

Imagine being peeled... the sublime ecstasy of fur in fashioning well-being...

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**11th Annual Conference of the International Foundation of Fashion and
Technology Institutes (IFFTI)**

Fashion and Well-being?

**London College of Fashion
2-3 April 2009**

Abstracts were subject to double blind peer review, and the following comments were received:

- 1. This abstract on fur offers a different perspective on the wearing of 'fur' from a poststructuralist perspective. It is well written and fits in closely with the conference theme as well as touching on other sub-themes such as ethics and health.*
- 2. This is a well-written abstract, which offers a challenging perspective on a controversial subject. It fits well with the conference theme as well as the sub-theme of ethics.*

Avoidance of death-marks on the fetish-fabric of the fur is vital, allowing the disavowal needed by fetish-purists who seek the idealised and non-bodily material pleasure of a 'fur experience'. This paper asserts that it is the heady mix of sex, sadism, seduction and sensuality that keeps fur both perennially attractive and ascendant in the fashion industry, and connects it powerfully to the production and consumption of the most notorious and unsavory of pornography: 'snuff'. Filmic 'snuff' violently discloses the body and its private parts, negating the disavowal of fetishism by insisting that its gift is essentially overt, violent and real. Somewhere within a territory of perversity, informed and troubled by definitions and corruptions of fetishism and sadism, however, fur dynamically co-joins the fetishistic disavowing pleasure of its rich surface with the overt deliberateness of suffering at its point of production (in turn informing its moment of consumption, where arguably it activates *commodity* fetishism again). Fur manages to

perform this oscillation between the fur fetishist's disclaimer and the fur sadist's de-fetishized knowingness, corrupting both in its insinuation that the deep and complex perversion of Western fur appreciation lies in the fetishist's obverse acceptance of the 'attraction of repulsion', the inversion of the traditional male fetishist in the legions of fur-wearing *femme fatales*, and the Sapphic implications of such *femmes'* somatic insertion into the fur that still is inflected as female genitalia...

With this potent oscillation in mind, the embodied nature of fur, its origin as a soft cover for a (once) living creature, arguably positions it as an essentially deathly fabric. Is it possible now to escape the ecstatic pleasure of the skin-stroking of soft pelt, or avoid the knowing acceptance of agony, to disavow desire for the sex-death nexus, or to critically subordinate emotion and empathy in making or taking fur? Fur, I contend, provides the true 'stuff of snuff', allowing hard-core pornography's "perverse substitute of death spasm for pleasure spasm: the replacement of orgasm's 'little death' by real death" (Williams, 1990:192). It is the *actual* deaths of fur's birth that creates in fur the sheath-space of heightened pleasure for the sadist-fetishist (the former looking directly at the slit-skin, the latter seeing no death-marks and choosing to disavow *in spite of* what is seen). It is then the *absence* of death that makes even the extreme fineness of micro-fibres nothing other than a poor sterile substitute for the 'real snuff'.

The 1980s anti-fur campaigns left Western consumers in no doubt where fur comes from, how it is obtained, who consumes it, and what the dishonourable cultural penalty might be of wearing it. The environmental, social and trans-cultural, economic, gender-related, post-colonial and neo-imperialist aspects of fur production, trade and consumption are not this paper's focus: while the fur fashionistas accuse the anti-fur lobby of "self-righteousness and ecological Puritanism" (Bolton, 2005:68), the anti-fur

lobby counter-charge fur advocacy as decadent and selfish to the point of wilful cruelty and ecological destruction (Nadeau, 2001:177). It is, however, fur's role as a "libidinal fetish" (Emberley, 1998:4) that is key here, capturing fur's dynamic magic and its potency as a sexual signifier of great intricacy. The anti-fur campaigns that told us "It takes up to 40 dumb animals to make a fur coat. But only one to wear it" (Lynx 1984), and the like, missed the point of fur ethics entirely. As Skov (2004:24) notes, in spite of the vehemence of such opposition, and in spite of the now familiar tales of terror of how fur arrives on the high street, "the erotically charged entwinement of fur, beauty and pain has survived". Understanding and accepting that entwinement as shifting between denial and celebration of the perversions of fur (fetishism on one hand, sadism on the other) liberates us then to consider our principled position in relation to it.

