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I Wish to be Dissolved

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Abstract

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This thesis investigates the co-occurrence of violence and sexuality in popular media through the thought of Sigmund Freud and Georges Bataille.

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## **Introduction: The/Our Therapeutic Modality**

There is a quote which has very significantly resonated with me over the course of my research and the ongoing development of this thesis. On page 12, in Section II of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, there is a line which comes right after Freud has described the perplexing occurrence of recurring nightmares which plague the war veterans who have been diagnosed with ‘Traumatic Neuroses’.<sup>1</sup> These individuals have developed a neurosis from the experience of some event which caused them great surprise or fright, and whose dreams repeatedly bring them back to the place of this accident. Varying translations differ on the exact wording of the line, but I prefer James Strachey’s version found on Psychoanalytic Electronics Publishing: “This astonishes people far too little”. How comically straightforward and understated a reaction. Freud here is encountering events massively incongruent with his beloved Pleasure Principle and marveling at how little attention is seemingly paid to such strange occurrences. I believe this quote sets the tone and conviction for the remainder of the essay: a genuine curiosity/surprise/awe which invites investigation. From here on through the end of the thesis, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is devoted to working through/correcting/understanding this apparent contradiction.

While it may not have come about as quickly or with quite as much elegance, my astonishment when I began conceptualizing the topic of my thesis was much the same. The feeling that you’ve discovered a secret unknown to many; the excitement at the prospect of thinking about/conceptualizing something in a novel way; ferociously consulting past works that

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<sup>1</sup> A reference to the case study which motivated Freud to write *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Traumatic-neurotics are veterans of WWI, whom today might be diagnosed with PTSD, who have some unresolved psychic conflicts related to the binding of cathectic energy generated by an event of trauma which causes them to experience recurring nightmares. The question: why does the pleasure principle not allow these veterans to experience pleasant, tensionless dreams?

have dealt with similar topics to help orient yourself. All this in the hopes of ultimately assembling or even creating the puzzle pieces needed to put together a coherent, particular, and clear description of what you're looking at that you can hand to someone uninitiated. For Freud, this search is played out in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. For myself, that search has produced this thesis. In a sense, I see the project undertaken in the subsequent pages unfolding with similar sentiments and convictions that Freud wrote with in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.

The essential structure to *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is, as I see it: re-establishing the foundational principles of Psychoanalysis, identifying cases from clinical experience which are inconsistent with these principles, and reformulating/adding onto these principles in light of these cases. While I don't run my own clinic nor do I have grandchildren, my experiential research has come in the form of simply consuming popular culture and its media. Netflix is my clinic; Twitter is my Fort-Da. It is the disturbing, uncomfortable, or plainly weird pairings of violence and sexuality on these platforms which initially astonished me. To return to the framework of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, I believe it is a roadmap which will be useful to keep in mind when explicating exactly what is so astonishing about these tv shows, music, and movies, as well as when formulating a theory to help us make sense of it all.

The essential structure of this thesis is, as I see it:

- I. Here is a strange phenomenon we observe occurring in the world
- II. Here is what Freud might have to say about it
- III. Here is what Bataille might have to say about it
- IV. We collect the notes from these two consultations, put them in conversation with each other
- V. We attempt to reach some diagnosis of the phenomenon in the wake of this synthesis



Given that I did not have the background Freud had, Freud was one of a number of thinkers I turned to. The principal other among them being Georges Bataille. His work on Eroticism and the erotic experience helped me greatly in making sense of the sheer pervasiveness or even banality of violent sexuality. This work will attempt to put the two in conversation and reveal their shocking and radical similarities. To read Freud through Bataille, and to situate Bataille in Freud. With a good and composite consideration of these two theories, the violently sexual media we encounter will no longer seem astonishing, but rather expected.

## Chapter 1: The Presenting Problem

“Whenever you tell me I'm pretty  
That's when the hunger really hits me  
Your little heart goes pitter-patter  
I want your liver on a platter  
Use your finger to stir my tea  
And for dessert I'll suck your teeth  
Be too sweet and you'll be a gonner  
Yeah, I'll pull a Jeffrey Dahmer”  
--Ke\$ha, *Cannibal*

“Bend her over then I murk [murder] her”  
--Lil Baby, *Woah*

In both popular culture and media, the pairing together of images of violence and sex is ubiquitous. From violent video games that allow the player to assume the POV of the murderer and the rapist (*Grand Theft Auto*), in aggressive music which describes sex as an act of conquest (*City Girls*, *Young Thug*, *Ariana Grande*), and in films which portray as sympathetic or even erotically desirable the serial killer (*Extremely Wicked*), blood is not usually far off from an exposed breast. The examples are too numerous to count. Two attractive, rival spies exchange gunfire and engage in a bloody fight scene replete with corny music and crudely sexual one-liners before acrimoniously embracing (*Mr. and Mrs. Smith*). A woman sings about her desire for the boy she likes, but for sexual satisfaction or to cannibalize him one cannot be sure (*Cannibal*, Ke\$ha). Hypermasculine slang which refers to the number of sexual partners one has had as their ‘body count’, getting sex as a ‘kill’ or a ‘hit’. Volumes could be filled with examples from all sides of popular culture which place the violent squarely next to the erotic. In many cases they are one in the same.

These scenes, when presented bluntly and without emotion, seem absurd, shocking, and often gross. And yet, this not the reaction many in the audience would report when consuming their respective media. For example, the opening line to Lil Baby’s 2020 hit single *Woah* reads:

“Bend her over then I murk [murder] her”. What a wildly violent way to talk about having sex. If one were to look at this song or many of the examples just listed critically and with a tabula rasa, there is no doubt that they would find the content at best strange or worse off putting. But this clearly is not the case. Instead, popular audiences are singing along: unsurprised, unperturbed, or unastonished. In any one of these different mediums, whether it be on the radio, television, or Xbox, the violently sexual seems right at home.

Take as another stark and graphic example the Netflix series *You*. In this show, the main protagonist Joe is an awkward, attractive loner who fixates on a different girl each season: systematically killing any friends or family that get in the way of her falling in love with him. He is the dreamy antihero--a caring and complex feminist father-figure who obsessively stalks his chosen victims, tapping their phones and controlling their lives. Graphic and downright romantic sex scenes between Joe and his girlfriends (victims?) are interrupted by shooting/stabbing/butchering/disposal. The imagery of penetration interspersed with the imagery of penetration.

In the Final scene of season 1, Beck, the object of Joe’s desire and frustration, literally realizes her Stockholm Syndrome in being locked in a cage in Joe’s basement. She pleads for her life, appeals to his love for her, only to escape and ultimately be bludgeoned to death with a mallet. Almost adding insult to murder, Joe then frames her well-intentioned therapist for the murder and skips town to find his next victim in season 2. This sounds like the plot to a horror movie and yet the series is presented with the candor of a romantic comedy; the whole vibe of the show is more akin to that of *Gossip Girl* than *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>*. We see Joe’s abusive upbringing/struggles and his conviction for a strict moral code, the function of which seems to act as an apology for the murders. Quippy one-liners about toxic masculinity and platitudes

about being a good person preclude any real discussion of the psychotic hallucinations from PTSD Joe experiences in visions of his past victims. While the violence clearly does take a toll on Joe, a general nonchalance and even playful attitude pervades the series, ultimately undercutting the significance of the deaths.

This plot is shocking when stated bluntly, but even more shocking is the audience reception of these characters. One twitter user wrote, “I would totally let Joe lock me in his basement [tongue emoji]” (@princessproblum). Another wrote, “Joe is a literal psychopath and I think that’s most of the reason why I’m attracted to him” (@VaguelyDean). And even another said, “Okay but @PennBadgely was sexy in Gossip Girl but lord Joe is a whole new level” (@capricornyyy). One might expect that knowing Joe’s secret from the beginning would lead to abhorring his actions even more intensely. Clearly, this is not what mostly unastonished viewers think of Penn Badgley as Joe.

It seems that in whichever medium of entertainment one was to look, depictions of violence and depictions of sex are directly adjacent and moreover blasé. This is not to say that this is because we have been bombarded with these images ad infinitum so as to now accept them as unimportant. That is, it is not solely a function of their omnipresence that they are rendered familiar. While it may be in part true that marketing agencies have overloaded us with these images because they sell, this banality cannot be due simply to desensitization. I believe that answers the question of the egg but not the chicken. Rather, this phenomenon can shine light on something constitutive about human sexuality/desire as much as it can about the dynamics of society on a grander scale.

## Chapter 2: II

A desperate question jumps forward to the astonished consumer: Why? What conditions would lead to a world in which *Sex Sent me to the Emergency Room* is a nationally syndicated TV show, and “Sex made me more Emotionally Intimate with my Partner” does not exist? Why would someone rather watch a TV show about painful, sexual failures than one about wholesome, sexual accomplishments? Why would a show whose plot is to recount wacky and graphic stories of people dying have so much partial nudity and explicit sexual overtones (1000 ways to die)? Why is it that this astonishment is lost on the vast majority of viewers?

There are many hermeneutic routes one might take in an attempt to answer this question, and the chief one employed in this thesis might be called psychoanalytic. This is not to say that others are unhelpful when attempting to reach a coherent explanation. To look at this question through a feminist lens would lead to conclusions which are by no means false. It is without doubt that phenomenon does not present equally in terms of which gender is more often the victim of the violence engendered in the image. When violence or death is paired in some way with sexuality, the body of the woman is frequently the sacrifice. The trope of the innocent/pure ‘Good Girl’ falling for and being corrupted by the mean ‘Bad Boy’ is well-known to both songwriters and TV executives (*Falling in Reverse*; *Step Up*).<sup>2</sup> While this is all true, it fails to get to the heart of the phenomenon. There are many and clear examples of women who occupy the position of the aggressor, and the effect for the male viewer is not qualitatively different. That is, while the phenomenon does absolutely intersect with misogyny, it is not ultimately rooted in it.

Rather, this phenomenon serves as evidence which points us in the direction of being able to say something about the nature of human sexuality or desire irrespective of gender. Namely it

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<sup>2</sup> For the sake of brevity, the 100s of examples which jump to mind at this point will be omitted.

seems that, in some sense and on some level, the marriage between images of violence and erotic images is experienced as attractive/desirable. An attractive person of the preferred sex is desirable, but that same person holding a gun or engaging in illicit activities exerts a paradoxically stronger pull on the observer. Someone might perceive Angelina Jolie as a desirable partner, but Angelina Jolie as an assassin elicits a double-take: drawing their attention and interest more forcefully.

We can see this clearly enunciated in many of the examples listed above. “Sex made me more Emotionally Intimate with my Partner” could be a show filled with graphic and steamy descriptions of romantic and satisfying sexual encounters between consenting partners, ending with a healthy and constructive discussion between the participants. This plot would no doubt draw the attention of many viewers with its sexual content--and yet it doesn't exist. Instead, we are stuck with *Sex Sent me to the Emergency Room*, a show that ran for more than 50 episodes whose plot consisted of graphic and crass descriptions of sexual encounters that went so erroneously as to cause serious injury that required hospitalization. Through an honest introspection, we might be able to understand the essential and obvious difference between the two. Even if not, the smoking gun lies in the very actuality of the latter show. The former show might catch our attention, but the latter's injection of violence makes it that much more interesting.

The hypothetical distinction between these two shows, the actual and the contrived, moreover highlights the importance of investigating media examples which might be thought of as ‘base’ or ‘low-brow’. Sexual desire is not a feeling endemic to highly intellectual/cognitive/‘proper’ mental apparatuses or artistic endeavors. Rather, it is in many respects described as dirty, carnal, primal, vulgar, or base. Just as sexual desire is thought of in

this way, the sordid or vulgar shows, songs, and movies which deal in it are thought of as similarly base. That is, it requires no higher mental functioning to sit and enjoy the show *Sex Sent me to the Emergency Room*, the brain can shut off and go along for the ride in a way that would not be possible with its wholesome, hypothetical contrast. This is moreover an important point to keep in mind for our analysis. In that these media examples require little or no cognitive effort to consume, I believe they can tell us something about what lurks in those parts of the psyche on which conscious scrutiny is seldom cast. That is, the base nature of these shows points us in the direction of being able to speak on what is at base of the human psyche.

There are comprehensive theoretical ventures we can undertake which can help us diagnose this perplexing problem. Beyond simply arriving at conclusions about the propagation and orientation of human desire, we will similarly theorize the place of these media examples within the broader context of our culture's dynamics. That is, we will come to understand these media examples as they fit into a psychology of human desire as well as their place in a sociology of the flow of energy in a society: two areas of analysis which are by no means exclusive of the other. In the chapter wherein we establish a clinic at the Pyramid of the Sun, we will see that the abstract structures, processes, and dynamics of the individual psyche & social psyche are exceedingly similar. And, once we have sufficiently formed this theoretical framework, we will apply it to offer an analytic construction which aims to explain the phenomena listed above. The answer to the question of whether these media examples satisfy the demands of the TV network as a social institution or the demands of the audience's desires might eventually be that it satisfies both simultaneously. Once we have worked through Freud's clinical cases and Bataille's poetries, we might be able to answer both the *why* of the production/creation of these portrayals of sexual violence as well as the *why* of the lack of astonishment elicited in

the general population. These are interplays and claims which will be made clearer in the course of our analysis.

Through a reading of Freud, we will be able to understand this phenomenon as it arises from the unconscious desire of the individual. Through a reading of Bataille, we will be shown the gravity of such a claim, as well as understand how this phenomenon arises from the give and take of societal forces. In our putting together the two, the intensity and frenzy of Freud will be with Bataille conclusively brought to light. We will understand the essential similarity between the dynamics of these two systems: the psyche of the individual and the drama of the taboo and its transgression in society. In effecting a union of their theories, experiences, and mythologies, we will get as close as one can to writing the inexplicability of death, eroticism, ecstasy, and their inassimilable yet irreducible importance to life and knowledge. The project of working with both Freud and Bataille will allow us to diagnose and describe an essential conflict constitutive of both the individual and society, a diagnosis of both or either with more confidence and breadth than would a consultation of Freud/Bataille alone allow. Ultimately, we will arrive at multiple avenues, equipped with a well-stocked toolkit and accompanied by mythological characters, through which we will make this phenomenon less surprising or astonishing, but nonetheless distressing and gravely important.



### Chapter 3: Life in, through Death

“The highest and the lowest are always closest to each other in the sphere of sexuality”  
--Sigmund Freud, Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality, The Freud Reader, 254<sup>3</sup>

“Then we shall be compelled to say that ‘The aim of all Life is Death’”  
--Sigmund Freud, Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Section 37

Throughout his long and mystic canon, Georges Bataille has written extensively and ferociously on topics revolving around death, violence, the erotic, and the occult. In perhaps his magnum opus *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, Bataille continues his investigation into the “connection between death and sexual excitement” (11). He deals explicitly in cases of human sacrifice, incest, and religious ecstasy: writing with a prose or conviction more befitting poetry than a philosophical treatise. Whatsoever is considered taboo/sacred in society is brought out, mixed with blood and shit, and imposed onto the reader in such a way that it is not merely understood but experienced. Deindividuation, (De)sadism, and orgies are recurring imagery in his elucidating discourse. To anyone interested in the phenomena we aim to discuss, his works are indispensable.

The famous psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, on the other hand, is a writer whose main interests stray far away from this dark corridor. There are, however, a number of writings wherein Freud confronts face-on the problem of death and its function in the human psychology. The definitive work of Freud’s one ought to look in order to understand how he works through death’s place in psychoanalysis is *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. It is here that Freud acknowledges the primacy of death and its mobilizing force in the unconscious of the mind, ultimately leading to his naming of a ‘Death Drive’ that forced a reconceptualization of the all-

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<sup>3</sup> Freud includes a quote from Goethe’s tragic play *Faust*: “From Heaven, through the world, to Hell”.

important pleasure principle. His conjecture here, while exactly speculative,<sup>4</sup> is likewise indispensable for understanding the role that death plays in our conceptual schemas.

For all their significant and stark differences as both writers and thinkers, the substantive intersections are numerous, and many revelations can be derived from their being put into conversation. They share in an intense fascination/bewilderment at the figure of death and its influence.<sup>5</sup> For both, death is at once the upheaval that pushes us away and the seduction that pulls us in. It is the beginning from whence we arrive and the end we long to reach: the alpha and the omega. One avenue into the two authors and their frameworks can be found already in the introduction to *Erotism* and the main portions of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. It is here that both authors deal in the origins of life, cellular reproduction, and the work of death in relation to life<sup>6</sup>. Freud, whose essay came earlier and perhaps in more rudimentary/cautious form, will be worked through first. In beginning our consultation with the psychoanalysis of Freud, we hope to work towards an informed diagnosis of the presenting problem introduced in the first sections.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud writes that, though we can “know nothing of the excitatory process that takes place” (29), there was at some point a time when inanimate matter became an animate organism. The life of this organism was no doubt short-lived and turbulent, a frantic endeavoring to cancel out its life and return to the nothingness. It is here that the first instincts of the organism had to come into play, for there is no doubt that the experience of being pulled out of the bliss of inorganicism was a tense and provocative affair. In response to this

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<sup>4</sup> Freud repeatedly cautions the reader before the main sections of the work, “What follows is speculation, often far-fetched speculation” (4).

<sup>5</sup> For further discussion of Freud’s on the importance of death within psychoanalysis, see *The Uncanny* (1919). These texts, when placed in chronological context with his 1915 work *Thoughts for the Times on War and Death*, provide a developmental overview of Freud’s thought on death in the wake of WWI.

