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The Politics of Eros:

The Philosophy of Georges Bataille and Japanese New Wave Cinema

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy  
in Film and Television

by

Andrey Gordienko

2012

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Politics of Eros:

The Philosophy of Georges Bataille and Japanese New Wave Cinema

by

Andrey Gordienko

Doctor of Philosophy in Film and Television

University of California, Los Angeles, 2012

Professor Kathleen McHugh, Chair

This dissertation assesses the relevance of Georges Bataille's philosophy for film studies and explores the conjunction between the political and the erotic operative in his work. It is widely held that, at the time of the German occupation of France, Bataille experienced the "inward turn," which had marked his transformation from being a political activist to a solitary philosopher preoccupied with eroticism. My project contests the view that he had lost interest in politics at that point as it discloses the political dimension of erotic experience. Furthermore, I demonstrate that the logic of the "inward turn" helps to illuminate the work of Japanese New Wave film movement of the 1960s. What precipitates the "inward turn" is the experience of disappointment. In Bataille's case, it stems from the rise of fascism in Europe and the failure of the Left to assume power in France. In the case of Japanese New Wave, it has roots in the political protest movement that opposed yet ultimately failed to offset the renewal of the Japan-U.S. Mutual Security Pact of 1960. In each case, the turn towards eroticism constitutes a different kind of refusal – an act of separation from the social order as opposed to an act of destruction, a movement away from the community of militants and towards the community of lovers.

The dissertation of Andrey Gordienko is approved.

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2012

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## Introduction

### Film and Bataille's Philosophy

*Why not consider the cinema from the point of view of a 'philosophical' spectator?*  
D. N. Rodowick, *Gilles Deleuze's Time Machine*

#### The Delay of Bataille

Georges Bataille (1897-1962) was a prolific figure: a philosopher, a novelist, an archivist at the Bibliothèque Nationale, a leader of dissident Surrealists who refused to associate with André Breton, and a political activist who participated in a number of important albeit short-lived organizations and secret societies during the 1930s in an effort to offset the rise of fascism in Western Europe. Thus, it should come as no surprise that his thought has left a lasting legacy in a number of diverse fields: philosophy, art history, literary criticism, political theory, anthropology, and psychoanalysis. Indeed, as some commentators note, Bataille's texts frequently transgress disciplinary boundaries, thereby making it nearly impossible to situate this thinker in relation to one particular field. Julian Pefanis takes the marginal and unclassifiable status of Bataille's thought as the determining reason for what he describes as "the delay of Bataille" in the Anglo-American academic disciplines: "How do we explain the delay of Bataille? Why, after the successive waves of French theory, starting with Sartrean existentialism, which have periodically been diffused through the English-speaking West, is it now (rather than twenty years ago as was the case for his reception in France), that Bataille finally emerges as one of the central figures in French thought?"<sup>1</sup>

As Pefanis notes, the sudden interest in Bataille among the English-speaking academics can be explained with reference to the publication of a (by now quite influential) collection of Bataille's writings from the 1930's, *Visions of Excess* (1985), in which the editor Allan Stoekl

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<sup>1</sup> Julian Pefanis, *Heterology and the Postmodern: Bataille, Baudrillard, and Lyotard* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 41.

describes Bataille as an important precursor of post-structuralism. Stoekl's nomination, in fact, points to another and, perhaps, most crucial reason for the sudden popularity of Bataille in Anglo-American academia, namely his relation to and effect on the key figures in contemporary French philosophy: "For quite a while now we have experienced the effect of Bataille's thought in secondary literature without being able to specify its precise origins. It has been like the movement of a large dark body, maybe a black hole, whose presence in the heavens has been discernible in the erratic orbits of the visible planets."<sup>2</sup> The "visible planets" in question are, as Pefanis goes on to explain, Bataille's more famous post-structuralist successors: Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Julia Kristeva. As these thinkers began to exert their influence within a number of fields—philosophy, comparative literature, art history, and anthropology—in the Anglo-American academic disciplines, the English-speaking scholars became increasingly aware of and interested in Bataille's position in the history of modern French thought.

While the aforementioned thinkers have certainly produced a lasting impact on the development of film studies, most Anglo-American film scholars continue to exhibit a marked lack of interest in Bataille's work. While I am aware of a few film scholars (such as, most notably, Annette Michelson, Allen S. Weiss, Maureen Turim, Steven Shaviro and Akira Lippit) who occasionally refer to Bataille in their work, I have yet to encounter a single book-length study on Bataille and cinema published in English.<sup>3</sup> My dissertation constitutes a systematic attempt to introduce Bataille's philosophical concepts into the field of film studies and to develop

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>3</sup> See Allen S. Weiss, "Between the Sign of the Scorpion and the Sign of the Cross: *L'Âge d'or*," in *Dada and Surrealist Film*, ed. Rudolf E. Kuenzli (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987); Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); Maureen Turim, *The Films of Oshima Nagisa: Images of a Japanese Iconoclast* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998); Annette Michelson, "Eisenstein at 100: Recent Reception and Coming Attractions," *October*, vol. 88 (Spring, 1999); Akira Mizuta Lippit, "The Death of an Animal," *Film Quarterly*, vol. 56, no. 1 (Fall, 2002).

a distinctly Bataillean way of reading films. Such an attempt, I believe, is long overdue in the field that has yet to get past “the delay of Bataille.”

### **Philosophy and Film Studies**

What is the potential value of Bataille's philosophy for film studies? In order to answer this question, one must first embark upon a systematic articulation of the relationship between philosophy and film. Most of us can intuitively grasp the nature of this relationship, which can be most easily conveyed through the following axiom: cinema provokes thinking. This assertion forms the basis for what is perhaps the most sustained attempt to give expression to the philosophical potential inherent in cinema—the work of French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, who famously argued that philosophical concepts are already images of thought. Yet one need not be familiar with Deleuze's oeuvre in order to describe a favorite film as “thought-provoking.” On this note, I would like to indulge in a brief moment of self-reflexivity and recall my experience growing up in a former Soviet republic, Ukraine, where I first discovered my interest in film. Despite many years of censorship imposed on thinking, which made it nearly impossible for the people in my former country of origin to learn anything about currents in 20th-century Western philosophy, I continually heard the word ‘philosophical’ being applied with respect to works of literature and cinema. It is as if, in the absence of philosophy, literature and film assumed the task of giving expression to thought. Undoubtedly, the special role accorded to cinema in my culture accounts for the fascination with art film that I had experienced despite my rather limited exposure to it (due to poor distribution and lack of literature on film criticism). Since I was not familiar with the term “art cinema” at the time, I learned to appreciate the work of such directors as Tarkovsky, Bergman, and Antonioni as first and foremost “philosophical cinema.”

A growing body of research on the philosophy of film, driven at least in part by Deleuze's

path-breaking work in this field, not only substantiates our intuitive comprehension of the philosophical potential inherent in cinema but also lends it greater clarity and precision. Deleuze argues that “the concepts which philosophy produces would resonate with pictorial images today, or with cinematographic images.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, in his celebrated cinema books, motion pictures come to elucidate Bergson’s understanding of thought as internal movement and of memory as complex duration. Approached from the Deleuzian perspective, film directors appear as genuine thinkers, on par with the most eminent of philosophers, yet at the same time different insofar as they think with movement-images and time-images.<sup>5</sup> Fundamentally, these books reveal cinema’s power to generate what Kenneth Surin calls its own ‘thinkability’: “Every culture or cinema generates its own ‘thinkability’ (and concomitantly its own ‘unthinkability’ as the obverse of this very ‘thinkability’), and its concepts are constitutive of that ‘thinkability.’”<sup>6</sup> For a film scholar, to recognize cinema’s power of thinkability would entail learning to extract concepts from it; ultimately, it would mean learning to read films from the point of view of a “philosophical spectator.”

Informed by Deleuze's work on film, my own research addresses the following questions: Can cinema provoke us to think about Bataille in a new way? Does it have the potential to perform a visualization of Bataille's thought? How can it illuminate his concepts and reassess some of the problems posed in his writings? In order to begin to address the above questions and convey the nature of my engagement between film and philosophy, it may be worth examining one important Bataillean concept—that of transgression. In his early celebratory essay on

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<sup>4</sup> Gilles Deleuze, “Portrait of the Philosopher as a Moviegoer,” in *Two Regimes of Madness: Texts and Interviews 1975-1995*, ed. David Lapoujade, trans. Ames Hodges and Mike Taormina (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2006), 213.

<sup>5</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), xiv.

<sup>6</sup> Kenneth Surin, “On Producing the Concept of the Image-Concept,” in *Releasing the Image: From Literature to New Media*, ed. Jacques Khalip and Robert Mitchell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 173.

Bataille, Michel Foucault stresses that the notion of transgression does not exclusively designate the actual act of violation of a sexual taboo, but transpires in and through the movement of philosophical discourse at the cost of the dissolution of the subject.<sup>7</sup> Hence, as he provocatively suggests, the very notion of transgression introduces the possibility of the mad philosopher. Now, in order to endow this vision of the mad philosopher with a greater clarity and concreteness, Foucault invokes an image—that of an upturned eye—culled not from one of Bataille's philosophical texts, but, crucially, from his great pornographic novel, *Story of the Eye* (*Histoire de l'oeil*, 1928). In this case, one can see how a work of literature enables philosophical discourse to perform something akin to a visualization of the thought on transgression. How much more legible does the concept become when one recalls the image of an upturned eye that evokes, at one and the same time, the state of erotic ecstasy, the lapse into madness, and the instant of death! And has one not seen the same image in so many films made by (to recall only the most famous examples) Nagisa Oshima, Stanley Kubrick, and Luis Buñuel? If, as Foucault once claimed, Bataille's work touches upon “the inner experience” that comes as close as possible to “the unlivable” (as opposed to the lived experience of everyday reality) and possesses the maximum of intensity, I argue that the work of certain filmmakers such as Oshima, Pasolini, and Brakhage illuminates the nature of such experience insofar as it concerns precisely those extreme states (of eroticism, of ecstasy) so often evoked in Bataille's texts.

Undoubtedly, the very idea of the visualization or concretization of philosophical concepts may give rise to legitimate concerns: Does not such a visualization of the concept amount to a fundamental oversimplification? Does it not, in fact, go against the spirit of “the art

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<sup>7</sup> Michel Foucault, “A Preface to Transgression,” in *The Essential Foucault*, ed. Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose (New York: The New Press, 2003).

of nuances” which Nietzsche upheld as the highest virtue (“the best gain of life”)?<sup>8</sup> Insofar as one grasps the concept as an image, does not one thereby reduce it to a kind of “dumbed-down” simulacra of the concept? In order to respond to the above criticisms, one must first interrogate the problematic hierarchization of sense inherent in the above line of questioning. Indeed, these questions reproduce the age-old philosophical dichotomy between the *concept*, which belongs to the domain of reason and knowledge, and the *image*, which is located on the side of experience. Seen from this traditional philosophical perspective, the concept necessarily presents itself as superior to the image in its power to convey and thematize the operations of thought. This point has enormous implications for a study of the visual arts grounded in philosophy. As D. N. Rodowick explains, philosophy traditionally “defines the self-identity of the arts through the opposition of linguistic to plastic expression and then produces a hierarchy of value based on this opposition that renders thought equivalent to linguistic sense.”<sup>9</sup> In “An Elegy for Theory,” he makes a case for the development of a philosophy of film that “may and should be distinguished from theory.”<sup>10</sup> Such an approach to cinema, I argue in my dissertation, would have to accept as its immediate task a sustained interrogation of the relationship between the image and the concept as well as a deconstruction of the hierarchy between linguistic sense and visual expression.

As it is well-known, such critics of contemporary film theory as David Bordwell and Noël Carroll like to point out that a recourse to theoretical concepts developed in psychoanalysis or literary semiotics leads film analysts to ignore specific properties of the film medium and treat a given film text as nothing more than an illustration of a concept. To this objection, I would add

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<sup>8</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Basic Writings*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: The Modern Library, 1992), 233. Nietzsche makes this claim in *Beyond Good and Evil*.

<sup>9</sup> D. N. Rodowick, *Reading the Figural, or, Philosophy After the New Media* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), x.

<sup>10</sup> D. N. Rodowick, “An Elegy for Theory,” *October*, vol. 122 (Fall, 2007): 102.

another one: too often film theory mobilizes concepts in a manner that leaves the latter uninterrogated. In such cases, a particular theoretical argument finds its way into a piece of film criticism only to be confirmed, with its basic assumptions left intact. The unfortunate consequence of such a theoretical approach to film consists in the fact that, while theory may indeed add new insights to film criticism, film criticism fails to offer anything new to theory. On the other hand, the kind of alliance between film and philosophy envisioned by Deleuze and, more recently, advocated by Rodowick, has the merit of treating the two disciplines equally, without subordinating one to the other. On this point, Deleuze writes: "It is not when one discipline begins to reflect on another that they come into contact. Contact can be made only when one discipline realizes that another discipline has already posed a similar problem, and so the one reaches out to the other to resolve this problem, but on its own terms and for its own ends. ... All criticism is comparative (and cinematic criticism is at its worst when it limits itself to cinema as though it were a ghetto) because every work in whatever field is already self-comparing. Every work has its beginning or its consequence in the other arts."<sup>11</sup> Just as cinematic criticism has much to gain from reaching out towards philosophy, so does philosophy find in cinema an important condition and support for its own being. There exists, in fact, a certain philosophical tradition, which has always maintained that philosophical truth comes into being through the encounter of philosophy with something else: science, politics, art, or love.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, while a film philosopher may indeed 'import' philosophical concepts into film criticism or turn towards cinema so as to lend greater concreteness to a given concept (as Slavoj

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<sup>11</sup> Gilles Deleuze, "The Brain is the Screen," in *Two Regimes of Madness: Texts and Interviews 1975-1995*, ed. David Lapoujade (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2006), 284-5.

<sup>12</sup> I am alluding, of course, to the philosophy of Alain Badiou who, in specifying the four conditions of philosophy (namely, art, science, politics, and love), insists on following in the footsteps of Plato. On this point, see his *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (London and New York: Verso, 2001), 119-20. "For Plato, philosophy begins thinking not in relation to itself but in relation to something else – to the people you meet and what they say (Socrates), but also, in relation to the discoveries of the mathematicians, to the work of those who write poetry and tragedy, to political situations and debates, to the existence and intensity of the feeling of love."

Žižek does in so many of his books), the very act of the importation of the concept into a new field produces a kind of mutation in the concept by bringing its hitherto indiscernible (or, as Deleuzians would put it, *virtual*) components into presence. On this point, Rodowick deviates ever so slightly from Deleuze in insisting that philosophers do not only create concepts *ex nihilo* but also borrow them (borrow *creatively*, one might add) from other philosophers. Deleuze himself constantly borrows concepts—be it the Nietzschean concept of ‘force’ or the Spinozian concept of ‘desire’—while reconfiguring them in entirely new and creative ways. “Sometimes the concept is entirely new, an autopoiesis. And sometimes the concept is adopted, though in passing from the care of one philosopher to another it may lose its cherished and comfortable identity to set off on a series of mad adventures like some Don Quixote who leaves us trailing, like poor Sancho Panza, in its wake.”<sup>13</sup> Not surprisingly, in his quest for a deconstruction of the opposition of word and image, Rodowick frequently mobilizes the work of Deleuze, who discovered a certain “zone of indiscernibility” inhabited by both concepts and images alike. In this zone, he argued, “the same thing could be expressed by a pictorial image, a scientific model, a cinematographic image, or a philosophical concept.”<sup>14</sup> The task of a philosophy of film, I would add, is to occupy this zone of indiscernibility and to investigate the infinite couplings of concepts and images found therein.<sup>15</sup>

Undoubtedly, a film philosopher committed to the interrogation of the hierarchical opposition between the linguistic and visual need not rely solely on the conceptual tools adopted from Deleuze’s texts. In *Reading the Figural*, for instance, Rodowick frequently engages

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<sup>13</sup> Rodowick, *Reading the Figural*, 1.

<sup>14</sup> Deleuze, “Portrait of the Philosopher as a Moviegoer,” 214.

<sup>15</sup> See Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 161. In this text, Deleuze goes as far as to propose the possibility of what Surin refers to as *the image-concept*. In a distinctly Hegelian formulation (uncharacteristic for the avowed enemy of the dialectic), Deleuze asserts: “The concept is in itself in the image, and the image is for itself in the concept.”



readings of Benjamin, Kracauer, Foucault, Derrida and above all Lyotard, from whom he borrows the concept of the figural defined as “a semiotic regime where the ontological distinction between linguistic and plastic representations breaks down.”<sup>16</sup> It is hardly surprising that Rodowick, writing from a predominantly Deleuzian perspective, should ignore Bataille’s role in deconstructing or, better, transgressing the aforementioned dichotomy between the linguistic and the visual. Although, as some commentators (such as Eugene Holland) have pointed out, Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus* exhibits an unmistakable influence of Bataille’s theory of general economy, Deleuze himself had only disdainful things to say of Bataille. In a perhaps self-conscious effort to go against the then-fashionable post-structuralist preoccupation with the notion of transgression, he writes: “‘Transgression,’ a concept too good for seminarists under the law of a Pope or a priest, the tricksters. Georges Bataille is a very French author. He made the little secret the essence of literature, with a mother within, a priest beneath, an eye above.”<sup>17</sup> How does one refute a criticism of this sort? A snide remark, it does not lay claim to any sort of correct reading. The Bataille scholar would certainly waste his breath in citing textual evidence in an attempt to disprove Deleuze’s observation. Perhaps, one should refrain from starting a quarrel and initiate a productive dialogue instead by pointing out that the eye to which Deleuze refers appears in Bataille’s writings as an enucleated, upturned, or blind eye. In his *Disenchantment of the Eye*, Martin Jay is most attentive to this point as he traces numerous references to blindness in Bataille’s work. Indeed, this point leads Jay to approach Bataille’s texts as most representative of a certain tendency in the twentieth-century French thought, namely the tendency to denigrate sight: “Like much else in the cultural life of the interwar era, the denigration of sight was expressed with an intensity that often bordered on

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<sup>16</sup> Rodowick, *Reading the Figural*, 2.

<sup>17</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, “On the Superiority of Anglo-American Literature,” in *Dialogues II*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 47.

violence. Indeed ... in the cases of Georges Bataille and the Surrealists, that border was often deliberately transgressed and the noblest of the senses subjected to explicit rituals of violent degradation.”<sup>18</sup>

In chapter 5 of this dissertation, I address the above point and discuss Bataille’s tendency to mobilize the metaphor of a blind eye in his presentations of the two closely linked concepts—that of *inner experience*, which (to paraphrase Foucault) brings life to its boiling point, and *nonknowledge*, which constitutes an integral part of the said experience and involves the subject’s confrontation with a hole in discourse. This pair of concepts, in turn, is closely related to the conceptual figure of *the sovereign*. Divorced from the tradition of political philosophy developed by Hobbes and, later, Carl Schmitt, Bataillean sovereignty presupposes the possibility of the subject’s freedom from alienation in the symbolic, an impossible liberation that Jay links to the dethronement of the eye. Jay’s reading appears convincing since the operation of transgression and the attendant act of unknowing must not only take place against the background of the symbolic realm of language but also produce a disintegration of imaginary identity. Since, as we know from Lacan, the subject’s relation to a field of vision is mediated by the imaginary register, the subject’s lapse into nonknowledge would thereby involve a traumatic blinding experience (or, as Bataille’s post-structuralist successors would put it, the *limit-experience*) effectively conveyed by Bataille’s frequent references to the blind eye.

Such an insistence on the denigration of vision at work in Bataille’s thought, though quite convincing, runs the risk of presenting him as yet another philosopher who tended to privilege the linguistic concept over the image. Bataille’s strong interest in visual arts, however, strongly undermines this reading. One must recall, for instance, that Bataille not only devoted his final

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<sup>18</sup> Martin Jay, *The Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century Thought* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 209.

book, *The Tears of Eros* (1961), to the history of eroticism in visual art but also described this text as “the one which in my eyes counts the most.”<sup>19</sup> Indeed, in his introduction to the book, J.M. Lo Duca adopts a view diametrically opposed to Jay’s approach and goes as far as to claim that, in his final book, Bataille comes to privilege the image over the word: “From Gautier d’Agoty to the plates by Cranach and the Christian and Chinese tortures, the image *said* everything in a compressed form, whereas the words were only a tame reflection.”<sup>20</sup> In my own reading, I do not endeavor to prove the validity of either Jay’s interpretation or that of Lo Duca. While clearly committed to demonstrating the relevance of Bataille’s philosophy to visual studies, I do not seek to reverse the hierarchical opposition between the image and the word and insist on the former term’s superiority to the latter; rather, I investigate that zone of indiscernibility in which the image and the word work together, so to speak, and produce productive and unexpected alliances. The image can certainly say or, better, *communicate* inner experience but so can the word. In *Inner Experience* (1943), Bataille is very clear on this point: “It is not beyond expression—one doesn’t betray it if one speaks of it—but it steals from the mind the answers it still had to the questions of knowledge.”<sup>21</sup>

The real task of understanding Bataille’s interest in the visual arts is to grasp the relation between the image and the word *dialectically*. Conversely, one must dialecticize the relationship between the operation of *transgression*, transpiring in the discursive realm, and that of *meditation* oriented towards a field of vision. Bataille himself puts the two aforementioned operations in relation while describing the method of *dramatization*. Developed by disciples of Saint Ignatius, the method in question involves “the will, adding itself to discourse, not to be

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<sup>19</sup> Cited in Peter Tracey Connor, *Georges Bataille and the Mysticism of Sin* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 1.

<sup>20</sup> J. M. Lo Duca, introduction to *The Tears of Eros*, trans. Peter Connor (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1989), 2.

<sup>21</sup> Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. Leslie Anne Boldt (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988), 3-4.

content with what is stated, to oblige one to feel the chill of the wind, to be laid bare. Hence we have dramatic art, using non-discursive sensation, making every effort to strike, for that reason imitating the sound of the wind and attempting to chill—as by contagion: it makes a character tremble on stage (rather than resorting to these coarse means, the philosopher surrounds himself with narcotic signs). With respect to this, it is a classic error to assign St. Ignacius *Exercises* to discursive method: they rely on discourse which regulates everything, but in the dramatic mode.”<sup>22</sup> It is crucial to note that dramatization allows the subject to break free from the prison-house of language built out of “narcotic signs” while, at the same time, allowing the discourse to regulate everything. Dramatization is, thus, added to discourse without negating or replacing it completely; it lets the chains of signification tremble under the impact of the image.

Perhaps the most famous instance of dramatization practiced by Bataille himself involves a contemplation of the photograph of a Chinese man subjected to the excruciating torture known as “death by a thousand cuts.” Fascinated by the ecstatic expression imprinted on the face of the man convulsing in his death throes, Bataille writes: “The young and seductive Chinese man of whom I have spoken, left to the work of the executioner—I loved him with a love in which the sadistic instinct played no part: he communicated his pain to me or perhaps the excessive nature of his pain, and it was precisely that which I was seeking, not so as to take pleasure in it, but in order to ruin in me that which is opposed to ruin.”<sup>23</sup> Through anguished contemplation of the photograph, the subject does not succeed in abolishing the powers of language, but rather encounters the point of inconsistency in discourse—the Real that, while nonsymbolizable, nonetheless maintains a dialectical relation to the symbolic in the mode of constitutive exception. Topologically speaking, one could also say that the Real belongs to the Symbolic as its excluded

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 120.

interiority. The image communicates but in the dramatic—that is to say, non-discursive—mode. What one reads in the contorted face of the victim is the mute experience of *jouissance*—the experience of maximum intensity in which the most excruciating anguish is indistinguishable from the greatest bliss. If the method of dramatization can be said to involve identification with the image, it is far from that narcissistic identification between the ego and the other that Lacan associates with the mirror stage. The traumatic, masochistic identification that Bataille develops with the dying victim does not work to consolidate and prop up the narcissistic ego but, on the contrary, carries with it “the unbinding force of the death drive” that, to quote from Richard Boothby, brings about “the disintegrating return of the real against the structures of the imaginary.”<sup>24</sup> What the image communicates, finally, is the intensity of *jouissance* and what it gives rise to in the contemplating subject is *passion for the Real*.

### **Passion for the Real, or, Reading Bataille with Lacan**

At this point, I must address the methodological orientation of this dissertation. As I find it increasingly difficult to avoid Lacanian parlance in my discussion of Bataille, I must lay my cards on the table and disclose the (by-now obvious) fact that my reading is heavily indebted to psychoanalysis. Most critical studies addressing Bataille’s relationship to Lacan tend to focus on biographical details. One knows, for example, that Lacan and Bataille were close friends and that Lacan regularly attended meetings at the Collège de Sociologie (co-founded by Bataille). Even more famous is the fact that Lacan developed a romantic relationship with Bataille’s wife, Sylvia Bataille, whom he married in 1953. More theoretically-minded commentators have also noted that Lacan’s concept of *jouissance* owes much to Bataille’s notions of *expenditure* and *excess* and that Lacan’s theory of the Real betrays marked affinities with Bataille’s conception of the

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<sup>24</sup> Richard Boothby, *Freud as Philosopher: Metapsychology After Lacan* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 153.

*heterogeneous* order. Nonetheless, as most critical studies of Bataille and Lacan reveal, such observations are frequently relegated to the footnotes and rarely explored in detail.

The notable exception in this rather under-researched field of study is Carolyn J. Dean's *The Self and Its Pleasures: Bataille, Lacan, and the History of the Decentered Subject*, which endeavors to place the notion of the decentered self in the intellectual context of interwar France and focuses primarily on Bataille and Lacan.<sup>25</sup> Dean, however, does not read Bataille *with* Lacan, but rather explores the notion of self-dissolution first with reference to Lacan and then with regard to Bataille. My work, on the other hand, approaches the two thinkers not through two successive accounts, but rather simultaneously as it concentrates on the Lacanian dimension of Bataille's philosophy. Furthermore, Dean's account adopts an orthodox view of Lacan as a structuralist—the position which has been challenged following the recent “philosophical turn” in Lacanian circles. Indeed, as Lacan's later seminars and writings became increasingly available in print (first in France and more recently in English-speaking countries), it became apparent that the “structuralist” orientation of seminal early papers such as “The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious” (1957) gave way to his growing concern with the Real and *jouissance* that came to the fore in his 1970's teachings. These late seminars, as Jacques-Alain Miller shows us, represent a significant rupture within Lacan's oeuvre insofar as they no longer ground themselves in familiar frames of reference such as Lévi-Straussian structuralism or even Freudian psychoanalysis.

The effect of Bataille on Lacan is already evident in Lacan's seventh seminar entitled *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (1959-1960). This point is effectively articulated by Žižek who argues:

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<sup>25</sup> Carolyn J. Dean, *The Self and Its Pleasures: Bataille, Lacan, and the History of the Decentered Subject* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992).

Far from being the seminar of Lacan, his *Ethics of Psychoanalysis* is, rather, the point of deadlock at which Lacan comes dangerously close to the standard version of the ‘passion for the Real.’ Do not the unexpected echoes between this seminar and the thought of Georges Bataille – *the* philosopher of the passion for the Real, if ever there was one— point unambiguously in this direction? Is not Lacan’s ethical maxim ‘do not compromise your desire’ (...) a version of Bataille’s injunction ‘to think everything to a point that makes people tremble,’ to go as far as possible—to the point at which opposites coincide, at which infinite pain turns into the joy of the highest bliss (discernible in the photograph of the Chinese submitted to the terrifying torture of being slowly cut to pieces), at which the intensity of erotic enjoyment encounters death, at which sainthood overlaps with extreme dissolution, at which God Himself is revealed as a cruel Beast?<sup>26</sup>

One finds a confirmation of this point in Elisabeth Roudinesco’s excellent and exhaustive biography of Lacan, which initiates a path-breaking attempt to understand the extent of Bataille’s influence on the famed psychoanalyst. Roudinesco goes as far as to suggest that the encounter with Bataille prompted Lacan to deviate from the Freudian theoretical framework. In particular, she argues, Bataille initiated Lacan “into a new understanding of Sade, whose writings would later lead him to formulate a non-Freudian theory of pleasure.”<sup>27</sup> This “non-Freudian theory of pleasure,” of course, refers to the conception of *jouissance* to which Lacan devoted considerable attention in his late seminars. This concept, in fact, designates precisely the experience of infinite pain turning into the joy of the highest bliss, which, as Žižek points out, Bataille discerned on the face of the Chinese man submitted to torture.

This dissertation, however, is not concerned with questions of influence. The digressions into psychoanalytic theory found in every chapter, in fact, serve a purely practical purpose insofar as Lacan’s work supplies the conceptual tools that I find indispensable to understanding particularly difficult points in Bataille’s texts. Central to this study is the notion of *the passion for the real* that I borrow not from one of Lacan’s texts but from Alain Badiou’s *The Century*, which takes a close look at the numerous manifestations of the passion for novelty in political

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<sup>26</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 54.

<sup>27</sup> Elisabeth Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan*, trans. Barbara Bray (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 136.

and artistic avant-gardes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The passion for the real is, above all, a thirst for new experience, a lethal desire for traumatic face-to-face encounters with the real in all its horrors, even at the price of death.

I am convinced that what fascinated the militants of the twentieth century was the real. In this century there is a veritable exaltation of the real, even in its horror....Lacan correctly perceived that the experience of the real is always in part the experience of horror. The genuine question is in no way that of the imaginary, but rather that of knowing what it is in these radical experiments that assumes the role of the real. Whatever it may be, it's certainly not the promise of better days.<sup>28</sup>

Can there be a more paradigmatic manifestation of this passion than Bataille's famous affirmation of "joy in the face of death"?

In essence, my dissertation constitutes a prolonged attempt to develop Žižek's characterization of Bataille as "*the* philosopher of the passion for the real." I am tempted, in fact, to take seriously Roland Barthes's assertion that, despite his extensive and varied oeuvre, Bataille wrote "continuously one single text."<sup>29</sup> Every passage in this text bears witness to Bataille's passion for the Real. Nonetheless, just as texts vary and unfold, so did Bataille's passion evolve over the course of his intellectual itinerary. Indeed, as Susan Rubin Suleiman notes, Bataille's presentation of various concepts varies "not only from this text to others, but also, occasionally, from sentence to sentence."<sup>30</sup> In order to account for these multiple variations and to attempt a difficult task of periodizing Bataille's work, I make use of Suleiman's notion of the "inward turn"—that is, the turn from the endorsement of violent revolutionary action during the years with *Contre-Attaque* to an affirmation of the "inner violence" (evoked on the pages of *Inner Experience*) that is not externalized in direct action, but is a "laceration, an inner

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<sup>28</sup> Alain Badiou, *The Century*, trans. Alberto Toscano (Malden, MA: Polity, 2007), 19-20.

<sup>29</sup> Roland Barthes, "From Work to Text," in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 157.

