Fetishism and Displacement in John Fante’s *The Road to Los Angeles*

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Abstract

*The Road to Los Angeles*, the first novel written by Italian-American author John Fante, is most often recognized as a tale concerned with Italian-American alienation, xenophobia and existence on the periphery of mainstream society. This essay, however, aims to analyze the novel from the viewpoint of fetishism. Fetishism, a motif that constitutes a vast theoretical field in itself, will be analyzed using the lens of Freudian theory and more recent works by critics such as Louise J. Kaplan and Johanna Malt. While fetishism unproblematically can be defined as the misdirection of libidinal energy, and the objectification of a sexual object’s seductive powers, this essay also aims to throw light on the intricate nature and general applicability of fetishism.

Fante depicts fetishism as essentially oxymoronic in its presence-absence duality, as instrumental in animating the inanimate and dehumanizing the sexual object. Fetishism, which in many ways shares an affinity with scopophilia and voyeurism, is essentially semiotic and instrumental in projecting the will onto the external world. Moreover, read through the lens of the inherent death drive, as theorized by Sigmund Freud, manifestations of brutal violence and self-torture are seen as direct counterparts to fetishism.

**Keywords:** John Fante; *The Road to Los Angeles*; fetishism; scopophilia; voyeurism; Freud; semiotics
Always he will slink through life with the bloodless women of papers and books.

- *The Road to Los Angeles*

John Fante is one of those rare writers whose style possesses the quality of illusory simplicity and remarkable accessibility. Having earned recognition posthumously, the fate of this Italian-American writer’s authorship is perhaps most properly described as bittersweet. Fante’s biographer Stephen Cooper describes Fante as “unabashedly autobiographical,” although never hesitant to “change the facts to serve his stories” (xi). Current literary scholarship merely brushes upon the bibliography of John Fante, presumably as a logical consequence of a too recently received recognition. The act of writing on Fante’s literature thus becomes, at once, a contribution to a scholarship that is most appropriately defined as a gaping void. Since Fante is of Italian descent, central themes in his works are alienation and the existence of the immigrant in the margins of mainstream society. Consequently, a considerable part of current literary scholarship has already used exactly that as its point of departure. This essay, however, engages in the exploration of fetishism as depicted in the literary landscape of *The Road to Los Angeles*.

Fante’s work *The Bandini Quartet* (1938-1982), comprised of four novels published in the span of thirty-nine years and to which *The Road to Los Angeles* belongs, is a coming-of-age saga that tells the story of protagonist Arturo Bandini’s childhood, adolescence, and adulthood and his aspirations to become a writer. Fante presents us with a character who lurks in the shadow of beautiful women, only to emerge and consume objects they leave behind. In this essay I will explore the occurrence and recurrence of fetishism in John Fante’s *The Road to Los Angeles*.

Fetishism, as encountered in *The Road to Los Angeles*, I suggest, is at once an example of a distortion of the attributes distinguishing the animate from the
inanimate, and a manifestation of various forms of displacement. Displacement is, in
the strict Freudian sense, the transfer of passionate emotions onto inanimate objects
and an avoidance of sexual objects. Fetishism may be considered a manifestation that
is fruitless in that the fetishist is unable to seduce the sexual object, but nevertheless
entails conquering one aspect of the same object. Fetishism, in *The Road to Los
Angeles*, can be viewed as both a phenomenon of having and not having at the same
time, and a presence-absence oxymoron – that which is present is defined by the
absent. The fiction of John Fante constitutes a literary space that is inhabited by a
protagonist that effaces dichotomies and treats inanimate objects as perceived
extensions of animate subjects. Furthermore, its hero’s relation to lifeless matter,
which entails effacing the animate and humanizing the inanimate, offers a view of
fetishism as essentially semiotic and, thus, as I will show, instrumental in projecting
the imagination onto the external world. Moreover, sadism and self-torture, in
combination with fetishism, constitute a duality that is best analyzed using the
Freudian theory of the inherent death drive.

*The Road to Los Angeles* was posthumously discovered among John Fante’s
unpublished manuscripts. Due to its relentless attacks on the church and capitalist
society, publishers refused to touch it for nearly half a century. Fetishism and sadism
are significant motifs in the novel, but before proceeding to the actual analysis of
these themes, it is necessary to establish the hero Arturo Bandini’s inclination to
distort the common attributes that distinguish the animate from the inanimate.
Although it is easy to yield to the temptation of psychoanalysis at this stage, it must
be avoided simply because literary characters lack both an unconscious and the
dynamics of living beings. Some fifty pages into the novel we encounter one
particular instance of this kind of estrangement: “A fine idea, big as a house” (RLA,
263). The abstract, or symbolic, is signified by the concrete. Further down on the
same page we are told that “the days would not move. They stood like grey stones”
(263). This pattern, if not its particular content, is at the heart of the problematic of
fetishistic displacement: days or ideas (the abstract) are objectified and concretized
into “grey stones” and “big as a house,” and libidinal energy is diverted away from
the sexual object, and directed towards the fetish object which, accordingly, is
endowed with sexual implications. The seductive force of the sexual object becomes
transferred, and thus reduced, to insignificant inanimate objects. Using the phrasing of
Karl Marx in a different context, one could propose that fetishism entails “endowing
material forces with intellectual life and stultifying human life with a material force.” The intangible, which we refer to as the abstract (days, ideas), and even life, becomes stultified with a material force, “She looked at me with a waxy expressionless face” (RLA, 235). The misdirection of libidinal energy that is essential to fetishism is also instrumental in objectifying the sexual implications of the sexual object.