Fur *is* sex, it *is* transgressive, it *is* perverse, it *is* about climactic dominance and it *is* about death, it *does* conjure the magnetism and dynamism of sadomasochistic sexual practice. And, in parallel, it perversely disavows all this to be purely about the fetish-fur-iness of itself and its breath-taking affect. If fur-wearing lovers of fur *know* their breach of the codes of compassion and the ethics of endearment (and even the most disavowing fetishists *must*), then any punishment experienced at the hands of PETA activists only liberates their enjoyment of fur's purity and perversity. Williams argues in this vein within the complex and shifting expressions of the sadomasochistic scenario, but her sentiment – that punishment thus "serves a function: it absolves the supposedly desireless woman of responsibility and blame for pleasures she nevertheless enjoys" (1990:213) – is arguably applicable to the fur-wearing woman who deals with punitive activist scorn and strides onwards, fur-clad and bold, propelled by her conviction in North's "urge to extravagance" (1999:unpaginated). As a lone fetishist, she is more unusual in her gender; as a sadist, however, she finds a number of phallicized female

fur-fellows with whom to stride. The depth of the pleasure and power combination contained in the wearing of fur for such women is so great that no form of societal or cultural censure deflects it. It is effectively a sadomasochistic bond, rather than a strictly fetishistic one, with all the mobility of identification that such SM bonds allow. It echoes the intensity of the slow coital strangulation and castration of Kichi by the phallic female Sada in Oshima's film *In the Realm of the Senses* (1976) – 'snuff' is followed by absolute possession, of the strength of that felt by the wearer for her fur. Sada *owns* Kichi's body by the chilling deathly action of her desire and its enactment. So too, the fur-woman owns her collection of bodies, represented in the punishingly potent, achingly poetic and sensually superior fabric of fur. Its rejection can, I argue, only be then made *in spite of fur, and as an act of conscious denial of its 'pleasure space', rather than in opposition to it...*

Male fetishist Mockle's adolescent rite of passage into the 'pleasure space' of fur ownership reads as a long-anticipated and delicious sexual initiation, charged with secrecy, furtiveness, and a particularly intense sense of private autoeroticism:

...two of our female teachers had gorgeous long dark musquash coats ... except the initial contact in the school playground, I had yet to feel a fur...

...I acquired my first fur shortly before my eighteenth birthday ... I rushed home, smuggling it in past my parents, and remember spending much of the rest of the day touching it, stroking it and, I have to admit, being sexually aroused by it...

(www.mrmockle.com).

While fur's silky soft handle and cool suppleness ensures the pelt's material-fetishistic capability for conjuring sexual excitement (Entwistle, 2000:191-192), its "powerful erotic appeal" is especially characterised for Mockle by its unique combination of tactile, olfactory and visual stimulation. Fur becomes a 'whole body' sensual experience, and fur's caress of the body – both how that privately feels and how that outwardly looks – encourages heightened sensation, and invites – symbolic or actual – erotic engagement (Hollander, 1995:134). The private and preserved fur fetishist's excitement results from refusal of the pelt's association with death, loss, castration, even female genitalia: fur's touch, sight and smell conjure a powerful sensual experience, but arguably the whisper of death is also there to inflame other complex entanglements and to struggle with the fetishist's disavowal through insistence on *knowing*. That whisper is of the necromantic, the necrophilic, the sense of 'deaths and maidens', underpinning the more acceptable, more savoury explanations of fur's appeal. Thus, fur is *bodily*, and an *embodiment of body-ness*, and more, it is the stillness of fur's embodied body that is its erotic and deathly beauty. That which once rippled and writhed, is stilled, and by force of action or of consumer will. That (phallic) devouring force, as a sadistic instrument, the convoluted politics of desire acting around it, and the implications of that enactment, require further exposition than mere fetishism allows...

Imagine, fetish-sadist, being peeled...

Imagine a heap of carcasses, a peeled racoon raising *your* bloody dying head to stare at a camera, a racoon with gorgeous lashes, blinking but with *your* poor bleeding heart exposed, and *your* precious pelt flayed off over *your* head like a jumper...

But we don't believe in cruelty. We feel fur *can* be ethical. We're in liberal London, the Parliamentary home of the British Fur Farming Prohibition Bill of 2003. We're not, as liberals, averse to a bit of cleaned up 'snuff', but we're *intellectually* attracted only... That poor old racoon in pesky China should be the last of a dying breed... Let's *disavow* together...

