay homage to. By interweaving masochism with expensive cultural goods, the protagonist stages himself as a cultivated gentleman. The shameful of his masochistic obsession is combined with a bourgeois cultural recognisability. His lack of interest in the natural forms of Eros and also his preference for posturing conform to the dominant artificiality and theatricality of the dominant culture. Fetishism and idolatry create a passion for clothing and materials, makeup and gestures, that is not only in keeping with the taste for opulence of the time, but also the commodity fetishism linked to it, which was simultaneously being discovered by Marx.

Unlike Marx, who deciphers the secret of commodity exchange in fetishism, there is nothing concealed in Sacher-Masoch's camouflage, no secret in the fetishism, no original in the copies and replicas, no source text in the citations and no real origin of the desire. Sacher-Masoch is, unlike Marx or Freud, completely disinterested in revelation, although he does adopt a voyeuristic style by giving the reader a forbidden look behind the scenes in the theatre of love. Its staging follows the tone of the genre of seduction, indeed even the comedy and the travesty. The dark sides of obsession are made invisible. Throughout the novel, he alternates strangely between a humorous tone and counterpoints of devastating passion, which for an instant reveal a hidden fear. It is a game that in fact seeks to escape slavery with its dark lusts and tragic inescapability. The protagonists

² All these are topical attributes of the femme fatale. Cf. Rudloff 1987.

³ On the fetishes and paraphernalia in Sacher-Masoch cf. Koschorke 1988, 139 ff., as well as Deleuze 1997, here 185 ff.; Böhme 2003a; Weibel 2003.

are protected from utter destruction, which is played with in order to increase the excitement, by a semi-legal contract. Thus the author turns off into the wide narrative street of the humorous, which makes the lascivious and dungeon-like passion consumable for a bourgeois reading public.

There is a strong need for theatricality in sexual fetishism. It generates the significance of the equipment, the fabrics and the things that become performers on the masochistic stage. Things – fur, hair, clothing, colours, furniture, pictures, statues and whips – becoming the agents of a masochistic game corresponds to Marx's analysis. In Marx too, as we have seen, the point is that commodity fetishes become agents on the stage of social relationships and are given a kind of contractual form. This deforms the dynamics of power – or the Hegelian master-slave dialectic – or indeed: perverts it.

Both Krafft-Ebing and Freud elevate this structure to normality by portraying sadism and masochism as flanks of 'normal' sexuality and then define the gender order with them. This results in the conviction that sexuality can only be conceptualised by a man. In the world of sex, there is only male desire. The woman does not have her own desire. Jacques Lacan later ascribes this absurd idea to Freud's depth of intuition. As bizarre as this may be, the psychoanalytic 'fathers' therefore follow in the footsteps of the mythical founding figures of modern sex. All of them circle around a signifier, its presence or absence, in other words, around the problem of castration, which turns out to be *the* male problem. Women only play a supporting role in this.

Casanova is a man who chases the dream of proving himself as an inexhaustible phallic cavalier. For him, all women become performers of the desire that *he* causes in them. He always assumes that women do not desire anything but the phallus, whose unique owner he is. Like an obsession, Casanova must produce himself as a man between the thighs of women. He does not produce any offspring between her legs – that would be a banal surrender to the norm of procreation; instead he produces himself, which means he ensures that the fantasy of the all-pleasing phallus is maintained. He is nothing *but* this phallus. He identifies with a phallic narcissism as relentlessly as he does compulsively, which forces his poor body and the body of women to constantly perform. The phallus is the only actor on the stage – everything else is masquerade, hiding its appearance in order to allow his epiphany to radiate more brightly.

De Sade's libertines also produce endless series (and texts), always according to the same script (Barthes 1971/1989; Horkheimer/Adorno 1947/2002, 63–93). By defiling their victims, they demonstrate the autonomy of their "machines", which, by injuring the – mostly – female bodies, demonstrate their own boundless power. If Casanova feared the woman that does not desire him – a fear that made him a virtuoso of seduction – the fear of de Sade's libertines

stems from nature and women's power to procreate, which they can never compete with. They therefore become virtuosos of cruelty. One of the most unnerving scenes in de Sade is the ritual sewing up of the mother's genitals (*Philosophy in the Bedroom*, dialogue 8), who is then murdered. This demonstrates that there is no gender apart from the phallus and the endless stream of semen. Behind the sewn up, raped and executed mother, the fantasy of female nature appears, whose true infinity and creative power is unattainable for the libertine. This defilement turns into a sadistically violent act of vengeance that aims to rip to shreds the untouchable generativity of female nature – forever.

In contrast to Casanova, who must stylise himself as a pleaser of women, Don Juan is one of those seducers whose compulsive addiction to women never produces anything but victims, because every woman seduced by him is immediately worthless (Watt 1996). His betrayal occurs in the same moment as his triumph and the surrender of the woman. He can only prove himself as a man by being a traitor. The seducer and the traitor are the mirror image of the same figure. This was the reason why Søren Kierkegaard was so fascinated by Don Juan (Kierkegaard 1987, 45–135 and 301–446; cf. Haustedt 1992). Both Don Juan and Casanova represent different versions of what Freud and Lacan called the constitutional infidelity of the male, as though it were a law of nature. They represent the supplement to this infidelity that is “the universal tendency to debasement in the sphere of love” (SE XI 179–190), which turns all women who cannot play the saint into whores. The whore is the saint made to fall, the idol whose seduction makes phallic narcissism swell. As a whore, the woman is the insignificant shell of male self-affirmation, which can only last if the act of seduction and debasement is endlessly repeated, one woman after another. Freud and Lacan both also conventionalise this dynamic as the foundation of gender relations.

Walter, on the other hand, is a Victorian lord who gives up all other activities in order to do nothing but have sex. He too is a serial offender, yet in another register. Although he also exploits his social privileges, which he takes advantage of in the field of purchasable sex, his obsession is focused on other aspects. He is most aroused when allowed to investigate and *visually inspect* the women's genitals. He oculates the vulva. He wants to see what is inside. What he sees there remains empty for thousands of pages. Yet there are clues. For his second passion is secretly watching other couples copulating. But here he is only interested in the man's phallus. When he looks into a woman he wants to see... *nothing*. He is compelled to repeatedly assure himself that there is nothing there: that is the greatest favour a woman can grant him. He wants women to give him their castration as a gift, or more precisely, he purchases the sight of castration. Most of the women refuse to do this; the procedure requires a certain level of shame-

lessness. And what should they think of a client who only wants to see this gaping void anyway? One might say, philosophically: he longs to see chaos (chaos is gaping, yawning). He ritually exposes himself to this threat, against which he instantly erects his genitals.

This corresponds to the fact that while watching the copulating couples, he is especially aroused by men's huge apparatuses. In general, Walter is only interested in organs – in their complementary order: inside and outside, invisible and visible, fluid and hard, nothing and being. While the mother is sewn up in de Sade, with Walter all women are to be opened in order to establish by experiment that nothing is *there* – while it is *here*, the phallus he possesses. The lack of being in the woman reassures Walter of his own being. The sewn up woman in de Sade and the Walterian visual inspection of her vulva, which only ever reveals the folds, the hollow, the chasm: the zero of women is proven in both – thus affirming the one of the man. That is what the game is all about.

Sacher-Masoch, on the contrary, is more honest (if you can say that) than all the others, despite his rigid pattern of sexuality. For he never locates the imaginary phallus on himself (this is what produces his effeminacy). Because the phallus is always elsewhere and nowhere, and even where it is located, it must be acted out: by the dominatrix, the Jew, Apollo (the last two are rivals). Sacher-Masoch introduces castration to the phallic theatre of Casanova, de Sade, Don Juan and Walter. He reveals lack as the problem of a damaged male identity and all five men use women, as victims, service providers, actresses, as a cure for this.

The archaic primal mother with her super-potency in de Sade is turned into the services of a dominatrix in Sacher-Masoch. He reveals castration to be a humiliating wound, which must be either covered over by all means necessary or played out by all means necessary. Castration is the negative of the phallic. For all five men, this is in fact the real idol around which their sexual charades are performed. They all commit the worship of an idol, the idolatry of a super-human phantasm, a divine Priapus that provides them with emotional stability – otherwise they will plunge into the hell of castration. All power in both normal and perverse sex comes from this dichotomy, all violence and rape, all objectification and fetishisation. For this is how the absent phallus is forced to appear. That is how it appears, but it is only an appearance: and that is why all five men cannot stop. Nothing can affirm the phallus more than the sacrificial victim. That is why there is a compulsion to repeat in all perversions, but also why it is close to religion, the sacred and the liturgy, which all make the absent present.

Freud had good reason to portray “The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex” (SE XIX, 173–179) as a process of maturation. For the end of the Oedipus complex means leaving behind the narcissistic omnipotence of the phallus. This cre-

ates an opportunity to come to terms with the finite nature and vulnerability of one's own desires and one's own body. Jacques Lacan's view is very different: in his revision of Freud he re-establishes the "signification of the phallus" (2001, 215–222). He therefore prolongs the influence of the confused ideas and fantasies that, between Casanova, Don Juan, de Sade, Walter and Sacher-Masoch, kept modern sexuality under a fantastical spell. Lacan even exacerbates this dilemma by making the relationship to the phallus the ineluctable defining factor in being a subject for both genders. However, this is nothing but a legacy of the nineteenth century dressed up as a modern revision of psychoanalysis.

Perhaps the 'mythical fathers' of the male sex have already said everything there is to say. However, we must follow science's path, which took nearly one hundred years since sexology's inception in the 1880s to make possible a theoretical formulation of the centrality of the phallus fetish and thus fetishism, and to critically reflect on its own theory fetishism. Towards the end of the twentieth century, this syndrome begins to disappear: due to the cultural publicity of sex, the women's movement and the astounding spread of fetishism on all levels of culture.

2 Alfred Binet: the discovery

Alfred Binet (1857–1911) was the man who lit the first spark. In 1887, he published his groundbreaking study *Le Fétichisme dans l'amour* (1887/1888), which was almost immediately published in German by Max Dessoir (1888), was used by Krafft-Ebing and was still studied in depth by Freud. Since 1883, Binet had worked in Jean-Martin Charcot's neurological clinic at the Salpêtrière hospital (where Freud also spent time in 1885/1886) and had been director of the Laboratory for Physiological Psychology at the Sorbonne since 1894. In the beginning, he was working philosophically along the lines of Descartes and Condillac, psychologically with Charcot's ideas of suggestion and hypnosis, which he then broke with after moving to the Sorbonne. However, the fetishism study originates from the time when he was still working with Charcot. His theory centres on a 'hypnotic' link between the fetishist and the object. He focuses on case studies, that is, works in the narrative-biographic form with a phenomenological approach, inspired by literature, especially by Rousseau (Binet himself wrote a series of dramas). Indeed, Rousseau himself becomes the model example of the fetishistic masochist.

Binet also often refers to the religious studies scholar, Max Müller, whose concept of religious fetishism is very useful for a "genre of sexual perversion" (Binet 1887, 3). From Descartes and Condillac, Binet takes the associationist psy-

chological link between the idea and thing, which through an “insertion vicieuse” (the corrupt entrance or introduction of the object) interrupts the normal erotic context and reinitialises it. This idea is also argued by Havelock Ellis. Ellis presupposes a “sexual hyperesthesia” in all perversions. The roots of the arousal also condition the fetishistic symbolisation. This connects an idea, via an “automatic link of similarity or contiguity to an earlier such” idea (1907/1920, 229). Unexpected erotic experiences and chance biographical occurrences in childhood play an important role in this. Ethnographers noticed something similar in African fetishism and described it as the ‘first contact scene’. Binet regularly remarks that fetishistic traits are often mixed in with so-called normal object relations or that they cause love in the first place. Binet is cited by Havelock Ellis approvingly: “Normal love is the result of complicated fetishisms” (ibid., 221–222). Binet also calls this ‘little fetishism’. He emphasises that fetishistic traits can be found in every ‘normal’ love, because “le fétichisme ne se distingue donc de l’amour normal que par le degré” (Binet 1888, 82); it is the “germe dans l’amour normal” (ibid., 84). Binet sees the alloplastic energy of sex (“l’amour plastique”), which becomes the foundation for Freud’s theory of instincts, as the reason for the limitless malleability of desire and its objects. In perverse fetishism, however, the symphonic and polytheistic ensemble structure of desire ruptures. In perversion, the fetish becomes tyrannical and monotheistic (ibid., 84). It shatters the union of things and people and makes everything subject to a single regime. This remark is wonderful; because from the monotheistic perspective fetishism means precisely the obscene multiplication of worshipped objects and forces. Binet turns this relationship around: the ‘monotheistic’ fixation on a master trope of desire is perverse, while the constant metamorphosis of desire, attached to multiple objects, is ‘normal’. Freud will later agree with him on this. The fetishist ‘idolises’ *one* element of the object, so to speak, makes the particular absolute and loses contact with the whole by making the part the *absolutum*: this is monotheistic according to Binet. Binet has thus also discovered the *pars pro toto* structure of fetishism, only the fetishised ‘part’ does not stand ‘for’ the whole to which it refers, but instead tyrannically asserts that it is this whole itself.⁴

Binet shares the sexological interest in classification. It is no coincidence that Binet, who later created the intelligence test (the Binet-Simon scale), and his work are often seen in parallel to Cesare Lombroso’s taxonomy of crime and Alphonse Bertillon’s invention of the identity card and the fingerprint.

⁴ Havelock Ellis is also of this view. In complete fetishism, “the person as such is no longer sought, but merely viewed as an appendix to the symbol, or they completely recede into the background and only the symbol is the aim and it alone is fully sufficient to provide sexual satisfaction.” (Ellis 1907/1920, 135)

Binet classifies the unruly field of fetishes, just as Christoph Meiners had done before him, according to the species and varieties of the part objects to which the passion of the fetishist was linked. Foucault saw this mania in early sexology as part of the controlling surveillance biopolitics carried out on the population. With regard to Binet, however, this is truer of his later experimental psychology and intelligence research. The Binet of the Charcot period, full of the sense of material bodies' and things' suggestiveness, classifies fetishes according to body phenomena and parts like hair, smell, foot, voice, hand, etc. (1887, 14–21) or according to the peripheries of the female body, its clothing and accessories, such as handkerchiefs, nightgowns, hobnailed boots, white aprons, etc. (ibid., 35ff.). Binet clearly recognises that the 'normal' lover also values the part objects belonging to his beloved, who for him is a non-interchangeable, poly-aesthetic integral of all possible stimuli. The fetishist, on the other hand, under the spell of his absolute object, remains unmoved by 'all possible' stimuli. The lover is faithful to his beloved because and as long as she embodies 'all possible' stimuli, while the fetishist is faithful to the 'only possible' part object, which nevertheless can be serially reproduced. This is exactly what makes his behaviour perverse and, in terms of the politics of reproduction, sterile and degenerate.

According to Emily Apter, Binet "emphasised the fractal, metonymic nature of the fetish, religious or sexual. Whether inanimate (the nightcap, the apron, the nail of the shoe) or alive (red lips, an alluring curl of hair, an eye or mouth) the fetish was *partial*; a detached spot of intense visual cathexis [...] Binet placed the fetish in a signifying chain of synecdoches marking the displacement of genital desire to objects and hearkening back etiologically to a moment of sexual prehistory" (1991, 20).⁵ The fetish, Binet argues, is decontextualised, autonomised, 'cut off' from the ego of the other and shut away within the self. But is this still a synecdoche? Does fetishism work within the constructed system of rhetoric that also defines the language of love?

Let us leave that unanswered for now and from Binet take with us that: as concretistically as the fetishistic desire for an object might seem to 'stick' to an object, according to Binet it is in fact abstract and generalised, namely abstracted from the desired person and generalised with regard to its performative pattern. The fetishistic part object is always, everywhere and on every person 'the same' (Binet 1887, 66ff.) – a 'stage', on which not people appear, but soft, long, red gloves, the haptic qualities of furs, long black hair, a specific smell, a certain bodily fluid. But the fetish does not 'stand in' for the 'person' behind these things, who it actually 'means'. It does not follow the logic of representation.

5 Cf. also: North 1970, 20ff.; Pietz 1985, 9.

This insight from Binet is very useful. Freud was the first to pursue the question of what the fetish might then be the substitute of. Speaking in Binet's terms, one could say: the fact that in fetishism anything can become anything else and yet is ultimately fixed already points to a complex but close relationship to the rhetorical and the artistic. Binet comes close to this idea when he discusses Rousseau, his exemplary case (*ibid.*, 49 ff.). The degrading treading of his mistresses on him and his compulsion to be treated with contempt swings between foot fetishism and masochism. Rousseau thus resembles the formulaic pathos of Pygmalion in front his idol. Indeed, Rousseau dedicated a scenic poem "Pygmalion" (1771) to that model case of the ancient fetishistic sculptor. In 1763, Etienne Maurice Falconet gave the Pygmalionist idol cult that had bewitched Rousseau its classical sculptural expression.⁶ Binet uses Rousseau to draw conclusions about the relationship between perversion and writing. As an imaginary act, writing enables and intensifies perverse fantasies. Indeed, erotic language itself is a fetishisation, whatever perverse form of writing it takes. The art work *is* the fetish – and this makes a link between authorship, synecdochic rhetoric and fetishism. The 'distance from life' in fin-de-siècle literature especially can be explained from this vantage point and Binet describes this indirectly too. It consists of refusing biological responsibility and locking oneself away in an artificial kingdom of objects and precious things, which barricades itself against life and founds an autonomous aestheticism (Wilde, Huysmans, the young Hofmannsthal).

There are reasons that Binet became the man who initiated the psychological discourse on fetishism. In his analysis of Charcot's museum, Andreas Mayer believes it is more than a coincidence that Binet wrote his study of fetishism while working so close to Charcot (2001, 190). Mayer shows that Charcot's hypnosis experiments required a massive technical apparatus. There were close links between the clinic, the laboratory and the museum that Charcot had been building up since 1875. While experimental practices were carried out on female patients constantly suspected of faking it, transforming their hidden motives into verifiable, objective findings, a gigantic collection of documentary images of religious possession, photos of hysterical women and preserved anatomical parts grew around them, completely filling the display cases and walls. Charcot's museum resembled the 'savage' fetish huts where African priests had supposedly collected thousands of fetishistic objects. Charcot (and Binet) was principally concerned with arranging the setting for experimentally produced hallucina-

⁶ Etienne Maurice Falconet: *Pygmalion*. 1763. Baltimore, Walters Art Gallery. 58 cm high. On this see: Diderot 1967, vol. 1, 468–470.

tions, in which the female patients automatically revealed their inner world to the outside and thus the laboratory's observation room – for the purpose of 'objective' documentation, which in turn made its way into the museum. The therapists were also often integrated into this process when they were made into erotically, libidinally charged objects by the female patients, either as entire persons or merely as body parts (or sculptures from the collection). Andreas Mayer calls this kind of outwardly projected object relation fetishistic (Mayer 2001, 186 ff.).

As correct as this is, he nonetheless overlooks that these experimental settings do not 'unmask' the patients as fetishists by inducing them to reveal the truth despite their attempts to deceive, but rather that it is the doctors themselves, not just in their mania for collection, but also in the therapeutic context, who have succumbed to fetishistic object relations – and then project it onto the female patients. By making the patient a fetishist through his experiments, the doctor reveals himself to be the real fetishist. Mayer's observations on the interior of Freud's office at 19 Berggasse, which, according to him, at the end of the 1890s looked more like an "archaeological archive" than a psychoacoustic laboratory, have similar implications: Freud filled his office with suggestive objects in order to awaken the fantasies and associations of his patients. Freud then linked these 'spontaneous feelings' towards the objects back to himself: as the patient's transference. But what has been overlooked regarding this manoeuvre is that Freud could only have viewed his patients' fantasies about the things in his room as being aimed at him if he had projected 'his own self' onto these things himself: Freud, just like Charcot, fetishised himself in his relationship with his patients. The lifeless things on the walls, in glass cases, on the table, in display cabinets and cupboards, become Freud's masks, loaded with aura, silent signs of a magical object relation between the therapist and the patient. Here, for the first time, we encounter evidence that psychoanalysis itself could have in fact produced the very fetishism that it saw its vocation to treat.

3 Richard Krafft-Ebing: collections of fetishists

The mania for classification is particularly strong in Richard Krafft-Ebing (1840 – 1902), who in his *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886)⁷ presented a catalogue of perversions and fetishism. Sexology had an exorcistic zeal for naming, distinguishing

7 [Böhme cites] Krafft-Ebing 1912 (= new imprint of the 14th edition ed. by Alfred Fuchs, 1912) [The 1906 English edition cited is based on the 12th German edition.]

and listing the symptoms of perversions in a complete record, in order to then subsequently, if not exclude them, cure them in therapy. The first edition from 1886 was a thin volume of 110 pages and contained neither the term fetishism, nor sadism or masochism, which first appear in the sixth edition (1891) and from then on form the main section of the “parasthesias” or perversions.⁸

Although Krafft-Ebing presupposes an equivalence between religious and sexual fetishism (1906, 8–11), he does not have a very deep knowledge of the fetish concept’s origin in religious studies; or rather, although he knew about it, he adopted Binet’s version of it wholesale (including the references to Max Müller; Krafft-Ebing 1906, 17–19). Krafft-Ebing understands fetishes as “sign [s]”, which regulate the “relationship between the notion itself and the parts thereof” (ibid., 18), i.e. it is a *pars pro toto* relation. It is sexual because the “visual memory” of the fetish causes stereotypical sexual arousal. The random association between thing, memory and arousal in the fetish already asserted by Binet leads Krafft-Ebing back to the idea that the fetish is “a distinctive mark [that...] can only be of an individual character [...], which appears incomprehensible or silly to others”. The sexual fetishist “worships” a true cult, which drives the exalted subject to a state of “pronounced psychical anomaly” (ibid., 19).

For this reason it cannot be understood as “real love”, which venerates the “entire person” (ibid., 20): the fetishist makes himself perverse by deviating from this norm. Fetishism is the only sexual practice that proves the “moral degeneration of public life [or the race]” in an exemplary fashion. This confirms fetishism’s status as the ‘leading perversion’ in early sexology. In the background of their investigations into sex, sex scholars weave together two of the biggest delusions of the nineteenth century: that of hereditary physiological devolution and moral degeneration. These figures of fear are what motivate the recording of every single occurrence of pathological sex. Its conscious classification

⁸ While in French literature ‘sadism’, “so named from the notorious Marquis de Sade”, has been “applied” as the name for what is known as “active algolagny” (A. v. Schrenck-Notzing) in Germany, the term ‘masochism’ is used by Krafft-Ebing in reference to the “revered author” who “frequently made this perversion, which up to this time was quite unknown to the scientific world as such, the substratum of his writings” (1906, 80 and 132). In the sixth edition, fetishism is covered in only nine pages, obviously after becoming aware of Binet’s initial study. What is interesting is that compared to all other phenomena of psychopathological sexuality, fetishism experiences the fastest growth in the subsequent editions: from nine pages (sixth edition) to thirty-six pages (eighth edition 1898) and finally 48 pages (twelfth and final edition revised by Krafft-Ebing, 1902). While fetishism had quantitatively languished far behind sadism and masochism in the sixth edition, by the end it had climbed to first place in the rank of perversions. Another significant change: from the eighth edition onwards, three sections on fetishism are added to the introductory chapter – as the only example of perversions.

works as a palliative against the decadence of ethnic vitality. Science is the war against it. Again and again, Krafft-Ebing formulates the “norm” of sexual behaviour, according to which marriage and the order of gender represent an institutionalised function of the “reproduction of the human race”. That is why individual desires are the potential enemy of biopolitical duty. It is therefore evident from his definition of fetishism that it is mainly constructed as pathological because it refuses to carry out the duty of procreation:

Fetichism [sic] invests imaginary presentations of separate parts of the body or portions of raiment of the opposite sex, or even simply clothing-material, with voluptuous sensations. The pathological aspect of this manifestation may be deduced from the fact that fetichism of parts of the body never stands in direct relation to sex, that it concentrates the whole sexual interest in the one part extracted from the entire body. As a rule, when the individual fetish is absent coitus becomes impossible or can only be managed under the influence of the respective imaginary presentation, and even then grants no gratification. Its pathological condition is strongly accentuated by the circumstance that the fetishist does not find gratification in coitus itself, but rather in the manipulation of that portion of the body or that object which forms the interesting and effective fetich. (Krafft-Ebing 1912, 53–54)⁹

However, Krafft-Ebing also identifies fetishism as a hybrid form of normal sexuality. Here too we find the sexual investment of body parts and accessories, e. g. when lovers are separated and use handkerchiefs, flowers, etc. as “mnemonic symbols of the beloved person – absent or dead – whose whole personality is reproduced by them”. For the fetishist, on the contrary, “the fetich constitutes the entire content of his idea” (1906, 221). He denies every reference to the person the fetish is linked to, which inverts the *pars pro toto* relation that the lonely lover makes use of: the part is the whole. “Pathological erotic fetishism”, however, “does not confine itself to certain parts of the body alone, but it is even extended to inanimate objects, which, however, are almost always articles of female wearing-apparel, and thus stand in close relation with the female person.” (ibid., 219) “Here the abnormality consists only in the fact that the whole sexual interest is concentrated on the impression made by a part of the person of the opposite sex, so that all other impressions fade and become more or less indifferent.” (ibid., 219–220) The fetishist is therefore not a “*mon-*

⁹ On the one hand, Krafft-Ebing identifies a tendency in women to sexually charge their appearance through clothing, toiletries, hairstyles, makeup, etc. (1906, 16, 21). On the other hand, he only identifies fetishistic perversions in men (women are *terra incognita*, ibid., 23). And because men perceive women sexually in any case, a trap for perversions in the conventional gender order is thus already set: women’s fashionable dress inadvertently increases the danger of the fetishisation of some part of her body, dolled-up to heighten her attraction, or the fashionable accessories themselves. Terrible stimulants for hungry perversion!

strum per excessum, like the sadist or the masochist, but a *monstrum per defectum*” (ibid., 220). The fetishist has veered away from the logic of coital desire, the family and reproduction, and locks himself away in the abject world of his fetish collections. Krafft-Ebing (like the ethnographers) actually does describe fetishists’ passion for collecting, who, sometimes through criminal means, build collections of handkerchiefs, shoes, underwear or stolen braided hair (on shoe and corset fetishism, cf. Steele 1996, 61–118).

In aetiological terms, along with it being hereditary, Krafft-Ebing sees a kind of traumatisation as the cause of fetishism. This corresponds to the ethnologists’ first contact theory. He concludes that “in the life of every fetishist there may be assumed to have been some event which determined the association of lustful feeling with the single impression” (Krafft-Ebing 1906, 222). The object is arbitrary, but henceforth fixed. There is “a simultaneous coincidence of the first sexual citation and an absolutely heterogeneous impression” (ibid., 268), and thus “the object of fetishism may also be found in a thing which only by sheer accident stands in relation to the body of woman” (ibid., 280). This prefigures the Freudian idea of the infantile fixation on an initial object. In development post-puberty, it is decisive that a desired object is “associated” with the primary object (ibid., 222); this corresponds to the Cartesian theory of association, which Binet also used (Descartes 1648/1989, art. 14–16, 26–27). The fixation of libidinous energies on the fetish leads to “psychical impotence” (Krafft-Ebing 1906, 220). This impotence features in many of the cases he describes. Coitus is only possible when some kind of relationship to the fetish object is successfully established; otherwise touching the object or even the mere sight of it is enough to cause ejaculation.