<sup>6</sup> If not for their vast differences in prose and style, one might be forgiven for assuming the substance came from the mind of one writer. While little is known about how much of Freud’s work Bataille directly read and was influenced by, it does seem more than a remarkable coincidence.

tension—and under the guide of the pleasure principle—the organism desires to slip back into the tensionless peace of non-existence, “to return to the inanimate state” (Freud 1920, 37). In the elemental agitation of ancient life, this process was likely repeated ceaselessly before the right conditions arose which allowed for the development of these “germ-cells” beyond a mercurial instant of life.<sup>7</sup>

Freud here proposes two possibilities for the sustenance of life. First, that death in the return of the organism into inorganic nothingness must be “immanent in the organism itself” (Freud 1920, 38). That is, while “the aim of all life is death” (Freud 1920, 37), I aim for *my* death and you for yours. As such, when external forces create roadblocks for the organism to end its tension, we continue to exist only insofar as we can fashion *our own* coda. It is here where the paradoxical nature of those instincts for life and self-preservation can be seen. In those movements wherein an organism is instinctually compelled to avoid threat and dangerous events, it is compelled to do so only with the ultimate goal of reaching the death constitutive to itself. Thus, those self-preservative instincts which were the “guardians of life” are also at once “myrmidons of death” (Freud 1920, 38). There is some salience in this intimation at a fundamental paradox for our project which we will return to later.

Secondly, Freud proposes a hypothesis for the way in which an organism could come to be able to weather an “external world charged with the most powerful energies” (1920, 26). In the process of the organism’s struggle to die, the stimulation from the outside world penetrates and deadens the outer layer of the creature, and this outermost surface “thenceforward functions as a special envelope or membrane resistant to stimuli” (Freud 1920, 26). What cosmic irony that the very attempt to die forces the organism to live and develop: in the death of the outer layers,

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<sup>7</sup> The exact conditions or circumstances which were favorable for the prolonged maintenance of life are likely likewise ones which we “can know nothing of” (Freud 1920, 29).

the exact conditions/possibility for survival is afforded to the inner core. That is, in the partial realization of a self-inflicted dying off of living cells under the purview of the death drive, the organism is protected against the stinging stimuli of the external world and so lives on.

These two propositions highlight the ambiguous stance of Freud's germ-cell and of Freud himself. The former is a proposition of how the organism can survive in the face of a death drive, while the latter is one for how the organism can survive in the face of a hostile external world. That is, the first asks *how can the organism survive in spite of its own death drive?* While the second asks *how can the organism survive when confronted with a hostile external environment?*<sup>8</sup> The confusing amalgamation of these two questions gives the impression of an organism beset on both sides by threat and danger. For the organism to view the external world as the hostile enemy or the tranquil homeland: this is what Benjamin Fong has described as the "primal ambivalence" (Fong 2016, 33).

That is, the creation of the protective carapace around the organism "transforms a longed-for origin into a hostile threat and that differentiates it from the organism's protective outer layers" (Fong 2016, 32). Even though the drive which precipitated the killing off of a cortical layer had death as its aim, the creation of such a layer is itself the precipitation/necessitation of a reconceptualization of the organism and its surroundings. In a sense, with the advent of a dead, inorganic outer layer around the organism, what allows the organism to view this dead layer as a part of itself and not simply a continuation of the inanimate milieu it inhabits? It is this stage where Freud and Fong begin to see the creation of states like *Inside vs. Outside/Within vs. Without* the organism.<sup>9</sup> There must be here some degree of differentiation/individuation in the organism existing with an *Inside* that can be contrasted with an *Outside* for its animacy to be

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<sup>8</sup> For further discussion, see Benjamin Fong's *Death and Mastery* (31-33).

<sup>9</sup> For a more robust discussion on this issue of the Organic within Inorganic vs. Organic between Inorganic: (Fong 2016, 33-35)

fully understood. In the completion of this movement, the external-world-as-homeland becomes the external-world-as-threatening. Again, what creative act of providence that the drive towards death, with the aim of confusing the Self and the Other in a return to nothingness, comes to be redirected towards the creation of the separating/individuating categories Self and Other.

Thus, we see that the self-inflicted “anticathexis” (Freud 1920, 29) is the precondition for being able to relate to the world at all. Through a self-injurious pruning, and in the construction of the outside as a hostile other, we can begin to describe something along the lines of a subjectivity that interacts with its environment. The death drive, initially the executioner aimed at killing the organic matter, is turned on its head to become the arbiter of life. In this sense, a taste of death is necessary for the instantiation of life--an indispensable realization we will soon return to. This might begin to answer the peculiarity of the “mysterious masochistic trends of the Ego” (13) which set off Freud’s search in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Why do traumatic-neurotics seem to masochistically torture themselves in recurring nightmares night after night? In this hypothetical Freud has just proposed, some degree of masochism is a requisite for the development of an Ego at all. If this conjecture about the origins of life turns out to be useful, it might be true that ‘masochistic trends’ in the psyche are more prevalent than previously understood.

There are multiple important and relevant insights to take into account from this speculation—the literal biogenetic Truth of these claims being none among them. Firstly, and most importantly, in order for life to be sustained in any meaningful sense, some degree of death must be injected into it. Death is not the static opposite/endpoint of life waiting motionlessly at the finish line of the march of time. Rather, Freud’s analysis outlines a possibility for a conceptualization of inanimacy as a mobilizing and necessary force which interacts playfully

with the forces of animacy. Given that a desire to return to *some kind of death* is the match which sparks off the embers of life, the cross-contamination between the two is without doubt more widespread and robust than previously thought. This cross-contamination moreover cannot be a single instant from which an insurmountable rift between the two states arises. While it is true that some polarity/differentiation/demarcation exists between the two, it is not at all true that animacy and inanimacy remain strangers.<sup>10</sup> The constant interplay/intertwining of the two constitutes a large portion of the psychic life of the organism forever after. The psychological organization that Freud has painted in this work is one constituted by the ambivalent conflicts between desiring to return to inorganic nothingness and viewing this nothingness as total destruction. The struggle and final outcome of these conflicts no doubt constitutes a significant portion of psychological life. As such, the proximity of death and life is in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* made quite clear.

Moreover, not only is death a dosage administered into life/Eros, but we must take into account who organizes it: the self. Insofar as we can at this point discuss a ‘self’, it is this actor which inflicts the injection. So fundamental/primordial is this drive towards death, that it arises at a time before—or perhaps at the very moment when—concepts like Self and Other become intelligible. The emphasis here is shifted away from the conscious Ego as the primary/central mode of being<sup>11</sup>, or even constituting the majority of the psyche, but as merely a functional part of the organism that exists to mediate between it and its outside. We can see clearly that there is a rich psychological life that exists before a conscious Ego can even form. As such, the only movement

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<sup>10</sup> There are number of points throughout the work wherein one might see Freud coming close to even calling into question the existence of a life instinct (23; 38), conjecturing that the influence we have attributed to life instincts may just be a death instinct endeavoring for its own death. While this is not an interpretation concluded by Freud, that these two instincts may be hard to distinguish does well to characterize the extent to which they are intertwined.

<sup>11</sup> “Psycho-analytic speculation takes as its point of departure the impression, derived from examining unconscious processes, that consciousness may be, not the most universal attribute of mental processes, but only a particular function of them” (Freud 1920, 23).

possible would be a reflexive one: the animate organism has as yet not established a matrix through which it could intelligibly relate to the world, much less another animate being. It would then be incorrect to formulate the death drive as/associate it with drives related to anger, aggression, or rage. To live and aim towards death is to aim towards my own death irrespective of what happens with the death of others; *I aim towards my own death* does not become *I aim you towards yours*.

Here, then, is the definitive response to critics who might claim that Freud throws death to the wayside, or otherwise does little work to theorize its place in psychoanalysis. We can see his interest in death going back to the 1915 essay *Thoughts for the Times on War and Death*, spurred on by the atrocities of the first world war. In this work, Freud rails against the exclusion of an orientation to/consciousness of death from the popular culture of the time, arguing that it is exactly this rejection of death which left us so ill-prepared to understand the grand violence of the war. Already, one might be able to see some inklings of his formulation/diagnosis of the *war-neuroses* that make up part of the perplexing phenomena in the beginning of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and which incite his later investigations and speculations. And yet, while we might be able to trace the beginnings of this project to 1915, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* amounts to nothing less than a comprehensive theoretical upheaval for the formulation of a psychoanalytic metapsychology at the time.<sup>12</sup> Up until now, the pleasure principle had enjoyed an untouched reign in-situ as the dominant motivating force in psychic life. Now, the death drive emerges to disrupt that rule, a formidable contender for the title of foundational instinctual

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<sup>12</sup> Metapsychology as Freud employs it refers to Economic, Topographical, and Dynamic factors relating to psychic organization. The proposition of a drive to die that jockey against the drive to live upsets each of these categories, requiring a reconceptualization of the overall structure of the mind as well as of the movement of its cathexis.

impulse. In the wake of this essay, and in the theorization of a ‘metapsychology’, the struggle between Eros and Thanatos becomes a main point of the formation of conflicts in psychic life.

Again, while the literal truth of this psychoanalytic Book of Genesis may or may not withstand scrutiny, it does give a clear impression of that impelling instinct lurking within the unconscious system of the mind. This is to say: to take Freud’s words about the germ-cells on their face would be to misunderstand or otherwise misinterpret what Freud aims at. In his 1937 work, *Constructions in Analysis*, Freud offers up a picture of the state of clinical psychoanalysis which might be helpful in making sense of my claim. For the practicing clinician, Freud explains, the literal truth of a proposed construction has little importance for the flow of their therapeutic conversation and the eventual outcome of analysis. Rather, it is exactly its effect on the continuation of the conversation which determines its importance. The associations which the analysand builds from the given insight, the ambiguity or precision of the response, the unconscious or behavioral reactions to the proposition: all “provide a valuable basis for judging whether the construction is likely to be confirmed in the course of the analysis” (8). A ‘confirmation’ which does not correlate with its truth-value, but its place in advancing/hindering the course of therapy. Moreover, a construction by the analyst in an attempt to diagnose the unconscious warring of the patient is exactly that: constructed. It is a creation of the analyst, aimed at *creating anew* rather than *deducing* the actual psychic formations/conflicts/interplays of the patient. In this way, the literality of the biologisms written in Freud’s works are irrelevant to the scope of this thesis. Insofar as they exist as illuminating analogies which allow us to conceptualize the logic of the world through new paths, they can exist as tools within our toolkit of psychoanalysis (to borrow the Deleuzian metaphor in *What is Philosophy?*).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Deleuze 1994, 55.



Still elsewhere, in the *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, Freud expresses a similar sentiment. He writes, “The theory of the instincts is so to say our mythology. Instincts are mythical entities, magnificent in their indefiniteness. In our work we cannot for a moment disregard them, yet we are never sure that we are seeing them clearly” (95). Instincts and drives are then attempts by the psychoanalyst to name that fleeting thing which is almost entirely ineffable. A construction of a constellation offered by the analyst from a composite of ‘myths’ out of the mouth of the analysand might give a shape through which pathology could be expressed/re-expressed. In this way, whether mythological entities or shades of paint for our paintbrush, instincts and drives offer up avenues through which a form might be given to that pre-discursive, inarticulable feeling. With this in mind, the usefulness of the death drive lies not necessarily in its actuality but exactly in its indefiniteness: in its function to give the patient the ability to say, ‘Here is something that finally strikes at the nature of how I feel’.

Having up to now understood the origin of the death drive in Freud’s writing, what more can be said in theorizing this compulsion? The death drive, at its heart, allows us to make sense of those confusing and at first counterintuitive impulses which impel us to act against our own interests or pleasure. How can it be that we are paradoxically pulled towards that which is unpleasant or traumatic? Why is there an inexplicable desire to ceaselessly repeat that which we exactly don’t want to? Why would we ever be motivated to act against our own interests? The death drive is at work. It is the death drive which is at the root of the neuroses of the veteran of war. The veteran, who wants nothing more than for the nightmares which plague him each night to end, is himself the progenitor of his torments! It is exactly the instinctual pressure reaching upwards from his unconscious psychological system which is finding its expression in recurring nightmares. There must be something intrinsically gratifying/satisfying in this move, for its

outcomes are clearly experienced as unpleasurable. The soldier who recurrently frightens himself, the child who again and again throws his toy out of reach<sup>14</sup>, or, for Edgar Allan Poe, the Imp which again and again pushes us to do exactly that which we know we ought not to.

This *Imp of the perverse* pushes us to desire and ultimately actualize that which is exactly against our interests, for no other reason than *exactly because it might harm us*. This imp does not simply disregard our interests, rather “the desire to be well is not only not aroused, but a strongly antagonistical sentiment exists” (Poe 1845, 2). It is well aware of exactly that which we endeavor towards, and extracts glee in forcing our hand to the opposite. The narrator of this story admonishes the reader to introspect honestly, saying that he who does, will not “be disposed to deny the entire radicalness of the propensity in question” (Poe 1845, 2). They evince complete confidence in their belief that this imp spares its torment on no one. This, coupled with the narrator’s nameless anonymity, obliges each reader to reflect upon the moments also in their life when this imp has reared its head.<sup>15</sup> Ultimately, it is this imp which needlessly forces a confession to murder through the throat of the narrator, condemning him to be executed. The Imp is seemingly a creative attempt at making sense of those confusing compulsions which come from within ourselves by imagining them as the external influence of a mischievous demon. In this portrayal we understand the extent to which these unconscious instincts, while entirely idiosyncratic, seem both foreign and scary to the individual.

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<sup>14</sup> A reference to the Fort/Da game Freud observes in his son and on which he in part bases his speculation in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. (See Freud 1920, 13-16).

<sup>15</sup> This is, I believe, the most effective way through which one might be convinced of the existence of a death drive. Given that it is impossible to definitively point to a specific instinct/drive, that there is always some interpretation required, enjoining one to engage in an honest introspection into their past thoughts/desires seems the only reliable route. Still, the death drive is an indefinite tool, and one which cannot be universally applicable.

This drive, that “paradoxical something” (Poe 1845, 2) which mobilizes one to act without a rational motivation behind it,<sup>16</sup> finds its expression at innumerable points. The Call of the Void—L’appel du Vide—describes the inexplicable want, *that paradoxical something*, which tempts another step once we’ve reached the edge of the cliff. While we might not consciously want to throw ourselves forward into the disorienting void, we cannot deny the tingling ripple that runs through our body which invites us to look on it as welcoming. Likewise, there exists in many a sudden and overwhelming urge to drop/throw a helpless baby that has just been handed to you. No desire to harm the baby exists, in fact quite the opposite. And yet, *just because—just to see what would happen...*<sup>17</sup>

The addict knows all too well the recurring and ceaseless nature of this drive. Each time, she thinks to herself, *I’ll only have one more, just this one time*. Despite the self-admonition that this will be the last indulgence, she can no longer remember the count of times she has said that to herself. Past the point even that engaging in the addiction is experienced as pleasurable, the addict feels unable to stop. Consciously, only contempt can be felt for the object of addiction, and yet it is consumed again and again. A cathexis exists to the object, but also seemingly in the recursive *one more* that gnaws from somewhere in her head.<sup>18</sup> Just as the addict feels as though they time and time again literally have no choice but to take another hit, the death drive likewise describes a repeated compulsion. We can here see why ‘Drive’ or the German *Trieb* is such an apt descriptor for this compulsion. It conjures up images of a relentless, pounding drum: one that never misses a beat, drowns out other sounds, and marches on irrespective of the feelings of the

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<sup>16</sup> “In the sense I intend, it is, in fact, a mobile without motive, a motive not motivirt [sic]” (Poe 1845, 2)

<sup>17</sup> There are few academic or psychological papers which investigate this phenomenon. Nonetheless, a cursory search in some popular online question boards will reveal a number of startled users seeking advice after having experienced this strange impulse. In the view of Poe, I would admonish the reader to introspect honestly and think if there have really not been any moments in their life when the Imp has reared its head in this way.

<sup>18</sup> See *Addiction and Will* by Brian Johnson (2013).

individual. Again, whether or not a death drive can accurately encapsulate all aspects, it nonetheless seems a functional tool for allowing the addict to name at least partly some of the phenomenological experiences of addiction.

Ultimately, these corollary descriptors—the seductive whisper of the abyss, the conniving laughter of the perverse imp, the droning drum—are all imaginative names for a phenomenon that emanates from within our own locus. All these are different terms or anthropomorphizations (or perhaps characters in different mythologies or even different sets of tools) which aim to describe the same feeling. Namely, that there exists some strange, paradoxical, unnerving, and repressed drive which compels us to do/think strange, paradoxical, and unnerving things. It makes us act against ourselves, in wanton and alarming ways and with destructive outcomes. Once we have ruled out the influence of demons or gods, we come to realize that this drive exists within ourselves. It is directed at the self and emerges from it as well. This drive, as Freud argues, is each person aiming towards their immanent death. It ultimately names the confliction between the desire to be and the desire not to be; the pleasure principle aiming to reduce psychological tension in life and the death drive aiming for the same in death; Eros against Thanatos.

In this, we can see the ambivalence, the bittersweet both/and which characterizes the experience of the influence of the drive. It is at once a compulsion towards destruction that frightens us and an itch that simply must be scratched. Even if scratching this itch hurts us the act of scratching it is in itself satisfying; We love to hate it and so repeat it over and over. The original germ-cell was torn between viewing the inorganic as its natural home and a deadly threat, and so was forced to incorporate some amount of death in order to live. Its original and sole instinct, to dissipate/dissolve/die, ended in its codification as a discrete entity. In the same way, the human psyche is beset by the repressed desire to return to the inorganic in the death

drive, and the fear of what this homecoming entails. Their psychological life is constituted by the conflict between the drive's imperative to take being up to and past the limit, and life's desire to avoid this turbulence.

It would not seem entirely inappropriate now to include our presenting problem among the number of phenomena listed above which we have attributed to the influence of a death drive. Why does it seem that there is something about violence/danger which is attractive/desirable to many? A Freudian psychoanalyst might respond that this is the work of Thanatos in the unconscious of the mind. To theorize the existence of a drive towards death or imagine Thanatos as a mythological heuristic allows the analyst to understand a preoccupation with things which are deadly/dangerous/violent as its behavioral manifestation. That is, the individual might see in some violent, *outré* image the promise of sweet release. Given our conclusions about the masochistic trends of the ego being foundational to the constitution of the individual, an individual acting on a desire to consume violent media is interpreted as a manifestation of this masochism.