<sup>30</sup> Susan Rubin Suleiman, "Bataille in the Street: The Search for Virility in the 1930s," in *Bataille: Writing the Sacred*, ed. Carolyn Bailey Gill (New York: Routledge, 1995), 41.



sundering.” In other words, it designates his transformation from a political activist, who had authored a number of revolutionary calls to action during the 1930s, to a solitary philosopher, who had come to occupy himself with the inner experience of mysticism and eroticism.<sup>31</sup>

The central aim of my dissertation consists in conceptualizing Bataille’s inward turn as a mutation of his passion for the real. In this respect, my work deviates from Suleiman’s thesis insofar as it contests the view according to which Bataille had lost interest in politics at some point in his career. After all, the passion for the real, according to Badiou’s definition, is also the experience of the exigency of annihilating the existing symbolic structure and producing the new social order, the new figure of humanity. While it may present itself in different ways, it invariably involves “the certainty that, issuing from an event, the subjective will can realize, in the world, unheard-of possibilities; that very far from being a powerless fiction, the will intimately touches on the real.”<sup>32</sup> Seen from this perspective, the passion for the real, regardless of whether it manifests itself in the arena of activist politics or in the realm of erotic art, always produces political consequences. Indeed, in the final chapter of this dissertation, I maintain that even such late texts as *Erotism* (1957) foreground the political implications of erotic experience as the following passage demonstrates: “Eroticism always entails a breaking down of established patterns, the patterns, I repeat, of the regulated social order basic to our discontinuous mode of existence as defined and separate individuals.”<sup>33</sup> In other words, the shattering experience of

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<sup>31</sup> While the idea that Bataille’s transformation enjoys considerable currency in contemporary Bataille scholarship, one must acknowledge that Bataille’s turn to eroticism in the late texts is also a *return* of sorts. After all, his first published book, *Story of the Eye*, constitutes a classic of erotic literature. Furthermore, one could easily demonstrate that, at no point in his career, did Bataille abandon his interest in the erotic experience. Nonetheless, I believe that the notion of the “inward turn” is relevant to one’s understanding of the subtle shifts that separate the “early Bataille” from the “late Bataille.” As I demonstrate in the final chapter, Bataille’s late texts do not merely continue his preoccupation with eroticism but develop its philosophical implications and political consequences.

<sup>32</sup> Badiou, *The Century*, 99.

<sup>33</sup> Georges Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, trans. Mary Dalwood (San Francisco: City Lights, 1986), 18.

eroticism unfetters (temporarily, at least) the individual from the consistent identity imposed upon him by the social order.

### **Psychoanalysis and Film Theory**

As my analyses of films aim to demonstrate, Bataille's work offers indispensable conceptual tools for a study of eroticism in cinema as well as for an assessment of the encounter between cinema and politics. While attempting to import Bataille's concepts into film studies, it also strives to reevaluate Lacan's current status in it. The backlash against psychoanalytic theory has been taking place in film studies for quite some time now. In his 1993 text, *The Cinematic Body*, Steven Shaviro declares: "Twenty years of obsessive invocations of 'lack,' 'castration,' and 'the phallus' have left us with a stultifying orthodoxy that makes any fresh discussion impossible. It is time to recognize that not all problems can be resolved by repeated references to, and ever-more-subtle close readings of, the same few articles by Freud and Lacan. The psychoanalytic model for film theory is at this point utterly bankrupt; it needs to be not refined and reformed, but to be discarded altogether."<sup>34</sup> Since, like many other critics of Freud and Lacan, Shaviro does not provide evidence that he has read anything whatsoever by these two thinkers, but chooses to base his polemical thrust against psychoanalysis on paraphrases culled from secondary sources, I will not spend much time responding to his criticism.<sup>35</sup> For the sake of argument, however, I will take his argument seriously and respond that, if the problem of "stultifying orthodoxy" cannot be resolved through repeated readings of "the same few articles by Freud and Lacan," then perhaps one should turn to other texts, different articles. For some decades now, numerous film theorists have based their engagement with Lacanian psychoanalysis on the reading of "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function" (1949). Indeed, this early text by Lacan inspired a number of

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<sup>34</sup> Shaviro, ix.

<sup>35</sup> For a particularly effective response to critics of psychoanalytic film theory see Joan Copjec, "The Orthopsychic Subject: Film Theory and the Reception of Lacan," *October* 49 (Summer, 1989): 53-71.

quite brilliant critical efforts to mobilize the concept of the imaginary in theorization of the spectatorial pleasure. It is against such psychoanalytically-grounded theorizations of imaginary pleasure that Shaviro mounts his own theory of “visual fascination” inspired, principally, by the work of Deleuze and Guattari. In order to demonstrate psychoanalytic film theory’s mistrust of images, he cites these classic lines that open *The Imaginary Signifier* by Christian Metz:

“Reduced to its most fundamental procedures, any psychoanalytic reflection on the cinema might be defined in Lacanian terms as an attempt to disengage the cinema-object from the imaginary and to win it for the symbolic, in the hope of extending the latter by a new province: an enterprise, a territorial enterprise, a symbolising advance...”<sup>36</sup> Such calls for mastery of the imaginary pleasure and the attendant emphasis on symbolic forms of understanding provide Shaviro with an excellent opportunity to situate the work of Metz and Jean-Louis Baudry within the same philosophical tradition (already discussed in this introduction) that privileges the word over the image:

Ever since Plato, philosophers have warned us against being seduced by reflections and shadows. Metaphysics prefers the verbal to the visual, the intelligible to the sensible, the text to the picture, and the rigorous articulations of signification to the ambiguities of untutored perception. It posits a radical distinction between the perceptible realm of mere appearances and the invisible realm of truth. And Lacanian psychoanalysis remains within this Platonic tradition, at least to the extent that it denounces the delusions of the optical system or metaphor and privileges the Symbolic order of language in opposition to an Imaginary defined primarily in visual terms. An appeal to Lacan in recent film theory is usually the occasion for a Platonic attack upon the illusionism of cinema and the image’s powers of falsity and deception.<sup>37</sup>

Shaviro’s critique of Metz and Baudry is a powerful one. Indeed, if I choose to single out *The Cinematic Body* among many other texts that engage in a critique of psychoanalytic film theory, it is because this book exhibits a forceful grasp of contemporary continental philosophy as well

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<sup>36</sup> Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, trans. Ben Brewster et al (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 3.

<sup>37</sup> Shaviro, 15.

as a conviction (which I completely share with its author) that film theory must strive to rid itself of the vestiges of the metaphysical opposition between the verbal and the visual. Nonetheless, Shaviro's text succeeds in attacking psychoanalysis only at the price of presenting a woefully incomplete picture of Lacan's thought. Thus, faced with Shaviro's insistence on the hierarchical opposition between the Imaginary and the Symbolic, ostensibly at work in psychoanalytic film theory, one cannot help but wonder: Whatever happened to the Lacanian third term, the Real?

Thus, when Shaviro proceeds to present his own conception of "visual fascination," which overwhelms the spectator rendering him at once passive and excited, I cannot help but accept his assessment as an extremely precise description of the confrontation with the Real to which cinema exposes the spectator: "Something has happened to the act of looking. Outbursts of violence and gradations of light arouse, agitate, and unsettle the spectator. Narcissistic gratification is interrupted, not through any recognition of loss or lack, but because I am drawn into a condition of excessive, undischageable excitation."<sup>38</sup> Shaviro is absolutely right to theorize visual fascination, which dispossesses the spectator, in contradistinction to imaginary pleasure and scopophilic desire studied by the exponents of the "gaze theory" such as Laura Mulvey. He does not take into account, however, that psychoanalysis too carefully distinguishes between *jouissance* and pleasure, on the one hand, between the drive and desire, on the other. When it comes to considering the above distinctions, argues Charles Shepherdson, "it is a question of the border between the real and the symbolic. An affect presents us with a charge of *jouissance* and a dimension of bodily suffering that is quite distinct from an emotion, which entails, to be sure, a strong bodily dimension, but which maintains a symbolic link."<sup>39</sup> The very possibility of *jouissance*, therefore, attests to the fact that, according to the theoretical framework

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>39</sup> Charles Shepherdson, *Lacan and the Limits of Language* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 83.

of Lacanian psychoanalysis, the subject is not wholly submerged in the symbolic order. Contrary to Shaviro's argument, psychoanalysis does not seek to uphold the absolute supremacy of the Symbolic, but foregrounds the possibility of the subject's confrontation with the Real, which gives rise to jouissance that agitates and unsettles the subject. Thus, Shaviro's reference to the famous Kojévian-Lacanian dictum, "the word is the death of the thing," must be supplemented with another, equally famous, Lacanian pronouncement: "What is foreclosed from the Symbolic, returns in the Real." In other words, while the process of symbolization does indeed drain the Thing of jouissance, the only substance recognized by psychoanalysis, it fails to completely obliterate this substance, which reemerges in the dimension of the Real.

What thus returns and continually haunts the subject is, of course, the leftover of the Real, the *objet petit a*. Curiously, when Shaviro attempts to refute the psychoanalytic idea of "the lost object" and introduce his own conception of the cinematic object, he ends up supplying a remarkably exact definition of the Lacanian object: "the problem for the cinema spectator is not that the object is lost or missing, but that it is never quite lost, that it is never distant or absent enough. ... The image is not a symptom of lack, but an uncanny, excessive residue of being and subsists when all *should* be lacking."<sup>40</sup> Most Lacanians could not have articulated the definition of *objet petit a* more eloquently: ephemeral and insubstantial, it nonetheless insists and haunts the subject; foreclosed from the Symbolic, it comes back and perturbs the subject's symbolic functions. If, as Shaviro maintains, such an object can be grasped as image, then, perhaps, no other image provides a better illustration of the power of visual arts to prompt the subject's exposure to jouissance than the aforementioned photograph of the Chinese man subjected to torture. Instead of producing narcissistic gratification, the act of contemplating this horrible image inflicts a wound upon the ego's narcissism. Instead of eliciting an identification with the

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<sup>40</sup> Shaviro, 17.

other and, in the process, consolidating the subject's identity, the act of contemplating this image propels the subject to exceed itself—that is to say, to transgress the boundary between the real and the symbolic, to come face-to-face with that “excessive residue of being” which is not alienated in the big Other. In view of these theses, my dissertation is informed by the conviction, articulated by Leo Bersani, “that both art and psychoanalysis offer ample evidence of the human subject's aptitude for exceeding its own subjectivity.”<sup>41</sup>

### **The Politics of Japanese New Wave Cinema**

Bataille's name for the subject's aptitude for transgressing the boundaries delimiting his own sense of self is *sovereignty*. Nonetheless, as I have suggested early on in this introduction, Bataille's concepts—“nonknowledge,” “inner experience,” and “sovereignty”—evolved and developed as his intellectual itinerary unfolded along the trajectory of the “inward turn.” In the chapters that follow, I trace the development of different figurations of sovereignty, while paying close attention to the political implications attached to this concept. I perform this task not only through a close reading of Bataille's texts from different periods of his career, but also through a detailed discussion of three Japanese films from the 1960's—Seijun Suzuki's *Fighting Elegy* (1966), Kihachi Okamoto's *The Sword of Doom* (1966), and Yasuzo Masumura's *Blind Beast* (1969). It may perhaps come as a surprise that a dissertation inspired by the work of a French philosopher should incorporate analyses of Japanese films, yet my decision is motivated by a number of considerations.

Even at the outset of my graduate studies, when I first discovered Bataille's work, I entertained the idea of dedicating a portion of my dissertation to Japanese cinema and, in particular, focusing on the New Wave movement of the 1960's. Influenced by such American

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<sup>41</sup> Leo Bersani, “Psychoanalysis and the Aesthetic Subject,” *Is the Rectum a Grave? And Other Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 139

scholars as Rosalind Krauss and Allen S. Weiss, I sought to discern the Batailleian aesthetics of excess in the films of Oshima, Masumura, and Suzuki that foregrounded a baroque display of violence as well as frank eroticism. As my interest in Japanese film history deepened and my knowledge of Bataille's work became more complete, I came to a conclusion that in each case—that of Bataille and Japanese New Wave cinema—the foregrounding of violence and sexuality could not be accounted for solely in terms of aesthetic concerns, but had to be situated in a specific historical context. *The stylistic excesses of the Japanese avant-garde, in particular, had to be understood as anything but gratuitous as the emerging New Wave directors attempted to formulate a radically new approach to filmmaking, one that would be self-consciously opposed to the style of such revered predecessors as Yasujiro Ozu and Akira Kurosawa and better suited to assessment of contemporary political situation.*

As I struggled to comprehend the nature of the “inward turn” in Bataille’s thought, I also became aware of another kind of “inward turn” that took place over the course of development of Japanese cinema during the 1960s—the turn from enthusiastic celebration of political activism in the streets to the fascination with erotic experience in the bedroom. Most notably, one could discern this turn in the career of Oshima who had directed such explicitly political films as *Night and Fog in Japan* (1960) early on in his career and then turned towards eroticism in such late masterworks as *In the Realm of the Senses* (1976) and *Empire of Passion* (1978).<sup>42</sup> A similar trajectory could be discerned in the work of Masumura, the director who had first secured recognition for biting social satire of such early films as *Giants and Toys* (1958) and *The Black Test Car* (1962), only to refashion himself later on as a specialist in the soft-core erotic cinema (the genre known in Japan as “pink movie”).

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<sup>42</sup> *Night and Fog in Japan* reflects on the activities of Zengakuren, a predominantly communist-led league of students opposed to the Japan-US Security Treaty.

In each case, the turn towards eroticism can be linked to the experience of disappointment. In Bataille's case, it has to do with the rise of fascism in Europe and the failure of the Left to assume power in France. In the case of Japanese New Wave movement, as David Desser explains, the sense of disappointment has roots in the political protest movement that opposed yet ultimately failed to offset the renewal of the Japan-U.S. Mutual Security Pact of 1960.<sup>43</sup> Nonetheless, I insist that a turn towards eroticism does not entail a turning away from politics. On the contrary, it constitutes a different form of refusal – an act of separation from the social order as opposed to an act of destruction that aims to annihilate the said order. In the context of my dissertation, I examine the subversive potential of erotic art by means of reading Japanese New Wave films through the lens of Bataillean philosophy.

Bataille, as the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy points out, has always been the thinker of community. One could argue, then, that at the time of the “inward turn,” Bataille has turned his attention away from the community of militants and towards the community of lovers. In each case, a formation of community has as its requisite a refusal of society. Furthermore, the refusal in question entails a passage through the Act in a precise sense given to the term by Lacanian psychoanalysis - that is, “an act of ‘losing all,’ of withdrawing from symbolic reality.”<sup>44</sup> What constitutes the “inward turn,” then, is a subjective process whereby the subject of the Act relinquishes all attempts to annihilate the socio-political order and chooses instead to subtract itself from the symbolic big Other. In other words, the “turn” in question involves a passage from the act of destruction to the act of subtraction. Guided by this Lacanian reading of Bataille, I intend to discern an analogous “inward turn” in the work of Japanese New Wave directors - the turn from fascination with youthful revolt that, as Suzuki's *Fighting Elegy*

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<sup>43</sup> David Desser, *Eros plus Massacre: An Introduction to the Japanese New Wave Cinema* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988).

<sup>44</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 43.



demonstrates, invariably ends in failure to preoccupation with accursed lovers, such as the ones found in Masumura's *Blind Beast*, the lovers isolated from the rest of the world and lost in the throes of erotic ecstasy.

In conclusion, I must add that my readings of Bataille's texts as well as my analyses of Japanese New Wave films privilege an experiential rather than formalist approach. In order to clarify this distinction, I would like to briefly compare two existing readings of Bataille's *Story of the Eye*, Barthes's influential structuralist analysis and Franco Rella's lesser-known but equally brilliant philosophical discussion of this novel. In "Metaphor of the Eye," Barthes points out that *Story of the Eye* is, quite literally, a story of the object--the story of its transformations within an image system. He painstakingly traces the metaphoric trajectory of the said object, namely the Eye, along two series of signifiers: the first series associates the eye with affinitive images such as the sun, and eggs; the second series involves liquids such as milk, egg yolks, and sperm. Crucially, Barthes insists, the elaborate structure composed of these two signifying chains contains neither a privileged term nor a hidden center. Consequently, he concludes, Bataille's text has no profound secret to offer to the reader:

*Histoire de l'oeil* is not a 'profound' work: everything is given on the surface and without hierarchy, the metaphor is displayed in its entirety; circular and explicit, it refers to no secret: we have here a signification without a signified (or one in which everything is signified); and it is neither the least beauty nor the least novelty of this text to compose, by the technique we are attempting to describe, an open literature which is situated beyond any decipherment and which only a formal criticism can—at a great distance—accompany.<sup>45</sup>

In *The Myth of the Other*, however, Rella discloses the limits of formalist criticism by effectively demonstrating that Bataille's text does contain a profound secret—"the scandal of this work"—a central point around which not only *Story of the Eye* but Bataille's entire oeuvre revolves. The

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<sup>45</sup> Roland Barthes, "The Metaphor of the Eye," in *Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972), 242-3.

scandal of *Story of the Eye* does not lie in its stylistic excesses, Rella suggests: “The scandal is truly in the *story*, in the *destiny* of the eye: in what it sees *at the end*.”<sup>46</sup> At the end of its journey, the eye sees *nothing*, as it sits still in Simone’s vagina, blind and enucleated, gazing through the tears of urine. “The image is terrible and tragic. Terrible because it reveals the *death of the sun*, the metamorphosis of its light into a dead lunar glow. Terrible too because the eye, sunk within the vagina, where it was to find the truth that is not visible to the light of reason, through the opaque medium of the sperm and the transparency of the urine *sees nothing*: it is a dead eye, bearing witness only to death.”<sup>47</sup> The image perfectly conveys the lethal consequences of the passion for the Real, which Bataille develops in *Inner Experience* and “Method of Meditation” (1946-54). The latter text compares the experience of confronting the “extreme knowledge” to emerging from a “tissue of understanding”—an apt metaphor for the subject exceeding itself! Only upon transgression of his own limits can the subject finally open his eyes onto the blinding light of nonknowledge. The instant of seeing, however, coincides with the instant of death: “In a sense, the condition in which *I would see* would be on leaving, on emerging, from ‘tissue.’ And without doubt I must say immediately: this condition on which *I would see* would be dying. At no moment will I have the possibility of *seeing it!*”<sup>48</sup> In my own readings of Japanese New Wave films, I largely bypass Barthesian formalist analysis of structures, aiming instead at experiential treatment of images that, like the image of enucleated eye or that of the torture victim subjected to “death by a thousand cuts,” evoke the subject’s overcoming of the limits that delimit his subjectivity.

## Structure of the Dissertation

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<sup>46</sup> Franco Rella, *The Myth of the Other: Lacan, Foucault, Deleuze, Bataille*, trans. Nelson Moe (Washington: Maitsonneuve Press, 1994), 85.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>48</sup> Georges Bataille, “Method of Meditation,” in *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, ed. Stuart Kendall, trans. Michelle Kendall and Stuart Kendall (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 85.

In the first two chapters of the present dissertation, I not only introduce the conceptual tools that play a crucial role in my argument, but also make a case for approaching Bataille as a political thinker. Thus, the first chapter examines the idea of the “inward turn” in Bataille’s thought and takes a close look at the texts composed during Bataille’s engagement with a short-lived political organization, *Contre-Attaque* (1935-6). Written before the turn in question, these texts nonetheless anticipate Bataille’s conception of sovereignty in evoking the figure of the collective subject caught up in the moment of revolutionary effervescence. While this chapter stages an encounter between Bataille and Alain Badiou, in an attempt to conceive of the Bataillean figure of the crowd in the streets as the *we-subject* of politics, the next chapter places Bataille in dialogue with Deleuze and Guattari so as to illuminate the complicated relationship between revolutionary militant tactics and fascist politics. In reading the texts composed during Bataille’s engagement with the secret society known as *Acéphale* (1936-9) and the *Collège de Sociologie* (1937-9) and subjecting them to schizoanalysis, I discuss elective communities and secret societies, which so preoccupied Bataille at the time, as microfascist formations.

In subsequent chapters, I introduce detailed film analyses so as to illuminate the development of Bataille’s thought on sovereignty and to clarify the political implications of his work. In Chapter 3, I carry on with the schizoanalytic treatment of the *Collège de Sociologie* texts while engaging in a reading of Seijun Suzuki’s film, *Fighting Elegy*. A close reading of this film enables me to draw an extended comparison between European fascism and Japanese nationalism; it also allows me to illuminate the rhetoric of virility shared by fascist ideologues and certain members of the *Collège*. In Chapter 4, I explore Bataille’s theorization of the human-animal distinction, while paying close attention to the proximity of the beast and the sovereign. In this chapter, I take a close look at Kihachi Okamoto’s *The Sword of Doom* in order to argue

that the “freedom of the wild animal,” which only the sovereign possesses, necessarily implies a lapse into psychosis. The final chapter argues that Bataille’s late texts on eroticism develop the philosopher’s passion for the Real while, at the same time, suggesting a way out of the passion for destruction. In my reading of Yasuzo Masumura's *Blind Beast*, I discuss the possibility of a community of lovers separated from what Bataille describes as “the society of production” and devoted entirely to the pursuit of jouissance. In my conclusion I insist that a turn towards eroticism does not entail a turning away from politics but, on the contrary, opens up an unprecedented space that makes resistance possible. In attempting to show how the logic of “the inward turn” illuminates a tendency towards separation in Bataille’s philosophy as well as in the work of major auteurs of Japanese New Wave movement, it addresses scholars of continental philosophy as much as scholars of Japanese film history.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> In chapter 5, I follow Alain Badiou in theorizing the tendency towards separation as the “subtractive orientation” of the political subject.

## I

### Mass Sovereignty and the We-Subject:

#### Bataille and Contre-Attaque

##### Politics of the Impossible

In order to better understand the process whereby Bataille arrived at the conception of sovereignty, it is not sufficient to look for the concept's antecedents in the history of philosophy by pointing out, as Jacques Derrida did, that it shares much in common with the Hegelian notion of lordship.<sup>50</sup> One must also search for its antecedents within Bataille's own corpus, thereby historicizing the gradual actualization of this concept. Undoubtedly, the concept of sovereignty received the most sustained attention in Bataille's post-war writings, most notably in the third volume of *The Accursed Share* entitled *Sovereignty* (1953-4) as well as in the various essays intended for his unfinished atheological summa, *La Somme athéologique* (the last two projected volumes of which, *Le Pur Bonheur* and *Le Système inachevé du non-savoir*, were never completed), and lectures that he delivered at the Collège Philosophique over six years from 1947 to 1953. It is nonetheless possible to discern Bataille's early efforts to construct a theory of sovereignty in his writings produced throughout the 1930s, during the years immediately preceding the outbreak of World War II. A crucial and explicit reference to sovereignty appears as early as 1933 in his essay entitled "The Psychological Structure of Fascism,"<sup>51</sup> while the discussion in "The Notion of Expenditure," published during the same year, already contains the central tenets of the theory of sovereignty (without, however, employing the term itself) and

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<sup>50</sup> Jacques Derrida, "From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism without Reserve," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

<sup>51</sup> Georges Bataille, "The Psychological Structure of Fascism," in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. and trans. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 142. Here Bataille speaks of "the *heterogeneous* world" comprised of individuals who stand outside the law: "the numerous elements or social forms that *homogeneous* society is powerless to assimilate: mobs, the warrior, aristocratic and impoverished classes, different types of violent individuals or at least those who refuse the rule (madmen, leaders, poets, etc.)"

anticipates Bataille's argument in *The Accursed Share*.<sup>52</sup>

Bataille's thought underwent dramatic shifts during this particular period as it became increasingly preoccupied with the urgent need to reintroduce the sacred values into society then suffering from, to use Bataille's own words, boredom and stupefaction. During the 1930s, Bataille found himself actively involved in political life as he considered the necessity of responding (in the virile manner) to the threat of Nazism.<sup>53</sup> In this context, resacralization constitutes, for Bataille, the only means of countering apathy and restoring unity amongst men – that is to say, the only means of awakening the will to aggression in the face of encroaching fascism. Thus, the two principal targets of Bataille's political activity - the project of resacralization and that of anti-fascist (as well as anti-capitalist) resistance - are not at all unrelated. One finds strong evidence for this claim in the first issue of *Acéphale*, the review founded by Bataille in 1936, which opens with the following quote from Kierkegaard: "What looks like politics and imagines itself to be politics, one day will show itself to be a religious movement."<sup>54</sup> Bataille, who in his engagement with revolutionary politics refused to label himself "communist," expressed his political views in terms strikingly different from the standard Marxist parlance. His short piece entitled "The Sacred Conspiracy", also published in the first issue of *Acéphale*, further foregrounds the religious fervor with which Bataille embraced emancipatory politics: "WE ARE FEROCIOUSLY RELIGIOUS and, to the extent that our existence is the condemnation of everything that is recognized today, an inner exigency demands

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<sup>52</sup> Georges Bataille, "The Notion of Expenditure," in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, trans. and ed. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 117. Here Bataille evokes the figure of the sovereign in describing "a youthful man, capable of wasting and destroying without reason" and "incapable of a *utilitarian* justification for his actions."

<sup>53</sup> As I will explain in the second and third chapters of this dissertation, the virile rhetoric permeates Bataille's political writings of the late 1930's.

<sup>54</sup> Denis Hollier, "Foreword: Collage," in *The College of Sociology (1937-39)*, ed. Denis Hollier, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), xxv. The *Acéphale* group (a short lived secret society founded by Bataille together Jean Wahl, Pierre Klossowski, Georges Ambrosino, and Jules Monnerot) published its views in the review of the same name during the period of 1936-1939.

that we be equally imperious. What we are starting is a war."<sup>55</sup>

For Jean-Michel Besnier, Bataille's work during the 1930s is marked by a preoccupation with the "politics of the impossible" – the notion designating Bataille's rejection of organized takeover of political power and his concomitant affirmation of the will to aggression that gives birth to a revolution as if it were an interruption, an unforeseeable rupture in the ordinary order of things.<sup>56</sup> As Besnier defines it, "the politics of the impossible chooses revolution not as a goal to reach but as an unplanned uprising, what Bataille calls 'la dépense pure' [pure expenditure]."<sup>57</sup> Now, although Bataille is far from offering a developed theory of sovereignty in his political texts from the 1930s, I would argue that it nonetheless functions as an implicit horizon against which his political declarations take shape. Thus, if one follows Besnier's argument, it becomes apparent that the will to aggression, which Bataille celebrates in numerous texts from this period, also presupposes the will to live one's life without shying away from the risks and calculating the consequences – the principal trait of sovereignty – as well as the desire to bring experience to the maximum point of intensity and surrender to the lacerations of negativity without cause.

Insofar as sovereignty, as I have defined it in the previous chapter, entails an impossible relinquishment of symbolic mandates and thus a subtraction from the symbolic order, it appears to imply a certain inaction with respect to political life, a withdrawal into the private realm of eroticism and mysticism. Besnier's work, however, suggests that the opposite is true: not only do the sovereign values preclude a detachment with respect to the political but they may, in fact, serve as a basis for truly emancipatory politics. Indeed, at the time of his engagement with the

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<sup>55</sup>Georges Bataille, "The Sacred Conspiracy," in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, trans. and ed. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 179.

<sup>56</sup>Jean-Michel Besnier, "Georges Bataille in the 1930s: A Politics of the Impossible," trans. Amy Reid, *Yale French Studies* 78 (1990): 169-180. Although Besnier finds the notion of "politics of the impossible" useful to describe Bataille's political work produced in the 1930's, Bataille himself coined this notion rather late, in a letter to Jérôme Lindon dating from 9 January, 1962.

<sup>57</sup>*Ibid.*, 178.

short-lived Contre-Attaque group (founded with André Breton in September, 1935) and his subsequent activities at Acéphale (founded in 1936) and the Collège de Sociologie (established in 1937), Bataille calls for action as well as for a new community of men united together in the struggle against fascism and capitalism. This call, however, does not appear to be at odds with Bataille's subsequent valorization of the erotic ecstasy and mysticism on the pages of *Inner Experience* (as well as in his post-war texts). As Besnier explains in a different essay, "privileging action obviously meant taking existence to its boiling point or, to put it another way, experiencing one's limits and feeling the fundamental continuity which fuses individuals together. In privileging the ascetic experience, the issue is the same, even if the quest is from now on a solitary one, sheltered from the solicitation of history."<sup>58</sup>

Few scholars would dispute the explicitly political orientation of Bataille's work of the 1930s; not everyone, however, accepts Besnier's thesis concerning the fundamental continuity between this work and his latter-day propositions on inner experience and sovereignty. Thus, responding specifically to Besnier's thesis, Susan Rubin Suleiman points out that, during his engagement with the Contre-Attaque group, Bataille did, in fact, recognize the necessity of the deployment of power and discipline in the service of revolution. There is no lack of textual evidence to sustain her point. In 1936 (the year that witnessed the dissolution of Contre-Attaque and formation of Acéphale), Bataille issues forth the following imperative: "Affirm the value of violence and the will to aggression insofar as they are the foundation of power."<sup>59</sup> Suleiman herself points out that, in one of his Contre-Attaque texts, he envisages a displacement of the authority of a single master by "ALL acting as MASTERS."<sup>60</sup> In an effort to appropriate the

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<sup>58</sup>Jean-Michel Besnier, "Bataille, the Emotive Intellectual," trans. Alisdair McIntosh, in *Bataille: Writing the Sacred*, ed. Carolyn Bailey Gill (New York: Routledge, 1995), 20.

<sup>59</sup>Georges Bataille, "Program (Relative to Acéphale)," trans. Annette Michelson, *October* 36 (Spring, 1986): 79.

<sup>60</sup>Susan Rubin Suleiman, "Bataille in the Street: The Search for Virility in the 1930s," in *Bataille: Writing the*



weapons created by fascism in order to mobilize them in the antifascist struggle, Bataille called for the new revolutionary discipline that would displace the “servile discipline of Fascism.” On the basis of this evidence, Suleiman states her position as follows: “I agree with Besnier that Bataille’s projected politics was a ‘politics of the impossible’ for many reasons, not the least of which was the problem of being a non-Communist revolutionary intellectual in the 1930s; but I disagree about the question of political power *as Bataille conceived it at the time of Contre-Attaque*. His writings during that brief period suggest that he did envisage a ‘takeover of political power,’ including the use of authority and discipline.”<sup>61</sup> In thus differentiating between distinct periods marking Bataille’s intellectual itinerary, Suleiman insists on the radical heterogeneity of his corpus, on the presence of turns and shifts within his thought. Indeed, her central thesis concerns the “inward turn” that ostensibly takes place in Bataille’s work – that is, the turn from an endorsement of violent revolutionary action during the years with *Contre-Attaque* towards an affirmation of the “inner violence” (evoked on the pages of *Inner Experience*) that is not externalized in direct action, but remains a “laceration, an inner sundering.”

According to Suleiman, this shift becomes pronounced in Bataille's 1939 text published in the last issue of *Acéphale*, "The Practice of Joy before Death," and reaches its culmination in 1941 when he sets out to write *Madame Edwarda* and "Le Supplice" [The Torment] (eventually published as a part of *Inner Experience*). This is the time of solitude for Bataille. In 1938, he had witnessed the death of his lover, Colette Peignot. A year later, in 1939, he had seen the dissolution of both *Acéphale* and the Collège de Sociologie, which signaled the end of his intense intellectual collaboration with Roger Caillois and Michel Leiris. Finally, as Suleiman emphasizes, in 1940, Bataille had experienced the German occupation of France: "The inward

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*Sacred*, ed. Carolyn Bailey Gill (New York: Routledge, 1995), 38.

