



Fetish: Fashion, Sex & Power

By Valerie Steele

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Kinky boots, corsets, underwear as outerwear, second-skin garments of rubber and leather, uniforms, body piercing.... Today everything from a fetishist's dream appears on the fashion runways. Although some people regard fetish fashion as exploitative and misogynistic, others interpret it as a positive Amazonian statement--couture Catwoman. But the connection between fashion and fetishism goes far beyond a few couture collections. For the past thirty years, the iconography of sexual fetishism has been increasingly assimilated into popular culture. Before Michelle Pfeiffer's Catwoman, there was Mrs. Peel, heroine of the 1960s television show "The Avengers," who wore a black leather catsuit modeled on a real fetish costume. Street styles like punk and the gay "leatherman" look also testify to the influence of fetishism.

The concept of fetishism has recently assumed a growing importance in critical thinking about the cultural construction of sexuality. Yet until now no scholar with an in-depth knowledge of fashion history has studied the actual clothing fetishes themselves. Nor has there been a serious exploration of the historical relationship between fashion and fetishism, although erotic styles have changed significantly and "sexual chic" has become increasingly conspicuous.

Cultural historian Valerie Steele has devoted much of her career to the study of the relationship between clothing and sexuality, and is uniquely qualified to write this book. Marshalling a dazzling array of evidence from pornography, psychology, and history, as well as interviews with individuals involved in sexual fetishism, sadomasochism, and cross-dressing, Steele illuminates the complex relationship between appearance and identity. Based on years of research, her book *Fetish: Fashion, Sex & Power* explains how a paradigm shift in attitudes toward sex and gender has given rise to the phenomenon of fetish fashion.

"Steele is to fetish dressing what Anne Rice is to vampires," writes Christa Worthington of *Elle* magazine, "the intellectual interpreter of...wishes beyond our ken." According to Steele, fetishism shows how human sexuality is never just a matter of doing what comes naturally; fantasy always plays an important role. Steele provides provocative answers to such questions as: Why is black regarded as the sexiest color? Is fetishizing the norm for males? Does fetish fashion reflect a fear of AIDS? And why do so many people love shoes?

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Because this is Valerie Steele's second book on the topic of fetishistic clothing, her opening statements that she is an outsider to the paraphilias and perversions that she discusses seems a bit hollow. When she says that she is only "a cultural historian specializing in fashion" there's no need to fear: while the book is rigorously researched and loaded with valuable bibliographic references to previous researchers in the area, it's apparent that underneath her cool prose Steele really gets a kick out of her subject, if only on an intellectual level. Dividing her book into sections based on the various fetishes (corsets, shoes, second-skin fabrics, underwear), Steele shows a remarkable facility with the history and trivia of each item of clothing. This produces some amusing juxtapositions, such as when she reveals little-known information about the Chinese practice of footbinding, and a page later presents a Tom of Finland picture of a nude man surrounded by motorcycle-booted feet. There are plenty of drawings and photographs here, ostensibly to supplement the reading. Photos range from 19th-century Viennese ultra-high-heeled shoes to contemporary neo-gothic hipster chicks in corsets and leather. This is obviously not a book for children, but it's also far more than a collection of erotica in that it presents an informative and well-researched history of fetishism and the theories that have been put forward to explain it.

From Publishers Weekly

Drawing on psychoanalytic, poststructuralist, feminist and Marxist theory, cultural historian Steele (*Fashion and Eroticism*) explores the role fetishist sexual practices play in shaping fashion history. She asserts that fashion trends both reflect common sexual fantasies and help construct gender identities; in this sense, clothing can function as an important marker of a culture's sexual politics. The fascination with fetishist garb?corsets, underwear as outerwear, the use of "kinky" fabrics like rubber and leather?among prominent contemporary designers may, she proposes, signal our own culture's willingness to blur the boundaries between the "normal" and the "perverse." Steele puts forward a fluid definition of fetishism, noting that its devotees exhibit a wide range of behaviors and that one particular style or object can have a variety of different meanings for different people. Consequently, psychoanalytic arguments that the fetish is always a stand-in for the phallus or feminist claims that certain fashions like corsets and high heels are intended to oppress women are potentially valid but reductive. Steele's greatest strengths here are her flexible perspective and her deft negotiation of various theoretical perspectives. Her analysis is sometimes sketchy, but this is a thought-provoking overview of the relationship between sex and clothing. Photos not seen by PW.

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From Library Journal

Steele, who teaches at the Fashion Institute of Technology, ably describes the connections between fetishism and fashion by assembling evidence from the last 200 years of Western social and psychological history. In a detached, tactful, and nonproselytizing tone, she catalogs such variations in sexual expression as tight-lacing, shoe fetishes, transvestism, and "leathersex." Steele quotes from pornography as well as ostensibly more legitimate academic writings and lists in her bibliography such titles as the *American Journal of Psychiatry*, *Bizarre Shoes and Boots*, and the *Natural Rubber Company Catalogue*. In all, her short book is a worthwhile purchase for larger libraries not already owning David Kunzle's more thorough 1982 study, *Fashion and Fetishism*. --Douglas F. Smith, Oakland P.L., Cal.

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Karen Lheureux:

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Patrice Reese:

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