To form an identification with a character in a TV show who dies partially scratches the death drive's itch in allowing us to psychically imagine our death. Fantasizing about a romantic relationship with an attractive murderer from a movie likewise allows the individual to simulate their self-destructive instincts. We feel compelled to engage with these media because there exists in the human unconscious some drive towards threats of precarity. As if Poe's Imp were controlling our thoughts/behaviors, they are experienced as desirable exactly because they shouldn't be, exactly because we ought not desire a dangerous partner for the sake of our lives. The violence is exciting and pulls us in as a result of the influence of that "paradoxical something" (Poe 1845, 2) lurking in our unconscious. That these examples are so

commonplace/easily accessible in popular culture—compounded by the very fact that these instincts as we understand them are unconscious—causes few to become astonished and introspect on the source of their attraction.

While this may be a sufficient diagnosis which allows a patient to consciously accept their unconscious pathologies, there are no doubt aspects of our phenomenon which it lacks to the explanatory power to address. This realization, that this scary drive exists within each of us, need not extend merely to the psychological or clinical. Rather, as we will see in our consultation with Bataille, there are broader philosophical implications that can be derived from the existence of something called a death drive. These implications, his avenues of approach and terminologies, provide yet more embankments from which we can set out endeavoring for explanation. In a sense, while it might be sufficient to stop here—to take account and proclaim that the death drive is the culprit behind the collective interest in media which portray a heightened violence in romance—this will miss at least part of the mark. We must remind ourselves of the exact importance of the indefiniteness of the myths with which we work. If placing the characters from Bataille's narrative in a scene with Freud's allows the unconscious mind to appear more clearly, then we have gained something and lost nothing.



## Chapter 4: In the Anguish of Desire

“In the violence of overcoming, in the disorder of my laughter and my sobbing, in the excess of raptures that shatter me, I seize on the similarity between a horror and a voluptuousness that goes beyond me, between an ultimate pain and an unbearable joy!” *Georges Bataille, The Tears of Eros, 20*

“In the abyss of possibilities, proceeding, thrown always further, hastening towards a point where the possible is the impossible itself, ecstatic, breathless, *experience* thus opens a bit more every time the horizon of God (the wound); extends a bit more the limits of the heart, the limits of being; it destroys the depths of the heart, the depths of being, by unveiling them.” *Georges Bataille, Inner Experience, 104*

Bataille’s project, while employing a far less scientific/psychological approach, explores concepts and conflicts radically similar to those Freudian ones we have herein discussed. From the place of death in life to the cooperation between the two, the similarities between the substance they deal in is no doubt far-reaching and comprehensive for the close reader. The links between the poles of Freud’s death drive—between the itch and its scratch, the call and its answer, life and its death—are thought exhaustively in Bataille’s canon. While this is true, there are essential distinctions between their approach, style, and prose. The death drive in Freud’s writings finds its birth in the behavioral clinic, while Bataille’s project emerges from the orgy and the human sacrifice. Freud walks with the neurotic; Bataille, the intensity of the psychotic. That is, in the course of our consultation between the two, we ought to work with the aim to understand Bataille in the way Freud would interpret an analysis and to understand Freud as would Bataille with a complex and extravagant artwork: to effect a triumphant collision between the gods of the two.

And, interestingly, abstract any apparent direct links between the two, the starting place from which Bataille begins *Erotism: Death & Sensuality* is strikingly similar to Freud’s in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Bataille, like Freud, begins at the microscopic level of the single-



celled organism. Unlike Freud, Bataille focuses his analysis on a process similarly important for the propagation of life to being able to survive the environment: reproduction.

In the course of this discussion, Bataille aims to give the reader a sense of the gravity and terror which grips him as he himself works through what he writes. There are few things we encounter which are graver or which seize our attention with such force as sex, death, or religion. The power to excite and frighten is clearly endemic to the realms of each. This gravity, this power, should not exist for the student of Bataille as a mere objective fact, but as an intruder which enters and turns the room upside-down. If Bataille speaks of sex or death, it is as a participant in the orgy or the sacrifice. If he deals with religion, it is not like a schoolteacher regurgitating cultural practices, but “like the brahmin himself” (Bataille 1962, 34). In the tradition of Nietzsche, Bataille attempts to write in such a way as to resist the tradition of philosophy.<sup>19</sup> The personal *inner experience* of an erotic feeling is so much better a source of knowledge than is the textbook: “one must grasp the meaning from the inside. They are not logically demonstrable” (Bataille 1988, 8). While his claims might stand up to rational scrutiny, this is only a small part of their significance. That is, it is his fear that what he has written might “merely be understood” (Land 1992, 95) which informs the poetic rhetoric and repetitive imagery Bataille employs. To show rather than simply speak the *discontinuity*, the gulf, that exists between all beings which engage in some form of reproduction; to *make felt* those awful and awe-inspiring moments when this gulf is bridged. With this in mind, we begin our consultation by sitting aside the single-celled organism, engrossed with morbid fascination as it lives out the catastrophic events of its lifespan.

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<sup>19</sup> It would seem antithetical for one who takes Bataille’s words seriously to use up his work and subsume it within the system of philosophy. As a writer of heterogeneity, limits, and abjection, appropriating his thought into a point along the historical process of philosophy would only be possible after first having stripped it of its power to shake and disturb. Allowing his works to horrify us, rather than sit on our shelves, seems the better homage.

The most spectacular of these events in the lifecycle of the cell, and in fact all beings, are those moments when they come and go, begin and end. When in the course of growth that a cell accumulates a surplus of energy, it expends this energy through the multiplication of more copies of itself. It reproduces asexually, literally splitting itself in order to create two. These two copies are entirely distinct from one another, and each is entirely distinct from the first: the being  $A$  dies in order to create  $A'$  and  $A''$ . These 3 cells, while identical in DNA, are discontinuous: existing discretely and concretely within the clearly delineated boundaries of their beings. In the Alpha the progenitor  $A$  is ontologically distinct and at the Omega the two descendants  $A'$  and  $A''$  are likewise discontinuous. And yet, there is an instant in this process wherein the coherence of this ontology is not so clear. In the moment that the membrane of  $A$  splits open, when the muddled migration of the nuclei is not yet finished, when one cannot yet be sure of whose who and what is what, there is a moment of *continuity* between the beings. In the death of  $A$ , when its borders are opened and it ceases to exist in order for  $A'$  and  $A''$  to come into existence, there is a continuous, indefinable link between the entities. Eventually, this continuity concludes with the bordering off of the two progenies, who revert back to a state of discontinuity.

A similar drama plays out in the crisis of sexual reproduction. Two distinct and separate gametes (one male and one female) exist in opposition to each other. Through sexual reproduction, the two are brought together, and fuse/mix together to form the zygote. In this union, in “the death and disappearance of the separate beings” (Bataille 1962, 14), a new entity comes into existence. The gametes unite to create an offspring that exists independently of them, and in this process they cease to be. The essential structure of these methods of reproduction is the same: discontinuity marks the beginning of the dance, interrupted by an instant of physical

rupture/violence/frenzy which leads to an experience of continuity, ending in a state of discontinuity.

This tragedy (comedy?) of the cell in reproduction serves as the archetype-by-analogy for the phenomenological experience of eroticism. That is, the drama of the individual resigning themselves to their sexual partner weeps of a similar catastrophic violence. Before the sexual act, they sit unperturbed and discrete, a clearly defined subjectivity floating along in a world amongst clearly defined others. Ignited by the obscenity of nakedness, a “state of communication revealing a quest for a possible continuance of being beyond the confines of the self” (Bataille 1962, 17), the participants attack. Hairs stand on end and eyes glaze over; the stomach is beside itself and the mouth is flooding. In the mingling of their limbs and senses and orifices, the symbolic barriers between their skin begins to lose its significance and the crashing waves enmesh. The phrase ‘where does one end and the other begin’ here takes on a literal ontological significance. The ramping up of the sexual frenzy is at the same time a breaking down of individuality. At the peak of its intensity, at its very limit past which one could not dare enter and bear to live, at the sexual climax, the self is effaced. Disoriented and dissociated, they? stand indistinguishable from the mass of their partners and the excess of energy they have just expelled. For a brief destructive moment, the flesh of the partner is the reagent catalyzing one’s deliverance from the chains of mere existence. Finally, once the penis has softened and the sweat evaporated, discontinuity climbs back to regain its seat. For whatsoever language one might employ to describe such an irreducibly material/embodyed/base experience, it all aims to get at the “elemental violence” (Bataille 1957/1986, 93) of an experience so violating: “what does physical eroticism signify if not a violation of the very *being* of its practitioners” (Bataille 1957/1986, 17).

In this conceptualization of the sexual experience, Bataille emphasizes the violence/pain/death that is concomitant to its bliss/ecstasy/life<sup>20</sup>. To speak of a sexual ecstasy is already to carry this recognition sequestered within it: ecstasy coming from the Greek *ekstasis* meaning *standing outside oneself* (Reschika n.d., 2). A constitutive aspect of the experience of the erotic, this movement is at once horrifying and mesmerizing. It promises a violation or a new mode of being, but always at the cost of the current state of affairs. The erotic is *obscene*,<sup>21</sup> an “uneasiness which upsets the physical state associated with self-possession” (Erotism 18). The sexual act and reproduction exist as a radical taking up of another’s vulnerability and a reciprocal giving-up of the same: an opening up to an alterity that collapses any meaning in the distinction between the self and the other. This sacrifice/transmutation is what makes physical eroticism so powerful, gripping, or in Bataille’s words *sacred*.<sup>22</sup> If the world exists with a certain order and a certain coherence in public, behind steamy windows this world is turned on its head.

No doubt part of the exciting and powerful nature of sexuality is that it exists at this edge/limit. Words or feelings which cannot be tolerated on the outside here find their expression in the whisper into a lover’s ear; lights are turned off and darkness envelops to aid in the lapsing into continuity. Taboos which denote powerful cultural imperatives are wantonly transgressed<sup>23</sup>—This point of a taboo and its transgression is an important one we will soon turn to. There is no doubt that such vulnerable intimacy is intoxicating/transgressive. Intimacy, or, *to*

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<sup>20</sup> This is a sentiment/conviction worked through by a wide range of philosophers who write on the problem of desire. See (Lacan 1994, 184; 281); (Kristeva 1941/1982, 9-11)

<sup>21</sup> An object or action’s obscenity is derived from the specific ways in which it violates a culture’s taboos: “There is no ‘obscenity’ in the sense that there is ‘fire’ or ‘blood’” (Bataille 1962, 215). It is not constitutive to the act or object, but a relationship which originates in the mind of the person who condemns it as obscene.

<sup>22</sup> The concept of the sacred has a long history in the anthropological/sociological schools which influenced Bataille. Durkheim employs it to highlight the specific ways through religious customs and rites imbue material things with a powerful or spiritual meaning that is not at all endemic to the object in itself (Durkheim 1995, 124). Later on, we will discuss the ways in which Bataille’s usage of the concept breaks off from the Durkheimian tradition.

<sup>23</sup> So often sexual kinks and fetishes involve transgressing some cultural taboo. Roleplay frequently finds its shape in the glee that is derived from simulating and transgressing some social power dynamic. Sexual fantasies regularly revolve around the desire to engage in some act or subject relation which is forbidden in the public world.

*be intimate*, is such the felicitous euphemism: it communicates a secrecy, privacy, deepness, closeness. It is a closeness that radically brings-together in ways unachievable elsewhere, it bridges a gap between two individuals that language and discourse can never hope to achieve. Just as the organism which engages in some kind of reproduction of itself is characterized by a discontinuity that must be overcome, so too does language/discourse belie the existence of an interpersonal chasm for which words serve a lackluster bridge. The written word and its world are hopelessly contained in the structures of grammar and the rules of syntax. The delirious mixing of selves in eroticism represents a move beyond this limitation and the breakdown of its significations. To say 'I love you' is intimate, but to physically *make* love requires breaking the rules. Thus part of the attraction to the aura of sex that humans revel in is derived from its ability to threaten, destabilize, or otherwise put into question those quotidian means through which we relate to our world.

Moreover, the existence of this and so many more euphemisms for the sexual act in themselves belie both the power of the violence of eroticism as well as the general population's tentative, cautious, or better unconscious awareness of it. The function of the euphemisms employed to reference sexual activities is as an antiseptic, intended to deaden or otherwise *make palatable* the naming of the violence of an erotic experience. It is the result of the transgressive power of eroticism itself, or otherwise the vailing forces of society to cordon off a taboo, that to simply reference sex in the daylight is unbearable. Rather, they 'became intimate', they 'knocked boots', they 'bumped uglies', they '*did it*'.<sup>24</sup> It seems as though we cannot look at Medusa's horror straight on: like Perseus we must fashion euphemisms to look at her reflection in the

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<sup>24</sup> There are hundreds of such examples regularly used in the English language. An interesting note is that many of them seem to degrade the act itself as something gross or detestable: 'bumped uglies' or 'did the nasty' or many others which involve making some crude joke. I also find it fascinating that '*did it*' can even refer to a sexual act. Is sex really that ever-present of a figure that it can be referenced that ambiguously?

mirror. That this mirror is utilized by the average layperson when discussing sexual acts is indicative of a pervasive awareness and yet unquestioning acceptance. The rush of blood up into the flushed cheeks of anyone who shirks this rule is a similarly telling moment of petrification. While language can never achieve the intimacy of the erotic act, it can conjure up images which are upsetting and uncomfortable to the polite dinner guest. This exciting perturbation evinces a “wicked glow which is so seductive” (Bataille 1990, 67), one whose power entices but whose horror demands to be held at arm’s length in social niceties.

This erotism is, moreover, not an experience or desire that is by any means contained to the literally sexual. It extends to the religious and perhaps even psychedelic, whose essential structures might be said to be the same to the sexual one. The religious zealot who falls to his knees and raises his hands to the heavens, or the religious ascetic caught and exalted by the delirium of hunger, soon come to know this experience. Take for example Ezekiel’s vision of God in Christian eschatology. With its description of flaming monsters and bestial seraphim, the figure of a burning God atop a platform supported by floating golden rings adorned with moving eyes: it seems a description more befitting a work of cosmic horror than an encounter with an omnibenevolent God.<sup>25</sup> Ezekiel’s undying devotion to and love for God in the face of this sight marks the absurdity of human behavior and reminds one the violent ambivalence of sexual eroticism. This ecstasy of Ezekiel, propelled by his complete adoration of God, is intensified by the sheer terror evoked by God’s form. Were God to take the form of a nonthreatening and familiar figure, the heights of his affective experience would no doubt be flattened.<sup>26</sup> Finally, the

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<sup>25</sup> The description of God in Ezekiel’s vision reminds one of the descriptions of the Great Old Ones in Lovecraft’s works of horror. Immensely powerful and beyond the reaches of human comprehension, Ezekiel’s vision of the Christian God here would not seem out of place in a story with Lovecraft’s monstrous Cthulhu.

<sup>26</sup> “The more difficult the horror is to bear, the more desirable it is—but one must be able to bear it!” (Bataille 1976/1993, 97). One might see this juxtaposition in how God is popularly conceptualized in mainstream Christianity. No longer a disturbing monster, He is now frequently drawn as an impossibly white and familiar human man. The figure of God has been anesthetized into an easily consumable and nonthreatening platitude.

ecstasy reaches its climax when God takes over Ezekiel's body and speaks to him. Here, Ezekiel is literally made to *stand outside himself*.

So robust are the connections between the tumult of religious and sexual ecstasy that we can turn to yet another artistic representation which blurs the lines between the two. Saint Teresa de Jesus, a Carmelite nun living in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, wrote in her autobiography of recurring visitations from an angel sent by God. In the vision, Saint Teresa describes a beautiful cherub equipped with a flaming iron spear that stabs her repeatedly in the heart. She writes, "The pain was so sharp that it made me utter several moans; and so excessive was the sweetness caused me by this intense pain that one can never wish to lose it, nor will one's soul be content with anything less than God" (Teresa of Jesus 1995, 164). If one were to replace the name of God with the name of a potential lover, the meaning clearly changes. That is, what might be described as sexual overtones in this passage should be blaringly obvious. The motif of a transverberation<sup>27</sup> by God, of being penetrated in the heart and this penetration being both painful and pleasurable, is squarely sexual before it is religious when given the benefit of context. Moreover, the statue created by Gian Lorenzo Bernini to memorialize this occasion, *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*, furthers these connections. Transfixed by both anguish and desire, the face of the saint<sup>28</sup> is hard to place. If one were to look at the expression on the statue's face alone, it would be truly difficult to tell whether it came from a woman at the climax of orgasm or a woman as she were being murdered. This confusing both/and of pain/pleasure, anguish/desire, ecstasy/ecstasy in religious eroticism, mirrors that same experience in physical eroticism.

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<sup>27</sup> That the image of penetration, of being pierced through by the love of God, is the essential descriptor for many experiences of religious ecstasy, seems almost too on the nose in its connections to sexual ecstasy.

<sup>28</sup> A close-up of the face of the Saint from this bust graces the cover of Bataille's *Eroticism*.

This connection between physical eroticism and religious eroticism in a radical, violent, and ambivalent loss of self allows us to better make sense of the connections Bataille finds between the erotic and the sacred. Here we can return to our earlier point on taboos and their transgressions.

