

I found myself inside her fur...

© Catherine Harper, 2008

A final version of this text was published in the Skin Special Issue (editor: Caryn Simonson) of Textile: the Journal of Cloth and Culture 6:3, Autumn 2008, pp.300-314.

An earlier, shorter version of the paper was published in selvedge magazine (2005), and a paper based on it was presented at the 11th International foundation of Fashion and Technology Institutes (IFFTI) conference, London College of Fashion, April 2009. This essay has been developed as a chapter for Catherine Harper's second book Fabrics of Design (Berg, 2010).

For the wild beasts, their 'snuff' moment is the trap's slamming shriek, blood-red whip-lashed etching, shuddering on virgin snow, until the orgasmic arching stops and stiffens. Raccoon, beaver, bear, fox, lynx, mink, otter, wolf, ermine – such exquisite beauty renders the excruciating pain somehow poetic...

For the farmed creatures, their sacrificial 'snuff' is the sanity-shattering cage-slam, incarceration breeding intolerable distress: repeated baying, pacing, twitching until the petit mort of anal/vaginal electrocution, of asphyxiation or poisoning, of pressing, strangling, stamping, bludgeoning, or the heightened ecstasy of being skinned alive...

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'. Snuff, as a verb, means to extinguish, douse, smother, choke, blow out, quench, and it is used informally as replacement for 'kill' (first coined in Ed Sander's *The Family*, based on Charles Manson's story, the word was employed subsequently in the Findlay partners' commercial film *Snuff*, released in 1976 shortly after the US confiscation of several South American underground films containing footage of women apparently killed on camera and during climactic sexual action). Such 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 fabric manages to perform this oscillation between the disclaimer of the fur fetishist and the de-fetishized knowingness of the fur sadist, corrupting both in its insinuation that the deep and complex perversion of Western fur appreciation – certainly post-1980s PETA – 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 stroke of soft pelt passing across one's skin, 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 what Linda Williams calls in relation to hard-core pornography "the perverse substitute of death spasm for pleasure spasm: the replacement of orgasm's 'little death' by real death" (Williams 1990:192). My contention is that 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 the best of micro fibres nothing other than a poor and sterile substitute for the 'real snuff'.

The anti-fur campaigns of the 1980s and since have left Western consumers in no doubt as to where fur comes from, how it is obtained, who consumes it, and what the dishonourable cultural penalty might be of wearing it (Emberley 1998:21-42; Quan 1998:1; Hoffmann 2006). The environmental, social and trans-cultural, economic, gender-related, post-colonial and neo-imperialist aspects of fur production, trade and consumption are not the focus of this paper, and they are amply covered elsewhere. It is not necessary here, for example, to review the English 'sumptuary laws' of the fourteenth to early seventeenth century, their restriction on all kinds of perceived excess including the wearing of fur apparel (by those of lesser social rank than the higher nobility), and their functions to preserve class distinction and privileged social order, regulate luxury and extravagance for moral purpose, and to encourage frugality and industry in the lower classes to support those in the upper classes (Emberley

1998:8-9,43-44). Nevertheless, the tension between hedonism and restraint (Baldwin 1926:10 in Emberley 1998:44), or critique versus practice of excess (Bourdieu 1984: 24), illuminated by these laws in some way previews the pro-fur and anti-fur rhetorics of the late twentieth century wherein fur fashionistas accused the anti-fur lobby of "self-righteousness and ecological Puritanism" (Bolton 2005:68; Quan 1998:2), while the anti-fur lobby counter-charged fur advocacy as decadent and selfish to the point of wilful cruelty and ecological destruction (Nadeau 2001:177). Specifically, it is what Emberley calls fur's role as both a "libidinal fetish" and a "complex sign of political, poetic and ... erotic power" (1998:4) that is central to this paper's argument. In these words, fur's dynamic magic is captured, and its potency as a sexual signifier of great intricacy is established. 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 (fetishism on one hand, sadism on the other) of fur 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. As such, it echoes the intensity of the slow coital strangulation of Kichi by the phallic female Sada in Oshima's film *In the Realm of the Senses* (1976). As there, that 'snuff' is followed by absolute possession – of the strength of that felt by the wearer for her fur – when Sada castrates Kichi (literally 'taking the phallus', but here death-marked) in what Williams calls "an expression of their mutual desires carried to the limits of life itself" (1990:221). She *owns* his 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 description of his 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...