I will henceforth refer to a presence-absence oxymoron when discussing fetishism; the present is defined by, or calls to attention, that which is absent. Although the co-existence of presence and absence in the same space, at the same time, may instinctively be dismissed as a dichotomy – that which is not present is by definition absent—I would argue that fetishism is a means of invoking the absent to the present—that is—to the fetish object. In her book Obscure Objects of Desire, in a discussion of Surrealist art, Johanna Malt states that “even when not actually present in an object, the body is constantly alluded to, raising those questions of presence and absence which have been addressed in terms of the uncanny, but which are also raised by fetishistic disavowal” (115). Fetishism can be described as a juxtaposition of two binarily opposed values (presence-absence) that usually constitute a dichotomy. In The Road to Los Angeles this is frequently manifested as a presence-absence oxymoron.

Arturo Bandini is the novel’s protagonist and narrator. Intermittently employed, occasionally fired but most often deliberately resigning from jobs, he spends his days immersed in Nietzsche and Schopenhauer. At other times, he curses his own predicament as a fatherless proletarian who is forced to support his mother and sister. The library, which becomes a source of both intellectual and visual stimulation, is, apart from an object of fetishism, a means of coping. We encounter one unmistakable instance of fetishism in The Road to Los Angeles in the following passage:

She still held that book. But what was that book? I didn’t know, but I must have it for my eyes to follow the path her eyes had followed before me […] Lord, I wanted it, to hold it, to kiss it, to crush it to my chest, that book fresh from her fingers, the very imprint of her warm fingers still upon it perhaps […] Perhaps she perspires through her fingers as she reads it. (268-69)

In his work Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality Freud stated that fetishism becomes pathological when “the longing for the fetish […] takes the place of the
normal aim, and, further, when the fetish becomes detached from a particular individual and becomes the sole sexual object” (20). The most intriguing and, indeed, conspicuous aspect of this passage is that Arturo Bandini does not explicitly express a desire for the woman. He immediately resorts to fetishism; his arousal is transferred onto the book that she has held. It seems implicitly conveyed that he does not consider the alternative of even attempting to seduce her. The book is treated as an extension of her, full of erotic implications. Arturo imagines and waits excitedly for her to put it down. He is already aware of its fetishistic potentials. The book is depicted as a substitute and extension of the sexual object who is the desired destination for his libidinal energy: “I must have it for my eyes to follow the path her eyes had followed.” In other words, this follows Marx’s argument that we endow material forces with intellectual life; the implication of the words instantly become that of having been seen and touched by someone to whom the fetishist is attracted. Freud stated that the “overvaluation of the sexual object […] extends to everything that is associated with it” (Three Essays 20). Accordingly, from now on, the words carry the connotation of the woman’s gaze and touch; the sexual object has become objectified; as Freud stated it is defined by its associations. Arturo even goes as far as to desire that there be actual physical remainders of the librarian on the fetish object, “perhaps she perspires through her fingers.” Moreover, as Freud put it: “the fetish object becomes detached from a particular individual and becomes the sole sexual object” (20). In other words, this is a passage in which an object’s metamorphosis, i.e. its transformation through the act of fetishization, is made manifest. Bear in mind that this is only the stage in which the fetish object has not yet been acquired by the fetishist.

Louise J. Kaplan defines fetishism as “the deadening and dehumanization of otherwise alive and therefore threateningly dangerous, unpredictable desires” (6, my emphasis). Accordingly, the decision to avoid the human who inspires desire, and to abandon the possibility of actually approaching the animate sexual object must be viewed as a form of dehumanization. Of course, “unpredictable desires” is not as specific as one would like. However, while it refers to the fetishist in this case, it could also point to the desires of the sexual object. The human being is not considered someone together with whom sexual arousal could possibly be converted into intercourse.
This, then, is an example of the pre-fetish, the metamorphosis: the fetish’s cocoon state. Let us proceed to the moment in which Arturo Bandini has actually acquired the fetish object:

I held the book close to my eyes, searching for some trace of white fingers no more than an inch from the bottom. There were finger-prints all right. No matter if they belonged to so many others, they nevertheless belonged to Miss Hopkins alone. Walking toward the park I kissed them, and I kissed them so much that finally they were gone altogether, and only a blue wet spot remained on the book, while on my mouth I tasted the sweet taste of blue dye. (270-71)

Let us bear in mind Malt’s observation that fetishism raises “questions of presence and absence” (115). The fetish object (which is present) at once alludes to that which is not there, namely, Miss Hopkins. Bearing the implications of her, the fetish object is a substitute presence and embodiment of the absent sexual object’s seductive qualities. Even though the finger-prints could belong to anyone, Arturo projects his desire onto likelihood: the finger-prints of conceivably anyone become those of Miss Hopkins alone. The fetish object exists only by virtue of the absent sexual object simply because it is created and treated as an extension of that absent subject. Within his diegesis, Arturo’s awareness and intentional repression of the possibility that the finger-prints may belong to someone other than Miss Hopkins entails a subordination of reality in favor of the imagination. Moreover, there are instances in which Arturo’s fetishism takes on the semblance of ritual: “I made a shrine from twigs and blades of grass. It was the throne of Miss Hopkins” (RLA, 271). Miss Hopkins is naturally unaware of her status as a fetish object, and it is therein the key lies: fetishism for Arturo entails directing the libidinal energy to an inanimate object and avoiding the animate sexual object. Miss Hopkins is by necessity absent, and her very absence is the means of connecting her essential characteristics to the chosen substitute: the fetish object.

As time passes, Arturo becomes increasingly unstable and erratic and the tension between Arturo and his sister instensifies. He finds a job at a fish cannery which functions as a catalyst that triggers fits of delusion. When Arturo spots an unknown woman he decides to follow her. She lights a cigarette and drops the match: “The smoke hung in the dead air like distorted blue balloons […] When I got to the motionless clouds I lifted myself on tiptoe and drew them down” (356). Notice how Fante uses adjectives such as dead and motionless when referring to the milieu
surrounding the fetish object. The subsequent effect becomes that of emphatically distinguishing the object from the environment enclosing it, as if to bring it to life, “The smoke from her cigarette [...] I knew where her match had fallen [...] I picked it up [...] No perceptible difference from other matches [...] I put it in my mouth and began to chew it” (356). As I have already made a point of addressing fetishism in terms of presence and absence, the reader will discern the emphasis on her cigarette. Immediately, the smoke, one of the fetish objects, is defined through the absence of its signifying subject. The smoke becomes interesting, not because there is an inherent quality in smoke as smoke, but rather because it is endowed with an erotic and spiritual force displaced from a human being onto an object. Similarly, there is, to the outside observer, no conspicuous difference distinguishing this match from any other match. Arturo, however, goes as far as to name the match: “‘Match,’ I said ‘I love you. Your name is Henrietta. I love your body and soul’” (356). Arturo, in other words, literally humanizes his fetish object, paying it more attention than the sexual object. An object is generally not perceived as “having a soul.” Moreover, the act of investing an inanimate object with a soul, and the constant “presence of the absent,” goes hand in hand with a claim that Fante presents inanimate objects as potentially animate extensions of animate subjects.

Fetishism, in The Road to Los Angeles, could, at times, be compared to a monster that grows beyond proportions and control. In the aftermath of the episode with the match, the fetish object grows to enclose a large space. The focal point turns from the match to the confines of a whole store and its surroundings:

I saw the sign again: Highest Prices Paid For Old Gold. It stirred me because she had read it, the woman in the purple coat. She had seen and felt all of this – the store, the glass, the window, the junk inside [...] This very sidewalk had felt the enchanted burden of her weight. She had breathed this air and smelled that sea. The smoke from her cigarette had mingled with it. Ah, this is too much, too much! (361, my emphasis)

Again we have in front of us an example of a fetish object (as always present) that is fetishized because of an absent sexual object. Fetishism leaves traces that are indistinguishable to most individuals and observable solely by the fetishist. The sentence “she had seen and felt” evocatively suggests a misdirection of libinal energy. The fetishization of the sign, which is the object of her gaze entails a displacement of her powers of seduction. Furthermore, the fetish object, which by now has expanded
to enclose the sea, the street and a whole store, is treated as an immensely large extension of the animate sexual object.