For Bataille, taboos are social imperatives intended to forbid expressions of aberrant desires so as to protect the dominant, productive order of the world. Taboos and cultural prohibitions serve the function of tamping down on those “contagious impulses to excess in which nothing is left but the immediate surrender to excess, to violence” (Bataille 1962, 41). Exactly because these impulses are communicated in an infectious contagion which spreads virulently,<sup>29</sup> and because they require the violent indulgence in a total consumption of resource, their possibility (for the sake of ordered society) must be quickly condemned and strictly foreclosed. Take as the hallmark example sexual desires. When that deep hunger enters the conscious mind, it does so only as those rational and conservative inclinations exit. That individual who has been even partially taken by a starvation for which only the naked partner will bring satisfaction does not have in his mind an awareness or care for what happens beyond the achievement of such satisfaction. He acts wantonly/recklessly, expending resource in the pursuit of that definitively unproductive and expensive action. In condemning and rejecting from public society these profligate impulses, taboos do the work of instantiating productive efficiency and utility as the overarching matrices which govern meaning in society. No longer can an object or action only be appreciated for/understood in its facticity,<sup>30</sup> as it exists

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<sup>29</sup> For a more in-depth discussion of the issue of contagious communication, see page 30.

<sup>30</sup> A Bataillean sacred experience denotes those moments in which we come to be able to relate to/appreciate objects for their mere materiality, for the way they exist in and how we relate to them solely in that very moment. To be able to take a hammer out of the meta-narratives which give it meaning by placing it in some broader system of objects, or away from those economic matrices that make of it a tool to be bought/sold rather than metal fixed to wood. This seems a definitively different use of the sacred than in Durkheim, and might moreover highlight some Marxist influence or otherwise the economic approach that Bataille takes.



noncontingently. It must now find its place in the system of obligations, consequences, and uses. That is, it must now be appraised for its ability to either hinder or advance work and the productive force of society. Orientations or movements which threaten or detract from this project must be expelled or otherwise excluded from what is (in the social consciousness) understood as possible/acceptable. It ought to be clear how the use of energy in a sexual act is largely incompatible with this goal.

We might here observe the foundation being laid for the Iron Cage of rationalization described by Max Weber in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1920/1992, 27). It is this repression of inassimilable impulses which leads to the conditions that allow for the advent of work on a grand scale. That is, the world of work and labor demands a conduct that is oriented towards futures and ends, lifetimes and goals: reasoning which focuses on the ultimate then rather than the intermediary now. The haze that clouds the eyes of the person consumed by sexual passion is no doubt counterproductive to this. In exalting production and degrading consumption, the human and their objects gain a telos, a purpose or significance proceeding from beyond their immediate and material existence.<sup>31</sup> This mundane, quotidian view towards the future and its interests attempts to preclude the possibility for a relationship to the world which indulges risk, sacrifice, or consumption. The picture here painted by Bataille is a servile one: the flow of energy within a society is castrated and contained into avenues which merely reproduce the conditions necessary for further acquisition and conservation. However, this movement of condemnation and pathologization does not mark the end, but rather the beginning of the relationship between the taboo and its transgression.

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<sup>31</sup> This seems to be the essential trait for those acts and actors which Bataille describes as profane (1957/1986, 113-115).

In a confusing, unrelenting, and oppositional dialectic, the realm of the inassimilable impulse and its transgressive power stands forever at the edge of the prohibition and its profane world. In those moments of festival, sexual ecstasy, and psychotic delirium, in those “fleeting experiences of explosive affectivity” (Jeremy Biles 220), the rules and regulations of the profane world are thrown off and the individual dives face-first into its materiality. It can be said to be *sacred* in that it turns the normal ordering of the world on its head: whatsoever was before prohibited is now radically permissible. It is *sovereign* not as in being the position for creating, enforcing, or for being a king ‘beyond and above’ law, but as the “nonlogical difference” (Bataille 1996, 129) against law itself.<sup>32</sup> This sovereignty describes the freedom of one ripping themselves away from the normative hand of society to realign their use of energy to the “wasteful movements of the cosmos” (Papandreopoulos 2016, 100).

We can see this distinction in the juxtaposition between the cosmos of the Gods and the terrestrial world of humanity. As Freud writes, “Mythology will teach you that incest, which is supposed to be so much detested by humans, is unhesitatingly allowed to the gods” (Freud 1917/1965, 278). This lesson is for Bataille absolutely theoretically coherent. The secular and constraining taboos of mundane, human life do not apply to the sovereignty of the Gods: the awe and power concomitant to the stories of the cosmos are derived in part from that impunity with which Zeus fucks his siblings or Yahweh cuckolds Joseph. Their narratives are intentionally written to violate these social and cultural prohibitions, for without such flippant autonomy to transgress they would not be Gods. In another sense, whatsoever puts into question the integrity of that Cage of Rationalization is imbued with an aura of sovereign spirituality. In the same way,

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<sup>32</sup> The place of boundless refuse in the economy of the universe relates to the place of crime in a system of law. Bataille sees both the actor of blind excess and the criminal not as negations or oppositions, but as nonlogical figures whose irreducible difference must be somehow reckoned with.

the erotic iconoclast who capitulates to the frenzy and breaks through the Iron Bars is sovereign in their imploding the meanings of *there and then*, thinking only explosively and destructively about the *here and now*. In the transgression of laws/taboo/prohibitions through whichever indulgence, the participant escapes the totality of reason and consequence.

This experience is not an idealized transcendence that leads to new modes of cognition or meaning, but an intoxicating delirium which blows the doors off of any system which makes a static ‘meaning’ possible.<sup>33</sup> Inassimilable, Contagious, Disorienting. Whereas homogenous reality presents itself with a static neutrality of clear and identifiable objects and subjects, the heterogeneous realm is characterized by shocks and charges, liminal signs/significations of objects and subjects constantly changing and interchanging.<sup>34</sup> The heterogenous element is that which disrupts/breaks the coherent homogenous whole, and so is always already connected to an impression of violence<sup>35</sup>—this is the theoretical underpinning of that phenomenological experience of violence in an erotic encounter. These heterogenous elements, any and everything rejected by society as dangerous, wasteful, or inassimilable, are a “Nonexplainable Difference” (Bataille 1996, 141): tendencies and positions beyond the grasp of a coherent social system.<sup>36</sup> The loss achieved through an expenditure of energy contained in such an element is absolute, without reserve. So absolute is this loss and so empty is the plate once it is finished that it cannot be properly recuperated/reintegrated into a homogenous, intellectual, or philosophical schema. These affects, desires, social relations, or marked individuals find their expression as negativity in a “white heat” (Bataille 1962/1986, 40), an ultimate intensity.

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<sup>33</sup> The toxic and explosive bursts of affect disappear and reappear far too liminally for some assimilable coherence to be gleaned from them.

<sup>34</sup> See Bataille 1996, 143.

<sup>35</sup> For further discussions on the relationship of the homogeneous and heterogeneous, see Bataille 1962 *The Notion of Expenditure*, 193; Bataille 1996, *The Psychological Structure of Fascism*.

<sup>36</sup> “Heterogeneous existence can be represented as something other, as incommensurate, by charging these words with the positive value they have in affective experience” (Bataille 1996 *The Psychological Structure of Fascism*, 143).

This is a heat that melts away anything beyond the immediate facticity of its elements: “what can never occur is that will and consciousness subsist at the point of 'intensity'” (Hegarty 2000, 178). Just as the subject in the throes of eroticism comes to resemble something closer to a transgressive energetic/affective burst than a concrete subject, so slips away their rational worldviews. It would be absurd to question whether an adrenaline junkie has a robust intellectual relationship with their confrontations with death. Absolutely not: this relationship is only *felt* or *embodied*. The all-encompassing vibration in their stomach as they hurdle towards the abyss is the exact marker that this experience is, while they may try to speak of it, so irreducibly inarticulate. “It is not...knowable, but it can be experienced” (Bataille 1962/1986, 23).<sup>37</sup> A similar sentiment might be expressed after consuming a heroic dose of some psychedelic substance. As the geometric twists and undulations of the universe implode the user’s field of vision and sense of self, they experience what many users describe as an Ego Death. The essence of such an experience is one which cannot be accurately given form in the systematized, rule-governed grammar of a language. In that syntactic and semantic rules of a language’s grammar give a strict and rigid shape, its articulation cannot be spoken or written. *Oh man it’s indescribable, you’ve really just got to try it yourself*. Poetry, whose function is often to play with and overcome the rules of conventional meter and grammar, has a more free-form morphology which can come closer to evincing the free-form morphology of the Self during this experience.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> If, before their flight, one had the option to consult a scientist who had done comprehensive research on the physiological effects of skydiving or the uneducated veteran skydiver, the better choice for getting close to the actual experience they were about to undertake would be the skydiver.

<sup>38</sup> It is ultimately impossible to express in the structure of words that which is shapeless or infinitely shaped. Intensely affective poetry can however come close to this, “to touch the intimate nerve, to grab hold of emotion by means of speech, to make writing oral, in other words, contemporaneous, swift, obscene.” (Kristeva 1941/1982, 137).

Along a different vein, we can use this dialectic to make sense of the experience Frantz Fanon describes in *Black Skin, White Masks*. He writes, “I had rationalized the world and the world had rejected me on the basis of color prejudice. Since no agreement was possible on the level of reason, I threw myself back toward unreason” (81). In the French colony of Martinique where he grew up, his black skin color was conceptualized by the dominant social institutions as a pathological and dangerous negativity. It expelled without that aberrant element which was too threatening to be kept within: leaving him ‘unreason’ as the only avenue of existence. It is through this application of our theoretical framework to the (no doubt abhorrent) social position of the black subject that we can understand Fanon’s inclination to and eventual participation in the rebel guerilla groups fighting against French occupation. He was forced into a position of unreason, and so the unreason of violent revolt seemed the only avenue for emancipation. In the cover image of the *Acephale*, the secret society founded by Bataille, we find much the same unreasonable sentiment expressed: the head of Dionysus is decapitated and capitulated to the level of its corpus.<sup>39</sup>

This dialectic, the relationship between the homogeneous and heterogeneous, the interplay between taboo and transgression, is further expressed by Bataille’s adoption of Nietzschean metaphor in the rivalry of the Greek Gods Apollo and Dionysus. Here, even literal mythological entities are added to our interpretative pantheon. As a heuristic, Apollo is employed by Bataille as the embodiment of Order, Rationality, or Truth. Dionysus is in many ways its opposition: The God of Festival, Art, Creation, or Destruction. Theirs is a complex and shifting dyad. The Apollonian consciousness seeks out and maintains stability and order,

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<sup>39</sup> Both the name of a public review and a secret society founded by Bataille, the *Acephale* (from the Greek literally meaning ‘headless’) is where, similarly as in Fanon’s participation in unreason, we see the application/ethic of Bataille’s unreasonable thought. In secret rites and occult sacrifice, the group was an attempt to realize and experience the hypersocial and irrational praxis of sacred transindividuation. So committed were the members to this ethic, the infamous rumor goes, that there were an abundance of members willing to sacrifice themselves but none who volunteered as executioner.

eschewing contradictions and incongruities in order to maintain an organization/unity. Tight, clear, intentional: Apollo represents the virtues of the head as the seat of consciousness.

Dionysus, not the head, is rather heady: an intoxicating God of madness and frenzy.<sup>40</sup>

Whatsoever was organized by Apollo on the table is by Dionysus thrown into the air and scattered. Whereas before contradiction was eschewed, Dionysus—in the flights of festival and the madness of drink—celebrates and maintains contradictions: he explores incongruities down whichever path he cares to, combining and forming unions which are elsewhere illogical and impossible.

In their interactions, Bataille sees Dionysus as the subversive underbelly of the Apollonian affirmation. If Apollo finds pleasure in the maintenance of order or resolution, Dionysus finds the same in reacting to and upending this rational creation. The act of Apollo demands a Dionysian reaction, which will in turn no doubt cause Apollo to act once again. This process begets more action and reaction and thus the continuance of their struggles. In fact, so long as both their forces continue to exist, their conflict will never cease. Here, one is reminded of the addict who—under the influence of their death drive—is hopelessly caught between the poles of abstinence and indulgence in the eternal recurrence of their drive towards the object of addiction. Or elsewhere, the place of taboo and its transgression in society. It is obvious that were the taboos which condemn/limit/prohibit sexual activity completely insurmountable, there would be little possibility for that society to survive for long. As we have seen before, the relationship between the two cannot be as simply a static opposition. Just as with Apollo and Dionysus, the warring between the two is constitutive of their relationship, and it is this conflict which forms the basis of an intriguing play. Bataille writes on transgression, “There exists no

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<sup>40</sup> See, Bataille 1961/1989, 74.

prohibition that cannot be transgressed...often [the transgression] is even prescribed (Bataille 1962, 63). Just as a Dionysian reaction is demanded by the actions of Apollo, so too is the transgression often compulsory. That taboo which can never be transgressed holds no power, it is unimportant, meaningless. The periodic breaking of the rule is what paradoxically imbues that rule with significance.<sup>41</sup> In the same way, that act which does not wet the lips of Dionysus can readily be overlooked.

It is in this use of Nietzsche's articulation of the drama of artistic creation and tragedy that we can see the extent to which Bataille, aiming to *experience* rather than *critique* Nietzsche, used his writing to "pour out [his] lifeblood" (Bataille 1992, xxi). This invites the reader to take his writings for the weapons which they are. Inasmuch as either can be described as a philosopher, or as participating in the process of philosophy, Bataille and Nietzsche participate as outside transgressors whose goal is to smash and upset. Their thought is not limited merely to an Apollonian accretion of ordered Truths but is already also constituted by the Dionysian annihilation of these Truths in madness. Jubilation and fullness are themselves progenitor of tragedy, which springs "out of desire, out of power, out of overflowing health, out of overwhelming fullness of life" (Nietzsche 1872/2004, 4). The celebration begets necessarily the humiliation.<sup>42</sup> Bataille, in the purview of Nietzsche, reads the natural flow of energies and affects constitutive to the social human condition in the affirmation of suffering and pleasure in the fits of Greek Tragedy. The interplay between the revelry of chorus and the imposition of dialogue in the tragic play (Nietzsche 1872/2003, 25), "that synthesis of God and goat in the satyr"

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<sup>41</sup> While perhaps paradoxical, this tent of taboos should be intuitive. A prohibition against levitating while riding on the subway is uninteresting, nonsensical, and ultimately would have no power—it's impossible for anyone to break it. Instead, the prohibition against jumping a turnstile is powerful exactly because it can be and is broken daily.

<sup>42</sup> The celebration of ecstasy necessitates its pain, but also in the Potlatch, the celebration of festival necessitates the humiliation of the participant. The potlatch, a festival of sacrifice identified by the anthropologist and Bataille's predecessor Marcel Mauss, involves a dance of ritual and useless destruction of property between rival tribes with the aim of attaining social status. The celebration of wantonly consuming resource humiliates the spectator and demands their contribution to the fire.

(Nietzsche 1872/2003, 4), serves as our image of man. That the fervor of an artistic celebration is the chosen analogy for the erotic conflicts of the human mind should already begin to give the impression Bataille aims at. One can here see connections to the madman in Nietzsche's *The Gay Science*, who laments the vicissitudes in a society in which God has been killed. He shouts, "Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward. forward. in all directions? is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing?" (125). That desperation for a place to grab onto to stop the twisting and orient ourselves is all too familiar.

In this sense, what is homogenous and maintained through the taboo is hopelessly connected to that transgressive material it aims to exclude. The taboo requires a transgression which is powerful enough to periodically usurp the prohibition but not so powerful as to make the prohibition meaningless. The homogenous, organic whole requires the heterogenous expulsion to remain without but always near so as to supercharge its meaning and life in comparison. Apollo could not exist without the countervailing forces of Dionysus, and Dionysus the same without Apollo. Life requires its death to be in a close proximity, but not too close so as to overshadow life itself.

If the transgression were to be subsumed by the taboo or the essentially heterogenous brought into the homogenous, this would implode the very significance of either side of the coin. That is, this movement would be both a consumption and an excretion: it would at once be an appropriation of the element but also an excretion in rejecting anything that made it aberrant or powerful, the element qua heterogeneous, in the first place.<sup>43</sup> Take for example Martin Luther King Jr. and his relationship to the dominant social systems throughout his life and in death. During his life, he was maligned as a crazy revolutionary and completely written off. While in

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<sup>43</sup> "[The Marquise de] Sade, emasculated by his cowardly apologists, takes on the form of a moralizing idealist" (Bataille 1996 *Visions of Excess*, 39).



jail for protesting racial injustice, the FBI sent him a letter encouraging his suicide.<sup>44</sup> The social systems of the time, based fundamentally on a strict racial hierarchy, could not tolerate his convictions/beliefs/actions and so completely rejected him. In contemporary times, the figure of King has been assimilated into the popular social discourse only after having been stripped away of everything about him which was radical or threatening. Now, the FBI pays lip service to his washed memory by retweeting cherrypicked quotes of his which advocate nonviolence.<sup>45</sup> It would not be possible for the homogenous social system to assimilate his aberrance and remain unperturbed, and so his representations must first be dipped in anesthetic.

What connects Dr. King's treatment with these vastly different and wide-ranging examples of heterogeneous elements is their inassimability to the overarching schemas which organize and allow the status quo to remain coherent. While it is true that Dr. King's representation can be understood as a heterogeneity in this way, we must explicitly distinguish between those systems which cohere and give meaning to social relations, and the system or organization of concepts which gives form and significance to what it is in the world that can be intellectually known. Both the erotic experience and Dr. King's convictions are socially heterogeneous in that the former necessitates profligate and unproductive expenditure and the latter necessitates an upheaval to the racial hierarchy on which the homogeneous whole was based. And yet, while it is true that Dr. King represents an aberrance which could not be withstood by the social institutions of his day, his fight for racial equality and social amelioration are nonetheless intelligible concepts. The same cannot be said of the limit-experience<sup>46</sup> in erotic

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<sup>44</sup> See "FBI-King Suicide Letter"

<sup>45</sup> See References

<sup>46</sup> A limit-experience is perhaps another written attempt one might use to articulate the "elemental violence" (Bataille 1957/1986, 93) of the breakdown. It refers to actions or experiences which push the individual closer to the edge of living in terms of their intensity and impossibility. Erotic ecstasies or that which elicits the glow of abjection might be limit-experiences in that they test the limits of ordered reality.

ecstasy. These are experiences which occupy a space at and beyond the limits of what a constructed conceptual system can intelligize. While Dr. King's speeches/protests absolutely contain strong affective energies which endeavor to change the organization of the homogeneous unity, the diffusion of the self/other, the inarticulate awe of oblivion, and the raw intensity of ecstasy are clearly not evinced in them. In this sense, while both the limit-experience of erotic ecstasy and Dr. King are aberrances and so excluded from the unity of the whole, there are different homogeneous systems for which different affectual elements will function as a heterogeneity.