4 Excursus on the rhetorical form of fetishism

In American research particularly, fetishistic image and language forms in fetishism are described in rhetorical terms as synecdoche. As the reader may have noticed, this does not apply to Krafft-Ebing and Binet. We will propose a different argument.

The surface of bodies and clothing are an enormous playground for the erotic gaze. From hair accessories to fans and the foot, anything can become a signifier of desire: it becomes an erotic sign. A scarf or a garter becomes “the promise of use value” (W.F. Haug), becomes the signal of a lust that is represented in anticipation in this sign. Thus ‘I’ read the object transformed into a sign, which now precisely no longer ‘means’ ‘protection from cold wind’ or ‘keeping up a stocking’ – that is their thingly function. Instead, in the erotic reading, things be-

come part of a semantics of fantasy: this semantics mainly refers back ‘to myself’, as it was ‘me’ who tore the things out of their functional context, invested them with erotic energy and then withdrew double the amount again – that is the wonder of surplus value. The whole thing is an act of projection and yet more than just a projection: for I get the projected *desire* back as *lust*. The erotic signifier – garter, scarf – are switches for erotic power currents. Things play their part in this erotic game too though; because scarves and garters are often not produced in order to keep someone warm or keep up their stockings, but also to provide a stage for the gaze. We all know that this belongs to the theatre of sex.

Shifting is characteristic of the erotic reading of bodies and clothing. I mentioned a playground. The erotic gaze does not follow a line (like reading a book), instead it darts around, jumps, wanders, pauses, insists, creeps, immerses itself, etc. One can record this eye-movement graphically (eye tracking). This results in areas of concentrated focus and areas of looser focus, clusters and entanglements of the point of the gaze that show the signifiers of the gaze.

Speaking in the terminology of rhetoric, the signifiers of the erotic gaze are metonyms: the surfaces of bodies and clothing form a syntagmatic axis, as Roman Jakobson says, along which the reading eye moves. This movement is a forward propulsion from one signifier to the other, from this one to the next... Each time, the eye stops at the signifier for a moment, but the signifier never becomes the signified of all lust; and so the erotic signifier piques the desire to the same degree as it calls up lust. There is therefore no end to this, instead the signifiers are lightly touched upon and then this is repeated. The repetitions do not prevent the erotic readings from forming an endless chain.

The fetishistic gaze, on the other hand, selects one and precisely that one sexual signifier. This signifier is a part of the whole – and in this sense a *pars pro toto* in rhetorical terms: a synecdoche. But the fetishist’s behaviour is different to synecdoche: the part that represents the whole makes the whole superfluous. The fetishist selects his paradigm from the dictionary of sex and then throws the dictionary away. The fetish is therefore not a *pars pro toto* (the part stands for the whole), but a *pars in loco totius* (the part in place of the whole).

The borderline of perversion is drawn between the two. This is already evident in the “blasons anatomiques” of the Renaissance (Böhme 2001). Synecdoche is a figure of selective investment with meaning, in which a value is produced that in fact does not need to be singular as in a successful metaphor, but which can be shifted and serially reproduced (Jakobson 1971, 90–96): your nipple is a cherry a raspberry a marble a lump of sugar a poppy leaf... This is how the erotic gaze delights itself: it shifts the focus from part to part on the surface of the woman’s body until, in the process of wandering around

the body from head to toe, from hair accessory via clothing to the shoes, the desire is perhaps synthesised. The difference is that the body fragments remain bound to the person in this process: the person is loved by looking at his or her parts. Yet *the type* of synecdoche that is significant in fetishism (*pars in loco totius*) unites characteristics of metaphor *and* metonymy, of concentration *and* shifting. Fetishistic synecdoche is a figure through which the signifier completely substitutes the object it refers to, thereby becoming independent of this object. The selection of *one* signifier is final, 'fatal'. One can therefore call fetishism, to use a phrase coined by Jean Baudrillard, a 'fatal strategy': it is a targeted, intentional action and at the same time it is 'fatal', thoroughly saturated in fate: a kind of paradoxical behaviour.

Let me give some examples: every fetish is, just like a relic or an image of a saint, a 'significant' fragment. Once the shoe fetishist has selected his sexual signifier once and for all from the universe of all possible sexual signifiers in a kind of primal scene, from then on the magical substance can fill all shoes that fulfil the specific optical-tactical-olfactory set of requirements, which makes this shoe and this one and this one and this one... the object of all desires. This results in the seriality and stereotypical quality of niche pornography. It is no different from the medieval serial production of a potent statue of Mary or of relics, devotional objects and votive offerings (Beck/Bredenkamp 1997; cf. also Bredenkamp 1992). Rhetorically, they function as synecdoche, from an ethnological perspective as fetish magic, the power of which consists of the substitution of the original by the representative and the representative of the representative. The analogy and difference that fetishism displays in relation to the three forms of metaphor, metonymy and synecdoche proves that it is a rhetorical figure *sui generis*. Fetishism is a unique type in the universe of symbolic forms.

Fetishistic synecdoche describes the mechanism through which the first encounter scene, which welds the fetishist to his object, is made mobile. This causes – and everything depends on this – an uninterrupted self-transforming circulation of a somehow sacred substance – *mana*, *orenda*, the divine, dead ancestors, the desired object, the worshipped idol. What is important in this process is the form of compromise. It marks the absence of the initial object, which is often subject to amnesia, but at the same time forces the absent, as a screen memory, into a serially extendable presence – in every new fetish shoe the repressed scene from which the arousing magic once originated is once again called up. The agitation of every erotic gaze can also be found in the fetishist: in the obsession with making a perfect collection of all varieties of the fetishistic object available to them.

The figure of prosopopoeia, made prominent again by Paul de Man, is also quite close to synecdoche.¹⁰ It means that the dead, the absent or also things can be given a voice like that of a person, which is physiognomic and pathognomonic, and therefore follows the rules of performance or representation (*fictio personae*). Prosopopoeia functions synecdochally, insofar as it is the voice that calls up the *absent other* in the *name* of this other and therefore is fully entitled to represent and present the full significance of this other. What is important for the genesis of the fetish is that something with no voice cannot carry any meaning or signs, is dumb and opaque, in other words, basically dead – prosopopoeia therefore gives this nameless *stuff* a voice and significance. This occurs in fetishism just as it does with medieval wax idols, in the creation of cult objects and in the passion of collecting – and ultimately also in aesthetic production. In this sense, it is the legendary sculptor Pygmalion (Ovid: *Metamorphoses* X, lines 243–297) who creates the myth of the art work, thereby becoming a fetish worshipper – or to put it more loftily: Pygmalion allows the ivory Venus to act according to the model of prosopopoeia.¹¹ This is always about overcoming death or the dead (things) that mark themselves as absent and a void. Fetishism can thus be described as an animating force that is taken from a memory that masks its origin and yet in the fetish becomes an event in the here and now. This is why every fetish has an *intermediate form of existence*, which swings between being dead and vital presence, between the primal scene and memory, between thing and meaning, between loss and lust.

Of course, Krafft-Ebing was nowhere near thoughts like these. Freud was the first to bring some clarity to this murky relationship. Along with his work in classification and the thesis of traumatic fixation, Krafft-Ebing's importance lies above all in highlighting the parallel between sexual fetishism and religious fetishism in Africa. The same structural forces that ethnographers had believed for centuries to have identified in the Africans are constitutive in fetishistic perversions: the first encounter, chance, fixed association, desire and thing, the peculiar timelessness of the fetish object, the binding of subjective energies to the same and the endless seriality of the fetish once the genre has been fixed. Ever since fetishism was implanted into the market economy by Marx, sexual fetishism has also seemed to be ruled by the same structure. The fetish reappears in both cores of European culture: in the commodity and in the subject. This is

¹⁰ Cf. de Man 1984, here 75 f. De Man also reads the Pygmalion myth according to the model of prosopopoeia in *ibid.*: 1979. Cf. also: Müllder-Bach 1997, here 272, 297; Menke 2000.

¹¹ On Pygmalion cf. Mayer/Neumann 1997 (with a comprehensive bibliography).

what Freud will call the “internal foreign territory” (SE XXII, 57).¹² One can therefore assert that, after the publication of the first volume of *Capital* in 1867 and the publication of the *Psychopathia Sexualis*, the model of fetishism is fixed, almost irrevocably, for the next one hundred years. As a model for interpreting European culture, fetishism is a nineteenth-century invention.

5 Sigmund Freud: winding paths to fetishism

Freud did not dedicate a single study to fetishism as he did for other phenomena – for example melancholy or masochism. However, when one examines all the sources, beginning with *Three Essays on Sexuality* from 1905 and up to the fragment “Splitting of the Ego in the Process of Defence” from 1937/1938, it is safe to say that fetishism is a central concept for Freud. A confirmation of his remark from 1905: “No other variation of the sexual instinct that borders on the pathological can lay so much claim to our interest as this one, such is the peculiarity of the phenomena to which it gives rise.” (SE VII, 153) In the beginning, Freud depends quite significantly on Binet and Krafft-Ebing (and to lesser extent on August Forel and Iwan Bloch). Yet in the process of his reading of ethnological research for *Totem and Taboo* (1912/1913), he became aware of the cultural universality of fetishism. He was not familiar with Marx’s commodity fetishism however. Thanks to Ernest Jones, we know of two further lectures on fetishism, unpublished in Freud’s lifetime, one of which turned up in his estate.¹³ I will first outline the complicated genesis of Freud’s concept of fetish using the various sources, before a more systematic abstraction can be attempted.¹⁴

From the very start, Freud leaves behind the principle, widespread in ethnography and sexology, that fetishism should be classified according to the objects toward which the fetishising investment of energies orientates itself. He draws this conclusion from the frequently made observation that the object is arbitrary for fetishistic lust (for the fetishist the opposite is true: the object is essential,

¹² The Freud citations [by Böhme] follow the *Studienausgabe* [student’s edition] in 10 volumes, with supplementary volumes. Ed. by A. Mitscherlich, A. Richards, J. Strachey. Frankfurt am Main: 1969–1979. [Translations follow the English standard edition edited by James Strachey. London: 1966–1974. Abbreviated to SE + Roman volume number + page number]. Any other citations from Freud will be referenced separately.

¹³ Freud 1909/1992. – Cf. Jones 1955–1972, vol. 2, 332, 342–343. In the latter entry, Jones provides a summary of the previously unknown lecture on foot fetishism from the 11th of March 1914.

¹⁴ A good introduction to Freud’s theory of fetish can be found in Smirnoff 1972 and Dorey 1972. See also: Gamman/Makinen 1994, 37–44.

while everything else is arbitrary). Furthermore, Freud avoids the method common among ethnologists and sexologists of collecting as many cases as possible. This obsessive collecting by scholars itself demonstrates fetishistic traits (which also applies to all collections). Both of Freud's decisions are a result of the fact that his interest is in the aetiology of fetishism. Because the fetish conceals a dark past, his psychoanalytical efforts aim to reveal precisely this past. Freud is not interested in putting together an imaginary museum of all possible fetishes.

The earliest discussion of fetishism can be found in the *Three Essays on Sexuality* (1905) under the heading "Unsuitable Substitutes for the Sexual Object". The fetish is 'unsuitable' for the 'normal' sexual act; it 'replaces' the object required for the sexual act: the female genitals. I say this because, in the list of "Sexual Aberrances", there is no mention of women; in Freud (as also already in Krafft-Ebing), fetishism is always masculine. Apparently basically nothing is known about female "aberrances". According to Freud, because of the "stunting effect of civilised conditions" and women's "conventional secretiveness and insincerity", the female "erotic life" "is still veiled in an impenetrable obscurity" (SE VII, 151). Freud therefore shares stereotypical prejudices with the sexologists: heterosexual coitus is 'normal'; fetishism can be explained with the thesis of substitution; only the male sex can be discussed; female sexuality is a *terra incognita* (dark continent). A trait therefore emerges here, which still dominates in the recent generation of psychoanalysts, before the question of forms of female fetishism has ever even been asked: even long after the Second World War, fetishism has exclusively masculine connotations. However, that does not prevent it from being universalised in both ethnology and psychoanalysis. It is Naomi Schor, building on the work of Sarah Kofman (1980), who first fundamentally disputes that "fetishism is the male perversion par excellence" and that "female fetishism is [...] an oxymoron" (Schor 1985, 303). Emily Apter (1991) cuts straight to the chase and gives her important study the title *Feminizing the Fetish*. I do not intend to discuss this work here; I merely wish to draw attention to the fact that, from the beginning, the discussion in psychoanalysis was one based on a conventional gender order and the equation of normal sex with coitus from the male perspective. This has consequences right up until Lacan, indeed they are even exacerbated by him. Just as the Europeans once believed to be penetrating the African continent with the 'white' concept of the fetish, the semantics of which came from idol worship in the Europeans' own culture, so too is the relation in sexual fetishism: the fetishism investigated in men's 'own' behaviour is ultimately extended to the "still [...] impenetrable darkness" of female sexuality.

It is interesting that Freud, in a similar way to Marx, situates fetishism within a value system. However, his concern is not the tension between economic value

and the false appearance of commodities, but instead the value added to an object through sexual desire: this results in the “overvaluation” (SE VII, 150) of the object. Smirnoff speaks of an “economic understanding of sexual intercourse to the extent that it truly becomes a stock exchange of value”; the fetish is a “security bond” for the “solvency” of the unstable subject (1972, 77, 104). Like in Marx, where the theatricalisation of the commodity leads to an overvaluation of the thing disguised in the false appearance of the commodity, desire “spreads over the psychological sphere” and envelops the desired object in a nimbus, which displays itself as an “intellectual infatuation” (that is, his powers of judgement are weakened) [...] as well as the latter’s judgements with credulity” (SE VII, 150) towards the object. This overestimation is “psychologically essential” (SE VII, 154) for ‘love’ to be triggered at all. In this sense, all love is fetishistic, namely in the sense of the perversion of value that had already outraged the ethnologists and which drove Marx to write his political economy. “Sexual overvaluation” is the normal insanity of love – just as the ‘overvaluation of commodities’ is normal pathology of capitalism.

Freud suggests what the political consequences of ‘love as overestimation’ might be; it would be “an important, if not the most fundamental, source of *authority*” (SE VII, 150). No less than Marxian commodity fetishism, Freudian sexuality works as a ‘delusion that weakens judgement’, which can form the basis of authoritarian systems. There is no reciprocity and no democracy in the kingdom of the fetish – neither in sexual nor commodity fetishism. This insight is produced by a concept of fetishism that the ethnographers had already insinuated might be based on exploitation, and which Binet assumed functioned in a monophonic and tyrannical way.

Conventional sexual overvaluation works in two different ways: 1. It frees itself from the “restriction” to the “actual genitals” and extends “to the whole body”; and 2. it “extends to everything that is associated with it [the love object]” (SE VII, 154), and therefore attains a comprehensive form: it is not only the genitals that ‘stimulate’, but also the hair, the smell, the foot, the breast, along with the ‘packaging’, that is, clothing, jewellery, habitus, as well as the personal characteristics of the love object – already we have the ‘enslaved’ lover who has succumbed to overestimation. This ‘comprehensive’ form of desire is another version of what Binet called symphonic desire. This already concludes our brief summary of this terribly prosaic understanding of love, as is to be expected of Freud.

It has implications for the concept of fetishism. If it is ‘normal’ that every body part or thing associated with desire in fact refers to the “actual genitals”, then there is also a little bit of ‘normal’ fetishism in it and this always becomes evident when – for example during a brief separation – desire “transgresses” to a “completely inappropriate” thing as its “normal sexual object”. Freud cites

Goethe: “Get me a kerchief from her breast,/A garter that her knee has pressed!” (*Faust I*, verse 2661–2662) Normal fetishistic desire is a shifting of the ‘singular’ onto ‘anything at all’. And then, when Mephisto promises to present her that very day, Faust also cries, with a clarity we can be grateful for: “And shall I see her? Possess her?” (*ibid.*, verse 2667). For Faust, the “kerchief” and the “garter” really are only a metonymy for the vagina. In this sense, Faust and Freud are radical proponents of sexual prose: any poetisation of the sexual object, even when it is “entirely unsuited to serve the normal sexual aim” (SE VII, 153), exaggerates the real value of what is desired. If the main aim here is the reciprocal use of the genitals and everything else is nothing but rubbish produced by overvaluation, then we have here an understanding of sex that was common in pornographic literature since the eighteenth century – one that served libertine gentlemen.

Against this background, fetishism is an erotic and semiotic “aberrance” from the proper sexual object. This is “substituted” by and “attached” to “some part of the body [...] which is in general inappropriate for sexual purposes [...] or some inanimate object”, so that the fetish “becomes detached itself from a particular individual” (SE VII, 153–154) and becomes the sole authority (the tyrannical in Binet). Freud evaluates this as a sign of “weakness in judgement”, which may remind one of Africa: “Such substitutes are with some justice likened to the fetishes in which savages believe their gods are embodied.” (SE VII, 153) Fetishism is the Africa within the subject. And in the form of perverts, the savages are among the Europeans.

Freud’s comments on the fetish as the carrier of *unconscious* memories are also important. Here, Freud goes back to Binet, who also refers to scenes from childhood that are replayed in fetishism: “On revient toujours à ses premiers amours”, cites Freud, a classic bon mot (SE VII 154). Freud thus takes up the thread that leads into the very heart of psychoanalysis. He refers to it in a 1920 addendum to the text from 1905: he mentions a “first meeting” between desire and the object. Yet that does not explain how “it already aroused sexual interest” (SE VII, 154, note 2). Freud believes he has discovered “a submerged and forgotten phase of sexual development” behind the first memory. The fetish “like a ‘screen memory’, represents this phase, and is thus a remnant and precipitate of it.” (SE VII, 154, note 2) This is an important turn: the “first meeting” ‘screens’ an older memory, for which the fetish is a masked representation. The fetish is therefore an actor on the stage of unconscious memory.¹⁵ The performative as-

¹⁵ In 1907, Freud provides an example of this. In “Delusion and Dreams in Jensen’s *Gradiva*” (1907), the protagonist, archaeologist Norbert Hanold, demonstrates a variant of “fetishistic

pect of the fetish comes from the fact that it contains three temporal layers. The *present* of the fetishistic magic restages an *infantile initial experience* (first contact), which in turn is the masked representation of *even older* scenes. Freud's objective is to reveal these scenes.¹⁶

In order to do so, in 1910 and 1915 he adds some notes to the 1905 text that indicate this hidden aetiology. Regarding the case of a foot fetishist, he says: "The foot represents a woman's penis, the absence of which is deeply felt." – "In a number of cases of foot fetishism it has been possible to show that the scopophilic instinct, seeking to reach its object (originally the genitals) from underneath, was brought to a halt in its pathway by prohibition and repression. For that reason it became attached to a fetish in the form of a foot or shoe, the female genitals (in accordance with the expectations of childhood) being imagined as male ones." (SE VII, 155, note 2; cf. Rossi 1977)¹⁷

Freud tells the story of the fetish's 'primal scene' in accordance with the psychiatrist Robert J. Stoller's dictum: "A fetish is a story masquerading as an object" (1985, 155)¹⁸ – the most succinct statement ever written about fetishism. But what story? And is it really a story? And if so, is it only one story? Do the psychoanalysts tell completely different stories to the ethnologists and political economists? We will soon see. In any case, the addenda to the 1905 text transgress the idea that the fetish can be reduced to a rhetorical figure. If the fetish

erotomania" (SE IX, 45). His strange passion for the position of the feet in a stone statue is an example of an unconscious memory for Freud: this is a foot fetish, he argues, in reference to Binet (45–46). "Repressed unconscious memories" means: Hanold does *not* remember, instead the fetishisation makes him unconsciously fixated on a repressed scene from childhood.

16 In the essay "A Child is Being Beaten" (1919), Freud returns once again to unsatisfactory aspects of Binet's concept of memory: "However, if these processes (= sublimation, H.B.) are absent, then the perversion is retained in adult life, and where we find a sexual aberrance in an adult – perversion, fetishism, inversion – we can also justifiably expect to discover this kind of fixating experience from childhood through anamnestic research. Indeed, long before the time of psychoanalysis, observers like Binet were able to trace unusual sexual aberrances in adulthood to these kinds of impressions, namely those from childhood at around five or six years old. But at this point the enquiry was confronted with the limitations of our knowledge; for the impressions that brought about the fixation were without any traumatic force [...] It was impossible to say why the sexual impulse had undergone fixation particularly upon them." (SE XVII, 182) The fetish is not only a sexual, but also a traumatic "memorial" (SE XXI, 154) of a time long before the fifth or sixth year of life.

17 There is an interesting novel about foot fetishism by Ernst Weiss: *Der Verführer* [The Seducer] (1937). Frankfurt am Main 1980.

18 Stoller 1985, 155: "I have a hunch about the dynamics of erotic fetishes [...] An object [...] becomes a fetish when it stands for [...] meanings that are wholly, or in crucial parts of the text, unconscious: a fetish is a story masquerading as an object." Translation cited in Garber 1990, 45.

is, as Stoller asserts, a reified narrative, then in the double sense that it is factually a thing and at the same time a reification, a reified story. Freud has now understood this. He no longer uses a symbolic equation – the fetish = the female genitals – instead he introduces scenic elements. The voyeuristic little boy, who wants to spy upon the genitals (of the mother) “from underneath”, but who is “brought to a halt in [his] pathway”: this is an extremely specific scene. What does he see? He does not see what he expected to see: male genitals. There is nothing like that *there*. This ‘nothing like that’ is what ‘halts’ his gaze. Freud does not express this very precisely; for there has already been the *imagined* sight – the expected phallus; there must have been a sight that marks the lack of the phallus as frightening; there must have been a gaze cast downward, a gripping of the knee, foot or shoe. One of these is now ‘employed’ as a fetish, i. e. as an object that replaces a seen other and from now on ‘arrests’ any gaze that comes across it and binds all sexual energy to it. The halted gaze remains in one place forever. In short, behind every fetish is the sight of a woman who reveals the absence of the phallus: castration. The fetish provides, according to Freud, *something to see* and *something not seen*, the foot and the castrated genitals, the trauma and the defence against it. The phallus can be kept alive as a phantasm, because the fetish that ‘keeps it alive’ enables the fetishist to avoid the sight of castration. At the same time, it absorbs all desire, which henceforth is compulsively shifted from the genitals to the substituted thing. The fetish makes the unconscious fantasy that there is ‘nothing but the phallus’ possible. At the same time it preserves the repressed fantasy that there is such a thing as castration: the female genitals represent castration. It is the sight of Medusa, to whom Freud dedicates a fragment from 1922, first published posthumously in 1940 (SE XVIII, 273–274).¹⁹ *The fetish represses the fact that there can never again be an integral phallic identity*: this is the message of the “horror of castration” (SE XXI, 154; SE XXIII 277). A whole phallus is a mere phantasm, just as mythical as castration – the bloody sight of beheaded Medusa, who according to Freud is the “symbol of horror”.

Fetishism is thereby primarily organised as a process. Its form of compromise based on the splitting of the ego contains two mutually excluding attributions: castration *and* the phallus, horror *and* self-reassurance. For this reason, both Jacques Derrida and Sarah Kofman identified a perpetual oscillation between the two sides of the fetish concept, a *structure of ambivalence*. The fetish is always two mutually exclusive dispositions at the same time, and their preca-

¹⁹ On the connection between fetishism and the sight of Medusa, see Kofman 1985, 82–89.

rious balance is a protection against psychosis (Kofman 1985, 86–89; Derrida 1986 232ff.).

This is the ‘story’ Freud tells then, in the addenda to the 1905 text. It is itself a *mythical tale*, a drama, which would be a tragedy if the fetish could not be re-written in another genre: the *tragicomedy* of the lover enslaved to his things. He must treat them carefully, ritually, with devotion, like relics that represent a terrible sacrifice that has been transformed into salvation. In sexual fetish worship, things must always be kept in balance: the annihilation of identity by castration, which can no longer be expunged from the world (the sacrifice), must be represented in a new form, must mask itself as the love object that warrants all feelings of lust being focussed on it. In the strict sense, the fetish is a *compromise*²⁰ that is made in the unconscious between the fear of castration and the saviour of the phallus. This contains something of the ambivalence of all ‘sacred matter’, which represents the sacrifice and salvation at the same time.

And this is exactly how the fetish ‘employed’ works, by strengthening the little boy who is coming closer “from underneath”, like a consecration, by transforming the sight of Medusa into healing salvation, the sacrificial victim of castration into lust. And because this is an *imaginary story*, which cannot provide any guarantees in reality, the unique aspects of the initial scene must be transferred into a *rite*: consisting of *an endless series of all the fetishistic scenes* the lover must perform *again and again* to appease the pain of his wound and keep his desire and his phantasm alive.²¹ This is the reason for the anankastic aspect of fetishism.

In 1905, Freud is still nowhere near the story at the heart of psychoanalysis. In his essay “On the Sexual Theories of Children” (1908), he gives a partial explanation: children only take on *one* gender (SE IX, 215 f.). “The Infantile Genital Organisation” is only familiar with one genitalia and therefore inaugurates the “primacy of phallus” (SE XIX, 142). The presence of two genders is denied by a “falsified perception” (SE IX., 216). The fact that the wife/mother/sister has no penis is repudiated in the unconscious (SE XIX, 142). The inability to give up

20 Sarah Kofman calls fetishism “a real compromise” and “a split between denial and affirmation of castration” (1985, 86).

21 The “wound” always reminds of castration; Freud first asserts this in his study of Leonardo from 1910. There, in the name of infantile sexual theory, he speaks of a woman equipped with a penis, of castration and of the perception of the female genitals as a “wound” (SE XI, 95, 94–96). The original desire to see the female genitals is transformed into feeling disgust toward them, which is usually the cause of impotence and homosexuality, he argues. The early supposition of the “object that was once strongly desired” – the phallic woman – leaves behind “indelible traces”, which fetishism attests to; in this sense, the fetish is a “substitutive symbol”. Men who cut off braids re-enact the castration of the woman.

the phallus in the sexual object supposedly leads to homosexuality (which avoids the sight of a missing penis) – or to fetishism.²²

Wilhelm Stekel (1868–1940), later the author of the *opus magnum* on fetishism, heard Freud's unpublished lecture "On the Genesis of Fetishism" (Freud 1909/1992, 10–22). Here Freud introduces his aetiological concept of fetishism. He adopts two characteristics of the fetish from Krafft-Ebing: "the infantile event" and the "the event of reminiscence" (*ibid.*, 11). However, he now finds the first contact thesis aetiologically dissatisfactory. There is something "mysterious" (*ibid.*, 12–13) in it, which must be deciphered by uncovering the memory locked within the fetish. After presenting two cases of clothing fetishism,²³ he asserts: the patient "becomes a clothing fetishist after repressing scopophilic desire" (*ibid.*, 13). Freud thinks this is "theoretically significant", because it would prove that subsequent fetishism is not, as Binet and Krafft-Ebing believed, based on the first scene that is *remembered*, but that this scene *represses* a previous split. The memory contains a "splitting of the complex", of which one part is repressed and one is idealised. This is what makes the *screen memory* unique: it contains both a *manifest* and a *repressed* content. The fetish is manifest; the shameful or dangerous part is repressed. The patient Freud discusses is a foot fetishist who represses one part, the shameful desire to smell the vagina or the secretions of the foot and sublimates it in the idealisation of the foot. The fetish is therefore the unconscious representation of a repressed "instinctual lust" or "disgust lust": "That would be the most important new aspect" (*ibid.*, 16).