(Mr Mockle, www.mrmockle.com, accessed 08.11.06).

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 and his like by its unique combination of tactile, olfactory and visual stimulation (Steele 1996:143). Encountering fur therefore in that sphere becomes a 'whole body' sensual experience, and fur's caress of the body – both how that privately feels to the wearer and how that outwardly looks to the viewer – encourages heightened sensation, and invites – symbolic or actual – erotic engagement (Hollander 1995:134). The private and preserved excitement of a fetishist results from refusal of the pelt's association with

death, loss, castration, even female genitalia: for the fur fetishist, fur's touch, sight and smell conjure a powerful sensual experience, but I maintain that 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 prompts a subtle shiver 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 this is key to its position as the primary fabric of desire. Nadeau (2001:8), for example, illuminates her own sensual and embodied fur-response as she "cannot help but seeing the feeling of the fur at the tips of [her] fingers ... cannot help but feeling the skin that is wearing the fur". Her words merge her with the animal that once was, revealing that it's about the purity of qualitative indulgence of personal desire, it's about the pleasurable excess of the sensual pelt-touch of purest foxy-fur on bare bold flesh. It's about gratifying the decadent itch of a want so sexy it's a rush, the breathy mouth-feel of the slink and glide of it, its oil-slick of sex... 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...

My grandmother wore four peeled pelts to her Presbyterian kirk.

The minks' beady glass eyes and their tiny hooked claws unnerved the child-me, but – through the childish terror that provokes the onset of sexual fetishism – I ached for the smooth sweep of their long, lustrous bodies, yearned for the lash of their perfect tail-whips, and burned for the imagined glamour of a God-fearing woman dripping furs. No foxy vixen she, no Diana, no Dionysian diva or Bacchanalian fur-clad nymph, no earthy Amazon: for my grandmother her minks signalled social solidity, a lucky marriage, and distance travelled from birth in a Belfast butcher's shop. A lover of animals, she hit men for hitting dogs, but neither she nor I – disavowing class-fetishists together – reflected the connection between suffering hounds and those four dead minks. My grandmother was no sex kitten: more a puritanical puppy, an Old Testament gal, for whom "the Lord God made coats of skins, and clothed [Adam and Eve]", concealing their shame (Genesis 111: 21). Hence, for her fur was modest and biblical, arguably symptomatic of her religion's smug operation of a notion of God-given leadership over lowly beasts. This staunch fur-clad matron was a world away

surely from the decadence of the Marquise de Fontenay, attending post-Revolution Opera clad only in the skins of tigers (Ewing 1981:100), entirely detached from Walter Chin's iconic model in *au naturel* Galliano fur and flesh-matching undergarments (Bolton 2005:74), light years from the Dalmatian-draped archetype of Cruella de Ville, a key player in fur's association with "human greed, extravagance, folly and even sin ... the epitome of ... depraved luxury" (Ewing 1981:26). Not my grandmother, surely? But the ties that bind these unlikely protagonists are there, and they are the real ties of mink tails, stiffened sinews, coagulated bloodied arteries. I can mobilise Konopnicki's question in relation to my grandmother's minks, "Am I an accomplice to murder by stroking the softness of animal fur with the tips of my fingers?" I can hear my inner conscience ask am I a sinner for the sexy stirrings the feel of those minks elicited from me. I can reflect on Konopnicki's answer: "I have no remorse and I refuse to renounce the shiver of a body wrapped in fur..." (1995:9 in Nadeau 2001:7).

Refusal combined with knowing: a potent combination.

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...

Oh sweetness, imagine suffering to death...

Oh my love, imagine your poor bleeding heart exposed for me...