Thus, we can see that regardless of the system in which we operate, neither a complete rejection nor a complete subsumption will be satisfactory for how it orients itself to heterogeneity. To try to give death or these disorienting erotisms an ordered place in our thoughts is exactly antithetical to their destructive power. To do so, as with MLK's legacy, would be to make inert and platitudinal what at their base should be disruptive. If Apollo were to subdue and completely capture Dionysus or if Dionysus were to succeed in murdering Apollo, in either case the essence of both gods would die. In the case of the erotic experience, we must never lose sight of the fact that these are elements "which [find] no place in our intellectual architecture except negatively as a limiting factor (Bataille 1957/1986, 23). The aberrant negativity of these elements and their expulsion from the architecture of our intellect give this cognitive construction its form. They cannot be subsumed for their intense energy would collapse its buildings, and they cannot be rejected for without them no building can be formed.

Thus, these elements cannot be appropriated and essentially destroyed nor can they be completely rejected, but rather they ought to remain without and yet in close proximity so that their opposition is neither destroyed nor overwhelming. Just as in Bataille's relationship to the

tradition of philosophy, Dionysus to Apollo, or the transgression to its taboo, they exist first and foremost as agitators which are profoundly disturbing and whose threat of change and perturbation is constant. A forceful, dynamic, and mercurial relationship must be established and reestablished ad infinitum. If the homogenous social/intellectual whole is imagined as a healthy body, the threatening heterogeneity is the vomit of this body philosophic against which it forms its shape and organizes its meaning. It cannot reuptake the vomit into its body and yet it cannot lose sight of this excretion; it is a horrifying sight but nonetheless an indispensable one. Rather, it must orient itself tentatively towards exactly those elements which threaten it, allow their influence to be felt and experienced. As Bataille writes, “we desire to bring into a world founded on discontinuity all the continuity such a world can sustain” (Bataille 1962, 19). In our mundane and profane existence, we must live with a cautious yet firm orientation to alterity and its horror. The loss in death is exactly that bottomless hole which I am drawn to dangle my feet into and the negativity against which my life retreats and is made to make sense. We desire to approach this heterogeneity because it turns us on our heads, and we are repelled when this upturn approaches oblivion. This is the radically ambivalent back-and-forth of the tragedy of existence: “One does not know it, one does not desire it, one joys in it. Violently and painfully. A passion” (Kristeva 1941/1982, 9).

## Chapter 5: The Clinic at the Top of the Pyramid of the Sun<sup>47</sup>

“On the one hand the horror of death drives us off, for we prefer life; on the other an element at once solemn and terrifying fascinates us and disturbs us profoundly.” Georges Bataille, *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality*, 45

“This astonishes people far too little.” Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 12

Having up to now become acquainted with two possible theories for understanding human experience and behavior, we must remind ourselves of that progenerating question which set us down the path of death drives and ecstatic eroticisms. Again, it was the mystery of the close proximity between sexual images and violent ones in popular culture and its media which served as the impetus for this investigation. The sheer ubiquity and relative lack of astonishment from viewers demands a thorough understanding of this phenomenon. Why, in the Netflix movie *Extremely Wicked, Shocking Evil, and Vile*, does Liz Kendall, ex-girlfriend of serial killer Ted Bundy, seem to harbor so much resentment and disgust for Jerry Thompson, the well-meaning detective trying to care for her. She repeatedly rejects his attempts to comfort her and even kicks him out of her house in favor of ruminating over the lost love of a murderer. Jerry, the stereotypical nonthreatening and inconsequential ‘Nice Guy’ that is boring but treats her well is woefully unattractive; so much so that she prefers a literal serial killer who she herself turned in to the police. Why is this an understandable choice many viewers sympathize with? It would seem that the partner who is not-a-serial-killer is the no-brainer. And yet, caught up in the emotion of it all, everyone can at least understand the confusion she’s feelings. In the following

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<sup>47</sup> The issue of sacrifice, both of objects and humans, is ubiquitous throughout Bataille’s canon. In *The Accursed Share* (Bataille 1976/1993), Bataille writes extensively on the role of human sacrifice within the Aztec mythology and economy. The usage of these pyramids by the Aztecs in relation to death and sacrifice, in contrast to perhaps the most well-known instance of an ancient culture’s pyramids, the Egyptians, is intended to metaphorically explicate Bataille’s orientation towards death. In Aztec festivals, death in human sacrifice was realized in the open air on top of their pyramids, allowing its power and intensity to contagiously overflow to the audience below (Bataille 1976/1991, 49). In ancient Egyptian culture, the pyramids remind one of the death of a king while keeping his corpse and its abject power buried deep within and hidden from sight. On the steps of the Pyramid of the Sun death is realized, and this forces its audience to join in and reckon with its ecstasy.

pages, we will aim to synthesize a comprehensive theory between the works of Bataille and Freud to allow us to more accurately answer such a question.

This is a synthesis which will allow us to understand the sympathy many feel towards Liz Kendall's behaviors as transgressive, but also the existence of the film itself as a transgression. Everything we have up to now considered might seem to justify our ending it at: 'the experience of the erotic is always already an experience of violence, and so one would expect to see them closely acquainted in cultural or artistic expression/behavior' or 'the multiplication of sexual excitement in its conjunction with a violent image is the unconscious work of the death drive pushing us towards that which threatens to kill us'. Whether it be the transgressive incorporation of this violence in the sexual realm *or* the satisfaction derived from engaging in a behavior/experience which threatens to destroy our very existence, either seems satisfactory for getting at something of the nature of this phenomenon. And yet, there is more that can be derived in putting the two projects into conversation. In the works of Bataille we find reflections which can allow us to make explicit what is already implicit in Freud. Only through a union of the two does the interplay between the dynamics of the individual psyche and the dynamics of social forces become clearest. That is, through applying Bataille to Freud we can pull out the complete philosophical salience sequestered within *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.

The aim of this chapter is to open up Freud to the flights and intensities of Bataille's thought, to use Freud to make Bataille's sociology resemble a psychology (or better psychoanalysis). How does thinking of the unconscious drives and impulses found in Freud through Bataille's concept of Sovereignty change their meaning? How can the interplay between taboo and transgression inform our reading of Freud's life and death instincts? How does erotism help us to understand a Freudian drive towards death abstract only a literal biological death?

What is the logic of the system from which the death drive emanates? If the unconscious is in fact characterized by a drive towards death, we smash Bataille into Freud with the understanding that “Eroticism opens the way to death” (Bataille 1957/1986, 24). There is then no doubt something to be gained in mixing their toolkits or creating a new narrative by placing together the mythological entities that each writer works with and observing the outcome.

In doing so, we will unleash the latent lines of Nietzschean thought which are already at work in Freud and deny definitively a Hegelianism<sup>48</sup> in Freud or Bataille’s treatment of death. Human psychology in Bataille’s Freud is not merely one of a static and defined conflict between Eros and Thanatos, but the turmoil of an epic battle between the two: Eros stepping on Thanatos and Thanatos spearing Eros. Their conflict, and thus one of the main conflicts in psychical life, is a constant and confusing flux with few moments for pause and few positions of stability. We will come to understand the unconscious as the seat of those whipping heterological forces which are inassimilable to a conscious mind. We will find eroticism and its constitutive components to be an example/application/reprisal of the death drive. Moreover, we will find this phenomenon to be coherent not only as a response to these unconscious desires, but as a heterogeneous transgression on the level of societal forces. That is, we can come to understand these phenomena as they exist to serve/satisfy the demands or desires of their audience as well as understanding these phenomena as they exist within themselves. Our analysis leads to an understanding of the inclination to engage with these media as a symptom of the individual, but, also, an understanding of the media themselves as a symptom of society. In total, through a consideration of both, we will arrive at a better understanding of the absurdity and errs of the

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<sup>48</sup> As we will see, the importance that Bataille (and Freud in our union of the two) places on the ‘Inner Experience’ and its sovereignty will displace premises of Hegel’s philosophy which see the transcendence of Spirit completed in discourse or consciousness. Rather, as we will see, the sovereign, embodied experience of what can only be ‘inner’ ruptures the totality of this transcendent process (Bataille 1954/1988, x; 80-81; 108-111).

human mind and the paradoxical, weird, and scary behaviors it seems to enjoin us to engage in as well as their interaction with the broader context of the flow of social energies. With this in mind, we can begin the work of reestablishing Freud's behavioral clinic atop the Aztec Pyramid of the Sun, performing analyses on their festivals and human sacrifices.

A starting point from which we can understand this new interpretation is the same as above, in the scene of the germ-cells and their forays into life. Here is no longer an organism coldly making use of the layer of dead skin around itself in order to protect from outside stimulation. Rather, it is an entity caught at once between the crashing of two intense waves: the draw of life and the draw to be "like water in water" (Bataille 1973/1989, 19). Insofar as there is a drama already in Freud's portrayal—which is indeed undeniable—Bataille turns the volume up to 10 and rips the knob off. There is no doubt both authors describe a similar feeling of ambivalence, but the radicality of such a feeling of ambivalence in Bataille can be used to give a clearer impression of the turmoil taking place in the unconscious of psychic life. The conflict between Eros and Thanatos becomes an all-encompassing whirlwind leaving no part of the organism's psyche unafflicted; there is no place to rest and no point where the battle is won and identity stabilizes. Subjectivity forms along the curves of the violent and twisting flows of these affective/energetic bursts: the clawing for survival of the conscious life instincts and the guttural wail of the responding death instincts. As Thanatos approaches, Eros curses and rebukes; as Thanatos retreats, Eros pleads and implores.

For Bataille, it is this *inner experience* of the germ-cell, the lived reality of that agonizing position between life and death, which is so important. As Bataille writes, "One must grasp the meanings from the inside. They are not logically demonstrable. One must *live* experience" (Bataille 1954/1988, 8). Intellectual questions are at their base dry and incomplete, leaving us

lacking in real substance to be said about the issue at hand. The function of an attitude or experience in connecting to some transcendent value/virtue/logic is so wholly untotalizing, and our analyses and theories should reflect this conclusion. In this sense, while the analogies of the survival and reproduction of single-celled organisms are useful for making sense of our confusing world, the point at which they remain an abstraction is the point at which they cease to be useful. Rather, the immanent value of an inner experience is derived from the unmediated authority of its having occurred exactly in itself. While we can give an objective, logical, and by no means inaccurate description of the torments of the germ-cell, this undoubtedly misses the aspects of its experience which are real and yet nondemonstrable. In much the same way, to view psychic life from the outside would equally lose out on its affective depth. In the words of Bataille's all-important predecessor, "Let each truth be false to us which was not greeted by one laugh!" (Nietzsche 2006, 23). This a point we must keep in mind when theorizing a metapsychology. We must aim to understand the structures, flows, and nature of conflicts in the psyche not by dryly numbering them, but by attempting to demonstrate the havoc. It might even be true that the grand war between the wills to live and to die is constituted partially by characters which can only be clearly known in the moment of the experience itself.

With this in mind, we can extract the full significance of Freud's claim that "A unity comparable to the ego cannot exist in the individual from the start; the ego has to be developed" (Freud 1989, 547). Two important points can be taken from this acknowledgement: firstly, the organism exists primarily without a conscious ego, and secondly that there is some process through which this ego comes to be. The process alluded to here (which we will discuss in-depth later) is one which should give an impression of an individual which is irreducibly mercurial and constantly at question, it should not be one of a rational subject engaging in a pensive



deliberation on the plights of Being. The process of an ego developing can constitute nothing less than an absolute upheaval of the psychic life and identity of the organism. As we have seen in our initial discussion of Freud, it radically changes the way the organism relates to itself and its environment, and with Bataille, we can appreciate the full gravity and terror of this process. That is, the life instincts in their battles with the deadly ones in the birth of an ego cannot be reduced to resemble an organized chess match. While the conscious ego might be partly in control of their psychic organization, there exists—and perhaps principally so—a large pool of affective energy over which they have no conscious control/influence. This process is no doubt disorienting and tumultuous, and one whose chess pieces may be inarticulate outside of the moment of the experience. That is, the flights of ecstasy experienced by the carnival-goer are the better archetype for the psychic amalgamation of life and death instincts than is Descartes meditating in front of a fire.

And, if this is in fact the principal conflict of an individual's psychology, we begin to see how a Bataillean psychoanalysis plays out. We can apply the interaction between a taboo and its transgression or the dramatization of Apollo and Dionysus to Freud's structural models of the mind. Recall that a taboo is, for a society or culture, a rule or prohibition intended to outlaw/forbid those aberrant activities which threaten the healthy or normal functioning of the world. They intend to exclude impulses which cannot be borne by the social whole, and so are slated to the level of crime and disgust. The transgression of the taboo is an irreverent and uncaring breaking of these rules that reaches up and gives the ordered structure of society a good shake.

In a remarkably similar movement, we see something of the same occurring in the union of an ego in the psychic life of the individual. In the course of human development, there arise

invariably some instincts which “turn out to be incompatible in their aims or demands with the remaining ones which are able to combine into the inclusive unity of the ego” (Freud 1920, 10). Instincts whose aims and demands are compatible with the reality principle, the need of the organism to capitulate to the demands of the external world in order to survive, are allowed access to conscious life in the ego. These are the instincts which endeavor to propagate the organism’s life: mediating the demands of the pleasure principle and the demands of the world to promote the normal and healthy functioning of the individual. Those instincts whose aims are incompatible with the healthy functioning of the organism are banished from this sanctum. Through the act of repression, these chaotic and inassimilable impulses are pushed away from the coherent ego and down into the repressed id. Even after this initial repression, the ego maintains an anticathexis to ensure that the repressed material remains a sufficient distance away. And yet, these repressed instincts are never at rest: they struggle forever upwards to achieve cathectic release in some or another pathological expression. The repressed instinct, owing to the reason for its repression, pays no mind to the consequences of its expression. It simply seeks to release the tension built up in the stifling act of repression. In the energetic explosion of this manifestation, the individual is similarly shaken up:<sup>49</sup> “[the repressed instinct] proliferates in the dark, as it were, and takes on extreme forms of expression, which when they are translated and presented to the neurotic are not only bound to seem alien to him, but frighten him” (Freud 1989, 270). Here, a description which ought to remind one of the similarly alien and frightening behaviors which are attributed to the death drive.

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<sup>49</sup> Here we arrive independently at a similar sentiment or otherwise an explanation behind Edgar Allan Poe’s description of the death drive imagined in the Imp of the Perverse as a mobilizer but not motivator. Given that these unconscious instincts have exactly been repressed and so excluded from conscious life, their ultimate expression when they jockey loose from anticathexis is so often somatic. We feel the body being drawn instinctually to act in ways or towards things without also being able to report a cerebral desire to do the same, and so are understandably frightened.

It seems as though the dynamics which regulate an individual's psychological organization have clear parallels to those which govern a society. The taboo comes to be as a rule to maintain a culture's order and function; the life instincts exist to do the same for the individual. Repression functions to remove from the ego those instincts which cannot be assimilated to it; the taboo does the same for social systems. The transgression works to break the rule and expend energy in irrational excess; the repressed instinct endeavors for the same in their resistance to the homeostasis of the mind. The transgressive act is without reference to rational or logical motivation; the impulses of repressed unconscious were repressed exactly because they were a nonlogical negativity against the aims of conscious life. As Freud notes, "the sexual instincts are imperfectly tamed, and, in the case of every individual who is supposed to join in the work of civilization, there is a risk that his sexual instincts may refuse to be put to that use." (Freud 1917/1965, 12). This claim is as pertinent for the individual as it is for the society in which they live. The individual needs to repress their sexual instincts to the extent that they get in the way of productive instincts and endanger their life, and the society needs to make sexual instincts somewhat prohibited to the extent that they get in the way of the course of productive work. And, as we have just seen above, the processes set off by this realization is essentially the same for both. In each, a unity begins to form from which aberrance must be expelled. In each, the dynamics between the union and its rejects informs the shape that both take. The connection between these different life instincts and taboos, despite that they may differ substantively or pertain to different aspects of life, is that they are included on the inside of this unity. In this sense it is exactly the act of expulsion which actualizes their homogeneity. With this pairing of Freud and Bataille together, we see clear parallels between the flows of energy in the individual and social psyches.

But, also, the interaction between a psyche and its social environment is itself dynamic and dialectical. That is, we should be cautioned from thinking of the society as *merely* the macro subject, or vice versa. Many parts of the individual's unconscious are no doubt resultant of the laws and taboos of the culture in which they have been raised and so conditioned. Then, what is considered taboo/obscene in that culture will inform what is marked for repression by the individual's ego. If taboos/rules/laws differ from culture to culture—and indeed they do—then the repressed unconscious of the individual will take shape in unique ways based on their society's specific mores. Simultaneously, the constitution of a given social psyche is in part the culmination of the unique organization of a people's symptoms/desires/defenses. Whether informed by what one encounters frequently in the physical environment or some genetic heredity, the exact formations cannot be the same for a Norwegian as they are for a Brazilian.<sup>50</sup> There is as such an exchange between the social and the individual psyche. An interexchange which, like the intra-dynamics of both the individual and society, is turbulently ever-present.