Look, we don't know whether our fur is ripped off a racoon's shrieking frame in Hebei Province, excised from the cooling body of Finnish fox electrocuted to oblivion, or sliced off some gibbering creature whose last meal was its own living leg shattered in a trap in deepest Omaha. Fetishist, we really won't be able to tell if we've been naughty little fur consumers or if we've joined the self-less fight against over-population by 'pest species'...

Fur farm footage shows cage-mad foxes pacing, ducking, twitching; racoons incarcerated with the cannibalised carcasses of their cage-mates, a chinchilla with an exposed bone protruding from her ulcerated leg, her deeply infected eyes waiting for death and accessories-use rather than full-pelt glory (www.petatv.com). It's *uber*-porn, all the more delightful since its narrative evidences that market-acceptable lush and luscious fur will grow even in the short life of a traumatised, undernourished, dehydrated, abused creature, putting paid to the argument that if caged fur animals weren't treated well, the fur would be poor. *This*, essentially, is the expedient perversion of fur-loving: the oscillation of contemporary Western fur-lovers between indulgence in not-knowing and enjoyment of the sheer pleasure of the fur (purist-fetishists), the impossibility of not-knowing but somehow managing to turn away (disavowing fetishists), the rationalising of fur as necessary in the grand scheme (masochistic moral

apologists), and immersion in the deathly delight and cruel excess of the 'snuff' (fur-sadists).

A dog fox involuntarily bites on a metal pole as an electrically-charged steel rod is pushed upward deep into his rectum. He violently arches his back in orgasmic ecstasy, his insides fry, his teeth shatter, his heart ruptures, he shudders towards oblivion: it could be the best of 'snuff', an eloquent tale of climactic death inscribed with painful beauty, a noble guarantee that his fur, unmarked by cause of death, will provide a full pelt and a sublime bodily experience for its wearer (Origin Assured™). Remember, dog fox, your fur equals more than one kind of sex: J-Lo's blinged-up street 'ho', Beyoncé's hypnotic ass-shakin' ghetto-queen, Liz Hurley's English classic-fur charm, Lizzie Jagger's hot-red hussy, Monroe's kitten-heeled, kitten-soft, kitten-kitsch... Yes, Quan, you're right when you note a "woman in a fabulous fur coat looks arrogant and carnal because she obviously does not mind if a few animals have died to keep her warm" (1998:2), and yes, Lurie, you're close to the essence when you state "One of the most persistent specialized forms of erotic appeal is that which connects love and death, sometimes so closely that only what is damaged or dangerous can arouse the passions" (1992:256). But note Williams' argued complicity between those who witness cinematographic 'snuff', "in the flesh" even if on screen, and the abusive perversion of its mode of production (1990:185). Her contention that "going to a cinema to watch a death spasm is obscene" is surely no less dreadful than wearing its results (1990:186), and it usefully focuses the (porno)graphically-described death of our dear dog fox above. So, with fashion providing opportunity for enactment of specific fetishistic or ambiguous sadistic sexual fantasy, fur finds top billing in the material construction of sexuality, its fabric sado-fetish operating to both focus desire on and disclose "the *real*

object of curiosity and desire”, arguably the human body and ultimately its genital prize beneath the animal’s fur (Hamlyn, 2003:13)...

Nadeau asserts that “Skin, flesh, fur all act as interfaces of the *female* body [my emphasis]” (2001:8), and the association of fur and *female* genitalia as representing a highly sexualised focus for the typically male fetishist is well documented (Freud, 2005:299). Quan (1998:2) proposes that a “mink or sable worn half-open is reminiscent of ‘a woman’s lush, unwaxed outer labia”, and Helmut Newton’s *Laura Dressed in a Fox Cape, Avenue George V, Paris* (1974) pictorially activates just this concept. In the Cammell-Roeg film *Performance* (1970) the polysexual protagonist Pherber lies talking to her London Gangster while stroking her fur coat just above her naked crotch, and other commentators note the various fur references connected to colloquial or vulgar terms for the vulva or vagina – pussy (Bell-Price, 2005:117), muff (Lurie, 1992:234), beaver (Nadeau, 2001:12), meat (Adams, 1990), and just fur

...the emotion I felt being inside her fur, literally inside, because you see when she grabbed me to kiss me, her coat half-opened and suddenly I found myself inside her fur, so to speak ... I suddenly remembered Tata Rachel’s black pubic hair of my childhood dreams, and I started feeling something bulge inside my pants...

