

## **Bringing Out the Gimp: Fashioning the SM Imaginary.**

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**Abstract:** The intention of this article is to investigate the cultural power associated with the gimp and the gimp mask. The gimp is a clothed or costumed SM body, frequently a submissive that often wears a leather or rubber costume that covers and effectuates the entire body including the face. The gimp is also a representation of SM that circulates throughout fashion and film and other forms of popular culture. Since the gimp's first outing and naming in the film *Pulp Fiction* it has become the byword for the head-to-toe leather SM look that has been appropriated by a number of designers as way of exploring and exploiting the relationship between fashion, fetishism, and transgression. As a counterpoint to the popular image of SM in fashion and film, this article also explores how the artists Catherine Opie and Robert Mapplethorpe have represented the gimp, not as an index of horror or transgressive style rather as an affirmative image of their own SM communities that, while still intended to shock, is an defiant attempt to rescue or reclaim the gimp from its negative associations.

**Keywords:** Sadomasochism, Gimp, Fetish, On/Scenity, Masks.

### On/scenity

In the introduction to her *Porn Studies* collection Linda Williams (2004) proposes the term on/scenity as a way of capturing the proliferation of pornographic discourses and representations that are now seemingly both abundant and public. Whereas the term 'obscenity', literally meaning off stage or off scene, marked the hidden, private, and clandestine nature of pornography, on/scenity, as on stage and seen, more accurately

captures the contemporary where nothing is hidden, in which ‘a culture brings on to its public arena the very organs, acts, bodies, and pleasures that have heretofore been designated ob/scene and kept literally off-scene’ (2004: 3). The usefulness of Williams’s concept of on/scenity is that, in addition to what we might consider the ‘real’ pornography of the porn industries and amateur productions, the term also covers a diverse range of recent cultural phenomena and practices that bear no industrial or obvious generic relation to the porn industry yet, flirt, signify, allude, remediate, and invoke the pornographic, the perverse, sexual limits and even sexual extremes as part of an everyday media and cultural landscape. From popular Hollywood films, the freedom of HBO programming, music videos, editorial fashion spreads, celebrity sex tapes, and the runway there is a recognizable on/scenity trend that ‘marks both the controversy and scandal of the increasingly public representations of diverse forms of sexuality *and* the fact they have become increasingly available to the public at large’. (Williams 2004: 3) Utilizing the concept of on/scenity allows one to explore, and account for, a myriad of pornographic gestures beyond a more easily defined and exclusive understanding of pornography to include many facets of popular culture and artistic practice seemingly engaged with pornographic signs, yet seemingly remote from those very signs and influences giving them shape.

In this contemporary on/scenity context there is a distinctive posturing that evokes pornographic conventions which can be seen most explicitly in some of the upper-end European niche fashion magazines like *Purple*, *Love*, and *AnOther Magazine*. However, my concern here is less to do with the erotic fashion legacy of Guy Bourdin and Helmut Newton, the seemingly compulsory nudity and ‘vanilla’ porno-conventions of niche magazines, and is instead focused on the more risk-associated

garments and dress motifs associated with sexual transgression, in particular SM (somasochism), and even more specifically the themes of horror that SM appears to invoke. Not that SM clothing and accessories haven't found themselves used in fashion magazines as favoured props by, say, Steven Klein who has championed a bondage-light signature in the majority of the high-end glossies. Within the expanse of the SM wardrobe, there is one particular outfit that is the most efficacious in signifying this sexual transgression, horror, and risk-attachment- namely, the gimp. The gimp, a *tout ensemble* of black leather, buckles, zips and lacing, entirely encasing the body, still seems beyond the now more accepted fetishistic fashions. Beyond the dungeon, it is a hard look to pull off publicly and editorially, despite its relative ubiquity as a media image- it is fetish wear that seemingly has no place in the everyday. The gimp's mediation in popular culture invokes a sinister and debasing spectacle- it is the total body coverage of an assumed sexual expression of terror and submission to torture: it is, what Gayle Rubin calls the 'leather menace' (2011).