Moreover, the turbulence of this interinfluence occurs through means of a contamination or contagion. The intermingling of the psyche of the individual and the psyche of the social is a communication characterized not by rational or measured discourse, but by the overflowing of affects.<sup>51</sup> We should be cautioned from thinking the subject as borne into the world through the solipsism of Descartes, rationally and in isolation. Rather, it is through the contagious overtaking of laughter “whereby we become ourselves – while being someone other” (Lawtoo 2011, 74).

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<sup>50</sup> The animals, plants, foods, weather patterns, and celestial patterns are radically different between the two environments. The abundance of energy from the selfless gift of the sun year-round leave such a surplus that massive carnival festivals are required to squander it. In Norway, where the sun disappears for half the year, there is no such luxury.

<sup>51</sup> The movie *Midsommar* (2019) does a fantastic job of portraying this concept we're discussing visually. At the movie's climax, when a village crowds around a human sacrifice being burned alive, the villagers burst into screams/cries/tears along with the sacrifice as the flames begin to engulf him. The camera whips quickly across the crowd of spectators, as if placing the movie's audience into the point of view of the contagious affect itself and allowing them to experience firsthand the virulence. “Contagious Virulence is in full swing” (Bataille 1957/1986, 67).

Author Nidesh Lawtoo, in *Bataille and the Birth of the Subject*, shows how Bataille takes a page from Nietzsche<sup>52</sup> in conceptualizing the subject in a relational or mimetic existence. The Bataillean subject is “from the very beginning open, by reflex, to the contagious affects of the *socii* in childhood” (Lawtoo 2011, 80). It is the corporeal, unconscious, or reflexive impulse of the child to imitate and return the smile of her mother which characterizes the permeability or relational nature of the subject. There is a pull on the chest of the baby, the child, or the adult when they are confronted by another who is themselves experiencing some intense emotion. Tears from a friend pour contagiously outward to invite or better compel the subject to pout their lip and share in the feeling of sadness. “Seeing and hearing a man laugh I participate in his emotion from inside myself...we cannot usually feel part of stone or board but we do feel part of the nakedness of the woman in our arms” (Bataille 1957/1986, 153). A shared bout of laughter or the wave of emotional influence which washes over us in an embrace show the openness/vulnerability of the self to the flux of affects in the Other. The subject takes place in this portrait of communication translucently. They are at once a clearly defined self, but one whose subjectivity is always indebted/vulnerable to the affects of the *socius*. Thus, the subject does not become as in the locution ‘I think, therefore I am’; but as in ‘I join in laughter, so we are’.

It is in this way that the overlap we have encountered between the structures and processes of the individual/social psyche cannot be thought as a static parallelism. The similarities between the two are not the chance of a happy coincidence, or came about in the past and have passively persisted, but emerge directly as a result of their contagious communication.

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<sup>52</sup> “Older than speech is the mimicking of gestures, which takes place involuntarily and is even now ...so strong that we cannot look upon facial movement without innervation of our own face ... The imitated gesture led the person who was imitating back to the sensation that expressed itself in the face or body of the person being imitated. Thus the people learned to understand one another; thus the child still learns to understand its mother.” (Nietzsche 1995, as cited in Lawtoo 2011, 76)

It would be no surprise then to find that there is an overlap between what are considered transgressive or inassimilable forces for the two. In that there is such a foundational and mutual connection, we may end up realizing that what characterizes the system of one does so also for the other. With this new conceptualization, we come to find the sovereignty of Bataille's transgressive action now in the unconscious of Freud's patient.

The repressed unconscious might be thought sovereign in that it is a realm in which we can find refuge from the tyranny of logic, obligations, and consequences. The pressure to surrender one's instincts to the logic and limitations of the real world, to eschew contradictions in our thought or to celebrate order and resolution, this pressure is in the unconscious disregarded in favor of any and every avenue of exploration one wishes to walk down. Perhaps the example par excellence to elucidate that feeling of freedom I am here getting at is found in the logic and composition of the unconscious dream-work. In the oneiric world of dreams, the work by the unconscious to condense multiple unconscious affects into impossible unities and to displace this meaning onto transposed and random objects is an absurd and confusing nonlogic.<sup>53</sup> In waking life, the authority of the reality principle would demand that we overcome this absurdity in order to objectively understand the situation. However, when one dreams and enters the mad world of Dionysus, this contradiction is sustained and multiplied. In this sovereign realm, it is possible for a kettle borrowed from a neighbor to have been simultaneously returned undamaged, already damaged, and never borrowed in the first place (Freud 1900/n.d. 268). In this way, the world of the dream strips from the kettle its discrete and concrete definition: it is not completely destroyed but is a starting point from which it is distorted/amalgamated/confused/*made continuous*. Its

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<sup>53</sup> The dream-work refers to the processes undertaken by the unconscious mind when the subject drifts off to sleep and it can finally come out to play. Displacement is the process whereby affective cathexis is split off from the objects logically related to it in waking life and is injected into objects which it might not have any rational relationship. Condensation takes these unbound, chaotic affects and smashed them together into confusing and amalgamated caricatures. (see Freud 1999: *On Dreams*, 154-158)

borders/identity become indefinite to make the impossible possible, and it becomes the receptacle for affects that do not logically belong to it. As such, the unconscious is characterized by an “insubordination” (Bataille 1996, 128) in resisting assimilation to an organization of meaning.

The infrastructure of the dream in the unconscious gives us further evidence by which we can claim that it is a sovereign escape from the rules of life. At the heart of every dream, Freud writes in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, “there is often a passage...which has to be left obscure” (525). “This is the dream’s navel”, a hopeless entanglement of dream-thoughts, “the spot where it reaches down into the unknown” (525). The choice of the navel as the metaphor for irrevocable nonmeaning is an interesting one. The navel on the physical body marks the site of the attachment of the umbilical cord, the bridge that gives sustenance to the fetus in their mother’s womb. In this way, it would be inaccurate to think of this dream navel as nonproductive or meaninglessness by an *absence* of meaning. Rather, the dream navel represents a nonmeaning in its *excess* of meaning, in the endless and entangled branches of significance whose contradictions cannot or will not be eschewed. Just like the umbilical cord whose gift of food flows out and into the fetus to sustain it, the dream navel’s excess of meaning overflows into every character/object of the dream.

The power of this dream navel and its excess of meaning is no doubt affirmed and elevated by Bataille, who unplugs the knot and allows the rest of the dream to flow into an embrace with the unknown. “The nature of understanding demands that the blind spot within it be more meaningful than understanding itself” (Bataille 1954/1988, 110). The dreaming of an inexplicable and delusional plot which seems to carry so much gravity in the moment but dissipates as soon as one awakens is both a disorienting feeling and familiar to many. It is clearly

not a complete absence of signification, but one of excess which flows out and over the barriers of the conscious mind. Just as with the treatment of the borrowed kettle, the excess of meaning overflows both the boundaries of the object being imbued with meaning as well as the ability of an epistemology to organize such meaning. We now find the sacred of Dionysus in the basement of the mind, along with its filth and refuse.

By now, the heterogeneous nature of the repressed instincts in the unconscious in relation to the homogeneous ego ought to be apparent. The realm of the repressed is constituted by roaming affective energies which have been, through the act of repression, split off from their corresponding ideas and objects. Transient, chaotic, mercurial: the unconscious is the realm of unbound cathectic energy desperately clamoring to be bound up in some actual expression. Just as in Bataille's description of the homogeneous society which is instantiated through the taboo which expels the heterogeneous, the homogeneous unity of the ego is predicated on the repression of the heterogeneous instincts which cannot be assimilated into this whole. The repressed unconscious is that seat of heterogeneous elements and unbearable threat: they impel towards a breakdown in order/function/normality which demands their censure and expulsion. And yet, because the ego cannot be formed nor this formation take shape without the expulsion, the repressed is the debtor of the ego. The drive towards death, in all its excess and violence, is a precondition for the assemblage of a drive towards life. As Bataille writes, "Human life cannot in any way be limited to the closed systems assigned to it by reasonable conceptions. The immense travail of recklessness, discharge, and upheaval that constitutes life could be expressed by stating that life starts only with the deficit of these systems" (Bataille 1996, 128). Freud seems already aware of this truth—that a nonmeaning is necessary for life—in the use of the dream-*navel* metaphor. It is thus in this way that *The Psychological Structure of Fascism* for Bataille firmly



resembles the psychological structure of the human mind for Freud. What we are left with, the taste lingering our mouth once we are through, is the hint that these are different terminologies for describing essentially similar dynamics in subjects with essentially similar characteristics. A sense of a world based on the powers and throes of the turbulent immanence of Nietzsche rather than the transcendent absolute of Hegel.

In total, Freud's unconscious once it has been wrung through Bataille's work, is always foremost at its heart an usurpation or violence. Found in the 'logic' of the dream, its use of meaning/signs as playthings and its relation to the absolutely unknowable, and in the harboring of the repressed as a vault of dangerous and inassimilable impulses, the unconscious is the seat of nonreason and champion of sacred indiscretion. It is in this way that the repressed unconscious becomes "the lived impossibility of a Hegelian 'Absolute Knowledge'" (Biles 2015, 236). The unconscious carries that same sacred elemental violence, a loss without possibility for recuperation, as the festival, sacrifice, or death itself. Both the confrontation by an image of death and the repressed impulse towards it "constitute so irreversible an expenditure, so radical a negativity...that they can no longer be determined as negativity in a process or a system" (Derrida 1967/1978, 259). Evinced by the fact that we are so often confused and scared by the expressions of the unconscious that have climbed their way into conscious life, they do not exist as recuperable negations opposite positive affirmations. They are more akin to intruders/invasers who reach into the system from without and grip and shake. We should be cautioned from thinking of this negativity as simply a negation, as a denial or opposition. Rather, so radical and disruptive is the movement of heterogeneity that it doesn't simply deny/oppose/delete the process or system but escapes it. That is, to conclude we ought to "succumb and give [death] an ordered place in our thoughts" (Razinsky 2009, 81) is definitively counter to the intentions of

both Freud and Bataille, and moreover not possible. It would be impossible to represent death qua death in an epistemological system. Illustrated in a different way, heterogenous elements are not the zero from which the homogenous system's nonzero is given meaning. These elements are instead constituted by an unstable, aberrant, and violent liminality whose explosive movements resist numeration. It is the presence *and* expulsion of this negativity<sup>54</sup> from the system, not only the negativity itself, which gives shape to the system.

Thus, similar flights of incomprehensibility exist both in the act of the orgy as well as the psyche of the participant: the practice we have established at the site of the sacrificial pyramid is well in business. Up until now, we have discussed the repressed unconscious with general reference to any and all repressed instincts found in the unconscious. This is with good reason: it is the case, I claim, that the 'death drive' which Freud names in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is a catch-all name for these instincts. That is, there is no one or singular, *the* death drive: it would seem antithetical for the unconscious to be the realm of boundless affective energies and a death drive to be clearly identifiable among them. Instead, the naming of a 'death drive' is an attempt to give identity to a culprit behind the varied confusing behaviors that clinical patients engage in. This is the case for almost every diagnosis of mental illness. That is, 'Schizophrenia' is not a concept/entity which has any meaningful existence independent of the minds of psychiatrists or their patients. The symptoms associated with it are very real, but the name 'schizophrenia' is just a construction employed to make sense of a recurring picture of psychosis. In much the same way, the 'death drive' described in Freud is a construction by an analyst to help the analysand make sense of a constellation of inaccessible instincts. This is the advantage of the mythological indefiniteness of the death drive. It is not singular: it is many. It describes the conglomeration of

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<sup>54</sup> Negativity rather than negation. The former denotes an element whose existence is not stably defined as a negation, but as one characterized by a liminal negativity that resists the stability of a definitive classification.

the inclinations and directions of the repressed instincts we have now become all-too familiar with. Its ultimate expression is the result of the tug-of-war between not only the repressed instincts themselves but also their battle with the repressing anticathexis which emanates from the conscious ego. This is not to say that we can come to know literally nothing about any one repressed instinct, for there are clearly patterns/themes/motifs which emerge that we can observe within a patient and between patients. I have no doubt that repeated iterations of this tug-of-war might form a curvature that a close observation could begin to understand. Rather, it is more to interpret the death drive as naming perhaps the nucleus of psychic heterogeneous force writ large.

In this sense, the death drives *lie* at the heart of any and every aberrant instinct found in the unconscious. This is an interpretation that Bataille quickly affirms in *The Psychological Structure of Fascism* when noting that “the exclusion of heterogenous elements...formally recalls the exclusion of the elements, described by psychoanalysis as unconscious, which censorship excludes from the conscious ego” (141). The threat of a productively inexpedient or socially unacceptable action is “identical” (143) to that incoherent, muddled, and multiple figure of the death drive in the unconscious. The death drive might represent the pool of instincts which whisper in our ear to disregard the rationale of the ego’s reality principle, to desire/dream/think/act in whichever way simply because this irreverence is pleasurable.

In another sense, the heterological death drive mobilizes, but does not motivate.<sup>55</sup> That is, it impels the individual to act while lacking a rational reason for doing so: it is a compulsion which lacks a telos as its conclusion. In the excessive overflow of its liminal shocks and bursts, the death drive names instincts which propel us to blur and ultimately exceed a rational

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<sup>55</sup> See discussion of Poe’s *Imp* above.

coherence. Its sovereignty and sacred aura are derived from that impunity with which it disregards the burdens of intellect and upturns the prohibitions of taboo or cultural imperative. Hierarchies, organized systems, and subject/object distinctions are in the waking world the exalted matrices through which significance is gleaned. The repressed unconscious is sovereign, is sacred, is transgressive, is deadly, is heterogeneous exactly because it acts in ways which rip apart the lines of organized knowledge and diffuse it evenly throughout. If the death drive is indeed our mythological entity, it is part Hydra: multi-headed and tangled, each neck and its attached mouth presses ceaselessly forward to spew an excess of incomprehensibility and nonmeaning at Hercules.

While literal death might be a collateral outcome of such a drive to exceed beyond a rational logic, it is not necessarily the primary or central aim of the drive. The absence or loss contained in a literal death is no doubt an inassimilable heterogeneity, but Bataille has shown us that religious, physical, or even psychedelic ecstasies can similarly be a radical negativity. Their inarticulability, the fact that these experiences cannot accurately be given their depth through the system of language, marks this heterogeneity. The overpowering excess which flows from the lover/God and the absolute loss of the coherent self in either's embrace is just as intellectually unknowable as literal death. That the same paradoxical ambivalence exists in an embodied confrontation with God as in the germ-cells dealing with life or death belies its power as an irrecoverable loss. In the opening chapter to *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud entertains the proposition by a friend of an "oceanic feeling" (5) which undergirds the general preoccupation with religion. While he admits the existence of such a feeling in some, he denies being able to find it within himself as well as denies its being the primary source for the institutions of religion. If only Freud could have himself met God and felt the full force of the ocean obliterate

him. The creation of a God and the mythologization of their might is the externalization of a power that oozes out of our very own pores. To meet God and experience an oceanic “oneness with the universe” (Freud 1999, 727) describes the same feeling as a religious eroticism, and yet only Bataille is able to fully appreciate and theorize the intensity/power of such ecstasy.

We are here reminded of Bataille’s claim that “Eroticism opens the way to death” (Bataille 1957/1986, 24). The ontological disruption experienced in the ecstasy of religious or physical eroticism is so profound as to give the recipient a taste of death and its eternity. The salience of its intensity is the breaking point around which Bataille’s philosophy is formed, and through which we interpret Freud’s. It is with this in view that we can understand *la petite mort* in the same terms as *le grand mort*.<sup>56</sup> The loss of the self in the headrush of orgasm is a microcosm of the loss of self at the end of life. While we revert back into ourselves after a minute, we are forever left with an impression of oblivion. It would thus be inaccurate to say these experiences did not contain the requisite excess of intensity and meaning that they could be intellectually known. Just like a literal return to inorganic nothingness, the return to God, a lover, or LSD is similarly a death. What I am here trying to get at is the sense in which, philosophically or ontologically speaking, an experience of continuity is an experience of death. The death of the self is not only experienced in the literal transition from bounded animacy to boundless inanimacy, but also in the profound feeling of boundlessness. In the bloody headwound of the corpse we view death, but in the overwhelming violence that this image *shows* us, we *feel* death, the “‘I’ is expelled” (Kristeva 1941/1982, 4). The corpse’s power to confuse the orderings of objects or subjects, its abjective nature and my violent reaction to such a disturbance, is the

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<sup>56</sup> “La petit mort”, literally translated to “the little death”, is a French term of art which refers to the sexual paroxysm experienced at the moment of orgasm. The intensity of such a self-effacing instant is in this phrase thought of as itself an experience of death. It is in this way we can connect the “the little death” of orgasm with the “the grand death” of literal inorganicism.

ontological disruption which is akin to actual death. The imposition of nonreason into life is the end of the discrete/coherent self, a death. With these notions in mind, we see how a death drive might describe an ambivalent desire to *break the hegemony of being* more so than a desire for *an end to being*. The death drive is then for the psyche a rebellion against the conscious ego, like an angry mob outside the doors of parliament is for the governmental apparatus.

Now, if in Bataille's analysis of society there exist bursts of extravagant loss when the stability of production is threatened by an excess of energy/resource, and if we are right in our comparisons with Freud's metapsychology, we should see some appropriate affective/behavioral cognates in the individual. That is, we have seen there are moments in the life of a community when consumption/expenditure is necessary to clean the whole of its excess. For the premodern culture this heterogeneous move took the form of the festival/human sacrifice; in modern cultures it is in war and bourgeois conspicuous consumption.<sup>57</sup> If the parallels hold—which I believe they do—there will be moments in the life of the individual psyche when similar excessive and unproductive bursts are necessary. Perhaps as a result of their mutual influence on each other, these cycles/processes are strikingly equivalent. The individual organism's psyche in constant and intimate contact with the social organism's psyche mutually shape their infrastructures/structure/lifecycles; Apollo and his ambivalence towards Dionysus explain the interplay between society's prohibition and its transgression as much as the individual psyche's prohibition and its transgression. That is, occasionally lapsing into the sacred frenzy of festival is necessary to maintain the stability of society, and occasionally throughout the development of life it is necessary for Eros to be made to cry.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> For further discussion see Bataille in *The Accursed Share* pages 35-38 (1976/1991).