(Federman, 2001:215)

Fur’s bad reputation precedes PETA (Quan, 1998:1): associations with prostitution, moral degeneracy, and sexual depravity are central in, for example, Pabst’s *The*

Joyless Street (1925), Mann's *Butterfield 8* (1960), and in the pimp-whore dynamic of Liebovitz's iconic *American Vogue* image staging P. Diddy Combs emerging from a white Mercedes, in a white fox fur coat, with a white 'trophy' woman (played child-like by Kate Moss) into a crowd of paparazzi (Bolton 2005:53). With *his* fox an encultured white, worn easily on confident shoulders of assured status, *her* fur is 'other', a wilder 'cat-spot', clutched by this ambiguous woman-girl-creature for protection from *other* predators. The pimp-whore power dynamic manifests also in the role of the fur in the clothed and unclothed gendered body scenario, doubly contested in von Sacher-Masoch's *Venus in Furs*' protagonist Wanda's cruel and sadistic dominance of the story's male character. Key to reading her fur, we understand she is physically and emotionally icy: it is the interface between her marble skin and the warm furs that mobilise the sexual exchange between her and Leopold. Nadeau argues that it is exactly the "carnal and intimate contact" between female and animal skin that creates an enormous sexually-charged and sensually mesmeric force in Wanda, rendering her combination of self and fur as embodying desire for her slave, and enabling the exchange of heightened pleasure for devoted adoration (Nadeau, 2001:15). Leopold's character Severin effortlessly connects sexual passion with tyranny and cruelty perpetrated by a fur-clad woman, describing the exquisite pleasure of sexualised suffering and torture. So, the potency of the fur-clad female is rendered archetypal.

Yet, Ed Gein peeled his female murder victims, fashioning a 'woman suit' in late 1950s USA, and informing the fictional character 'Buffalo Bill' Jame Gumb who starved and skinned women to similarly construct a garment in Demme's *Silence of the Lambs* (1991). How problematic would it be to raise an argument that the knowing use and wearing of fur must echo (at least) the viewing of (if not participation in) the most heightened versions of sadomasochistic pornography since the sensibility required to

pass the use of fur must either be that of the sadist (dominating the animal) or perhaps the masochist (in abject empathy with the animal), or wavering, as good perverts do, between them both? As in critiques of the spectatorship of such pornography, might an argument hold that the user is only one step removed from the bloody action of the means of production, which is implicit in the product? That is, is the wearer of fur only one remove from the barbarism, excess and orgiastic cruelty of its manufacture, and indeed is this absolutely understood by the consumer of fur (even if subsequently denied to allow return to the purist pleasure of the absolutist fetishist)?

Williams examines the 'slasher' film genre which "like pornography ... pries open the fleshy secrets of normally hidden things" (1990:191), and the 'snuff' film category comprising "a perverse displacement of pornographic hard-core sexual activities, which typically end in penetration, onto the penetrating violation of the body's very flesh" (1990:192). In describing "the perverse pleasure of witnessing the involuntary spasm of death" (1990:193), Williams might as readily be transposed onto a discourse of witnessing or wearing the fur evidence of the agonies of fur-bearing animals prior to and during their surrender of their fur. Might this be considered analogous to the witnessing of the execution or discharge of 'snuff'? Arguably, if a fur coat has some connection to pubic hair, then the body of a dying animal or a dying woman exposes the hidden orgasm that hard-core seeks but never sees. Williams cites the "frenzy of the visible" in 'snuff', which counteracts the "*invisible* involuntary spasm of orgasm that is so hard to see in the body of the woman" (1990:194), that "intangible aspect" that for Bataille (1986:29) is the essence of human eroticism. Williams further queries the hidden nature of the female orgasm and the need for its disclosure:

Read in the context of pornography ... a flinch, a convulsion, a welt, even the flow of blood itself, would seem to offer incontrovertible proof that a woman's body, so resistant to the involuntary show of pleasure, has been touched, 'moved' by some force (1990:194).