Strike dear mistress and cure his heart (Velvet Underground *Venus in Furs* 1966).

But, look, that racoon – not you, my heart – was in China, and we're here together in the humane West. We don't believe in cruelty. We feel fur *can* be ethical. We're in liberal London, the capital of Great Britain, known throughout the world for fair play, fair game, the love of dogs, cats, foxes, and little children, and 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, honey, and stroke the fur together, honey...

Disavowal? Fetishist, 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 whose pacing up

and down in a fur farm cage beat out a rapid rhythm of despair, or sliced off some gibbering abject creature whose last meal was part of its own leg as it tries to gnaw its flesh and bone from the steel jaws of a leg-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'...

And – honey – as for those darned proliferating baby harp seals on the ice floes of Newfoundland ... damn their selfish fish-eating ways, honey...

Imagine being a fish-eating fashion victim.

Imagine wearing pure white baby fur.

Imagine being a Newfoundland boy-man, steeling yourself for that first penetration.

Imagine being a fur virgin.

Imagine *that* loss of innocence...

Imagine having a fur coat and no knickers.

Imagine being a turn-coat.

Imagine being Naomi and Cindy, infamously posing in PETA's '*I'd rather go naked than wear fur*' campaign, then popping on the second-hand coats of dead animals (Frankel 1997; McVeigh 1999, referring to Naomi Campbell and Cindy Crawford).

Once a fetishist...

Imagine being Claudia and Melissa similarly 'changing their spots' (Fur Information Council of America, referring to Claudia Schiffer and Melissa Etheridge).

Once a sadist...

Fur's ubiquity and versatility as seared, plucked, knitted and trimmed fabric as much as in swathes of the pure stuff, satisfies the 'snuff' enthusiasts as much as the lower-key Mockles. Kardasis opines that farmed fur "doesn't make this right, it just makes it the best we can do". Fur is, he asserts, "the first coverlet of your life" (Kardasis 2005: unpaginated), but his guilt-tripping validation of a primal infant attachment to the 'mother-fur' is excruciating (he truly is the knowing-disavowing fetishist), and so far away from sexy sassy Kate Moss' promenade of her fatal-foetal attraction in velvety dove grey broadtail, baby-wrinkled and severed straight from Mummy. *That*, is the sexy fetishist, never mind whether it's the 'best we can do'...

Imagine fur-lined fetish-knickers, Ms Moss

Imagine giving a damn...

Fur farm footage shows cage-mad, stress-crazy foxes pacing, ducking, twitching, while excrement and filth builds up in layers below them; racoons incarcerated without cover or heating, but with the infected and cannibalised carcasses of their cage mates for company; a vixen with bone exposed in 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, infected creature, putting paid to the argument that if caged fur animals weren't treated well, the fur would be poor.

Let's *disavow*... sit back and enjoy the movie.

Imagine it's important that they aren't treated well (damn their verminous fish-eating ways...); imagine it's important that we don't think about it.

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). This is the complexity and charge of fur, more potent than any other fabric.

A dog fox involuntarily bites on a metal pole as an electrically charged steel rod is pushed upward deep into his rectum. The fox violently arches his back in orgasmic ecstasy, his insides fry, his teeth shatter, his heart slowly ruptures, he painstakingly 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 (phew...), will provide a full pelt and a sublime bodily experience for its wearer. This is what Stella McCartney describes as "immeasurable suffering", but – somehow, sweetheart, it's because I'm worth it.

Imagine suffering immeasurably...

Imagine suffering deliciously...

Imagine lying naked in a cold space, while a thick and heavy blanket of finest dog-foxy fur is slowly drawn up over each inch of your charged, enlivened body, your nipples like bullets, your clitoris rock hard (you bad phallic female fetishist, you), your

heart racing, your pulse beating, your breath heavy and low...

