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THE ‘PARODY OF THE MOTTLED CORPSE’ IN ANTONIONI, ALMODOVÁR, CARAX AND WINDING REFN

Abstract
In The Neon Demon (Nicolas Winding Refn, 2016) there are several thought-provoking topics concerning the fashion world that can be related to Walter Benjamin’s analyses in Passages. Winding Refn appears to adopt completely the German thinker’s idea that fashion is close to a parody of death, especially in his representation of the fashion system through a violent, blood-thirsty, cannibalistic dimension. In addition to Refn’s work the idea expressed by Benjamin can also be found in films directed by Antonioni, Almodóvar and Carax. All of these directors relate to Benjamin’s idea that fashion comprehends some perversions. In Blow-Up (1966), Kika (1993) and The Skin I Live In (2011), Holy Motors (2012) there is a common thread that finds its apex in Neon Demon (2016), where Benjamin’s concept lies in its coils and its soul. Furthermore, that impulse to violence, which is latent in Antonioni’s film but increasingly present in the films by Almodóvar and Carax, and especially in The Neon Demon, represents their connection both to Benjamin’s thought and to the ideas expressed by Bataille in Erotism, in The Accursed Share and in The Notion of Expenditure. In these books, the French philosopher shows that the same elements which are present in the five analysed here – that is, violence, sacrifice, beauty profanation, murder and cannibalism – are expressions of the concept of dépense, which also includes fashion, intended as a form of dissipation through excess and splendour.

Keywords
Perversion; dépense; transitoriness; fashion system; excess.

In memory of James Butler

1. INTRODUCTION

In The Neon Demon (2016), the latest film by Winding Refn, there are several thought-provoking topics concerning the fashion world that can be related to Walter Benjamin’s analyses in Passages. It seems that the Danish director totally adopts the German thinker’s idea that “fashion has always been nothing but the parody of a mottled corpse, the provocation of death through the woman’s body and a bitter whispered dialogue with putrefaction, among shrill laughs repeated mechanically”, especially when Winding Refn

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defines the fashion system represented in the film through a violent, bloodthirsty, cannibalistic dimension.

The idea expressed by Benjamin can be found in Winding Refn’s latest film as well as in films directed by important authors who have focused their interest on the representation of the fashion system, especially Antonioni – *Blow-Up* (1966) – Almodóvar – *Kika* (1993) and *The Skin I Live In* (2011) – Carax – *Holy Motors* (2012). In such movies links are to be found with what Winding Refn has created and these links can all be traced back to Benjamin’s idea that fashion has within itself “perversions” and a “dialectic between woman and goods” or even more so between “pleasure and corpse”. Taking into account the five quoted films, the dynamic noted by Benjamin becomes more apparent and the relationship woman-goods gradually mutates into the relationship pleasure-corpse.

2. FROM WOMAN-GOODS TO PLEASURE-CORPSE

Let us briefly analyse this aspect starting from *Blow-Up*. In the scene where the fashion photographer, Thomas, frantically takes pictures of models or models-to-be, careless of their needs, he handles them like objects of his neurotic, possessive whim. This makes the models similar to objects for the photographer’s cannibalistic eye, as well as the eye of the future looker-on who will enjoy such photos. This dynamic is more evident in the film *Kika* where the male protagonist, the photographer Ramon, tries to reach the maximum desire during an intercourse with his girlfriend by using a Polaroid. This way the opening scene of the film where he takes a picture of a model for an underwear advertisement while simulating an intercourse is proposed again. His photos fix in an image the body he would like to possess, so deeply that he shows a pathological perversion with a scopophilic connotation. This perversion will lead his beloved Kika close to death, embodied by the rapist Pablo.