Freud has not yet gone any further in the essay "Repression" (1915), where he writes: "Indeed, as we found in tracing the origin of the fetish, it is possible for the original instinctual representative to be split in two, one part undergoing repression, while the remainder, precisely on account of this intimate connection, undergoes idealisation." (SE XIV, 150) The unconsciously repressed portion of the fetish is emphasised here, whereby a structural split in the object is produced, which is in turn reflected in a split of the subject.

It soon becomes clear why Freud did not publish the lecture from 1909. It does not fit very well with his later line of interpretation, already suggested by

²² "But it seems to me that the significance of the castration complex can only be rightly appreciated if its origin in the phase of the phallic primacy is also taken into account." (SE XIX, 144)

²³ An interesting case is that of a philosopher (Freud 1909/1992, 13) who sublimates the voyeuristic desire to look at his mother, who always undressed herself in front of him; he splits the sight of the naked mother he avoided into two types of fetishes: language (as a philosopher) and clothes (as a voyeur).

his addenda to the 1905 text and later consolidated into his definitive theory of fetishism. The link to castration is missing (and therefore to the imaginary phallus), while the connection between instinct, repression and sublimation in the ritualised screen memory (= fetish) remains valid.

It is interesting to note that in this lecture, Freud accuses all women, including the “most intelligent women” of clothing fetishism: the woman represses her lust to exhibit herself, to show off her (naked) body and sublimating it, shifts it onto clothing in line with permitted and expected fashions (1909/1992, 15). An ironic or naïve remark like this, according to which “half of mankind” is fetishistic, shows how unclear Freud’s understanding of fetishism was. The sublimation theory explains Freud’s great interest in the fetishism of smells in these years. In the lecture and “Notes upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis” (1909), he discusses this more in depth: there is an anthropological link, he argues, between the development of the upright posture of *homo erectus* and the repression of the olfactory. This repression by civilisation could be the reason that some people remain obsessively fixated in the olfactory stage (SE X, 248; Freud 1909/1992, 15). These kinds of comments demonstrate Freud’s cultural anthropological interests in fetishism. It is therefore not surprising that in *Totem and Taboo* (1912/1913), Freud cites the relevant sections from James G. Frazer’s great work *Totemism and Exogamy* (1910):

A totem is a class of material objects which a savage regards with superstitious respect, believing that there exists between him and every member of the class an intimate and altogether special relation [...] The connection between a man and his totem is mutually beneficent; the totem protects the man, and the man shows his respect for the totem in various ways, for example by not killing it if it be an animal, and not cutting or gathering it if it be a plant. As distinguished from a fetish, a totem is never an isolated individual, but always a class of objects, generally a species of animals or of plants, more rarely a class of inanimate natural objects, very rarely a class of artificial objects [...] (SE XIII, 103)²⁴

It gradually becomes clear to Freud that he must construct a universal theory of fetishism in order to compete with the cultural anthropologists.

Yet such a theory is still not complete in the “Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis” (1915–1917). He proposes the thesis that the libido is shifted onto

²⁴ Frazer 1910, vol. 1, 3ff. – In *Civilisation and its Discontents* (1930), Freud mentions the example frequently cited in ethnological literature, which describes how in cases of bad luck the believers do not blame themselves, but the fetish, and punish it rather than themselves – unlike the civilised, more highly developed sense of guilt out of fear of authority or the super-ego (the people of Israel). Passing remarks like these make it clear just how much Freud shares the opinion that the worship of fetishes is a form of primitivism (SE XXI, 127).

a part object.²⁵ Because of the “adhesiveness of the libido” (SE XVI, 348), it sticks to an object that is associated with a remembered primal scene. This is a barely altered version of Binet’s idea (cf. SE XVII, 181–183). However, around the time of the third theory of structure, Freud formulates a short but significant “interpolation into [his] theory of sexuality” from 1905 in the essay on “The Infantile Genital Organisation” (1923), almost exactly along the lines of the notes added to that early text in 1915 and 1920 mentioned above. He summarises the systematic interdependency of the primacy of the phallus and the castration complex and this leads to a definitive concept of fetishism (SE XIX, 141–145). The fetish is the perverse memorial to an archaic time in which there was “a *male* gender, but not a *female* one”. This pre-genital stage only knows the antithesis between “a *male genital* and being *castrated*” (SE XIX, 145). This tragic conflict dominates fetishism, but sadism and masochism too, and also has an influence on all forms of the Oedipus complex. The primal experience of the shock of castration (the sight “from underneath”: Medusa) calls forth an imaginary phallus as a reaction, which is then preserved in every fetish. It also unconsciously penetrates the gender order, along with almost every cultural mechanism. As a result of this turn to an opposition equally archaic and universal (phallus or castration) fetishism is no longer just some perversion, it is a *metapsychological concept*. Freud has reached the level of the cultural anthropologists and of Marx.

6 Fetishism as metapsychological concept

In the short 1927 essay “Fetishism”,²⁶ as well as in the fragment “Splitting of the Ego in the Process of Defence” (1938/1940), all of Freud’s disparate remarks are finally brought together. In the process, since 1905, fetishism has become a metapsychological concept. Fetishism is thus a phenomenon *sui generis* on the *border* between neurosis and psychosis, a borderline effect. Like *neurosis*, the demands of reality are upheld in spite of the needs of the id: castration is

25 “Then come others again, who have abandoned the genital as an object altogether, and have taken some other part of the body as the object they desire – a woman’s breast, a foot or a plait of hair. After them come others for whom parts of the body are of no importance, but whose every wish is satisfied by a piece of clothing, a shoe, a piece of underclothing – the fetishists.” (SE XVI, 305) – It was Karl Abraham who introduced the binary form ‘part versus total’ into structural theory; this plays a significant role in Melanie Klein’s school of thought and can be used to explain fetishistic cathexis.

26 This essay was translated into English in 1928 by Joan Riviere, the translator of many of Freud’s works whom he held in high esteem, just before she wrote her own “Womanliness as a Masquerade” (see pp. 346–348 of this book).

recognised and a relatively normal social life can be led. With *psychosis*, fetishism shares the demands of recognising the id and denying reality: ‘there is’ a female phallus, there is no threat of castration, desires can be pursued without being punished. *Aetiologically*, fetishism goes back to the “psychical trauma” (SE XXIII, 275) of the “horror of castration”, which is both sustained and defended against. To borrow Jones’ term, fetishism therefore originates in what he calls the “deutero-phallic phase” (1933, 3–4). From a *structural* point of view, fetishism is a case of the repression, denial *and* sustaining of that which has been denied, an “artful”, “ingenious” and “subtle” (SE XXIII, 277, 275; XXI, 156) *compromise* between logically and psychologically irreconcilable operations. Equal tribute is paid to both the desire principle and the reality principle. The conflict between them is sustained not in the conscious mind, but in the unconscious, which does not know negations. It is not the fetish itself then, which after all can belong to the public realm, but the fetishistic mechanism that belongs to the “primary processes” (*ibid.*, 154). Freud deserves a tip of the hat for this complex “solution”.

The price that must be paid for this is the “rift in the ego” (SE XXIII, 276) or the “splitting of the ego” (*ibid.*). The *paradoxical* structure of the fetish, which is a “representation”²⁷ of irreconcilable meanings, castration *and* the imaginary phallus, nonetheless allows the fetishist to live a life “quite satisfied” (SE XXI, 152) – even when he must pay for this with disgust towards the female genitals and consequently give up ‘the woman’.

In terms of the *theory of memory*, Freud picks up where he left off in his addenda to the text from 1905. “When the fetish is instituted”, it is a memorial to “the stopping of memory in traumatic amnesia” (SE XI, 155). The subject’s libidinous interest “comes to a halt half-way”; the “last impression *before* the uncanny and traumatic” sight is “retained as a fetish”. Once again, Freud introduces the figure of the voyeuristic little boy, who “peered at the woman’s genitals from below, from her legs up”: “Fur and velvet – as has long been suspected – are a fixation of the sight of the pubic hair, which *should have been* followed by the longed-for sight of the female member; pieces of underclothing, which are so often chosen as a fetish, crystallise the moment of undressing, the last moment in which the woman could still be regarded as phallic” (*ibid.*, emphasis H.B.). The fetish simultaneously reifies a memory, a “scene” and a drama of looking: what has happened (castration) is denied and retained; what has not hap-

²⁷ Only things that fulfil the “considerations of representability”, in other words, things that can act scenically, find their way into fetishism. Freud introduced this term in his *Interpretation of Dreams* in 1900, as an aesthetic principle according to which the dream can only process that which can be represented visually (SE IV, 339 ff.).

pened (the phallus) is undone by transferring it to fur and so forth. The paradox of the gaze and its petrification in the fetish consists of keeping the wound that it does not want to see constantly open.²⁸ Nowhere is the interdependence of amnesia and memory as close as it is in the charade of fetish.

However, the scene that Freud describes is itself imagined and unites the narrator and the patient in a fantastical “setting”.^{*} The fetish is not simply a story masquerading as an object; it creates a scene where the patient generates symptoms, which only the analyst can turn into a story – in the interest of theory. For fetishism is *proof* of the “existence of the castration complex” (ibid.) for Freud, and therefore a fundamental part of psychoanalysis as a whole. *Being able to tell a story about every thing or symptom is the fetish of psychoanalysis itself.*

The performative moment is even more important than the narrative. It turns the fetish into a complex theatre of memory instead of just a symbol. The fetishising harbours highly charged imaginary content, which forces itself to be performed and formats scenes of unconscious memory. The more “the meaning of the fetish is not known to other people” (SE XXI, 154), the more fluid this acting can be. It is public *and* secret. Its significance is masked *and* manifest. Protected in this way, the thing can act and even enter into public circulation – Freud mentions the bound feet of Chinese women, the myth of Chronos and Zeus (SE XXI, 157; XXIII, 278) and that of Medusa as “popular psychological” examples of this. In them, the issue of castration is introduced to public tradition and ritualised. The secret of fetishism can (like in Marx) only be revealed by the exclusive observer of the scene – whether it is the political economist or the psychoanalyst, both playing the role of the bringer of light.

But why is the fetishist “quite satisfied”, although he is tormented by the “horror of castration” in his unconscious? Freud did not sufficiently take the comedic element of fetishism into account. His use of words like “artful”, “subtle” and “ingenious” point to the wit of the manoeuvre. Fetishism always has a playful character and shows that, even when dealing with the tragic, the human being remains a *homo ludens* (Huizinga 1949; Caillois 1961). Fetishism has a tendency to winkingly pretend ‘as if’, to dressing up, to masquerade and charades. Attempting to describe this gesture of ‘exhibition’, which is both aware of its fictive character but takes itself ‘seriously’ at once, Octave Mannoni (1964) came up

28 Guy Rosolato (1972) develops his theory of “a fetishism whose object ‘resists’” based on Freud’s fetishism essay – with some bold theses on the direction of the gaze and shifts in language.

* In the quote above, Freud uses the third person neuter pronoun ‘man’ instead of the passive, which means ‘one’ or by implication, ‘we’.

with the following: “Je sais bien... mais quand même”.²⁹ This is the formula for the ‘belief’ in fetish. It has already had a big impact far beyond the French discourse on fetishism.

Taking Freud’s fetishism essay and his concept of denial *and* recognition in perception as his starting point, Mannoni works out the paradoxical structure of belief. To do so, he refers to Pauline faith (we know that Jesus died, but yet... it cannot and should not be; the dead man must live). One might recall the story of doubting Thomas, who wants tangible proof and not just faith: he wants to use his hand to touch the dead Jesus and feel *that* he *is* alive. But precisely this would not be faith. The *noli me tangere*, which Jesus says to Maria Magdalena, demands a belief that can neither be materially nor rationally assured. If one *knew* that ‘the apparition there’ is the living Jesus, then one would not believe; one only knows *that* he is dead and *yet still* wants to believe that he lives... : Paul makes this the key to faith. *Credo, quia absurdum*. Faith consists of knowledge and at the same time a denial of knowledge or perception, which is ‘believingly’ replaced by the object that does not exist: the resurrected Jesus, the female phallus. Mannoni’s aim is to show that the structure Freud describes as the paradox of fetishism based on denial is a universal one. He takes examples not only from the Bible and from psychoanalysis, but also from ethnology, aesthetics and literary history: for example the Hopi Indians’ belief in *kachina*; its history “c’est l’histoire de tout le monde, normal ou névrosé, Hopi ou non” (Mannoni 1964, 1270). He identifies the same form of perception oscillating between knowledge and denial in a theatre audience’s belief in the theatrical illusion. He finds the same structure in Casanova. The Cartesian differentiation between belief and knowledge is based on the same thing. The perception that an object ‘is not there’ is denied, in order to hold on to it ‘still being there’. This paradox is a form of protection (not just a defence) against a traumatic threat to the ego, for believers in Jesus and fetishists alike. In belief, having witnessed something (the knowledge ‘there is nothing there’) is forgotten. In strange ‘spectral’ forms of being (the resurrected Jesus, the fetish), the forgotten (the dead, castration) is retained and kept safe just as the desired object is in the present. Through a metonymic shift, belief puts the question of whether something is or is not into the realm of *the undecidable*. The ‘image’ of the risen Jesus is just as enigmatic for Thomas and Mary Magdalene as the fetish is for the fetishist, whether it is a substitute or a non-substitute. Belief – whether magical, animistic, Christian, hallu-

²⁹ This form of unconscious knowledge, which knows that it is sustaining something that is imaginary, is also succinctly summed up by Ernest Jones: regarding the “wound” that is the vagina “there is knowledge, but it is *unconscious knowledge*” (1932/1933, 5 and 6).

cinatory, even psychotic – is, according to Mannoni, always based on the paradox “Je sais bien... mais quand même”.

In Freud’s version, the fetishist knows that he is acting and that what he is acting out is not real, but merely an illusion, which he both believes and does not believe, which he directs and which he obeys, which he passionately submits to and yet which is only a surrogate. The paradox is always at work: he reveals his invisible wound; he ‘has’ a female phallus; the absent is present; yet the present is imaginary; he does not remember but at the same time acts out his memory; he ‘believes’ his act, which he knows is fake; he turns the tragedy he had repressed into a farce, which has no fear of the ridiculous. Almost like a jester (Koepping 1984), he operates on the border between the genres and the genders and does not shy from the grotesque and the silly aspects of his passions. “Je sais bien... mais quand même”.

Freud sees the “panic” in the deep reaches of the fetishised mind as a parallel to the panic that is experienced “when the cry goes up that Throne and Altar are in danger” (SE XXI, 153; cf. Kofman 1985, 89–92). Here he touches upon the political dimension of fetishism. Could it be that the ‘significant’ symbols of society (throne and altar) are fetishes too? That the theatre of politics and religion owes its existence to the fetishistic enchantment of consciousness? That a repressed fear is being processed in the public performances of politics, religion and culture, which is however produced by them in the first place? That the idolisation of leaders and the fetishisation of things subdues a panic that threatens to erupt at any time when these are “in danger”? Are they or is it in fact we who are in danger? Is the protection we grant public idols and fetishes only the reverse of the fear we have of them? Is that the secret of power? Do we secretly know that, but yet... ?

7 Wilhelm Stekel: theatricality and religion

The 604 pages of the first edition of *Der Fetischismus* was published in 1923 as volume seven of Stekel’s ten-volume monumental work *Störungen des Trieb- und Affektlebens* [Aberrations in the Instinctual and Emotional Life], a very comprehensive sexual psychopathology. Stekel claims (in the foreword) that the book was “already largely finished in 1914”. This means it was not long after Stekel’s expulsion from the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society, of which he was a founding member, at the end of 1912 (Nitzschke 1992, 186–191; Fages 1981, 90–92). This was because of disagreements and personal rivalries in the psychoanalytic movement of the time (for example the resignations of Alfred Adler and C.G. Jung; cf. Jones 1962, vol. 2, 156–184). But Stekel did not break with Freudian

psychoanalysis. His book on fetishism belongs, despite defining himself against the “Freudians” (Stekel 1923, 13 and elsewhere), to psychoanalysis. However, Stekel did not assimilate Freud’s later ideas.

The book seems like an attempt to outdo Freud. Stekel had heard Freud’s fetishism lecture in 1909 and immediately got involved in the discussion with two case histories – the “Wednesday patients”, literally.³⁰ In Freud’s view, one of the cases did not belong to the category of fetishism at all. And indeed, it does not appear in Stekel’s book. The other case, which Freud does not mention at all, takes a prominent role in Stekel (1923, 186–225) and is presented graphically in a complex factor model – the only case that is (ibid., 224).³¹ Unsurprisingly, this case proves a theory that is not Freudian. Freud had referred to a total of three cases of fetishism in 1909. In contrast, Stekel presents seventy cases (partly of other sexologists). The most sprawling case is that of an orthopaedic fetishist, which takes up the length of a novel (ibid., 423–533). The patients themselves are often quoted. There is a lot of focus on dream description and analysis. This is evidence that Stekel, who had allowed himself to be analysed by Freud in 1901 shortly after the publication of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, had been involved in the earliest days of psychoanalysis. Of course, at this stage he no longer thinks much of Freudian dream analysis.³² Because of the sheer number of his cases alone, he knows he has surpassed the slim empirical basis of Freud’s concept of fetishism. The ambivalence of a dissident can be detected in the references to Freud, a dissident who admires the old authority just as much as he struggles with him, and who wants to prove, with his own ‘great work’, just how much the man who ‘rejected’ him has in fact harmed himself. However, Stekel’s book also confirms Freud’s judgement of him, which he was unaware of, namely that although he had a great sense for the unconscious,

30 On this see Jones 1955, vol. 2, 153. Apparently, Stekel always began the discussion after every Wednesday lecture by announcing that he had just had a patient that morning with exactly the same symptom that had just been discussed.

31 The case studies in Stekel’s large-format book were mostly printed with very tightly spaced lines in a small font, which means that this particular case study would take up around 80 normal printed pages.

32 “Precisely this dream analysis is glowing proof that one doesn’t get very far in most dreams with Freud’s method and therefore most definitely should work with my method if one wants to make new discoveries.” (Stekel 270) What Stekel means is his talent for decoding symbols and, going against psychoanalytical restraint, intervening actively in the therapeutic process. Stekel’s strategy of an actively interpreting, interventionist therapy is seen by Fages (1981, 90–92) as a reason for breaking with Freud, as well as latent Jungianism.

he had very little theoretical talent.³³ The novelistic and exhausting descriptions are the strength and the weakness of the book at the same time. In his mania for classification and material, he is a successor to older sex scholarship. However, his typology is implemented rather chaotically. He does not formulate his theoretical results very succinctly.

More strongly than Freud, Stekel emphasises the link between fetishism and culture in general, even if he does also explore the “paraphile” (= perverse) and compulsively neurotic aspects of it. Fetishism is culturally and sexually prevalent everywhere, he argues, indeed it belongs to the conditions of love in every object selection. Stekel approvingly cites Albert Eulenberg (1840–1917): “Fetishism thus has its physiological basis in the individual conditions of love, the frequently identifiable tendencies of conscious or unconscious partial attraction in the love object selection of the healthy.” (Stekel 1923, 2)³⁴ This constantly powerful “partial attraction”, which results from the investment of emotion in part objects and which in no way deviates from “normal sexual orientation to the woman” (ibid., 13), only becomes pathological when a body part or thing takes the place of the woman “as a departure from the woman, an escape from the woman” (ibid., 1). Fear of women and the avoidance of coitus is the main cause of fetishism for Stekel. There is a “secret fear” behind every fetish (ibid., 16). The “tyranny of symbolism” (ibid., 4, 187, 575), however, conceals that the very thing the fetishist fears is precisely the thing he desires: namely incest, which according to Stekel is the basis of all fetishism. The obsession that takes prisoner of the fetishist serves the purpose of keeping the forbidden desires in check, of shifting them (Stekel speaks of “consignment”) and binding them to objects that on the one hand allow these urges to be acted out, but on the other protect the forbidden object (mother, sister). This double structure fulfils the fetishist’s aim: to experience “lust without guilt” (ibid., 189). A paradoxical structure is produced: the fetishist is fixated on a replacement that allows him to be independent, not just ‘from the woman’, but also from social reality in general. Stekel wishes to investigate the “mental superstructure” (ibid., 10f., 11, 365f.): “fetishism is a complicated religion, an artful construction, which can be compared to compulsive neurosis in its structure” (ibid., 10).

33 On Stekel’s instinct for the unconscious and the symbolic, cf. Jones (1955, vol. 2, 151–152). Freud mentions Stekel in a letter to C.G. Jung on the occasion of the publication of Stekel’s *Die Sprache des Traums* [The Language of Dreams] in 1911 and calls him the “pig” that “finds truffles” (cited in Nitzschke 1992, 177).

34 Eulenberg 1914. Together with Iwan Bloch, a researcher in sexuality, Eulenberg was editor of the journal. Bloch (1872–1922) wrote an insignificant book about fetishism under a pseudonym: *Veriphantor* 1903.

This really is different to Freud. The artful, religious, constructed in the fetishist might be pathological, but is nonetheless part of culture. Stekel thus dwells extensively on the different forms fetishism takes; he does not immediately attempt to reconnect it with traumatic primal scenes. Although he does not want to present a “cabinet of curiosities” (1923, 131), his method demands that he undertake a fetishising approach himself, namely collecting and expanding his evidence. Stekel produces the very cabinet of fetishistic artworks and curiosities he intends to analyse in the first place. It is indicative that Stekel elevates his collection, which he even sometimes acquires by criminal means, to a central feature, and which he describes as “the fetishist’s harem cult” (ibid., 29, 149–160, 258–260, 400–401 and elsewhere.³⁵) Yet he never comes up with a theory of collecting, his own passion, which might have allowed him to reflect on its spread through the ten volumes of his study, a curious treasure trove of all possible perversions.

It is notable that Stekel specifically focuses on the histrionic character of the fetishist. They are “actors” who, thanks to the strength that comes from their artfully extended system being so closed off, are capable of a radical “annulment of reality” (1923, 65). According to Stekel, they live in a fictive sphere of the ‘as if’, a term that he (ibid., 369) takes from the famous *Philosophy of ‘As If’* (1911; in English 1924) by Hans Vaihinger (1852–1933). In this sphere, the theatrical does not conflict with the obsession the fetishists are subject to and for which they must pay a painful social price. The conflict between personal instinctual urges and moral denunciation, between lust and guilt; the masking of repressed wishes that are both represented and denied in the fetish; the high level of social secrecy coupled with pride regarding the uniqueness of the fetish; the feeling of limitless power over the fetish object, while at the same time the experience of degradation and impotence; the fear of the fetishistic desire being discovered, while the fetish protects from a fear and revelation even more terrible; a worship of the fetish that is equally obedient and tyrannical; the monomaniac compulsiveness that gives life a single focus, but also forces the fetishist to take on the risk of criminal methods of procurement (theft of underwear, hair, shoes, etc.); the threat of legal, medical, social, vocational and familial ostracisation – all this hiding, avoidance, these passions, conflicts, fears and contradictions force the fetishist to create performances that cannot be put into practice without a bizarre form of intelligence and a creative, inventive imagination.

35 “The diversity of his collection makes up for the lack of unity. The cult of the harem conceals a rigid erotic monotheism.” (Stekel 1923, 584) It is evident that Stekel makes Binet’s observations on the tyrannical and monotheistic aspects of the fetish important support for his ‘theory’: fetishism as religion and as despotism over the collection.

In Stekel, fetishism is a mechanism of closure – closure of the open world horizon, of meaning, of differentiability, alterity; linked to a constant fear of discovery. ‘Closure’ and ‘disclosure’ – together they form a tense unit. In his “tyranny of symbolism”, the fetishist homogenises everything under his control, excludes everything that does not belong to it, saturating everything in the as-if of his play, thereby generating, in the exclusion of the foreign, a radical (self-)alienation, which is his heaven and also his hell. Stekel cites and agrees with sexologist Havelock Ellis, according to whom the fetishist is extremely individuated, encapsulated against society and therefore alienated: “He is a loner.” But in his “dangerous isolation”, he develops a stupendous strength, the compulsive theatre of his passion. In this way, fetishism demonstrates “the enormous plastic power of the imagination” and the “peak of the power of human idealisation” (Ellis 1920, 229–231). This is what Stekel means by “superstructure”, which springs from the fetishist’s histrionic performance and which links him with general cultural mechanisms, as isolated and alone as his theatre might be. The tension between secretiveness and exhibitionistic performance defines the behaviour of the fetishist (1923, 286–288, 65) for Stekel, who had already written about the “neurotic as actor” in an essay of 1911.³⁶ “One can also say”, Smirnoff later confirms, “that the fetish is nothing without the fetishistic ritual.” (1972, 88) The fetishist thus becomes “the author of his own life” (Stekel 1923, 574). He lives in a “twilight state”, in which “the borders between reality and dream blur completely” and fetishistic actions are carried out like a somnambulist (*ibid.*, 29, 160, 242, 397 and elsewhere). What he means by this is the intermediary state of the ‘as if’, the immersion in a fictive world of symbolisms. “The animism of the fetishist symbol can be explained with this ‘as if’” (*ibid.*, 586).

In his discussion of symbol theories, Stekel (1923, 575–596) recognises an important point about the active power of symbols: fetishised signs are not limited to their ‘meaning’ alone and they cannot be solved hermeneutically either. What is important is the invisible but therefore even more powerful affective loading of the symbols, which makes them fetishes in the first place, through repression, concentration and shifting. Stekel argues that this is what makes symbols appear magically alive (*ibid.*, 583). The power to perform is inherent to the symbolic itself and this power makes the fetishist an actor of the symbols he himself produces. He is subject to the symbolic as if to a powerful force, even

36 Even as late as in Freud’s time, in the *Zentralblatt für Psychoanalyse* (1.1, 1911). Freud handed over the running of the journal to Alfred Adler in 1910. After the break with Adler, Stekel strongly opposed Viktor Tausk becoming one of the chief editors, as was Freud’s wish. After the break with Tausk, Freud gave Stekel the journal to run (in the middle of 1912), which shortly afterwards had to cease publication.

though he himself has produced it; he cannot see that he is the author of the play, although he experiences himself as its obedient actor. This corresponds to the double structure of commodity fetishism in Marx, which also revealed a confusion of subject and object.

The interpretation of fetishism as a “replacement religion”, “second religion”, “secret religion” or even simply as a “religion” is similar to the shroud of mystery that surrounds the fetish itself. This makes Stekel very different to Freud. Appearance, which as the illusionary aspect of fetishism was to be deconstructed by psychoanalysis, becomes for Stekel its essential form. “Fetishism is a replacement religion. It provides its followers with a new religion in the form of perversion, in which the need for something to believe in is satisfied. It is born of a compromise between supremely powerful sexuality and a strong sense of piety. [...] This piety hides itself beneath an image of Satanism and Libertinism, and its aims go well beyond this world.” The heart of fetishism is a “Christ neurosis” (Stekel 1923, 93). There are sections like this throughout the whole book (cf. 144, 181, 191–195, 212, 222, 284, 321, 367, 499, 553, 560) and they represent the fundamental core of what Stekel presents as his discovery.³⁷ He therefore comes close to the religious studies scholars and early ethnographers, who saw fetishism as a savage and atavistic religion. In Stekel, fetishism is the perverted form of Christianity – thus striking at the very heart of European culture. What is the Christian format of fetishism? Stekel identifies an ascetic quality in fetishists, in that they sacrifice their desire and divert it to the fetish that they love and worship. The desire is directed toward the maternal object and wanting it is a rebellion against God (the law of the father). The fetish means eschewing the maternal object and at the same time is a distorted representation of it. The fetish enables both: pious worship and subjection to the law of the father while at the same time living out forbidden desires, which permanently attack “God”.