As we have seen so far, fetishism in the *The Road to Los Angeles* is dynamic and multifaceted. The fetish comprehends everything from insignificant objects to confined areas and vast spaces. There is undoubtedly an awareness in Arturo of fetishism which is recurringly made manifest. One of the most interesting and striking of those instances is perhaps the passage in which Arturo refers to himself as someone who “will slink through life with the bloodless women of papers and books” (405). Fetishism is perceived as “things which once were, yet never really were” (306). Moreover, he strikingly defines the wedding ring, which is at once both surface and symbol, as an object that can “symbolize the union of man and woman” (343). Thus, in a sense, there is an intrinsic inclination in man, found in many definitions of fetishism, to endow material with abstract and intangible qualities that is not exclusive to Arturo as a fetishist. As Freud puts is, a “certain degree of fetishism is thus habitually present in normal love” (*Three Essays* 20). Moreover, Fante’s mentioning of the wedding ring as a symbol of the union between man and woman could be read as a diagnosis of society, as a whole, as fetishistic and endowing material forces with spiritual life. Ironically, this profound awareness of the nature of fetishism does by no means implicate an immunity from it. In fact, sexual anomalies of this nature are by definition paradoxical, and the novel brings this out: despite Arturo explicitly referring to a fetish object as “bloodless” and intangible (“things which once were, yet never were”) there is still an insistence on endowing them with an, as it were, intellectual force. Fetishism thus entails, at once, both the impossibility of attempting to animate the inanimate, and the paradox of invoking the absent to the present.

Congrous with the principles of fetishistic projection is the novel’s depiction of an aspiring writer: the major theme of the novel. At one point in the story, Arturo is unemployed and goes to the Ford Motor Company with hopes for employment. The fact that he does not get the job allows him to ponder and ventilate his thoughts on his favorite subject: “labor conditions in the machine age,” a “topic for future work” (261). He suggestively notes that “life is a stage” and that his role is that of the “spectator” (260). Indeed, the implications of this quote can easily be dismissed as self-evident. However, this passage is paradoxical and as the careful reader is likely to point out that a spectator is usually passive, Arturo is a spectator whose “word is law” (260). Hence, he is in fact very much involved in the meaning-making process of
reality, and not simply a beholder. The basic idea here is that the stage functions like a canvas, that is, it does not. Precisely as a canvas is merely subjected to the strokes of the brush, the stage is a space that does not intervene. It becomes the play that takes place within its confines. Thus, life, seen as a stage, is subordinated to the dictation of Arturo qua director. Accordingly, the play which happens to take place is shaped by Arturo’s imagination. Consequently, within his diegesis, reality is subordinated to his imagination and the projection of will that is at work. Within the novel, thus, the world functions as an alterable resource. Thus, I will show how looking through the eyes of a writer is equivalent to the act of projecting your fantasies onto the external world, and how, within the subjective diegesis of Arturo, it entails altering that external world. One way of discerning this is to separate a rational interpretation from an arbitrary one.

Arturo’s decision to become a writer comes to him as an epiphany: “from then on I wanted to be a writer” (240). This moment marks the shift from a past as a reader into a future as a writer. Hence, the subsequent change in mindset comes as no surprise. From now on Arturo acquires the mind of a writer – a mind that obsessively detects and reshapes its external surroundings. In an extensive episode dealing with projection of will onto the external world the following takes place: “all of a sudden everything at my feet began to move [...] they were crabs” (243). The movement of the crabs is perceived as an attempt to “foment a revolution” (246). Here, the narrative becomes two-fold since Arturo’s interpretation of the movement of the crabs, within his diegesis, differs from the rational conclusion that the reader is able to draw. This becomes most obvious when distinguishing between the reality that is identified by the reader, and the perceived reality that is shaped by Arturo’s imagination, ”they had tried to unseat me” (246). The movement of the crabs, which for the sober reader would merely implicate that the crabs are alive, is for Arturo a sign of defiance. This idiosyncratic view is by the same token a means of fabricating an image of self as heroic—“a mighty superman” (397)—and, moreover, instrumental in projecting will onto reality: if he feels defied, he is defied. It is further indicative of a split between actual reality and projected fantasy. Arturo’s alteration of reality, which, precisely like fetishism, is an act of projection, mockingly shatters the logical connection between a certain event and its rational implication. Moreover, by doing so, the split between reality and imagination is blurred. Consequently, those spaces merge and become inseparable. This replacement of reality with imagination is in fact hinted at in the
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novel: “all the books I’d read came alive at once and I saw better people out of books” (241). In coming alive, the book has been animated through reading. As for real people in the real world, they are replaced with “better people out of books”: real people, in the flesh, can be disappointing, but within the diegesis of a novel, fictional characters have the potential of achieving perfection.

While this inclination to project is not always instrumental in animating the inanimate, as my previous paragraph illustrates, it can be. Nevertheless, in principle, the mechanisms at work in fetishistic projection are also involved in the semiotic alteration of the diegesis. A perfect example of semiotic projection that entails animation of the inanimate takes place when Arturo is walking around with a conspicuously white, bandaged thumb. It was “so white and glaring,” he notes, “as if every lamp in the street knew of it” (355). Arturo ascribes to the lamp the quality of the gazing subject. Because he becomes self-conscious and intimidated by this lifeless object, he removes the bandage: “I tore the bandage off” (355). The beauty of this passage lies in its subtlety and this example, too, since it could easily be disregarded, calls for special attention. The reflection of light against the whiteness of the bandage would generally indicate that the lamp is on and functioning. However, contrastive to that correlation, Arturo perceives that the reflected light is equivalent to that of the gaze. The gaze is naturally a quality of the animate and it is in that sense that Arturo’s intimidation indicates an animation of that lifeless object and because Arturo is intimidated, that lifeless object is made possessive of a power to judge: “I tell you he’s insane, sir. He’s done some strange things, sir” (355).