<sup>61</sup>*Ibid.*, 37.

turn in Bataille's thought became more pronounced as the outward events around him became more violent. By the autumn of 1941, when he wrote *Madame Edwarda* and began working on 'Le Supplice', the Nazis were fully established in Paris, executing hostages, rounding up Jews and carrying on other 'routine' activities (such as dynamiting synagogues)."<sup>62</sup> This brief survey of historical context certainly gives credence to Suleiman's thesis. More recently, another Bataille scholar, Patrick ffrench, essentially reiterated Suleiman's argument by singling out the year of 1941 as a moment of rupture in Bataille's work. Apart from examining the historical context discussed above, he also emphasizes the significance of "Le Supplice" as the text marking a certain interruption in Bataille's work. On September 5 of 1939, Bataille began writing a journal (which he eventually published under the title of *Le Coupable* [Guilty]) as well as developing material for *The Accursed Share* project. In 1941, however, Bataille found it necessary to temporarily suspend work on these projects in order to produce *Madame Edwarda* and "Le Supplice." This fact leads ffrench to make the following conclusion: "This period, and in particular the 'interruption' which produces 'Le Supplice' thus appears as a crucial point in Bataille's work, a moment at which a number of engagements are being negotiated, and a moment which will be generative not only of Bataille's thought and writing itself but also of the engagements with Bataille which form his legacy. To the extent that a major engagement and negotiation on Bataille's part is with the legacy of Hegel, as it is represented by Kojève, it is essential to set out the stakes of this encounter."<sup>63</sup>

The Besnier-Suleiman dispute (to which ffrench's recent work contributes) merits further discussion since it concerns the crucial premise which informs my arguments in this dissertation, namely the centrality of the concept of 'sovereignty' to the entirety of Bataille's oeuvre. If, as

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<sup>62</sup>Ibid., 40.

<sup>63</sup>Patrick ffrench, *After Bataille: Sacrifice, Exposure, Community* (London: MHRA, 2007), 68.

French argues, the text of "Le Supplice" marks a significant departure for Bataille who, at this point in his life, initiates a sustained engagement with Hegel's philosophy and develops a full-fledged account of sovereignty (and here French essentially corroborates Derrida's principal thesis according to which Bataille's conception of sovereignty involves a certain radicalization of Hegel), then it would appear that Bataille's texts written during the involvement with Contre-Attaque do not yet exhibit the preoccupation with sovereign values (devoid as these texts are of any explicit engagement with Hegelianism). Suleiman certainly seems to uphold this view insofar as she sets up a stark opposition between, on the one hand, Bataille's Contre-Attaque texts that exhibit faith in the possibility of direct revolutionary action, espouse the necessity of discipline, and affirm the virtues of virility and even power, and, on the other hand, the texts written during his engagement with the Collège, the literary texts such as *Madame Edwarda*, and finally "Le Supplice." These latter texts exhibit Bataille's growing fascination with "inner violence," torment, ecstasy, mystical states, and erotic passion. The language employed by Suleiman to describe this work (i.e. "inward turn," "inner violence," "inner sundering," etc.) constantly foregrounds Bataille's privileging of interiority, which she opposes to the Contre-Attaque's concern with organized revolutionary politics in the streets. Evidently, Suleiman maps "the inner experience" onto the private realm while situating "the political" within the public sphere as she notes that "by the time he founded the Collège, Bataille's idea of action had little to do with politics in any ordinary sense, or even in the extraordinary sense of Contre-Attaque. If one can speak of activism as part of his ambition for the Collège de sociologie, it was an activism founded in ritual and myth, unfolding between the 'sacred space' and the bedroom."<sup>64</sup>

Certainly, one needs only to compare the titles of two important texts, "Popular Front in the Street" and *Inner Experience*, one published before and the other after the watershed year of

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<sup>64</sup>Suleiman, 39.

1941, to concede that Suleiman's argument concerning the move from privileging the exteriority of political life to foregrounding the interiority of mystical (or religious) experience has certain merit. And yet, in what follows, I wish to complicate this opposition by insisting, first of all, that Bataille's increasing interest in the "sacred space" and mystical experience did not, in fact, propel him out of political life and into absolute individualism without relation. Indeed, his constant concern with thinking the idea of community precludes any attempt to classify his work with respect to a simple dichotomy of public/private. Furthermore, unlike Suleiman and French, I perceive "Le Supplice" as more of a development in Bataille's conceptualization of sovereignty rather than as a dramatic rupture or break with his early work. If the very notion of inner experience can only be understood against the background of his theory of sovereignty and if, as I intend to demonstrate, sovereign values inform Bataille's "politics of the impossible" of the 1930s, then there must be a certain relation between the two periods in question, one which I intend to demonstrate in what follows. While siding with Besnier's view according to which the preoccupation with sovereignty functions as a kind of thread that links Bataille's disparate texts together and establishes an element of continuity between them, I do not, however, wish to dismiss Suleiman's objections. Indeed, I find that her insistence on periodization must be taken even further: apart from singling out a single "turn" or "break" that takes place between the inception of *Contre-Attaque* in 1935 and "the grim autumn of 1941," one ought to discern multiple turns that signal not so much the interruption as the development or becoming of Bataille's thinking on the subject of sovereignty.

### **The Politics of Community and the Group-in-Fusion**

Perhaps, then, Suleiman's effort to periodize Bataille's intellectual itinerary does not contradict Besnier's thesis concerning the centrality of sovereignty to Bataille's thought? This

question hinges on whether Suleiman understands the concept of “the political” as well as that of “power” in the same way as Besnier does. I would contend that when Bataille speaks of the seizure of power, he has in mind the "powerless power" of the masses as opposed to the State power. In "Popular Front in the Street," he writes: "What interests us above all ... are the emotions that give the human masses the surges of power that tear them away from the domination of those who only know how to lead them on to poverty and to the slaughterhouse."<sup>65</sup> Power of the masses, of which Bataille speaks, is anarchic power that differs in kind from that form of power which founds the State. The distinction between the two forms of power in turn presupposes two radically different conceptions of revolution. Thus, when Bataille appeals to the power of the masses to revolt, he calls for the destruction of the very form of the State as opposed to mere substitution of some new version of the State for its existing variant.

While this distinction inevitably invokes Walter Benjamin’s discussion of the difference (originally posited by Georges Sorel) between a general *proletarian* strike and a general *political* strike (with the former entailing the complete negation of the State and the latter merely demanding that the State reform itself), it is in Maurice Blanchot's work that one finds the most precise characterization of Bataille's politics of the impossible that bases itself on the revolutionary potential of the powerless power of the people: “Contrary to 'traditional revolutions,' it was not a question of simply taking power to replace it with some other power, nor of taking the Bastille or the Winter Palace, or the Elysée or the National Assembly, all objectives of no importance. It was not even a question of overthrowing an old world; what mattered was to let a possibility manifest itself, the possibility - beyond any utilitarian gain - of a

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<sup>65</sup> Georges Bataille, "Popular Front in the Street," in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, trans. and ed. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 166.

*being-together* that gave back to all the right to equality in fraternity through a freedom of speech that elated everyone.”<sup>66</sup> Although Blanchot has in mind not the activities of Popular Front in the 1930s, but rather the event of May '68, his work shows a marked affinity with Besnier's decision to discuss Bataille's political logic in terms of ‘possibility’ and ‘impossibility.’ In other words, “the possibility of a being-together” that Blanchot finds disclosed in the image of the agitated masses taking over the streets is *the possibility of the impossible* – of the community forming *spontaneously*, without programme, without demands for political representation, held together only by pure effervescence. The power of the people is limitless, he insists, precisely because it incorporates absolute powerlessness - that is to say, powerlessness with respect to the possibilities of founding another State, securing the right to representation, passing new legislation, etc. Indeed, the idea of "freedom of speech" invoked by Blanchot has nothing to do with the ideal of freedom advocated by the proponents of parliamentary democracy inasmuch as the former presupposes that the people need no politicians to represent them and thus rejects the very principle of mediation. As Bataille himself puts it, “for us having the debate means having it in the street, it means having it where emotion can seize men and push them to the limit, without meeting the eternal obstacles that result from the defense of old political positions.”<sup>67</sup> Thus, when Suleiman invokes Bataille's calls to seize power in order to question Besnier's thesis concerning the politics of the impossible, she appears to retain the traditional conception of power that presupposes the existence of the State. Besnier, on the other hand, puts forward an entirely different notion of power at odds with the form of the State: “the 'powerless power' which, resistant to all power and in that sense 'impossible,' characterizes the people.”<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*, trans. Pierre Joris (Barrytown: Station Hill Press, 1988), 30.

<sup>67</sup> Bataille, "Popular Front in the Street," 163.

<sup>68</sup> Besnier, "Georges Bataille in the 1930s," 178.

As the passage from Blanchot quoted above suggests, an assessment of Bataille's emancipatory politics must consider the place of community in his philosophical project. Jean-Luc Nancy insists on this point: the idea of community cannot be separated from the concept of the political: "the political is the place where community as such is brought into play. It is not, in any case, just the locus of power relations, to the extent that these relations set and upset the necessarily unstable and taut equilibrium of collectivity."<sup>69</sup> In this sense, Bataille's work, before and after 1941, cannot be separated from what I shall call (borrowing an expression from Christopher Fynsk) *a politics of community*. Suleiman appears to overlook this fact when she argues that, in relinquishing the hope of seizing political power for the proletariat by means of a violent revolution, Bataille also terminated his involvement in politics. His later work on eroticism, however, as much as it privileges the private space of bedroom over the public space of the street nonetheless concerns community because, as Nancy points out, "for Bataille, community was first and finally the community of lovers."<sup>70</sup> In this respect, the only difference separating the early Bataille of "Popular Front in the Street" from the mature Bataille of *L'Erotisme* consists in the fact that the community diminishes from the masses held together by shared passion to the community of lovers in the grip of erotic ecstasy.

Thus, it should come as no surprise that Bataille's more explicitly political writings from the late 1930's attempt to envision a politics of community. For instance, "Popular Front in the Street" – the very text in which Suleiman discerns Bataille's affirmation of a revolutionary takeover of power in order to then question Besnier's interpretation – certainly exhibits preoccupation with that "fundamental continuity which fuses individuals together" that, according to Besnier, characterizes Bataille's political stance in the 1930s. (It may be worth

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<sup>69</sup>Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, ed. Peter Connor, trans. Peter Connor et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), xxxvii.

<sup>70</sup>*Ibid.*, 36.

noting, at this point, that the idea of community put forward in this text has very little to do with Nancy's conception of it insofar as the latter refuses to think of community as a fusion or as an immanence of a communion. As I trace the development of Bataille's thought in my subsequent chapters, I will attempt to account for those texts in which Bataille's thoughts on community do enter into close proximity with Nancy's propositions.) Thus, in defining the primary objective of this address, which resembles a manifesto, Bataille writes: "If we are to speak of the Popular Front, we must first identify what holds us firmly together, what links our origins to the emotions that constitute it, namely, the existence of the Popular Front in the street."<sup>71</sup> Earlier in this essay, he once again speaks like an "emotive intellectual" in Besnier's sense of the term, the one who is less concerned with developing a careful strategy for a revolutionary takeover of power than with blindly plunging himself at the very epicenter of revolutionary developments: "What drives the crowds to the street is the emotion directly aroused by striking events in the atmosphere of a storm, it is the contagious emotion that, from house to house, from suburb to suburb, suddenly turns a hesitating man into a frenzied being."<sup>72</sup> Such is the experience of communal fusion which extirpates the individual from isolated existence and plunges him into the crowd in the street.

What makes this community of people-in-fusion differ from that dominant idea of community linked to the concept of nation-state? For Nancy, the latter presupposes fusion as well as sublation of particular egos with a view toward the formation of one unified communal Ego as each individual member of society discovers his or her truth in the person of the monarch or (in the absence of monarchy) in the State itself. This conception is entirely consistent with Freud's fundamental insight in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*: "A primary group of this kind is a number of individuals who have put one and the same object in the place of their

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<sup>71</sup>Georges Bataille, "Popular Front in the Street," in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, trans. and ed. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 163.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid., 162.



ego ideal and have consequently identified themselves with one another in their ego.”<sup>73</sup> The ego-ideal is thus precisely what confers an imaginary sense of totality upon a given community. Furthermore, located at the juncture of the imaginary and the symbolic, it functions as the signifier that provides a minimum of coherence to this imaginary totality. In Bataille's vision of the crowd qua an "ocean of people rising up," however, the ego ideal is conspicuously absent – there is no leader that could provide the masses with a source of imaginary and symbolic identifications – and egos are evacuated entirely, melted into a single formless ocean rising up in turmoil. What comes after this dissolution of the egos? Nancy in his own conception of community proposes the following answer: "[Community] is not the space of the *egos* - subjects and substances that are at bottom immortal - but of the *I*'s, who are always *others* (or else are nothing). If community is revealed in the death of others it is because death itself is the true community of *I*'s that are not *egos*.”<sup>74</sup> At this point, I must make note of one obvious difficulty involved in my attempt to engage Nancy's work in the study of Bataille informed by psychoanalytic theory. It concerns terminology. For Lacan, ‘egos’ are not at all synonymous with ‘subjects.’ Indeed, if one were to translate Nancy's proposition into Lacanian parlance, one would have to conclude that what emerges after the dissolution of the ego is precisely the subject – that is to say, the subject of the unconscious.

Now, although Nancy derives his thesis from a careful reading of Bataille, he does not seem to consider the *Contre-Attaque* writings, which contradict the claims made in *The Inoperative Community*. These writings already depart from Hegel's and Heidegger's conceptions of collectivity as project (and Nancy is resolutely critical of the Hegelian conception of the State), but they do not yet offer the probing meditations on finitude, sacrifice, and inner

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<sup>73</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XVIII, trans. James Strachey (London: the Hogarth Press, 1955), 116.

<sup>74</sup>Nancy, 15.

experience that one finds in Bataille's mature works and that do indeed substantiate Nancy's claims. Indeed, Nancy himself posits a significant turning point in Bataille's thought that would appear to coincide with the moment of the disbanding of *Acéphale* and the *Collège de Sociologie* in 1939. At this point, Nancy argues, "Bataille went through the experience of realizing that the nostalgia for a communal being was at the same time the desire for a work of death." But, as Nancy notes earlier in the text, a work is something that community does not do which is why, in the final analysis, communal fusion is not constitutive of communities. Hence, he continues, Bataille "came to understand the ridiculous nature of all nostalgia for communion, he who for a long time - in a kind of exacerbated consciousness of the 'loss' of community, which he shared with a whole epoch - had represented archaic societies, their sacred structures, the glory of military and royal societies, the nobility of feudalism, as bygone and fascinating forms of a successful intimacy of being-in-common with itself."<sup>75</sup> Here Nancy clearly alludes to the important work Bataille conducted during the years of his involvement with the *Collège de Sociologie* between 1937 and 1939. If he disregards the *Contre-Attaque* period entirely, it is probably because a piece such as "Popular Front in the Street" exhibits the nostalgia for communion, the utopian dream of the crowd-fused-into-one, like no other text in Bataille's oeuvre.

I have no intentions of reproaching Nancy for being selective if only for the obvious reason that he lays no claim to presenting Bataille's entire corpus in great detail. Nonetheless, I find that lumping the communitarian enterprise of *Contre-Attaque* together with all the other communitarian enterprises would not do Bataille justice. For instance, in "The Psychological Structure of Fascism," Bataille also discusses the concept of the State and argues that its function

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<sup>75</sup>Nancy, 17.

“consists of an interplay of authority and adaptation.”<sup>76</sup> It is precisely through this function, he goes on to assert, that the State guarantees a form of social homogeneity – the minimum of consistency required for holding the imaginary totality together. In Bataille’s *Contre-Attaque* writings, however, the frenzied beings that compose the revolutionary crowd have nothing to do with the assemblage of particular egos into the communal body of the state. In accordance with the principle of the nation-state, each member of community acquires his or her identity only in the process of becoming subordinated by state power. (One could also say, this time adopting the language of Lacanian psychoanalysis, that subject acquires symbolic mandate only insofar as he acquiesces to the authority of the big Other.) The ocean of people rising up in revolt, however, has the following aim in view: the annihilation of the state and the attendant collapse of that great communitarian Ego evoked on the pages of *The Inoperative Community*. Bataille is unambiguous on this point: “It must be understood that if a proletarian movement does develop, it is essential that there be, at the same time, a true collapse of the social order; otherwise the repercussions within the right wing of opposition will result in a reconstruction of oppressive forces in new forms.”<sup>77</sup>

Thus, the question not addressed in *The Inoperative Community* persists: if the idea of group-in-fusion entails the evacuation of the Ego, what comes in its stead? It cannot be the *I* in Nancy’s sense of the term for the Bataillean image of the crowd presupposes a certain immanentism characteristic of communion. Could it be the subject that replaces the ego? Perhaps. *The Inoperative Community* cannot help us to answer this question since Nancy persistently clings to the view that “a thinking of the subject thwarts a thinking of community.”<sup>78</sup> Therefore, one must turn elsewhere in search of an answer to this question, to the work of Alain

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<sup>76</sup> Bataille, “The Psychological Structure of Fascism,” 139.

<sup>77</sup> Bataille, “Toward Real Revolution,” 36.

<sup>78</sup> Nancy, 23.

Badiou, which exhibits an equally rigorous attempt to think community without, at the same time, dispensing with the problematic of the subject.<sup>79</sup>

### **Bataille's Justice**

The political formation described on the pages of "Popular Front in the Street," this image of group-in-fusion (to evoke Sartre's formulation), may be best apprehended through a reference to *mass sovereignty* which Badiou defines as "a sovereignty of immediacy, thus of gathering itself."<sup>80</sup> In all likelihood, Badiou's notion owes less to Bataille than to Marx who, in "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right" speaks of a "sovereignty of the people." Nonetheless, I maintain that sovereignty, in this case, can also be understood in the precise Bataillean sense. To be sure, an individual lost in the crowd cannot be equated with a sovereign who, as Bataille puts it in *The Accursed Share*, "is not on the bandwagon of the mob and knows how to die in solitude."<sup>81</sup> The collective body of the crowd nonetheless affirms the fundamental sovereign value – the courage to act in the instant without anticipation of future outcomes, without calculation (and this is why, in response to Nancy, I maintain that, although the community evoked in "Popular Front in the Street" coalesces around desire for communion, it does not constitute collectivity qua project since project necessarily presupposes an anticipation of the projected outcomes). Indeed, "Popular Front in the Street" (as well as other texts from the same period such as "Toward Real Revolution") continually emphasizes the *urgency* demanded by the masses in revolt thus foregrounding the essential feature of mass sovereignty, namely its immediacy. For Bataille, the masses in the street ought to assume the sovereign right to act *spontaneously*, without waiting for any orders or programs to come from

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<sup>79</sup> It must be noted, however, that Badiou rarely refers to 'community,' preferring instead to speak of organization as it pertains to the subject of politics.

<sup>80</sup> Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics*, trans. Jason Barker (New York: Verso, 2005), 88.

<sup>81</sup> Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: Volumes II and III: The History of Eroticism and Sovereignty*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1993), 16.

above—for the violent and direct drives animating the crowd demand an immediate release.

Michel Surya corroborates this point when he argues that “what Bataille expected was a human uprising carrying along with it everything that constituted its limits; in a word, it would become sovereign.”<sup>82</sup> Such is, in Badiou’s view, the affective experience of injustice: it is *immediately* apparent to the revolutionary masses and it *urgently* demands reparation.

Bataille does not typically refer to the ethical category of 'justice' in his work. He is certainly not famous for elaborating anything like a sustained conception of ethics. Nonetheless, his political writings of the 1930s frequently allude to very concrete instances of injustice responsible for the existence of those raging drives that compel the masses to march the streets. In his 1933 text, “The Notion of Expenditure,” for instance, he directly tackles the issue of class struggle, arguing that the fundamental division between noble and ignoble individuals continues to characterize contemporary bourgeois society despite democratic politicians’ best efforts to attenuate it:

The rich man consumes the poor man's losses, creating for him a category of degradation and abjection that leads to slavery. Now it is evident that, from the endlessly transmitted heritage of the sumptuary world, the modern world has received slavery, and has reserved it for the proletariat. Without a doubt bourgeois society, which pretends to govern according to rational principles, and which, through its own actions, moreover, tends to realize a certain human homogeneity, does not accept without protest a division that seems destructive to man himself; it is incapable, however, of pushing this resistance further than theoretical negation. It gives the workers rights equal to those of the masters, and it announces this *equality* by inscribing that word on walls. But the masters, who act as if they were the expression of society itself, are preoccupied - more seriously than with any other concern - with showing that they do not in any way share the abjection of the men they employ. *The end of workers' activity is to produce in order to live, but the bosses' activity is to produce in order to condemn the working producers to a hideous degradation* - for there is no disjunction possible between, on the one hand, the characterization the bosses seek through their modes of expenditure, which tend to elevate them high above human baseness, and on the other hand this baseness itself, of which this characterization is a function.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Michel Surya, *Georges Bataille: An Intellectual Biography*, trans. Krzysztof Fijalkowski and Michael Richardson (London: Verso, 2002), 225.

<sup>83</sup> Bataille, “The Notion of Expenditure,” 125-6.

Here Bataille comes as close to the Marxist point of view as he ever would. Just two years after the publication of "Popular Front in the Street," his reserved acceptance of the basic tenets of Marxism will give way to an enthusiastic Nietzscheanism. At this point, however, his condemnation of "hideous degradation" of the workers owes a great deal to Marx and Engels's critique of the "miserable character" of private appropriation of the products of labor "under which the labourer lives merely to increase capital, and is allowed to live only in so far as the interest of the ruling class requires it."<sup>84</sup>

Now, it is precisely this acute awareness of workers' degradation that calls the revolutionary subject into being. In his 1936 piece, "Counterattack: Call to Action," Bataille questions, with exasperation, the general inaction of the political leaders faced with the obvious case of injustice done to the proletariat:

What is it that keeps capitalist society alive?

- Work.

What does capitalist society offer to him who gives his work?

- Bones to gnaw on.

What, on the other hand, does it offer to the owners of capital?

- All they want, more than they want: ten, a hundred, a thousand turkeys a day, had they stomachs large enough...

And if they can't eat the turkeys?

- The worker is jobless, dying of hunger, and rather than give the turkeys to him, they throw them into the sea.

Why not throw the capitalists and not the turkeys into the sea?

- Everyone is wondering why.<sup>85</sup>

For Bataille, such a state of affairs commands only one possible plan of action: the annihilation of the established order. Hence his lack of patience with those politicians bent on endlessly deliberating the question of whether or not the conditions are ripe for revolution.

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<sup>84</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), 485.

<sup>85</sup> Georges Bataille, "Counterattack: Call to Action," trans. Annette Michelson, *October* vol. 36 (Spring, 1986): 26.

If one pays close attention to texts such as "Popular Front in the Street" and "Counterattack: Call to Action," one perceives the illegitimacy of a rather widespread view which treats Bataille as a kind of rebel without a cause. According to this interpretation, shared by many supporters as well as critics, Bataille needed no justification to back revolutionary politics, celebrated spontaneous outbursts of violence apparently unmotivated by any concrete agenda, and (to adopt a well-known formula) affirmed revolt for revolt's sake. Such a view appears to be consistent with Bataille's propositions on sovereignty. If sovereignty serves nothing—that is to say, if sovereign values cannot be subordinated to some political project—then the sovereignty of the people manifesting itself in the explosion of revolutionary violence would be marked by a certain refusal of deliberation or agenda. This view, however, is only partially correct: while Bataille chose not to articulate specific objectives for the proletarian revolution, being fully aware that the latter must take place as an incalculable event, he nonetheless maintained that the established order must be overthrown *for a reason*, the reason being that the capitalist practices must be done away with in order to emancipate the workers from degradation.

One must, therefore, question Marc de Kessel's claim according to which Bataille affirmed the values of sovereignty as the primary motivating force behind revolutionary struggle: "The ideals one fights for are never more than a *secondary* revolutionary mainspring; their role is to veil, behind rational and ideological reasons, the principal purpose man seeks, and which lies in this 'moment' of lethal negativity. One overthrows feudal and royal authority, not because one objects to feudalism and royalty, but because one desires to be just as wild, unjust, and irresponsible, as any feudal, sovereign lord; because one wants to dispose of one's own life just

as frivolously as of the lives of others.”<sup>86</sup> As ample textual evidence shows, Bataille did not in fact adhere to this view, which appears to suggest that the revolutionary working class ought to concern itself with the sovereign privilege to expend sumptuously rather than with the ideals of justice and equality. de Kessel's interpretation, as much as it treats Bataille's work seriously and sympathetically, has the unfortunate side effect of legitimizing the claims of those who insist on Bataille's complicity or (as these critics like to put it) his 'fascination' with fascism. Indeed, if one agrees that in Bataille's view the oppressed want nothing better than the right to be as wild and unjust as their oppressors, then it becomes fairly easy to claim that Bataille started out as a supporter of emancipatory politics but ended up siding with a fascist mob driven by hatred and intoxicated by the prospect of power. For instance, in *The Seduction of Unreason*, Richard Wolin puts forward the following argument: “The stress on revolutionary violence, the endorsement of ‘sovereignty’ and ‘mastership,’ the celebration of ‘affective exaltation and fanaticism’ – the emotional side of mass politics that fascism had excelled in exploiting – represent key aspects of the ethos of left fascism as propagated by Bataille.”<sup>87</sup>

Wolin's argument demands scrupulous examination, which it shall receive as I intend to take up the issue of Bataille's complex attitude towards fascism in the following chapter. Nonetheless, it may be worthwhile to briefly address it here since (together with de Kessel's piece) it yields the characterization of Bataille as an irresponsible intellectual. For to give consent to violence without considering the consequences, to affirm the sovereign act of expenditure that disregards the value of human life, and to pay lip service to a wild mob that claims the right to kill and pillage without justifying its actions, would indeed be irresponsible.

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<sup>86</sup> Marc de Kessel, "A Sovereign's Anatomy: The Antique in Bataille's Modernity and Its Impact on His Political Thought," trans. G. Daniël Bügel, in *Cogito and the Unconscious*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1998), 202.

<sup>87</sup> Richard Wolin, *The Seduction of Unreason: The Intellectual Romance with Fascism: From Nietzsche to Postmodernism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004), 180.



One need not, however, accept such a characterization since both de Kessel and Wolin overlook the profound ambivalence with which Bataille approaches the issue of sovereignty at the very moment when he initiates his investigation of fascism. On the one hand, insofar as he maintains (in "The Notion of Expenditure") that "human activity is not entirely reducible to processes of production and conservation," he affirms the sovereign desire to lose and to expend against the ignoble concern with the preservation of wealth.<sup>88</sup> In this respect, Mark de Kessel is entirely right to claim that "sovereignty is something like man's universal 'essence,' making him what he is."<sup>89</sup> Whereas the principle of classical utility consigns the agonistic pleasures accompanying every act of nonproductive expenditure to the category of 'pathological' and, consequently, presupposes a renunciation of *jouissance* as an essential condition for society's well-being, the sovereign will toward pure expenditure does away with restrictions imposed on human activity by these utilitarian principles of acquisition and conservation, giving free reign to that integral part of existence oriented towards loss and ecstatic pleasure. Now, on the other hand, Bataille fully realizes that, while the act of spectacular destruction of wealth elevates those privileged few capable of performing it into the ranks of nobility, it simultaneously places the larger part of humanity into a servile and degrading position, thus giving rise to inequality and, hence, to injustice.

While apparently drawing on "The Communist Manifesto" in his evocation of the fundamental distinction between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, Bataille elaborates his own distinction between the poor and the rich through a reference to the notion of expenditure. In other words, he distinguishes between those who possess the power to spend sumptuously and those who not only lack this power but also suffer degradation when faced with the sumptuous

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<sup>88</sup> Bataille, "The Notion of Expenditure," 118.

<sup>89</sup> de Kessel, 199.

expenditure of wealth, the activity from which they are excluded. The principle of non-productive expenditure, therefore, functions as the essential principle of separation whereby the noble man assumes his distance from the ignoble masses: "Thus expenditure, even though it might be a social function, immediately leads to an agonistic and apparently antisocial act of separation. The rich man consumes the poor man's losses, creating for him a category of degradation and abjection that leads to slavery."<sup>90</sup> Indeed, argues Bataille, slavery exists even to this day and is reserved for the proletariat. The masses, then, have only one means at their disposal to combat this injustice—to assume power through the only form of expenditure available to them, namely, revolution. "As dreadful as it is, human poverty has never had a strong enough hold on societies to cause the concern for conservation—which gives production the appearance of an end—to dominate the concern for unproductive expenditure. In order to maintain this preeminence, since power is exercised by the classes that expend, poverty was excluded from all social activity. And the poor have no other way of reentering the circle of power than through the revolutionary destruction of the classes occupying that circle—in other words, through a bloody and in no way limited social expenditure."<sup>91</sup> For Bataille, revolution becomes not just one form of expenditure among others, but "the grandest form" insofar as the loss accomplished through it is the loss of human life: "Class struggle...becomes the grandest form of social expenditure when it is taken up again and developed, this time on the part of the workers, and on such a scale that it threatens the very existence of the masters."<sup>92</sup>

One can see that, already in "The Notion of Expenditure," Bataille elaborates the central tenets of his 'general economy' - the project developed at length in his three-volume work, *The Accursed Share*. Furthermore, it is in this early text that Bataille highlights the political

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<sup>90</sup> Bataille, "The Notion of Expenditure," 125.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 120-1.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 126.

implications of his economic model. He thus shows that the poor's demand for non-productive expenditure cannot be denied or repressed. When the workers' wealth (i.e. the products of their labour) is taken away from them and when their energy is channeled into work, the workers' unsubdued desire to expend sumptuously eventually finds an outlet in violence and revolt.

Bataille does, in fact, paint a rather disturbing picture of what he sees as an inevitable outcome of the class struggle:

In historical agitation, only the word Revolution dominates the customary confusion and carries with it the promise that answers the unlimited demands of the masses. As for the masters and the exploiters, whose function is to create the contemptuous forms that exclude human nature - causing this nature to exist at the limits of the earth, in other words in mud - a simple law of reciprocity requires that they be condemned to fear, to the *great night* when their beautiful phrases will be drowned out by death screams in riots. That is the bloody hope which, each day, is one with the existence of the people, and which sums up the insubordinate content of the class struggle.

Class struggle has only one possible end: the loss of those who have worked to lose 'human nature.'<sup>93</sup>

Despite this vivid evocation of bloody riots accompanied by the death screams of the vanquished masters, I object to the view that Bataille called for a revolution out of some irrational desire to experience a bloody riot for its own sake and not because he had good reasons to demand the destruction of the established order. Furthermore, as much as one may be tempted to situate Bataille's political logic under the banner of 'irrationalism,' one must also keep in mind that he never ceased to assert the importance of discipline and organization to the revolutionary mass movement: "What we demand is a coherent, disciplined organization, its entire will straining with enthusiasm toward popular power; this is the sense of responsibility that must devolve on those who tomorrow must be the masters."<sup>94</sup>

This combined emphasis on spontaneity and discipline, paradoxical at first sight, could, perhaps, be best clarified through a reference to the concept of the event which has gained much

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 127-8.