Unlike the 'porno chic' styles exacerbated by reality television and low-level celebrities- a trickle down version of the presentational style of porno actors- not to mention the ubiquity of leather cuffs as an accessory, the most exalted being the Hermès *collier du chein* or 'dog collar', studded and spiked clothing, rubber and plastic, corsetry and body sculpting clothes, and the popularity of higher-than-high Christian Louboutin heels and those who ape him. Contrary to this, the gimp is not fashionable. Even those who utilize fetish clothing in their sexual practices, and do see some garments as having cross-over potential, are quick to separate the wearing of gimp attire from looking fashionable. As Helen Henley, columnist for the canonical seventies fetish wear magazine *AtomAge* once wrote of wearing masks:

"After wearing a mask for several hours and lovemaking I must go to the hairdressers yet again". This is a quote from a recent letter from one of my sex who lives in Germany which highlights another problem in wearing coverings to please HIM. For what do you say to your hairdresser to explain why your crowning glory is looking such a mess? You can hardly casually mention you had been wearing a rubber suit with a rubber helmet and a gasmask. (Henley 1979: 9)

The gimp appears to be antithetical to fashion, although designers will try and bring out the gimp if only to generate copy rather than customers, while fetishists consider such outfits as costume, as necessitating sexual fantasy and play but rarely consider them fashion. Rather, the gimp is associated with something else, the restriction and deprivation of bondage, the theatre of masters and slaves. Frenchy Lunning refers to this type of fetish clothing as *effectuating*, that is, clothing or costume that is directly linked to sexual gratification as an effect of wearing it (2013: 100). The 'effectuation' of a leather hood or gimp mask ranges from the wearer having no sight or hearing to controlled-suffocation and intense pressure through inflation and tight lacing.

Lunning categorizes this type of effectual clothing as 'the most subversive and, frankly, the most disturbing category' and 'garners the most fear and sexual disgust because of a sense of dehumanization and degradation' (100) which is precisely what Robert Mapplethorpe captures in some of his photographs of his own SM community for example *Leather Mask 1980* (Fig. 1). The gimp, like the one in Mapplethorpe's *Leather Mask 1980*, often involves total leather or rubber encasement of the body and head, zipped, laced, chained, buckled, most commonly worn by one who submits his or her will to another; on occasion the gimp mask is also worn by a master who metes out punishment as a fake hooded executioner. Unlike the majority of fetish clothing

that circulates without scandal or threat, gimps still retain a potency in popular culture more likely to suggest and embody horrific qualities than sexy or fashionable ones - hence their ubiquity in the horror genre. The gimp is expressly connotative of extreme bondage, suffering, torture and sexual slavery, deprivation, and debasement- even terrorists and serial killers are invoked by the gimp mask. It is these latter attributes that have made the gimp's on/scenity so appealing to filmmakers like Quentin Tarantino whose film *Pulp Fiction* (1994) I discuss below and in the many horror films dubbed 'torture porn' where the real and explicit acts of consent central to SM culture are seemingly absent. The gimp's raiment still retains a sense of depravity and in some cases personifies evil as it does in the film *8MM* (1999) and *The Collector* (2009). The gimp crosses a boundary of taste and acceptability that has waned in other forms of fetish fashion and attire. The transgressive appeal of the gimp has long fascinated artists ranging from Andy Warhol whose gimp masked Victor (Gerard Malanga) appears in the 1965 gay SM film *Vinyl*, to Nancy Grossman's sculptures of leather-wrapped wooden heads, and Robert Mapplethorpe's notorious *X Portfolio* (1978). Finally, there is a long list of fashion designers who invoke the gimp's shock-image factor including Gareth Pugh, Riccardo Tisci, Rick Owens, Sibling, Thierry Mugler (when he was at the helm of his own brand), Alexander McQueen, Aitor Throup, Zandra Rhodes, and Walter van Bierendonck.



**Fig. 1. Robert Mapplethorpe, *Leather Mask* 1980**

The intention of this article is to investigate the cultural power associated with the gimp, emphasizing the gimp mask, an index of ob/scenity and horror. It is an object that retains disturbing and provocative qualities as a ‘symbolic exercise of social risk’ (McClintock 2003: 237). I will limit the analysis mainly to the film *Pulp Fiction* and the artists Catherine Opie and Robert Mapplethorpe. The gimp has generated a range of controversial and pornographic meanings both on/scene and ‘obscene’ across film, art, fashion, and popular culture. The approach here is concerned with some of those meanings, the textual and sexual politics of the gimp as a representation of SM, dependent on being a clothed or costumed embodiment of SM. Films, fashion and so on, that mine SM imagery attempt to capture some of the social risk and yet simultaneously contain that risk by misrepresenting the axis of power, rendering conventionally masochistic clothing designed for submissive binding and sensory

deprivation in to the attire of sadistic monsters and torturers. Gimps in popular culture are often the stuff of nightmares.