<sup>58</sup> The full voluptuousness of this imagery, that the god of Love and desire might cry, is written extensively in *The Tears of Eros* (Bataille 1961/1989).

I claim that the death drive and the behaviors we have up to now attributed to its influence are the cause of these tears. That is, the manifestation of a death drive in certain reckless behaviors/desires is an actual incarnation of a violent negativity within the psyche of the individual. As well, I claim that it is oftentimes the case that expressions of aberrance which we attribute to the death drive can simultaneously be attributed to social dynamics. That is, reckless/chaotic instances of societal transgression are simultaneously indicative of a radical negativity within the psyche of the social. It should not be a shock that what makes Eros cry and what is a violent negativity to the social whole are so often one in the same. Through this point, the extent to which the institutions/lifespans of the two (individual/social) are something of a mirror to each other has been made clear. In the subsequent and final chapter, when we fully dive into the dirty substance of our perplexing phenomena, we will move this comparison definitively away from an abstraction. In turning finally to the actual/material phenomena we began with, we will fully codify the breadth of this overlap in understanding how they can be diagnosed as the symptom of a disease in either the individual or social body.

## Chapter 6: The Analyst's Construction

“Induction, a posteriori, would have brought phrenology to admit, as an innate and primitive principle of human action, a paradoxical something, which we may call perverseness, for want of a more characteristic term... Through its promptings we act without comprehensible object; or, if this shall be understood as a contradiction in terms, we may so far modify the proposition as to say, that through its promptings we act, for the reason that we should not.” Edgar Allen Poe, *Imp of the Perverse*, 2

“I would totally let Joe lock me in his basement [tongue emoji]”.  
Twitter user @princessproblem

Finally, after such careful consideration of the works of Freud and Bataille, we can be satisfied in our theoretical preparation and can feel prepared to be able to say something about the presenting problem. With our comprehensive synthesis between the worlds of Freud and Bataille, we are now better able to situate the cases we have encountered in our contrived clinic. In constructing our diagnosis, we will conclude that the literal violence contained in these erotic images is a concomitant of the psychic violence inherent to the death drive and eroticism writ large. In doing so, we will realize that the representation in media of these violent images is just one facet of an inclination/desire of which we are now able to speak. Beyond just its representation in media, violence and its association with sexual or erotic imagery is a symptom of a conflict which constitutes the main portions of psychic life. That is, it might be said to be the outcome of a battle which belies and points us in the direction of the war. In total, we will conclude that the jerk who treats us terribly is far more appealing than the one who treats us well because our ambivalent feelings of fear/excitement towards this maltreatment are a manifestation of our unconscious' reckless carelessness. Further, we will conclude that the murderous psychopath is more appealing than the jerk exactly because the violence of their actions represents an even more intense break from the pressure of homogeneity to unify, to be rational,



to *make sense*. At the same time, we will conclude that the media portrayals which scratch this itch for us do so simultaneously for a similar societal itch.

We begin this application through an example par excellence of this violent negativity eking its way into conscious life, arising in the trial of the serial killer Ted Bundy and dramatized in the movie *Extremely Wicked, Shocking Evil, and Vile*. The portrayal of Ted Bundy and his relationships notwithstanding (this is a point we have visited before and will return to soon), some occurrences during his trial provide a rich portrait of heterogeneous energy which, while at first confusing, become theoretically coherent once we employ the work we have done in the previous sections. Namely, during Bundy's trial for the brutal murders of a number of sorority girls at Florida State University, a large contingency of the onlookers were young women, contemporaries of the girls that Bundy had raped and murdered on his killing sprees. These women attended the proceedings of the trial, by their own admission, because they were dazzled by the spectacle of Ted Bundy himself. Despite his horrible crimes, or perhaps more accurately *because of them*, these young women felt some kind of paradoxical attraction to him. This is the death drive at work: mobilizing (not motivating) these women to seek out the heterogeneous violence embodied by Ted Bundy.

Let me be clear, in no way am I trying to hint to the claim that these women in any way wish to be brutalized in the way that his victims were: "it is imperative to distinguish what's *psychically* dangerous from what's *physically* dangerous." (Dean 2000, 165). If any of these onlookers were to encounter Bundy in a dark alleyway, I imagine the fantasy would immediately collapse and they would, like everyone else, be desperate to escape. Similarly, while St. Teresa's ecstasy in being stabbed by God's angel was excessively powerful, it is likely that she would not have wanted to be actually, physically stabbed. In fact, many of the young women describe the

fear that subsists with them when they close their doors and double check their windows' locks at night. While this fear is very real, Ted Bundy's shackled hands and confinement behind armed guards 20 feet away is the Goldilocks zone which allows them to eroticize Bundy's violent and dangerous image. His being able to turn around and penetrate the crowd of onlookers with his gaze is the perfect brush with heterogeneity which dazzles and disorients the young women without being able to completely destroy them. If they were to get too close to this physical danger, the crucial distinction between fantasy and reality would collapse, and too with it the homogenous whole of the conscious ego would be placed in jeopardy. In this sense, the image of Ted Bundy is the object onto which their unconscious death drive attaches and through which it can push its heterological impulses into conscious reality.

The total incomprehensibility of heterogeneous forces allows us to make sense of the shoulder shrug, nervous giggle, and 'I don't know' the attendees offer when asked why, despite their fear, they return again and again to attend the trial.<sup>59</sup> This uncertainty resembles the lack of explanation which Freud's war-neurotics can give for the way their minds repeatedly bring them back to the scene of their trauma, the alien/unfamiliar nature of repressed instincts which are brought up to the neurotic, or why Poe's narrator in *The Imp of the Perverse* gives himself up. It is because the impetus behind these behaviors emanates from the repressed unconscious, a realm whose instincts have been expelled from logical or conscious assimilation, that they cannot be consciously articulated. It resembles further still the speechless awe of the ascetic who has just met God. We understand now the essential structure of both feelings to be the same. In both the ascetic and the young women at the trial, there resides a desire to transgress, a drive to push at the confining limits of reason, a desire for ecstatic release in the possession of the object of

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<sup>59</sup> See in references *Ted Bundy groupies*, ArchiveNewsFootage.

fantasy, an amalgamation of muddled feelings and unresolved confusion. In all instances, a dissatisfaction with the prison of reality and a noncognitive yearning by the body to move beyond these limits occurs. To be sure, there are few things in life less logical than intentionally starving oneself or desperately fantasizing about a sexual relationship with a serial killer.

In this sense, there is a sacredness about Bundy and his actions which repels some and pulls others in: mephitic and emancipatory. The sacred aura for Bataille might already be described by a morbid intrigue, so the transgressive burst of murder is doubly an intriguing morbidity. The intense transgression of rule/law/taboo/reason in his litany of murders is what gives him that “wicked glow which is so seductive” (Bataille 1961/1989, 67). The seduction of wickedness is a violent ambivalence, one which has clearly allowed the attendees of the trial to overcome their rational *I know that I shouldn't* with a primal *But I feel as though I must!* Just as the homogenous society requires the existence of heterogeneous transgression in order to expel it, the psychic formation of the so-called ‘groupies’ of Ted Bundy, as in every human, required and repressed the instincts which drive them towards him.

We can here return also to our discussion of the interplay between the psyche of the individual and the psyche of the social, and perhaps be able to answer the question posed initially as to whether these media examples were the responses to individual's desires, or the products of dynamics contained to the TV network studio as a social institution. In the interplay between the two, there is an influence between what is repressed for the psyche and what is repressed in that psyche's milieu—the repressed here referring to all those elements which are simply too transgressive to be brought into the whole. So deep is this influence, that one could accurately interpret these phenomena as fitting into/the products of either system. They clearly do respond to the desires of the individual's repressed drives, but so too do they function as a

transgression to a taboo on the societal level. It is perhaps the two systems' interplay which leads these media examples to be the stone that kills two birds. The essential dynamics of the two are not statically 1:1, but so intimate is their interinfluence and so similar are their infrastructures, it is our conclusion that these phenomena function as a heterogeneity in either level of analysis. The question of the chicken or the egg is now meaningless or otherwise impossible to answer. The individual and the social are equally contented with this expression of pathology, and to deduce which contributes more to it is either impossible or of little importance. It is in this way that we say this phenomenon of sexual violence in media is theoretically coherent as the manifestation of a radical negativity to the individual mind and to the society in which we live.

In this way, our bridging the gap between Bataille and Freud allows us to observe how the psychological dynamics of the young women attending the trial reflect the macrodynamics governing the courtroom writ large. The outlined society complete with its prohibition against violence and murder can only be instantiated in the moment that this prohibition is violated. The homogenous whole, itself constituted by divergent and distinct elements, is given shape when these forces unite in the act of rejecting that which is a threat to its maintenance. For however justly the court will censure/punish Bundy for his actions, it is in a broader sense indebted to this act of transgression. This same maneuver occurs in the psyches of the young women enamored with Bundy in ways which we have above discussed. Here, we are reminded of an infamous line from Benedict Spinoza's *Treatise on Theology and Politics*: "Why do men fight for their servitude as stubbornly as though it were their salvation?" (3). This is a question taken up by Wilhelm Reich in his *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, a sociological work that was immensely influential on Bataille. Whether on the level of the society, or on the level of the individual mind, the essence of our question and the one posed by Spinoza is the same: why do people repeatedly

act against their own interest? Our synthesis of Bataille and Freud leads us to answer that it is the logic-effacing and transgressive force of repressed drives which impel individuals to act wantonly in both political and sexual endeavors. For however intensely Apollo works, Dionysus is always behind him ready to pull his feet out from underneath him. The question posed by Spinoza and taken up by Bataille shows us the clear parallels between the psyche and the social. One might interpret in the whole judicial process a societal act of repression. The trial determines whether or not the individual is assimilable into larger society, and prison becomes the receptacle of acts or actors deemed too dangerous to the broader social order. It is then no wonder that in visiting a prison one is overcome with a sense of its sinister or abject importance: it is society's repressed unconscious, the harbor of radical negativity it locks up and disappears.

If one were to take a vivid, virtual tour of that same prison, there would no doubt be that same sinister feeling, albeit now to a lesser degree. In the same way, viewing a tape of Ted Bundy would elicit a similar wicked glow, but now only a simulation of such. That is, we can interpret and understand these situations and their significances most simply when they are attributed to actually existing people, but a novel layer is introduced when we deal in an analysis of their portrayal on a screen. This layer is at once an abstraction which removes the viewer from the threat of real danger, but also one which brings them closer to the images on the screen—the ambivalent both/and sentiment is clearly inescapable. What is meant by this? It is true that the TV screen is not nearly as grand or profound as true theater. The glow of the LED backlight, not the real, fleshy face of the actor twisted into emotion, is what literally confronts me. And yet, it is at the same time more intrusive/penetrative in bringing vivid and increasingly lifelike images inches from the eyes. It takes the killer and their associated violence out of their contexts and

beams them into my bedroom after midnight. The drama of the theatre was before contained to the physical location and time of the performance, but now enters my home on-demand.

Further, the clearest evidence as to the validity of the inclusion of media portrayals in our analysis is marked by the extent to which the vast majority of users would self-report the impact it has made on them. When asked about their favorite shows or movies, viewers would no doubt wax poetic in describing attachments to and identifications with the characters of the show. We can here revisit a tweet introduced in the very first section, recalling the plot of the Netflix show *You* and its murderous antihero Joe who climactically locks his love interest Beck in a cage. Twitter user @princessproblum wrote, “I would totally let Joe lock me in his basement [tongue emoji]”. There should be no doubt that one would not proclaim to the world their desire for the fictional character Joe to lock them in a cage if his depiction had not had a profound emotional (or sexual) impact on them. In fact, it might be true that the privacy of isolation and/or the option for anonymity afforded by technology allows some to explore their transgressive inclinations down paths that shame/embarrassment would otherwise foreclose.<sup>60</sup> This, compounded with assured physical safety in the providence of the bedroom, might actually allow many to dip their toes into topics, subjects, and the exploration of desires they would not have been able to before. The experience is a simulation, to be sure, of a reality which is likely more intense, but the existence of and widespread engagement with material which gives a simulation of eroticism/death does not detract from our analysis and is in fact its corollary.

This is an interpretation affirmed by Bataille when, writing on the popularity of adventure novels, he notes “if we think of our deepest desires which frailty alone forbids us to realize, the

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<sup>60</sup> It might be said that these technologies create the conditions for the proliferation of more perverts and less neurotics. In that isolation and privacy can act as safeguards against shame and embarrassment, the unconscious desire to transgress might increasingly find expression in these mediums exactly because they hide the user from social interaction which instantiates taboos.

stories we read so eagerly will show us their nature” (Bataille 1957/1986, 87). The impression of psychic danger or precarity that is created in watching a movie could only be all the more vivid than what is felt in reading a detective novel. While physically safe watching Netflix in one’s bed or watching Ted Bundy from the pew of the courtroom, the psychic danger is similarly real and exciting. It is this psychological danger that is most salient, as in experiences of ecstasy one is not literally ripped in twain but feels as though they have been. The vicarious identifications we establish with characters of these shows are no less felt or resultant of our drives simply because they appear on a screen. It is with this understanding that we are justified in using simulations from electronic media to point us in the direction of our understanding of eroticism and the death drive. Thus, the person who obsessively consumes media related to serial killers and frequents online forums dedicated to discussions of their crimes, should be, for our purposes, treated in the same way as the young women who obsessed over Ted Bundy in-person.

In this way, we can now turn to the various electronic examples referenced throughout in order to analyze the actions projected onto the characters of the screen by their writers, as well as make sense of their impacts on the living, breathing viewers. We can firstly look at the characters portrayed in *Extremely Wicked* and see if our own mythological characters can help us make sense of their actions. At first glance the choice of Zac Efron to play the role, an actor who came to fame as a teenage heartthrob and who has repeatedly won People Magazine’s ‘Sexiest Man Alive’ award, gives an idea of what sentiments the director intends to elicit in the audience. It is immediately apparent that the portrayal of Ted Bundy by Zac Efron is exceedingly humanizing and full of charm. He is extremely patient with Liz Kendal (played by Lily Collins), the single mother for whom he cooks/cleans and plays an excellent surrogate father. As the story of lies and deceit progressively unfolds, one cannot help but feel for the fictional Kendal and her inability to

give up her love for Bundy. Even given the privilege of hindsight, it is hard not get caught up in the gleam of Efron's smile, which, like the Cheshire Cat's, beams across the screen to hide the horror of what lurks just beneath it. Director Joe Berlinger is attempting to reify in his audience that same spellbound feeling experienced by the real Bundy's victims and admirers.

The narrative of *Extremely Wicked* is one which illustrates the influence of the repressed unconscious. Liz Kendal, even after she can no longer consciously reject the truth of Bundy's murders, persists in her love for him. In a poignant and wrenching scene, she pushes away the comforting hand of her well-meaning but boring suitor Jerry Thompson, staring helplessly at her TV screen as she watches Bundy get sentenced to death for his crimes. What else could this be than her fighting stubbornly for her own servitude? Just like the women attending his trials, there is some ineffable feeling which won't allow her turn away. Bundy's titular extreme wickedness, instead of limiting her interest in him, has rather multiplied it. The violently excessive explosion of energy which overflows from the broken prohibition against murder contains a sacred hue which draws her in when she knows it should not. The allure is the chink in the armor of reason that he both effects and embodies. This is what her repressed death drive inclines her towards: an indulgence in a violent nonsense. Her death drive is exactly that conglomeration of instincts dangerous to her conscious self, and so it pushes her to act in ways free from the reign of consequence, telos, or instrumentality. In this sense, her rejection of Jerry indicates the intense strength of her unconscious drive as a negativity. Jerry represents the blasé status quo and so is unattractive; Ted Bundy represents a non-Euclidean status quo on its head. In this way, we can understand the fictional Liz Kendal's attachment to Ted Bundy as the influence of the death drive in pushing her towards experiences of sovereignty or transgression.



This is a drive or dynamic which occurs in most all of the examples listed above. Particularly in the Netflix show *You*, we can see this drive not in the actions of the characters on the show but in the emotional reaction by viewer's to the show's content. Recall that in this series, the delusional protagonist Joe in each season murders the friends and family of his chosen target in order to manipulate her into falling in love with him. While one could likely attribute many of the self-destructive or self-defeating behaviors of the victim Beck to a death drive, such a drive is also an explainer of the audience's reaction. We now finally return to the tweet referenced above: "I would totally let Joe lock me in his basement [tongue emoji]" (@princessproblem). Again, what else can we see in this besides someone desiring exactly that which logic should predict they ought not to? As we have seen countless times before, there is in the woman who tweeted this some part of her which is attracted to the thought of danger for its own sake: the risk is the reward. The psychic danger felt at entertaining the thought of being locked up by an attractive, dangerous murderer is exciting and scratches the itch that the death drive creates. A scratch that begets another itch and so another scratch without end in an unexhaustive "circular agitation" (Bataille 1954/1988 111); Dionysus follows Apollo who is followed by Apollo again endlessly.

Still elsewhere we see a striking example which lays bare the distinction we have been aiming to describe. Twitter user @Capricornyyy writes, "okay but @pennbadgley was sexy as Dan but lord Joe is a whole new level". Penn Badgley, the actor who plays Joe in *You*, previously played the role of Dan in the TV show *Gossip Girl*. The characters are strikingly similar in that both are quiet and complex, and actor Penn Badgley is similarly 'tall, dark, and handsome' in the two shows. The significant difference between the two characters is that now in *You*, Penn Badgley portrays a serial killer. This is the element which brings his sex appeal to a

whole new level: violence, death, aberrance, heterogeneity. The tweet makes it starkly clear: the incorporation of the prospect of murder into his image makes a desirable partner all the more wickedly desirable. The sentiment expressed by this twitter user is an organic manifestation of the same noted by the Marquise De Sade when he wrote “The best way of enlarging and multiplying one’s desires is to try to limit them” (2002, 39). Penn Badgley is an attractive actor, but when depicting a gossiping manipulator, or even a manipulator *that murders...* oh lord.