<sup>94</sup> Bataille, "Popular Front in the Street," 168.

currency in contemporary philosophical debates. As far as his writings on politics are concerned, Bataille is the thinker of the event in the way that anticipates more recent work by Derrida, Deleuze, and Badiou. What links these diverse thinkers together is the common attempt to think the event as the incalculable. Badiou, for instance, describes his personal involvement in the political activities of the late 1960s in the manner that brings to mind Blanchot's aforementioned characterization of May '68: "As for what then took place, yes, we were the genuine actors, but actors absolutely seized by what was happening to them, as by something extraordinary, something properly incalculable."<sup>95</sup> Significantly, he adds the following qualification: "I've never argued that the event, when we examine it in its facticity, presents irrational characteristics. I simply think that none of the calculations internal to the situation can account for its irruption, and cannot, in particular, elucidate this kind of break in scale that happens at a certain moment, such that the actors themselves are seized by something of which they no longer know if they are its actors or its vehicle, or what it carries away."<sup>96</sup>

As my discussion of "Popular Front in the Street" and "The Notion of Expenditure" reveals, Bataille's political work displays a striking affinity with the aforementioned inquiries on the nature of the event. He too conceives of it as an interruption and, for this reason, maintains that revolutions cannot be achieved through an endless elaboration of political strategies in preparation for that perfect timing when the conditions are ripe for organized uprising. Nonetheless, he demands that revolutionaries submit themselves to a strict discipline and organization thus implicitly stipulating a fundamental difference between a revolutionary formation and an agitated mob. Bataille's "Toward Real Revolution" offers a particularly striking instance of his assertion that a revolutionary movement must be at once organized and

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<sup>95</sup> Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (New York: Verso, 2001), 124.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

spontaneous, disciplined and driven by intense emotions. Here Bataille discusses revolutionary movements as *organic movements* which he defines as follows:

Organic movements differ, in the first place, from those shapeless uprisings which have abolished autocracies and whose coherence was a function of the unity of the authoritarian powers attacked by them. Secondly, they differ from political parties of Right or Left based on unchanging (or largely unchanging) class interests. Their causes are not to be found within permanent frames as within so many divisions of space; they are manifested only in time. Less abstractly put, they are engendered not by direct class interests, but by dramatic historical situations. ... Like insurrection, moreover, an organic movement develops independently of established political frameworks, in open hostility to parliamentary rule - less from a program shaped by strictly defined interests than from a state of intense emotion. This emotion at once takes on a value as a sudden consciousness of superiority. And again like insurrection, an organic movement leads its followers toward violence, organizing them in strict discipline. ... The program of an organic movement cannot be abstract and schematic. In its capabilities for immediate realization, it cannot be directly subordinated to rational conceptions. It is necessarily led to immediate needs which are partly fortuitous and tentative, to those aspirations which, in fact, motivate a particular mass at a particular time and place."<sup>97</sup>

One can see that Bataille differentiates revolutionary insurrections from shapeless uprisings while, at the same time, attaching more importance to spontaneous emotional outbursts and immediate demands of the masses than to meticulous strategic planning. Furthermore, his refusal to take into account particular interests prevents us from following one possible conclusion offered by de Kessel's reading. For if one accepts this reading and agrees that the proletariat's revolutionary aspirations can be reduced to the ability to be as wild and frivolous as the ruling class, then one would have to conclude that Bataille's idea of revolution does not, in fact, aim at "the destruction of the existing world" (contrary to his own claims stated in the program written for the Acéphale group). It would amount merely to the transfer of spending power, luxurious lifestyle, and other privileges from one class to another and, thus, would preserve the existing order characterized by class division and unequal distribution of power.

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<sup>97</sup> Bataille, "Toward Real Revolution," 38-9.

In Badiou's view, such a revolutionary subject, motivated solely by its particular interests, possesses no relation to the universal ideals of justice and equality and thus has no relation to truth. Strictly speaking, such an individual cannot be even called a "subject" if one understands this term in Badiou's sense—that is, as the subject of truth. “We know that the overwhelming majority of empirical instances of politics have nothing to do with truth. They organize a mixture of power and opinions. The subjectivity that animates them is that of demand and resentment, of the tribe and the lobby, of electoral nihilism and the blind confrontation of communities... The only subjective element of any importance to them is self-interest.”<sup>98</sup> On the other hand, a genuine politics, “founded upon the egalitarian principle of a capacity to discern the just,” takes no account of particular interests, concerned as it is with bringing about “a representation of the collective capacity on the basis of a rigorous equality between each of their agents... Equality means that the political actor is represented under the sole sign of the uniquely human capacity. Interest is not a uniquely human capacity.”<sup>99</sup> Bataille's concern with justice and equality comes across in the passage from "The Notion of Expenditure" quoted above in which he speaks of "a simple law of reciprocity" that condemns the masters to the unending fear of imminent revolt of the masses. Thus, one could argue that, while the event qua the incalculable precludes the possibility of precise estimation of the "right time" for insurrection, it nonetheless involves a certain necessary settling of accounts.

### **Badiou's We-Subject**

In his relatively recent reflections on the dominant intellectual and political currents of the 20th century, Badiou claims that "every authentic subjectivation is collective, and that every vigorous

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<sup>98</sup> Badiou, *Metapolitics*, trans. Jason Barker (New York: Verso, 2005), 97.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 97-8.

intellectuality implies the construction of a 'we'.”<sup>100</sup> Badiou goes on to assert the need to take risks in the name of “unheard-of possibilities” and to destroy in order to pave the way for the New. This insistence on the inseparability of the destruction of the Old and the creation of the New as well as his condemnation of the obsession with security can already be found in *Theory of the Subject*. Not only does Badiou proclaim that “security is the sign of a subjective impotence” in this early text but he also stresses that “a political subject comes into being only by tying the revolt to a revolutionary consistency, and destruction to a recomposition.”<sup>101</sup> In *The Century*, Badiou reaffirms the inseparability of destruction and subtraction by pointing out that destruction constitutes a kind of necessary evil that must be accepted inasmuch as it makes the production of the New possible. He mobilizes the notion of “passion for the real” to argue that the militants of the 20<sup>th</sup> century did not tolerate horrors of the real in anticipation of the better tomorrow, but rather aspired to come face-to-face with the real in all its horror. Badiou thus elaborates the temporality of the we-subject caught up in a revolutionary turmoil: instead of risking death in the hope of attaining some specific future outcome, the we-subject, as Bataille would have put it, aspires to experience ‘joy in the face of death’ in the present instant.

In ascribing the passion for the real to the great revolutionary movements of the century, Badiou would thus seem to privilege the moment of destruction over reconstitution. Nonetheless, this overwhelming desire to experience violence in the instant is not as gratuitous as it may seem. Those critics of generic communism who speak of the irrational and barbarous tendencies inherent in every revolutionary enterprise miss the point: the revolutionary proletariat destroys out of necessity, out of perception of injustice, and not out of some vicious resentment towards the rich and the powerful. Badiou states this point clearly in one of his interviews: “Destruction

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<sup>100</sup> Alain Badiou, *The Century*, trans. Alberto Toscano (Malden, MA: Polity, 2007), 98.

<sup>101</sup> Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, 160.

signifies that a part of the situation can be destroyed for the new, for the event.... In political events and generic processes the violence is always there because many people don't like newness. The transformation of the situation is always against some people – rich men, men in power.”<sup>102</sup> Violence is necessary in order to ‘wipe the slate clean’ (as Slavoj Žižek likes to put it), but it is not an end in itself, insofar as destruction must be supplemented by creation, which is why Badiou often chooses to maintain his distance from the passion for the real and fraternal violence.

### **The Subject of the Real**

“Violence is legitimated by the creation of the new man,” writes Badiou in an attempt to capture the revolutionary perspective of the century and adds: “If what is at stake is the new man, the man of the past may very well turn out to be nothing but disposable material.”<sup>103</sup> Who is this new man? Clearly, Badiou has the collective subject in mind and not a solitary individual. As he demonstrates in *The Century*, the infinite ‘we’ prevails over the finitude of the individual during outbreaks of fraternal insurgence. Furthermore, inasmuch as the we-subject asserts its demand for justice and equality, it provokes opposition in the bourgeoisie and those supporters of the State who refuse to accept the egalitarian axiom. Thus, the we-subject as well as the new man that comes in the wake of revolutionary turmoil constitute a rare occurrence.

The subject's coming-into-being does not involve standing up for one's particular economic interests. On the contrary, it involves the refusal of selfishness or self-possession. “It was in this manner,” writes Badiou, ‘that, as an adolescent, I understood Sartre's vulgar maxim: ‘Every anti-communist is a dog,’ for every anti-communist manifested this hatred of ‘we’, his determination to exist solely within the limits of *self*-possession – which is always the possession

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<sup>102</sup> Badiou, *Infinite Thought*, 132.

<sup>103</sup> Badiou, *The Century*, 32-3.



of few goods.”<sup>104</sup> It is hardly surprising, then, that the subject constitutes a rare occurrence: how many individuals would be willing to sacrifice their concern for security, their obsession with property, their familiar identities – all for the sake of the communist ideal?

Nonetheless, for Badiou, the we-subject is not a theoretical fiction but a real possibility. The question remains: What causes the subject to emerge? The answer, familiar to all readers of Badiou, is that the subject comes into being in proclaiming his or her fidelity to the truth-event. As Badiou puts in *Ethics*: “I call ‘subject’ the bearer [*le support*] of a fidelity, the one who bears a process of truth. The subject, therefore, in no way pre-exists the process. He is absolutely nonexistent in the situation ‘before’ the event. We might say that the process of truth *induces* a subject.”<sup>105</sup> Yet one still wonders what sort of event could cause the individual to undergo what Žižek calls a ‘symbolic suicide’ which consists precisely in the subtraction from the symbolic order and the attendant disidentification.

Badiou’s argument in *The Century* suggests that the event in question would constitute a brush with the real. The we-subject, as I have already pointed out, manifests itself through fraternal violence. Now, fraternity according to Badiou “is the real itself pure and simple, the sole subjective guarantee of the novelty of experiences.”<sup>106</sup> The we-subject, then, comes into being through the encounter with the real. Following Lacan, Badiou stresses that the real presents itself but it cannot be represented. Representation, as he shows in *Being and Event*, is the province of the State. Thus, it follows that the revolutionary we-subject caught up in the violence of fraternity cannot be represented by the State; it presents itself, illegitimately, through insurrections and demonstrations. For Badiou, the we-subject does not possess a proper place

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<sup>104</sup> Badiou, *Infinite Thought*, 96.

<sup>105</sup> Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (New York: Verso, 2001), 43.

<sup>106</sup> Badiou, *The Century*, 101.

assigned to it by the State; it manifests itself illegitimately through manifestation: “For any fraternity – and therefore for a we-subject in the process of being constituted – to demonstrate is to manifest itself. ... This is because the ‘we’ is ultimately nothing but the set of its demonstrations.”<sup>107</sup>

With regards to this discussion of fraternal violence, it is tempting to recall the old slogan from May '68: “Structures do not walk the streets.” Who, then, does walk the streets? According to Badiou’s analysis of fraternal violence, one is tempted to answer that it is the Real itself that presents itself during violent uprisings. Or, to be fair to Badiou, one could adopt the language of *Theory of the Subject* and claim that it is the subject, *as seized by the Real*, that courageously manifests its insubordination to the symbolic order. Despite the obvious unpalatability of this assertion from the perspective of Lacanian psychoanalysis, let us note that it presents a clear advancement over Freud’s *Group Psychology* inasmuch as it attempts to think revolutionary unrest in terms of the real and not just in terms of the imaginary. Badiou’s “passion for the real” that animates the We-Subject is a far cry from the Freudian “herd instinct” that prompts individuals to discharge aggressiveness through violence against the outsiders who threaten the imaginary totality of the group and, at the same time, keeps them enthralled in narcissistic identification with the leader.

Badiou’s disquisition on fraternal violence, however, runs the risk of embodying or substantializing the Real. Likewise, if one attempts to read Bataille’s *Contre-Attaque* texts in the light of Lacanian psychoanalysis, one can only think that “pure effervescence” of the agitated masses in the streets in terms of naïve Lacanian conception of *jouissance* qua fullness uncontaminated by the symbolic law. Indeed, Lacan himself proposes such a notion of *jouissance* in some of his early writings and seminars by locating it in the beyond-of-the-

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<sup>107</sup> Badiou, *The Century*, 107.

signifier. In his later seminars, however, he abandons this conception by insisting not only on the unrepresentability of the real within the symbolic network but also on the fact that the real does not persist as the “outside” of the symbolic but insists as its “intimate exterior.” Likewise, neither Badiou nor Bataille find themselves trapped in the impasses of naïve Lacanianism. As early as in *Theory of the Subject*, Badiou pinpoints the relationship between revolutionary practice and the psychoanalytic one as follows: “Marxism is the practical discourse for sustaining the subjective advent of a politics. What practice? I approve of the definition Lacan gives to praxis: ‘[...] It is the broadest term to designate a concerted human action, whatever it may be, which places man in a position to treat the real with the symbolic.’”<sup>108</sup> It is pointless to look for the pure manifestation of the real in demonstrations and violent uprisings, since it designates a hole or a lack, a point of inconsistency within the symbolic order; one can only “encircle” the real within the symbolic order itself. In his own way, Bataille seemed to have understood this when, after disbanding *Contre-Attaque* and *Acéphale*, he turned his attention away from war and revolution. This is not to say that he ever relinquished his “passion for the real,” but that he ceased to pursue it through his obsession with excessive violence. Instead, he became increasingly preoccupied with mysticism, meditation, and writing itself—a preoccupation that propelled him towards the limit-experience that afforded him the glimpse of the real qua the point of impasse in the symbolic structures of language. If there is any meaning to Bataille’s “inward turn,” it is to be found in his rigorous effort to theorize the Real-of-language.

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<sup>108</sup> Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, 129.

## II

### Reading Bataille with Deleuze and Guattari:

#### On Microfascism

Following the dissolution of a short-lived Contre-Attaque, Bataille had to confront a difficult question: What to do now after what he initially perceived as the event of mass uprising failed to produce a genuine change in the political situation? My reading of his manifestoes written during this period demonstrates that Bataille perceived mass movements as the only political force capable of resisting both the threat of fascism and the oppression of a capitalist state. At the heart of mass politics Bataille discerned the egalitarian axiom that consists in the acknowledgement of the fact that justice without equality is impossible. It is through the uncompromising demand for radical equality that the masses could accomplish the twofold goal of resisting fascism and overthrowing capitalism since the egalitarian principle is precisely what undermines classification of individuals on which both fascism and capitalism depends. The demand for equality exposes the relations between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, the bosses and the workers, the Germans and the Jews, and the Aryans and the non-Aryans as impossible non-relations constituting a cancerous disease that can only be eliminated through revolution.

Following Alain Badiou, one could say that equality is the proletarian potential latent in every situation; according to his ontological terms, the proletarian force functions as the void which exists in the situation as its constitutive exception, as the foreclosed real of the symbolic structure. It is only during the times of exceptional disorder that the void manifests itself as the demand for equality chanted by the masses in the streets. The manifestation of the void is nothing other than unraveling of the generic truth within the situation—the truth according to which every subject must be ordained to equality. Thus, unlike capitalism or fascism, a generic

political procedure declassifies individuals and addresses everyone. Denis Hollier argues that “Bataille’s Marxism may be a version of what he calls love for a mortal being.”<sup>109</sup> I take this reference to “a mortal being” to refer to a generic being, a being not classified in accordance with individual’s social class, economic status, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc. In this respect, both Bataille and Badiou adhere to the fundamental principle of Marxism which Bruno Bosteels articulates as follows: “Ultimately, politics is nothing if it is not the active organization of a generic equality, one possible name of which continues to be communism. Indeed, with the notion of the generic, which according to Badiou, is the most important conceptual contribution of *Being and Event*, we finally come back to Marx. It is, after all, he who, in the posthumous *Manuscripts of 1844* and the *Grundrisse*, speaks of the possibility of the human as a generic species-being.”<sup>110</sup> For Bataille, the agent of this generic truth is the heterogeneous proletariat—the genuine political subject capable of actualizing the idea of equality through revolt and destruction. The problem, at the time, consisted in motivating the working class to undergo subjectivation and become this agent capable of sacrificing its particular class interests in the name of the universal communist idea.

Unfortunately for Bataille, *Contre-Attaque* lasted only eighteenth months and, along with its dissolution, Bataille’s hopes for the mass movement’s capacity to overcome fascism and capitalism faded away. Bataille’s exasperation with the failure of mass politics and his anxiety about the uncertain times lying ahead are reflected in the collectively-signed “Declaration” of the newly-founded Collège de Sociologie, which was published in November 1938:

The College of Sociology regards the general absence of intense reaction in the face of war as a sign of man’s *devirilization*. It does not hesitate to see the cause of this in the relaxation of society’s current ties, which are practically nonexistent as a result of the development of bourgeois individualism. There is no love lost in its condemnation of the

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<sup>109</sup> Denis Hollier, “Bataille’s Tomb: A Halloween Story,” trans. Richard Miller, *October* 33 (Summer 1985): 94.

<sup>110</sup> Bruno Bosteels, *Badiou and Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 32.

effect: men who are so alone, *so deprived of destiny*, that they find themselves absolutely defenseless when faced with the possibility of death, who, having no profound reasons to fight, find themselves inevitably cowards in the face of battle, no matter what battle – some sort of conscious sheep resigned to the slaughterhouse.<sup>111</sup>

No longer marked by enthusiasm and optimism at the sight of rioting masses, this declaration shows not a glimmer of faith in the possibility of the masses entering on the path of proletarian subjectivation. At this point, Bataille's proximity to Badiou is particularly striking: an individual unwilling to sacrifice his comforting illusion of security for the sake of the communist idea and to respond courageously to the proletarian call of "Destroy, he says!" is not the subject of politics, but only a human animal, a "conscious sheep" lacking the motivation to combat injustice.

To be sure, even at the time of his engagement with Contre-Attaque, Bataille never let himself be completely carried away by the optimistic view of the masses. His novel *Blue of Noon*, composed at the beginning of 1935, is marked by a decidedly bleaker tone when compared to the declarations of Contre-Attaque, which were written with the purpose of agitating the workers. Much ink has been spent on the relationship between the novel's protagonist Troppmann, who is said to stand in for Bataille himself, and Lazare who evidently represents Simone Weil. Indeed Bataille's characterization of Lazare reflects his ambivalent feelings towards Weil. On the one hand, he clearly admires her enthusiastic commitment to the revolutionary cause, for Lazare is a true militant subject who does not hesitate to sacrifice her well-being in the process of the anti-capitalist struggle. On the other hand, he finds himself repelled by her asexual nature, her morose asceticism and commitment to virtue. Few commentators, however, highlight the significance of Lazare's stepfather, Antoine Melou, a militant who teaches philosophy in a country lycée. It is precisely Melou who gives voice to the

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<sup>111</sup> Georges Bataille et al, "Declaration of the College of Sociology on the International Crisis," in *The College of Sociology (1937-39)*, ed. Denis Hollier, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 45.

very real dilemma faced by Bataille at the time. While acknowledging the hopelessness of the situation—the imminent danger of fascist forces and the unwavering power of capital—Melou articulates the necessity of deciding between, on the one hand, a resigned acceptance of this state of affairs and, on the other, a suicidal act through which the revolutionary subject expends itself in one final battle against fascism and capitalism: “Monsieur Melou went right on, articulating in professorial tones the ‘agonizing dilemma’ that confronted the intellectual world in this deplorable age. (According to him, it was a misfortune for anyone gifted with intelligence to be alive just now.) Straining his brow into folds, he declared, ‘Should we wrap ourselves in silence? Should we, on the contrary, bestow our help on the workers as they make their last stand, thereby dooming ourselves to an inescapable and fruitless death?’”<sup>112</sup> Troppmann’s (and, by extension, Bataille’s) ambivalence towards this character is evident throughout: although he feels “unimaginable compassion” while bidding farewell to Melou, the latter’s pompous presentation makes him sick and exhausted. Filled with nausea, he even rudely interrupts the speech with “Why should I give a damn?” Reflecting Bataille’s own distaste for organized form of politics and his refusal to join the French Communist Party, the protagonist of *Blue of Noon* questions Melou’s and Lazare’s leftist politics in the face of the apparent triumph of the right: “All the same, there’s one thing I’d like to know. If the working classes are done for, why are you both Communists, or socialists, or whatever?”<sup>113</sup> To which Melou replies: “Things have come to this. We’re like a farmer working his land before the storm, walking down his fields with lowered head, knowing that the hail is bound to fall ... And then, as the moment approaches, standing in front of his harvest, he draws himself erect and, as I am now doing’ – with no transition, this ludicrous, laughable character became noble: that frail void, that slick voice of his was imbued

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<sup>112</sup> Georges Bataille, *Blue of Noon*, trans. Harry Mathews (London and New York: Marion Boyars, 1986), 47.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

with ice – ‘he pointlessly raises his arms to heaven, waiting for the lighting to strike him – him, and his arms. . . .’<sup>114</sup> Although Bataille evidently mocks the tragicomic pathos of Melou’s declarations, the dilemma articulated by this clownish militant was undoubtedly relevant to Contre-Attaque’s enterprise and it remained central to Bataille’s thought even after the organization’s demise. One must recall that, in the speech given in November of 1935, shortly after the completion of *Blue of Noon*, Bataille himself opts for one of the alternatives voiced by his character when he demands that intellectuals support mass politics and place their faith in unplanned uprisings staged by the revolutionary crowds in the streets.

Bataille’s political enthusiasm displayed in “Popular Front in the Street” stands in stark contrast with the bleak outlook of *Blue of Noon*. Indeed, it appears to contradict Hollier’s assertion that “[a]ll the political texts written by Bataille in this period (which was also the most intensely politicized period of his life) take as given the immanent victory of a fascism. . . They do not try to avoid that inevitability or to delay its arrival.”<sup>115</sup> The question thus arises: if Bataille was so sure of the left’s impotence in the face of an encroaching fascism, why did he maintain that “only this ocean of men in revolt can save the world from the nightmare of impotence and carnage in which it sinks!”<sup>116</sup> Hollier supplies an answer to this question when he notes that Bataille’s concern lay with the proper *attitude* that the revolutionary left must accept in the face of imminent catastrophe. If the left must perish, it must perish well—that is to say, in the sovereign manner. Bataille recognizes the impossibility of stopping the impending disaster, “[y]et at the same time he views this ‘lack of a way out’ as a unique opportunity being offered the revolutionary conscience to take on a Don Juanesque dimension, in other words, as an

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>115</sup> Hollier, “Bataille’s Tomb,” 88.

<sup>116</sup> Georges Bataille, “Popular Front in the Street,” in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. and trans. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 168.



opportunity for a despairing Marxism, suddenly permeable to the tragic, to accede to what Bataille was shortly to term joy in the face of death.”<sup>117</sup>

What Hollier calls a “Don Juanesque dimension” refers to a properly ethical attitude which cannot be detached from Bataille’s thought of sovereignty. The tragic experience in the face of death—the experience of despair suddenly transformed into euphoria—invokes Žižek’s description of the ethical act. Incidentally, Žižek illustrates the conception of ethical act with reference to the story of Don Juan: “Don Giovanni persists in his libertine attitude at the very moment when he knows very well that what awaits him is *only* the gallows and none of the satisfactions. That is to say, from the standpoint of pathological interests, the thing to do would be to accomplish the formal gesture of penitence: Don Giovanni knows that death is close, so that by atoning for his deeds he stands to lose nothing, only to gain (i.e. to save himself from posthumous torments), and yet ‘on principle’ he chooses to persist in his defiant stance of the libertine.”<sup>118</sup> Similarly, Bataille knows that the triumph of fascism is close yet he chooses to persist in his Don Juanesque attitude of supporting the workers and advocating for a properly virile response to the encroaching catastrophe. In other words, he embraces the very position chosen by Melou from *Blue of Noon*: to offer unconditional support to the revolutionary masses as they take their last stand in the streets. If one must lose in the revolutionary struggle, one ought to lose well, in the sovereign way—that is to say, to die in the state of exaltation while fighting against the State instead of gradually succumbing to demise like “conscious sheep resigned to the slaughterhouse.”<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Hollier, “Bataille’s Tomb,” 89.

<sup>118</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 96.

<sup>119</sup> To use a somewhat Heideggerian formulation, one could say that, for Bataille, dying in the sovereign fashion means dying like a human being rather than perishing like an animal.

Just as, for Badiou, the collective subject who embraces revolutionary terror experiences passion for the real, for Bataille, the revolutionary masses who combat superior forces of the State while laughing in the face of death experience the sacred impulse. “The revolutionary impulse of the proletarian masses is, moreover, sometimes implicitly and sometimes openly treated as sacred, and that is why it is possible to use the word *Revolution* entirely stripped of its utilitarian meaning without, however, giving it an idealist meaning.”<sup>120</sup> For Bataille and his associates who founded the Collège de Sociologie in 1937, the sacred impulse is precisely lacking in modern society leading to servile resignation, absence of solidarity, and inability to revolt. For this reason, the rioting masses that crowded the streets in February of 1934 appeared to Bataille as a rare event. Joining the masses in revolt, therefore, was less a matter of pursuing a utilitarian goal than sharing their sacred impulse. Indeed, as Hollier suggests, Bataille’s ambition at the time of Collège’s activity amounts to nothing less than a resacralization of society. What is at stake in this political stance (I hesitate to say ‘project’ since it presupposes all the planning and calculation that is abhorrent to Bataille), as I have tried to show in the previous chapter, is the formation of revolutionary community, the composition of the We-Subject. Yet, experience proved that, apart from a few isolated events, the masses do not possess enough motivation to relinquish their individual interests and enter into the process of proletarian subjectivation. Following the dissolution of Contre-Attaque, Bataille finds no more causes for the kind of political enthusiasm that once prompted him to write “Popular Front in the Street.” The problem then becomes: What can the militant intellectual do when he loses the option of supporting the masses, when the masses refuse to respond to his militant declaration? Here, one is tempted to follow Susan Suleiman’s hypothesis and argue that Bataille underwent the inward turn and

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<sup>120</sup> Georges Bataille, “The Use Value of D.A.F. de Sade,” in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. and trans. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 100.

completely relinquished his hopes for the formation of a community of militants opting instead for sovereign solitude. In the following chapter, I will address the consequences of this hypothesis and examine those texts in which Bataille appears to call for a retreat into silence and solitude, thus offering his own version of what Foucault calls “the tragic vision of madness.”

Bataille’s intellectual itinerary, however, is more complicated than this hypothesis allows for; the inward turn in question, therefore, must be approached not as a single rupture but as a series of developments. In truth, Bataille, as Jean-Luc Nancy insists, never stopped thinking the question of community. Indeed, shortly after disbanding *Contre-Attaque*, Bataille declared in a speech delivered to the members of *Acéphale*, a secret society to which he belonged: “Amidst the current decomposition, it can only be a question, effectively, of rediscovering the conditions of affective communal life through arbitrary decisions or by being elevated by inspiration.”<sup>121</sup> Thus, following Allen Weiss’s suggestion, one must acknowledge Bataille’s remarkable consistency insofar as the idea of community never ceased exerting its force on his thought while addressing the development, a kind of alteration in scope, that his vision of community underwent: “Note that the community in question diminishes from that of a heterogeneous proletariat in *Contre-attaque* to the secret community of *Acéphale*, finally to the isolation of the inner experience, where Bataille is in community with Nietzsche himself as described in the texts of *La somme atheologique*.”<sup>122</sup>

In 1937, the model of secret society exemplified by *Acéphale* appears to present an obvious solution to the dilemma faced by Bataille after he had witnessed the Popular Front’s failure in resisting fascism. The crux of the problem can, once again, be articulated in terms of

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<sup>121</sup> Georges Bataille, “What We Have Undertaken...”, in *The Obsessions of Georges Bataille: Community and Communication*, ed. Andrew J. Mitchell and Jason Kemp Winfree (Albany: SUNY Press, 2009), 190.

<sup>122</sup> Allen S. Weiss, “Impossible Sovereignty: Between ‘The Will to Power’ and ‘The Will to Chance,’” *October* 36 (Spring 1986), 132n4.

*motivation*. After the demise of Contre-Attaque, Bataille no longer faced the option of giving his full support to a mass movement simply because the masses lacked sufficient motivation to enter into the composition of the militant We-Subject and to fully commit to the anti-capitalist struggle. Instead of accepting resignation, however, Bataille embraced the principle of elective community which presupposed a tightly bound unit of *motivated* individuals committed to the same set of goals. One can thus see that a turn from mass movements to secret societies does not constitute a turn away from socialization and the affirmation of solitude and silence. While a secret society presupposes a subtraction from a larger social body, it simultaneously implies a constitution of community bound by a more powerful principle of socialization. Hollier articulates this point quite forcefully: “Caillois reminds us that sect and society share the same etymology. ‘One only unites through severance,’ he says. Here secession no longer has anything to do with loosening the social ties. Quite the contrary, it is inspired by a desire for ‘oversocialization.’”<sup>123</sup>

One must also note that, at this point in his intellectual career, Bataille’s political thought departs from Badiouian generic communism precisely because his texts delivered at the Collège call for a type of elective community that privileges consistency and oneness particular to tightly bound social units. For Badiou, however, it is not enough for a militant group to subtract itself from the state; to constitute a finite fragment of the infinite communist idea, it must also be unbound or split from within: “Thus, the communists embody the unbound multiplicity of consciousness, its anticipatory aspect, and therefore the precariousness of the bond, rather than its firmness.”<sup>124</sup> One could formulate the difference between the two thinkers by noting that Badiou’s dialectical principle stipulates that “One divide into Two,” whereas Bataille’s

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<sup>123</sup> Denis Hollier, “Mimesis and Castration 1937,” trans. William Rodarmor, *October* 31 (Winter 1984):14.

<sup>124</sup> Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics*, trans. Jason Barker (London and New York: Verso), 74-5.

communitarian principle demands that “Two fuse into One.” Hollier’s articulation of this principle provides a particularly striking evidence for the College’s renunciation of generic communism: “A thick front had to be set up with no gaps or cracks, with nothing missing, nothing different, no solitary dreams, rather a homogeneous and compact body that was completely present and active.”<sup>125</sup> Bataille’s model of secret society deviates from generic communism because it renounced the egalitarian axiom by erecting a new type of hierarchy. By definition, a secret society must expunge differences and thus guard itself against unbinding by shutting its doors to the general public while welcoming a select few who completely adhere to its ideals.

Now, apart from the obvious concern with unity and motivation, Bataille had another reason for giving up his faith in mass movements and embarking on an investigation of the subversive potential of secret societies. Jean-Michel Besnier hints at this reason when he argues that the Contre-Attaque exposed “its militants to the trap against which they fought.”<sup>126</sup> This trap is fascism. Much has been written on the topic of Bataille coming dangerously close to embracing fascism in his Contre-Attaque writings. The very term ‘sur-fascism’ (invented by Jean Dautry to describe the politics of Contre-Attaque) is troubling enough to confirm the worst suspicions of the group’s critics as is Bataille’s declared aim of fighting fascism with its own weapons. These weapons of fascism were designed precisely to motivate the masses, to arouse their emotions and awaken the passion of the real, even at the cost of ensuing violence and destruction. The masses in revolt, which fascinated Bataille at the time, unsurprisingly reminded Contre-Attaque’s critics of the angry mob that the fascists were so adept at manipulating. As

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<sup>125</sup> Denis Hollier, “Foreword: Collage,” in *The College of Sociology* (1937-39), ed. Denis Hollier, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), xvii.