Another example of fetishistic projection, perhaps the most pertinent to this discussion, is connected to Arturo’s fetishization of the book: “there were finger-prints all right. No matter if they belonged to so many others, they nevertheless belonged to Miss Hopkins alone” (270). The act of systematically altering reality, replacing it with the projected wish, is in this specific example as explicit as can be. Notice the interesting oxymoronic duality here: the finger-prints are both hers alone and anyone else’s. Both possibilities are implied in one sentence. Yet, the projected wish takes the place of likelihood. Despite the implausibility, and the mere chance act of finding her exclusive finger-prints, Arturo seemingly consciously represses the conceivable in favor of the desired. Qua fetishist, he semiotically projects a desired reality onto an actual one. Thus, fetish objects transcend their intuitive and
conventional use-value. Their value is arbitrary: no object bears an intrinsic value; it is a matter of ascription and projection.

As I have shown so far, fetishism can be instrumental in a subjective animation of the inanimate. In addition to this kind of fetishism, we have a scopophilic dimension of Arturo’s relation to the inanimate. Scopophilia, or “pleasure in looking” (Three essays 23) shares essential ontological similarities to fetishism while, as I will illustrate, differing significantly from it. Arturo, as a fetishist or “lover of women in clothes closets,” who does not discriminate, derives his fetishistic arousal from, as I have already mentioned, objects (e.g. the book and the match) that bear implications of living women, on the one hand, but also from a hidden collection of magazines depicting naked female bodies: “The pictures in Artists and Models were honeys […] ‘Chloe,’ I said, ‘I worship you’” (RLA, 228). In her famous essay Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema, Laura Mulvey identifies certain scopophilic aspects of cinematic experience. “Woman”, she argues, is a “bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning” (7). While film, as an art form, differs substantially from literature, Arturo’s relationship to photographs within the diegesis of the novel can unproblematically be discussed using this cinematic analogy. It is important to emphasize that, although the reader is not allowed to see the erotic images in the novel, they must still be acknowledged as existent within the diegesis of its hero. The scopophilic aspect of Arturo’s image-viewing amounts to exactly an uncompromising fabrication of meaning. The women represented in the photographs are subjected to the fetishistic projections of Arturo’s imagination. The imaginary and illusory female presence derived from the photographs signifies the lack of a living female presence in Arturo’s life. While it is true that they are the source of sexual arousal, they are not involved in the actual making of meaning. Mulvey goes on to state that “the determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly” (11). Luce Irigaray, feminist and psychoanalyst, has made a similar observation: “Woman […] is only a more or less obliging prop for the enactment of man’s fantasies” (Qtd. in Spearing 144). Thus the semiotic aspect of fetishistic projection and imposition of meaning is also significative of scopophilia: “my poor Nina was crippled […] not in the picture, oh she wasn’t crippled there, only when I met her” (RLA 305-6). This meeting, it should be noted, takes place only in Arturo’s imagination.
Although scopophilia represented in literature does not function in the same way as in cinema, we may still derive the information necessary for an analysis of scopophilia both as a phenomenon, and, in the case of Arturo, the means of animating the inanimate. Arturo animates Tanya, represented in one of the images, by imagining that he meets her: “I used to meet Tanya at night in a cave” (303). The act of actually ascribing to these images identities must itself be considered a case of animating the inanimate image. Moreover, Arturo talks to the hips of one of the girls, “I never spoke to darling Hazel but to her hips, addressing them as though they were living souls” (303). This suggests that his scopophilic fetishization of the image takes place beyond volition. He consistently brings the pictures to life in his imagination despite an awareness of its futility. The phrase “as though they were living souls” implies the futility of attempting the impossible even while knowing that it is impossible. Again, an awareness of fetishism does by no means implicate an immunity from it.