Remember, dog fox, your fur equals sex, and more than one kind of sex. If it's not the controlled pleasure of a spike-heeled, sheath-skinned, skin-sheathed dominatrix, it's J-Lo's blinged-up, sexy, sharp, street 'ho', or Beyoncé's hypnotising ass-shakin' ghetto-queen. It's Liz Hurley's sophisticated quintessentially English classic-fur charm, or Lizzie Jagger's hot-red foxy *femme fatale*. It's kitten-heeled, kitten-soft, Monroe-kittenish kitten-kitsch or it's four minks on a puritan's shoulder... Yes, Quan, you're right when you note that 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" (Quan 1998:2), and yes, Lurie, you're close to the essence when you state that "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" (Lurie 1992:256). But note please Williams' arguing of 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 provides a useful focus for reflection on 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 a 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). Such association is apparent in visual practice: Oppenheim's dainty *Breakfast in Fur* (1933) invites erotic domestic oral consumption; Helen Chadwick's *I Thee Wed* (1993) encircles phallic vegetable forms in furry rings; Linda Dement's *In my Gash* (1995) explores the artist's corporeal aggression, fleshly desire and destructive fantasies in vulval digital fur imagery. Jana Sterbak's pungent *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic* (1987) may be closer to the real picture. 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 film *Performance* (1970, UK, directed by Donald Cammell and Nicolas Roeg) 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 and da Cruz 2005:117), muff (Lurie 1992:234; Bolton 2005:72), beaver (Nadeau 2001:12), meat (Adams 1990), and just as 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)

Angela Carter takes us further and darker, linking – in 'cunning lingua' – the intensely oral aspect of female genitalia to the skinning of fur production and a form of erotic skinned rebirth as "each stroke of his tongue ripped off skin after successive skin ... and left behind a nascent patina of shining hairs" (Carter 1979:75). So, as Quan notes, "Fur had a bad reputation before PETA tried to give it one" (1998:1), and in more general terms associations with selling, or at least trading, sex and the achievement of fur ownership are strong. Filmic representations of the prostitute (or equivalent) and her fur are many: in Pabst's *The Joyless Street* (1925), Garbo's fur coat "functions as a soft currency of libidinal exchange" (Emberley: 1998:4), while in Mann's *Butterfield 8* (1960), Taylor's fur coat informs the viewer of her character's sexual and moral degeneracy. The excessive consumption of fur by the current 'celebrity nobility' is notable, and echoes the sex-charge and power-potency of these relations. Liebovitz's *American Vogue* image of P. Diddy Combs' emergence 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 showcases Combs as one of the fur-clad aristocrats of the new Golden Age of Glamour (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 sub-text relationship – wealthy male and fur-clad mistress; whore and pimp; cultured and animalistic; sadist and fetishist; black man and white woman – is linked to the archetypal iconography of fur particularly since the

earlier twentieth century. Bolton (2005:53) mines fur's other association of "virility, machismo, and, ultimately, male dominance" via its "espousal and acquisition by pimps", referencing Tracy Funches' *Virgo Couple* photograph (1998 from the *PIMPNOISIS* series, 1995-2001) in which a naked black woman clings to her pimp who is head to heel in white fur, diamonds and chain, bespoke suit and fur trilby. Bolton describes the fur's role in mediating the relationship between possessor and possessed asserting that the "mink coat...along with a Cadillac or Rolls Royce, is a pimp's most palpable display of economic and sexual supremacy" (2005:53). Hot and heady 'snuff'...

The pimp-whore power dynamic manifests also in the role of the fur in the clothed and unclothed gendered body scenario. Skov (2005:21) picks up on fur's contested role in navigating between historicised notions of individual personality expression through clothing and societal fears of "showing too much", thereby "giving off signs of a sexuality at odds with the dominant perception of feminine morality". Skov argues that tension was resolved by the layering possible in adoption of the fur coat, which allowed a "new sexual layer to the dressed appearance" which has then focused fur explicitly on the body underneath, whether dressed or not (Skov 2005, citing Sennett, 1992: 188-9). This layering is essentially played out as a key theme in the iconic narrative of von Sacher-Masoch's *Venus in Furs* (originally published in 1870). Protagonist Wanda, in "Ermine furs [that] adorn the imperious" (*Velvet Underground Venus in Furs* 1966) cruelly and sadistically dominates the story's male character. Key to reading her fur, we are compelled to understand that she is physically and emotionally icy, and it is the interface between her marble skin and the warm furs that mobilise the sexual exchange between Wanda 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. The cruel coldness of Wanda informs a range of scenarios from that of the trophy huntress (Lurie 1992:233) to the animalistic primitive, from that of pretenders to being "a very expensive animal" (Lurie 1992:232) to the versatile and brittle heroine-villainesses of 1940s *film noir* who "dripped furs over their severe