It is not incidental that Barthes points out how in photography “the subject is transformed into an object” and the subject undergoes a “micro-experience of death”, so that he becomes a “whole image that is Death itself”. This is because the photographer and the looker-on deprive the subject of its nature and “fiercely make of it an object”. This desire for dominion and transfiguration of the body in goods with the aim to make it similar to a corpse starts from the fashion world and is more pervertedly evident in *The Skin I Live In* where the intention is to make the body of others similar to a manikin to possess and manipulate to the extreme of the alteration of its features and sexual attributes through surgery. This is a common procedure in fashion where it is necessary to “go to the mechanician”, as the models in *The Neon Demon* say, because “plastic needs maintenance”. Such actions are perverted and conceal the patient’s identity as well as his own existence, as it happens to Vicente/Vera through Robert; Merde, the character in *Holy Motors* who is between Pluto and Pan, kidnaps the actress Mendes while she is posing in a fashion photo shoot and takes her to the *underworld* of Paris to force her to display the garment designed by Carax’s monster and to be the object of his perversions; and in *The Neon Demon* Jesse, the haute couture model, is the victim of a cannibalistic act carried out by three colleagues, Ruby, Gigi and Sarah, who transform her body and

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her blood in food for the fashion system regeneration and consider corpses as sexual objects—just think of the necrophiliac scene in the morgue where Ruby masturbates on the dead body of a woman.

In the five quoted films there is a common thread that reaches its final point in *The Neon Demon*. In the coils of this thread Benjamin’s consideration takes to extremes Simmel’s analysis according to which fashion ‘oppress things externally’

The sense of ‘dominion over things’ and the twofold fascination towards transitoriness and novelty treated by Simmel is clear, while Benjamin’s thought remains obscure and therefore Winding Refn’s film is cryptic and, as said earlier, seems to translate in imagines what the German thinker wrote.

In order to better understand Simmel’s radicalism proposed by Benjamin and turned into images by Winding Refn and, even if with less excessive terms, by Antonioni, Almodóvar and Carax, it is necessary to explain the connection between *mottled corpse* with fashion, putrefaction and fashion system.

It is Benjamin to suggest the path to take in order to elicit the clear sense of his words when he quotes in the epigraph opening his chapter on fashion a passage from *Operette morali* by Leopardi, that is the first sentence of *Dialogue between Fashion and Death*:

> “Madam Death! Madam Death!”

This dialogue clearly expresses the tight connection between fashion and death. Indeed the two realities, that are anthropomorphic subjects in Leopardi’s fantasy, are linked by a sisterhood relationship: “I am Fashion, your sister” Death is told, “the two of us were born from transitoriness”. They share the same blood and were born from the lap of fleetingness—fashion, just like death, is the expression of “despair that nothing lasts”, as Baudrillard writes. Simmel observes that this characteristic is not an element that downgrades but that “gives fashion further charm”.

Both Death and Fashion cancel history—Death confesses that she is “capital enemy of memory” and are projected to the disappearance of the present datum, for the future cancellation of the future objective, in a never-ceasing search for renovation—a race forward that does not allow either of them to stay still. “If we had to compete in the Palio”, Fashion says, “I can’t tell who would win the race because if you run, I gallop faster; and if we had to stay still, if you faint, I pine. Therefore we go on running, thus, as you say, we will talk about our cases”.

This aspect is highlighted by Simmel who writes “fashion is at the same time being and non-being, it is always the watershed between past and future” and, even though he points out that fashion “gives a sense of present, so strong that it overcomes any other phenomenon”, he also makes clear that every fashionable element “will fade away with the same rapidity with which it establishes itself”.

For this reason Fashion and Death “both aim at undoing and constantly change things down here”, Leopardi writes, thus underlining how the ways to achieve the objective of undoing and renovating seem different only at a first glance. From the very be-

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beginning Death, in fact, calls on “people and blood”, while Fashion “settles with beards, hair, clothes, household goods, buildings and such things”\textsuperscript{9}. This apparently different course is actually very similar, so much so that the routes join. It is Fashion itself that declares this to her sister Death:

> it is true that I have not failed to play, and keep playing, games comparable to yours, such as piercing ears, lips and noses and tearing them with trifles through holes; burning flesh with hot molds I create for them to imprint their skin for beauty; I spoil children’s heads with bands and other devices establishing the custom of a particular hairstyle as I did in America and Asia; I ruin people with small footwear; I leave ladies breathless with incredibly tight corsets and one hundred other things of this kind. Generally speaking, I persuade and force kind human beings to bear every day one thousand fatigues and one thousand discomforts, often pains and torments as well. I force some to die gloriously in the name of their love for me.

The two sisters’ routes interweave so much that when Death asks Fashion for support to achieve its natural objective more easily, Fashion answers that especially in the latest period, or rather starting from the beginning of “modern life” characterized by an “impatient rhythm”, as Simmel writes\textsuperscript{10},

> in your favour, I have left behind and forgotten the fatigue and the exercises that improve physical well-being and I have introduced and valued others that weaken the body in thousands of ways and shorten life. Beyond this, I have introduced into the world such orders and such customs that life is more dead than alive, so much so that this century can be genuinely considered the century of death\textsuperscript{11}.