Although there are some conspicuous parallels to be drawn between scopophilia and fetishism, there are some essential ontological discrepancies separating them. Whereas fetishism is signified by the displacement of the implications of sexual objects and properties such as beauty onto inanimate objects, scopophilia resists that kind of transference. In the case of fetishism, we find ourselves facing an inseparably triadic relationship: in order to displace the features of a sexual object onto a fetish object we need a sexual object, and the features of that sexual object cannot be displaced without a fetishist. As to the ontology of scopophilia, the relationship between a photograph and its spectator constitute an intimate duality. Although the absence of animate women may be responsible for it, there is no avoidance of a specific sexual object. Nevertheless, despite these essential differences, scopophilia maintains an interesting affinity with fetishistic projection. In his work *The Cinematic Society*, Norman K. Denzin argues that the “cinematic apparatus […] turns the spectator into a voyeur who gazes at the screen” (3). “This gaze,” he continues, “is focused in the voyeuristic gazing of the voyeur, so a voyeur watches a voyeur gaze” (3). Indeed, whereas the scopophiliae normally is the subject in the relationship between a photograph and its spectator, he now becomes the spectacle (and thus object) of the spectating reader. In that sense, we have a kind of voyeurism of scopophilia: not watching per se, but peeping into the life of the characters from a safe distance; gazing at his voyeuristic indulgences. In depicting the
scopophilic fetishist, Fante adds an interesting allegorical dimension to the novel and we can explore this by returning to the wedding ring.

Within the novel, the wedding ring comes to constitute a means of representation. It is moreover, as I will show later, oxymoronic. An analogy can accordingly be drawn between semiotic alterability through projection (i.e. a fetish object is subordinated to the projections of the fetishist) and its representational power as a symbol of union. Indeed, the function of the wedding ring is to “symbolize the union of man and woman” (343). It is additionally referred to as follows: “little did this piece of stupid metal know its significance” (343). We can, in other words, assume that Arturo, in acknowledging its significance, is also aware of it. The contrast between the material insignificance of the ring and its representational potency is striking. Moreover, within the text, the ring functions as an embodiment of the inanimate object’s ability to implicate animate subjects (man and woman) and semiotic projectability. It is important to emphasize that there is a notable difference between the ring and the match as fetish objects. While it is true that certain representational powers are projected onto the ring, there is no displacement of features belonging to a specific sexual object (as in the cases of the match and the book) onto this particular fetish object. In this sense, fetishistic scopophilia shares this ontology.

Arturo recognizes the wedding ring as something “vulgarly phallic” (227). It is subsequently acknowledged as “the vestigial remains of a primitive savagery anomalous to this age of so-called enlightenment and intelligence” (227). While the phallus reference is notably ambiguous, several interpretations can be extracted from it. By labelling it “vestigial remains of a primitive savagery” it functions as a monument which connotes an uncivilized past. In accordance, it is perceived as an anachronism that should be deported to bygone times. Possibly, it is by the same token a denunciation of the institution of marriage. If not, it is at least a refusal to allow this “stupid piece of metal” to symbolize holy matrimony—of course, that would render Arturo, qua fetishist, a hypocrite. Nevertheless, this kind of indeterminacy is precisely the point: an object’s power of representation, its alterability and its implications point exactly towards both the novel’s allegorical dimension and arbitrary fetishistic projection. It is in this sense that literary interpretation shares an affinity with fetishism. That is not to say that literature can plausibly mean anything; rather, it can be claimed to mean anything.
Whereas sexual fetishism is oxymoronic in its linkage between presence and absence, the wedding ring similarly comes to mark both union and separation. During the closing passages of the denouement, Arturo steals his mother’s wedding ring and buys a train ticket to Los Angeles, “beside it lay my mother’s ring. I put it in my pocket” (399). Subsequently he steals the family’s jewelry and sells it. It remains untold whether the ring is included in the deal. It is nevertheless interesting that Arturo chooses to bring with him the ring, and nothing else. A possible selling of the ring would mean that the money earned becomes instrumental in facilitating his flight. It may also be the case that he does not sell the ring that can “symbolize the union of man and woman” (343). In any case, the means of union comes to connote separation. Whereas the union of man and woman is intuitively thought of as husband and wife, a Freudian reading could be pursued to suggest an Oedipal bond between a son and his mother since the phrase man and woman is not as specific as one might wish.

While it remains unclear whether or not the ring is sold, it nevertheless functions as a token of bygone times. In either case, it marks the separation between mother and son, brother and sister, and a boy and his family. It is by the same token a separation that (if the ring is indeed kept) is underscored by an inability to cut the bond between him and his mother: the ring becomes a means of maintaining the linkage between the past and the now, or the refusal to let time pass. Nevertheless, the indeterminacy of Arturo’s final decision is precisely the point. The ring’s immensely powerful representational powers remain in accordance with the principles of fetishistic projection and ascription. Regardless of whether Arturo can or cannot cut the bond emotionally, he is still physically separated from his family. The ring either represents bygone times, or a refusal to accept the separation—a refusal to accept that a separation has taken place of course entails that a separation has indeed taken place. Moreover, the inescapable function of the ring’s oxymoronic mode is to juxtapose two opposites. Thus, in strict accordance with fetishism and its oxymoronic mode of simultaneous presence and absence, there can be union and separation without mutual exclusion; a thing can simultaneously be its own opposite; like the fetish object it welcomes ascriptions and projections of virtually any nature.