tailor-mades ... backless, slinky dresses ... trenchcoats..." (Wilson 2003:143-144), from New Yorker fur panache and "unrepentant, brash display" to Knightsbridge furs' "badge of class" (Wilson 2003: 140), and from the 'foxy lady' of David Garnett's *Lady into Fox* novel (1922) to Bell-Price's "sartorial barbarism" (2005:20,31).

Imagine being barbaric...

Ed Gein (1906-1984) peeled his murder victims and exhumed corpses for the same purpose, fashioning a 'woman suit' in the USA of the late 1950s. His peelings informed the fictional 'Buffalo Bill' Jame Gumb who starved and removed the skin of his victims to similarly construct a garment in Jonathan Demme's film *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)?

Writing of hard-core SM and 'snuff' porn, 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 can never see but always seeks. 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
(Williams 1990:194).

Does a fur then allow us collective access to a moving experience, a body death, an orgasmic climax, that is 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? I think here of da Cruz's relation of how the quivering bristle of fur's texture signifies its connection to "animals aroused by passion or aggression... [and] ...sexual gentility and ferocity" (2005:166). That arousal conjures the (detachable) phallus, and Williams reminds us that Andrea Dworkin (1987:63) defined "all sexual acts involving heterosexual penetration as real or symbolic aggression and thus as sadism" (Williams 1990:195). The sexualised 'penetration' of the fur-bearing animal via the teeth of traps, through shock-inducing 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 peeled alive, enacts Kaja Silverman's (1988:31 in Williams 1990:195) 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 (Williams 1990:188).

So, if normatively "Abject terror [is] gendered feminine" (Clover 1987:212, referenced in Williams 1990:207), 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?

Imagine wearing a fur phallus...

In the ineffectual high camp of fashion speak, Valerie Steele asserts "designers today are increasingly channelling the spirit of warrior women, with female modernity concerned with a fashion discourse of silk and steel" (Steele 2006:1). In this language, fur operates specifically to conjure the intimacy, nakedness and sensuality of lingerie while simultaneously activating hard protection and powerful discipline. By doing so, fashion's female protagonist is situated as a delicate man-eater or femme fatale, a "conceptual fusion of woman and beast" however other she appears (da Cruz 2005:145). As Medusa, Siren, spider-woman, 'black widow', eroticised death, as the animalistic and ferocious Irena of *Cat People* (1982), the feral savage, or Bell-Price's "ancient Amazon, the voluptuous virago and divine huntress" (2005:13), 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. This is acknowledged repeatedly:

The fur-bearing woman, as a class unto herself, collectively comes to figure as a cold and cruel monstrosity, an accessory to the crime who would wear her capacity for terror and violence on her sleeve (Emberley 1998:25)

But darker again, Bell-Price and da Cruz reference pagan animism, witchery, "psychic felineism", and folkloric antiquity (2005:117) in relation for fur-wearing females, citing the Bacchantes' "infamous unbridled frenzy ... murderous savagery ... frolicking with animals or wearing their skins ..." (2005:130). Such excess becomes fur, with its threat of extinction, its insatiable appetite, and its interconnectedness to death.

