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# Fetishism and the Camera

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## Abstract

This paper discusses the power relationship between camera and subject, and the power of fetish objects over the photographer. Charles de Brosses popularized the term "fetish" in anthropology in *Du culte des dieux fétiche* (1760). It provided a materialistic approach to the origins of religion, and introduced the term "*fétichisme*" to the field later known as ethno-anthropology.

*Fetish* comes from the Portuguese *feitico* ("spell"), applied to magical amulets encountered by Europeans in 1613 in West Africa. A fetish object, in the strict sense, is manmade, believed to have supernatural powers or with power over others. The term was later expanded to include certain types of ideation, attraction to, and excitement induced by inanimate objects and anatomical body parts not related to reproduction. *Fétichisme* was first used in an erotic context by Alfred Binet in 1887, and later adopted by Sigmund Freud in 1928 where the person is libidinally bound to the object of desire. Fetishism is not a mental illness.

The invention of the camera led to the emergence of certain fetishistic behaviors, viz. (1) inordinate attraction to and obsessive photography of certain subjects or parts thereof, (2) the secret use of cameras to observe and photograph others, (3) excessive devotion or reverence towards camera equipment leading to accumulation of large collections and, (4) the obsessive collection of photographs and trading them for profit.

The four types of fetishism in photography may be categorized under the following rubrics:

- Subject fetishism
- Voyeur fetishism
- Collector fetishism
- Commodity fetishism

**Keywords:** Fetish, Fetishism, Camera, Photography, Voyeurism, Paraphilia, Gaze, Power relationship

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