### The Gimp Mask

The gimp and the gimp mask are recent coinage that comes from the film *Pulp Fiction* and the now infamous 'bring out the gimp' scene. 'Bring out the gimp' made public an on/scenity of gay SM spectacle, one previously confined to sex clubs, dungeons, and pornography, and bestowed on popular culture an ability to represent more fully, and essentially through clothing and costume, what sadists and masochists might look like, especially gay ones. Take for example Ricardo Tisci's 2011 spring summer men's collection for Givenchy that featured models in gimp-style masks. Tisci's masked men were frequently referred to in editorial copy as 'gimp masks' and 'gimps' even presenting the masks as a realistic purchase as part of Givenchy's look-book accessories collection. They also appear to be designed without effectuation in mind and as an affront to the real deal they actually come in white! This would seem a provocation, conjuring up gay SM, for despite their appearance in the look-book they never appeared for sale either in store or online. Givenchy menswear under Tisci often appropriates the codes of transgression, more frequently gang violence and danger: for example, the popular Rottweiler prints that invoke Europe's inner-city gang cultures. The Givenchy gimp is another example of the appropriation of codes of danger and social risk otherwise remote from fashion culture, in this instance dangerous sex. Gareth Pugh, who on occasion sends an avant-garde version of the gimp down the catwalk (SS 2007 being the most notable), refers to some of his early collections as 'the poodle and gimp shows' (Attwood 2011). Pugh at least does it for the design as well as profile-raising and his gimps are fully realized in their execution

and merging of fashion and the codes of SM clothing as conceptual rather than wearable. Fashion blogs were ablaze when in 2010 a Louis Vuitton monogram gimp mask of unknown origin appeared on the *Colette* blog, mixing SM and luxury to great effect, leading one to wonder if Louis Vuitton trunks, belts, and leather apparel have been similarly utilized for SM. Was the Vuitton gimp mask a commission for a genuine slave to fashion? In 2009 the BBC reported on a robbery referring to it as a ‘gimp mask raid’ (2009). The tabloids have a particular fascination for the gimp and like its connotations of sexual deviancy, especially when those meanings can be attached to stars and celebrities for example, ‘From Poker Face to Gimp Mask: Lady Gaga Unveils Her Most Ridiculous Outfit Yet’ (2009) or ‘George Michael Had Sex Toys and Gimp Mask in Car’ (2006).

Unlike the latecomers mentioned above, Walter Van Bierendonck has explored the power of SM and fetish clothing since his earliest collections of the 1980s with an emphasis on fetish fabrics, homoerotic codes and conventions, and importantly masks which are treated as almost mythic objects and not the mere catwalk shock-props seen elsewhere. Masks appear in his collections as the SM prop *par excellence*, as do candy-coloured latex gimps, but Bierendonck also draws upon masks from cartoons, sci-fi, Mexican wrestling, primitive art and tribal ritual. He is the one designer who has dedicated himself to the exploration of the mask’s cultural power to both hide and transform its wearer both in and out of SM culture. Van Bierendonck is fond too of referencing pornography and fetish culture without prudishness, yet exhibits a playful almost cheeky irreverence for SM which he counters as dangerous and painful when he presents knitted gimp masks, or terror masks as they are called in his autumn-winter collection from 2004. The knitted gimp masks evoke the mainstream reaction to SM as horrifying, at the same time recalling either childhood or feminine



associations with handicraft and knitting with their colourful yarns that offsets the otherwise assumed sinister connotations. Bierendock understands the intersection of the seemingly disparate cultures of fashion and SM as the recent career retrospective at Antwerp's *MOMU* (2011) demonstrated. In the exhibition catalogue he recounts to Valerie Steele that 'I'm fascinated by fetishism, S&M and role playing – because these come very close to fashion' (2011: 135).

The exact origin of the term 'gimp' in relation to SM remains unknown. There are no reference to gimps in bondage and SM literature, magazines, and clothing catalogues prior to *Pulp Fiction*. Historically, in *AtomAge* the fetish wear publication from the seventies, what we would now call gimp suits are rather plainly referred to as form-fitting suits or as one *AtomAge* reader describes it, 'a totally enclosing outfit' (Trunk 2010: 69). The serious SM outfitters for gay men such as *Fetters* and *Mr S Leather* use the categories of leather hoods. However, the more comprehensive all-inclusive sex and fetish wear stores such as *Bondara*, where SM is one of many sexual proclivities, do now seem to categorize leather and rubber hoods, masks, and head coverings with the gimp adjective as a clickable tab on their websites. Ironically, gimp is a term originating with clothing and fashion with a 'gimp' here referring to an ornamental trim where the fabric is bound with wire to give it a twisted decorative finish, especially common to lace work, although gimps are now more commonly associated with upholstery, such as embellishments for sofas. In addition to a gimp trim, a secondary meaning exists that seems somewhat abject in meaning a lame person, a limp or hobble for example, one may have a gimp leg. 'Gimp' is also offensive slang for a person with a physical or mental disability and one wonders if Tarantino's gimp is another example of his baiting of political correctness in suggesting the gimp is, for want of a better expression, 'a gay retard'. More recently