Fashion imposing itself in modern society aims therefore to install death in life and to direct pleasure towards death, or even more so, to connote pleasure with death instances, so much that thanks to Fashion “anybody with intelligence will praise and value you and love you so deeply that they always call you and look at you just like they look at their major hope”, as Leopardi writes, thus indicating a link that Fashion establishes between life and death and shows how the attention focuses not on the dialectic woman-goods, but on the dialectic pleasure-corpse.

It is a pleasure that can only become perversion, not only because it implies a body alteration that brings about discomforts, suffering and unnaturalness – the piercing of ears, lips and noses; burning flesh; spoiling heads and feet are only a few of the examples presented by Fashion – but also because accepting death inside life leads to the expression of the impulses that are contrary to what Freud called the reality principle and are in favour of the pleasure principle instead. The latter, as Marcuse says, is characterized by Eros and Thanatos instincts which contain a powerful “destructive force that culture cannot grant” as it is an expression of the reality principle\textsuperscript{12}. Through the reality principle in fact “man learns how to give up a momentary pleasure that is uncertain and destructive, in favour of a pleasure that is subject to constraints and delayed but it is certain”. Fashion cannot avoid the confrontation with the reality principle thus suppressing

\textsuperscript{9} Leopardi, Dialogo della Moda e della Morte, 22-26.
\textsuperscript{10} Simmel, Fashion, 197-206.
\textsuperscript{11} Leopardi, Dialogo della Moda e della Morte, 22-26.
the forces of Eros and Thanatos but the dialectic pleasure-corpse, highlighted by Benjamin, will always urge fashion to fully express the destructive forces that it hides and sublimates.

3. THE DESTRUCTIVE FORCES AND THE PLEASURE

This is the reason why fashion offers pleasures linked to perversion – firstly because it hides forces aiming at destruction, excess, at the objectivation of the other, its commodification, its possession, as we have seen in the five mentioned films. These forces aim to turn the body into a corpse to contemplate and enjoy; they are the manifestation of the “perversion” as indicated by Freud, that is the free outlet of the most secret, irrational instincts. Secondly, such instincts cannot manifest openly, therefore they must find expressions that are partially satisfactory, that represent a “compromise”, a “renunciation of the complete satisfaction of needs”, and in this case they generate perversions where pleasure is expressed as repressed, suffocated, distorted and it flows into attitudes that are uncommon.

The Freudian perversion, that is the opposite of the neurosis originating from repression and suppression, is evident in Merde, the character in Holy Motors. His breaking into the world of fashion and his proposing some of its practices show that Carax’s monstrous character feels affinity with fashion and that he perceives they move on the same wavelength so he feels free to objectify Mendes, to dress her up as he wishes, to possess her as he prefers.

At the end of The Neon Demon, the free expression of perversions within the fashion world violently bursts out when the three female protagonist decide to kill, eat Jesse and dive into her blood. They feel free to let out, in the intimacy of their private lives, of everything they have kept repressed and simulated in the fashion world – simulation and sublimation become real and the fake blood that covers Jesse’s body at the beginning of the film during the creation of a photo book becomes real blood where to plunge and renovate. Something similar happens in the movie The Skin I Live In where the plastic surgeon Robert can fully express his objectification instinct and his need for the substantial alteration of somebody else’s body, to the extent of changing his victim’s sex. He transforms in fact the kidnapped boy Vincente into the girl Vera in order to segregate her in a room, to spy on her and eventually try to possess her.

The perversion intended as a suffocated unconscious desire is apparent in the movies Blow-Up and Kika where fashion is given the task to sublimate the irrational, wild instincts within man’s Id. When Marcuse explains Freud’s theory, he writes that “Id is free from the forms and the principles constituting the social, conscious individual, it does not know either values, good, evil, or morality. He is not inclined to self-preservation and only fights for the satisfaction of his instinctive needs according to the pleasure principle”.