³⁷ It is revealing that Stekel places the Christ neurosis at the centre of this “Wednesday patient”, whom he had already introduced in 1909 after Freud’s fetishism lecture. Stekel, who constantly challenges Freud’s authority, thus incorporates everything that was part of the ‘drama’ between himself and father-Freud into this case (Stekel 1923, 183–225): Christ, who sacrifices himself for the law of the father; Christ, who obeys in order to be the beloved son; Zeus, who castrates his father Chronos; Oedipus, who punishes himself for incest with his mother and the murder of his father by blinding himself (castration) and then banishes himself from the community; the “lust without guilt” that Freud does not have, who accuses Stekel of a faulty “moral insanity” (Jones 1955, vol. 2, 153–155); the excessive onanism for which Stekel was being treated by Freud; the failed attempt at self-castration; the analysis of foot fetishism in opposition to Freud’s ideas on it; the attack on the Freudian thesis that fetishism comes from the traumatic effects of a primal drama: it is no exaggeration to say that this case study was a way of Stekel working out his rejection by Freud.

This is the oxymoron of an ‘untenable compromise’: a pious Satanist. It is the perverted form of official Christianity. In Stekel, fetishism is a private religion that takes its elements from Christianity. The fetishist plays the pious worshipper who masks the Satanist and acts the perverse Satanist who hides his pious submission to the law of the father. The deification he performs is the greatest blasphemy of them all.

The reading of fetishism as religion leads Stekel to describe it as a “social disease” (1923, 596) that is evidence of the “conflict in every civilised person” in an “infinitely larger” form (*ibid.*, 594). A sadistic rage toward social authorities and the abstinence forced upon the fetishist bubbles beneath the surface of the fetish worship. Fetishists convert the constraints that they suffer into the self-constraints of the their fetishistic idols, in whose protection and name they carry out the “ceaseless toil of obliteration” (*ibid.*, 590): the dismantling of reality. This enables the construction of the illusionary world of the ‘as if’, which is ruled by the fetish. This is reminiscent of current analyses of the postmodern culture of simulation. Stekel respects the “massive achievement of constructing a system like this” and the “creative power” required to “extend [these fictions] into the everyday world” (*ibid.*). Fetishists are the sick brothers of poets: instead of projecting their internal conflicts outward to enrich the world, they introject their phantasms and use them to enlarge their hermetic system. But above all, they are the sick brothers of Christianity, which has lost the power of cohesion in modernity and consequently has led to the search for a new mythology. In today’s ideological conflicts, the fetishists cultivate obsessive and closed private religions, in which they are the saviours and the saved at the same time. Fetishists are men driven by infantile delusions of greatness. It seems Stekel has never come across female fetishism, except for one case, which Ludwig Binswanger reports on (*ibid.*, 373–395). He also believes that Jewish fetishism is impossible. For the central Christ complex provides nothing for Jews or women to identify with (*ibid.*, 590–591).

Without much analytical depth, Stekel addresses problems that will become important motifs in the further development of the theory of fetishism: feminist fetish theory, which deals with the problem of the asymmetrical gender order in psychoanalysis; the issue of Judaism, which has less to do with a distance to Christ and more to do with the iconoclasm that has forbidden the worship of things since the bible; and the social-pathological perspective, which makes fetishism a mass cultural and political-religious structure, rather than an individual pathological problem. Furthermore, Stekel’s ideas about fetishism bring children into the picture, which psychoanalytic fetish theory will also examine further in later discourse (Donald W. Winnicott). Finally, the self-entanglement in an imaginary world of ‘as if’ opens up the possibility that the “magical channels”, which

determine our minds according to Marshall McLuhan, are not in fact contributing to the epidemic spread of the fetishistic mechanism in our media-saturated society.

Stekel is simply not equipped to develop these ideas. But he certainly was not just a pig that only occasionally found truffles – and in any case, as C.G. Jung wrote to Freud, it would be “a shame if his good nose would be lost to us” (Nitzschke 1992, 177).

8 After Freud: the differentiation of fetishism

Stekel’s cabinet of sexual fetishism curiosities has never been surpassed. Successors working with similar methods like Pauly (1957) or Gosselin and Wilson (1980) are pale imitations. Roland Villeneuve (1968) and Maurice North (1970) are a little better. It seems that not much new has been added to the sexological perspective on fetishism since the founding years of Krafft-Ebing, Havelock Ellis, Iwan Bloch, Albert Eulenburg, August Forel, Wilhelm Stekel and Magnus Hirschfeld. No theoretical progress can be identified at all. It was also a long time before new ideas in psychoanalysis could be developed beyond the level achieved by Freud. This is very surprising, since fetishism virtually explodes on all levels of culture in the twentieth century. It is particularly amazing that the socialist psychoanalysts since the 1920s – one thinks of Wilhelm Reich, Siegfried Bernfeld, Fritz Sternberg, Otto Fenichel, the SexPol movement, the early Frankfurt school – never tried to make the link between Freud and Marx using the concept of fetishism.³⁸ Instead they attempted to find a link via Freud’s social psychology and psychology of instinct as well as via his cultural theory, but underestimated the social, political and economic dimension of fetishism. This also applies to the few who tried to follow Freud’s trail in the field of ethnology and religious studies, for example, the unorthodox Géza Róheim.

Important stimuli for the ascent of the (sexological) discussion on fetishism in the last quarter of the twentieth century came from the following areas: 1. The psychoanalysis of children from Melanie Klein to Donald W. Winnicott and their successors. 2. Feminist psychoanalysis, which attempted to open up the fetish concept in numerous directions: the meaning and functions of fetishism in the

³⁸ Although Theodor W. Adorno always spoke of the fetish in a semi-Marxist, semi-psychoanalytical way, he never devoted himself to a more thorough examination of the systemic meaning of the concept.

gender order, in the media and in popular culture. And finally, 3. the spread of Jacques Lacan's new orthodoxy since the 1950s.

8.1 Melanie Klein: presymbolic origins

Melanie Klein's (1882–1960) analyses of children are, as she did not write about fetishism specifically, only indirectly important (1932; 1983). The fetish can be linked to the fantasy of the incorporated maternal phallus, which produces an ambivalence torn between desire and hate, between being the maternal phallus and destroying it. Early fears of dangerous internal and/or external objects, which can also be shifted back and forth between the father's and the mother's body, are defended against in the oral and phallic phase, "the phase of maximal sadism" for Klein, by fantasising about sadistic attacks on the mother's body, which not only appears filled with poisons, but also seems to be hiding a paternal phallus (Klein 1932, 187, 189 ff., 199 f., 208 f.). In later phases – and this is important for the concept of fetish – this sadistic aggression towards the object can be transformed into "a concern for the object itself". The object is no longer merely the aim of any compensatory behaviour; instead the ego, that "poor creature" (Freud SE XIX, 56), attempts to deal with its old fear with the help of the object. The internal threats that come from the child's powerful own instincts are also projected outwards and dealt with using the external object. We have already identified all of this as functions of the fetishised object. The fetish too is *neither completely a self-object nor completely a non-self-object*, but rather a person-thing. This suspension contains the attempt to cling on to the unconscious idea of the phallic mother in order to counteract the triangulation in the Oedipus complex, which redefines the child's position in relation to the mother and the phallic father, and therefore binary gender. The early split into the good and the bad object identified by Melanie Klein³⁹ is preserved in the double semantics of the fetish: it is an object that alleviates fear, protects and secures the integrity of the body. At the same time, as Stekel had also already noted, aggressive sadistic traits are also most certainly evident, as well as the individual's sense of inferiority, impotence, even fragmentation. These are the offspring of early fears of disintegration and sadistic defence against them or vice versa: a primal sadism, which causes fear of oneself (Klein 1932, 182 f.). The insatiable greed for acquiring any fetish that can be obtained – the tendency to cre-

³⁹ See Klein 1932, 179–368. Cf. also Klein's earlier essays, 1927/1928 and 1945. – Good and bad objects are, unlike the fetish in the form of a thing, pure introjections ('imagines').

ate series, to collect – should be understood as the desire to incorporate the maternal phallus (or the maternal breast), for the loss of either would immediately lead to the disintegration of the fetishist's ego.

Being united with the fetish – and after all that would mean incorporating the whole world – in these terms and in Stekel's religious language means embodying God, an archaic maternal goddess, who, if she were given up, would result in castration by a punishing father-god. This explains the tension between the “comedy of innocence” (Karl Meuli 1946)⁴⁰ and the fear of guilt. The unconscious – as Freud also saw it – preserves both the mother's imaginary phallus and an horrific castration. In short, the imaginary corporeal self-image is achieved by totality and dismemberment at the same time. That fetishism can also be reconciled with the theory of totalised part objects, which have a central role in Melanie Klein, following on from Karl Abraham, also speaks for these interpretations. Fetishism is the ‘successful’ enterprise, although the fetishist must of course pay the price of perversion, of evading the Oedipus conflict and refusing to enter the world as a non-ego under the weak protection of the maternal object. The world is governed by the paternal law of failure and the differentiating distribution of resources. The lonely world of the fetishist – relieved from the toil of love and the unattainability of the love object – is a scene that prevents the entrance of the father: he remains offstage, behind the curtain, a mere ghost, as Derrida (1994) will argue with regard to Hamlet. Without the fetish, the maternal phallus, the ego would be nothing, an ego-nothing. This dependency is however also the root of the secret anger towards the fetish (and the reason for the often noted resistance to therapy). This could provide an explanation for the fact that, especially in the dominatrix scene, which is linked to fetishism, the maternalised body of the woman cannot be equipped dangerously enough – as though the goal were the revival of the bad mother object, transformed by magic into a fetishised idol. In literature, this can already be identified in Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's *Venus in Furs* (1869).

This may all be true. But the problem with this interpretation is a controversial positing of a presymbolic, split imago of the mother from a time so early barely any light of memory can be shed on it. The advantage of the interpretation is that the hate so often contained within fetishism can be explained as hatred towards the woman. *She is not what she is fantasised as, must play at being what she is not and cannot be what the imaginary dictates her to be.* She is thus converted into a thing, which is a symbolic substitute for her self. The fetish is the

⁴⁰ Meuli uses this phrase to describe the acting out of one's one innocence in ancient sacrificial customs.

elimination *and* reanimation of the mother-*imago* in one holy and dirty object that is both worshipped and despised. This seems to be reconcilable with the concept of the splitting of the ego that Freud had reconceived while working on his last concept of fetishism. The fetish is a thing that allows irreconcilable demands to coexist: the demand for a maternal phallus that becomes the child's possession; and the demands of reality, where the mother has no phallus, which instead belongs to the father, who bears the name of the law.

8.2 Jacques Lacan and the phallus – with an excursus on primordial murder

Jacques Lacan (1901–1981) makes the symbolic order, within which the fetish is located, completely subject to the power of the phallus, the paternal metaphor par excellence (*métaphore parternelle*). Lacan argues for a universal structuralism that precedes every biological, but also every genealogical order, whether biographical or sociocultural. While the model of the dynamics of the phases of development in the growing human being in Freud, the Oedipus complex, is not abandoned completely, it is identified with language (the symbolic order) in general and acquires the status of the transcendental vis-à-vis all temporal phases: the name of the father (*nom du père*) or the phallus inaugurated in the Oedipus complex is the precondition for every single ontogenetic and every historical development. As much as Lacan values Melanie Klein's approach (unlike Freudianism, which he had little regard for), his programmatic "return to Freud" (Weber 1978) means he must abandon Klein's postulation of the autonomy and power of the archaic early phases. In Lacan, the presymbolic mother-*imagos* are not regents *sui generis* of the oldest development phase, which defines the later phases and can come back to haunt individuals in the form of perversions and paranoia. The introduction of language, linked to the Oedipus complex, is projected back onto all of the earlier phases by Lacan and becomes their *a priori*. This *a priori* of language should not be understood as a concrete 'origin', to which one can return like to some primal fact. Instead it is what makes all evolution and becoming a subject possible. How are we to understand such a sweeping statement? To do so, we must digress a little, go back to Freud and then determine what is new about Lacan's work.

Lacan transforms the mythical narrative Freud develops in *Totem and Taboo* (1912/1913, SE XIII, vii-162) into a structural agenda. For Freud, there is a primordial murder in the beginning, at the zero point of human history and the constitution of the subject. Myths of this kind are told across the world. Freud therefore turns himself into a detective investigating the primal murder and, by creating a collage of texts by ethnologists, scholars of religion and Darwinists, constructs

an aetiological novel that is supposed to provide an answer to the question of why cultures are so lastingly defined by guilt and why they are so ambivalent towards ‘paternal’ authority.⁴¹ Freud descends into the depths, not to the mothers like Goethe (or Melanie Klein), but to the hominid tyrant. “In the beginning was the Deed” (SE XIII, 161),⁴² namely the undeed; this is his retort to Goethe: the collective murder of the primal father, who had been monopolising all the females, by “Darwin’s primal horde”. Sexual competition as the origin of murder. The murder victim is promoted to clan totem and thus to a god (idol), because of whom everyone is guilty (all cultures are cultures of guilt or debt) and who is both loved and hated. Culture’s entire symbolic order emerges from this constellation, but also all fetishes and idols. Thus, even as early as Freud (and not first in René Girard 1977; 1986b), the sacred originates in violence, which leads to an irredeemable guilt and therefore to the putting in place of permanent rites to cope with this: religion. The cult of sacrifice is also created here: the god is ritually killed again and again and can only become a god through this process. The god’s substitute, the totem animal, is eaten at the sacrificial meal, thereby entering all the members of the clan and bringing their descendants together as a community, a cult community *and* a social group.⁴³ The cohesive forces of the social originate from the communal experience of the murder (the guilt), which at the same time produces the sacred status of the victim. The world, social order and the human community is generated out of the god’s sacrificed body. No ritual murder, no culture. We have already seen that Stekel was close to these ideas in his religious reading of fetishism, in which he saw a Christ complex.

In order to avoid descending into a horde of rival brothers fighting over the females (*bellum omnium contra omnes*), they introduce the rule that the women of *one* clan do not belong to anyone *in* the clan. This is the centrepiece of Freudian theory: the *law* of exogamy linked to the *prohibition* of incest – the Oedipus complex. Everything that has to do with sexuality, reproduction and marriage must be handed over to the control of the religious administrators. This is the reason why all the activities surrounding reproduction, birth and marriage are

41 That Freud’s myth of our origin is a literary fiction, despite the many references to empirical ethnology, is even clear to him.

42 Freud is referring to *Faust I*, verse 1237. It is Faust’s third attempt to translate the beginning of the Gospel of John. He had first placed the ‘logos’ at the “beginning”: “word”, “meaning”, “force”. It is significant that Freud places the “deed”, i.e. praxis, at the beginning and not language. In contrast, Lacan will once again make the “word” the unavoidable ‘origin’ – and claim that in doing so he is returning to Freud. This is questionable.

43 Freud knows that the Last Supper must also be included in this (SE XIII, 146 ff.).

themselves sacred. The sacrament of marriage is inherited from this tradition. According to Lacan, over it stands the imaginary phallus, in whose name, which is also the name of the absent father, the positions of all agents involved (father, mother, brothers, daughters, relations) and all permissible and forbidden actions are coded. Claude Lévi-Strauss, whose main international impact occurred before Lacan's rise to fame (Dosse 1997, vol. 1, 10–25; 91–125) had also made the Oedipus complex (the interdependence of the law of exogamy and the prohibition of incest) the fundamental form of all cultural structures (cf. Lévi-Strauss 1969, 1966). The incest taboo and exogamy pacify the internal relationships of the patriarchal, masculine tribe. Murdering members of one's own gene pool is placed under a taboo, but is permitted outside the clan; enmity between different groups is sanctioned. The endpoint of this pattern is Holy War (Colpe 1994).

The material from which Freud spins his myth, especially the circumstances in which the ritual of sacrifice re-enacts a primal murder of a father(god), is in keeping with René Girard's argument when he makes Nietzsche's aphorism about the murder of God a foundational act (1995, 255–275). But that was common knowledge to all ethnologists working on cosmological myths and sacrificial rites around 1900. In his book *Violence and the Sacred* (1977),⁴⁴ Girard, not without becoming rather mythical himself, characterises the “foundational violence” of bloody sacrifice as a mechanism that has operated throughout all of history: blood sacrifice protects the community from their immanent violence, ensures their coherence and disrupts the endless chain of violent revenge. It is therefore also a *protection from violence through the medium of violence itself*. Sacred violence is the catharsis of violence itself. Only by the sacred ritualisation of murder can society become stable and secure its order, which would otherwise collapse under the onslaught of ‘savage’ violence. This story is continued by William Robertson Smith and Sigmund Freud's mythical texts.

Walter Burkert, who reminds us that 95 to 99 per cent of all human history was that of the ancient Palaeolithic hunters, sees this killing as a genetically encoded, inherent feature of humanity (Burkert 1983, 16f.). That is why for him the foundations of religion are biological (Burkert 1996). Burkert adopts Ellegard Jensen's idea that through eating meat, killing has become a fundamental fact of human life (Jensen 1951, 197–229; Meuli 1946). To eat means to kill. Paracelsus once said the same thing (Böhme 1994). Jensen showed that in more recent tribal culture and extant mythical evidence, a man only became a man once he had

⁴⁴ On Girard cf. Assmann, H. 1997; Palaver 2013; Hammerton-Kelly 1986; Greisch 1984. – On sacrifice: Schenk 1984; Burkert 1983.

killed (1951, 198 ff.). In rituals, killing itself is the objective. It is lauded as an act that maintains order in the world. That is why killing can become a sacred act. At the same time, killing is a sacrilege (a horrifying violation of the sacred order of life). This is the reason why in hunting societies killing is often reinterpreted as an act committed not by the hunter but by someone else, or as an act demanded by God (Karl Meuli calls this ‘the comedy of innocence’). Killing fully merges with sacred sacrifice when human sacrifice, animal sacrifice, head hunting and cannibalism are the re-enactment of a primordial sacrifice of a god, whose dismemberment provides the elements of the present order of existence in the first place. Killing God and eating him is the foundational act of violence out of which the world is born. It is the affirmation of a world to which the act killing inherently belongs, but which nonetheless is ensnared in guilt.

This is the anthropological paradox that today’s scholars ask us to believe – a typical Enlightenment position. From it Burkert develops his theory of *Homo necans*, which he opposes to the evolutionary biologist’s more optimistic version, *Homo sapiens sapiens*. Successful killing is biologically programmed for Burkert, because it is the heart of the reproduction of hunter-gatherer societies. From this point on, evolution moves towards cooperation and targeted action, towards the division between inside and outside, between the masculine and feminine sphere and between tool development and child-rearing. Creating a community is a bloody art. “Man became man through the hunt, through the act of killing”, writes Burkert (1983, 22). The sacrificial rite shifts this dangerous potential into a domestic pattern. It regulates murderous aggression, transforms it into an act that binds the community and channels it ‘outwards’ to the prey of the hunt, the victim, the enemy and the scapegoat (Girard 1986a, 1986b). Killing thus becomes a mechanism for affirming life. But life is sacred. And that is why ritual murder is part of the sacred, indeed it supports it.

The human being, says Robert Musil, ironically prefiguring these findings, is just as capable of cannibalism as the critique of pure reason (2011, 391, 440, 158). However, this conclusion is already implied in Nietzsche, who asserts the indifference of nature to moral norms. But this means that examples of care and self-sacrifice are of equally little significance as examples of “savage energies” (Burkert 2001), of murderous or cannibalistic conflicts and sacrificial rites. In evolutionary history, there are no ‘arguments’ for either the *definition noire* along the lines of Thomas Hobbes, Freud, Girard and Burkert, nor for messages of peace from ancient utopias to Rousseau and Konrad Lorenz. Myths and sacrificial rites across the world represent cultural ways of processing evolution and two of the main matrices of human behaviour that have formed within it. However, Freud, Girard and Burkert are themselves under the spell of these myths and continue to write them. Just as there was no golden age of peaceful vegetarian-

ism, there was also no initial spark of human history in a primal murder and there is no proof that *Homo necans* has dominated history. The evolutionary biological foundations of Burkert's thesis are wrong, because being a *Homo necans* presupposes also having the ability to cooperate, to resolve internal conflicts, to share, to ensure that women and children have enough to eat, long-lasting social relationships, etc. Being a hunter would therefore only be possible in a developed social environment that precisely did not follow the logic of killing. *Homo necans* and *Homo sociatus* therefore develop in a co-evolutionary fashion. The unbearable ambivalence of this structure 'within us' gives rise to *Homo religiosus*.

By fusing Freudian psychoanalysis with a structuralist concept of language, Lacan comes up with a new justification for this myth, which cannot be verified, yet upon which the 'law' of all culture seems to depend (Lang 1986, 203–216; Krips 1999, 13–40; Ragland-Sullivan 1981).⁴⁵ 'From the beginning', he proposes, the Oedipus complex, which is the 'late' version of the production of symbolic order out of the primordial murder of the father, creates powerful structures in the genesis of the subject and culture. Lacan clearly argues for: 'In the beginning was the word' – and in this sense, he provides a 'Hellenistic' interpretation of psychoanalysis (which most certainly cannot be said of Freud). The father's phallus is a placeholder for an empty space where all laws and rules come from in "the name of the father". He does not 'later' impose his order on the dual relation of mother and infant in order to get them under his control, rather the name of the father is always already 'in place' in the mother's and the infant's desire: this is what gives him transcendental status. The phallus is the signifier of a blank space where the positivity of the linguistic order 'originates' and is 'inaugurated'. One should not misunderstand this as the real phallus belonging to the primal father, who is castrated in order to create the order of kinship in the process of dealing with this guilt. It is not about history and stories, but about structures, which only exist as such because of the precondition of language, into whose order the human being must enter in the doubleness of their Oedipal and semiotic coding. The order of language is 'always already' there, it structurally precedes the living being that is the human, the *zoon logon echon*.

⁴⁵ In order to remain at least somewhat understandable, I will not discuss Lacan's speculations around the "objet petit a" (the object little-a), on the basis of which many interpreters of his work have constructed a Lacanian fetish concept. Besides, not much more is won with this term than can be said with normal psychoanalytic language. – Equally, I will not discuss the essay first published in English with Granoff, which contributes very little to the theory of fetish, despite having the word fetishism in the title (Lacan/Granoff, 1956/1986).

In the split between the signifier and signified (between sign and meaning), yawns the chasm between presence and absence. The name of the father is the meaning that can never be reached, the symbol of an unattainable absence (which is represented by the father's death in myth). The name of the father cannot be forced into any presence; one can never get hold of it. It is precisely from this empty space that the law of the father draws its power: in the irresolvable lack that expresses itself in every desire and wish, in every speech act. Castration rules every subject; indeed it produces it as a subject in the first place. The subject's origin is not in a maternal integration, but in the wound, in dismemberment. Anyone who speaks (even if it is only an "oh" – "(d)a" in the *fort-da* game; even if it is only a rudimentary phonetic differentiation⁴⁶) is always already subject to the phallus (the law, the name of the father). And anyone who desires is always already inscribed in the grammar of language.

It is clear that Lacan is positioning the primacy of the symbolic order against the maternal powers of the imaginary. The 'primacy' of the mother (Melanie Klein)⁴⁷ is undermined by the 'always already' of the structural order. According to Lacan's argument, the fetish cannot be anything but the reified covering up of a gap, a void, which cannot be closed; this is not the maternal void however, but the one that the law of the father indicates. In his argument, Lacan himself fetishises the phallus, which becomes a theory fetish and gives its advocate, Lacan, a prominent place in the long line of the mythologists of patriarchy. Lacan has simply replaced the fantasy of the primal murder, out of which totems, idols and fetishes are born, with the more 'rational' seeming structure of language. But equating it with the structure of the Oedipus complex: that is mythologisation.

I will show this using the example of his lecture "The Signification of the Phallus", which Lacan gave in Munich in 1958 on the invitation of Paul Matussek (2001, 215–222). His discussion of 'the human', 'the woman' or 'the man', in its completely totalising abstraction of the phallus, can not only be seen as evidence of an uncritical patriarchalism, but a programmatic one. Every man or woman appropriates their own gender, "but only through a threat – the threat, indeed, of their privation" (*ibid.*, 215), in other words, castration. This is the sacrificial victim everyone must offer up.

Lacan does not argue biologically. He views gender identities as the effects of linguistic positions that are dictated by the signifier that is the phallus. If you

⁴⁶ Lacan is referring the famous *fort-da* game played by a little boy and analysed by Freud. The boy repeatedly spun his yoyo away and then reeled it back in again in order to symbolically process the absence of the mother (Freud SE XVIII, 13–16). On this cf. also Bernard 1980, 82–84.

⁴⁷ This 'primacy' of the mother had already been proposed in 1861 by Bachofen (1997). Cf. also the Jungian, Neumann 1955.

were to think that with ‘language’ he means a dimension of the human being’s self-construction that had developed over the course of its evolution, you would be disappointed. Lacan opposes culturalist and feminist views of the gender order, for example in Karen Horney (Lacan 2001, 218). In Lacan, language has a similar determining ability to ontological determinants.

What is definitive for both genders is “a relation of the subject to the phallus that is established without regard to the anatomical difference of the sexes”. Lacan knows that this is particularly problematic for women (2001, 216): why does the little girl view herself as castrated (“deprived of the phallus”)? Why is the mother fantasised about as being phallic by both genders (*ibid.*)? Why is the mother then in turn also discovered as being castrated?

The answers to these questions are linked to Lacan’s construction of the phallic phase of becoming a subject. In it, the “imaginary dominance of the phallic attribute” (*ibid.*) is fixed in both genders: in boys with the aid of the penis, in girls with the aid of the clitoris. The phallic object grows out of these (physiological!) experiences. It has the traits of both a fetish that is worshipped and a phobic object that is feared. It would then be plausible to argue that within a society dominated by patriarchy, a person’s experience of their body is modelled according to the scheme of symbolic hierarchies of value; in that case, the phallus’s rule would be nothing more than the symbolic expression of this cultural dominance. Instead Lacan argues extremely polemically, although he has no reason to, against Karl Abraham’s concept of the part object and Ernest Jones’ theory of the “normalisation” of the phallus as a part object. But why? Every relativisation of the phallus is sacrilege against its symbolic honour.

For it is about the signifier ‘phallus’ that we as subjects are always already subject to. This “passion of the signifier”, according to which we are always already woven into its game, is what Lacan calls the “human condition” (2001, 217). Obviously, Lacan is simply transferring the Heideggerian conception of language speaking us, no matter how strongly we believe we are speaking it, onto the phallus. For Lacan, I do not speak, but rather “it” speaks, namely the unconscious. The status of the phallus is to gender what language is to the speaker. It always exists prior to them and enables them in the first place. But ‘language’ no more exists in a positive sense (instead many languages), than ‘there is’ a phallus for someone. Rather, the phallus is the prior absence to which the genders and all kinds of subjectivity refer when they are allocated. The ahistorical aspect of this construction is not a problem for Lacan; indeed, it is a precondition for the transcendentalism of the phallus in the interplay between sex and gender.