<sup>126</sup> Jean-Michel Besnier, “Georges Bataille in the 1930s: A Politics of the Impossible,” trans. Amy Reid, *Yale French Studies* 78 (1990): 180.

Susan Suleiman puts it: “Marxists had to recognize that the street was not only the place of socialist revolution leading toward a new dawn, but the place of Nazi marches and torchlight parades, exploding the darkest human longings for violence, war and death.”<sup>127</sup> In the previous chapter, I already addressed this criticism by arguing that violence and destruction do not constitute an adequate criterion for lumping fascism and emancipatory revolutionary politics into the same category. Thus, I attempted to show that the Contre-Attaque group avoided the risk of succumbing to the lure of fascism by embracing the egalitarian axiom—that is to say, by resisting the customary classification of individuals presupposed by fascist politics. In the present chapter, I intend to argue that it is precisely at the moment when Bataille was most preoccupied with resisting the lure of fascism by means of embracing the secrecy of *Acéphale* and thus exiting the public sphere of organized politics altogether, that he came closest to the risk he wished to elude.

### **Bataille and Schizoanalysis**

In order to accomplish this task, I intend to suspend the interpretive gesture of reading Bataille with Badiou and borrow my conceptual tools from two thinkers particularly concerned with safeguarding emancipatory political thought from the vestiges of fascism, namely Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. According to Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari’s analysis of fascism is absolutely central to understanding *Anti-Oedipus*, the first installment of their two-volume work, *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*: “How does one keep from being fascist, even (especially) when one believes oneself to be a revolutionary militant? How do we rid our speech and our acts, our hearts and our pleasures, of fascism? How do we ferret out the fascism that is ingrained in our behavior? The Christian moralists sought out the traces of the flesh lodged deep within the soul.

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<sup>127</sup> Susan Rubin Suleiman, “Bataille in the Street: The Search for Virility in the 1930s,” in *Bataille: Writing the Sacred*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 27

Deleuze and Guattari, for their part, pursue the slightest traces of fascism in the body.”<sup>128</sup>

Deleuze and Guattari continued their investigation of fascism (albeit from a dramatically different perspective) in *A Thousand Plateaus*, and it is to this second volume of *Capitalism Schizophrenia* that I turn for a precise articulation of the problem that confronted Bataille after the disbanding of Contre-Attaque: “Leftist organizations will not be the last to secrete microfascisms. It’s too easy to be antifascist on the molar level, and not even see the fascist inside you, the fascist you yourself sustain and cherish with molecules both personal and collective.”<sup>129</sup> It is surprising, indeed, that numerous critiques of Bataille’s alleged proto-fascism or *sur-fascism* tend to bypass a schizoanalytical approach to Bataillean politics. In particular, Bataille’s writings from the Collège de Sociologie period supply a fascinating case study for testing the efficacy of the micropolitical method developed by Deleuze and Guattari to discern the presence of microfascism in the practice of everyday life.

Before examining in detail the definition of microfascism, it should be useful to first address the distinction between macropolitics and micropolitics. In a crucial passage, Deleuze and Guattari associate the former with rigid segmentarization and the latter with flows and lines of flight. “Beneath the self-reproduction of classes, there is always a variable map of masses. Politics operates by macrodecisions and binary choices, binarized interests; but the realm of the decidable remains very slim. Political decision making necessarily descends into a world of microdeterminations, attractions, and desires, which it must sound out or evaluate in different fashion. Beneath linear conceptions and segmentary decisions, an evaluation of flows and their

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<sup>128</sup> Michel Foucault, preface to *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), xiii.

<sup>129</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 215.

quanta.”<sup>130</sup> There is a curious proximity to Badiou here: macropolitics refers to the point of view of the state—that is to say, it assesses the situation with reference to established categories that classify (or count) individuals and collectives as representatives of particular classes, social groups, or ethnicities. In its properly macropolitical mode, the state relies on rigid segmentation; it segments the masses into recognizable classes, demographic groups, ethnic minorities, gendered identities, and the like. Microdeterminations, however, resist such rigid segmentarization and elude the statist perspective. Thus, while macropolitics can only discern the workers (who can be counted, whose interests can be represented, etc.), micropolitics also takes into account the proletarian force, the force that cannot be measured by the state inasmuch as it cuts across various social groups and classes. One ought to recall Peter Hallward’s comparison between the proletariat and the void scattered everywhere in the situation.<sup>131</sup> Could one not claim, from the Deleuzian-Guattarian perspective, that the proletariat can be apprehended only from the micropolitical point of view as occupying the line of flight?

Thus, Deleuze and Guattari identify macropolitics (which operates in accordance with macrodecisions, binary oppositions, and determinable interests) with politics in general, politics as we know it. Like Badiou, they propose the concept of the event – “a microscopic event [that] upsets the local balance of power” – which, they argue, is imperceptible from the macropolitical perspective but which nonetheless has the capacity to disrupt politics as we know it. As in Badiou’s philosophy, the event in *A Thousand Plateaus* is defined as incalculable or unaccountable. In the case of May 1968, for example, no macrodecisions were made because no single political leader or organization decided that the time was ripe to organize the masses and initiate the revolt. That is why, Deleuze and Guattari, argue, most traditional political thinkers on

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 221.

<sup>131</sup> Peter Hallward, *Badiou: A Subject to Truth* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 118-9.



the left were utterly baffled by this event: “May 1968 in France was molecular, making what led up to it all the more imperceptible from the viewpoint of macropolitics . . . those who evaluated things in macropolitical terms understood nothing of the event because something unaccountable was escaping.”<sup>132</sup> In light of this argument, it comes as no surprise that various commentators hesitate to treat Deleuze and Guattari as political thinkers insofar as, in accordance with their own admission, politics involves the macropolitical perspective and thus requires a certain decisionism, a will to think in terms of binary oppositions: “Good or bad, politics and its judgements are always molar, but it is the molecular and its assessment that makes it or breaks it.”<sup>133</sup> Nonetheless, once one agrees that politics do not amount to determining prescriptions, making calculated decisions, and predicting their outcomes, then, perhaps, one can approach Deleuze and Guattari as political thinkers. Indeed, from the Badiouian perspective, their conception of the molecular event qualifies as political insofar as the event breaks with the established state of affairs and produces something new and unaccountable. Ultimately, micropolitics is still politics even though it breaks with politics as we know it: “In short everything is political, but every politics is simultaneously a macropolitics and a micropolitics.”<sup>134</sup> Deleuze and Guattari can thus be approached as political thinkers under the proviso that their work goes against the grain of the macropolitical perspective and elaborates a distinctly micropolitical approach: “From the viewpoint of micropolitics, a society is defined by its lines of flight, which are molecular. There is always something that flows or flees, that

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 216.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 222. For an exemplary commentary on Deleuze and Guattari’s work that questions its status as political philosophy see Paul Patton, *Deleuze and the Political* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 9. Patton argues that “*A Thousand Plateaus* is not political philosophy in the sense that it provides tools for the justification or critique of political institutions and processes. Rather, it is a political ontology that provides tools to describe transformative, creative or deterritorialising forces and movements.”

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 213.

escapes the binary organizations, the resonance apparatus, and the overcoding machine.”<sup>135</sup> Just as for Badiou, the count-as-one necessarily fails to safeguard against the inconsistencies in the situation, so does the overcoding machine necessarily falter in the process of containing the molecular lines of flight in the framework of *A Thousand Plateaus*.

It is worthwhile to dwell on the assertion that every form of politics has a macropolitical as well as a micropolitical aspect to it: it suggests that, as much as the state apparatus needs to survey its territory from the macropolitical point of view, it still relies on the micropolitical dimension. Indeed, the State does not need to maintain a strictly negative relation to supple segmentarity, constantly trying to suppress the molecular lines which are perpetually evading its grasp. On the contrary, the State can manipulate the molecular flows to its advantage thereby strengthening its position or even succeeding in becoming totalitarian just as the fascist state comes into being with the aid of microfascist forces. At this point, I am prepared to clarify the opposition between microfascisms operating on a molecular level and fascism proper that belongs to a molar regime. To paraphrase the line from *A Thousand Plateaus* already cited above, one could say that it is not enough to affirm one’s anti-fascism on the level of the molar regime, for to do so would amount to restricting oneself to the macropolitical perspective. For instance, an individual could claim to be opposed to fascism solely because he/she is a registered democrat. This would amount to taking cover under one of the recognizable identities constituted vis-à-vis a molar or rigid line of segmentarity – the type of identity that has place within what Deleuze and Guattari call State geometry. In spite of possessing the type of identity that seemingly precludes any possible predilection towards fascism, however, a given individual (an individual who calls him/herself a ‘democrat’ for instance) may harbor microfascist tendencies within. It is precisely this microfascist tendency that cannot be accounted for or anticipated

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 216.

through a reference to determinate identities; it is what escapes the grasp of macropolitics. Let us take another more concrete example, that of politically-charged talk radio. Obviously, not a single recognizable exponent of contemporary American talk radio lays a claim to being a fascist. On the contrary, the term ‘fascist’ functions as one of the worst imaginable insults which such radio personalities as Glenn Beck and Michael Savage do not hesitate to hurl at supporters of health care reform, exponents of liberal media and so on. This openly declared anti-fascist stance, however, does not prevent many radio hosts from engaging in hate speech, promoting violence, and making openly racist jokes.<sup>136</sup> If there is any fascism in such hate-fueled radio shows, it can only be diagnosed from the perspective of micropolitics—the task that Deleuze and Guattari set out to accomplish:

We would even say that fascism implies a molecular regime that is distinct both from molar segments and their centralization. Doubtless, fascism invented the concept of the totalitarian State, but there is no reason to define fascism by a concept of its own devising: there are totalitarian States, of the Stalinist or military dictatorship type, that are not fascist. The concept of the totalitarian State applies only at the macropolitical level, to a rigid segmentarity and a particular mode of totalization and centralization. But fascism is inseparable from a proliferation of molecular focuses in interaction, which skip from point to point, *before* beginning to resonate together in the National Socialist State. Rural fascism and city or neighborhood fascism, youth fascism and war veteran’s fascism, fascism of the Left and fascism of the Right, fascism of the couple, family, school, and office: every fascism is defined by a micro-black hole that stands on its own and communicates with the others, before resonating in a great, generalized central black hole.<sup>137</sup>

One’s microfascism, in other words, is not strictly dependent upon one’s political identity or one’s declared ideological position. The same goes for collectivities and even states: it is not enough for the state to affirm its allegiance to socialist or liberal political doctrine to safeguard

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<sup>136</sup> This is not to say that, unlike conservatives, liberals are completely immune to the temptations of microfascism. While ostensibly committed to the struggle against racism and opposed to all forms of discrimination, liberal-leaning individuals can easily forget about political correctness when it comes to demonization of Christian working-class people from economically disadvantaged communities simply because the latter support socially conservative policies and allow their religious beliefs to guide their electoral choices.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 214

against the microfascist tendencies inherent in its politics. Likewise, the state cannot simply declare its official support for fascism and then to ‘interpellate’ the entire social body by means of some magical ideological operation. Thus, it would be a mistake to assert that fascism can flourish only in totalitarian states since, as Deleuze and Guattari maintain, it relies on molecular flows. The agent of molecular transformation that makes the emergence of fascism possible is a war machine which does not serve the State but, on the contrary, takes over the State:

This brings us back to the paradox of fascism, and the way in which fascism differs from totalitarianism. For totalitarianism is a State affair: it essentially concerns the relation between the State as a localized assemblage and the abstract machine of overcoding it effectuates. Even in the case of a military dictatorship, it is a State army, not a war machine, that takes power and elevates the State to the totalitarian stage. Totalitarianism is quintessentially conservative. Fascism, on the other hand, involves a war machine. When fascism builds itself a totalitarian State, it is not in the sense of the State seizing power by force, but of a war machine taking over the State. A bizarre remark by Virilio puts us on the trail: in fascism, the State is far less totalitarian than it is *suicidal*. There is in fascism a realized nihilism. Unlike the totalitarian State, which does its utmost to seal all possible lines of flight, fascism is constructed on an intense line of flight, which it transforms into a line of pure destruction and abolition.<sup>138</sup>

Even before clarifying the meanings behind the notion of a war-machine, one can immediately pinpoint the difference between Deleuze and Guattari’s definition of fascism in *Anti-Oedipus* and of that found in *A Thousand Plateaus*. Whereas the former text considered fascism as a kind of stasis or fixation of desire, the latter work identifies it with desire’s intensification (or acceleration) and emphasizes its dependence on molecular flows and lines of flight. Furthermore, as John Protevi suggests, the second volume of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* introduces a nuanced distinction between microfascism, the fascist totalitarian state, and the suicidal state. “Micro-fascism is the persistence of disciplinary subjectivity in a modulated control society: ‘little command centres’ proliferate everywhere, making coaches, teachers and cops all little Mussolinis. Suicidal state fascism is distinguished from organic totalitarianism by its having

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 230.

made deterritorialization itself into its goal. Instead of a massive resonating state, a huge organized totalitarian body politic, suicidal fascism is the appropriation of a state by a war-machine that has made war itself into its goal.”<sup>139</sup> It is possible to further clarify these distinctions by relating it to the difference between molecular flows (or fluxes) and lines of flight. It is rather easy to confuse the two notions since Deleuze and Guattari frequently attribute the same characteristics to them: both disturb the great binary machines, induce deterritorialization and trace another (molecular) line in between the (molar) segments. Nonetheless, in one of his dialogues with Claire Parnet, Deleuze insists on this distinction by endowing molecular fluxes with the capacity to induce micro-becomings while attributing to the lines of flight the power to effect genuine ruptures (or events). Thus, while molecular lines (or flows) and lines of flight must both be considered as agents of deterritorialization, the former notion refers relative deterritorialization and the latter to absolute deterritorialization. Whereas molecular fluxes cross thresholds and “trace out little modifications,” becomings or micro-becomings, in a given group or collective, the lines of flight cross an ‘absolute’ threshold and turn ‘everyone’ into a becoming.<sup>140</sup>

What is a war machine then? Out of the three lines described above, it is the line of flight that the war machine belongs to (“there is always something like a *war machine* functioning on these lines.”) Deleuze and Guattari write that “it seems to be irreducible to the State apparatus, to be outside its sovereignty and prior to its law: it comes from elsewhere.”<sup>141</sup> This formulation suggests that a war-machine can only be apprehended from the micropolitical standpoint insofar as it is not subject to the law of the state. Apart from stressing this crucial feature, however,

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<sup>139</sup> John Protevi, *Political Physics: Deleuze, Derrida, and the Body Politic* (London: Continuum, 2001), 194-5.

<sup>140</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, “Many Politics,” in *Dialogues II*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 124.

<sup>141</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 352.

Deleuze and Guattari insist that this concept is not an easy one to define insofar as it possesses a whole range of meanings. Following Nietzsche, Deleuze once famously claimed that “[a] thing has as many senses as there are forces capable of taking possession of it.”<sup>142</sup> Now, if one believes Eugene Holland’s reading of *A Thousand Plateaus*, the concept of war machine has no less than six different senses each of which is defined with reference to aim, object, space and form-of-sociality of the concept.<sup>143</sup> It is particularly important to note that each of its senses depends on the unique relationship that the war-machine maintains with the State—the relationship which can be conceived of as the interaction between forces in the precise Nietzschean sense. Thus, in spite of its heterogeneity with respect to the State, the war machine can be captured by the State or, on the contrary, it itself can take possession of the State apparatus. “*The State has no war machine of its own; it can only appropriate one in the form of a military institution, one that will continually cause it problems. This explains the mistrust States have toward their military institutions, in that the military institution inherits an extrinsic war machine.*”<sup>144</sup> As Deleuze and Guattari suggest, the two seemingly conflicting occurrences—the State capturing the war machine and the war machine taking over the State—constitute two sides of the same process. While the war machine may aid the State in attaining its goals, it not only remains insubordinate to statist aims but also continually threatens to disrupt established power arrangements. A perfect illustration of the Deleuzian-Guattarian thesis can be found Klaus Theweleit’s study of fascism, *Male Fantasies*, which focuses on the Freikorps, German paramilitary units which sprang up after the 1918 Armistice between Germany and the Allies and were composed primarily of soldiers and officers returned from World War I. As Theweleit points out, the Weimar

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<sup>142</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 4.

<sup>143</sup> Eugene W. Holland, “Schizoanalysis, Nomadology, Fascism,” in *Deleuze and Politics*, ed. Ian Buchanan and Nicholas Thoburn (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 80.

<sup>144</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 355.

government tolerated the egregious crimes committed by the Freikorps as long as the latter assisted in promoting the ideology of ethnic cleansing and defending the nation from the threat of communism. The situation changed in 1920 when the Freikorps attempted an unsuccessful coup d'état known as the Kapp Putsch: “The forces of right-wing nationalism – the ‘incurable militarists’ who had always been acceptable to Weimar governments when it came to ‘protecting’ the ‘republic’ against the Left – could thus be publicly denounced without fear of retribution.”<sup>145</sup>

In delineating the antagonistic relationship between the fascistic war machine and the totalitarian State, Deleuze and Guattari hold fast to the fundamental principle informing the analyses found in both volumes of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*: there can be no deterritorialization without attendant reterritorialization and vice versa. Thus, in order to consolidate its power, the State must rely on the war-machine and appropriate microfascist flows which eventually come to resonate together in the totalitarian state. In its totalitarian form, the fascist state aims to contain or block the proliferation of all possible lines of flight. Ultimately, however, Deleuze and Guattari do not find the concept of totalitarianism to be particularly useful in accounting for the emergence of fascism: “The concept of the totalitarian State applies only at the macropolitical level, to a rigid segmentarity and a particular mode of totalization and centralization.”<sup>146</sup> In fact, even the totalitarian fascist state must rely on molecular flows that infuse every type of social formation and account for the proliferation of all sorts of local microfascisms (fascism of educators, of factory workers, of the priests, etc.). Hence, Deleuze and Guattari’s appreciation of the following line from Paul Virilio: “It was in the horror of daily life and its environment that Hitler finally found his surest means of governing, the legitimation of

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<sup>145</sup> Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies volume 1: Women, Floods, Bodies, History*, trans. Stephen Conway (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 21.

<sup>146</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 214.

his policies and military strategy.”<sup>147</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, however, go further when they insist that, while the State may capture the war machine external to it and reterritorialize its movements, it cannot maintain complete control over its unruly force which continually threatens to destabilize its apparatus of capture. This is what they mean by asserting that the totalitarian State implies a certain conservatism, which consists in keeping molecular forces in check, whereas the fascist war machine deterritorializes the State’s arrangement of social space by accelerating the lines of flight. The State becomes suicidal precisely when the fascist war machine takes over the State completely; at this moment, the State accepts absolute deterritorialization as its mission even if it brings about its own self-destruction.

How does it all relate to Bataille and his transition from an engagement with mass politics in the streets to an exploration of the subversive potential of secret societies? I would like to argue that, as early as in “The Psychological Structure of Fascism” (1933-4), Bataille developed a uniquely micropolitical approach to analysis of fascism. Given the title of Bataille’s essay, my claim may appear far-fetched: Do Deleuze and Guattari not strive to avoid psychological explanations? Do they not explicitly reproach psychoanalysis for its alleged ‘Oedipalization’ of desire? Nonetheless, if one refrains from the temptation to dwell on Deleuze and Guattari’s well-known antipathy towards psychoanalysis in order to reassert the disciplinary divide separating philosophy from psychology, one can easily see that Deleuze and Guattari’s schizoanalysis and Bataille’s psychological assessment both bypass conventional (that is to say, macropolitical) approaches to fascism and concur on the conclusion articulated in *Anti-Oedipus*: “Hitler got the fascists sexually aroused.”<sup>148</sup> Indeed, Bataille’s essay aims to answer the crucial question raised in both volumes of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*: How do molecular flows that

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 231.

<sup>148</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 293.



Deleuze and Guattari call ‘microfascisms’ acquire power to penetrate every cell of society? Much like Deleuze and Guattari, Bataille does not attempt to answer this question by examining the policies that the State imposes on the masses from above, but by turning attention to the masses’ desire—the desire that seeks its own repression. As opposed to the macropolitical perspective, only micropolitical analysis—that is to say, political analysis operating at the molecular level—involves such a questioning of the desiring masses’ susceptibility to the appeal of fascist leaders.

Why does desire desire its own repression, how can it desire its own repression? The masses certainly do not passively submit to power; nor do they ‘want’ to be repressed, in a kind of masochistic hysteria; nor are they tricked by an ideological lure. Desire is never separable from complex assemblages that tie into molecular levels, from microformations already shaping postures, attitudes, perceptions, expectations, semiotic systems, etc. Desire is never an undifferentiated instinctual energy, but itself results from a highly developed, engineered setup rich in interactions: a whole supple segmentarity that processes molecular energies and potentially gives desire a fascist determination.<sup>149</sup>

The molecular energies in question possess an affective dimension discernible on the level of supple segmentarity. If fascism presupposes a kind of acceleration of desire, as I have noted earlier, this is because the fascist war machine extracts affects from the molecular plane and brings them together on the line of flight.<sup>150</sup> In *Dialogues*, Deleuze argues that the line of flight “combines all the movements of deterritorialization, precipitates their quanta, tears from them the accelerated particles which come into contact with one another, carries them on to a plane of consistence or a mutating machine.”<sup>151</sup> He goes on to clarify that, whereas rigid segmentarity presupposes a *plane of organization*, supple segmentarity implies a *plane of consistence or of*

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<sup>149</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 215.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 356. Deleuze and Guattari stress that “feelings become uprooted from the interiority of a ‘subject,’ to be projected violently outward into a milieu of pure exteriority that lends them an incredible velocity, a catapulting force: love or hate, they are no longer feelings but affects. And these affects are so many instances of the becoming-woman, the becoming-animal of the warrior (the bear, she-dogs). Affects transpierce the body like arrows, they are weapons of war. The deterritorialization velocity of affect.”

<sup>151</sup> Deleuze and Parnet, *Dialogues II*, 136.

*immanence* which extracts affects from subjects while carrying out transformations in these subjects.

On this point, Deleuze and Bataille share a number of striking similarities. As Michèle Richman argues, Bataille's psychological analysis owes less to Freud than to Emile Durkheim whose sociological method "envisions the social as a field of *mouvements d'ensemble*, energies that emerge in moments of effervescence, consolidate into groups, and effect transformations upon the psyche of social subjects."<sup>152</sup> This proposition can be translated into Deleuzian terms to mean that the social assemblage is composed of molecular flows and lines of flight, which have the power to produce genuine events and propel individuals onto a path of becoming. The transformation within the individual psyche takes place precisely through the extraction of affects during moments of effervescence occurring within collective ensembles.

Unlike Bataille, Deleuze and Guattari consciously refrain from drawing on Durkheim's influential work; in a characteristic manner, they choose to pay homage to the lesser-known rival, Gabriel Tarde. Whereas Durkheim preferred to study binary collective representations, Tarde focused primarily on flows of belief and desire.<sup>153</sup> Given the fact that Durkheim dedicated considerable attention to the study of effervescent energies, however, one wonders how Deleuze and Guattari could arrive at the bizarre contention that he overlooked the significance of flows of desire at the basis of every social assemblage. Ultimately, the authors of *A Thousand Plateaus* cannot resist drawing on the concept of *anomie* while refusing to acknowledge Durkheim's role in popularizing this concept.<sup>154</sup> Anticipating certain aspects of Deleuzian-Guattarian work, Durkheim elaborated the notion of *anomie* in *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*: "In anomic suicide,

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<sup>152</sup> Michèle Richman, *Sacred Revolutions: Durkheim and the Collège de Sociologie* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 144.

<sup>153</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 218-9.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, 237.

society's influence is lacking in the basically individual passions, thus leaving them without a check-rein."<sup>155</sup> Anomie, thus, involves a free reign of affects no longer constrained by molar stratification. Thus, instead of offering a refutation of Durkheim's work, Deleuze and Guattari articulate its political significance. For, insofar as anomic formations introduce disruptions into molar strata, they maintain an antagonistic relationship with the State, "which is the assemblage that effectuates the abstract machine of molar overcoding."<sup>156</sup> Minoritarian groups, secret societies, and criminal associations that enter into the composition of the war machine, they argue, are essentially anomic insofar as they belong to a peripheral position, extrinsic to the State.<sup>157</sup> In order to understand how the state of anomie comes about in a given assemblage and how it creates rupture within social institutions, one must first consider the transformative power of affective flows: "For the affect is not a personal feeling, nor is it a characteristic; it is the effectuation of a power of the pack that throws the self into upheaval and makes it reel. Who has not known the violence of these animal sequences, which uproot one from humanity, if only for an instant, making one scrape at one's bread like a rodent or giving one the yellow eyes of a feline? A fearsome involution calling us toward unheard-of becomings?"<sup>158</sup>

Curiously, it is precisely at the point when Deleuze and Guattari renounce the slightest trace of Durkheimian influence that they betray a close affinity with the famous sociologist. Did

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<sup>155</sup> Émile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, trans. John A. Spaulding and George Simpson (New York: The Free Press, 1951, 1979), 258.

<sup>156</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 227.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, 247. "There is an entire politics of becomings-animal, as well as a politics of sorcery, which is elaborated in assemblages that are neither those of the family nor of religion nor of the State. Instead, they express minoritarian groups, or groups that are oppressed, prohibited, in revolt, or always on the fringe of recognized institutions, groups all the more secret for being extrinsic, in other words, anomic."

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, 240. While I specifically address the question of the animal in the fourth chapter of this dissertation, it cannot be avoided here. Becoming-animal can produce both weakening and empowering effects. As Bataille and his Collège de Sociologie colleagues noted, one may respond to threat by turning into an indolent sheep and greeting danger with a stupefied passivity rather than with a (properly human) virile response. Deleuze and Guattari add that one is also capable of turning into "demonic animals, pack or affect animals that form a multiplicity, a becoming, a population, a tale." As the pack, one operates on the periphery of social institutions and produces a genuine subversion on the line of flight.

not Durkheim also claim that it is not the individual but the pack that acts under the powerful spell of effervescence and thus enters onto a path of becoming? Speaking of the orator addressing the crowd, Durkheim invokes the flow of affect in terms remarkably similar to those found in *A Thousand Plateaus*: “This unusual surplus of forces is quite real: it comes to him [the orator] from the very group he is addressing. The feelings provoked by his speech return to him inflated and amplified, reinforcing his own. The passionate energies he arouses echo back to him and increase his vitality. He is no longer a simple individual speaking, he is a group incarnate and personified.”<sup>159</sup> Durkheim goes as far as to invoke a qualitatively different “special world” which the individual enters during the effervescent gatherings. When he details the exact nature of the transformations in question, Durkheim in many ways anticipates Badiou’s conception of the We-Subject discussed in the previous chapter. In the moments of intense effervescence, the individual relinquishes his or her egoism in order to enter into composition of the collective ensemble: “A group is not only a moral authority regulating the life of its members, but also a source of life *sui generis*. From it there arises a warmth that quickens or gives fresh life to each individual, which makes him disposed to empathise, causing selfishness to melt away.”<sup>160</sup> Bataille’s analysis draws on these insights to demonstrate that fascism relies on the affective character of effervescent assemblies in order to strengthen social bonds among its followers. Bataille extends Durkheim’s sociological approach by combining it with Freud’s psychoanalytic insight and showing that effervescent (or, in Bataillean parlance, heterogeneous) force must be concentrated in the figure of the leader. “Considered not with regard to its external action but with regard to its source, the *force* of a leader is analogous to that exerted in hypnosis. The affective flow that unites him with his followers –which takes the form of a moral identification

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<sup>159</sup> Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Carol Cosman (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 158.

<sup>160</sup> Émile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society*, trans. W.D. Halls (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984), lii.

of the latter with the one they follow (and reciprocally)—is a function of the common consciousness of increasingly *violent* and excessive energies and powers that accumulate in the person of the leader and through him become widely available.”<sup>161</sup> The very terminology used by Bataille invites comparisons to Deleuze and Guattari: affective flows in question are, in fact, synonymous with molecular fluxes. When Deleuze and Guattari write that the Führer got fascists aroused, they claim that he precipitated acceleration of affective flows. The process does not stop there, however, for the fascist war-machine must also extract the accelerated affects and project them onto the plane of consistency thereby consolidating its power as a political movement.

Just as Deleuze and Guattari reproach leftists for refusing to relinquish the macropolitical perspective and thus failing to comprehend a genuine political event such as May '68, which arose as a consequence of molecular flows that escaped macropolitical determination, so does Bataille, in “Popular Front in the Street,” severely criticize those political leaders who attempt to change the world by devising elaborate schemes and political platforms instead of taking into account the exigency of desire that effectively escapes the constraints imposed by these platforms:

The opium of the people in the present world is perhaps not so much religion as it is accepted boredom. Such a world is at the mercy, it must be known, of those who provide at least the semblance of an escape from boredom. Human life aspires to the passions, and again encounters its exigencies.

It can appear out of place and even absolutely absurd to those who worry about which platforms must serve as the basis for future actions, when we respond by saying that the world in which they bustle about is doomed to boredom.

This remark, however, has a very simple meaning: in the Communist opposition, I have personally known a great number of people for whom the definition of platforms has had an essential value. Their activity resulted only in stunning boredom, which they saw precisely as the mark of revolutionary seriousness.

We want to say that we oppose these preoccupations.<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> Georges Bataille, “The Psychological Structure of Fascism,” in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. and trans. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 143.

<sup>162</sup> Bataille, “Popular Front in the Street,” 167.

Here, one has no trouble discerning the theme of *escape* which, as Stefanos Geroulanos points out, Bataille shared with some of his contemporaries such as Sartre and Levinas.<sup>163</sup> In an effort to avoid abstraction and make himself understood to a general audience, Bataille speaks of escaping from boredom but it is easy to recognize in the features that make up this world of accepted boredom the essential features of what, in “The Psychological Structure of Fascism,” he calls the homogeneous order and what later, in his presentations delivered at the Collège, he characterizes as society emptied of sacred values. Following Richman’s research, it is important to stress that the concept of the sacred deployed by Bataille owes more to Durkheim’s sociological investigations than to any traditional theological framework. Therefore, it refers not to a state of transcendence but to a particularly intense state of socialization inseparable from the corporeal level of being. The sacred, therefore, is responsible for “those moments of intense sociality responsible for transforming anomic individuals into a social unit that is conscious of itself as something other than the sum of its parts.”<sup>164</sup> Like Durkheim, Bataille describes such moments as effervescent. In his essay of fascism, Bataille characterizes a democratic society as essentially a society of boredom or apathy that makes no room for effervescence and sumptuous expenditure: “in a democratic society...the heterogeneous imperative agency...is reduced to an atrophied existence, so that its destruction no longer appears to be a necessary condition of change.”<sup>165</sup> Bataille defines heterogeneity negatively as everything expelled from homogeneous existence. Whereas homogeneous order has production as its basis and is essentially conservative insofar as it aims to preserve its resources and to maintain its productivity, “the heterogeneous world includes everything resulting from unproductive expenditure.” Thus, Bataille’s

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<sup>163</sup> Stefanos Geroulanos, *An Atheism That is not Humanist Emerges in French Thought* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

<sup>164</sup> Richman, 4.