Arturo’s relation to physical objects, which entails misdirecting libidinal energy and displacing the seductive powers of the sexual object, encourages allegorical reading. In its depiction of its hero, the novel simultaneously comments on the reader. This analysis itself is not very much different from Arturo’s fetishization...
of inanimate items in terms of projection: the reader, who is inevitably subjective, connects the literary constituents and constructs a consistent and preferably plausible interpretation. The relationship between a reader and a text entails animating the words (which by themselves are inanimate) in the imagination and, consequently, setting them in motion. The literary work of art is useless unless meaning is ascribed to it, and an object is just any object unless it is fetishized. In this sense, authorial presence is relevant to this discussion. When Fante’s biographer Stephen Cooper claims that Fante is “unabashedly autobiographical” (xi), he implicitly invokes him in the text. Accordingly, an authorial presence, or aura, must be claimed and perceived, the same way an object must be perceived in order to undergo the ontological metamorphosis into a fetish object. If the reader does not understand the meaning, it remains hidden. Since different interpretations can be derived, and literature seldom offers explicit messages, it is akin to semiotic fetishistic projection to fabricate meaning out of the potential of the textual raw material. Of course, in the case of literature it is not necessarily a book itself that is fetishized, although it could be, but rather the words it contains. In that sense, the novel’s function as allegory suggests that its depiction of the hero makes for a depiction of the reader’s interpretative process. Reading is moreover signified as an animation of the inanimate words, and the space in which this takes places is the fetishistic imagination.

As the other side of the fetishistic coin, there are instances of grotesque sadism. Arturo’s acquiring and fetishization of the book book that Miss Hopkins has held and read culminates in sadistic frenzy: “there he lay in my hand, that cricket, and he was I […] Arturo Bandini” (RLA, 271). In his imagination, Arturo displaces not only human characteristics onto objects of fetishism, but he displaces himself onto the cricket, subsequently torturing it to death, “I was forced to break his legs […] Here I lie with broken legs, a paltry black cricket, ready to die for thee […] And I killed the black cricket” (271). This duality of fetishistic displacement of libidinal energy and a desire for self-destruction points towards Freud’s theory of the two drives. As the dialectical counterpart to Eros, the death drive is man’s innate instinct to “lead organic life back into the inanimate state” (The Ego and the Id 38). Although normally directed towards the self in the form of self-torture or suicide, it can also be “diverted towards the external world in the form of aggression” (55-6). The fetishistic sexualization of inanimate objects must of course be considered an expression of Eros. Moreover, the juxtaposition of fetishism, sadism and symbolic self-effacement
encourages us to analyze those motifs using the lens of the death drive, as theorized by Freud. Instead of the death drive working against the individual, it takes the semblance of Arturo diverting it to the cricket. It is thus a manifestation of both sadism in its purest form, and an act of symbolical, or ritual, self-effacement, while diverting aggression to the external world. I argue that this should be read as a manifestation of the death drive according to the principles of fetishistic displacement. Moreover, the mind of Arturo seems to function as a space in which dichotomies are totally effaced: the object of sadism becomes the object of self-torture at the same time, albeit symbolically. Conversely, there are instances, which I will show, of brutal self-torture.

The dialectical opposition between Eros and Thanatos renders a dynamic antagonism. Thus, passionate emotionality finds its outlet either in fetishism, sadism or self-torture. Accordingly, the pattern which the instances of sadism follow suggests that when there is discontent there is sadism, and when there is contentedness there is no sadism: “Nothing ever felt so good […] Ordinarily I would have killed him” (RLA, 280). This quote refers to an encounter with a sandbug whose life is spared. Notice that “ordinarily” implies a habit, a behavioural pattern that points to an individual’s state of normalcy. At other times Arturo explicitly admits a desire for destruction: “I felt a swelling in me to kill these crabs” (244). On the next page he confesses this urge for destruction yet again: “I wanted to kill and kill” (245). The act of killing the crabs culminates in a morbid display of sadistic displacement: “Shortly after, I shot down another woman” (247). The relevance of this quote lies in the fact that the woman that is shot down is a crab that is imagined to be a woman: reality is subordinated to the imagination. Thus, in principle, sadistic displacement shares an affinity with fetishism. Sadism, precisely like fetishism, becomes instrumental in projecting imagination onto reality. Given, then, that we are confronted with manifestations of fetishism, sadism and self-torture in one and the same character, it is plausible to draw an analogy between Arturo and the Eros-Thanatos duality as theorized by Freud. According to that theory, the death drive can be “rendered harmless” both through sadism, and, “by being fused with erotic components” (The Ego and the Id 55). Or as Kaplan puts it, “the death drive tints itself in erotic color. The impression of erogenous color draws a mask right on the skin” (Cultures of Fetishism 8). Whereas fetishism is instrumental in animating the inanimate, sadism is the means of disanimating the animate by either destroying or avoiding it. Avoidance of the sexual
object naturally equals a form of dehumanization. Moreover, Arturo might then be seen, according to Freud’s theory, to represent the perpetual conflict between life and death.