Lacan works in an “other scene” than that of culture, society and history, namely in the “that of the unconscious” (2001, 218).⁴⁸ It is the scene of various shifts and concentrations, of metonymy and metaphor and of combination and substitution (Lacan thus adapts some underdeveloped ideas from Saussure and Jakobson). Reconstructed on this level, the phallus is no longer a part object, a phantasm, an organ – but the signifier of all signifieds. “It speaks in the other”, which means: the ego is only deployed as a subject in the unconscious, in the id, in the first place.

What does this mean? At this point Lacan turns to “the simulacrum that it [the phallus] represented for the ancients” (ibid., 218), in other words, to the image, the dream, to mirror and shadow images, the replica, the false and deceptive image, the phantom, the copy, the allegory, the image of the false god, the idol and the fetish ‘phallus’. All these are called ‘simulacrum’. Does Lacan explore this variant of the meaning of the word simulacrum further? No. His aim, in a grand gesture, is to lift the veil that had covered the ancient phallus mysteries. For the phallus “is a signifier [...] intended to designate as a whole the effects of the signified, in that the signifier conditions them by its presence as a signifier” (ibid., 218). If this is not “fashionable nonsense” (Sokal/Bricmont 1998, 18–37), then it is at least a fetishisation of the function the phallus supposedly has in language (Öhlschläger 1996).

That the phallus fulfils this a priori function is, according to Lacan, the effect of a primal repression, after which the ability to become a whole person is lost forever. Lacan had already argued that it was fragmentation and not wholeness that was the beginning of becoming a subject and that the ego’s integrity is therefore entirely illusionary, if not hallucinatory, in his mirror essay (2001, 1–6). From this he derives his ideas about the genesis of desire, which is directed at the shifted object that is always the masked other and the unattainable, but also represents the fragmentary nature of the subject. It is exactly this that the phallus marks, which is the object, the placeholder, the motive and the refusal of desire at the same time (2001, 218–219).

But why should the phallus (and not, for example, the sun or the mother’s breast) occupy this eminent position? “The phallus is the privileged signifier of that mark in which the role of the logos is joined with the advent of desire” (ibid., 220). This is practically a whisper. Perhaps, with this obscure turn, Lacan means the following: the phallus, by demonstrating the unattainability of the signified, calls language along with desire onto the stage of human life.

⁴⁸ It remains incomprehensible why the unconscious should be a stage devoid of history, culture and society, and instead that of language.

As human beings we always remain as separated from the object of our desire, which we wish to appropriate, as from meaning, which we want to be able to grasp. Why is this unattainability ascribed to the phallus, of all things?

At this point, Lacan regresses to physiologism. He writes: “It can be said that this signifier [the phallus] is chosen because it is the most tangible element in the real of sexual copulation, and also the most symbolic in the literal (typographical) sense of the term, since it is equivalent there to the (logical) copula” (ibid., 220). This sloppy mixture of physiology and semiotics, language and the body, logic and flesh, places the phallus at the beginning of all bodies, all desire, all language. However, this is in fact simply a mystification or even, insofar as the phallus is neither entirely an object nor entirely a symbol, a fetishisation.⁴⁹ Lacan – “like any patriarchal autocrat” as Marcia Ian asserts (1993, 29) – does not analyse the fetishisation of the phallus, he does it. Kenneth Mark Harris (1995, 51) calls it “Lacan’s notorious phallogocentrism”.

It is no coincidence that Lacan cites Melanie Klein here, according to whom “the child apprehends from the outset that the mother ‘contains’ the phallus” (Lacan 2001, 220). Note the words used: “from the outset”, “contains”. Lacan paraphrases Klein as if the body of the mother were the semiophore (Pomian) of the sign. But the incorporated phallus of the mother suppresses her castration. And so the desire of the child is directed towards an imaginary that masks the void and the absence.

If, on the other hand, “the desire of the mother is the phallus, [then] the child wishes to be the phallus in order to satisfy that desire” (ibid., 221). This interaction between two impossibilities, namely ‘being a phallus’ and ‘having a phallus’, reveals the ‘human condition’ already invoked to be a travesty and a romantic comedy. “This is brought about by the intervention of a ‘to seem’ that replaces the ‘to have’, in order to protect it on the one side and to mask its lack on the other, and which has the effect of projecting in their entirety the ideal or typical manifestations of the behaviour of each sex, including the act of copulation itself, into the comedy” (ibid.). Nothing is more theatrical than the act of love, which, precisely because it allows both partners to experi-

⁴⁹ Marcia Ian comments on the bizarre juggling Lacan does with the logical copula of penis/phallus as follows: “Nevertheless, to assign, as psychoanalysis does, to the penis, ‘raised’ to the symbolic function of the phallus, the status of universal signifier, the signifier of all possible conjunctions of bodies, is to make of it a fetish against the threat of its loss [...] The penis is not and never was the universal organ of connection. It is never even a temporary organ of connection between mothers and daughters, or women and women, or even, and this is most to the point because it is this relation upon which all psychoanalysis is based, between mothers and infant sons.” (1993, 32)

ence the ecstasy of wholeness, leaves them back in their lack even more mercilessly: no one is what they pretend to be; no one has what they desire to have; everyone gives something they do not have and does not receive what they are missing. The symbolontic curriculum, which has advocated the ideas of love and wholeness since Plato's *Symposium* (Aurnhammer 1986) is, according to the stipulations of the phallus-signifier, never anything more than superficial appearance. This is the reason for the melancholy of sex (*post coitum omnis triste*).

Based on this, for different reasons than Freud did in 1909, Lacan declares that all women are fetishists:

I am saying that it is in order to be the phallus, that is to say, the signifier of the desire of the Other, that a woman will reject an essential part of femininity, namely, all her attributes in the masquerade. It is for that which she is not that she wishes to be desired as well as loved. But she finds the signifier of her own desire in the body of him to whom she addresses her demand for love. Perhaps it should not be forgotten that the organ that assumes this signifying function takes on the value of a fetish. (Lacan 2001, 221)

The man uses this fetishisation in the opposite way: inasmuch as “the signifier of the phallus constitutes her as giving in love what she does not have – conversely, his own desire for the phallus will make its signifier emerge [or become erect] (sic! H.B.) in its persistent divergence towards another woman who may signify this phallus in various ways, either as a virgin or as a prostitute” (ibid., 221–222).

With this offensive legitimization of man's constitutive inability to be faithful, Lacan has reached the nadir of structural psychoanalysis: the “Universal Tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love” (Freud SE XI, 179–190), which Freud interpreted as the *cultural* split of male desire, is universalised by Lacan as the human condition and the order of gender. He describes the idea “that there is only one libido” as the “depth of Freud's intuition”: namely the masculine libido, the desire of the phallus, as both the genitive subject and the object of the subject. Outdoing Freud, Lacan adds the “most profound relation”, “that in which the Ancients embodied the *nous* and *logos*” (Lacan 2001, 222). This may be a nice little heresy: undermining the Christian miracle of the Logos incarnate by saying that the Greeks had already let that secret out; afterwards the word becomes flesh not in the Son of God, but in the phallus. However, that is not the knowledge of the Greeks, but Lacan's own platitudinous secret. His dismal gospel is that the great mystery of the world is... the phallus. At best though, the phallus is the secret of fetishism, the proclamation of which Lacan allows psychoanalytic theory to degenerate into. This could be regarded as ideologically typical or clinically significant for the year 1958: *phallic narcissism, the analysis of which is the task of the psychoanalyst, is universalised by psychoanalysis itself.*

There are therefore such things as theory fetishes: the Lacanian signifier phallus is a fetish of huge, magical proportions. The phallus is ordained as the name of the father (as the pope), i.e. the highest representative (signifier) of the always retreating signifier, which conceals a traumatic absence, castration. No one in the twentieth century declared phallic narcissism and fetishism to be the condition of humankind, of both genders, more successfully than Lacan. Against the background of the mythical narrative of the murder of the father, the rationalisation Lacan undertakes is transformed into a ‘deepening’ of the mythical spell. Everything the totem means as a representative of the dead father and his law, as the desire and guilt of the tribe, as the symbol of the community and the location of gender, is ascribed solely to the ‘phallus’ by Lacan. The phallus takes the place of the totem. This also applies when the phallus is not material like the totem. It makes little difference that the fetishised phallus represents an absence, while in tribal culture idols and fetishes, when they inspired the belief of their followers, in fact demonstrated the presence of a powerful meaning, which was healing if one came into contact with it. The phallus fetish creates a kind of negative community: a community of a “lack of being” (*manque à être*), to which we all, men and women, even if it is in different ways, are sentenced. The phallus refigures the totem in mythical tradition. Lacan, despite his strong influence on so much of modern discourse, therefore remains a member of an archaic tribe.

8.3 Joan Riviere: womanliness as masquerade

Towards the end of his lecture on the phallus, Lacan discusses the masquerade that always accompanies the theatre of love. Women, by wanting to be desired for what they are not, mutate into actresses in order to mask their own lack (Lacan 2001, 221). Lacan goes so far as to say “femininity finds its refuge in the mask” (ibid., 222). Femininity is so much identified with masquerade that it “mak[es] virile display in the human being itself seem feminine” (ibid.), in other words: men who fashion themselves too obviously seem effeminate. For anyone who parades themselves erotically indirectly demonstrates their lack of a phallus.

Typically, Lacan does not mention the English female psychoanalyst Joan Riviere (1883–1962) here, a student of Freud and Ernest Jones, who was friends with Melanie Klein from 1925 and who worked closely with her, especially in Klein’s early years in London and at the time of the debate around the analysis of children. Her essay “Womanliness as a Masquerade” (1929, 303–313) is, as Lil-

iane Weissberg has shown, a key text for the discussion of masquerade and fetishism.⁵⁰

Riviere's starting point is the observation that she more and more frequently encounters men and women who show signs of the traits of the opposite sex, or even openly demonstrate these. She is especially interested in the kinds of women who pursue masculinity (success, ambition, power, assertiveness), but mask this by presenting themselves as particularly feminine. In her case study of a successful woman, who often acts the 'little woman' after professional appearances in environments dominated by men, she identifies a strong identification with the father. She experiences her own success as threatening her father, symbolically: as castrating him. This makes her feel guilty. So she undermines her success, by playing the demure little woman: womanliness as masquerade therefore disguises the woman's 'phallic' assertiveness, which is repressed and experienced by her as the castration of the man. She also expects reprisals from the father, indeed from men in general (Riviere 1929, 305). "Womanliness therefore could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it." (ibid. 306)

Riviere gives this case study a surprising twist by asking whether there is in fact any difference between real femininity and the masquerade. "They are the same thing", she explains (ibid.): being a woman is a masquerade. Referring to Melanie Klein, she traces the occupation of gender (of the other) back to the early sadism of the infant: the desire to rip out the internal organs of the mother and devour them or wanting to castrate the father or bite off his penis.

The father's penis is the talisman the woman lacks that could secure her identity. By equipping herself with fetishes, costumes and masks, she hides her lack and at the same time can keep terrifying sadistic attacks on the bodies of the others (the father, the mother) in check (ibid., 311). Riviere views the 'successful woman's' erotic seeking of men's recognition as the masked wish to be given a penis by them: this hides the oral rage she would like to appropriate it with. Masquerade and fetishisation conceal, on the one hand, aggressive desires of appropriation (the successful occupation of masculinity); and, on the other, they provide the opportunity, despite the 'manliness' of success, to be

⁵⁰ In the same year, the essay was translated into German and given the title "Weiblichkeit als Maske". [Böhme cites] from the 1994 edition [my translation cites the 1929 original]. Weissberg claims that Lacan concealed his references to Riviere (1994, 9). Her foreword provides meticulous evidence of the influence of Riviere's masquerade concept, especially in the Anglo-American region. Cf. also the commentary by Lili Gast in Riviere 1996, 60, 83–86. Also: Benthien/Stephan 2003.

able to present herself fully and completely ‘as a woman’ and desire the phallus located in the other. In this way, she affirms the masculine world, but at the same time subverts it. It is a contradictory compromise but a clever move: I have no phallus, but I’ll take yours; I have a phallus, because I have castrated you; I am castrated and worship and love your phallus; give me your phallus so that I can carry it inside me (as a baby); by fetishising you, I give you the phallus (which you do not have). I know all this, but yet I still do it; I know nothing and am innocent. *Je sais bien, mais quand même...* This is the typical split in fetishism extended to apply to the whole female gender.

Womanliness is a masquerade. Riviere’s most valuable point is that women deal with a consciousness of lack differently than men: men compensate through competitive behaviour, that is, within the matrix of power; women cover up this lack with a masquerade, by shifts in the fetishised, visible side of their performances, through deception and illusion. The Eve pattern is thus continued. The woman is the idol of male desire. And by simulating this idol, she masks her secret attacks on the male insignia of power.

Lacan universalises the phallic stage of subject formation in the same way. The phallus fetish prevents the “dissolution of the Oedipus complex” (Freud). Lacan treats the phallus as he himself would like to be treated. The great, re-awakened primal father appears again from behind the scenes. Lacan turns himself into this myth: worshipped and feared, he is the totem of a new clan, the idolised self-object of a school of thought.

8.4 Donald W. Winnicott and his followers

Winnicott (1896–1971), a British psychoanalyst who completed his own analysis with Joan Riviere and after 1945 was the leading figure of the ‘moderate group’ between the orthodox Freudians around Anna Freud and the ‘Kleinians’ around Melanie Klein, is not a fetishism researcher; however, his theory of transitional objects and transitional phenomena provides an important building-block for a theory of the genesis of fetishism.⁵¹ His theory of play also provides insights into the as-if character of fetishism and perversion already identified by Stekel and later emphasised by the Winnicott scholar, Masud Khan (Winnicott 1971).

Winnicott’s concept of transitional objects brings together a large number of observations from the analysis of children. The issue is the transition from oral

⁵¹ The first formulation of this theory can be found in Winnicott (1953, 89–97). [Böhme cites] the German translation (1969, 666–682).

autoeroticism and being merged with the mother object to realistic relationships with objects. This requires recognising an independent world. In this process, children take certain things (scraps of bedding, their mother's underwear, teddies, etc.) into their bodily sphere, invest emotions in them and keep them close by to touch, feel and smell in states of stress or anxiety, but also in the transition to sleep. To use Mahler's terms, these things are located on the border between symbiosis and individuation (Mahler 1967; Mahler/Pine/Bergman 1975/2008). They make it easier to develop from one phase to another, or in Freud's terms, the transition into the anal and the phallic phase.

Besides this *temporal* dimension, transitional objects also have a *spatial* function. They form a *bridge* between the intraphysical world and the extraphysical world of objects. Unlike the spatial unit of infant and mother's breast,⁵² the infant and the transitional object form a space *sui generis*, which Winnicott calls an "intermediate space": this is "an intermediate area of experiencing, to which inner reality and external life both contribute" (1953, 90).⁵³ Winnicott quotes the Indian Nobel prize winner, Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941): "On the seashore of endless worlds, children play" (1971, 95). This 'between' (the coasts) results from the fact that these objects "are not part of the infant's body, yet are not fully recognised as belonging to external reality" (1953, 89). They are, as Phyllis Greenacre puts it nicely, "the first not-me object", but "never totally not-me" (1969, 146). In this in-between position, the object is the child's first non-illusionary, non-hallucinatory possession. The child possesses it, yet not in the sense of omnipotence; it can be treated tenderly, lovingly or angrily; it cannot be exchanged; it gives the child feeling of warmth and security and yet the impression that it lives its own life; it is animated (Winnicott 1953, 91; 1971, 5). All these are characteristics of fetishes too. With the help of the transitional object, the child protects itself from being overwhelmed by separation anxiety or, in Klein's view, from its sadistic anger (towards its mother). In the transitional object's temporal-spatial and material specificity, Winnicott sees the origin of play and art, of re-

52 According to Winnicott, the 'good enough mother' enables the infant to have the experience of fusing with the mother-object, which can even be imagined as a part of the child and as its creation. The mother then must force the child to go through the transition from this illusion to disillusionment, which is quite difficult, i.e. she has to enable a non-traumatic experience of the fact that there are autonomous objects in the world, to which the child then must form a relationship in order to complete the next stage of development. The child is supported in this process by its transitional objects, which must be tolerated by the mother, even when they temporarily seem to be 'more important' than the mother. Cf. Winnicott 1953, 94, as well as Winnicott 1971, 10–14, 47–48, 79–81, 84–85. Litt 1986 provides an outline of Winnicott's theory. 53 Winnicott also speaks about an "intermediate playground" (Winnicott 1971, 47) or a "potential space" (*ibid.*, 41, 47, 100, 107–110).

ligion, but also of fetishism (1953, 90, 96). Winnicott does not mention that the transitional object is similar to the wooden yo-yo in the little boy's *fort-da* game described by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (SE XVIII, 14–16). The yo-yo is something that is neither entirely a me-object nor entirely a not-me object; it becomes an element in a scene directed by the boy; it 'means' something, without the meaning becoming separated from the material arrangement; the yo-yo has a representational function: it performs the anxiety about separation from the mother, whose presence, absence and presence again is dealt with theatrically by the little boy; the 'game with a thing' therefore reduces stress and is pleasurable and supportive. Furthermore, in the yo-yo game, the presence and non-presence of the yo-yo (the mother) is commented on with sounds ("da" [there] and "o-o-o-o" = gone). Confronting the difference between the self and the non-self this way, the independence of objects (they come and go), with presence and absence (and also with rudimentary temporal modes) seems to happen in parallel with the acquisition of linguistic signs. It is possible that these have the same function as transitional objects, but are permanent and not just a phase. Language also creates an intermediate sphere, which does not work through fetishised things, but through symbols and their order. Freud remarks that the young boy's actions are a "great cultural achievement" (SE XVIII, 15).⁵⁴ Winnicott assigns this cultural function to all the successors of transitional objects. It is no coincidence that he then turns to play. Handling transitional objects is the first form of playing at all. And out of play, as not just Freud and Winnicott have argued, but many other cultural theorists and play researchers since Schiller, culture and with it the human being is born (although the higher animals certainly also play).⁵⁵

Winnicott also emphasises the link between transitional objects and language. Transitional objects 'are' not the mother's breast, but rather they 'signify' it. Yet as material things, they do not just 'signify' but also substitute the breast. They share this structure with fetishes, which a transitional object can become, but not necessarily so (Winnicott 1953, 91–93). Following Susanne Langer's argument, who differentiates between discursive and presentational symbols, one could say that transitional objects – just like objects belonging to rites, religion and art – make a meaning *present* (they do not just represent it). Handling transitional objects is a performative act. Hannah Segal sees a "symbolic equation"

⁵⁴ Cf. H. Lang 1986, 213–218. – Surprisingly, Winnicott does not mention the *fort-da* game, although he describes a very similar situation himself (1971, 96–98).

⁵⁵ "[...] man only plays when in the full meaning of the word he is a man, and he is only completely a man when he plays." In Schiller 1967, letter XV, 106–107. Nietzsche also asserts this idea in many places. Cf. Groos 1899; Buytendijk 1933; Huizinga 1949; Caillouis 1961.

between the sign and its meaning.⁵⁶ This means that the sign is not arbitrary and conventionalised, but is fused with the materiality of the thing. This is what defines the magical power of the object-symbol; it is a *dromenon*, a performing, psychic effect causing, movement producing, uplifting and cathartic game, in other words, a drama.⁵⁷

Winnicott recognises the similarity between transitional objects and fetishes. The latter term had been proposed by Wulff before him (1946) for precisely those phenomena Winnicott now includes under his new term. Winnicott thinks it misleading to use a term from the nosology of perversions to describe universal, transient phenomena necessary for early childhood development, for him also the source of all creativity (1953, 96). The majority of researchers have agreed with him on this; but others reject his position.⁵⁸ This dispute is not important for our purposes here. For just as one cannot ‘absolve’ children of fetishism, one can equally not deny the “cultural achievement” of fetishism: art works acquire the character of fetishes, artists become idols; in religion and in rites, fetishes play a paramount role, to say nothing of film and mass culture. But the reverse is also true: if one emphasises the creative and cultural function of transitional objects, one cannot simply dismiss fetishism as a mere perversion. Neither can one declare transitional objects to be universal, as Winnicott does,⁵⁹ when empirical follow-up studies have shown that transitional objects are specific to cultures and social classes, and also influenced by contingent styles of childrearing and childcare (research overview in Mitscherlich 1984; Litt 1986).

However, there are a significant number of features common to both fetishes and transitional objects. Both unfold in an “intermediate space”, a ludic as-if, which is neither illusionary nor subject to the reality principle. Freud, Stekel, Winnicott and Khan all agree on this. Both appease fear (comforters, facilitators,

56 Susanne K. Langer and Hannah Segal cited in Mitscherlich 1984, here 190.

57 Huizinga 1949, 14f. Winnicott is not a theoretician; in that sense his discovery of the role of play in the constitution of the subject is lacking a little with regards to theory, cf. Winnicott 1971, 38–41, 47–48, 51–52. What is important is his idea that playing can only begin if anxieties are kept in check and the drives are not too strong; an excess of either would result in the collapse of the ‘frame’ (the intermediate playground; *ibid.*, 52).

58 Melitta Sperling (1963) polemically criticises Winnicott’s terminology, saying it is “not only fallacious but dangerous”; she demonstrates a series of cases of children’s fetishism (in girls too) and agrees with Wulff’s position (Sperling 1963, 377). – I cannot judge the significance of Winnicott leaving out his criticism of Wulff in the extended version of his essay, chapter one of *Playing and Reality* (Winnicott 1971, 13–14: the criticism of Wulff was once in these sections).

59 “What I called transitional phenomena are universal.” (Winnicott 1971, 40); he also believes “it is play that is the universal” (*ibid.*, 41).

companions, guardian angels; Litt 1986, 396) and protect against disintegration (castration panic; Greenacre 1969, 162). Insofar as they fulfil this role, they are objects of lust and satisfaction. As “subjective objects” (Winnicott), both are placed entirely at the disposal (love and violence) of the ego, on the one hand, and yet on the other are magically animated and endowed with protective forces. Both have a secretive character that is more rarely guarded by children by hiding the objects or being ashamed about them, but always by the fetishist, who always hermetically cordons off his activities. Phyllis Greenacre points out that transitional objects are usually more defined by their haptic and olfactory qualities, while fetishes are defined by what they look like (1969, 150; 160); however, the opposite has also been observed (Freud, for example, emphasised the fetishism of smells). Both are presentational symbols, incorporated into things and part of repeated scenes. Both are embodied memory, not simply memory *stores*. They are rather elements of a primal *theatre* of memory that repeatedly performs ritual scenes of omnipotence and impotence, of lustful pleasure and anger, of merging and abandonment, of primal trust and disappointment, of separation and fear. Like a good initiation guide, transitional objects lead the child into a new phase; afterwards they are no longer needed and can be forgotten. Or they transform into the compulsive spell of the fetish, which petrifies time into a monotony of always the same sexual performance. The “intermediate area” provides space for a “journey between the stages of recognition memory (i.e., memory in the presence of a specific stimulus) und evocative memory (i.e., memory in the absence of a need for the object or its presence)” (Litt 1986, 386). As constant companions, transitional objects and fetishes secure the continuum of time and also the continuity of the ego, which is threatened by traumatic fragmentation, by “ruptures”, as Freud said, by a collapse of its fragile structure.

Sexual fetishes are objects that have lost the transient character of the transitional object, in that they are locked in repetition. Transitional objects are usually unique and irreplaceable; fetishes on the other hand can be and are usually collected and stored. This too has its roots in childhood. Children almost always collect something and build up treasure troves of objects that seem worthless in the eyes of adults (one thinks of fetishism’s ‘perversion’ of value), a treasure which is “kept safe, hoarded, possibly hidden [...] even sometimes forgotten” (Fatke/Flitner 1984, 236). The act of collecting is not about using the things, but about setting up a “a space for oneself, which one wants to keep to oneself” (ibid., 237). The emotional density of the collection can be explained by the things being made the child’s own in this way. Everything in it is significant. The child, according to Fatke and Flitner, brings order to the chaos, creates resistance “against transience” (ibid., 250) and the threat of disappearance. By col-

lecting something, the child stops time, by seizing things from hungry Chronos by ‘preserving’ them. The child stabilises space by cutting out a space from blurry, unpredictable horizons and ‘fixing it in place’. Often overwhelmed by the outside world and its opaque ‘existence for itself’, the child forms a microcosm that ‘stands alone’, where it can rule *pars pro toto* and control the world, which can usually withdraw so quickly or frighteningly force itself upon the child. We also identified this complementary structure in the relationship between ‘inalienable things’ and the mass of circulating commodities (see pp. 233 ff. and 279 ff. of this book).

Werner Muensterberger highlights the “decrease of the tension that stems from the experience of separation anxiety” in sexual and tribal cultural forms of fetishism, in religious rites and collections, as well as creative art. He therefore places castration anxiety at the crux of fetishistic processes, but emphasises their “significance within the social structure”, in that “they enable an occasional or periodic collective regression for everyone or for the individual” (Muensterberger 1981, 81; 1994). Unlike ruptured reality, art and fetishism permit us to enter a secure, magical sphere: the work of art or the fetish “whose inherent power refers back to a lost object” (*ibid.*, 82). Fetishes, artworks and collectors’ items are things that appeal to us to immerse ourselves in them, to worship them, to protect them and to love them. They thereby promise the fulfilment of our longing for the restoration of lost union. “Treasured objects” (Litt) reproduce lost symbiosis. They are “artificial paradises” (Baudelaire). And the fetishist, artist and collector long to be treated just as they treat their objects. The magic that emanates from things is their “defiance of the anxiety of separation” – in that sense they are apotropaic; they are “strengthening objects” and with their constant “reproducibility” support the “search for inner balance” – in that sense they are maternal (Muensterberger 1981, 80–92).

Based on material from ethnology, clinical observation and the analysis of art, Muensterberger comes to the conclusion, in agreement with Phyllis Greenacre, that the fetishistic mechanism is rooted in pre-oedipal damage to the body image with corresponding narcissistic injuries; the magical objects are used to defend against this. At the same time, fetishes take on the phantasmagoric role of “recreating the intactness that would otherwise be impossible” (*ibid.*, 98).⁶⁰ “So what,” asks Muensterberger (*ibid.*, 102), “do artists and fetishists

⁶⁰ According to Greenacre, the purpose of desire for the fetish is acquiring a sense of indestructibility and “to fill a sense of lack in the body image”. The fetish is a bisexual symbol and “serves as a bridge which would both deny and affirm the sexual differences” (1969, 146, 150). Roger Dorey is also of this view: “Bisexual identification leads to a kind of permanent oscillation of the body-self, with brief identifications with others, above all via the medium of seeing,

have in common?” They always dramatise the same dilemma, which stems from the “pain of disappointment that came from the early passive connection to the mother” (ibid., 100). The artwork and the fetish both once again provide this early (paradisiacal) dependency, deal with the doubleness (split) of regressive longing and the fear of dissolution resulting from the separation phase, and manage to somewhat stabilise, through the medium of the magical not-me object, the fantasy of independence, integration and control.⁶¹ We also identified this structure in the fetishistic behaviour of consumption and collecting.