GIMP, an acronym for the *GNU Image Manipulation Program*, refers to a digital photo-retouching programme. Both the textile and offensive slang meanings of gimp have uncertain origins in keeping with the third meaning, the SM leather-clad and hooded slave, seemingly derived from the character and scene in *Pulp Fiction* who appears named in the dialogue and end credits as simply 'the gimp'.

It is the gimp's mask that seemingly holds the most power to mean something. In terms of dominance the gimp mask often functions to conceal identity and enable the fantasy role of domination by the master/top. Commonly the master's mask is more flexible or loose, often with the lower part of the mask removed or the mouth and eye parts fully open and unzipped, as one needs to be able to see and issue commands and abuse. At the other end where the mask is used as a device or symbol of submission and effectuation, it is most likely tightly laced and zipped, often experienced as an object that functions to deny the privilege of identity or action through different levels of sensory deprivation as 'highly constricted, identity-less, faceless, orifice-less, and featureless' (Lunning 2013: 104). The submissive gimp mask heightens the fantasy of helplessness, feelings of debasement and being at the mercy of a dominant top. As McCarty and Nunley write, on masks in general not SM in particular:

'In addition to disguise and transformation, revealing identity is neither reason for masking. Masks empower us to divulge our hidden, true selves or secret thoughts, exposing inhibitions or personality traits that we ordinarily contain or feel unable to express. We even wear masks to become anonymous, enjoying the pleasure of not being recognised. The protection of anonymity gives us the protection to behave in ways we otherwise might not, to act aggressively or to break rules.' (1999: 17)

Anthropologists and historians of primitive art have suggested that the origin of the mask is closely related to this transformation of identity. Masks were used among primitive peoples to commune with spirits and frighten children and enemies. They were also and still are used in theatre to elaborate on character. More recently masks have become a form of identifying rank and profession, and as protective covering, for example in sports and motorcycling (Laliberte and Mogelon 1973). It is the transformative power of the mask, eroticizing secrecy and disclosure as an act of power, that SM and the articulations of SM imagery in popular culture rely upon. The notion of hiding something about ourselves, the mask being ‘a garment that advertises that it has something to hide’ (Warwick and Cavallero 1998: 130) enables an acting out of fantasies of domination and submission, reversing the relations of power one might have socially or publically, as is typical of SM. In the deeply censorious and homophobic trial around the NEA’s (National Endowment of the Arts) funding of Robert Mapplethorpe’s *The Perfect Moment* exhibition of 1989, one of the prosecution’s witnesses argued that such obscene SM images were not ‘art’, based on the notion that the said images elicited no emotion because the subjects were masked (Meyer 2002: 217).

Following the scandal of Mapplethorpe’s gimps, the following decade seems to have been a turning point in the representation of SM – if not in acceptance at least in awareness – and coincidentally fuelling the fetish-fashion phenomenon that seemingly explodes not long after Madonna’s *cause célèbre* of fetishism, the *Justify My Love* (1990) music video. It is no coincidence that Valerie Steele’s *Fetish: Fashion, Sex, and Power* (1996) is published in that decade and sets the fashion history and theory agenda on the subject: *Fetish* begins with a visit to London fetish-fashion club Torture Garden (established in 1990). Linda Williams’ *Porn Studies* recognizes the beginning

of a proliferation of public-porno discourses with the Starr report on Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinski's detailed sexual practices, including the scandal of rimming, in tandem with the widened access to pornography via the Internet. Madonna's *Sex* (1992) book is released and includes a 'pornocopia' of mild SM fantasy photographed by Steven Meisel and both Jean Paul Gaultier (who clothed Madonna for much of the 1990s) while Thierry Mugler's fetish-inspired designs reach the pages of respectable magazines and newspapers with much applause and fanfare. SM was almost legitimate through its connection to fashion and fame, though no less controversial - the same cannot be said about cinema's treatment of similar material.