<sup>165</sup> Bataille, “The Psychological Structure of Fascism,” 158.

characterization of the relationship between the heterogeneous element and the homogeneous world is analogous to the one Deleuze and Guattari draw between the war machine and the State. Heterogeneity refers to whatever is unassimilable, absolutely other, exterior to the homogeneous social order committed to the preservation of its resources and the minimization of nonproductive expenditure—much like the war machine that arrives from elsewhere and disturbs the state's effort at conservation. As opposed to democracy, which no longer possesses the heterogeneous element responsible for generating effervescence among those exposed to it, fascism belongs to the heterogeneous order:

Opposed to democratic politicians, who represent in different countries the platitude inherent to *homogeneous* society, Mussolini and Hitler immediately stand out as something *other*. Whatever emotions their actual existence as political agents of evolution provokes, it is impossible to ignore the *force* that situates them above men, parties, and even laws: a *force* that disrupts the regular course of things, the peaceful but fastidious homogeneity powerless to maintain itself (the fact that laws are broken is only the most obvious sign of the transcendent, *heterogeneous* nature of fascist action). Considered not with regard to its external action but with regard to its source, the *force* of a leader is analogous to that exerted in hypnosis. The affective flow that unites him with his followers – which takes the form of a moral identification of the latter with the one they follow (and reciprocally) – is a function of the common consciousness of increasingly *violent* and excessive energies and powers that accumulate in the person of the leader and through him become widely available.<sup>166</sup>

The parallels between this characterization of fascism and that found in *A Thousand Plateaus* are indeed striking: apart from describing fascist force as exterior with respect to the law and disruptive with respect to the established state of affairs, Bataille as well as Deleuze and Guattari emphasize its power to provoke or induce *affects*. The inseparability of force and affect is the essential point that Deleuze never ceases to reiterate when he writes on thinkers as disparate as Spinoza, Nietzsche, and Foucault.<sup>167</sup> Indeed, it is tempting to interpret Bataille's famous

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>167</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 117. "Foucault and Nietzsche have three main things in common. The first is their conception of force. Power in Foucault, like power in Nietzsche, isn't just violence, isn't just the relation of a force to a being or an object, but

opposition between sovereign and servile qualities in terms of Deleuze's distinction between active and reactive forces – an interpretive gesture all the more convincing due to the fact that both oppositions have a common root in Nietzschean thought. What Deleuze describes as a characteristic of reactive affects—a susceptibility “to be incited or provoked, to be induced, to have a ‘useful’ effect”—could thus be taken as a rather precise definition of the servile disposition that Bataille associates with a commitment to utility and willingness to produce (“Life beyond utility is the domain of sovereignty.”) Accordingly, the figure of *the sovereign* would not be identified with a particular kind of individual (a psychological type) but refer to the active force expressing itself through inciting or provoking—that is to say, through *affecting* other forces. In any event, the sovereign could not be equated with a Self endowed with interiority but with an active affect that is exteriorized and desubjectified. As Deleuze and Guattari put it, with respect to Kleist, “feelings become uprooted from the interiority of a ‘subject,’ to be projected violently outward into a milieu of pure exteriority that lends them an incredible velocity, a catapulting force: love or hate, they are no longer feelings but affects...the Self (*Moi*) is now nothing more than a character whose actions and emotions are desubjectified, perhaps even to the point of death.”<sup>168</sup>

Does this figure of the sovereign find its perfect embodiment in the fascist leader? Using the same Nietzschean parlance that one finds in Deleuze's work but also making obvious references to Le Bon's *The Crowd* and Freud's *Group Psychology*, Bataille does suggest that the fascist leader possesses an active force capable of inducing powerful affects in the masses. Speaking of the *force* that places leaders “above men, parties, and even law,” Bataille certainly invokes a conception of sovereignty that brings to mind the figure of a leader who holds a

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corresponds to the relation of a force to the other forces it affects, or even to forces that affect it (inciting, exciting, inducing, seducing, and so on, are affects).”

<sup>168</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 356.



tremendous power over his followers. Instead of contenting himself with this rather traditional conception of sovereign power, however, Bataille will go on to elaborate what Derrida calls “a counterconcept of sovereignty.” Thus, in the lectures delivered at the Collège, Bataille and Roger Caillois will elaborate a crucial distinction between the man of power and the man of tragedy. In a text such as “Power,” written by Caillois but presented by Bataille (Caillois could not attend the meeting due to illness), power is no longer synonymous with force: “*Power* in a society would be distinct from the production of a religious force, from a sacred force concentrated in one person. It would also be distinct from the military strength of a leader. *Power* would be the institutional merging of the sacred force and military strength in a single person who makes use of them for his own individual benefit and only in that way for the benefit of the institution.”<sup>169</sup> Power can thus be understood as a condensation as well as institutionalization of force. This proposition is consistent with Bataille’s earlier analysis in “Psychological Structure of Fascism” in which he declares: “Fascism therefore appears first of all as a concentration and so to speak condensation of power.”<sup>170</sup> Furthermore, inasmuch as it involves the putting of force to work with a view towards strengthening the Führer’s political position, it constitutes a perversion of sovereignty, a negation of the tragic spirit that embraces radical freedom and expenditure without reserve even at the cost of self-destruction. Thus, in another Collège de Sociologie lecture entitled “Brotherhoods, Orders, Secret Societies, Churches,” Caillois writes: “faced with threats appearing on every side, the tragic spirit does not necessarily become aware of the destiny that will impose its rule: Quite the contrary, it is unable to stop itself from the movement of self-destruction that is its peculiar nature. The tragic spirit is freedom, and this freedom that is its life can distract it from worrying about making itself recognized as a human being’s inmost

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<sup>169</sup> Roger Caillois, “Power,” in *The College of Sociology* (1937-39), ed. Denis Hollier, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 132.

<sup>170</sup> Bataille, “The Psychological Structure of Fascism,” 154.

reality.”<sup>171</sup> It is precisely for this reason that Caillois and Bataille assert that power and tragedy are diametrically opposed to each other, tragedy being precisely what cannot be put to work for the benefit of power.

Before embarking on a detailed examination of Collège de Sociologie texts, I can address the distinction between power and tragedy in the same terms deployed in my previous discussion of Bataille’s Contre-Attaque texts: the man of tragedy situates himself on the side of powerless power. Like Monsieur Melou in *Blue of Noon* and like Bataille himself during his engagement with Contre-Attaque, the tragic man does not hesitate to give his unconditional support to the cause that is doomed to defeat, to embrace the mass movement that has a very slight chance of gaining power in the battle against the capitalist state. *Unlike* Melou, however, the man of tragedy quits the realm of organized politics altogether while affirming the politics of the impossible—that is to say, the politics without party leaders and without platforms. The man of tragedy is the man without Self, without ego, making impossible any sort of identification between him and the crowd. Even if the rebels cannot help but look for a new Master, as Lacan wryly put it apropos of May ’68, they will not recognize the tragic man as an adequate representative of mastery. The man of power, on the contrary, is the very image of a ‘strong individual’—that is to say, he serves as the locus of identification for the crowd inasmuch as the latter situates him in the place of their ego-ideal. As such, he serves as the very guarantor of power and thus approximates the figure of the sovereign described on the pages of Carl Schmitt’s *Political Theology*. In an effort to prevent confusion between sovereignty and authoritarian power, Jean-Luc Nancy argues:

But this [Bataillean] sovereignty is not exercised over anything; it is not domination. It is not exercised; in truth, it is exceeded: its whole exercise is to exceed itself, not being

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<sup>171</sup> Roger Caillois, “Brotherhoods, Orders, Secret Societies, Churches,” in *The College of Sociology* (1937-39), ed. Denis Hollier, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 148.

anything but the absolute detachment or distancing of what has no foundation in the property of a presence, immanent or transcendent, and of what is thus in itself the lack, the failing of a presence that shows itself as a stranger to self, in itself a stranger to self, sovereignly alienated.<sup>172</sup>

The abuse of political power would thus constitute a perversion of sovereignty. Furthermore, the very attempt to incarnate active force in the figure of a leader would be a deviation from Nietzsche's teaching. As *On the Genealogy of Morals* demonstrates, there is no "substratum" or "subject" behind acting, affecting, and becoming. Indeed, Nietzsche ridicules attempts to embody active force in "the strong man" as so many efforts to separate strength from expressions of strength. The untenability of any kind of equation between Nietzschean forces and autocratic Führers undoubtedly accounts for the vehemence with which Bataille protests the appropriation of Nietzschean philosophy by the Nazis: "Official Fascism has been able to use invigorating Nietzschean maxims, displaying them on walls; its brutal simplifications must nevertheless be sheltered from the too-free, too-complex, and too-rending Nietzschean world. This prudence seems to be based, it is true, on an outmoded interpretation of Nietzsche's attitude, but this interpretation has been carried out, and it has been because the movement of Nietzsche's thought constitutes, *without any hope of appeal, a labyrinth*, in other words, the very opposite of the *directives* that current political systems demand from their sources of inspiration."<sup>173</sup>

During this period in his career, Bataille studied Freud's *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*—the text which he saw as essential to the inauguration of "mythological sociology." He credits Freud with the recognition of the affective dimension underlying every genuine form of communal existence. It is this affective element that made possible the formation of "primitive and savage communities" that depended on mythical imagery and ritualistic rites. The recovery of communal exaltation in contemporary societies cannot be

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<sup>172</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Muses*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 72.

<sup>173</sup> Georges Bataille, "Nietzsche and the Fascists," in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. and trans. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 187.

accomplished without an understanding of the affective structure of collective formations.<sup>174</sup> Freud's accomplishment consists precisely in discerning the ground of affective communal life (essential to the existence of primitive societies) in a distinctly modern phenomenon—that of the crowd. “This new fabric is precisely of the same nature as that of primitive societies: it is mythic and ritual; it has shaped itself vigorously around images charged with the strongest affective value; it has formed itself in the vast movements of crowds regulated by a ceremony introducing symbols that subjugate them.”<sup>175</sup> Following Freud, one ought to understand the point concerning *images* charged with affective value as referring to the paternal *imago*s that form the basis for the collective ego-ideal. It is precisely the image of paternal authority that functions as the locus of identification thereby guaranteeing the existence of bonds linking individuals in a given community. Furthermore, the image of authority (personified by the leader or *Führer*) is responsible for the affective dimension of communal existence, for that peculiar mixture of love and hate that one finds in every type of transference relationship. Every crowd needs its leader or master capable of agitating it. As Freud himself puts it, “the group still wishes to be governed by unrestricted force; it has extreme passion for authority; in Le Bon's phrase, it has a thirst for obedience. The primal father is the group ideal, which governs the ego in the place of the ego ideal.”<sup>176</sup> In his essay on fascism, Bataille has no trouble linking this figure of the leader to the fascist *Führer* who has the power to arouse people's emotions and induce violent effervescence in the crowd. This is why the fascist leader is heterogeneous to the society of boredom: unlike

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<sup>174</sup> Bataille, “What We Have Undertaken...”, 192-3. “The analysis of the affective structure of the army and of the church, as Freud sets out in his *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, is perhaps one of science's most surprising and most consequential revelations about the nature of lie, for it is not only an introduction to the comprehension of great forms that unite their members. Having acquired knowledge of the facts about primitives, the premises of Freud's analysis open the way to a general understanding of social structures of all kinds, whether it be of a church or a religious order, an army or a militia, a secret society or a political party.”

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.

<sup>176</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XVIII, trans. James Strachey (London: the Hogarth Press, 1955), 127.

political leaders associated with democratic and even communist parties, he is capable of rousing the masses out of apathetic slumber and giving at least a semblance of glory to the exhausted contemporary life.

Nonetheless, Bataille does not restrict himself to merely following Freud in understanding the affective dimension of communal life and applying psychoanalytic concepts to the analysis of fascist movement. The goal of his mythological sociology is thus to pass from theoretical understanding towards political action committed to the liberation of collective existence from enslavement to authority of the ego-ideal. “And if Freud himself was not able to practice a general analysis of living forms, this is not to say that he did not leave the possibility of crossing that divide open to those who follow him. And not only the analysis of what is, is henceforth open in several senses, but it has become possible to envision experience itself, which is to say the attempt to pass from understanding into action. Facing the great formations—those that unite living beings—that have brutally closed and fixed existence in other countries, attempting a religious movement or perhaps more precisely a ‘church,’ that in response to the immediate needs of a composition of forces, will not only unite existence but will also to set it free.”<sup>177</sup> The concluding words are crucial: Bataille insists that sacred sociology must reintroduce “communal exaltation” into modern societies without, at the same time, imposing a “brutally closed and fixed existence” characteristic of the life in totalitarian states. Indeed, Bataille’s reference to closed and fixed types of social existence has much in common with Deleuze and Guattari’s description of totalitarianism conceived as a conservative tendency of the state that aims to block or contain effervescent lines of flight. Thus, while Bataille stresses the importance of learning from the fascist strategies of agitation, he also demands that the affective experience

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<sup>177</sup> Bataille, “What We Have Undertaken...”, 193.

requisite for social cohesion not be put in the service of totalitarian politics and the cult of personality.

In this respect, Bataille's work offers an important corrective to the currently-widespread definition of fascism. Roger Griffin, a leading contemporary authority on the subject, insists that the defining feature of fascism consists in its attempt to initiate a revolution in time through the reinvigoration of national community. In order to support his thesis, Griffin cites the following lines of Italian scholar Marco Tarchi: "The choice of the qualitative and organic community [...] is a constant of fascist movements transcending the level of historic contingencies to find articulation in the realm of cultural expression in the full sense of the term, namely in political philosophy and doctrine: the myth of 'community of destiny,' the moment of supreme collective identification, and the pivotal concept of the 'new politics' intuited by Mosse and buried by the catastrophe of the Second World War, is both its emblem and its culmination."<sup>178</sup> As I have suggested, Bataille also comprehended the fascist movement's potential to achieve unity among the masses and, like Griffin, he understood that such an effort involved an attempt to rediscover a sense of "sacred time" (as opposed to the profane time of modern technocratic societies). Unlike Griffin, however, Bataille offers adequate criteria for distinguishing between fascism and emancipatory revolutionary movements. The former correctly observes that fascism emerged as a revolutionary movement but erroneously concludes that every revolutionary movement runs the risk of succumbing to the fascist valorization of violence. Griffin goes as far as to draw comparison between the French Revolution and Nazism in an effort to critique Walter Benjamin's famous thesis concerning the revolutionary impulse to institute a new calendar and blast "the time of the now" out of the continuum of history: "Thus fascism was an attempted

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<sup>178</sup> Roger Griffin, *A Fascist Century* (London: Palgrave, 2008), 20. The quote is culled from Tarchi's essay entitled "Between Festival and Revolution."

revolution, both aesthetic and temporal: a bid to create a new total culture in the sense that the Romans and the Mayans were a total culture; a bid to inaugurate a new era. Had Benjamin realized that the ‘aura’ fascists wanted to recreate was of the same stuff as that of the mythic ‘nowness’ comprising the French Revolution, that the aestheticization of politics under fascism was profoundly linked to the explosion of festival time in the French Revolution, then he would have provided himself with a powerful heuristic device to unlock its secrets as a political phenomenon.”<sup>179</sup> Unlike Griffin, Bataille understands that while it may be true that the fascists were revolutionaries, not all revolutionaries were necessarily fascists. In his essay on fascism, he points out: “In fundamental opposition to socialism, fascism is characterized by the uniting of classes.”<sup>180</sup> In other words, Bataille convincingly argues that the socialist revolution involves an exacerbation of class struggle, whereas the fascist one presupposes a disavowal of class conflict for the sake of achieving a conciliatory social fusion. Most importantly, Bataille succeeds in stressing the difference between fascism and other revolutionary projects by insisting that the former involves a *concentration and centralization of power* in the *head* of the state as opposed to *spontaneous expression of force* in *headless* revolutionary movements. At a crucial point in his Acéphale lecture, Bataille makes very clear that the politics of effervescence he envisioned at the time precludes all comparisons with fascism: “Amidst the current decomposition, it can only be a question, effectively, of rediscovering the conditions of affective communal life through arbitrary decisions or by being elevated by inspiration. We cannot tolerate maintaining a link to a past of any kind.”<sup>181</sup> Apart from the fact that Bataille dissociates his call for the resacralization of society from the notion of palingenesis (i.e. rebirth of the national spirit that necessarily presupposes return to the past), the notion so dear to fascists, he also privileges arbitrary

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<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>180</sup> Bataille, “The Psychological Structure of Fascism,” 154.

<sup>181</sup> Bataille, “What We Have Undertaken...”, 190.

decisions and sovereignty of immediacy over political platforms and sovereignty of law and of the state. As I have argued in my reading of “Popular Front of the Street,” Bataille grants the sovereign right to decide spontaneously to the masses and not to the leader.

Thus Bataille splits the concept of sovereignty—the traditional emblem of indivisible power—in two: sovereignty inseparable from power and sovereignty without power, sovereignty of state leaders and (to evoke Derrida once more) *rogue sovereignty*. These two conceptions, in turn, presuppose two different subjective figures (or, if one must stick to Deleuzian-Guattarian parlance, two different conceptual personae): the fascist leader fit to stand in the place of the collective ego ideal and the man of tragedy who accepts desubjectification either by entering into composition of the mass-in-fusion (as in the mass politics of *Contre-Attaque*) or by subtracting from the big Other at the cost of symbolic suicide (as in the later texts that comprise his unfinished *La Somme athéologique*). In the years that follow his “inward turn” (the period identified roughly with the publication of *Inner Experience*) Bataille will develop a full-fledged theory of sovereignty that will be identified primarily with the latter subjective figure. At this point, however, Bataille places his faith in community as the medium for attainment of qualitatively other “level of being” without, at the same time, succumbing to madness. As Richman rightfully points out: “Conveners of the Collège acknowledged their debt to the French school’s basic premises that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, that the collectivity induces transformations within its participants, and that these transformations are only accessible and sustainable within a mouvement d’ensemble. The group becomes the privileged locus for explorations otherwise capable of inducing madness or suicide in the isolated individual.”<sup>182</sup> As I have argued in the previous chapter, during his sojourn in *Contre-Attaque*, Bataille discovered the transformative power of effervescence in spontaneous mass uprisings. At the time of his

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<sup>182</sup> Richman, 5.



engagement with the Collège, however, Bataille develops a conception of “elective community” as a collective unit subtracted from or closed off to a larger social body. It is this type of elective community (that finds its privileged example in the case of secret societies) which Bataille opposes to mass movements as the privileged means towards realization of the tragic spirit. In a commentary on Caillois’s paper, he asserts that “the man of tragedy belongs to an empire that can be realized by means of the elective community, and, in addition, it is the only possible means of realizing it. I assume that the ‘elective community’ or ‘secret society’ is a form of secondary organization that possesses constant characteristics and to which recourse is always possible when the primary organization of a society can no longer satisfy the desires that arise.”<sup>183</sup>

It would be a mistake to assume that Bataille’s interest in elective community is motivated solely by a gratuitous impulse to experience effervescence without effecting a real transformation in a political situation. The aforementioned assertion, after all, comes as a response to the question: “How, faced with the burdensome realities of the world today – which are daily reduced to a terrifying military reality – is it possible for a man to dream of imposing silence on his surroundings?”<sup>184</sup> This question brings us back to the one which opened the present chapter: How can one combat the absence of virile reaction to the encroaching threat of fascism? How can one motivate the apathetic masses that not only refuse to join forces and combat injustice but appear to desire their own oppression? In order to find an adequate answer, both Bataille and Caillois turn their attention towards elective communities. It was Caillois, in particular, however, who perfectly articulated the elitism of Collège in contradistinction to the populism of Contre-Attaque. In “The Winter Wind,” he offers his own answer to the question

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<sup>183</sup> Caillois, “Brotherhoods, Orders, Secret Societies, Churches,” 149.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

posed above: just as during a particularly harsh winter, the strong survive while the weak perish, so in the adverse political climate, the community purifies itself of sickly and decadent elements that spread all over and infest its body during more prosperous times. “This is no longer clement weather. There is a rising wind of subversion in the world now, a cold wind, harsh, arctic, one of those winds that is murderous and so salubrious, one that kills the fragile, the sickly, and the birds, one that does not let them get through the winter. And so a silent, slow, irreversible cleansing takes place in nature, like a death tide that rises imperceptibly. ... The coast is clear for those who are most able: no obstructions on the roads to impede their progress, none of the countless, melodious warblings to cover up their voices.”<sup>185</sup> The select few, those who desire power and who are not lacking in virility, must relinquish the thankless task of serving and protecting the weak and bind together in elective communities that prize secrecy and exclusiveness. Such an elective community would be able to effect changes in the political situation not by means of a direct action in the street but by means of clandestine subversion. In Caillois’ remarkable formulation, a secret community of rebels would have to undergo a transformation from being *Satanic* to being *Luciferian* in order to become truly effective. “This plan supposes a certain education of our sense of rebellion, that would take it from riotousness to a broadly imperialist attitude and would persuade it to subordinate its impulsive, unruly reaction to the necessity for discipline, calculation, and patience.”<sup>186</sup>

With regards to their shared concern with theorization of elective community, the members of Collège de Sociologie undoubtedly anticipate Deleuze and Guattari’s conception of the war machine. Indeed, *A Thousand Plateaus* treats the phenomenon of secret societies as one particular instance of the war machine: “The secret has its origin in the war machine; it is the war

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<sup>185</sup> Roger Caillois, “The Winter Wind,” in *The College of Sociology* (1937-39), ed. Denis Hollier, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 42.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

machine and its becomings-woman, becomings-child, becomings-animal that bring the secret. A secret society always acts in society as a war machine.”<sup>187</sup> As this passage makes clear, a secret society constitutes a privileged example of the war machine because it manifests a number of traits essential to the latter concept. Secrecy is one of them and so is the quality of becoming-animal. Since Deleuze and Guattari argue that every secret constitutes a collective assemblage, they treat a secret society as a pack. As such, a secret society presupposes a becoming-animal since every animal is necessarily a band, a pack. “Schools, bands, herds, populations are not inferior social forms; they are affects and powers, involutions that grip every animal in a becoming just as powerful as that of the human being with the animal.... We could cite hunting societies, war societies, secret societies, crime societies, etc. Becomings-animal are proper to them.”<sup>188</sup> After thus announcing the transformative and empowering effect of becoming-animal, Deleuze and Guattari go on to emphasize the subversive potential carried by a secret society (once this secret society is considered as an animal pack): “the secret society cannot live without the universal project of permeating all of society, of creeping into all of the forms of society, disrupting its hierarchy and segmentation.”<sup>189</sup> This quality particular to elective communities undoubtedly accounts for Bataille’s and Caillois’s attraction to secret societies. Thus, Caillois stresses that the former attain a greater subversive power during the times of disaster. Following Durkheim, he notes that, as a collective formation possessing a high degree of social density, a secret society not only preserves its social ties during periods of economic and political upheaval but moreover strengthens its bonds while the larger social body becomes torn apart by conflict.

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<sup>187</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 287.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, 241-2.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, 288.

Deleuze and Guattari echo this point in their own inimitable way: “It is in war, famine, and epidemic that werewolves and vampires proliferate.”<sup>190</sup>

Despite numerous affinities with regards to their respective analyses of elective communities, Deleuze and Guattari nonetheless differ from Bataille and Caillois on one crucial issue: where the latter embrace agitation, the former choose prudence. I already noted that Deleuze never aspired to construct a corpus of political philosophy. In *Dialogues*, for instance, he and Parnet claim that politics is active experimentation, which follows a path that cannot be calculated in advance in accordance with determined programs.<sup>191</sup> Indeed, Deleuze has this much in common with Bataille who desists from systematizing his thoughts on politics. Whereas the latter rejects political programs in favor of direct action in all its immediacy, however, Deleuze and Guattari perceive the dangers inherent in spontaneous revolt. Ian Buchanan writes apropos of *Anti-Oedipus*:

Deleuze and Guattari do not offer a model that we can follow if we want to be revolutionaries. They do, however, outline three tasks – one negative and two positive – that will better position us to become revolutionaries, should we choose to go down that path, by arming us against the many betrayals all revolutions seem to suffer, namely the betrayals that come from within. *Anti-Oedipus* is not so much pro-revolution as it is anti-revolution. The fascist inside that Foucault warns us against in his preface is precisely the counterrevolutionary, the revolutionary who has lost their faith in the revolution, the courage of their convictions, and the will to change.<sup>192</sup>

While I agree with the first part of Buchanan’s claim, I do not see the fascist as a resigned cynic who has no faith in the possibility of change. As I shall demonstrate in the following chapter, the fascist ardently believes in a revolution and calls for a direct action as the only means for the realization of his revolutionary goals. Deleuze and Guattari themselves stress that the fascist follows the line of flight because he is driven by the passion of abolition, the passion for

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<sup>190</sup> Ibid., 243.

<sup>191</sup> Deleuze and Parnet, *Dialogues II*, 137. “Politics is active experimentation, since we do not know in advance which way a line is going to turn. Draw the line, says the accountant: but one can in fact draw it *anywhere*.”

<sup>192</sup> Ian Buchanan, *Deleuze and Guattari’s Anti-Oedipus* (London and New York: Continuum, 2008), 116-7.

destruction as opposed to creation, and they demand utmost prudence from those revolutionaries who choose to follow the path of becoming and deterritorialization.<sup>193</sup> Thus, the fascist inside that Deleuze strives to eradicate is not so much a reactionary and apathetic cynic as an impassioned rebel who does not exercise caution but embraces annihilation with a blind enthusiasm of a zealot.

It is not the marginals who create the [molecular] lines; they install themselves on these lines and make them their property, and this is fine when they have that strange modesty of men of the line, the prudence of the experimenter, but it is a disaster when they slip into a black hole from which they no longer utter anything but the micro-fascist speech of their dependency and their giddiness: ‘We are the avant-garde,’ ‘We are the marginals.’<sup>194</sup>

Fully aware of the dangers accompanying this state of giddiness, Deleuze called for the absence of agitation (*ataraxia*) in politics; one must act, one must experiment, but with caution.<sup>195</sup>

Incidentally, Bataille was frequently accused of being giddy to the point of being irresponsible. While I will not join the ranks of critics who condemn him to the category of Left fascism, I accept Jean-Michel Besnier’s perspicacious characterization of Bataille as an “emotive intellectual”: “I will try to show that the label of emotive intellectual applies best to writers, philosophers, artists or scientists who are less concerned with bearing witness, judging or teaching than with joining history, which bruises and moves them just as much as anyone else.”<sup>196</sup> The very fact that Bataille wished to be affected by the political turmoil (unfolding in

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<sup>193</sup> Patton, 66-7. “Nothing in *A Thousand Plateaus* is unambiguously good or bad and the line of flight is no exception. It is both the line of maximal creative potential and the line of greatest danger, offering at once the possibility of the greatest joy and that of the most extreme anguish... The danger is that, once having broken out of the limits imposed by the molar forms of segmentarity and subjectivity, a line of flight may fail to connect with the necessary conditions of creative development or be incapable of so connecting and turn instead into a line of destruction... The potential danger and uncertainty associated with lines of flight are the reason for the essential prudence of Deleuzian politics.”

<sup>194</sup> Deleuze and Parnet, *Dialogues II*, 139

<sup>195</sup> Constantin V. Boundas, “What Difference Does Deleuze’s Difference Make?”, in *Deleuze and Philosophy*, ed. Constantin V. Boundas (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 23. “What Deleuze advocates is *ataraxia* (absence of agitation), which is not to be confused with *apraghia* (repudiation of action).”

<sup>196</sup> Jean-Michel Besnier, “Bataille, the Emotive Intellectual,” trans. Alisdair McIntosh, in *Bataille: Writing the Sacred*, ed. Carolyn Bailey Gill (New York: Routledge, 1995), 12.

the streets crowded with people in revolt) “as much as anyone else” is enough to demonstrate his affirmation of the egalitarian principle at the time of his involvement with Contre-Attaque.

Indeed, Bataille’s fidelity to the principle of equality sets him apart from Caillois (not to mention the fact that Caillois’s affirmation of discipline and calculated action signals a clear difference from Bataillean politics grounded in the principles of spontaneity and unproductive expenditure). In contradistinction to his colleague’s emphasis on the love of power and “imperialist” attitude that tolerates no weakness (or, which is the same thing, no difference), Bataille calls for the *acéphalic* community—that is to say, community without a political center, without a leader.

While Bataille’s explicitly anti-totalitarian and anti-fascist stance cannot be disputed, however, one might still wonder if his Collège de Sociologie texts reveal microfascist tendencies, which are indisputably present in Caillois’s lectures. (The task of differentiating between Caillois’s and Bataille’s positions is complicated by the fact that some of the Collège lectures have been written by the former but delivered [with alterations and additional commentaries] by the latter.) To this end I will have to continue my engagement with Deleuze and Guattari and subject Bataille’s texts to schizoanalytic treatment. In what follows, I will develop a schizoanalytic approach to elective communities with reference to a concrete example of one such community found in Seijun Suzuki’s *Fighting Elegy* (*Kenka ereji*, 1966), a film which not only depicts the kinds of brotherhoods and secret orders which fascinated Bataille and Caillois but also offers a rather precise illustration of the phenomenon that Deleuze and Guattari termed “pack fascism.”

### III

#### Pack Fascism in Seijun Suzuki's *Fighting Elegy*

##### Japanese Nationalism and the Aesthetics of Militarism

Even before the publication of his deservedly influential cinema books, Gilles Deleuze discovered in film a wealth of material for the elucidation of his concepts. Anticipating the currently prominent call for a schizoanalysis of cinema, he and Félix Guattari stress Hollywood cinema's special aptitude for illustrating the remarkable propensity with which fascism multiplies into molecular movements and permeates every social sphere. "What makes fascism dangerous is its molecular or micropolitical power, for it is a mass movement: a cancerous body rather than a totalitarian organism. American film has often depicted these molecular focal points; band, gang, sect, family, town, neighborhood, vehicle fascisms spare no one."<sup>197</sup>

Undoubtedly, Deleuze and Guattari refer to such Hollywood classics as *The Wild One* (Laslo Benedek, 1953), which depicts a nomadic formation (motorcycle gang) that traverses territory at great speed rather than entrenching itself in a protected position, has its own "code of honor" which prizes virility and spontaneous violence, and maintains its unity around a charismatic leader (portrayed by Marlon Brando). In what follows, however, I intend to locate a particularly striking depiction of microfascism at work in *Fighting Elegy* (1966), the film by a Japanese New Wave director, Seijun Suzuki. The film's narrative is set during a particularly tumultuous period for Japan, in the year of 1935 to be precise—that is to say, one year before young officers' rebellion (February 26, 1936), two years before the China War (1937), and six years before the attack on Pearl Harbor (December 7, 1941). The fact that Suzuki's film brings up the young officers' failed coup d'état (known as the *ni-ni-roku incident*) in its concluding shots attests not

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<sup>197</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 215.

only to the New Wave movement's concern with the recent history of Japan and the formation of the national identity, but also to its obsession with the theme of youth in revolt. Like other New Wave filmmakers of the 1960's, Suzuki was fascinated with modern youth culture. Reflective of this interest, his films generally fit into two categories: the *yakuza* films, which focus on criminal gangs and owe much to Hollywood gangster cinema, and the *pink* films, which introduced soft-core eroticism into Japanese cinema. In one respect, therefore, *Fighting Elegy* constitutes a departure from his trademark preoccupation with modern youth insofar as it casts a reflective gaze on history. In another respect, however, the film continues and extends this preoccupation in treating the gang as a microcosm of the Japanese society.