8.5 M. Masud R. Khan: alienation as perversion

One difference between fetishes and transitional objects is, however, that fetishes are not homogenous, but “conglomerates”, a “kind of amalgam” as Roger Dorey says, or a “collage”, a “collated internal object”, as Masud Khan calls them, or polyvalent mixed-objects, as Sylvia Payne says (Dorey 1972, 45, 52; Khan 1989, 120–138, 164; Payne 1939, 161–170). On this basis, Smirnoff concludes “that the formation of the fetish results from the sum total of a number of different effects: the overdetermination of the symbolic significance of the fetish; its production out of heterogeneous elements; the reproduction of emotional traumas, none of which are significant on their own, but which only together, in accumulated form, produce what Masud R. Khan calls ‘cumulative’ trauma.” (Smirnoff 1972, 85) This particular quality excludes the possibility that fetishes can be assigned *one* cause, *one* function or *one* meaning. Their intermediate status means they become a point of intersection for many symbolisations. In his excellent book *Alienation in Perversions* (1979), Khan writes that the fetish:

[...] envelops complex and archaic effects, psychic processes and internal part-object relations and manages to sustain them in an unintegrated state. I am inclined to say that in the capacity to create a fetish we see the inherent strength of the infant-child ego and its capacity to save itself from total collapse and disintegration. [...] The primary anxiety affects related to dread of surrender to excitement and the exciting object, sadism, and threat of body-dissolution, and annihilation and being abandoned. The fetish is both a phobic and a counter-phobic phenomenon. (Khan 1989, 164)

especially in sexual situations.” Greenacre and Dorey explain the theatricality of fetishism with this constant switching of gender. These oscillations originate in the fact that identification with the mother means sometimes identifying with the phallic and sometimes with the castrated mother. “The fetishist,” says Dorey, “suffers [...] the pain of a fear of castration.” (1972, 53–54)

⁶¹ “The fetish then seems [...] to be an attempt to restore the integrity of the body of the mother and therefore that of the subject itself.” (Dorey 1972, 48)

This “type of internal anxiety-situation” is “the basic predicament for the fetishist”. “Hence the bizarre, hopeful and absurd nature of all fetishistic phenomena.” (ibid., 165)

What is important is that the intensity of the intersecting affects, relationships, object uses, symbolisations, actions and rituals are *sustained* “in an unintegrated state”. This is precisely what defines the structure of the fetish as an *assembled* object. This ‘sustaining’ of the heterogeneous is what accounts for “the as-if adult quality of the fetishist’s exploits” (ibid., 166). At a high price; for this as-if is not just simply an enjoyable game, but in it, the fetishist’s double alienation is preserved: from themselves and from the object of their desire. Like every perversion, fetishism is also the attempt to rescue the self, to deal with archaic anxiety situations. More than others, Khan has empathy for the complexity and achievement of the fetishistic arrangement and also for the dark obsession and misrecognition that pushes the subject to the very edge of psychotic disintegration.⁶² “The inconsolability of the pervert is matched only by his insatiability” (ibid., 16). There is a tragedy in this that definitely deserves empathy: “Hence the fetishist is a person deluded by the certainty that he has access to, and omnipotent possession and control of, a magical object.” (ibid., 167)

Masud Khan proposed a new explanation for this phantasm: ‘perverts’ are usually very loved as infants. They are viewed by the mother as their thing-creation, which results in an “idolisation of the infant child”. Idolisation is not the same as idealisation, which in this early stage can actually aid development. Khan understands idolisation as the “over-cathexis of an external actual object” (1989, 12). This is not restricted to inner-psychic objects, but models the external world, in this case the infant. In the second step, the child internalises this idolised self, identifies itself as a thing-creation, i.e. already in an alienated form. If the mother then withdraws, the infant is made to feel traumatically insecure, to which it responds with increased cathexis of its internal idolised self and sadistic fantasies about the mother. These fantasies then cause the reparative drive (compensation) discovered by Winnicott to go into action,⁶³ which is invested in the fetishised object. The perverse object, the fetish, thereby “play[s] the part of an as-if transitional object” and thus takes on the function of protection against early anxiety situations that threaten the idolised self. Resentful, self-isolating fetishists, who feel that no one cares for them, reproduce the “mother’s idolisation of the infant-child as her created object” with the fetish (ibid., 14). The fetish

⁶² “The fetishistic reveries protected the ego against psychotic breakdown.” (Khan 1989, 164)

⁶³ It was in fact not Winnicott, as is often claimed, but Melanie Klein who first worked out the reparative drive (cf. Melanie Klein 1932, 236 ff., 242f., 322f.).

represents the idolised self. Because the ego is reified in this process, because it is embodied in the “created object”, Khan understands fetishism in general as a model for “alienation” as it applies to all perversions. In the translation of the fetish (created object), the pervert reproduces the earlier idolisation by the mother, whose object he himself was. At the same time, by worshipping and caring for the fetish, the aggression the child developed in his fear of abandonment, when he was banished from the ‘paradise’ of idolisation, are compensated for.

This enables Khan to explain important characteristics of fetishism and perversion: the structure of repetition; the bizarre focus of all energies on one “created object”, a thing; the circularity that results from the fetishist striving to get rid of his self-alienation by the very same gesture with which he was reified as a child: idolisation; and finally, the composition of the fetish out of extremely contradictory drives and feelings; fear and sadism, reparation and resentment, surrender to love and loneliness. Like the idolised child, the pervert too becomes the victim of a mechanism that destroys him in the same act that is supposed to ‘glorify’ him or which negates the thing-creation in the very act of creation. Fetishism is a form of creation through destruction (see p. 67 of this book). This kind of structure cannot be maintained in reality. From this Khan derives features of the perverse object relation (not only those of fetishism): the structured character of play that is nonetheless without obligation (the as-if); the phantasm of the secret, exclusive relationship to the object; the reparative gestures towards the other; the feeling of strengthening the ego through the scenes acted out; the knowledge that one will be separated again; a feeling of thankfulness. I would add to this that these moments of acting out a scene are a mask, beneath which the self-reification of the actors endlessly continues.

8.6 Psychoanalysis of fetishism – fetishes of psychoanalysis

It is about time we took a step back. Khan develops his interpretation against a background of many different psychoanalytic explanations, which explain the lack of homogeneity in fetishism less than they reinforce it. The confusing multiplicity of psychoanalytical aetiologies of fetishism reflects – so it seems – the collage structure of the fetish itself. Freud based his theory of fetishism on the castration anxiety stemming from the phallic phase. Others see primary separation anxiety and the fear of being abandoned as the reason for the threat of the destruction and disintegration of the ego. Sometimes a primary bisexual identification with the mother is identified in the fetish; sometimes the fetish marks the escape from incest. In other cases, it is viewed as a protection against pre-phallic fears, which are close to psychotic states. Others see a reproduction of

the pre-oedipal relationship to the mother's breast or to the mother's incorporated phallus, which the fetishist either identifies with or wants to destroy, depending on the different theories. Sometimes the fetish is understood as an object the ego identifies with in a projective manner; sometimes it comes from a "phase of maximal sadism" (Melanie Klein) and expresses the aggression towards the genitalia of sometimes the mother and sometimes the father. Or it functions as a defence against the desire to kill the love object. Sometimes it protects from the sadistic mother, sometimes from the castrating father. Sometimes it masks the wish to completely submit to the cruel mother; sometimes it disguises the triumph of having rescued the phallus and brought it under one's own control.⁶⁴

With Khan's work, research has finally reached the stage when it critically reflects upon itself: the history of psychoanalytic concepts of fetishism produced a labyrinth of different theories. If Lacan's theory of the phallus already turns out to be overcome by a fetishisation, namely of the phallus, through which, ironically, the fetish analyst becomes a fetish worshipper, then one could argue that the 'conglomerate' of theories are subject to the determining forces of fetishism and therefore reproduce it.

In eighty years of psychoanalytic fetishism research, almost every possible interpretation has been tried. In each attempt, the goal was to bring to light the "secret" that – as has been known since Freud or at the latest since Greenacre (if not since Marx) – belongs to the structure of the fetish. Enlightenment is the essential gesture of psychoanalysis. Yet in the chain of these theoretical attempts at revelation, the secret that was meant to be uncovered has been inadvertently made to grow. Added to this are a constantly growing number of 'cases' since Krafft-Ebing, not only in the cabinet of fetish curiosities, but in the always growing manufactory of their production and the irreconcilability of all their causes. More and more new meanings have therefore been added to fetishism over time. Its typology, its phenomenology, its aetiology and its functions grow ever more complex. We are further from 'the' explanation of fetishism than ever before. Not because of a lack of theory, the opposite – the theories have also become increasingly complex. Yet no one has managed to make the phenomenon of the increasing complexity of the explanations itself the object of theory. And this means that to a certain extent we have succumbed to fetishism.

Fetishistic processes are extremely varied. As 'lacking in imagination' as fetishistic practice might seem in individual cases – the tiresome repetition of al-

⁶⁴ This grossly simplifies the history of psychoanalytic fetishism research. More on this can be read in "Fetish as Negation of the Self" in Khan 1989, 139–176.

ways the same fetish – the more imaginative fetishism’s morphologies, narratives and performances are in general. It is this ‘adaptability’ that enables it to occur in such a huge number of epochs, variants of meaning and forms of practice. It takes on any form, always allows new interpretations and can be associated with almost all perversions. If fetishism can be linked with almost any body part ‘from head to toe’ and every vestimentary periphery, then it demonstrates the very protean structure in the field of sexuality that often gave the psychoanalysts occasion to identify it in the spheres of artistic creativity, the collection, religion and cultural praxis (without any of them ever pursuing the significance of this).

“The obvious impenetrability of the sexual fetish”, writes Smirnoff, “doubles the more evident it is: all those rustling skirts, boots, arsenals of whips, shackles and chains – what difference is there to medals, amulets, collectors’ items? All of them have been taken from culture [...]” However, these conventional determinants do not put an end to the incredible immunity of fetishism, but rather strengthen it, and it appears even stronger when Smirnoff shows this convention in a new light: “Transported to another time, another civilisation, the veil, the corset, the waxed would only retain the laughable character of glorious crusades, which lordly invalids compete with each other to live off.” (1972, 104–105) The extravagant as a mask of convention, the tragic as the disguise of the ridiculous, the evident as the mantle of the secret. What is achieved by this? We know for certain, but yet...

This should have caused some alarm bells to go off. For it is quite clear that a mechanism as ubiquitous as this, both in the field of cultural practice and in the field of drives, cannot be summed up with one-dimensional interpretations. In that sense, the insight of the conglomerate structure of the fetishistic object is a real step forward. *It highlights fetishism’s polyvalent, semantically over-determined, materially random (polymorphous), functionally multiple, genetically multi-causal and typologically and phenomenologically endlessly processual form.* As long as one ‘tinkers’ at some explanation of this or that fetish (and this must be done due to the singularity of the cases), one is under the influence of the fetishistic mechanism: by putting the partial (*one* interpretation) in place of the whole (the conglomerate), we reproduce the fetishism we think we are analysing. Just as the fetishist collects fetishes, so the analyst collects interpretations of them. Each analyst constructs a monopoly, just as the fetishist constructs *his* monopoly. By generalising the truth of one particular case, the fetishism being analysed on a case level is reproduced on a discursive level. It is like the story of the tortoise and the hare: the fetish always brings the ‘I’m already there’ silently with it.

Yet when this leads to no longer viewing the particular aspects of a case as equal to the whole, but wanting to have an overview of the parts within the field of their heterogeneity, another pesky effect of fetishism soon makes itself known: *there is no such thing* as this ‘whole’, the super-signifier, the universal theory. And when it is forced into existence, it results in *theory fetishes*. After endlessly ploughing the field of fetishism, one seems to arrive back at the place that in 1946 Wulff already called the “empty space” that fetish occupies. This empty space – which can also be a wound, an absence, a negation, a hole, a lack, a vacuum – and the alloplastic, allotropic, allonymic form of fetish seem to be linked. Fetish always goes under a false name (allonymy), it is a ‘different turn’, a ‘various occurrence’ (allotropy), ‘artificial, fake material’ (alloplasty); and it therefore performs a tragicomic hocus-pocus of ‘alien things’ and irrational ‘nonsense’ (in the eyes of others).

That is why Dorey, Payne and Khan’s points on the conglomerate structure are so important: for in theory too, the aim cannot be to create a homogeneous construction, a theoretical *passepartout*. Much rather the processes involved in fetishistic production (in the economy, in culture, in sex, in the unconscious, in art, in religion *and* in scholarship) and the *process* of interpreting them should be examined at the same time. This establishes an observation of the second order, an observation of the observation, as Niklas Luhmann (1985) called it: there is the tangled web of fetishistic practices; there is the level on which religious studies scholars, psychoanalysts, Marxist economists, ethnologists, etc. isolate, identify and explain individual variants, and support these explanations with theory. But in the process, what we have observed occurs: the ethnographers practically invent the magic of fetishism; Marx is the first to produce the secret of commodity fetishism that he analyses; by stacking analysis upon analysis, the psychoanalysts make an even bigger secret of that which they wish to reveal. The third level, the observation of the observation, would therefore mean not producing new semantics of fetishism, but studying the processes of interpreting fetishism. If there is any truth to this, then one cannot stay within the field of psychoanalysis (or any other discipline). If one compares the different sciences, one sees that there was an obsession with the “secret” of fetishism (which was to be unmasked), its ‘most profound depths’ and its ‘primal cause’. But this “secret” does not exist as such. Instead, the issue is always really the mysterious aspects of our projected relationships to and countertransferences onto objects, which in a strange, sometimes perverse seeming, sometimes, in the form of commodity fetishism, completely unquestionable way, become ‘values’ ‘for us’, bind us and connect us; and the second issue is our relationship to ‘meanings’, which seem to speak to us and which we must decipher. “A fetish is a story masquerading as an object”, said Stoller (1985, 155). However, there is a

double trap in this statement: both when one believes one has decoded the ‘story’ and when one believes that the object’s disguise has been taken off, one has succumbed to the temptation of fetishising one’s own gesture of enlightenment. Where fetishism is concerned, the opposite is always true too: ‘A fetish is an object masquerading as a story.’ Our thinking must therefore somehow stay ‘in between’ and tolerate the contradictions.

This applies even more so for the sciences and academic scholarship, because they too are not immune to fetishisation: they observe and analyse fetishes, the explanations of which are themselves once again fetishistic. Fetishism can function at any time and in any place; it cannot be solved or gotten rid of through scientific explanation. All we can do is become reflexively aware of it and perhaps then learn to deal with it in a different way. We could call this a fetishism of the second order: instead of aiming for or worshipping *one* analysis of fetishism, the analyses that psychoanalysis unintentionally turned into a labyrinthine knot would be “sustain[ed] in an unintegrated state” (M. Khan).

A defining moment in this self-reflexive turn in fetishism research is the 1970 publication of a special edition of the *Nouvelle Revue de Psychanalyse*, edited by Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, on *Objets du fétichisme*.⁶⁵ It not only retraces the path taken by psychoanalytic research, but also opens up the borders between the different disciplines in the field of fetish research and in historical terms by publishing extracts from sources such as de Brosses, Hegel, Comte and Marx, with the different contributions also representing different areas: ethnology (Pouillon, Adler, Bonnafé), commodity analysis (Baudrillard, Godelier), popular culture (Dadoun, Fédida). All subsequent interdisciplinary studies (including my own) are indebted to this volume.

To me, the paper by Smirnoff is symptomatic of the approach. Smirnoff deduces three consistent minimum definitions of fetishism from his summary of the history of its analysis. Fetishes always display the following functions: 1. *compensation* for a lack, “which was forced to enter the dialectic of castration”; 2. *reconstruction* of a lost continuity caused by separation anxiety; 3. of *recognition*, insofar as the subject is assigned a sexual status via the fetish as an insignnia, mark, even emblem (1972, 103–104). Taking this as a starting point, Smirnoff compares Winnicott’s intermediate space to the psychoanalytic setting itself; by doing so, he opens up – and this is the self-reflexive turn – the possibility that fetishes are present within the analytical process and setting themselves.

However, Smirnoff only examines the analysand, whose productions in the “analytical cave” (ibid., 109) take on the status of transitional objects. Some-

65 The French edition is still being reprinted today. The German translation is: Pontalis 1972.

times the analyst takes on the function of a fetish (as a security-providing, protective phallus) and sometimes takes the place of the ‘good enough mother’. The patient wants the analyst to take the “empty space of his own lack and fill it” as a stand in (ibid., 108). These transferences structure the ‘scenic speech’ of the analysand. Smirnoff sees language itself as the arena of fetishistic processes. The analysand tends to “speak, in order to say nothing”, so that they can sustain their phantasms, for which the analyst must take on the guarantee and for which they must provide the “alibi of a phallic image of the mother” (ibid., 111). The words the analysand uses work in a fetishistic way. Smirnoff recognises that manifest fetishistic pathologies do not necessarily exist in analysis, but that the analytic process per se can be infested with fetishism. Just as Winnicott argued, the analyst must successively disillusion the illusionary, which they themselves are the carrier of.

But what about countertransference? The analyst as “hieratic phallus”? As the good mother? As an intervening or a kind but stern father? As a beloved transitional object? As a worshipped idol? As a wise guide in a rite of passage called analysis? Smirnoff calls all this the “shadow of the analyst”, his “figuration” (1972, 109–110). The question is, however, whether the analyst can remain independent, autonomous, unchanged in this process, or: what does he do with his shadow? In his countertransferences, he is always the one under threat from the patient’s fetishistic projections – less so on the level of professional abstinence and more on the level of interpretations. The analyst then creates his own fetishes: the language of his deep-hermeneutic procedures, into which he pours his desire to understand, for theoretical consistency and definitive closure. Completing a perfect analysis is the analyst’s fetish. He appends, e.g. in publications, a ‘collection’ of all previous other analyses to it in a silent gesture that suggests he has penetrated the secret of fetishism: the light that he has brought to the dark game of the fetishistic manoeuvre, the thread of Ariadne that has led him through the labyrinth of meandering false trails – they are *his* fetish. The “empty space” is discussed and inscribed. *He already knows* (that the empty space can never be filled), *but yet...* (he believes in the power of his deep-hermeneutic interpretations). It is precisely in this that he has remained a “shadow” and an “image”, who does not take himself into account too. This is an enlightenment which, by disenchanting the fetish, becomes a fetish itself. In 1970, Smirnoff came very close to critical self-reflection. Once it has happened, fetishism research changes for good.

It must have sounded rather worrying to psychoanalysts and is even more credit to the editor of the journal’s special edition on fetishism, J.-B. Pontalis, that he allows an ethnologist to have his say: Jean Pouillon, who demands that, as a consequence of these projected, inverse effects of fetish research,

“we first examine the position of the observer – in order to recognise them as the one who perhaps believes in the fetish most of all” (Pouillon 1972, 201; 1975). Pouillon therefore turns the *scandal of fetishism* into a *scandal of the fetishism researcher*: it is difficult to decide who is more aptly described by the term ‘fetishism’, ‘we ourselves’ or ‘the others’ (the perverts, tribal cultures, the superstitious). If only because he does not just trace psychoanalytic research back to Freud (as if he were an ‘origin’), Pouillon has a broader perspective than most analysts; he is also familiar with ethnographic material as well as de Brosses, Hegel, Comte, Constant and Marx. It should be noted that psychoanalysis never experienced the same kind of autonomous criticism that totemism research experienced at the hands of Claude Lévi-Strauss. Pouillon, of course, knows his book *Totemism* (1962/1963) well. Pouillon also identifies a never proven but unanimous assumption, also created by psychoanalysis, namely “seeing [fetishism as an] absurdity”: the “fetishist’s mistake” is “mistaken attribution”; the fetishist sees a living soul where there is none (instead only dead things); they see a value where there is none (instead only junk); and they mistake for real things that are not (but instead habitual repression) (Pouillon 1972, 197–201). Building on Marcel Mauss’ radical rejection of the term ‘fetish’ and Lévi-Strauss’ subsequent criticism of totemism, Pouillon asks whether fetishism might not in fact be first produced by shifting the phenomenon from the perspective of being observed to that of the observer. By doing so, he once again raises one of the oldest points, which led to the ironic question of whether the Europeans, who so criticised the Africans for their fetishism, had not in fact been affected by the same thing – that they were in fact its host, although they viewed the natives as primitive. This “cult of inanimate objects” with its “refusal of the distance between the object and the person who is responsible for it” (*ibid.*, 200), is indeed precisely what European culture does when it attributes barbarism to Africa. Pouillon then shows that these kinds of shifts and borrowings, crossings and projections also occur in the way fetishes are used in the tribes he has studied. The fetish one has or takes over always has an obscure origin; it is an alien other that has ‘somehow’ become part of oneself. This not only characterises the confusion and mutual projections between African and European culture with regard to the fetish custom, but also the relationships among the African tribes themselves: fetishism results from a massive misunderstanding between tribes or civilisations. “Fetishism would therefore be the culture that has not been understood, that one accepts or belittles. To put it more precisely, as a theory, fetishism is the foreign culture that one condemns by claiming to explain it; as a practice, it is the foreign culture that one appropriates as one’s own without understanding it. In short, the fetish is always an other and strictly speaking, fetishism is the unintelligible, the unthinkable.” (*ibid.*, 201)

Thus, according to Pouillon, there is no positive theory of fetishism, because one always runs the risk of falling into the traps of a projected misrecognition and a pejorative rejection. Pouillon therefore pleads for the investigation of “*fétiches sans fétichisme*”, the title he gave his book (1975). For fetishism (but not fetish praxis) is based on an unnoticed binary opposition: ‘us here’ (the healthy, enlightened, critical) – ‘you there’ (the perverted, superstitious, primitive). Value here – useless trinkets there. The clean separation between subject and object here – the dirty mixing with things there. Knowledge here – misrecognition and delusion there. Freedom and productivity here (heterosexual reproduction and economic production) – the un(re)productive, obsessive clinging to part objects and phantasms and the captive spell of the false appearance of the commodity there; the autonomous focus on what is important here – the dispersal of the self in consumption there; the gravitas capable of great thoughts and art here – frivolous, mind-numbing play there.

But is this criticism of binary oppositions a good enough reason to reject the concept of fetishism altogether? Pouillon does not think so and he asserts: “Fetishisation is the general process through which a society makes itself opaque.” (1972, 210) What he calls a “non-cumulative dialectic” (*ibid.*, 209) would be the attempt to make “*fétiches sans fétichisme*” the object of knowledge, without the superior, Euro- or logocentric knowledge of the Hegelian dialectic. Although there may be theoretical aporias in the concept of fetishism, simply eliminating it will not rid the world of fetishes, fetish practices or fetishistic functions. They are an important cultural mechanism within symbolic thinking that deserve to be analysed, understood – and also clarified (‘enlightenment’). ‘Enlightenment’, but not from a position of cultural superiority that exploits fetish practice in order to ‘accumulate’ its own position of superiority and sense of wellbeing. Research without the pejorative rejection of the fetish and without the positive self-affirmation of the (white, European, superior) theoretician. ‘Fetish without fetishism’ – which also means: the beginning of a self-reflexive modernity.

Alfred Adler and Pierre Bonnafé do not escape this precarious situation, for in their opinion we should “free ourselves” from the “fetishistic illusion” (Adler 1972, 218, 223; Bonnafé 1972). Thus Adler writes: “Fetishism has lost any right to be a part of anthropological theories of today. One could retrace the history of mistakes, prejudices and misunderstandings that authors from the past have made about primitive religions and especially about those of Black Africa, and who forged the pseudo-theory of fetishism.” (1972, 217) – “We must therefore conclude that the ‘fetish’ is a pseudo-concept, a hiding place, made to deceive us about the theoretical fruitfulness of a system of interpretation that does not hesitate to put its own speech in the place of the speech of those that belong to the culture whose secrets the system of interpretation is not capable of under-

standing.” (ibid., 223) Bonnafé adds: “The term fetish or fetishism has been banished from the vocabulary of ethnology. To use them meant (and still means) siding with the missionaries and the colonisers [...]” (1972, 234) Without considering applying such deconstructive gestures to the concept of fetishism, both ethnologists continue to use the ‘objective descriptive language’ and ‘indexical hermeneutics’ of traditional ethnography, as though they could be trusted more than the term fetishism, which actually came from precisely this tradition. Critically rejecting fetishism, indeed making it taboo, brings it in again through the back door: by ‘believing’ in ethnography’s objectifying instruments of knowledge and its language. The critics of fetishism have yet to engage in the ‘writing culture debate’.⁶⁶ As long as field research is still carried out under the aegis of an objectivity that does not foster even a little bit of the self-reflection that the fetishism concept is accused of lacking, fetishism has only been shifted elsewhere: it might not be identified with the other anymore, but it is carried within the self. The objectivity of ethnographic language is the fetish that protects ethnography’s own knowledge from disintegration. However, not long after, this very ‘belief’ in the ethnographic representation of cultures will collapse.

9 Cultural developments and feminist discoveries

9.1 The failures of psychoanalysis

An important revision of the psychoanalytic concept of fetishism has come from feminist discourse since the 1970s, which ultimately also promotes embedding fetishistic practices in cultural studies. It brings together the three traditionally separate strands of ethnography and religious studies, economics and sociology, and sexology and psychoanalysis. Literary studies made an important contribution to this: on the one hand with studies which, using examples of literature since Shakespeare, demonstrate the effects of fetishistic patterns in European societies long before Marx and Freud, and on the other, by more precisely defining the rhetoric and semiotic constitution of fetishes (Fedi 2002). This necessarily involves extending fetishism to a metacategory. It begins to be equated with the postmodern condition of society and culture in general. Whether contemporary consumer societies can be considered fetishistic will not be discussed here (see pp. 262–279 of this book). One way or the other, the expansion of the concept of fetish was definitely long overdue.

⁶⁶ Cf. Clifford/Marcus 1986; James 1996. Berg/Fuchs 1993 document this debate.

Feminist fetish discourse was above all provoked by the phallogocentric interpretation of fetishism in Freud and Lacan. Feminists worked on questioning their authority for decades. And there was in fact a kind of monism in them, which not only defined human sexuality, but also fetishism from the male perspective. Fetishism, considered by Freud, Lacan and Foucault to be most worthy of our attention, became the main male perversion. Yet, because of accepted doctrine, which categorised men as perverse and women as hysterical, the latter were 'excluded' from fetishism. Criticism is indeed most definitely necessary when early psychoanalysis (and its revision by Lacan) constructs femininity not from the point of view of what women have, but precisely the opposite, from the point of view of what she does not have. Women do not 'have' a penis – and if this caused a fear of castration in boys around 1900 that could lead to complicated compromises, through which this castration was both preserved and denied in the fetish, then it is almost a theoretical doubling of this infantile coping when psychoanalysis identifies not having a penis with femininity and restyles the symbolic phallus as a super-signifier for both genders. According to this theory, women are women because they have no penis, yet envy the male sex for having one: penis envy. Men are men because they have a penis and its oscillation between potency and impotence destabilises the phallic ego-ideal: what one has can be taken away and what stands up must come down again (and does so regularly). Men's stress (and almost preposterous madness) thus consists of being constantly 'threatened' by effeminsation caused by failing to live up to the phallic ideal and the possibility of castration, 'becoming women' as it were, in other words, mere negativity.