Does a fur then allow us collective access to a moving experience, a body death, a particular orgasmic climax, normally denied us? Might we further consider the ice maiden swathed in pelts as so essentially disembodied that her orgasm is only visible in the animal's death? The quivering bristle of fur's texture signifies its connection to "animals aroused by passion or aggression... [and] ...sexual gentility and ferocity" (da Cruz, 2005:166). The sexualised 'penetration' of the fur-bearing animal by the teeth of traps, through the shock of anal/vaginal insertion, in asphyxiation's gag or poison's invasion, by bullet piercing, pressing, strangling, stamping, bludgeoning, or through the 'skin flick' of being live-peeled, enacts Silverman's (1988:31) interrogation of Freud's articulation of perverse sexuality, defined as not ending in coitus, and lacking "a genital goal or discharge or 'end-pleasure'". Further, Williams' description of a typical SM film: "There is no visible climax, in either the dramatic or the sexual sense of the word, only a suspenseful spectacle of prolonged suffering" (1990:197) is telling if applied to the temporal and spatial distantiation enacted by even those fur-wearing consumers who acknowledge the sexualised violence inherent in fur. That separation, fur's "nihilistic desire for sensation" (Arnold, 2001:57), is that which Williams describes thus:

...we are watching (whether with fascination, pleasure, horror, or dread) an act that seems real but with which we have no physical connection ourselves (1990:188).

So, if normatively “Abject terror [is] gendered feminine” (Clover, 1987:212), is fur-wearing a means by which a woman achieves the high drag of phallic supremacy, interfering with – though not overtly challenging – normative hierarchies of male and female sexual and power relations? As Medusa, Siren, spider-woman, ‘black widow’, eroticised death, as the animalistic and ferocious ancient Amazon, voluptuous virago, divine huntress, and/or Sarah Palin, or even as the still-potent persona of Mrs Danvers, the depraved and secretive lesbian stroking the dead Mrs de Winter’s fur coat over her cheek (Hitchcock’s *Rebecca* 1940), she is the perpetrator of a sexualised act of terror and destruction. The ravenous *femme fatale* is never more present, however, than with the unborn karakul lambs of Central Asia whose unformed fur makes astrakhan, broadtail or Persian wool. This finest fur requires firm pressure on the ewe’s stomach to abort her semi-formed lamb with no death-marking of fatal-foetal, baby-wrinkled, terror-tender skin (Haven, 2002). Lagerfeld, Fendi, Prada, Dolce & Gabbana favour this “cruellest and most vicious fur” (Croft, 2005), severed straight from still-hot Mummy. The moment of sexualised death may be configured as rapturous, honourable, ecstatic, orgasmic, transcendental, but ultimately it is truly and actually *deathly*, as is the best ‘snuff’. Here, where “killing functions as a form of rape”, the ultimate orgasm is the “penetrating violation of the body’s very flesh” (Williams, 1990:191-192) in a ‘money shot’ combination of the foetal unborn and the already ‘snuffed’.

For some of the consumer-lovers of fur, the (symbolic) visibility of the death marks is vital to their appreciation. These are the fur sadists, for whom terror, death, pain and abject suffering inform the fur they wear, inflect their enjoyment of it, and allow their dominion over the animals and their potency, phallic or otherwise, as part of the enactment of their pleasure. This form of fur-loving is close in essence to the extreme enjoyment of the real death action of ultimate 'snuff'. For others, the need to disavow fur's origins – in spite of not being able to avoid that knowledge – is essential to their fetish-purist appreciation of the idealised pleasure affect of fur fabric. It is their complete refusal of fur as a skinned beast that permits their fetishised relationship to it. Fur's extraordinary fashion phenomenon defines the wild complexity of human sexual perversion by combining apparently opposite psychic forces – the will to destroy and the desire to appreciate. Enabling the perverse interconnection of sadistic and fetishistic drives, it reflects our collective capability for sexual decadence and the satiation of appetites regardless of cost. The death marks are always there, and cannot truly be ignored or overseen. In fur-love it is impossible not to see the death-marks, and the differences between the perverse positions of fur-lovers lie only in whether they choose to directly view/perform the heat of the 'snuff' or to delicately slide their eyes away to linger on the cooled pelt.

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