Both types of perversions live in and feed fashion, that is why Benjamin underlines how “in every fashion some perversions are virtually present, in the most shameless manner”13. The perversions that result from the contrasting relationship between death and life, reason and instinct, pleasure principle and reality principle express a conflict. Fashion, as Benjamin observes, “is a link between living body and inorganic world and

13 Benjamin, Fashion, 68-81.
claims rights for the corpse”, therefore it can only become the symbol of conflict and perversion.

Baudrillard clearly expresses these aspects in his essay *Symbolic Exchange and Death* when he observes that fashion imposes “the break with an imaginary order”, an order that is often undermined and reversed. It is through such reversal that we can “enjoy the dismantlement of reason, the settlement of sense”\(^{14}\), “the corruption of the rationality that it implies”.

Fashion, being the expression of the irrational impulses of the Id, comes into conflict with the rational Ego and becomes the spokesman of the *dismantlement of reason* indicated by Baudrillard. This abandonment to instinct implies a reduction of critical awareness. As Simmel observes, fashion takes concrete form in the aspect of mass action and every individual taking such action shows behaviours and “takes part in countless actions that would awake in him invincible resistances if he were to take them on his own”\(^{15}\). Such phenomenon occurs not only because “mass actions are characterized by the loss of the sense of shame”, but also because “the sense of responsibility is suppressed”, as it happens “among those ones who take part in mass murders. Each of them would withdraw from the action if they were to take it by themselves”.

Simmel’s association between mass murder and the behaviour urged by fashion impulses clearly expresses what Baudrillard eventually points out when he stresses how fashion can be considered a form of perversion opposed to rationality. It is so irrational that “finds frivolity in death”\(^{16}\), it expresses in pleasant, elegant, joyful terms *the despair that nothing lasts*: this despair can be simple like the awareness of fashion evanescence or it can be the deeper awareness that acknowledges in fashion the metaphor of transience of the things destined to death and disappearance.

Caducity, despair, perversion are ever-recurring elements and are fundamental to the treatment of the phenomenon of fashion; they explain the reasons why Benjamin holds that fashion is connected to the *mottled corpse*.

Baudrillard himself observes that “the desire for death is recycled by fashion” and he adds that fashion has the ability to void that desire of “any subversive ghost and involves it, like all other things, in its inoffensive revolutions”.

Is it really so *innocuous* the desire for death that fashion accommodates? Is it really void of any subversive *ghost*? Authors like Winding Refn, Almodóvar and Carax do not agree with this idea and neither does Antonioni who in *Blow-Up* matches photos of a murder to fashion photos of the bodies of young models. It is also true, as Leopardi writes, that death “addresses to people and blood from the very beginning” just like fashion is oriented to *people* and *blood* because they are two elements implicit in fashion and two objectives fashion aims at.

The films examined, along with Leopardi’s, Simmel’s and Baudrillard’s analyses, help us understand the *recycling* of the desire for death carried out by fashion and its orientation to *people* and their *blood* through the simplifying representation in images. This made possible to throw light on the deep, far-sighted, and at times cryptic, analysis by Benjamin and by Winding Refn. It is now clear that fashion is a *bitter whispered dialogue with putrefaction* because the caducity of living beings is the essence of its world and because *the despair that nothing lasts* is the expression of the restless dynamic of fashion.

Bataille provides a further understanding of the aspects indicated by Benjamin when he highlights how the elements in the five films analysed, that is violence, beauty profanation, murder, and cannibalism, are all expression of the principle of dépense (expenditure) that includes fashion as well. The French philosopher in fact denominates dépense phenomena such as “luxury, bereavement, wars, cults, the construction of shrines, games, shows, arts, perverted sexual activity (or rather deviated by the genital end)”\(^17\). In such phenomena the emphasis is put on “the loss that must be the greatest possible so that the activity acquires meaning”.

In these terms, it becomes clear that fashion can be included in the dynamic of the dépense principle as it is characterized by excess and the loss of excess which create a never-ceasing continuum of new models which are destined to fade away as soon as they appear; they are abandoned for the new that has to come in a vicious circle of endless dilapidation. It should be added as well the continuous waste of the “immense material value” of fashion products, whose abandonment emphasizes the squandering feature of the phenomenon.

This unproductive and irrational waste in fashion cannot be explained through the concept of “necessity”, however it can be explained through the concept of pleasure – a pleasure regarding “ostentatious loss”. This is to show that in every form of life there is a force, a “pressure”, aiming at the destruction of the “surplus of energy”, and it is this pressure that leads to an “inevitable loss” that is considered a means to achieve “pleasure” and not “utility”.