In the fetish, sexual curiosity thus creates an object that preserves and denies castration at the same time, in other words, which realises the fear of castration *and* the phallic ideal in one paradoxical act. A strategy like this only really makes sense for boys (and men). And it is also the reason women are not fetishists. The genitals they are equipped with cannot produce a positive body-self image, but only lack. Their desires always work with replacement: in coitus they temporarily incorporate the phallus; the child becomes their phallus; as a decorative accessory for the male they represent the phallic potency of the man; by distributing erotic attractions on the surface of their appearance (clothing, makeup, jewellery), they disguise their 'lack of being' – or they harbour, along with a bitter envy, a secret hostility against men, surreptitiously undermining his potency, attacking his phallic power (like the suffragettes) or mask their desire to take possession of the phallic.

This may all be true – but it is absolutely no use as a basis for theories of sexuality and of fetishism. Envy is a feeling that is too fundamental to be assigned to one gender. Boys and men are envious of both the size and potency

of other men's penises and also women's ability to give birth. The counterweight of phallic narcissism is birth narcissism. Having female genitals is most certainly a different experience than having a penis, but most definitely not one that simply creates envy because of its lack. Defining the female body as negativity is the male projection of his own castration anxiety. What gets forgotten (even already in Freud) is our original bisexuality, which is in fact also restaged in an altered form in fetishism. What is also forgotten is that in the archaic image of the mother, which both genders develop, the significance of the phallic, namely power and integrity, is precisely not imagined androcentrically, but maternally.

9.2 She has, she bears, she is the fetish – but whose? – Marcia Ian

Ideas like this motivated Marcia Ian to write her much underappreciated book *Remembering the Phallic Mother* (1993). The study is typical of the recoding of fetishism undertaken under the aegis of psychoanalytic feminism. Her thesis is that Freud and almost all of his successors (especially Lacan) avoided the phantasm of the phallic mother out of fear.⁶⁷ The construction of the phallus is a form of not wanting to know, which Ian calls epistemophobia, adapting the Freudian concept of the desire to know (epistemophilia). This led to the masculinisation of fetishism, the core of which hides an earlier form of fetish. Ian's aim is to show the priority of the mother imago and how fetishism is linked to this pre-symbolic phantasm. This precedes everything paternal, but also language and its logocentric order. This is also what Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous believe. Ian thus says of the imago of the mother: "Neither fully object nor fully subject, she is, to use Freud's term for the symbolic-and-therefore-real contents of the unconscious, our most fiercely guarded 'psychical object', as well as our role model and the very 'type' of the autonomous self." And she continues: "In short, she has, she bears, she is, the fetish – but whose?" (1993, 8f.) The answer is: the mother is the feared, misrecognised and secret *fetish of both genders*. This re-opens the arena of fetishism: the maternal also structures the fetish; not only men, but women fetishise too. Kaja Silverman's 1992 study, based strongly on Lacan, also works towards a similar conclusion.

We recall that Lacan called the penis a universal logical copula. Ian argues that this theoretical operation itself is an epistemophobic fetishisation.⁶⁸ In con-

⁶⁷ Of course this does not apply to women analysts like Helene Deutsch (*The Denial of the Vagina*, 1933) or Melanie Klein.

⁶⁸ "Nevertheless, to assign, as psychoanalysis does, to the penis, 'raised' to the symbolic function of the phallus, the status of universal signifier, the signifier of all possible conjunctions

trast, she emphasises the primary experience of connection through nutrition and declares the umbilical cord to be the only basal organic copula: “the umbilical cord is the only universal biological organ of connection” (1993, 35). Navel, umbilical cord, uterus and the internal organs of the mother’s body produce different symbols than the phallic order, with its dichotomies of active/passive, potency/impotence, male/female, having/being, command/prohibition, identical/non-identical, etc. The motherly environment thereby fulfils the Freudian definition of the uncanny (SE XVII, 217–255); it is unrecognisable, untouchable, untranslatable. It is the ‘familiar home’, the secret and at the same time monstrous and fear arousing, it is that which can nourish us or leave us to starve, that which places us in oceanic fluidness or pushes us out into the cold. The maternal connects birth and death, the beginning and the end of life, bliss and isolation, protection and abandonment. According to Ian, the masculinisation of psychoanalysis is a phobic reaction to the maternal body. The earliest memories, equally blissful and aggressive – here too Ian makes reference to Melanie Klein – are not phallically structured. Instead the phallus is a defensive substitute for the lost mother-child dyad, which is based on the copula of the umbilical cord.⁶⁹

Seen in this light, Lacan’s phallic myths are a survival narrative to provide protection against the uncanny realm of the maternal and are meant to represent the ‘erection’ of a countervailing power. Going through processes of separation is, however, inevitable for any process of becoming a subject, but also for every culture. One of the most important separations is from the mother, whether it be the physical mother, the mythical mother or ‘mother nature’. Separations are therefore necessary in order to end up with a clearly defined, independent, self-regulating life. Ian’s argument, however, is not against this “logic of the living” (François Jacob), but against granting power to the phallus, thus making the maternal untranslatable, presymbolic and uncanny.

Ian understands fetishism as a pathological, metaphysical passion through which the real is replaced with an idealised object. Fetishism is the passionate belief in symbols one has fabricated oneself, while at the same denying that

of bodies, is to make of it a fetish against the threat of its loss [...] The penis is not and never was the universal organ of connection. It is never even a temporary organ of connection between mothers and daughters, or women and women, or even, and this is most to the point because it is this relation upon which all psychoanalysis is based, between mothers and infant sons.” (Ian 1993, 32) This is pointedly aimed at Lacan and also refers to Melanie Klein who “demotes the phallus from its position as His Majesty the Signifier” (Ian 1993, 45).

69 “Both Freud and Klein offer a surreal vision of the world as a uterus from which there is no exit and a breast to which there is no return. Both assume that every child begins the world as half of a luxuriously intimate reflexive dyad that remains the model for knowing, being, desiring, and doing ever after.” (Ian 1993, 47)

these symbols are fabricated. The fetishist takes symbols ‘literally’ and makes a kind of “materialistic idealism” out of them. Reality is replaced with embodied images.⁷⁰ The fetishist is therefore an epistemophobe: they block themselves off from recognising the contingency of symbols; they deny the partiality of all experiences and things by totalising one single ideal object. The idols of power in totalitarian societies are also produced according to this pattern.

This generates “ideologies”, non-negotiable, epistemophobic security systems that are supposed to secure the belief in a desired, indeed hallucinated world through a rigid universalisation of super-signifiers (phallus, star, state, leader). If one claims that the phallus is a fetish, then one also claims: it is a matter of belief (symbolic-and-therefore-real content). It is the support system for an ideology, a theoretical hallucination. Ian writes: “Understanding fetishism as an erotic mystification that conceals the fear of difference helps to explain how our culture can be individualistic, democratic, and capitalistic on the one hand, and severely classist, homophobic, misogynist, and racist on the other.” (1993, 90)

9.3 Intellectual fetishes – fetishes of intellectualism

Marcia Ian does not provide a social analysis of capitalist modernity. Yet she attempts to show, using examples since Henry James and Baudelaire, from E.M. Forster, D.H. Lawrence, André Breton, T.S. Eliot, Samuel Beckett and Jean Genet, that literary modernism pays homage to precisely the same idea of linguistic autonomy without reference that also emerged in psychoanalysis at the latest with Lacan. Using Eliot’s term, Ian calls this phenomenon autosymbolism. This aesthetic of autonomy leads to the functional closure of language. Its drive for representation is cut off. The body (as the source and resonance of all speech acts) is as equally excluded as things in their own materiality. The modern subject creates itself via mechanisms of linguistic self-representation without an object: the fetishisation of language and the phallus fused with it (Lacan) would therefore be a characteristic of culture. This is rather extreme. When faced with the downfall of phallic power (through criticism, feminism, emancipation), the theoretically restored phallus forms a fiction that is self-sufficing. Ian calls the view that language is its own subject, organ and instrument an “intellectual

70 “‘Lustful substitution’ to a tangible symbol” (Ian 1993, 53–54). This indirectly explains the “noli me tangere” that Jesus says to Mary Magdalene after the resurrection: it prohibits fetishism. Believing in Jesus presupposes a strict separation between sign and meaning, which is precisely not the case in the fetish, where both collapse into one. According to this, religious touch – for example in the cult of relics or the sacrament – is a fetishistic act.

fetish". Symbols merely represent other symbols. Along with language being locked in itself, the subject also becomes a prisoner in its own illusionary world without references and without communication with others/another. A "thick wall of personality" (Ian 1993, 174) makes the modern ego a *homo clausus*. The fetishisation leads to a triumph of the object over the subject: language is the magical object the subject is subject to, indeed, it is the object from which it is produced and which gives it an identity.⁷¹ Theory itself thus takes the "fictional direction" (ibid., 181) that is already prefigured in Cartesian doubt about the materiality of the external world and in the moving away of the 'thing-in-itself' in Kant, and ultimately triumphs in the aesthetics of modernism (ibid., 184).

However, dream theory shows that the unconscious has a tendency towards embodiment rather than the representation of meanings. It prefers images to words and tends, because of the need for representability, to lean towards the concrete. The dream and its images represent things, not words. *Dream thoughts come in the shape of things*, by which I mean, they are 'images' as if they were things. This is what mental reality consists of. In a dream, images are experienced as the real presence of things. We do not dream of a world, but are always immersed in a world when we dream. In fact, this applies to mental activities in general. That is why the mental sphere can have "the status of the symbolic-and-therefore-real" (Ian 1993, 193). This idea is of central importance. It defines mental experience, the status of (unconscious) imagined images, but also of fetishes. The fact that mental representations come in the shape of things is related to the symbolic quality of the thingly fetish. Neither linguistic nor mental representations have any autarky. Their reference to the body is irreducible. Neither can things be completely self-contained. They are the condition for every representation. Whenever representation replaces the represented, hides it, represses it or makes unidentifiable, however, fetishism is present. It erases the category of the other as an other. The closing off of the world of the imagination, which then becomes the same as the world in general, is a form of "intellectual fetishism" or "poststructuralist discourse-fetishism" (ibid., 204). Theory creates an object for itself, but denies having created it. Language speaks us. This ontologisation of language is a fetishisation, which automatically results in the reification of the subject; the subject is a prisoner in a language that speaks the subject as the subject speaks language.

⁷¹ There is nothing in the subject (and its unconscious) that could be prior to language: "There is no place in the unconscious that is not always already engaged in producing representation." (Ian 1993, 175)

It is clear that Marcia Ian is simply replacing the fetishised phallus with another object, the umbilical cord or the mother. This is a feminist reverse manoeuvre, which swaps the defetishisation of one object for the fetishisation of another. Marjorie Garber is thus right to ponder whether the exclusion of women from fetishism has not created a form of “fetish envy”, as though feminism’s concern were simply conquering this field of male perversions for women (Garber 1992, 118–127). Naomi Schor had already anticipated this in 1986, at the height of the feminist discussion of fetish, when at the end of her analysis of fetishistic manoeuvres in George Sand she asks: “What if the appropriation of fetishism – a sort of ‘perversion theft’[...] – were in fact only the latest and most subtle form of ‘penis envy’?” (Schor 1988/1985, 309). Judith Butler (1997, 69–134) raises similar suspicions when she attempts to destabilise the heterosexual, patriarchal, phallogocentric gender order by inventing a “lesbian phallus” (*the* fetish of queer discourse; cf. Öhlschläger 1996, 61ff.). This is a parody of the Lacanian cult of the phallus at best. If the “lesbian phallus” is a spectre of theory with which to deconstruct the Lacanian phallus as a spectre and a fetish itself by a kind of mimicry, then we must ask the question of how long *women* wish to surrender to the authority of the Parisian patriarch, in order to break the fetishistic power of the phallus-priest with these kinds of empty rhetorical figures. Even the ironisation of fetishism, as suggested by Naomi Schor (1988, 89–97), is not enough when it remains under the spell of the ironised: the orthodox model of fetishism. Derridean elusiveness, which lends itself to fetishism, is merely reproduced as an ironised figure of style or the feminist conquering and misappropriation of fetishistic cultural types is recommended as the answer.

9.4 Feminism and the criticism of fetishism

What is certain is that the criticism of fetishism eradicates about as much fetish practice as the criticism of ideology does ideology. What is important to us here, more than the question of whether phallic authority is finally defeated in feminist discourse, are the kinds of questions that expand the concept of fetishism in cultural studies terms. More specifically, questions regarding transvestism, fashion and masquerade, eating disorders as a new phenomenon, as well as research in film and media. If fetishism has previously seemed like a perverse form of sexual behaviour carried out by men, who practice their shame-filled practices in secret or in subcultures, then a new trend can be identified: not only have sexual minorities increasingly forced themselves into ‘cultural visibility’ and demanded social recognition since the 1970s, but also, unlike the trickle-down effect, according to which cultural styles originating in the leisure classes spread slowly

‘down’ and influence the behaviour of other classes, the opposite can also be identified: a bottom-up movement. Especially in fashion and in the erotic styles of films, nightclubs, magazines, advertising, etc., the bodily aesthetics, clothing, self-fashioning and styles of behaviour of minorities and discriminated subcultures are transmitted ‘upwards’ with increasing speed and define the current trends. If this can be called the spread of fetishistic practices, then only in the sense that many fetishistic practices had already been prevalent ‘for a long time’, but had simply not been given much discursive attention. The impression that fetishism has become universal is also a result of the fact that the discourse about fetishism has multiplied and not its practices. Fashion, for example, has always been a major stomping ground for fetishism; fashion discourse had simply overlooked it. After the long nineteenth century, which emphasised the binary of the sexes like no other before, the twentieth century saw new phenomena in which the sartorial attitudes from the gay, lesbian and transvestite scenes emerged in *haute couture* and began to define styles. In the sphere of diet too, for example in the sphere of luxury celebratory meals, the erotic meal (Kiltz 1983) or the representation of ‘gourmet food’ in beautiful still lifes, there has long been a symbolic exchange between styles of diet and fetishism. However, it was only after the Second World War that the connections between the ideal of being thin, excessive ‘eating orgies’ and the surplus of food (compared to earlier and today’s societies of scarcity) became more concentrated. This was linked to a destabilisation of erotic self-images of the body. In particular, it became more difficult for adolescent girls to manage the crisis of the transition to being a woman: these complex interconnections encourage eating disorders and their associated fetishistic phenomena. ‘All of a sudden’, i.e. since the 1970s, more and more ‘cases’ of anorexia and bulimia have been noticed, which were not just viewed as individual illnesses, but in the context of a general ‘nutritive fetishism’ and were recognised as a social pathology.

Unsurprisingly, feminists noticed that women had been particularly intensively integrated into consumerism and fashion since the nineteenth century (as already noted by Scott in 1976).⁷² The culture of the male gaze, which breaks phenomenal wholes into fragmented, erotic signal values, inherently contains drives to fetishisation of all kinds, which were reinforced in advertising, in film and the women’s clothing (Stratton 1996, 87–116) – to say nothing of sexual subculture and prostitution. There, women are always objects of fetishism. However, along with criticism of this kind of sexist objectification, feminism was also concerned with women’s active role in fetishism. To examine this, attention was

72 See also Quinlan 2003; Taylor et al 2004; Bailey/Ulman 2005.

turned to the styles of female crossdressers, in the fetish scene and transvestism, homovestism, the lesbian scene, the queer and drag scene, but also elements of (lesbian) S/M culture or the self-fetishisation of the body. These phenomena did not comply with the dominant regime of the male gaze and could also not be satisfactorily interpreted with psychoanalysis.

Furthermore, fetishistic (self-)stylisations could no longer be viewed as private, neurotic pathologies: they became widely accepted lifestyles, indeed a precondition of making oneself noticed. This was another reason to stop viewing (female) fetishism in individual psychological terms, but from the perspective of cultural analysis. Feminist criticism of phallogentrism had attempted to work out its own form of female desire, the female sex and an autonomous female culture. This did not work so well when the primacy of the phallus was merely undermined and 'the feminine' was simply relocated in the pre-oedipal phase that was less capable of differentiation and more 'archaic'. The images of women developed in patriarchal culture were simply reproduced in the guise of criticism. These were always situated *before* the turning point in the oedipal crises and therefore women were constructed as primitive: they were frozen *before* the threshold that marks the beginning of the public male culture of achievement. It is clear that, in light of the millions of women moving into higher education institutions and careers, this was not sustainable – and neither was the mystification of an archaic motherliness (Heide Göttner-Abendroth), auto-erotic self-touching (Luce Irigaray) or the ineffable, pre-semiotic 'alterity' of femininity (Julia Kristeva), all theories prevalent in the 1970s. Many new theoretical positions came into play in the 1980s and 1990s, often based on laborious analyses of Lacan, which claimed to represent minority cultures of women, especially sexual subcultures, but which often had little to do with the reality of the lives of most women. The brutal exploitation of images of women (and real women) in the long since shamelessly fetishistic consumer culture, in film and in particular in advertising cannot be stopped by building theory-biotopes for these women, who have nothing to do with theory in any case (Brooks 1997).

With regard to fetishism research, insofar as it was not just the analysis of individual cases of male fetish perversions or the Marxist uncovering of commodity fetishes, some areas of this research have been very interesting and three of them will now be presented to conclude this chapter: fetishistic eating disorders, developments in fashion and fetishism in film.

9.5 Food fetishism

Gamman and Makinen (1994) are right to suggest that normative body images for women (being thin, young, erotically attractive) and their subjection to the regime of the male sexual gaze produce specific pathologies. Eating is *the* oral practice par excellence; it is a medium of both the physical self-design of the body (body sculpturing) and the development of individual diet styles within a drastically fetishised eating culture, to which one is forced to take a position: abstaining or over(ful)filling, being disciplined or unable to choose, ascetic or greedy, health-conscious or negligent of risks, social or self-isolating, etc. (Woods 1995). These kinds of individual strategies play out against the background of a culture that truly shows no balance with regard to eating and drinking. While millions of people (especially children) suffer from hunger 'in the rest of the world', post-industrial societies carry mountains of fat around on their bodies and require as much food to maintain as would be required to basically end hunger in Africa. The repercussions of this global asymmetry between over-eating and enforced starvation are bulimia and anorexia in Western cultures, which represent the extreme ends of the scale compared to standard over-nourishment. Moreover, not only are food and sex psychodynamically and linguistically intertwined in our culture, but the eroticisation of food is 'culturally unquestioned' (Hardt 1987). This creates the link to the fetishism of eating. In food advertising, cookery programmes and magazines, the displays in gourmet food shops, high-end restaurants, etc., foodstuffs become the actors in a fetishistic spectacle, which we view, with all our senses, centred around the oral matrix, as an eminent part of our being cultivated. There are, however, additional aporias beyond the contradiction mentioned above (to the starving of the world) inherent to the fetishistic opulence of gastrosophic culture. Paradisiacal surplus is diametrically opposed to performance (in the sense of achievement) and discipline; the pleasures of the taste buds contradict the imperative to diet; the culture of opulence torpedoes the postulated necessity of being thin; this in turn reduces food to the 'minimal art' of metabolism that barely sustains life; the barbaric greed for oral consumption puts the ego orientated towards self-control and self-management to shame as it repeatedly experiences defeat; in the field of food seduction, rationality is in constant conflict with the desire for consumption without restriction; and vice versa, the will to discipline triumphs over every little suggestion of exuberant appetite; the uncontrolled devouring of food clashes with a ceremonial slowing down.

The battle between setting 'rational' limits and lustfully abolishing them is acted out on the surface of one's own body, in one's physical contours. Food becomes the battlefield where the body one has fights with the body one is sup-

posed to have. There is no question that women, especially younger ones, are more severely affected by these cultural collisions. Food fetishism has become an area where not only commodity aesthetics (trillion dollar moms) are used to fight for market segments, but where it is also about the recognition/lack of recognition of individual obsessions, ideal bodies and the sexual difference of women. Aetiologically, bulimia and anorexia usually go back to the early stages of childhood. They are, however, also connected to adolescent conflicts around female self-identification and with general patterns of the sexual fetishisation of the female body and of food. Not eating or eating nothing, or eating too much, can be the refusal of a female role, a somatic protest against the enforced process of becoming a woman. The uninhibited sensual, lustful gratification that fetishised eating provides can also provide relief from being a woman who is forced to assert herself against men, as well as the opposite: food asceticism can become a refusal of dirty, impure corporeality and the model of the woman's role lived out by the mother. However, anorexia is usually associated with a more radical and self-damaging desire to achieve, with a dominating self-will that tries to control the person's own body as well as the environment. Young women are put to the challenge by an ego ideal that works against the disgusting and heavy wobble of a normal body with the beauty of a body dissolving into lightness. *This* fetish is a stranger among the fetishes of male fantasies that circle around castration and the phallus, a stranger also among the glossy fetishes of opulent commodity culture. Eating disorders are therefore all the more connected to the female unconscious, to orality, the archaic fear of separation and desire to unite – counter-images to the dominant cultural images of femininity.

Furthermore, bulimia and anorexia are also the extreme borders and a victim of commodity fetishism, where a senseless machinery of temptation and disappointment, of appropriation and restraint, of occasional feelings of happiness and permanent depletion, of non-union and non-separateness operates in a semi-conscious state between self-deception and being deceived. Eating disorders are the symptom of a commodity culture that is perceived as impure, fake, meaningless and false. Becoming the powerless organ of a limitless circulation through over-identification or forming an island of purity through proud self-refusal in a world of obscene metabolism are both equally extreme reactions. Consumers of the completely normal madness of eating culture are confronted with the denied horrors of their own selves in bulimia and anorexia. When fasting is no longer a sacred path to salvation and excessive eating is no longer a sign of belonging to the upper class, they break away from the edges and move into the centre of modern food fetishism. The appearance of rationality that cloaks the food commodity market is torn apart in the archaic barbarism of excessive eating or emaciation, which are both excluded from the culture of

modernity. They thus begin to creep back into modernity: bulimia and anorexia are the spectres of food (commodity) fetishism.

9.6 Fashion and fetishism

“Fashion is the comparative of which fetishism is the superlative”, writes James Laver.⁷³ Because this is true and because women – it is tempting to say ironically – are concerned or become concerned with fashion ‘by nature’, this is another zone where they inevitably become involved in fetishistic structures (as Tertullian already argues in 200 AD: 1959, 111–152). Women are once again objects of (male) fetishism, but actively influence it at the same time. Clothing is both a ‘natural’ and an artificial gesture with which people draw attention to themselves, or rather: strengthen their visibility, especially their sexual identity and attractiveness, but also their distinction in terms of taste, which marks their claims to a particular social status and wealth. The vestimentary register forms a complex system of meanings and performances, social attributions and aesthetic styles, erotic attractions and economic wealth.

A book by the Goncourt brothers about *The Woman in the Eighteenth Century*, published in 1862, will serve as our starting point. It is a pilot study. Similar to Charles Baudelaire, the Goncourts make a link between the unique term ‘la mode’ (fashion) and modernity for the first time. They construct a direct nexus between styles of clothing, models of femininity, eroticism and fetishism (without actually using the term; 1862/2013, 204–242). The fact that they are interested in *types* and not in empirical women characterises them as experts of eighteenth-century fashion. The Goncourts identify three types of women: the woman who incorporates mythological, heroic and allegorical elements, who has a grave stature and the magnificence of the time of Louis XIV; the fine, natural, delicate and gentle, graceful, physically expressive and playful, ironic and quick-witted women of the epoch of the Louis XV and Marivaux; and the sensitive, moving, yet naïve, harmless and shy beauty stylised in the literature of the end of the century. For our purposes, it is important what the Goncourts have to say about the second type of woman, who is nuanced and lively, restless and titillating, with bright eyes, smiling, bold and sparkly, constantly using gesture and her body playfully, neither just beautiful nor just majestic, but representing all the scales of affects. Far from arguing for any particular nature of woman, the Goncourts emphasise the *artificial beauty* that forms the external layer of the appearance

⁷³ Laver 1979, cited in Gamman/Makinen 1994, 205; and Steele 1996, 60.

and nature of woman; the *persona*, which is presented instead of the private self; the *codes* that define expressions; the *accessories* – the *mouches* and the make-up, the curls and bands, the ribbons and fans, the corsages and jewellery, the little slippers and the negligee – all these are more important than the resulting whole; the *theatricality*, which trumps all natural attractiveness; the perfecting of the erotic surface, which makes the natural body disappear; the *selective distinction* of the different outfits, which is privileged over a consistent performance of identity. All of this encourages the kind of fetishism that always prefers artificiality, the rhetorical and the pose to references to concrete persons or bodies. In the light-hearted and nimble game of coquettish allusions, everything becomes a signifier of inconstant Eros.

This is also the beginning of *haute couture*, the chosen stars among the “ministers of mode”, the coiffeurs and the shoe-artists, the beginning of the fashion magazine and a public discourse on the philosophy and aesthetics of *toilette* and fashion, and therefore also the beginning of the rhetorical fetishism that spreads throughout the literature and magazines of the elegant world. In her interpretation of the Goncourts’ misogynistic book, Emily Apter (1991, 65–98) speaks of a female clothing-superego. It becomes an imperative for women to turn themselves into a representation of men’s erotic projections and claims to ownership. The woman and her individual parts and surfaces become a figure of men’s fetishism. We saw how Thorstein Veblen showed that the role of women in the leisure class was structured in this way. Naturalness, which is presented as the essence of woman, is a masquerade, which must dress itself up as natural and yet at the same time must use it to stage a mysterious power of attraction in an artificial game. What the Goncourts identify in the fashion regime is identified by Joan Riviere much later in femininity in general: womanliness as masquerade. This has, however, less to do with women than with fashion, which becomes the massive machinery for the *production* of femininity. Constructing gender is the fundamental gesture of fashion. Like no other cultural form, it requires fetishistic mechanisms for this: it is they that allow the radical separation of the vestimentary-erotic signifiers from any kind of nature or essence of the feminine. The modern age of fashion is therefore based on fetishism, which is imperious and capricious enough to link scopophilic lust and vestimentary modes of performance with each other in such a way that the women involved become nothing more than dolls for representation, mannequins.

The fetishism of clothing is therefore quite old. I will not go into this in detail here, nor am I concerned with its specifics: all the fans and muffs, pinafores and caps, veils and ribbons for the hair, nail varnish and leather, vinyl and rubber, leather and furs, lace-up corsets and bondage gear, bodices and garters, high-heels and piercings, shoes and gloves, codpieces and push-up bras that became

the sacred objects of fetishists (cf. Kunzle 1982; Garber 1992; Steele 1996; Stratton 1996). These things can be examined in various illustrated books (e.g. Goedde 1998). I will also not deal with the types of woman that were the fuel of fashion fantasies in the nineteenth century or are the preferred figures of fetishism and/or sadomasochism: the Amazon, the dominatrix, the *femme fatale*, the heroine, the tomboy, the governess, the actress, the servant or flower girl, etc. All these types, once the figures of frowned-upon sexual preferences, have long become accepted in everyday society. They are not very useful for the link between fashion and fetishism.