#### Around 1994 (1): Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction*

The gimp owes its popularity to *Pulp Fiction*. *Pulp Fiction*'s gimp look was created by costume designer Betsy Heimann who combined clothing bought from a fetish store with elements of her own costume design. In *Pulp Fiction* the obscene figure of the gimp was made on/scene in that moment of utterance ("bring out the gimp") and bodily inscription, reified as a spectacle of gay leather SM (cut through with racism), outed by its straight director as a now infamous cultural icon. It is as if an imaginary finger points 'that is what gay perverts look like'. The gimp's unveiling in *Pulp Fiction* unsettled American cinema by dredging up from the underground a demimonde of gay leather SM not seen in mainstream cinema since William Friedkin's *Cruising* (1980).

For those unfamiliar with *Pulp Fiction*, here's what happens in the 'bring out the gimp scene'. After attempting to run down his former gang boss Marcellus Wallace (Ving Rhames), Butch (Bruce Willis) crashes his car. Marcellus who is dazed and

confused, pulls out a gun and opens fire on Butch. During the kerfuffle they pursue each other into a pawnshop, only to be interrupted by the owner Maynard (Duane Whitaker) who knocks Butch unconscious. Marcellus and Butch wake to find themselves each bound to a chair with orange ball-gags in their mouth. Taunted by Maynard and his friend Zed (Peter Green), who are now established as racist, redneck southerners (the pawn shop displays the confederate flag and if that wasn't explicit enough it is called the Mason-Dixon pawnshop) who pose a clear sexual threat to the men. We can also see paddles, whips, and restraining belts on the shelf behind Butch and Marcellus and a more ominous electric generator with crocodile clips is among the paraphernalia. The rednecks are worse than Butch and Marcellus imagined- that is, worse than racists, they are gay sadists. The scene then becomes more degenerate as Zed tells Maynard to 'bring out the gimp' who is apparently still sleeping. Maynard proceeds to the back room to wake the monster and opens a wooden trunk-cum-cage to reveal the gimp (Stephen Hibbert), on a leash and in head to toe bondage leather, hooded, with a studded harness and codpiece. Zed plays a game of 'eeny, meeny, miny, mo' to determine which of the men should be raped first and it is Marcellus who is dragged to the back room. The gimp is tied up to watch over Butch (Fig.2) before Zed and Maynard retire to the back room to rape Marcellus. Over the next few minutes, Butch manages to break free from his bondage, punches the gimp into unconsciousness, and escapes from the pawnshop only to decide at the last minute to turn back and rescue his nemesis, who has after all already sent hit men to kill him. Male rape in a gay SM scenario is a fate worse than death in *Pulp Fiction*'s world. Upon returning to the basement Butch breaks in to the back room, *katana* sword in hand, to find Marcellus bent over and being raped, which we as an audience now witness, and Butch saves Marcellus who calls quits on the hit if he agrees this never

happened. Butch leaves the pawnshop while Marcellus is left in the basement about to exact his revenge which is elided in the film's narrative. What are we to make of this scene? A canny spectator may understand Tarantino's problematic conflation of queers and rednecks- but for the presence of the gimp as the leather menace this scene almost entirely plays itself out as one of sexual terror and depravity despite the gimp's own passivity in the proceedings. The most menacing figure, a consequence of the leather costume and of being masked, doesn't even participate in the actual abuse and rape, yet holds the symbolic power of the entire sequence together. Had it not been for the potency of the gimp's outfit this scene would merely have played out as Tarantino's wink to the male rape scene in *Deliverance* (1972).



**Fig. 2. Maynard ties up the gimp to watch over Butch in *Pulp Fiction* (1994)**

In short, 'bringing out the gimp' presents a tacit acceptance of gays as degenerates, equates racism with the play of power in SM, and gives one of them a wardrobe to confirm it. Tarantino succeeds in re-pathologizing homosexuality as inherently sick through the unfolding of this scene. It is worth investigating the meanings generated by the 'bring out the gimp' scene and the ideas that circulate around his costume as a source of gay-themed sexual terror which, in addition to being couched in a complex

sex of highly problematic sexual *and* racial politics, was defined by the menacing ‘leather look’ of the gimp as perversely attired.

The filming of *Pulp Fiction*’s ‘bring out the gimp’ scene demanded a closed set, as the reproduction of the call-sheets in *Vanity Fair*’s (Seal 2013) oral history of the film tell us. Much like the filming of sex scenes in mainstream cinema, usually to retain the actors’ modesty, observed here in that there were ‘no visitors, no exceptions!’ In acting out such a scene, in getting an actor in to his gimp drag, seemingly it is already fraught with controversy and danger that it must take place in a closed set, off-stage or ob-scene unlike, one must assume, the more open set policy of watching the filming of shootings, overdoses, and brain-splattered cars which are also a feature of *Pulp Fiction*.