This then allows us to go beyond the claim that it is merely because the erotic experience is a violence that we see sexual and violent imagery expressed together. That is, their frequent co-occurrence is not simply a result of psychic violence contained in the erotic experience being expressed as literal violence. We now see that given the choice of an erotically desirable partner we would still prefer to turn towards an erotically desirable partner *imbued with violence*. That we are even more excited at the prospect of a violently salacious image shows that the violence in these images is not just an inert corollary. It clearly has a salience which operates to transform how we relate/react to these images. Just as how Ted Bundy were he not a serial killer not have garnered such fanatic adoration from so many, Penn Badgley is *merely* attractive outside the role of Joe. Now, as violent murderers, they are both *wickedly* attractive. It is the violence of transgression/ecstasy which intensifies the erotic desirability of their image. In this way, the death drive is as important in the mind of the enthralled *You* fan as it is in the fictional character of Liz Kendall or the young women actually present at his trials.

Even outside of traditional media, trends on the culturally dominant app TikTok are similarly disturbing and demand analysis. In this app marketed towards teens/pre-teens, users create videos up to 15 seconds long, usually set to music, of themselves dancing, making jokes, showcasing cool skills, or otherwise creating an aesthetically pleasing experience for the viewer.

The end-product can really be whatever the user can fit into a short vignette. It is telling then, with such indefinite creative freedom, that trends with thousands of videos have emerged of users roleplaying as victims of abuse or assault. To be clear, in the open-ended freedom of a creative license, TikTok users internally generate and independently realize the desire to pretend they were the victim of a brutal and horrific attack. One such video by a user begins with the young girl (@danleenc1) putting on her eyeliner and lipstick with an excited expression and a cute outfit, and then cuts suddenly to her walking into view with tears in her eyes, cuts on her lips, and bruises all over her face. The music that plays in the background is a sickly sweet and filtered 1950s chorus about unrequited love. The caption reads: “The boy I met online wasn’t who I thought he was”. Another young girl (@xxxxtentashton) posted a video which similarly shows her putting on makeup and an outfit as if to go on a date, only to jump to her unconscious and bloodied body being dragged underneath a bed. Thousands of similar videos can be found in hashtags related to Ted Bundy and Charles Manson among other mass murders.

The ethics of glorifying abuse aside, that this trend arose spontaneously from users on the platform is incredibly intriguing and must lead us to say something in the direction of why people would be inclined to glorify abuse in the first place. What motivates our interest here is the prior question of ‘why is this thing the way it is’, and not the contemplative stage of ‘is the way this thing is permissible?’. This is no doubt a point which should be kept in mind throughout the entirety of this thesis. The intent here is not to condemn or otherwise comment on the ethics of the advent of these videos, but to understand what exactly would lead to their creation.

That there is no rational explanation for why someone would want to fantasize being the victim of abuse, is the realization that this behavior is not rationally explainable. In creating their own narratives through which they play out the fantasy of becoming the victim of a brutal

assault, TikTok users come ever more intimately close to the wicked glow of injecting violence/danger into their lives. It is the same inclination to inch ever more proximate to death in life which characterizes the interest in shows like *You* and *Extremely Wicked*, which is also behind these TikTok trends. That is, the irrational repressed drives which derive satisfaction from threats of precarity and injury are here too at work. Painting fake bruises on skin or binding limbs and tying a ball gag around the mouth for a bedroom video psychically simulates intense violence, while actually in complete physical safety. This is not accidental: the contrast between the users' cute outfits, bright filters, and carefree/excited attitudes, and the absolute rupture of these portraits in their bloodied endings are clearly intentional and meant to add to the macabre power of the video's abrasive twist. The abrupt change from life to lifeless in the videos is the offensive transgression which rips the viewer from business-as-usual to abjection: the simulated violence is accompanied by a feeling of confusion/disorientation/fright in that the 'why' for this behavior lacks a rational/satisfactory answer. Here, a clear distinction between what is known cerebrally and what is felt somatically. While they may not have a conscious understanding of *why* they're doing what they're doing, these creators know what feeling it is they're aiming for when they experience it themselves. We can now come to read in these videos/trends "the unconscious pathological desire to be struck down violently like Icarus and Prometheus" (Bataille 1996, 37).

It should be clear that, whether or not a novel, the theatre, or even Netflix could in some way simulate an erotic feeling in their respective audiences may be an area for legitimate debate, the ability for TikTok to do the same is undeniable. In fact, TikTok might give its user the ability to more closely or more intensely simulate these experiences and the feeling of danger. No longer in a movie where violence is entirely imagined through passive identifications with

victims and plots, TikTok's interactive platform allows its user to become active participants in their contrived abuse. On the movie screen or the living room TV, the audience member is beholden to the point of view and perspective of the director through her camera lens. Now, the TikTok user is their own director, and with the camera on their iPhone they can create along almost any curve that their unconscious desires. Now, the user sees themselves as the character on the screen that is brutalized, a privilege that had previously been reserved to actors and actresses. With such radical autonomy and safety from shame, it is no wonder we see the expression of latent desires within each of us finally in someone perverted enough to carry them out. Or, in a world where one has to accept that they will never get to experience the electric environment of Columbine High School during its infamous mass shooting, using TikTok to roleplay this fantasy might be the next best thing.<sup>61</sup>

While it may seem in analyzing its expression in popular media that an eroticization of violence is endemic/exclusive to women, this is, to reiterate, not the case. As we have seen throughout its explication/synthesis, both Bataille and Freud (and I) would claim their theories as descriptions of every human mind. While some relics of past centuries of sexism might have influenced their writings, removing these inflections will lose nothing of import from the theory. That is to say, an attraction to images of violence or towards a partner imbued with violence is at its base not gendered: it is not only masculinity which can embody a heterogeneous nonmeaning. While the psychic process of repressing aberrant death drives is constitutive of all humans irrespective of gender, it is this instinct's intersection with misogyny which causes the female to more often than not become the idol and the male the iconoclast. Sexism's influence in popular

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<sup>61</sup> As above, and while it might seem to flirt with glorification, this thesis and its characterization of our phenomena is not intended to evince a sense of admiration. It is rather an awe at the gravity or disturbing import of these examples which is aimed to hit the reader in the chest.

culture has made it more palatable to portray a man as the active violator and the woman as the passive appreciator of such violence. Could Freud's Germ-Cell be taken from our toolkit and applied here to make sense of why this is so? In that the figure of the mother is one of the first objects we identify/relate to in the external world, and as such feel the need to expel her in order to instantiate ourselves? This may be the case, but it would lead us down rabbit holes out of which an extrication would double the length of our journey.

Regardless, there are many examples to the contrary. Angelina Jolie acting as the character Lara Croft is infamously sexualized, and yet it is an image of exposed cleavage which authoritatively pulls the trigger rather than covers as a damsel. No doubt there is some wicked intrigue elicited by Uma Thurman as the vengeful Bride in *Kill Bill* which is simply not there in Uma Thurman herself on the red carpet. Ke\$ha throughout her discography and particularly in the song *Cannibal*, gives aggressive and violent depictions of sexuality which make the woman the active doer of violence. *1000 ways to die*, a series on Spike TV marketed towards young men which contains wacky and almost categorically sexual depictions of deadly circumstances, frequently depicts the man as the fool on whose body this violence is acted out. As before, the examples are too numerous to count. While the distribution of examples of sexual violence in media might skew towards depictions of violence against women, this is not due to a bias in the drive itself but rather its intersection with misogynistic social values.

Now, it would increasingly approach redundancy and further absurdity to discuss in detail each and every example of sexual violence in media posed throughout the thesis. The inclusion of so many was intended to give credence to the claim that they did in fact occupy every corner and every medium of popular culture. With a close analysis of a few examples and a coherent understanding of the projects of Bataille and Freud on which we rest, we can make

sense of the group of these phenomena as a whole. In total, we see that each example is a different symptom, a different point wherein some or another repressed desire reaches its expression. At each point, a different combination of circumstances caused this repressed desire to be articulated in a different avenue or different area of culture. Together, these symptoms form the constellation of a disease for which the death drive is our makeshift culprit. Just as a mind constituted by expelling into the unconscious inassimilable drives is plagued by their recurrence, a society based on the neurosis of repressing sexual desires through prohibitions and taboos is bound to experience the ultimate return of these repressed energies. The heterogeneity of the excess of erotic expenditure is expelled in both the society as well as the individual in order to make room for more utilitarian instincts/drives. They are the unconscious behavioral manifestations of a mind which represses into shocks and bursts the affective energy of its sexual desire and the cultural manifestations of a culture which does the same. In this way, the structure of the mind of the individual is the parallel for the structuring of the mass. The desire in the individual for a simulation of the psychic danger which violence and heterogeneity put us in is reflected by the organic advent of social infrastructure to do just that in society. Here, the union of Bataille's sociological analyses and Freud's metapsychology has made this apparent, a top-down analysis which would independently predict the existence of such shows.

Still, this perspective might justly be charged with being too objective, that it stands too much outside the inner experience of the death drive's fever. These are symptoms in one sense, but also in another points of contact for experiences of eroticism and therefore death. Through Bataille, we have seen that the death drive does not relate only to biological death, but also to radically violent breakdowns in meaning or experiences which carry the philosophical/ontological salience of death. With this in mind, these shows are appealing because

the experience of watching them is the simulation of an erotic ecstasy. Given the choice between the shows ‘Sex made me more Emotionally Intimate with my Partner’ and ‘Sex Sent me to the ER’, we would choose the latter because this one scratches the perpetual itch that erotic desire places in our minds. The turbulence of eroticism is always already a violent transgression of boundaries and borders, and so our preference for violently sexual images might point to literal violence being a conceptual lubricant for this radical negativity. We perhaps, on some level, see in our fantasy image of the violent partner the sweet release from the pressure of having to act prudently and logically. That is, the irreducible reason for our experiential preference for such outré images is exactly because they contain the power of nonreason. The violent ecstasy of LSD/Sex/God are all characterized by excesses of meaning/energy/affective bursts which escape the limits of identity and intellectual assimilation. In this sense, we desire erotic experiences because they inject the experience of death into our lives, and violence’s transgression of the normal ordering of the meaning of the world gives us the same taste of our conceptual death. The sexualization of a violence (or vice versa) done by/to a character with whom we have formed a strong identification hits us over the head with a bittersweet ambivalence. In their death, we feel a sense of ecstasy. In their orgasm, we feel a sense of ecstasy. It is from this experience which flows the (non)reason for our morbid intrigue in such media.

I think rapper ‘The Kid Laroi’ puts the juxtaposition we are aiming to describe most plainly on his song *Wrong* when he proclaims, “I don’t want to get you on your own tonight...Girl I’m trying to get you on your wrong tonight”. The function of the erotic/sexuality and its discomfort in profane life is nothing if not a ‘wrong’. It is as if, when in their right mind, no one would dare to think about much less engage in sexual practices. Only in the sacred haze of a backwards frenzy can the better judgement of a rational ‘right’ be rejected in favor of a



stupidly destructive ‘wrong’. A girl that is “on her right” is thinking prudently, reserving her productive energy to be used towards dutifully utilitarian ends; a girl “on her wrong” isn’t thinking with her head but with her body, willing to gloriously expend energetic excess through sexual encounters. This ‘wrong’ of sexuality is its radical negativity: the extent to which one must be ‘wrong’ to act erotically is the extent to which it is a shortcircuit in the system of what is knowable. This break in organized knowledge, break from the better judgement of the Ego, breaking of the prohibitions of taboo, all contribute to the violent hue of erotic ecstasy. That this (and many other examples) is an orientation to sexuality which manifests independently in popular culture, and moreover one which makes intuitive sense to its listeners, is great evidence for our conclusions.

We now understand that the death drive compels us repetitively and ceaselessly towards the aggregate of what this ‘wrong’ indicates. It is death not in found the decay of organs but in the unconscious suicidal tendencies of rationality and knowledge. In a Bataillean understanding of the death drive we can read the desire for an oceanic oneness which Freud was so ready to toss to the wayside. In Freud’s description of the germ-cell’s ambivalent drive towards its external environment, Bataille sees the beginnings of a movement/possibility of ecstasy. The germ-cell reproducing, the transgressor of taboos, the saint meeting god, the lover stripping, the psychonaut drinking ayahuasca, Dionysus stabbing Apollo, the audience idolizing the serial killer, the audience idolizing the fictional serial killer: all in some sense experience an ecstasy only possible in the violence of “one who disrobes himself of knowledge” (Bataille 1954/1988, 123). The death drive is then the inescapable desire to strip and throw away the clothing of reason and leap naked beyond the edge of the void into the overflow of the ocean. The ‘wrongness’ which is at the base of such a drive is communicated in the inassimilable nature of

the repressed drives, the expelled heterogeneous element, and the unorganizable nonmeaning of ecstasy. Such is the difficulty of this work: it is an attempt to describe that which cannot be totalized in a description. The only recourse then is for the textbook to accept and name its limitation. Regardless of whichever terminology one employs to get ever closer to this corporeal violence, there is irreducibly that “paradoxical something” (Imp 1845/2018, 3) which resists capture in the words on a page. The ‘oceanic oneness’ bridges a gap which can never be crossed discursively/intellectually, and to argue otherwise anesthetizes the superlatives of human experience into a dry science. Language/writing/intellect can only ever be ‘right’; the world of the death drive is only ever ‘wrong’.

Now not only in the dreamed machinations of the unconscious, but also in tweets, in Netflix shows, in the convulsive laughter following a joke, in the delirious dance of swaying hips and correspondence of eyes in the nightclub, we are the “lived impossibility of a Hegelian Absolute Knowledge” (Biles 2015, 236). In the technical depictions we have explored, the death drive and all the concrete expressions/manifestations we have painstakingly attributed to it constitute the end of a knowledge. We reach the conclusion that there undoubtedly are notions that the body knows which the mind is not privy to. The truth of ecstasy is lost in the textbook which lacks its voluptuous terror. The full truth of ecstasy is only ever known in the instant that an excess of feeling causes one to dissociate. In this way, the glazing over of the eyes and the butterflies fluttering around the stomach in response to the abjection of the lover’s nakedness are the physiological markers that we are about to enter a world that is ‘wrong’. The shiver which runs down the spine of someone piqued and repelled by Joe’s insidious smile is a simulation of the same feeling. In total, the presence of violence as it is paired with sexual images in popular culture has come about as a response to the flows of heterogeneity/fulfillment of this drive—one

would expect similar manifestations to cooccur with the advent of new technologies which simulate this experience with increasingly lifelike vividity.<sup>62</sup> That the powerful reality of these experiences is so woefully undeniable is the capstone on which our argument rests.

Finally, at our coda, we see that the ubiquity which characterizes the presence of pairs of violence/sexuality in media is no less daunting and scary, but now at least theoretically coherent and understandable. Through the writings of Bataille or the analysis of Freud, and in the new characters created through the union of their mythologies, surprise should now at least be removed from the myriad of shocking and affective responses elicited by these images. We can revisit some of the questions posed at the beginning of this project which should now be answerable. Why is it that depictions of sex in popular media are so often violent and aggressive; why is it that a fantasy of violence enacted on the self is in some sense erotically desired; why is it that people so often end up/remain in relationships with partners who treat them terribly? There is some collection of unconscious impulses in each of us, named by the death drive, which causes us to err, aberrant energies which mobilize us to put caution to the wind and seek out that which dizzies/dazzles/disorients us. It is this instinct which causes many to find attractive both violent/abrasive sexual partners as well as violent portrayals of sex. There is an analogous and corresponding dynamic in the flows of energy in society: heterogeneous transgression bursting through to the socius simultaneously putting into question/instantiating its taboos. As accurate it may be to interpret these media representations to be a response to our repressed desires, they are also immanent to society itself. That is, they manifest as a consequent to macro, cultural forces

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<sup>62</sup> Virtual reality technology, headsets and software which allow one to literally take on a first-person point-of-view in a simulated world, are already available and becoming increasingly obtainable for the average media consumer. One would, in the view of our theories, predict the advent of programs or simulated worlds which allow the user to experience some or another simulated confrontation with death.

abstract the individual human as much as they do to scratch the itch of the unconscious. In this way, they are the stone which kills two birds.

Beyond these energetic movements, “eroticism opens the way to death” (Bataille 1957/1986, 24) in giving us a taste of the abjection/oblivion/obliteration that we so strangely desire. Just as the germ-cell had to deaden part of itself in order to live, so too is death the carrot suspended in front of us that we have been blinded to. The violent eradication of thought/knowledge/meaning requisite to the sacred/the sovereign/the heterogeneous which we now understand to be the driving force behind the death drive finds its literal expression in actual violence. The erotic turbulence of Bataille allows us to understand Freud’s death drive not only in the solitude of an administration of self-harm, but also in a movement that is yet self-reflexive but occurs in the meeting of an alterity at a mutual point of non-existence. The clinic at the top of the Pyramid of the Sun, replete with the guidance of Eros and Dionysus, and in view of the analyst as much as the orgiastic pervert, makes sense of death in its excess of sense. From up here, the full pantheon of human desires, emotions and experiences is clearest. Death, rather than a motionless figure which stands waiting patiently for the play to end, takes on an active and integral role in its plot. Death is no longer rejected from our being, it is the terrifying break around which life is formed, and we are nonetheless moved to participate in it.

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*Today, the FBI honors the life and work of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. A quote from Dr. King is etched in stone at the FBI Academy's reflection garden in Quantico as a reminder to all students and FBI employees: "The time is always right to do what is right." #MLKDay [Tweet]. (2020, January 20). Twitter.*

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