The connection between fetishistic projection and self-torture is perhaps best illustrated by reference to a passage in which those motifs are juxtaposed. Arturo finally destroys his female companions made out of paper but instantly regrets it. Subsequently, he enters his study which by now has been invaded, and thus altered, by his sisters’ clothes: “I put out my hand and felt her dresses […] They were like the shrouds of ghosts, like the robes of millions and millions of dead nuns from the beginning of the world” (337). Arturo feels an overbearing need to destroy the dresses: “they seemed to be there only to harass me and destroy the peaceful fantasy of my women who had never been” (338). The subsequent reaction to his desire to destroy the dresses is violence towards self: “I wanted to bump my head against the closet wall and hurt myself so much that I would be senseless […] I bit my thumb until I tasted blood. I felt my teeth against the pliant skin, refusing to penetrate, and I turned my thumb slowly until the teeth cut through the skin” (338-39). This specific discontent is treated with self-torture. The death drive, or desire to eliminate, is diverted towards himself (the animate). Conversely, by ascribing to the dresses the power to invoke the presence of “millions and millions of dead nuns” (337) he offers a perfect example of semiotic fetishistic projection. Hence, by juxtaposing the two motifs (self-torture and fetishistic projection), Fante emphatically points towards the Eros-Thanatos duality: fetishism animates; self-torture strives for disanimation. The crabs and the cricket, mentioned above, are also examples of the consistent occurrence of sadism and a drive to eliminate the animate. Conversely, fetishism, as the endowment of material forces with intellectual life, are examples of Eros made overt. Sadism and self-torture, then, are consistent responses to various anxieties. For instance, as Arturo revises his written work the response to the realization of its questionable quality is that of self-torture: “I tore the cuticle loose on my thumb. The pain flashed. Closing my eyes, I seized the loose cuticle between my teeth and ripped it off” (389). Similar to fetishism, self-torture and sadism are acts of displacement. Discontent is dealt with and converted into irrational and conspicuous urges to destroy, whereas the attraction to the sexual object is diverted towards inanimate objects that bear implications and associations to that object. Quite literally, the fetishization of, for instance, the match as bearer of sexual implications is a means of
bringing back organic life to an inanimate state: the sexual object is reduced to an insignificant lifeless object. For the fetishist, the fetish object is indeed an extension, if not substitute for the sexual object. The instances of sadism and self-torture, thus, cannot be dismissed as coincidental. They constitute a behavioural pattern of the protagonist that I suggest be read, as I have already pointed out, as the direct counterpart of fetishism. Moreover, whereas fetishism is instrumental in animating the inanimate, sadism and self-torture are manifested through the disanimation of the animate.

In summary, to read John Fante’s *The Road to Los Angeles* is to view the world through the eyes of a fetishist. Qua self-torturing sadist and fetishist, its protagonist Arturo Bandini is best viewed as the embodiment of the two dialectical counterparts that constitute Freud’s theory of man’s inherent death drive: *Thanatos*. Accordingly, he should be viewed as an allegory of the perpetual conflict between life and death. Essentially, this duality manifests itself through the destruction of the animate and the fetishization of the inanimate, thus amounting to a reversal of perceived values that constitute life and death. Borrowing the terminology of Marx, fetishism entails “endowing material forces with intellectual life and stultifying spiritual life with a material force.” In other words, the inanimate is animated whereas the animate becomes disanimated. Fetishism, moreover, is the misdirection of libidinal energy and the displacement of the seductive powers of the sexual object. Essentially this is manifested as an avoidance, and thus dehumanization, of the sexual object.

The novel’s major theme depicting an aspiring writer is highly relevant to the discussion of fetishism. Accordingly, within Arturo’s diegesis, the act of replacing reality with the preferred substitute follows the principles of fetishistic projection. As the fetish object, which is nothing more than insignificant lifeless matter, becomes a perceived animate substitute for the sexual object, semiotic projection of will entails that reality is subordinated to the imagination. The scopophilic aspect of fetishism, which entails ascribing to a photograph an actual identity, shares an affinity with the mechanisms at work in semiotic projection of will onto reality. Furthermore, when Fante depicts the scopophilic duality between spectator and spectacle, he makes the spectating scopophilic the spectacle of the reader. Hence, the spectator also becomes the spectacle and the reader, in turn, becomes the voyeur. Moreover, the mechanisms at work in fetishistic projection encourage an allegorical reading of the novel: the
fetishistic projection of meaning shares a strong affinity with the interpretative process of the reader who connects the different parts of a narrative and generates out of this inanimate raw material a subjective interpretation.
Works Cited