Fashion is body sculpture par excellence. On the one hand, as was common in many ancient cultures and is offered today by plastic surgery or fitness studios, it is about interventions in the body itself, changing it permanently: I am thinking here of the ornamental scarring, tattooing and piercing practiced in many tribal cultures as well as today's cosmetic manipulations of feet, legs, genitals, hips, stomachs, breasts, chests, necks, face and hair. In these practices, the body is remodelled according to fetishised ideals of beauty, or fetishistic ornamentation is permanently inscribed onto the body. On the other hand, the body is sculptured using clothing that can be put on or taken off, which, according to Johann Carl Flügel (1931; cf. Bovenschen 1986, 208–263), has three basic functions: covering up the naked body (the shame function), protection (the protective function) and decoration (the exhibitiv function). Fashion always fulfils all three functions. Yet, wherever it is about fetishisation, the (erotic) exhibitiv value dominates. This is interesting in the sense that fashion fetishes today no longer have anything to do with the kind of fetishism that creates a thesaurus of objects and collects them for private, secret viewing pleasure. Fashion fetishes belong to the public regime of gazes and symbolic exchange. To the extent that fetishism has penetrated fashion and essentially dominates it today, fetishism has become an element in public life. On the one hand it operates within the matrix of voyeurism and exhibitionism, of self-expression and pleasure in the self; on the other it serves as a final finish for the body to receive the gaze of others, in order to secure and optimise one's own sense of identity in public exchange by being looked at. Clothing-fetishes do both: they create the visual presence of the wearer as well as the desire for self-presentation and the gratification of the gazes that the body receives. Fetishism in fashion therefore primarily serves the "extension of the body-ego" (Flügel). It goes without saying that it also serves to increase sexuality, which is shifted metonymically from the naked body onto its exterior shell and precisely because of this, powerfully multiplies its allure. Nothing performs this shift better than fetishism; indeed, this shift is its most fundamental capability.

Of course, this is not about being phallic/castrated, but about presence, abundance and sexual appeal. Erotic fashion and the fetishism of fashion are the art of indirectness and allusion (not illusion) in a culture of superficiality. For this reason, they are closely linked, as noted early on by Georg Simmel (1905/1997; 1905/1919) and subsequently by Elizabeth Goodstein (1996), with coquetry, acting, playfulness, flirting, advertising, voyeurism – in other words, the whole range of the art of seduction. Fashion fetishes are therefore always promises: on the one hand, pivotal points to attract the gaze of others, on the other, the basis of radiant impressions in the “theatre of display” (Garber 1992, 120). The Goncourts recognised this long ago. Fetishes were always magical tools, and fashion is the business of magical performances. It works magically, atmospherically, metamorphically, theatrically – and therefore just like thing-fetishes. Nothing fulfils the demand to be experienced and perceived as a “body-thing” or a “person-thing” more than the fashionable immediate environment of our clothes (Gaines/Herzog 1990). However, fetishes were always also things’ disguises; and so the question is: to what extent is fashion, insofar as it functions fetishistically, also a disguise? It is, in numerous senses.

For Barbara Vinken (1993, 1998a, 1998b; cf. Lehnert 1999), today’s fashion (unlike in the nineteenth century and in periods with strict dress codes) does not represent the genders, but their unrepresentability, the impossibility of not disguising oneself.⁷⁴ What is a woman actually supposed to *be*? She cannot just be; instead she performs models of femininity or their rejection. This too was known by the Goncourts. Fashion is the creation of gender, not its image. All this points towards a performative game with the gender order, in the sense that it reproduces itself in conventional fetishes of the feminine. Unlike in the Goncourts’ time, today we see many travesties and transvesties, indeed vestimentary ironies, played out in the rhetorics of clothing, which destabilise the patriarchy that originated in Europe’s psychosexual fetishism. Vinken calls this a doubly exposed and therefore reflexive fetishism, “hyperfetishism”, which generates a “fashion after fashion”. Marjorie Garber (1992, 17, 121, 131 ff.) goes even further when she describes transvestism as a “disruptive element”, even as a “theoretical intervention”, that puts binary categories into crisis (man/woman; taste/kitsch; permitted/forbidden; rational/passionate etc.). The postmodern gender situation has no clear boundaries, imperceptive or drastic transitions, dirty edges and constantly changing rituals. Positioning oneself paradoxically in the order of gender is the aim of the game. Women always exhibit themselves as the desired object of the gaze or the exhibited object of the man –

⁷⁴ On the history of fashion, cf. Esposito 2004.

in this way, women are fetishised. Yet at the same time, women play a game of withdrawal with these symbols, in which the woman is always other than the one looked at and always the other of the gaze. This is the new, reflexive moment of fetishism, whereby fashion proves itself to be on exactly the same level as discourse, which, as we have seen, constructs and deconstructs fetishism in one go. Fashion fetishism is therefore part of the postmodern condition. It no longer creates, as in modernity, an integral style belonging to the period, but instead a floating fabric of self-references and quotations. Fashion fetishism today lives on continuously restaging past or used up attitudes as well as on bricolages of elements from the most diverse range of ethnic, subcultural, social, historical, stylistic and erotic provenances. Unlike anankastic, classical fetishism, where this was not possible, the space for experimentation between identification and distance, pathos and irony has become bigger, more complex and more reflexive in fashion.

Disguise also comes into play in another sense. Fetishes do not just disguise a repressed secret, but also protect from fear, feeling lost, abandonment and being hurt. In terms of the fetishism of fashion, fetishes are about the protective and not the decorative function of clothing. By protection I do not mean protection from physical attacks or the weather. Garber speaks of a “cultural fear” that spreads throughout the backstage of the theatre of fashion. As Bovenschen writes: “A fashion must pay for its identity with its destruction.” (1986, 13; see also Esposito 2004, 143–177) Behind the glitzy glamour of drag and fashion, seriousness and loneliness lurk. Every triumph is also a defeat at the same time: one cannot stop playing if one does not want to be left behind. Fashion also always means asserting a threatened ‘form of persona’ on the thin border between being out of fashion and being the latest trend, which can slip through one’s fingers at any moment. Everyone knows that even a successfully staged fashionable appearance, in which the fetishistic works like the good-angel function of the transitional object, is transitory. It only has the semblance of protecting from the failure and humiliation that all those who are mercilessly trapped in the circulation of fashion risk. We are most wrong when we think that we use fashion; the truth is fashion uses us. It stays young, good-looking and always new, but we do not. It assures us of its promise, which we believe; but it can never keep its promise, because fashion knows no fidelity and is a system beyond people. Georg Simmel (1900/2004, 490) noticed the “typically modern disloyalty with regard to taste, style, opinions and personal relationships” early on. Those who look for salvation in fashion, seek insurance from a place where the things they are insuring themselves against – fear, disappointment, aging, being hurt, death – do not exist. This results in the fetishistic, illusionary character of fashion. Fashion is so artificial that it no longer has anything to do with

the organic life form that wears it. It is a fetishistic claim to a successful life, but it is only ever fashion itself that is successful, not life. In the shimmer of its rigorous self-referentiality, it leaves everyone and everything else behind. Anyone who becomes subject to it must become as artificial as fashion itself. And that is why the effort required for maintaining the belief in fashion is growing; because we know that its restlessness does not calm us down, does not heal the wound, does not lessen the loneliness, does not ease the pain for the sake of which we truly invest ourselves in it, in the kingdom of its fetishistic sheen. *Je sais bien, mais quand même...* It is a belief that, as Freud said, is based on a split, one which does not heal the rupture in the ego, but instead deepens it.

9.7 Film and fetishism

The third example of the cultural expansion of the fetishism concept in the context of feminist research is cinema. It began with the famous essay by British film studies scholar, Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (first published 1975, citations here from the 2009 edition), which sought to link the Marxist and psychoanalytic traditions in film studies.

For the spectator, cinema – in the anonymous, dark cave with its play of light – is a hidden world of the secret observation of plots and persons who do not know they are being observed and therefore become the victims of the spectator’s gaze. This setting alone links cinema with voyeurism and with fetishism. Mulvey’s basic thesis is that the “paradox of phallogentrism in all its manifestations is that it depends on the image of the castrated woman to give order and meaning to its world” (2009, 14). From this theoretically rather conservative assumption, Mulvey constructs a logic of the imagery of classical narrative Hollywood film: filmic scopophilia. Freud had identified the latter in *Three Essays on Sexuality* (SE VII, 125–245) as one of sexuality’s instinctual components. According to Mulvey, voyeurism, which basically constitutes the cinema, only functions for the male spectators; this is clearly a gross exaggeration. But based on this, Mulvey argues that women in the cinema are always conditioned as objects of the male gaze. They only contribute to the scopophilic layer of the film, while the male hero carries the action and of course succeeds in acquiring the gaze of female desire.

Mulvey identifies two levels of the gaze: the first gaze is scopophilic and presents a female object to stimulate sexual desires; the second gaze strengthens male narcissism through identification with the actor’s character or through the image of the woman subordinated to the phallic regime. Mulvey’s theoretical reference for all this always remains the classical model of the castration complex.

For, she argues, film always secretly centres on castration, for which the woman, the castrated sex, stands in. Film thus provides the opportunity to deny castration by using scopophilic fetishes and heroic figures of identification. “Fetishistic scopophilia” also means the gaze that is enjoyed (and purchased) in cinema and allows the male spectator to participate in an imaginary phallic potency. He experiences this in the narcissistic identification with the star, while castration is shifted onto the woman who has been turned into a passive object on show.

Throughout the 1990s, Mulvey continues to assiduously hold on to this idea (1996). It is as though she has not taken any notice of earlier criticism.⁷⁵ The orthodox Freudian model continues to dominate, which is constructed entirely around the male fear of castration and used to justify the idea that mainstream film is always dominated by male voyeurism. Film also follows Winnicott’s reparative drive, in that the phallic integrity the man experiences calms his fear, pain and fragmentation. The fetishisation of the woman, making her a passive gaze-object, enables the spectator’s desire for phallic self-identification without being reminded of what the fetish hides: castration. Marilyn Monroe is the paradigm for this. Mulvey sees a link to commodity fetishism insofar as it is not just the star that functions within the commerce of commodities,⁷⁶ but also the film as a commodity itself: but this is repressed in the cinema’s cave of illusion. The fixing of the gaze on the surface of the images allows the production machine to be forgotten (Mulvey agrees with Christian Metz 1982 here), thereby allowing scopophilic fetishism free rein. The question of whether women also view film fetishistically and therefore do not just experience themselves passively as objects of the male gaze is not addressed. The relationships between a fetishistic film aesthetic and commodity fetishism are consistently inferred rather than explained as the corresponding macrostructures of real history and economy on the one hand, and film genres and motifs on the other. Mulvey’s work ultimately remains the science of revelation. She never delivers her film aesthetics of fetishism as promised. Doane (1991), who provides a first attempt of a theory of the female spectator, does not succeed in this either.

75 In “Afterthoughts on ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’” (Mulvey 2009, 31–40), Mulvey – who has also read Lacan, Bakhtin, Kristeva, Barthes, Viktor Turner, etc. – says, looking back, that her theory was based too strongly on a dichotomy. She now constructs the female spectator in such a way that she is forced into a kind of masculine position by the male bias of Hollywood film, because all action is reserved for the male hero. Women are conditioned to transgress their gender in the cinema, or at least to engage in a kind of projected ‘sex crossing’ as a female cinema-goer. Doane is also of this view: 1991, 25 ff.

76 The star would be a special case for investigation for the analysis of fetishism; cf. Faulstich/Korte 1997; Faulstich 2000; Gutmair 2000; Bronfen/Straumann 2002. They all completely neglect the link between fetishism and idolatry.

Harris (1995) sees the fetishising gaze in the cinema as dominant for both genders. Using the concept of “empathic identification”, which he takes from phenomenology, he attempts to explain the illusionistic image-sorcery and powerful attraction of the cinema. In this process, temporary changes of gender identity in the affective and imaginative experience of the film images are possible for both genders. The defining factor in being able to speak about film fetishism is, however, that the immersive aesthetic, which enables one to completely plunge into a fictional world (although one *knows* that it is fictional), is based on the typical structural pattern of the fetish: the fictional and the imaginary are experienced *as if* they were real; the spectator’s feelings and fantasies are linked to the images *as if* they were those of real people. In the dark space of the cinema, one leaves reality ‘outside’ in order to experience images there as though we were observing real actions and characters ‘outside’. The absence of reality (during the ‘hiatus’ of the cinema) is the condition for the real presence of feelings towards the images. This illusionary character makes film images into *imagines agentes*: something that is only an image seems to act by itself. Exactly this characterises fetishes in general. When fetishes work as ‘magical’ agents in this way, then only because their fabricated quality (*factitius*) has been ‘forgotten’. And exactly this also applies to film images, in the sense that their experience is structurally connected to the forgetting of the so-called apparatus, as Christian Metz calls the technical, but also institutional and economic structures that exist behind the images. By forgetting the ‘fabricated’ quality of the images, their structural apparatus, it becomes possible to completely and utterly fall under the spell of the images.

This illusionary character can be both critically denounced as the potential for manipulation in the cinema and understood as a gift, a dispensation, which temporarily switches off the reality principle. ‘*I know all that well*’ – as an educated citizen – ‘*but yet...*’ I go to the cinema (and allow myself to be enchanted by images and imaginations as though I were a member of a tribal culture). This collision between technical structure and image magic, between the most modern market capitalism and fetishism, cannot simply be understood as an asynchronicity, in which *still* existing relics and *already* developed rationality collide – with the silent assumption that the vector of development is pointing towards the defeat of those so-called relics. Film, as a paradigm of modern media, much rather shows that there are no contradictions between modernity and atavism, but instead that what we call atavistic, in this case image fetishism, is a structural element of modernity. Siegfried Kracauer (1992) describes early Berlin cinemas as “palaces of amusement” and a “*gesamtkunstwerk* of effects”, which flood the metropolitan masses multi-sensorially. The massive spread of immersive illusionary aesthetics based on fetishistic mechanisms is not an exploitation of the pre-

modern residues of our not fully rationalised ego, but instead a contemporary form of the medial exteriorisation of anthropological capabilities, on whose differentiation the religions, the arts and media have been working ever since. Wanting to categorically separate modernity from this would mean radically stunting it. The costs that have been added up by cultural criticism – alienation and fetishisation of the mind, passivisation, illusionisation, manipulation, exploitation, etc. – can in no way be simply ascribed to film or the media as such, but always only some of their individual products. Media are structurally characterised by the fact they conjure up something ‘in the imagination’ that is *really experienced* and experienced *as real*: symbolic-and-therefore-real content (Ian 1993). This ‘as-if’ structure is part of reality itself. If one starts with this assumption, fetishism finally has the chance to become an analytic category for the description of reality and not a battle concept used to denounce that very reality. Finally, it should be emphasised that if the concept of fetishism is used in this way, then criticism of culture-industrial exploitation and its obfuscation of our minds, of the dumbing down caused by the mass media and its political manipulation of us, will not become softer, but more pointedly precise.

All three cultural fields – nutrition, fashion, cinema – demonstrate similar structures: they are highly differentiated practices that serve to generate desires and pleasures in society. Fetishism intensifies these pleasures and desires. Yet it always also produces their reverse: food fetishism is a general social mechanism that produces existential victims with anorexia and bulimia. It represents the extreme cases of a fundamental lack of balance in our oral desires and diets. Fashion, working like film in the matrix of scopophilic desires, creates a glamorous world of narcissistic self-staging in the theatre of seeing, but in the ruthlessness of its systematic autopoiesis also contains the stressful imperative of always being up-to-date and the inevitable experiences of aging, illness and one’s own inadequacy. For immersive experiences of extraordinary feelings and desires, the cinema is a unique arena, but one which unavoidably must close again, releasing the audience back to their prosaic, average everyday lives. The ‘apparatuses’ of the food, fashion and film industry are deeply indifferent toward the consumer who uses them. Practiced cultural competence is required to handle the collisions between the glamour of eating, clothing and images on the one hand, and the disciplinary demands of a high-performance society on the other, without being damaged in some way. For this a reflexive relationship to fetishistic mechanisms is especially required: we must relinquish ourselves to them in order to be able to enjoy the extraordinary celebratory quality of fashion, of images and of eating; and at the same time we must be able to distance ourselves from them to prevent ourselves from going under.

The need to identify, whereby one gives oneself up to the flow of desires on offer, is diametrically opposed to the need to keep one's distance, which limits and frames this relinquishing of the self. This contradiction cannot be reconciled; it is therefore a paradox. This means that we cannot avoid operating fetishistically in the field of our oral and scopophilic desires – in other words we must give ourselves up to the fetishes' spell – while we must also be capable of controlling our own fetishism. Dealing with the as-if of fetishistic desires in fashion, food and the media requires strong cultural competence. We must be both the subject and object of fetishism simultaneously. We must be able to allow food, fashion and images to become 'events' that happen to us, take us with them, indeed even overwhelm us: if we do not succeed, we will go through our whole lives unhappy, comforted only by our social successes. At the same time we must be capable of restricting all of this magical enchantment spatio-temporally, of critically reflecting on it and occasionally controlling it; otherwise the real, the symbolic and the imaginary will confound us, and we will lose ourselves in the maze of desires and addictions. I should also add that it is no different with political idolatries. It is an illusion to be able to solve this paradox in one or the other direction: either one petrifies in the compulsive rationalisation of a pseudo-Enlightenment or one drowns in the pathologies of addiction, which exist in power as well as in fashion, the magic of images or the magic of food.

The development we have charted in this chapter from 1880 until today shows a clear tendency: it is a trend towards increasing reflexivity. The paradox described above is evident in the scientific history of fetishism in sexology and psychoanalysis, in that fetishism, which was the object of science, increasingly became part of the structure of science itself. Because of this, scientific research was faced with an increased need for self-reflexivity, not with the aim of exorcising fetishism, but in order to handle it in a controlled manner – and this is the paradox. The productive crisis the sciences therefore ended up in after 1970 was linked to an opening up of their cultural horizon. Until then, the sciences still believed that they could keep fetishistic phenomena away from themselves as individual pathologies belonging to patients; but then it became clear: fetishism is a pathology that also belongs to science itself. Even more than that. From then on, fetishism was understood as a general mechanism for forming social relationships and could no longer be seen as the deficient behaviour of single individuals. The women's movement had an important role in this dedogmatisation of fetishism. It is not just female analysts, but also female scholars from a very wide range of disciplines, who, in research into consumer behaviour, the analysis of fashion and studies of different forms of diet, are spreading the idea that fetishism penetrates all sectors of modern culture. The growth in reflexivity this has caused is linked to an inevitable overall development: the modernity of cul-

tures depends on the differentiation of observational competence, the observation of observation, making cultural evolution dependent on the precondition of increasing self-reflexivity. This is not in conflict with processes of fetishism and idolatry or magic and lustful (self-)enchantment, but is the precondition of cultural fetishism. Wherever this precondition is met, the indestructible need for magic and fetish can become a playful form of culture and a culture of play.

This is also evident in the fact that reflexivity is built into the practices that take place in the three fields dealt with here. We can no longer think about Hollywood film as a homogenous form, as Laura Mulvey did, which was nothing more than machinery for creating illusions in the minds of the cinema audience. Even Hollywood films play with their own genre or even with their conditions of production and contain recurring loops, which allow the voyeuristic desire to see and identify and a distanced reflection to coexist. Fashion, as we have seen, long ago became a tough business, but at the same time it plays with its own forms and reveals itself as such. It is a dictate that has a distance to itself built in already. In styles of diet, because of the extreme multiplicity of options, internationalisation and much more consumer knowledge about health and ecological issues, there is an internal heterogeneity and diversity that makes even the tiniest nutritional act a potentially reflexively considered decision. Recognising all this does not mean ignoring the fact that anankastic traits are still at work in cultural fetishism; succumbing to it all too often also means being burdened with very high psychological, health-related, social or economic costs that can grow into personal catastrophes or alarming social pathologies. Of course, there is also no doubt that the huge economic power that continuously drives capital's exploitation and expansion is accumulated in all three sectors. These are the objective borders of a reflexive culture and a liberalised fetishism. Yet these borders also represent power and a limit, beyond which the economy can only go under penalty of major losses or even collapses. Nonetheless, this means there is some hope for the effectiveness of the reflexive modernisation that we have identified. Although we have no choice but to live with it, we *can* live with fetishism, our own fetishism, which comes from our deepest drives, desires and fantasies, and the objective fetishism that is built in to our economic, political and cultural systems. Fetishism is no longer our opponent, which must be unmasked, exorcised and excluded. It is a part of us and we are a part of it. It is not its essential nature that is important, but our relationship to it.

Conclusion

The dream the Enlightenment dreamed was not even a beautiful one: a thoroughly secularised world; no magic, no superstition; religion reduced to a rational God, an abstract image of reason, to whom people happily submit in all their actions and endeavours. Sex that is as equally domesticated as our wild desires and fantasies; relationships ruled by the regime of mutual respect, effective work and leisure time that is filled with cultivated and dietary pleasures. A morality that no longer takes the form of strict demands, but is automatically in harmony with the motives and maxims of human beings. Sound democratic institutions that guarantee the freedom and equality of citizens. Freedom as the beautiful fruit of a society finally functioning according to the laws of reason. A society like this would of course be strangely dull.

This book steps out from the shadows of this dream, not necessarily willingly, but as the result of analyses that have examined both the *longue durée* of European culture and, above all, the last two centuries dominated by Enlightenment and reason. Not so surprisingly, we found that modernity is much less Enlightened than it thinks it is. This was also made particularly clear because we did not stick to the great philosophical traditions of theoretical thinking, nor did we examine the huge number of findings that were a result of differentiation in the sciences, in law, in art or in the economy, but instead placed the relationships people form with things in the centre of focus. Along with still lifes, in which things speak silently about human beings, there was also a type of painting depicting “spaces empty of people”¹ in seventeenth-century Dutch painting. In them, thingly ensembles become the physiognomic expression of the “presence of the absence” (Fatma Yalçın) of the residents. Studies of fetishism take a similar approach methodologically. Things are neither viewed as objective and ‘for-themselves’ nor as merely ready-to-hand for subjects who act. Instead they are interpreted as the key that, although not entirely determining it, at least influences and structures human beings’ presence and action in the realm of things. Taking this view means not being interested in the self-consciousness and self-interpretations of subjects, but in the unique thing-human fusions that tenaciously refuse the modern subject’s claims to autonomy. This oblique perspective, which does not allow itself to be attracted to the wonderful Enlightenment promises of autonomous self-consciousness, does not lead to a

¹ Fatma Yalçın: *The Presence of Absence*. On the history of images of empty spaces, figures with their backs turned and eavesdroppers in the Netherlands in the seventeenth century. Munich 2004.

declaration of the end of the Enlightenment, but its reflexive and also culturally practical growth.

The historical paths through the history of interpretations of fetishism in religious studies and ethnology, in economics and cultural studies, in sexology, psychoanalysis and feminism, have shown that fetishism has consistently been understood as an ‘opponent’, which was to be scientifically analysed, unmasked, destroyed or at least left behind by evolution. This proved to be one of modernity’s typical strategies for dealing with what was considered ‘premodern’; a strategy that in fact prolonged or even produced the phenomena it was fighting in the first place. The more anti-fetishistic the mental attitude, the more fetishistic the praxis. On all levels, again and again we saw that the fetishism we wanted to keep ‘outside’ – in Africa, in earlier periods of history, in unenlightened and superstitious cultures, among perverts, unthinking consumers, etc. – is from the first to the last a powerful force ‘inside’ modern Europe itself. The history of the last two centuries of science shows that the sciences failed to understand the phenomenon of fetishism. This led to a reflexive turn, and describing this was the main aim of this study: when the fetishism that is projected outwards is recognised as something that is ‘part of us’, we can bury the hatchet and end the critical campaign against it. This creates a kind of reduction of tension in the theoretical relationship to fetishism. However, this is less owed to the self-reflexive insights gained in the sciences than to the increased liberality with which modern culture has dealt with fetishistic phenomena. The sciences, which no longer use their theoretical weapons for the elimination of fetishism (they did up until around 1970), underwent their own reflexive turn as described, but they were not somehow ‘more enlightened’ and ahead of the rest society, but instead were simply part of this general cultural change in relation to fetishism. The end of the denunciation of fetishism coincided with fetishism itself becoming ubiquitous in modern society, no longer banished to the cellar where it was permitted to make its subcultural, shadow world. This could, however, also mean that the new liberalism towards cultural fetishism would not be a positive idea, but instead the final defeat of the Enlightenment’s critical inclinations: fetishism would have won by spreading epidemically and making any form of justified resistance futile.

The question of how far fetishism should be integrated positively into our own self-image, our relationships to things and those in cultural practices, and from which point on it should still be fought or treated with therapy as a sociopathological symptom, as alienation in the market economy or as individual perversions, goes beyond the scope of this book. That requires follow-up studies that deal more closely than was possible here with sexual, consumer, religious, mass-medial, political and cultural, but also artistic fetishism. This study

in no way proposes an unbridled and therefore unquestioning tolerance for every form of fetishism. Instead the aim was to critically examine the sciences, who in the name of the 'unfinished project' of the Enlightenment (Jürgen Habermas) have increasingly proven to be useless, in order to bring together the diversity of fetishism's phenomena, analyse them in a manner appropriate to those phenomena and think about them in cultural theoretical terms. The kind of fetishism research operating in the interdisciplinary manner I have described is necessary not just because of the omnipresence of the phenomenon, but also in the interests of the further development of subjects concerned with culture, which must overcome their Eurocentric inheritance along with the unsustainable assumptions upon which the discourse of Enlightenment and modernity is based. This aim is connected with a second point, shown in a number of cultural fields, namely that analysing fetishism can provide valuable contributions to our understanding of modern culture and that fetishism itself is a highly creative mechanism of the cultural shaping of human-thing relationships.

This rehabilitation of fetishism would not close our eyes to the sad dimensions of, in particular, modern fetishism. The massive speed with which phallic fetishism is spreading through internet sex, for example, is working against sexual emancipation. The billion-dollar industry of advertising fetishism undermines political attempts to develop consumer behaviour that critically questions itself. The media power of the tabloid newspapers uses the cult of celebrity and thing fetishism to fetishise the minds of their readers without any restriction. Anyone with a half-sound capacity for judgement who watches entertainment TV programmes, from breakfast TV to late evening talk shows, cannot help but notice how shamelessly, directly fetishistic and idolatrous imagery is used to insult human intelligence. 'The football is round' and a nice fetishistic thing too; and the role the football star played in the social structure of Ruhr Valley gangs forty years ago is also worthy of sociocultural analysis. As is the capital superpower that football is today, which even a chancellor admits her reverence for and which makes its profits from strategically exploiting the need for idols, cults, fetishes and collective excitement, accompanied by the babble of TV presenters, who, just like the ad agencies, always drop in the odd verbal kick to the man – : this is, however, depressingly accurate. It works this way or similarly in all of show business and increasingly also in politics and art. Considering this, it is almost impossible not to become a cultural pessimist.

However, this was not the reason for my plea that fetishism be dealt with more thoroughly by cultural analysis. One of the reasons is to understand how culture works more precisely with the help of fetishism theories that have liberated themselves from the nineteenth- and twentieth-century rhetorics of denunciation; the second reason is not to prohibit the social aspect of judgement that

takes objects of analysis seriously in order to form a critical judgement as a scholar either. This means that on the one hand the methodological openness that emerged in this study is necessary for research on fetishism; but so is equally precision in judgement. Both belong together and cultural studies is only complete when both are applied. It would be the wrong move to look for a way out of the dead ends of cultural criticism of the past, to abolish it completely because of its flaws. Indeed, cultural analysis that is carried out on the basis of methodological distance always has interventional and public criticism as its reverse. The analysis and criticism of fetishism therefore belong together. The more the understanding that the world cannot be rid of fetishism by any form of Enlightenment grows, the more this will be the case. To the extent that it belongs to modernity and, as we have shown, has in fact been universalised by modernity and increased its power, fetishism is not a cultural mechanism that is behind us, but one which lies in front of us. As such it is certainly not just a field of historical research, but one of the main challenges that remain for cultural analysis.

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