Chapter Four

Faust and Don Juan

I

In the eighteenth century, the Faustian attitude to autonomous representation and the objectification of the subject moves decisively into the realm of the erotic. Even in Spies and Marlowe, the erotic power exerted by the animate image of Helen of Troy marks the stage at which the distinction between illusion and reality breaks down. This condition is known to postmodern philosophers as “hyper-reality,” and thinkers like Jean Baudrillard have argued convincingly that the displacement of the referent by the sign is the definitive characteristic of contemporary consciousness. In Baudrillard’s work, however, hyper-reality loses some of the ethical stigma that his former Situationist colleague Guy Debord attached to the “spectacle.” While both Debord and Baudrillard trace a direct link between the spectacle and the imposition of imaginary exchange-value on an object, Debord emphasizes the fact that exchange-value is objectified labor-power, and this gives his critique a moralistic tone that has largely disappeared from postmodernist accounts of the hyper-real.

The theoretical foundation of Debord’s work is Georg Lukács’s extrapolation of Marx’s concept of commodity fetishism into the all-encompassing notion of “reification,” a phenomenon that is simultaneously psychological and economic. In Debord, as in Walter Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” and Susan Sontag’s On Photography, the twentieth century’s fetishization of images is shown to develop organically from the root of commodity fetishism. As Sontag puts it:

A capitalist society requires a culture based on images. The camera’s twin capacities to subjectivize reality and to objectify it ideally serve these needs and strengthen them. The production of images also furnishes a ruling ideology. Social change is replaced by a change in images. The freedom to consume a plurality of images and goods is equated with freedom itself. The narrowing of free political choice to
free economic consumption requires the unlimited production and consumption of images.²

Sontag’s insights have often been applied in feminist analysis, as a way of understanding the erotic objectification of women. In the 1970’s, such objectification was frequently discussed under the rubric of “pornography.” Susan Griffin’s comment that “the pornographic camera performs a miracle in reverse. Looking on a living being, a person with a soul, it produces an image of a thing”³ is representative of such critiques. They are prefigured in the antitheatrical discourse of the sixteenth century, which consistently connect the performative with commerce, and especially with sexual objectification. In 1580, Anthony Munday linked the theater with prostitution, claiming that “none delight in those spectacles, but such as would be made spectacles,” and observing the “harlots” in the audience who strive “to be as an object to all mens eies.”⁴ Munday follows a pattern of argument established by Stephen Gosson (1579), who united commerce, carnality, and the theater as a “generall Market of Bawdrie” where “every knave and his queane, are there first acquainted and cheapen the Merchandise in that place, which they pay for elsewhere as they can agree.”⁵

Feminist anthropology suggests that the sexual objectification of women, their translation into merely physical images, has a similar history and logic to the development of Debord’s “spectacle.” The spectacle is an independent image that grows out of a market in commodities and, according to Claude Levi-Strauss, the objectification of women grows from a similar system of exchange. Levi-Strauss argues that women were the first symbolic objects that made possible societies based on alliances between men: “The emergence of symbolic thought must have required that women, like words, should be things that were exchanged.”⁶ Gayle Rubin’s reading of Levi-Strauss calls for “an analysis of the evolution of sexual exchange along the lines of Marx’s discussion in Capital of the evolution of money and commodities,”⁷ and her own work, among many others, provides ample evidence of the utility of such studies. Andrea Dworkin describes fetishistic male sexuality as a kind of perverted Platonism:

The love of or desire for or obsession with a external object is, in male culture, seen as a response to the qualities of the object itself. . . . It is taken for granted that a sexual response is an objectified response: that is, a response aroused by an object with specific attributes that in themselves provoke sexual desire. . . . Men, perpetually searching to justify