Thus, apart from telling a typical story of competing gangs and teenagers in revolt, *Fighting Elegy* directs a critical eye on the collective mentality of the Japanese on the eve of a series of catastrophic events—the kind of mentality that facilitated the development of rampant militarism and made the rise of fascism possible. Instead of following the conventions of a historical epic and constructing a kind of master narrative involving the key events that led up to World War II as well as all the key figures that played part in these events, the film opts for a micropolitical critique of molecular fascist currents that infested every sphere (educational, religious, familial) of Japanese society during this particular period. In other words, it attempts to answer the very question raised by Bataille and, at a different time and in a different manner, by Deleuze and Guattari: How do fascist leaders succeed in capturing and manipulating the desire of the rebellious masses? *Fighting Elegy* demonstrates that, while driven by revolutionary forces, the “molecular focal points”—gangs, brotherhoods, and other collective units of microfascism—ultimately serve the interests of the very authority they aim to combat by combining to form a powerful war-machine that works in conjunction with the totalitarian State.



In their attempts to cite concrete instances of historical Fascism, the various thinkers mentioned in the present study (Bataille, Badiou, Virilio, Deleuze and Guattari) invariably make references to Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, while largely ignoring fascism in Japan. Such lack of attention towards Japanese fascism is partly justified by the fact that there was little cooperation between the Japanese military and its German and Italian allies (the German military attaché to Tokyo only learned of the Pearl Harbor attack after the fact). Furthermore, the kind of ideology that fueled the development of the Pacific War differed dramatically from that of the Third Reich inasmuch as the latter called for genocidal violence as the ultimate price to be paid for ethnic purification of the German nation whereas the former called for spiritual rebirth and a return to rural traditions in opposition to the growing influence of the West in East Asia and the modernization that accompanied it.<sup>198</sup> Nevertheless, it would be wrong to suppose that most Germans who supported the politics of the Third Reich were driven by the blood-thirsty desire to exterminate the Jews. On the contrary, as Hans Mayer argued in a 1939 lecture delivered at the Collège de Sociologie, the fascist movement owed its extraordinary success with the masses not so much to its racist ideology as to its commitment towards restoring the myth of national greatness: “we should repeat that living national socialism, in order to inspire the youth, depends far less on the racism of a Rosenberg, the crudeness of Streicher, than on the memories, the golden legends of a great German past and the eschatological prophecies of a glorious future for a globalized Germany.”<sup>199</sup> Mayer’s text in many ways anticipates contemporary theories of fascism. Griffin’s recent work, for instance, also underscores the positive, mythical side of fascism which appealed to the masses with its promise to promote spiritual growth within the

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<sup>198</sup> Japanese authorities justified military expansionism and invasion of Asian nation states with their purported goal of liberating Asia from the cultural domination of the West (as opposed to the typically fascist aim of purging the continent from the inferior races).

<sup>199</sup> Hans Mayer, “The Rituals of Political Associations in Germany of the Romantic Period,” in *The College of Sociology* (1937-39), ed. Denis Hollier, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 268.

community and cleanse it from the decadence associated with modernity. Thus, Griffin argues that “all dialects of Nazism, whether ‘blood-and-soil,’ militaristic, cultural, or technocratic, together shared the belief that there was a higher spiritual and temporal reality bound up with the history and destiny of the race that remained hidden to decadent, ‘non-Aryan,’ minds.”<sup>200</sup> Apart from corroborating Deleuze and Guattari’s point that historical fascism involves multiple currents of microfascism resonating together under a single aegis, this passage also highlights the utopian, positive (as opposed to strictly destructive) dimension of fascism oriented towards a reinvigoration of national ‘spirit.’ Similarly, in the context of Italian fascism, Griffin draws attention to the project of national renewal which claimed to dispense with useless programmes and embrace direct and maximally effective action. Even more significant for the present discussion is the fascists’ insistence on the reintroduction of festivals and rekindling of the sacred elements within society. In a 1914 article written for the ultra-nationalist periodical *La Voce*, Jean-Richard Bloch asserts that the problem central to modernity consists in “the lack of public festivals, rituals and theatrical elements that could restore an aura of grand spectacle to an increasingly impersonal and individualistic world. Modern people had ceased to believe in Catholicism, but had yet to find appropriate secular substitutes for its festivals. Without religious and seasonal festivals the world had become sad.”<sup>201</sup> Here one discovers a rather precise definition of the term “desacralization” deployed by the intellectuals at the Collège de Sociologie as well as ample evidence that, much like members of the Acéphale group, fascists too were “ferociously religious.” The writings and speeches of Italian fascists certainly verify Bataille’s fundamental claim according to which fascist leaders succeed at establishing unity among their followers through a successful manipulation of affective energies. As Griffin points out, aside

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<sup>200</sup> Roger Griffin, *A Fascist Century* (London: Palgrave, 2008), 16.

<sup>201</sup> Jean-Richard Bloch, “La democrazia e la festa” (“Democracy and Festivals”), *La Voce* (28 June 1914). Quoted in Griffin, 6.

from making impassioned calls for direct action and celebrating “a fighting spirit which accepts all risks,” fascist leaders privileged *myths* over *programs*. Mussolini “owed his ‘charisma’ to his instinctive ability to recycle, synthesise, and re-present myths of the nation’s imminent renewal ... His conspicuous lack of interest in providing a definitive doctrine and a cogent set of policies to ‘rationalise’ Fascism before the early 1930s was not just tactically necessary in order to guarantee the new regime as wide a support base as possible. This reticence also reflected his own deep-seated reluctance to commit himself to a particular vision of the palingenetic myth. In a way, then, it was the vision of renewal itself which became the adhesive linchpin for fascist ideology, rather than any particular set of policies or clearly conceived theory of state.”<sup>202</sup>

What Japanese fascists shared with their German and Italian counterparts was precisely this mythical, utopian, positive vision of an organic national community.<sup>203</sup> The prominent figure among Japanese nationalists of the 1930s was General Araki Sadao who served as army minister during the first half of the 1930s and as minister of education during the late 1930s. In both capacities, he inspired his followers with the idea of the “Japanese spirit” grounded in the

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<sup>202</sup> Griffin, 7-8.

<sup>203</sup> Unsurprisingly, those who stress the inadequacy of the concept of ‘fascism’ in designating Japanese politics of the 1930s (in order to dissociate Japanese military extension from similar enterprises initiated by Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy) choose to ignore the project (common to all varieties of generic fascism) of instauration of the myth of national community. Peter Duus and Daniel Okimoto, for instance, opt for a reductively economicist approach in order to claim not only that the term ‘fascism’ is ill-suited to designate the political situation in Japan during the 1930’s but also to suggest that the rise of fascism during this time period was a symptom of a larger corporatist tendency to establish a strong managerial state: “In considering the elite politics of the 1930s we should perhaps pay more attention to this issue—the attempt to substitute bureaucratic rationality for market rationality in the allocation of scarce resources and in the distribution of rewards from the productive process. There are parallels here, to be sure, with the fascist era in Europe. The point to emphasize, however, is not that Japan was ‘fascist’ or ‘proto-fascist,’ but that fascism in Europe was a subspecies of the general impulse toward managed economies that was on the rise all over the world in the 1930s—and that has survived into the postwar world as well. In other words, rather than stress that Japan resembled the European fascist regimes, let us rather remember that all these regimes grappled with a common problem: political economies that did not function well in the face of world economic crisis.” Needless to say, this economicist view not only fails to take into account the affective dimension of fascist mass politics but to even consider the fundamental commonalities between German Nazism, Italian fascism, and Japanese nationalism: the efforts to restore national ‘spirit,’ reinvigorate organic community, expunge the decadent effects of modernization, celebrate sacrifice in the name of the Führer or the emperor, and inaugurate the myth of destiny of the people. Peter Duus and Daniel I. Okimoto, “Fascism and the History of Pre-War Japan: The Failure of a Concept,” *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 39, no. 1 (Nov., 1979): 72.

rhetoric of myth. In his monumental study entitled *The Making of Modern Japan*, Marian B. Jansen writes that Araki “presided over a crusade of spiritual rearmament designed to make sure that every Japanese would, as he put it, have as the first and major element of his identity the consciousness that ‘I am ... a Japanese.’ What this required was gratitude in the heart of every schoolchild and subject that the polity of *kokutai* [translated roughly as ‘national essence’ or ‘sovereignty’] centered in the ‘family state,’ a myriad of familial hierarchies in a pyramidal structure with the compassionate figure of the emperor, at once parent and divine descendant, at its apex. It was something to inspire awe and gratitude, devotion and a fierce but also protective resolve.”<sup>204</sup> The nationalist enterprise promoted by Araki and his followers certainly demonstrates the applicability of Bataille’s analysis of fascism to Japanese politics of the 1930’s. Undoubtedly, Bataille’s definition of fascism as a concentration of power is general enough to apply to every type of totalitarian society and is, for this very same reason, not particularly helpful in accounting for the historical specificity of the interwar fascist movement. His later conception of power as “the institutional merging of the sacred force and military strength in a single person,” however, has the merit of considering “the evolution of militant nationalism from the years following the war” (to borrow a phrase from Mayer’s lecture) and possesses as much explanatory relevance with respect to Japanese nationalism as when it is related to European fascism. In all likelihood, Bataille developed the above definition of power under the influence of Mayer with whom he met regularly during the year 1938-39. Indeed, Mayer puts forward a remarkably similar claim specifically with respect to German Nazism which, he argues, did not arise out of nowhere but developed out of the prewar bourgeois nationalism. Translating Mayer’s argument into Bataillean parlance, one could say that the prewar nationalism relied on the mythical aura of the leader without, however, mobilizing military strength and imposing strict

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<sup>204</sup> Marius B. Jansen, *The Making of Modern Japan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 600-1.

discipline on the participants in the movement. The prewar nationalists, he writes, had “no myth or symbol other than adoration of William II, his eloquence and his uniforms (...); no personal obligations for the organization members; complete absence of any quasi-military discipline, or any profound, urgent, and exclusive contact between members.”<sup>205</sup> In the case of postwar fascism, however, the Führer’s sacred force comes to be coupled with military strength, thereby producing a higher concentration of power: “Discipline is military; strict obedience is expected; the individual is uprooted from bourgeois civil life; undefeated, he is linked to others who are undefeated.”<sup>206</sup>

Now, as Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney demonstrates, Japanese fascism of the 1930s did not emerge ex nihilo, but was anticipated by the Meiji-era nationalism. Following her discussion of the imperial myth, one can discern a similar coupling of sacred status and military force in the figure of the emperor. Thus, she points out that the official Japanese constitution of 1889, as well as its three drafts composed with the aid of European scholars, feature “the nearly identical phrasing and the notions regarding the identity of the emperor as ‘sacred and not to be violated’ and as the ‘commander of the Army and Navy.’”<sup>207</sup> The parallels between Bataille’s conception of the fascist leader and the Meiji constitution’s description of the emperor are indeed striking. Apart from assigning the status of an Almighty God to the emperor, the constitution also portrayed him as “the Father to all Japanese,” thus bringing to mind the Freudian analysis of group psychology that so influenced Bataille.

Jansen describes a curious ritual designed to bring about a conversion of the intellectuals on the Left and bring them back to the traditional values of the nation: “A workbook prepared for

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<sup>205</sup> Mayer, 268.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid., 269.

<sup>207</sup> Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney, *Kamikaze, Cherry Blossoms, and Nationalisms: The Militarization of Aesthetics in Japanese History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 72.

interrogators suggested that they begin by providing a bowl of chicken and egg on rice (...) which would remind the prisoner of the parental bond. The policemen should say nothing about ideology, but offer a reproachful reminder that ‘your mother is worried about you.’ He should by all means avoid mention of the father, as that might trigger defiance of authority.”<sup>208</sup> One could interpret this ritual differently by noting that the biological father’s authority had to be discounted in order to bolster authority of the emperor qua symbolic father. The constitution transferred paternal authority onto the emperor thereby establishing his symbolic function as the locus of collective identification and the guarantor of kinship ties linking his subjects into a cohesive community. “The presumed ‘blood tie’ between the Sun Goddess, the emperor, and the Japanese people was established and the Japanese were all in one family. The structure of body politic was laid down.”<sup>209</sup> It should come as no surprise that this vision of an organic ethnic community configured as the body politic elevated the emperor into the revered position of the ‘head’ of the nation-state. As Ohnuki-Tierney shows in her analysis of the politicized aesthetics of the Meiji Era, the emperor was frequently visualized as the head of the military in woodblock prints that frequently depicted a dragon head as the symbol of imperial power.

Having said all this, I do not mean to suggest that the Japanese emperor had the same level of involvement in the catastrophic events of World War II as the German Führer. On the contrary, although he was officially designated as the supreme commander of the Army and the Navy, the emperor did not in fact enjoy an unlimited power over the military. Jansen points out that, during the Meiji Era, “the emperor could not ... be trusted with military decisions, and an elaborate structure of advisers developed. They reported to him, but he was expected to legitimize their decisions and not to direct them....Despite all the talk of ‘direct command,’

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<sup>208</sup> Jansen, 610.

<sup>209</sup> Ohnuki-Tierney, 79.

authority and responsibility were fragmented.”<sup>210</sup> In fact, Jensen goes on to suggest, power resided mostly with the army generals who, “though outside ‘politics,’ played a major role in politics through their ability to break cabinets.”<sup>211</sup> The very terms Jensen uses to situate the military in relation to the political field invoke Deleuze and Guattari’s propositions concerning the war machine: like the war machine, the military power belongs ‘outside politics,’ yet it extends its influence over the political field through often illegal means (as evidenced in my brief discussion of the German Freikorps in the chapter). Ohnuki-Tierney corroborates Jensen’s observation by suggesting that the ‘sacred’ status attributed to the emperor not only did not endow him with absolute control over military decisions but, on the contrary, absolved him from any political responsibility. This absence of political responsibility on the part of the emperor, in turn, created an opportunity for the military to assume power outside legal parameters: “The Meiji constitution codified the emperor as the constitutional monarch and granted him imperial sovereignty, and yet at the same time it rejected the idea of direct imperial rule. Political responsibilities were placed in the hands of all organs of the state, each independent of each other and directly answerable only to the emperor. The military, reporting directly to the emperor, seized an independent power without having to clear its actions with other state organs.”<sup>212</sup>

While deprived of direct rule over the military apparatus, the emperor nonetheless played an enormous role in the rise of Japanese fascism precisely in its *mythical* status as a sacred sovereign. In one of the fragmented texts composed during the Collège years (collected by the editor Denis Hollier under the title “The Structure and Function of the Army”), Bataille offers an analysis of the military aesthetics and its reliance on sacred emblems:

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<sup>210</sup> Jansen, 590.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid.

<sup>212</sup> Ohnuki-Tierney, 72.

In order to firmly fix a correct and formal realization of this common fervor, the army groups its soldiers around a sacred emblem in the same way that a church clusters the houses that form a village around it. Most often this emblem is an object, colors, or a flag; it can also be a person (such as the noble maiden accompanying the nomads of Arabia into battle on a richly adorned camel). A leader can also have played the part of emblem regardless of his action as one who leads. These emblematic leaders and persons, these ensigns and flags are treated as the analogue of a soul by the body possessing them: It is better to die than have it taken away by the enemies. And conversely, it is *easy* to die for this conquering soul so eager for conquests.<sup>213</sup>

Undoubtedly, on this point Bataille's thought once again displays a marked proximity to Lacanian psychoanalysis: What is this sacred emblem that gives meaning to military enterprises (so much so that it is better to perish than be deprived of this emblem) if not *the master signifier* which, according to Lacan, "assures the unity ... of the subject's copulation with knowledge."<sup>214</sup> One could illustrate the process whereby the master signifier ensures the insertion of the subject into the field of knowledge with the aforementioned example of the rituals designed to induce the 'conversion' of Leftist intellectuals. In order to possess any meaning at all, these rituals presupposed the existence of the master signifier ('Japanese spirit' or 'motherland') embodied in symbols of national identity (hence references to 'mother,' offerings of traditional Japanese food, etc.) Perhaps no one illuminates the relationship between the master signifier and sacred emblems better than Jacques-Alain Miller:

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<sup>213</sup> Georges Bataille, "The Structure and Function of the Army," in *The College of Sociology* (1937-39), ed. Denis Hollier, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 142.

<sup>214</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XX: Encore, On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge 1972-1972*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998), 143. A path-breaking and convincing attempt to mobilize the concept of the master signifier in political theory can be found in Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London and New York: Verso, 1985, 2001), 112. "If the social does not manage to fix itself in the intelligible and instituted forms of a *society*, the social only exists, however, as an effort to construct that impossible object. Any discourse is constituted as an attempt to dominate the field of discursivity, to arrest the flow of differences, to construct a centre. We will call the privileged discursive points of this partial fixation, *nodal points*. (Lacan has insisted on these partial fixations through his concept of *points de capiton*, that is, of privileged signifiers that fix the meaning of a signifying chain. This limitation of the productivity of the signifying chain establishes the positions that make predication possible—a discourse incapable of generating any fixity of meaning is the discourse of the psychotic.)"



Constantine saw in a dream the sign of the cross, and received the promise that he would be victorious if he placed it on his banners: ‘*In hoc signo vinces*’ [‘with this sign you will vanquish’]. We owe the Christian Empire to that. You will agree that the image is a beautiful and memorable one; let us transpose it for the case of discourse. Every discourse, or at least every discourse which recruits, thus proposes its Constantinian sign – in a word, that *in the name of which* one speaks. Have I sufficiently prepared you now for the concept ‘master signifier’?<sup>215</sup>

Miller goes on to explain that the subject depends on the master signifier to possess a stable identity but, as the passage above demonstrates, the master signifier also confers meaning on larger collective enterprises when it comes to be elevated to the status of sacred symbol.<sup>216</sup>

Bataille’s point concerning the significance of the sacred emblem in military aesthetics is highly relevant to understanding the Japanese emperor’s relation to the military nationalism of the 1930’s. Indeed, it is precisely through the mediation of the sacred emblem, the emperor qua Father-God, that the military figures such as Araki hoped to accomplish the project of a spiritual reinvigoration of ethnic community. For such a nationalist enterprise to thrive, the emperor had to be stripped of real political power and reduced to the symbolic emblem—the mythical figure of paternal authority bestowing a sense of cohesion upon the community, each member of which could feel like part of a tightly bound family and possess the consciousness of “I am a Japanese.”

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<sup>215</sup> Jacques-Alain Miller, introduction to *Television*, by Jacques Lacan, trans. Denis Hollier, Rosalind Krauss, and Annette Michelson (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1990), xxviii.

<sup>216</sup> In the case of Nazi Germany, the place of sacred emblem was obviously occupied by the swastika. Like the cherry blossoms associated with the imperial myth, the swastika too referred to sacrifice. Commenting on the failed coup d’état (the Beerhall Putsch) of November 9, 1923, Theweleit writes: “On that November 9, Rossbach and Killinger were in action with Hitler in Munich. Lieutenant Ehrhardt stood with his troops at the Bavarian border, ready to march on Berlin. At the last minute, however, his ally, Bavarian Prime Minister Kahr, defected (under pressure from the army). Ehrhardt’s troops never marched. Shots were fired at the putschists, whose ranks included Ludendorff. The ‘movement’ claimed its first sixteen martyrs and acquired a cult object: the swastika flag carried in the putsch was raised to the status of a ‘blood banner.’ Throughout the 1920s, the seal would be set on SA initiations by the touching of that banner in solemn, often nocturnal rituals.” Theweleit, 22.

Furthermore, the sacred status of the Emperor was mobilized as a justification for sacrifice; it was, simply put, something to die for. In 1882, before the burgeoning of military nationalism, the Japanese government planned and issued the Imperial Rescript to Soldiers and Sailors (*Gunjin Chokuyu*) which included the following clause: “the obligation is heavier than the mountains but death is lighter than a feather.” Is there a better illustration of Bataille’s thesis that dying for a sacred emblem is *easy*? Whereas the symbolic debt to the Emperor qua Father-God is inexhaustible (just as, according to psychoanalytic theory, the subject’s debt to the symbolic father, e.g., the dead father in Freud’s *Totem and Taboo*, cannot ever be repaid), the moment of sacrifice in the name of the Emperor comes as a relief whereby the subject comes to absolve himself from the impossible duty to the leader.

This brief preamble on the status of the emperor in the Meiji Era Japan is, therefore, necessary to comprehend the psychological structure of fascism (in accordance with theoretical principles elaborated by Bataille). It is also necessary in order to answer the questions posed by Deleuze and Guattari: How does desire come to willingly desire repression? How does the fascist movement arouse this desire and manipulate it to serve its ends? Ohnuki-Tierney poses a very similar question in her discussion of Japanese student soldiers who joined the *tokkōtai* (*kamikaze*) operations at the end of World War II. She refuses to perceive them as unthinking pawns in the military game, blinded by the nationalistic and xenophobic ideology. Instead, she shows the *tokkōtai* pilots to be highly educated individuals, well-versed in Western philosophy, familiar with Marxism, and even critical of totalitarian regimes. The central question thus becomes: How and why do such individuals sacrifice themselves for the country? In her study, she sets out to “seek explanations for the remarkable fact that these bright young men – many Marxists, or Christians, and all highly educated – did not fight against their government but were

so patriotic as to sacrifice themselves for their country. In doing so, they reproduced the emperor-centered military ideology in their action, though not in their thoughts. In order to explore this phenomenon, I distinguish the patriotism of *pro patria mori*—to die for one’s country—that was espoused by individual pilots, from the political nationalism that was fostered from above and that promoted *pro rege et patria mori* – to die for emperor/king and country.”<sup>217</sup> At this point, I wish to argue that the fascist war-machine succeeds in capturing and accelerating the desire of the masses the moment it effects a conversion of patriotic attachments into nationalistic sentiments. As Ohnuki-Tierney suggests, this conversion is accomplished by means of elaborate rituals and the deployment of symbols—the whole aesthetics of militarism—designed precisely to propagate the myth of sacred sovereignty.

Aestheticization facilitated *méconnaissance*, a common phenomenon in symbolic communication in which actors fail to recognize that they are reading different meanings of the same symbol. The pilots endorsed the aesthetics of Japanese nature, and of cherry blossoms as a dominant symbol of nature, without realizing how these symbols were locked into the *pro rege et patria mori* ideology. Neither side – pilots or the state – was fully aware of the phenomenon. The young men found aesthetics in the purity of devotion to their country without realizing that such devotion was exactly what the state wanted so that they would die for the emperor qua Japan – not *their* Japan, but imperial Japan.<sup>218</sup>

Following Bataille’s discussion of military aesthetics, I already noted that the Emperor’s status qua sacred emblem serves as the condition of possibility for sacrifice. As one *tokkōtai* pilot proclaimed, “I shall fall happily for the emperor like a cherry petal.”<sup>219</sup> If, as Bataille maintains, it is *easy* to submit to self-sacrifice in the name of the emblematic leader, it is all the more so when the emblem in question is overdetermined, when the leader stands in for the cherished Japanese values and embodies the national spirit.

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<sup>217</sup> Ohnuki-Tierney, 7.

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

Now, using Deleuzian-Guattarian terms, one could argue that the myth of national ‘spirit’ serves as the focal point of attraction bringing together various microfascist flows, which come to resonate together along the line of flight. This line of flight, as Deleuze and Guattari write, is also a line of death leading ineluctably towards suicide. Having only absolute deterritorialization as its goal, it demands nothing but pure destruction and sacrificial violence: “Why is the line of flight a war one risks coming back from defeated, destroyed, after having destroyed everything one could? This, precisely, is the fourth danger: the line of flight crossing the wall, getting out of the black holes, but instead of connecting with other lines and each time augmenting its valence, *turning to destruction, abolition pure and simple, the passion of abolition*. Like Kleist’s line of flight, and the strange war he wages; like suicide, double suicide, a way out that turns the line of flight into a line of death.”<sup>220</sup> One can hardly dismiss the relevance of this analysis to the theorization of fascism. Griffin discerns the seductive pull that the suicidal line of flight (needless to say he does not use this term) exercised on the artistic avant-gardes of the late 19<sup>th</sup> - early 20<sup>th</sup> century. “We are rising to the divine or plunging, plunging into night and destruction – but there is no standing still,” declares Austrian writer Hermann Bahr 1890.<sup>221</sup> In the sphere of politics, the suicidal line of flight manifested itself in calls for direct action and, to quote Italian fascist Giovanni Gentile, demands for “greatness at any price, at the cost of any sacrifice.”<sup>222</sup> Even more relevant to the present discussion is the argument put forward by Mayer in the aforementioned lecture on “The Rituals of Political Associations in Germany of the Romantic Period.” He draws on Hermann Rauschning’s *The Revolution of Nihilism (Die Revolution der Nihilismus; Kulisse und Wirklichkeit im dritten Reich, 1938)* to emphasize “the nihilist character of all the policies of the Third Reich: the absence of a real program, real myths, integral values.

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<sup>220</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 229.

<sup>221</sup> Griffin, 5.

<sup>222</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

It reveals the art for art's sake of dynamism, a dynamism 'in itself,' moving in a vacuum, with neither its aim nor its necessity understood."<sup>223</sup> Mayer accepts Rauschning's thesis up to the point: the fascist war machine does move along a suicidal line of flight inasmuch as it embraces politics of pure destruction for the sake of dynamism ("dynamism in itself" being nothing other than absolute deterritorialization). "Their [fascists'] ideal is activism, whether in its pure form as dynamism, art for art's sake, a voluptuous pleasure in destruction, or in the form of an antireasoning, irrational, mythic nationalism inspired by images of the battle for the Reich, the final Reich."<sup>224</sup> He supplements this thesis, however, by noting that fascists are not entirely nihilistic for some of them are "sincerely and eagerly affected by the enchantment of magic formulas." In other words, if the fascist war machine succeeds in arousing the masses' desire for annihilation, it does so through the aid of sacred symbols and rituals. Mayer emphasizes that, even though Hitler and other Nazi leaders did not invent these rituals and symbols, they nonetheless possessed a real flair for culling them from the annals of German history and endowing them with a second life: "National socialism has created, invented, nothing in the way of symbols, but it has known how to use what already existed. It could signal certain half-conscious, almost-erased residues, to raise them, bring them back to life, and expand them."<sup>225</sup> In order to pull the nation down a suicidal path, the fascist leader had to reinvigorate "the visionary power of the imperial myth" in all its majesty.

The relevance of the Deleuzian-Guattarian analysis of fascism must not be limited to the European situation, however, for it has undeniable bearing on the study of Japanese nationalism of the 1930s. Jansen writes that, beginning with the late 1920s, Japan had witnessed a proliferation of "currents of perverted ultranationalism" as well as "new and frequently lethal

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<sup>223</sup> Mayer, 267.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid., 269.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid., 265.

form of factionalism developed through associations formed by classmates of the military academy.”<sup>226</sup> One such militant, responsible for the 1932 assassination of the Prime Minister Inukai Tsuyoshi (who waged an effort to control the military and thus posed a threat to nationalists), made the following declaration at his trial: “We thought about destruction first. We never considered taking on the duty of reconstruction.”<sup>227</sup> As in the case of their German counterparts, Japanese nationalists could not carry out their destructive work without some sacred emblem with the power to inspire acts of destruction and self-sacrifice. The *tokkōtai* pilots had to have their divine emperor to die for as well as the sacred emblem of cherry blossoms to symbolize the heroic status and purity of sacrificial violence.<sup>228</sup>

### ***Fighting Elegy***

During the rise of nationalism in the 1930s, Japan had witnessed a proliferation of multiple microfascist currents—military nationalism, agrarian fascism, school fascism designed at instilling national consciousness in Japanese youth—which did not add up to form a cohesive fascist movement but nonetheless played a role in propelling the nation towards the catastrophic events of World War II.<sup>229</sup> Suzuki’s film *Fighting Elegy* examines one particular current of microfascism, namely pack fascism. The film’s protagonist, Kiroku, is a willful and rebellious youth who questions the values of his schoolteachers and refuses to be bullied by his peers. At the beginning of the film, he is not yet a member of any local gang in his native Okayama. When confronted by a group of other schoolchildren who propose to show him how to fight but want to

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<sup>226</sup> Jansen, 595.

<sup>227</sup> Ibid.

<sup>228</sup> Ohnuki-Tierney, 13. “The ‘equal right’ to the Japanese soul and, consequently, to death was aestheticized by the symbolism of cherry blossoms, which successive governments used as the master trope to encourage soldiers to fight to the death.”

<sup>229</sup> Ibid., 109. Ohnuki-Tierney points out that militarist ideology was targeting the Japanese youth in particular. “Indeed, the 1930s saw the ascendancy of unbridled militarism. It was certainly no accident that the institution of the so-called ‘boy pilots’ was instituted in 1934. In 1937, a song was composed for the navy cadets of that year, which became very popular. It portrayed the cadets as scattering like falling cherry blossoms that would be reborn as blooming cherry blossoms at the Yasukuni Shrine, where the emperor would pay homage.”

rough him up first, he responds with mocking politeness and then skillfully fights off the group's leader. Shortly after the incident, however, he proceeds to enter into a number of alliances with the local hoodlums, partly to protect himself from aggression but perhaps most importantly to teach himself discipline and acquire fighting skills. Kiroku's first partnership is formed around a religious bond: he befriends an older boy from his Catholic church and together they swear to brotherhood. Kiroku's Christianity is highly significant and hardly coincidental given the fact that many young militants in Japan of the 1930's found inspiration in Christian beliefs. In particular, Ohnuki-Tierney notes, the *tokkōtai* pilots turned to Christianity to find the meaning of sacrifice. Curiously, Kiroku frequently laments and denounces his sexual desires in his prayers but he does not perceive his violent inclinations and his passion for fighting as a sin.

Following his pact with the Catholic boy (who goes by the nickname 'Turtle'), Kiroku undergoes a series of painful rituals designed to test his endurance and make him stronger. While most of the film's action unfolds in the rather squalid settings of small-town neighborhoods, the training sequence takes place in a forest and has the dreamy quality of classic *jidaigeki* films, Japanese period dramas that flourished during the 1950s and still enjoyed considerable popularity at the time Suzuki directed *Fighting Elegy*. Shot in soft focus to accentuate the luminosity of the rays of sunlight peeking through the tree branches, the scene depicts Turtle dressed in a traditional Japanese garment, wielding a bamboo sword, and playing the part of experienced master (*sensei*) giving lessons to his unskilled but enthusiastic disciple. One could easily make a claim that Suzuki, who belonged to a younger generation of Japanese New Wave filmmakers, was consciously referencing older masters such as Kurosawa and Mizoguchi in the same manner that his French contemporaries, Godard and Truffaut, frequently made allusions to Sam Fuller and Jacques Tati. Given the historical context of the narrative, however, one is

perhaps justified in claiming that the scene was intended to invoke the myth of Japanese spirit that motivated the rise of various military factions and nationalist movements in Japan of the 1930's. One can then see Turtle as a prototypical military leader with a special talent for re-presenting the myth of Japanese warrior and thus capturing the desire and imagination of militant youths.