The ravenous *femme fatale* is never more present, however, than with the unborn karakul lambs of Central Asia whose unformed fur makes astrakhan (also known as broadtail or Persian wool). As modelled by Madonna, this finest of fur requires firm

pressure on the ewe's stomach or a quick slash to her throat, aborting her young up to thirty days before they are due without any death marking of the foetal-soft, curly-cute and terror-tender skin (Haven 2002). The "cruellest and most vicious fur" (Croft 2005) is available from Lagerfeld, Fendi, Prada, Dolce & Gabbana and others. Nadeau asserts "fur *per se* has no value without the raw materiality of skin, and the constant rearticulation and sexualized negotiation between skin and pelts, between the apparent mobility of the body and the aberrant stillness of fur..." (2001:17). The moment of 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'...

Death-marks on the fur represent the key to this essay. For some of the consumers – lovers, for that is the potency of the engagement – of fur I argue that the (symbolic) visibility of those death marks is vital to their appreciation of their fur. These are the fur sadists, for whom terror, death, pain and abject suffering inform the fur they wear, inflect their enjoyment of it, and allows their dominion over the animals and their potency, phallic of otherwise, to be part of the enactment of their pleasure. I have traced and exemplified those who are steeped in this aspect of fur's particularity and pleasure. And I have asserted that this form of fur-loving is close in essence to the extreme enjoyment of the real death action of ultimate 'snuff'.

This is not the whole story, however, and there is no question that fur's position as the ultimate fabric of desire is assured by a more complex and dynamic set of meaning and articulations. For others who love fur the need to disavow its 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.

But this too is not the whole story.

I believe that fur is an extraordinary phenomenon in fashion in this time in human cultural history. It 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. This essay merely maps the field of fur-love, proposing that it is impossible not to see the death-marks, and suggesting that the differences between the perverse positions of fur-lovers lie only in whether they choose to directly view or perform the heat of the 'snuff' or to delicately slide their eyes away to linger on the cooled pelt.

Bibliography

Adams, C. (1990) *The Sexual Politics of Meat*. New York: Continuum

Anon. (1999) *Jungle stuff*. *The Economist*, 7 August

Anon. (1998) *Standard Guidelines for the Operation of Chinchilla Ranches*. Ontario Ministry of Agriculture and Food, March

Arnold, R. (2001) *Fashion, Desire and Anxiety: Image and Mortality in the 20th Century*. London: I.B. Taurus

Baldwin, F.E. (1926) *Sumptuary Legislation and Personal Regulation in England*. Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science 44, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press

Bataille, G. (1986, first published 1957) *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality*. San Francisco: City Lights Books

Bell-Price, S. (2005) *Call of the Wild* in Bolton, A. *Wild: Fashion Untamed*. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Yale University Press: New Haven and London, pp.12-41

Bell-Price, S., da Cruz, E. (2005) *Tigress* in Bolton, A. *Wild: Fashion Untamed*. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Yale University Press: New Haven and London, pp.116-143

Bolton, A. (2005) *Introduction; The Lion's Share and Birds of Paradise* in Bolton, A. *Wild: Fashion Untamed*. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Yale University Press: New Haven and London, pp.11; 42-79 and 80-115

Bourdieu, P. (1984) trans. Nice, R. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press

Carter, A. (2006, first published 1979) *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*. London: Vintage Book

Clover, C. (1987) *Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film*. *Representations*, University of California Press, Fall 1987, 20:187-228

http://www.representations.org/topic_body.php (accessed 1 March 2008)

Croft, C. (2005) *Aborted lambs are new fashion victims*. The Sunday Times Style Magazine, 6 March www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/article420528.ece

da Cruz, E. (2005) *Man-Eater* in Bolton, A. *Wild: Fashion Untamed*. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Yale University Press: New Haven and London, pp.144-175

Dworkin, A. (1987) *Intercourse*. London: Secker & Warburg

Entwistle, J. (2000) *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress and Modern Social Theory*. Cambridge: Polity Press

Emberley, J.V. (1979) *The Cultural Politics of Fur*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press

Emberley, J.V. (1998) *Venus and Furs: the cultural politics of fur* London: I.B. Tauris and Co. Ltd