SM and film costume do share some territory in that both are theatrical and they often involve dressing up to get into character. Much is made of SM’s theatricality (Weeks 1986, Hart 1998) and like film’s *mise- en- scene*, it is dependent on costumes, props, and roles. As one SM leatherman recounts:

You put on the costume, you become the character. As far as how it interacts with my leather, a lot of leather is costume. It allows us to act out feelings and to experience emotions and feelings we wouldn’t without because it creates a certain atmosphere or setting. When you add to that an actual BDSM scene where you’re going to do something involving your leather and S/M or bondage or discipline, you sort of create a very deep theatre... (Hennen 2008: 171)

Film costume in *Pulp Fiction* plays a crucial role throughout and not just in the gimp scene. As a key element, costume in *Pulp Fiction* goes beyond the conventional functioning of strengthening characterization and organizing visual coherence;

instead, costume is crucial to *Pulp Fiction*'s narrative ordering of events by the spectator. What the characters wear is central in piecing together the celebrated non-linear narration when chunks of story are out of order or sequence. The shift in costume from the cool of black suits to casual shorts and t-shirts allows us to make sense of Vincent (John Travolta) and Jules' (Samuel L. Jackson) story in a coherent linear order and thus piece together the other narrative events in the film solely from what they are wearing.

*Pulp Fiction*'s on/scenity is not just in this author's imagination, for Kathryn Bond Stockton also identifies and refers to the film as 'dirty' in the sense of it being pornographic and 'grimy, obscene, and scatological' (2006: 103). She writes that '*Pulp Fiction* dramatizes and thematizes... the shock of dirty details surrounding black and queer debasement' (107) that seemingly crystallize in the gimp scene. Stockton is concerned with the interface of queer and black debasements and shaming in this scene, the black not just of Marcellus's skin but also the gimp's black and queer leather, are yoked into a terrifying spectacle: on the one hand a racialized homophobia, on the other a compelling attraction that Stockton suggests is 'rarely or ever seen onscreen outside a gay pornographic film' (109).

### The gimp as American nightmare

The idea that *Pulp Fiction* stages a scene rarely seen beyond the confines of gay pornography is the sort of cultural on/scenity suggested by Williams. The 1990s is awash with mainstream and independent films that took as their narrative object the porn industries or a porno milieu in films such as *The People Versus Larry Flynt* (1996), *Hustler White* (1996), and *Boogie Nights* (1997). One of the key films in this cycle is *8MM* (1999) and it is notable for its spurious and reactionary approach to SM



insinuating that murder is a logical outcome. The premise of *8MM* involves private detective Tom Welles (Nicholas Cage) who investigates a snuff movie to verify whether it depicts the onscreen murder of a young woman at the hands of a knife-wielding, mask-wearing gimp called Machine (Chris Bauer). Welles uncovers a sinister world of illegal trading in SM movies and snuff films, seen as heinously interchangeable, which leads him to an encounter with director Dino Velvet (Peter Stormare) and producer Eddie Poole (James Gandolfini) and the snuff film's star, Machine the gimp. The film's climax involves a fight between Welles and Machine that takes place at the latter's house that is symbolically right next to a graveyard. Machine lives with his mom, listens to death metal up really loud (of course he would) and when unmasked, identity disclosed, he resorts to being a disempowered and pathetic creature without his mask but completely remorseless. Welles eventually exacts his vigilante justice and kills Machine. Like *Pulp Fiction* a lot of meaning can be tracked through the film's clothing in which leather comes to be associated with depravity, perversion, and evil. *8MM* is a good example of how film costume tells a story not readily apparent in the narrative events or spoken dialogue. Cage's character begins his investigation neatly turned-out in a crisp white shirt, tie, and raincoat. He is respectable and morally centred and his costume expresses as much but through the course of narrative events, as he descends further in to the world of pornography, SM, and snuff films, he swaps his professional look seemingly without motive for a black vest and leather jacket. It is as if his character is being contaminated by his exposure to the seedy underworld of extreme pornography and while this is not expressed in dialogue it is very much apparent in his sartorial transformation. In adopting the signs of this other world, the colour black, leather, exposed arms, it allows us to understand the character's psychological transformation that eventually leads Welles to

vigilantism and what the films sanctions as the legitimate murder of, in order, the snuff film producer and then the gimp. It is interesting that the final act of justice is served against the gimp and not the person who makes money from murder, which suggests that perverts are more monstrous than profiteers. This hierarchy of villainy and the depiction of evil in *8MM* is related to Machine as gimp-monster which is part of the longer history of cultural depictions of SM as horrific as Gayle Rubin explains:

'Sex politics are kept far to the right by many forces, among them a frequent recourse to terror. Our sexual system contains a vast vague pool of nameless horror. Like Lovecraft's pits, where unmentionable creatures perform unspeakable acts, this place of fear is rarely specified but always avoided. This reservoir of terror has several effects on our ability to deal with sex politically, making the whole subject touchy and volatile. [...] It provides a constant supply of demons and bogeymen with which otherwise rational people can be stampeded.' (2011: 110)

*8MM* is merely another example of the gimp's appearance as source of horror and dread and the use of the gimp mask allows figures associated with sexual minorities to be grouped alongside horror films and television series which included numerous masked monsters as a staple of the genre for example, Leatherface (Gunnar Hansen) in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) whose mask is made from human leather, *The People Under The Stairs* and 'Daddy' (Everet McGill), as if that name weren't a nod to SM, and the latex-clad gimp Tate (Evan Peters) in *American Horror Story: Murder House* (2011). A recent example of the gimp-monster in film is *The Collector* (2009) and its sequel *The Collection* (2012); examples of how SM imagery and costume have been recast for the purposes of horror. *The Collector* belongs to the 'torture-porn' horror subgenre along with the *Saw* (2004-2010) and *Hostel* (2005-

2011) franchises in which the capture and torture of victims is rendered as an inventive, drawn out, and gory spectacle. *The Collector* is notable for making the connections between horror and SM most explicit, not just in the actions of the killer, (he keeps some of his victims in a large trunk like the one that Tarantino's gimp gets out of), but also in the stylized gimp mask that is repeatedly shown in close-up throughout the film. The gimp mask is the collector's signature look clearly drawn from SM and ramped up to horror movie material, and the marketing imagery for the film is at pains to detail the mask and the corset-style lacing up the back. The movie's poster features the back of the mask and the collector pulling the lacing shut, emphasizing that he gets into costume and that dressing up is a part of his serial killing ritual. The gimp masks clearly suggesting that horror and SM are linked to the extent that it is constructed as Rubin has suggested 'in such a way that one of its outcomes appears to be death or murder' (Rubin 2011: 116). News media reporting on crimes that have an apparent sexual dynamic are also keen to establish a causal link between SM and murder, mining the language of horror while avoiding the centrality of consent to SM practices, and such stories are exacerbated if clothing and costume is part of the crime. The true crime book *Bag of Toys: Sex, Scandal, and the Death Mask Murder* (France 1992) details the 1985 murder of Eigil Dag Vesti, a Norwegian student at FIT whose corpse was found burned and mutilated wearing a leather hood that the press at the time referred to as a death mask. The death mask murder exploits SM themes and imagery attempting to collapse together associations

of SM with murder and horror through the object of the gimp mask.

*Self-Portrait/Pervert*, 1994  
Chromogenic print, 40 x 30 inches



**Fig 3. Catherine Opie *Self-Portrait/Pervert* (1994)**

Around 1994 (2): Catherine Opie's *Self-Portrait/Pervert*

In contradistinction to *Pulp Fiction* and the gimp monsters of popular culture and the horror film, in the same year as *Pulp Fiction* photographer Catherine Opie produced a self-portrait of herself in a gimp mask called *Self-Portrait/Pervert* (1994). In the self-portrait Opie is sitting in front of chintzy brocade wallpaper, lettering freshly cut in to her bleeding skin which reads 'pervert', and she is pierced along each arm with forty-

six evenly spaced temporary needles; at the time Opie belonged to the San Francisco SM community (Fig. 3). Why would Opie make an image that is so difficult to look at? Why would anyone do that to their body? Why would a self-portrait deny access to the artist's face? These are important questions the work provokes. In *Self-Portrait/Pervert* Opie recalls that she 'wanted to push the whole realm of beauty and elegance, but also to make people scared out of their wits' (Ferguson 2008: 106). Unlike the scare tactics of *Pulp Fiction* Opie's intentions are altogether different. *Self-Portrait/Pervert* also challenges the conventions of portraiture by having Opie's head covered by a gimp mask so that the viewer has no access to her face - she denies them a way to access her identity and instead evokes a confrontation with SM and pain and the questions posed above. Indirectly *Self-Portrait/Pervert* responds to the politics of *Pulp Fiction* that invokes a popular culture version of SM by making the gimp on/scene, while concurrently the real queers and SM subculture remain obscene, off stage, silenced, censored. Opie in *Self-Portrait/Pervert* and related works from around this period challenged the ongoing demonization of SM and the censoring of transgressive queer art which includes hostility from 'normalized' gays and lesbians. *Self-Portrait/Pervert* symbolizes the silences and the obliteration of identity that queers experience by heteronormative culture and other gays and lesbians; it is a work born out of the AIDS epidemic, which turns the pain associated with SM into a political statement to the point where the images test the limits of legibility, both in the extremity of the image of cutting and piercing and the gimp mask's erasure of the face as a point of identification. Opie explains the impetus behind the self-portrait:

'Perverts' [sic] is a very angry piece. I was pissed off. I really wanted to make that piece because of what was happening culturally in the US: the [NEA] censorship, the fuss around the Mapplethorpe show and what was happening

in mainstream gay culture. All of a sudden mainstream gays and lesbians were calling themselves 'normal' and yet a lot of communities were being pushed further and further out in a certain way.' (Blessing 2008: 16)

Opie also goes on to describe *Self-Portrait/Pervert* as 'a decorative image of pride; for people outside that subculture, it is a challenge, a gauntlet thrown down' (2008: 16) and she means those normalized gays and lesbians as much as the assumed audiences for *Pulp Fiction*. Despite an obvious delineation of these two texts, *Pulp Fiction* and *Self-Portrait/Pervert*, nonetheless get yoked together in reference to Mapplethorpe's SM pictures as Stockton remarks in her analysis of *Pulp Fiction*'s black and queer debasement and shaming that 'Tarantino's film puts into motion images reminiscent of Mapplethorpe's photography' (2006: 104). Mapplethorpe and the discourses around his photographs of gay leathermen and SM is a thread that links many of the ideas raised in this article about representation, the reification and reception of SM in culture as something risky and to be feared, horror being continually evoked but also as a source of pride and defiance.

A common assumption and reception (in conservative circles at least) would see Mapplethorpe's SM and sexually explicit photographs, which surely need no rehearsing here in terms of subject matter, as testing the boundaries of art in terms of content rather than their skilful formalism (as they famously tested NEA state funding of their exhibition). Similarly one might suggest that SM clothing and accessories test the boundaries of fashion more so for their form and function rather than the content of their meaning as sexual subculture. While his photographs are affirmative of gay SM subculture, Mapplethorpe obviously chose particular SM clothing and accessories because of their aesthetic possibilities and textures - for example, the way leather straps and harnesses enable geometricization and lineation in the image, the way

black leather refracts light and so on. Richard Meyer describing *Joe, NYC, 1978* suggests exactly this point in emphasizing how integral the gimp costume is to the photograph as a work of art; ‘the ridges of the rubber hood, the strap-on breathing tube, the studded collar, the industrial rubber gloves, the sheen of the latex body suit’ (Meyer 2002: 187). Mapplethorpe exhibited a fondness for the gimp, knowing the facelessness challenged photographic convention of portraiture and he elevated the gimp to the heights of aesthetic classicism in works such as *Jim, Sausalito 1977*, *Leather Mask, 1980*, and an *Untitled (1978)* headshot of a gimp mask worn with a ‘pop wig’, those cheap nylon afro-style wigs in gaudy colours from fancy dress shops, suggesting a camp gesture that is often downplayed in relation to Mapplethorpe.

### Conclusion

At the time of writing, a Zandra Rhodes exhibition at London’s Fashion and Textile Museum is about to take place in the fall of 2013. The key image that is being used to advertise *Zandra Rhodes: Unseen* is a slender male body outfitted in clothing that quotes SM through a gimp-style mask and bondage motifs. The image positions Rhodes as a fashion outsider, a British rebel much like Vivienne Westwood, and in order to reinforce this rebelliousness SM is invoked as the ultimate form of outsider subculture. It is a queer situation in that a respectable textile museum is able to promote an exhibition through SM imagery while having nothing to do with SM itself. The title *Unseen* does in fact evoke a play on secrecy and disclosure and the seen/unseen or on/scene obscene dichotomy that began this article. On the one hand *Zandra Rhodes: Unseen* does tout that the gimp image is far from waning since it is very much seen as the key image in the exhibition advertising and on the other hand, the exhibition demonstrates that the gimp no longer holds the power to shock and

transgress it once did. The gimp, perhaps, no longer seems to be obscene. While *Pulp Fiction* is responsible for bringing out the gimp and Hollywood for mainstreaming the gimp as a source of horror, it would seem that fashion at least still has a lot to explore since it always seems poised to give the gimp a whole new outfit.

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