

## II: Totemism, Fetishism, Idolatry: A Tableau

Within the domain of over/under-estimated images, the phenomena of totemism, fetishism, and idolatry seem like an inevitable topic, one that deserves a separate study in its own right. It might be useful at this point to provide something of an overview of their conceptual relations, and to open up some lines of inquiry. First, just to reinforce a few key components of this line of inquiry. Totemism, fetishism, and idolatry are not to be regarded as discrete, essential categories of objects, as if one could provide a description that would allow one to sort images and works of art into three different bins on the basis of their visual or material features. They are rather to be understood as the names of three different relations to things, three forms of “object relations,”<sup>1</sup> if you will, that we can form with an infinite variety of concrete entities (including words and concepts) in our experience. It is therefore important to stress that one and the same object (a golden calf, for instance) could function as a totem, fetish, or idol depending on the social practices and narratives that surround it. DNA is the techno-scientific fetish concept of our time.

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<sup>1</sup>Jean LaPlanche and J.-B.Pontalis, in The Language of Psychoanalysis (NY: Norton, 1973), remark that the term “object-relationship” may be misleading in its implication that the “object” is not really a subject, a human being or living thing that can “act upon the subject.” (278) From the standpoint of the idol/fetish/totem concept, however, the object may well be an inanimate thing that cannot act upon a subject without the cooperation of the subject’s fantasies about the object. The strategy here, then, is to re-literalize the concept of “object relations” and to take the misleading implication of “objects” as exactly what needs exploring.

The spectacle of “terrorism” and the word itself have become the political idols of our era.

It is also important to stress that the insight offered here is on the order of a triangulation of concepts that have formerly been thought of mainly in dualistic, binary terms. Fetishes have often been both contrasted with and equated with idols; totems are often confused with fetishes. The importance of triangulating the terms is not to provide absolute positionality, but a sense of their relations—*objective* object relations, as it were. One might compare this to the rough triangulating of shirt sizes as “small, medium, and large,” which are clearly relative to some norm of the human body. Intuition tells me immediately that fetishes are small, totems are medium, and idols are large, in a number of senses yet to be specified. When Claude Lorrain represents the Golden Calf as a tiny figure atop a classical pillar in contrast to Poussin’s massive sculpture, the shock of diminution is reminiscent of the moment when one sees the actual model of the great ape, King Kong, that was employed in the movie bearing his name. The giant ape, we are told, “was a god in his own country,” but is reduced to a mere theatrical spectacle in New York. Queen Victoria, a tiny woman in physical reality, was inflated into a grandiose figure by the words and images of British propaganda during her reign. The implicit “size” standard, then, is clearly not just physical but metaphoric and metonymic. It may measure the relative social importance of the objects: thus, Andrew McLennan’s definition of fetishism as totemism *minus* exogamy and matrilineal descent, or the commonplace notion that idols are, insofar as they represent deities that demand great sacrifices, the *most* important and dangerous objects that human beings can create. In Billy Wilder’s Sunset Boulevard, the Erich von Stroheim proudly informs the young screenwriter, Joe Gillis, that Norma Desmond was the greatest of the screen idols, and that one of

her frustrated admirers, having received a gift of one of Norma's stockings, later used it to strangle himself.

It is also hard to avoid noticing the resonances between the triad of totem, fetish, and idol and similar triads such as Lacan's Symbolic, Real, and Imaginary, or Peirce's symbol/index/icon.

Totemism, as the use of an object to regulate marriage, social identities, and proper names seems closely tied to the Symbolic, in both Lacan and Peirce's sense, as a figure of the Law (Peirce calls the symbol the "legisign," a sign constituted by *rule*, and Lacan associates it with prohibitions and the law). Fetishism, by contrast, seems deeply linked with trauma, and therefore with the Real, and with what Peirce called the "index," the sign by cause and effect, the trace or mark. The very name of idolatry, finally, suggests a primary identification what Peirce calls the "icon," that is, with *imagery* and the Imaginary, the graven image or likeness that takes on supreme importance as a representation of a god, or a god in itself. None of these associations is hard and fast, however, and one can imagine one person's fetish being treated as an idol by someone else, a totem by yet another. Fetishes can have iconic features, and insofar as there are prohibitions, conventions, and rules surrounding all these objects, all of them play the totemic, symbolic role of social bonding. All these disclaimers will, I hope, prevent anyone from making a fetish-object out of my table of distinctions among them (see below).