Ewing, E. (1981) *Fur in Dress*. London: B.T. Batsford

Federman, R. (2001) *Aunt Rachel's Fur*. Normal Tallahassee: FC2

Frankel, S. (1997) *Fur's big comeback snares supermodel: objections to pelts may be just skin deep*. The Guardian, 8 March

Freud, S. (1995) trans., edited, introduced Brill, A.A. *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud (Psychopathology of Everyday Life, the Interpretation of Dreams, and Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex)*. New York: Random House

Garnett, D. (1922) *Lady into Fox*. Authorhouse

Hamlyn, A. (2003) *Freud, Fabric, Fetish*. Textile: the Journal of Cloth and Culture, 1:1:9-27

Harper, C. (2005) *Pelting Down*. Selvedge magazine 8:(Nov/Dec):20-21

Haven, P. (2002) *Karzai's Hat Made From Lamb Fetus*. Associated Press, 23 April

Hoffmann, M. (2006) *It's a battle of trapper tradition vs. animal protection*. Milwaukee Journal Sentinel online, 2 April www.jsonline.com/story/index.aspx?id=411446 (accessed 20 October 2006)

Hollander, A. (1995) *Sex and Suits: The Evolution of Modern Dress*. New York: Kodansha International

Silverman, K. (1988) *Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema (Theories of Representation and Difference)*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press

Kardasis, B. 2005, telephone interview with author

Konopnicki, S. (1995) *Eloge de la fourrure: petit traité du poil lustré*. Paris: Seuil

Lurie, A. *The Language of Clothes*. London: Bloomsbury

- McVeigh, T. (1999) *Naomi on the catwalk, looking sheepish in wolf's clothing*. Express, 18 February
- Municchi, A. (1992) *Ladies in Fur 1900-1940*. Modena, Italy: Zanfi
- Nadeau, C. (2001) *Fur Nation: From the Beaver to Brigitte Bardot*. London: Routledge
- North, R.D. (1999) *Fur and Freedom: a defence of the fur trade*. December (British Fur Trade Association) <http://www.richarddnorth.com/books/downloads/F4Fweb.htm>
- Quan, T. (1998) *Pretty in Mink*. www.salon.com/feature/1998/05/cov_26_feature.html 26 May (accessed 17 November 2006)
- Sanders, E. (2002) *The Family*. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press
- Sennett, R. (1992, first published 1976) *The Fall of Public Man*. New York: Norton
- Skov, L. (2005) *The Return of the Fur Coat: a Commodity Chain Perspective*. Current Sociology 53:1:(January):9-32
- Steele, V. (1996) *Fetish: Fashion, Sex and Power*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Steele, V. (2006) *Love and War: The Weaponized Woman*. New York: Museum at FIT
- Veterinary Medical Association (2001) *Panel on Euthanasia Report 2000*, Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association 218:669-696
- von Sacher-Masoch, L. 1989. *Venus in Furs*. New York: Zone Books
- Williams, L. (1990) *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the 'Frenzy of the Visible'*. London: Pandora Press
- Wilson, E. (2003) *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity*. London: I.B. Taurus

Websites

- British Fur Trade Association www.britishfur.co.uk
- Fur is Dead www.FurisDead.com (www.furisdead.com/feat/ChineseFurFarms ; www.furisdead.com/feat-burberry.asp)
- Fur Free Alliance www.infurformation.com
- Fur Information Council of America www.fur.org
- International Fur Trade Federation www.iftf.com
- Mr Mockle www.mrmockle.com
- People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals www.peta.org (www.JLowDown.com)

Films

- In the Realm of the Senses* (dir. N. Oshima, 1976).
- The Joyless Street* (dir. G.W. Pabst, 1925)
- Butterfield 8* (dir. D. Mann, 1960)
- Rebecca* (dir. A. Hitchcock, 1940)

Silence of the Lambs (dir. J. Demme, 1991)

Cat People (dir. P. Schrader, 1982)

Snuff (dir. M. and R. Findlay, 1976)

Miscellaneous

The Bible, Genesis 11: 21

Velvet Underground (1966) *Venus in Furs*