**Potlatch**, a ceremonial feast among certain Native American peoples celebrated during periods of important change due to “accession, marriage or funeral”, as Mauss\(^18\) analysed, involves this peculiar dynamic of pleasure and dissipation, as it happens in fashion. During a potlatch in fact remarkable wealth is exchanged as gift – such dynamic of giving and receiving can be even more radical, as Bataille explains, by means of a “spectacular destruction of wealth”\(^19\) that leads to human sacrifice.

“In recent times – the French philosopher writes – a Tlingit chief would come forward into the presence of his rival in order to slaughter some of his slaves in front of him”: this is because the gift given to the “rival” must be considered “a loss and a partial destruction as well”. In this way the “desire to destroy is partially passed on to the donee”.

The sacrifice, led to by the potlatch, reveals itself to be the peak of a desire for dissipation, destruction of goods, of the dépense that resides in us and believes, as Bataille observes, that “of all conceivable luxuries, death is certainly the most costly in its fatal and inexorable form”; therefore it is the most longed for and sought-after. A part of us aims at the death of the other – it is the part defined by dépense, that lives according to the impulses of the *pleasure principle* and that Bataille defines as cursed part.

“Being scared, withdrawing from a squandering impulse that animates us, or rather that is us” writes Bataille, “cannot surprise us”; it creates a “cursed atmosphere” that provokes “anguish”. It is not a coincidence that an aura of “damned soul” and “anguished” surrounds the protagonists of the quoted films by Antonioni, Almodóvar and Carax. All of them express their distress by relating to fashion and through fashion they


search for forms of violence and profanation that could be tolerated by society. All the forms sublimate what the three ladies in Winding Refn’s film will carry out completely – that is to say the murder and cannibalization of Jesse and, above all, her sacrifice in order to realize the highest degree of dilapidation. Sacrificing Jesse’s virginal body at its utmost beauty, when it is “a diamond in a sea of glass” as said by the fashion designer in the film, is a wild and monstrous act that is precisely described by Bataille in his Theory of Religion:

human sacrifice is the climax of a contrast opposing an inconceivably violent movement to the real order and to duration. It is the most radical protest against the supremacy of utility. At the same time it is the highest degree of the outbreak of internal violence.

The three ladies represented by Winding Refn freely express limitations, repressions and the impulses dominating and animating fashion without any regrets. Fashion is therefore an expression of the accursed part of man, of the dépense principle and of the pleasure principle. They reach the climax of the dialectic between pleasure and corpse when they make a human sacrifice which represents the most radical form of violence, as Bataille writes. The “demon” of Fashion dominates Ruby, Gigi and Sarah without compromise, without waiver, without repression. Jesse is possessed as well. When she understands the power she has gained in the fashion system through her beauty, she realizes how “dangerous” it is. As she confesses to Ruby herself, her accession into the world of fashion after her first exhibition on the catwalk has transformed her “into the poison that intoxicates everybody else” – as Winding Refn says – because her face has been shown under the halo of the Neon Demon.

This transformation and evil possession, although in a milder form, can be found in Thomas – Blow-Up, Ramon – Kika, Robert – The Skin I Live In, Merde – Holy Motors.

4. CONCLUSION

What emerges is that fashion is the simulation of a sacrifice, a parody of murder, of cannibalization. It is the parody of the culmination aimed at by the neon demon, the cursed part, the dépense, the pleasure principle, the sisters Fashion and Death. In fashion rites, the violent act of dissipation and of potlatch echo, even if there is a substantial difference pointed out by Baudrillard that is “the ostentation of signs never has, in the primitive order, an aesthetic effect”. Conversely, what we enjoy and create can be considered a “feast”, “the aesthetics of transgression”, “an aesthetic revisiting of the potlatch”.

In fashion, violence and the radical dissipation remain locked in the apparent order of the aesthetic simulation and sublimation. We cannot know to what extent the cursed force can escape from the fashion world and become real; we can only get an idea thanks to the authors of films and essays who focused their attention on fashion in order to offer an interpretation, a foresight, a vision where pleasure dialogues with the corpse, Death dialogues with Fashion, in a dialectic where simulation increasingly gives way to raw irrational instincts.