The totem/fetish/idol triad also has a historical and empirical relation to certain times and places that seems much more stable and secure than these conceptual differentiations. Totemism is the most recent term, as has been noted, a 19<sup>th</sup> century concept in anthropology and comparative

religion. Fetishism, to remind us once again of Pietz's classic study, is an early modern concept associated with mercantile colonialism, the Portuguese in Africa. Idolatry is a creation of monotheism and iconoclasm, the ancient religions of the book.

We find, then, both analytic and narrative, synchronic and diachronic relations among the concepts of totemism, fetishism, and idolatry. One can tell stories about their relations, or one can think them as triangulating a kind of symbolic space in their own right, as if our relations with object-image assemblages— with “pictures,” as I have been calling them, or “things,” as Bill Brown would insist—had certain limited logical possibilities that are named by these categories of “special” object relations. For that is what totems, fetishes, and idols are: *special* things. They can range, therefore from what we might call rather ordinary, secular, and modern “special things” like commodities, souvenirs, family photos, and collections, to sacred, magical, uncanny things, symbolic things, associated with ritual and narrative, prophecies and divinations. These objects are also “special” in the sense that they are “species-like” comprising families of practices (everything from mobility and circulation to unique habitats and special practices like human sacrifice, mutilation, and festival)—what Arjun Appadurai calls a “social life of things”—and they are often specular or spectacular—that is, associated with image-making, ornamentation, painting and sculpture. As such, they are associated with familiar aesthetic categories—idols (especially those hidden in darkness) are linked to the Kantian sublime;<sup>2</sup> fetishes are characteristically linked with beauty and attractiveness, as opposed to the dangerous, forbidding aspect of the idol. And totems, as I will argue below, may have a historical connection with the picturesque, and specifically with the notion of the “found object” that comes to the beholder by chance.

Totems, fetishes, and idols are, finally, things that *want* things, that demand, desire, even require things—food, money, blood, respect. It goes without saying that they have “lives of their own,” as animated, vital objects. What do they want from us? Idols make the greatest demands: they characteristically want human sacrifice (or at least, this is the Hollywood fantasy of what they require). Fetishes, as I’ve suggested, characteristically want to be beheld—to “be held” close by, or even re-attached to, the body of the fetishist. Totems want to be your friend and companion. In the Wizard of Oz, the ruby slippers are Dorothy’s fetish objects; Toto (as his name suggests) is her totem animal—her companion and helper; and the Wizard himself is the (obviously false, hollow) idol. “Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain.”

It is with some trepidation that I offer the following table of distinctions as an aid to thinking about the historical and synchronic relations of among totemism, fetishism, and idolatry. The table should be thought of as “in quotation marks,” as a tableau of associations, some of which come from highly vulgar and vernacular sources like Hollywood movies, where certain stereotypes of idolatry and fetishism, especially, have been circulated as popular images. It also seems useful to sketch out the disciplinary locations (psychoanalysis, anthropology, historical materialism, comparative religion, art history) where these concepts have been. I offer this table, then, as a

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<sup>2</sup>Cite Critique of Judgment.

way of laying my cards on the table. But I fully expect that the cards will be re-shuffled, and that new cards will be played that I have not considered. The important thing is the framework provided by the triangulation of these concepts. To my knowledge, no one has tried to put these three ideas together in historical-conceptual structure, and this is nothing more than an invitation to try it out for yourself.

The essays that follow, then, are not meant to elaborate any systematic understanding of this structure, but to venture into it from a variety of angles. “Empire and Objecthood” explores the relation between totems, fetishes, and idols and three phases of imperialism. “Romanticism and the Life of Things” examines the emergence of the totem (along with a new concept of the fossil) in the 1790s. “Founding Objects” examines the notion of the “found object” in modern art, and asks what totemism might add to the picture. “Abstraction and Intimacy” examines the status of abstract painting in a post-heroic, post-avant-garde context, when its minor status opens it up to new communities of apprehension that were not quite so evident to a modernist aesthetic dominated by the categories of fetishism and idolatry. “Offending Images” looks at iconoclastic rhetoric and the desecrated or sacrilegious image in a contemporary episode, the scandal surrounding the Brooklyn Museum’s “Sensation” exhibition in the fall of 1999. “Living Color” explores the animation of racial stereotypes in Spike Lee’s film, Bamboozled. And “The Work of Art in the Age of Biocybernetic Reproduction” returns us to techno-scientific version of the animated icon in a period marked by computational and biological revolutions.

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