Around the same time, Kiroku also joins a group of hoodlums at his Okayama Middle School, the OSMS gang. The group possesses a number of traits addressed in Deleuze and Guattari's discussion of the nomadic war machine. For instance, the OSMS members create their own hand-made weapons which Deleuze and Guattari differentiate from the arsenal of the State: "It is on lines of flight that new weapons are invented, to be turned against the heavy arms of the State."<sup>230</sup> Whereas the latter are standardized and mass-produced, the former presuppose invention. Furthermore, in contradistinction to the heaviness of soldiers' ammunition, the weapons created on the line of flight are light and, most importantly, *fast*. Following Virilio, Deleuze and Guattari insist that "the weapon invents speed" and, in particular, emphasize its "projective character."<sup>231</sup> Undoubtedly, the lightness of the weapons complements the mobility of gangs and packs as well as their secrecy. "Packs, bands, are groups of the rhizome type, as opposed to the arborescent type that centers around organs of power."<sup>232</sup> The heavy ammunition of the state army goes hand in hand with military planning; the troops tend to advance along the predetermined path and they fight their battles on the field chosen by their commanding officers. In contrast, a pack such as the OSMS gang can create disorder spontaneously, out of the blue, and start brawls pretty much anywhere: in a public school, at a local noodle shop, in a nearby

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<sup>230</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 204.

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*, 395. "As a first approximation, weapons have a privileged relation with projection. Anything that throws or is thrown is fundamentally a weapon, and propulsion is its essential moment."

<sup>232</sup> *Ibid.*, 358.



forest. The lightness of home-made weapons not only augments the gang's celerity and its ability to act spontaneously, but also allows it to move about in a clandestine manner. As Deleuze and Guattari insist, secrecy is essential to gangs, packs, and other formations of the war-machine type: "every secret society has its own mode of action, which is in turn secret; the secret society may act by influence, creeping, insinuation, oozing, pressure, or invisible rays; 'passwords' and secret languages."<sup>233</sup> *Fighting Elegy* offers a rather comical illustration of this principle: in order to identify its members, the OSMS gang invents secret passwords that are remarkably predictable (when challenged with the passcode "OS," the gang member must respond with "MS").

On one essential point, however, the gang depicted in *Fighting Elegy* differs from the nomadic war machine. Deleuze and Guattari again:

We certainly would not say that discipline is what defines a war machine: discipline is the characteristic required of armies after the State has appropriated them. The war machine answers to other rules. We are not saying that they are better, of course, only that they animate a fundamental indiscipline of the warrior, a questioning of hierarchy, perpetual blackmail by abandonment or betrayal, and a very volatile sense of honor, all of which, once again, impedes the formation of the State.<sup>234</sup>

Whereas the last sentence of this passage (I will come back to it in a moment) characterizes the OSMS gang rather well, the former point concerning discipline cannot be further from the truth. Kiroku, for instance, proudly submits himself to a strict discipline promoted by his gang. Indeed, insofar as his secret brotherhood appropriates and mimics those rules of conduct found in the State army, it may be worthwhile to turn once again to Bataille's analysis of military aesthetics in order to comprehend Kiroku's desire to belong in a paramilitary unit.

"I do not want to discuss any real army," writes Bataille. "What I shall express will, therefore, be no more than the mystique of the army that is inscribed within me as it is inscribed in the mind of the simplest of persons: a collection of beliefs and reactions that I hold in common

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<sup>233</sup> Ibid., 288.

<sup>234</sup> Ibid., 358.

with living men like myself.”<sup>235</sup> Like Bataille, Kiroku and his gang mates are also fascinated by “the mystique of the army,” viewing it as a way of collective existence sufficient unto itself rather than a functional military unit in the service of the State. Thus, I would like to temporarily depart from the Deleuzian-Guattarian interpretation that perceives the invention of weapons and the creation of secret passcodes as means of increasing the pack’s mobility and secrecy. After all, the film frequently depicts the OSMS gang’s efforts to follow military discipline as not only ineffectual but also as comic (one scene depicts Kiroku proudly marching the streets of his neighborhood with the passersby laughing at his stiff, solemn steps). Following Bataille, I propose to view these rituals of training, exercising, and weapons-making as ends in themselves. If there is any purpose to these rituals, it consists not in turning the pack into a skilled and efficient paramilitary unit, but in establishing intimate bonds between its members as well as in producing a sense of separation from a larger social body.

Men fighting is not enough to make an army: It is necessary, first of all, for the bonds and reactions that are formed in drilling to have profoundly changed their hearts, minds, and bodies. ... Within society the army thus forms before me a ‘constituted body,’ a world closed in on itself, different from the whole, different from the other ‘constituted bodies.’ It cannot be reduced to its function—which is war.<sup>236</sup>

In order to attain a sense of separation and distinction, Bataille notes, the army “parades itself before others and offers itself for their admiration.” He goes on to suggest that it develops a whole aesthetic of its own: in addition to inventing elaborate rituals and appropriating sacred emblems, it “adorns itself with bright uniforms and is led by a band to show off its brilliance and give rhythm to movements like those of a virile and austere ballet corps.”<sup>237</sup> Similarly, when the OSMS gang members set out to fight their rival opponents, they gather under flags and raise each other’s spirits with warlike cries.

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<sup>235</sup> Bataille, “The Structure and Function of the Army,” 139.

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

With respect to pomp, Kiroku outperforms his cronies: although his proud marching elicits ridicule rather than admiration from his neighbors, he manages to capture his schoolmates' appreciation when he breaks school rules and alters his student uniform by dispensing with the shoes and adding the eagle insignia to his jacket. Significantly, he indulges in this form of rebellion while attending a class on military instruction for male students, thus countering the official aesthetics of the State army with his own brand of military aesthetics. When reprimanded by his instructor, Kiroku points out that, since other military men get to display their shiny badges and stars, he too is entitled to wear them. His desire to wear military insignias (even at the price of corporeal punishment administered by his teachers) is not as incomprehensible as it may seem for, as Ohnuki-Tierney notes, "In every military, insignias are 'beautiful.' Military insignia are not just meaningful among soldiers but often serve an effective means to display their power to ordinary people."<sup>238</sup>

Throughout the film, Kiroku's rebellious attitude manifests itself not only in spontaneous outbursts of violence but also in highly codified practices and rituals. Thus, when he becomes a second in command of the OSMS gang, he lays down a series of rules and directives—to alter school uniforms, resist authority, avoid dealings with girls, derive satisfaction from rebellion—that paradoxically serve to enforce discipline and obedience amongst the gang members while, at the same time, demanding disobedience and revolt against authority. Thus, the relationship between the gang and the individual members exhibits an apparent contradiction: on the one hand, the gang offers its members freedom to vent their destructive urges and satisfy a thirst for violence (as Le Bon once argued), on the other hand, it demands an unconditional submission to the authority of the leader as well as to its specific rituals. Ernst Jünger's *Struggle as Inner*

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<sup>238</sup> Ohnuki-Tierney, 109.

*Experience (Kampf als inneres Erlebnis, 1922)* offers a remarkable illustration of this contradiction at work. I quote from Theweleit's commentary on this text:

'Young manhood was their only flame and intoxication,' says Jünger of those men who would not at any price be anything other than soldiers. As the leader loves his men, so the simple soldier loves his superior.... That type of bond, love for the leader, appears in one form or another in almost all of these [fascist or proto-fascist] writers. Love and battle: 'When blood whirled through the brain and pulsed through the veins as before a longed-for night of love, but far hotter and crazier ... The baptism of fire! The air was so charged then with an overwhelming presence of men that every breath was intoxicating, that they could have cried without knowing why. Oh, hearts-of-men, that are capable of feeling this!'<sup>239</sup>

What Theweleit discerns in the fascist thirst for annihilation is love, a passionate affection for the leader and other military men. Only through this unconditional submission to the leader and acceptance of the iron discipline of the military organization, does one get to enjoy the "flame and intoxication" of violence.

The above contradiction was addressed in Freud's *Group Psychology*, which not only reiterates Le Bon's claims apropos of the crowd's uninhibited violence but also adds a distinctly dialectical twist to the argument: the individual cannot discover the desired freedom to destroy and commit violence as a member of the pack without first acceding to the symbolic authority. Indeed, the subject's acceptance of indebtedness to paternal authority—that is to say, the subject's symbolic castration—constitutes the primary condition for his or her participation in the symbolic order. This Freudian characterization of the group, however, does not perfectly describe the power relations among the OSMS gang members. Thus, Kiroku does not merely rebel against the authority of teachers and drill officers, but also directs his passion for violence against his fellow gang members including the gang's leader. Indeed, the OSMS group does not exhibit sacred bonds between men, which Bataille and Caillois discern in secret societies, but rather confirms the Deleuzian-Guattarian thesis according to which the war machine is subject to

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<sup>239</sup> Theweleit, 60.

“perpetual blackmail by abandonment or betrayal.” Thus, whereas Kiroku’s relationship to Turtle remains that of brotherly loyalty, his relations with the fellow gang members are marred by conflict and mutual suspicion. The OSMS gang members maintain solidarity as long as there is an enemy in sight. On such occasions, the group provides Kiroku with an opportunity to unleash his aggression in a brawl and to indulge his passion for fighting. Still, even when an opportunity for a good fight presents itself, the OSMS group reveals itself as lacking in genuine leadership. When Kiroku and his superior in rank attack a member of a rival gang, the OSMS ringleader largely keeps out of the fight, leaves all the dirty work to Kiroku, and steps in only to bestow a kick in the gut on the already defeated opponent. At this point in the film, the hero has yet to find his true master, the kind who could embody symbolic authority and thus lend meaning and purpose to an otherwise destructive behavior.

In the absence of the enemy, matters become worse as gang members unleash violence upon one another. As Theweleit notes apropos of the Freikorps militants, “When an outside enemy is lacking or out of reach, armed male brotherhoods are liable quite literally to set about tearing each other apart.”<sup>240</sup> The theme of betrayal and backstabbing is quite common in the work of Suzuki, who became famous primarily for his gangster (*yakuza*) films that, incidentally, also focus on the gang phenomenon. Thus, while *Fighting Elegy* may appear as somewhat of an oddity in Suzuki’s oeuvre, a historical drama penned by a filmmaker known for highly stylized gangster films, it shares a number of themes with his other films, most notably the themes of loyalty to the gang and eventual betrayal by the gang. David Desser makes the same point apropos of Nagisa Oshima’s films, which also frequently depict youth gangs and yakuza groups. Speaking of Oshima’s *The Sun’s Burial* (*Taiyo no hakaba*, 1960), he argues that “it is precisely the gang, with its codes of loyalty and obeisance, which leads to the destruction of its members.

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<sup>240</sup> Theweleit, 21.

In Oshima's film, the youth gang is compared to the militarist band (gang), thus making it clear that the gang is a microcosm of a nation-state. What Oshima shows is that while the gang demands absolute loyalty from its members, the gang can, and does, betray an individual gangster."<sup>241</sup> Since Desser's study purports to approach "the films of the 1960s as expressions of cultural concerns in the 1960s," it is highly likely that, for him, the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty constituted the quintessential act of betrayal on the part of the nation-state which, in turn, inspired the trope of betrayal in Japanese New Wave cinema.<sup>242</sup> Given the historical context of the 1930s Japan depicted in *Fighting Elogy*, however, it is perhaps more appropriate to invoke once more the fallen *tokkōtai* pilots who displayed outmost fidelity to their nation and were, in a sense, betrayed by the state ('in a sense' because, while their self-sacrifice was voluntary, they were nonetheless manipulated into dying for the cause they didn't even support).

Desser's commentary on Oshima's film can very well be applied to a number of Suzuki's films. In *Kanto the Wanderer* (*Kanto mushuku*, 1963), for example, the disintegrating gang uses Kanto, the only gang member who abides by the yakuza code of honor and remains unflinching in his loyalty to the group, to make up for the mistakes of his cronies and assassinate the leader of a rival gang (the act for which he must go to prison at the end of the film). A lesser act of betrayal takes place in *Fighting Elogy* to produce a largely comic effect. One evening, Kiroku and Michiko, a girl he secretly loves, take a walk along a quiet street. It is springtime and cherry blossom trees are in full bloom. This peaceful and romantic scene is rudely interrupted by the

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<sup>241</sup> Desser, 52.

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*, 3. The Japan-U.S. Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security was signed on January 19, 1960, and immediately provoked a wave of student protest movements. The chief bone of contention had to do with the U.S. military presence in Okinawa. Desser draws attention to this historical background which he regards as crucial to understanding the political dimension of Japanese New Wave film: "Thus we might conclude that if there was no conscious movement, no formal announcement as such, on the part of the handful of younger Japanese directors to create a 'New Wave,' the combination of the culture's interest in youth, the backgrounds of the young directors, the particular characteristics of the Japanese film industry, and the massive protests surrounding the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty renewal conspired, in a sense, to bring about a new look, form, and feel to the Japanese cinema." (47)

intrusion of a fellow gang member who is superior to Kiroku in rank. Since the OSMS rules prohibit romantic involvements with girls, the gang leader becomes suspicious at the sight of Kiroku holding hands with Michiko. Although Kiroku attempts to divert suspicions by pretending to be Michiko's brother, the gang leader grasps the truth and chastises Kiroku, promising him punishment in the future. Nonetheless, the leader quickly reveals his hypocrisy when, after pushing Kiroku aside, he starts flirting with Michiko and invites her to join him for a bowl of ramen. The following day, Kiroku arrives at the OSMS headquarters to apologize but his pals brush off the apology and threaten him with the mace. Having anticipated this turn of events, Kiroku calls for his back up, Turtle, and together the two fight their way out of the door.

This incident is interesting not merely as an example of rivalry and backstabbing among the gang members, but also as an illustration of a vehement rejection of femininity by the members of gangs, brotherhoods, and other exclusively male societies. While Kiroku refuses to accept punishment from his mates because he clearly perceives their hypocrisy as well as their heedlessly stubborn refusal to accept an apology, he nonetheless fully accepts the gangster's rule: it is shameful to associate with girls. Theweleit discerns a strikingly similar attitude towards women among the German Freikorps: "Denial of women is only natural, and therefore worthy. Dwinger plays dumb by having his warrior Pahlen philosophize: 'Freikorps men aren't almost all bachelors for nothing. Believe me, if there weren't so many of them, our ranks would be pretty damn thin!' 'Believe me' is an order; it demands that anyone who wants to join the troops should leave women behind. The men one meets there don't need women."<sup>243</sup> In particular, Theweleit refers to one episode from the autobiography of Lieutenant Ehrhardt, which possesses an almost uncanny similarity to the aforementioned scene from *Fighting Elegy*:

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<sup>243</sup> Theweleit, 34. Edwin Erich Dwinger was a German novelist and the author of *Auf halbem Wege (Halfway)* from which Theweleit quotes in the above passage.

In an account of his days in the army, Lieutenant Ehrhardt recounts how he once succeeded in exposing a navigation officer who pretended to be a paragon of virtue. Sailing along in a boat one night ('We were shooting birds in the moonlight'), he spots the 'noble paragon' in another boat with a Swedish girl. 'From that point on, his reputation was ruined,' he writes, adding that 'some have a passion for hunting and others for other things.' If the episode was humiliating for the other man, for Ehrhardt it is a tale of triumphant revenge.<sup>244</sup>

The resemblance between the two episodes is indeed remarkable: like the disgraced "noble paragon," Kiroku too feels utterly embarrassed, all the more so since, just a moment before the intrusion, he displayed obvious weakness when he nervously hesitated to take Michiko's hand. How can he, 'Fighting Kiroku' (as some of his friends call him), who fearlessly battled and defeated entire gangs, appear faint-hearted in the presence of a mere girl?<sup>245</sup> Nonetheless, the two episodes differ in one important detail: in Ehrhardt's autobiography, the incident is narrated not from the point of view of the romantic couple, but from the point of view of soldiers who suddenly intrude upon the romantic outing. Whereas in *Fighting Elegy*, it is the young hoodlum who rudely intrudes upon the couple, in the autobiographical episode, it is the couple which spoils the soldiers' intimate evening of male bonding (while "shooting birds in the moonlight"). Suzuki's film highlights brutality of the conflict between the individual's love and the militant's repudiation of the feminine: the scene concludes with the gang's leader angrily striking a branch of a cherry blossom tree with his stick and exiting the frame as the petals slowly fall down on the couple standing still. At this point in the film, cherry blossoms in full bloom function as a traditional symbol of femininity. "Ultimately, cherry blossoms celebrate love itself – an intense *relationship* between a man and a woman."<sup>246</sup> The young hoodlum's destruction of blooming cherry blossoms, however, serves to send the message to Kiroku and to reinforce the gang's law:

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<sup>244</sup> Ibid., 46-7.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid., 32. It is hard to resist making further comparisons to the fascist literature. Theweleit cites the following passage from Thor Goote's 'documentary novel' entitled *Comrade Berthold*: "A woman ... My comrades would probably laugh if they knew how I agonize over a young thing who has just left the family nest!"

<sup>246</sup> Ohnuki-Tierney, 33, 39.



there is no place for soft romantic feelings in the militant's heart. Most importantly, the scene's conclusion signals a mutation in the meaning of the sacred emblem. Indeed, during the militant 1930s, the symbol of cherry blossoms shed some of its more traditional associations with love and femininity and came to signify the splendor of self-sacrifice and loyalty to the emperor. As Ohnuki-Tierney points out, "complex and interpenetrated meanings, all embodied in the symbol of cherry blossoms with various degrees of physicality – various degrees of blooming and falling – became consolidated into 'falling cherry petals as young soldiers' sacrifice for the emperor' during Japan's modern period."<sup>247</sup> In particular, *Fighting Elegy* dramatizes the transformation of the *blooming* cherry blossoms (symbol of love and purity of the Japanese soul) into the *falling* cherry blossoms (symbol of life's impermanence and sacrificial death)—the transformation accompanying the substitution of militaristic nationalism for traditional Japanese patriotism.

The narrative of *Fighting Elegy* mimics other, more troubling aspects of fascist literature. Theweleit has the following to say apropos of a disturbing tendency to eliminate the already marginalized female characters from the fascist narratives: "Relationships with women are dissolved and transformed into new male attitudes, into political stances, revelations of the true path, etc. As the women fades out of sight, the contours of the male sharpen; that is the way in which the fascist mode of writing often proceeds."<sup>248</sup> When the fascist narrative does make room for a romantic relationship, the latter serves merely as an interlude, a temporary respite from the experience of violent struggle (with fellow men). Compared with the latter experience, Theweleit suggests, amorous affair with a woman pales in its intensity and its capacity to arouse men's passions. When he describes the exclusion of women from the ranks of military organizations, he certainly does not mean to suggest that the fascist militants denounced every expression of

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<sup>247</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>248</sup> Theweleit, 35.

passion and desire in favor of carefully calculated strategy and strict discipline. I have already cited his discussion of Jünger who speaks of “flame and intoxication” experienced in combat. At another point in *Struggle as Inner Experience*, Jünger describes a one night stand with a married working-class woman, whom he met during a temporary break from warfare (“an hour of oblivion stolen from the war”). Following this brief amorous encounter, “he slips from the world of his desexualized idyll to the Eros of warfare.”<sup>249</sup> Far from awakening the militant’s desire, an affair with a woman provides “an hour of oblivion stolen from the war” (as Jünger himself puts it), which temporarily sets desire at rest.

Something remarkably similar happens in *Fighting Elegy*. While Kiroku himself does not view his love for Michiko as a temporary means of relaxation, his rare displays of affection for her inevitably precede particularly violent episodes. It is hard to resist the temptation of invoking the Freudian concept of sublimation when discussing this film. Desser does just that when he writes that Kiroku “sublimates his sexual desires and uses the energy in outburst of violence, delivered in typically high style and humor by Suzuki.”<sup>250</sup> I do not wish to suggest that Desser’s observation lacks merit; on the contrary, Suzuki’s film self-consciously invites such an interpretation. For example, in one scene Kiroku watches Michiko play piano. Visibly moved by her performance but unable to summon enough courage to touch her, he steps out into the bright sunlight of the street where he immediately proceeds to fight a couple of hoodlums (the scene has a delirious quality which suggests that Kiroku merely fantasizes about the brawl as a way of venting his sexual frustration). While keeping in mind Desser’s commentary, one can suggest an alternative reading of such dramatic alternations of tenderness and violence. Following Theweleit’s analysis of fascist aesthetic, one can thus invert the logic of sublimation and argue

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<sup>249</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>250</sup> Desser, 70.

that, for Kiroku, fighting is not a mere substitute for lovemaking but rather his first “true love.” As a source of *jouissance*, the experience of violent struggle is, at once, exhilarating and excruciatingly intense. Instead of adding greater intensity to the militant’s passion, romantic love functions as an interlude that offers a brief relief from the overwhelming pleasures of fighting.

Shortly after the incident at school during which Kiroku gets in trouble for adding insignia to his school uniform, he leaves Okayama and moves to the more provincial Aizu area. Forced to live apart from his beloved Michiko, he becomes increasingly violent and rebellious towards school authorities. Indeed, with the woman now absent from his life, he discovers his true calling and turns into a “born fighter” (as the film’s Japanese title puts it) and not the inexperienced hooligan he once was. After entering a new school, Kiroku wastes no time and quickly puts together a new gang over which he assumes complete leadership. At this point, he is no longer content with mere training exercises and other rituals designed to mimic military practices. Earlier in the film, Kiroku almost had his opportunity to partake in a full-on battle between his OSMS group and another rival gang from Okayama. Unfortunately for him, the battle ended prematurely due to the arrival of his uncle who scared the hoodlums off by donning a police uniform. Now, as the leader of a newly-founded Aizu gang, Kiroku finally gets to satisfy his thirst for violence in a prolonged combat with a much more numerous local gang, the Showa White Tigers Brigade, over which he emerges victorious.<sup>251</sup>

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<sup>251</sup> It should be noted that the Showa White Tigers Brigade use primarily traditional Japanese weapons such as kendo swords and bows and arrows. One should recall, once again, Deleuze and Guattari’s observation on the nomadic formations’ preference for light weapons in contradistinction to heavy firearms. One must also keep in mind that numerous paramilitary factions of the 1930s self-consciously repudiated the use of Western weaponry in accordance with their anti-Western sentiments. Thus, the use of traditional weaponry ought to be perceived as part and parcel of a larger ambition to reinvent the myth of Japanese spirit. Jansen points out, for example, that a number of nationalist militants of this period insisted that the goal of imperial expansionism in East Asia must be accomplished without the aid of heavy firearms because Japanese soldiers had enough “spirit” in them to defeat the enemy. These opponents of modernization “argued that since Japan’s continental enemies did not have technological superiority they should be opposed by conventional forces steeped in Japan’s indomitable spirit and trained for sudden attack....Those who placed their hopes in ‘spirit’ rather than in modernization formed the nucleus of what

Even though Kiroku continually thinks of Michiko during this period and sends her touching love letters, the film does not conclude with the reunion of the romantic couple. Michiko visits Kiroku briefly but only to tell him of the mysterious illness which, she claims, will prevent her from ever becoming a wife. After the two finally declare love to each other, Michiko flees from Aizu with the intention of joining a convent. In contrast to the earlier romantic scene that took place during springtime, the scene of Michiko's departure unfolds in wintertime. The winter is harsh and, needless to say, it allows for no blooming cherry blossoms. As Michiko follows a narrow path leading out of Aizu, she struggles to walk against an icy winter wind sending snowflakes flying into her face. On her way, she passes a column of soldiers marching in a manner that brings to mind Kiroku's comical, exaggeratingly solemn steps from one of the early scenes depicting his attempts to follow military rituals. The soldier's strict adherence to discipline does not permit them to slow down or make way for a struggling woman. Pushed aside, Michiko stumbles and falls on the ground. The scene concludes with the close-up shot of a rosary that falls from Michiko's hand and is trampled into the snow under the soldiers' heavy boots. The shot allows for at least two interpretations that are not mutually exclusive. On the one hand, the crucifix lost in the snow signals the prevailing anti-Western attitude of the Japanese imperialism of the 1930s and the attendant rejection of Christianity in favor of the "state Shintoism."<sup>252</sup> On the other hand, it connotes the self-sacrifice of the Japanese youth in the service of military nationalism and, in particular, the sacrifice of women so that their men may find their true calling and realize the destiny of national community. Both interpretations are

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became known as the Imperial Way (*kōdō ha*) faction. Araki Sadao (1877-1966), whose obscurantism muddied the waters throughout the 1930s, became a spokesman for this persuasion." Jansen, 594.

<sup>252</sup> Ohnuki-Tierney, 90. "The creation of national shrines was accompanied by the persecution of other religious beliefs and practices. In 1870 an imperial edict was issued to promote Shintoism and to eliminate 'foreign religions' (*gaikyō*) that had 'plagued' the nation since the medieval period, with Buddhism as the prime target but Confucianism and Christianity as targets as well."

reinforced through the dissolve which accomplishes a transition from the close-up shot of the cross to another close-up shot of the military star, which opens the following scene. Once again, this transition can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, the military emblem appears to negate the religious symbol of Christianity (which, furthermore, connotes an intimate bond between Kiroku and Michiko). On the other hand, it must be noted that the transitional dissolve does not only supplant one shot with another but also joins them together (indeed, it briefly superimposes one shot upon another). In this way, the dissolve effectively dramatizes Bataille's thesis according to which the fascist form of power *joins* the sacred force with military strength. Although the nationalist ideologues appeared to do everything in their power to eliminate every trace of foreign religious influence from Japanese culture, they did, in fact, refashion this same culture by drawing on elements of Christianity such as the idea of God the Father and Christ as model of sacrifice.<sup>253</sup>

The scene of Michiko's departure (I hesitate to say death since it is never explicitly depicted) as well as the previously discussed incident involving her outing with Kiroku disrupted by the OSMS gang leader bring to mind the dominant trend in the post-war Japanese representations of femininity. As Lisa Yoneyama and Adam Lowenstein point out, Japan's construction of a collective memory of the wartime experience involved a production of gendered identities in literature and cinema. Whereas women were frequently represented as blameless victims, Japanese men assumed the burden of responsibility for rampant nationalism and military aggression. Thus exculpated from involvement in the nation's military expansionism, the Japanese woman emerged as a victim in double sense: the victim of aggression perpetrated by male militants and the victim of the atomic bomb that put an end to

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<sup>253</sup> Ibid., 255-9. "I select the refashioning of the emperor as God the Father after the model in Christianity. The idea was suggested by von Stein and adopted by the Meiji oligarchs." "The state focused on its main goal – the construction of the notion of sacrifice for the emperor as an ancient tradition."

Japan's involvement in World War II. Lowenstein describes "a pronounced shift in postwar Japanese cultural representation that covers over Japan's pre-Hiroshima imperial aggressions in favor of post-Hiroshima national victimhood, where national iconic images of the militarized male are replaced with images of the blameless, self-sacrificing maternal female. Through such a substitution, Yoneyama explains, 'postwar Japanese womanhood became fully implicated in sustaining the myth of national innocence and victimology.' Central to this myth are figures such as the Japanese 'A-bomb maiden,' a tragic young heroine suffering from atomic-related illness."<sup>254</sup> While the narrative of *Fighting Elegy* unfolds long before the atomic bomb explosion of 1945, Michiko certainly fits the profile of the "A-bomb maiden" who embodies youthful beauty and innocence and stands for traditional cultural values untainted by the influence of military nationalism. She continually questions Kiroku's obsession with virility, at times laughing at his preoccupation with military training, at other times treating his violent predisposition with sad seriousness. Her love of music is contrasted with his passion for fighting. Even her mysterious illness (never fully explained in the film) recalls the symptoms of radiation illness, which must have appeared as new and inexplicable to the real victims of explosion. In the end, she attempts to separate from the world of escalating militarism and join the convent, thus maintaining her feminine virtue and chastity, whereas Kiroku's obsession with virility comes to overshadow both his love and his religion. She fails to accomplish even this peaceful act of withdrawal, however, as she falls victim to violence at the hands of her own countrymen.

Seen as a reflection of postwar representations of femininity, *Fighting Elegy* undoubtedly appears as a reactionary effort to dilute Japan's responsibility for its imperialist aggression and resuscitate the myth of the pure Japanese 'spirit' (this time coded feminine)—that is to say, the

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<sup>254</sup> Adam Lowenstein, *Shocking Representation: Historical Trauma, National Cinema, and the Modern Horror Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 86.

very myth that was deployed by fascist ideologues to justify military expansionism. I would argue, however, that Suzuki's film incorporates the trope of feminine victimhood not in order to safeguard the myth of Japanese spirit but to mimic and critically interrogate the structure of fascist fiction. Thus, Michiko's demise accompanies a number of substitutions. Apart from the aforementioned mutation in the symbolism of cherry blossoms (cherry blossoms as the symbol of imperialism supplanting its former significance as the symbol of love), her demise allows for Kiroku's new love to flourish. Following his departure from Okayama, his love for a woman gives ways to love for the leader. This time, Kiroku encounters someone dramatically different from the inept ringleader of the OSMS gang—the genuine leader who could lend a meaning and a purpose to his passion for violence. This master is Kita Ikki, a mastermind behind the Outline Plan for the Reorganization of Japan (*Nihon kaizo hoan taiko*) and an author of several influential works of political theory that had inspired the failed coup d'état of February 26, 1936 (*ni-ni-roku*). Like other nationalists of the period, Kita aspired to restore Japan's spirit but, in contradistinction to those militants opposed to modernization, he wished to reinvent the idea of national essence (*kokutai*) in accordance with the principles of national socialism. Thus, his revolutionary politics aimed to curb private greed by limiting rights to private property and Kiroku's fascination with Kitta is anticipated by his relationship with the principal of Aizu Middle School. Like Kiroku himself, the principal harbors an admiration for skilled fighters as well as a disregard for official school rules. Thus, he happily overlooks Kiroku's misconduct since the victory over the Showa White Tigers brigade brings glory to his school. Although the official school rules prize the importance of being seemly, the principal congratulates the young delinquent on his propensity for violence and invites him to partake in the kendo sword fight right in the middle of his office. Desser's perceptive observations on the link between the

Japanese educational system and Japanese nationalism help to illuminate the significance of this rather marginal character to Suzuki's critique of militarism: "Suzuki thereby demonstrates that an educational system which encourages violence and conformity to the group leads to the possibility of global adventurism and that, moreover, youthful idealism is easily swayed."<sup>255</sup> In many respects, the relationship between the principal and Kiroku serves as an analogy for that ambivalent relationship between the State and the war-machine. The principal chooses to disregard the student's transgressions only as long as they serve his interests and boost the prestige of his school, just as the State tolerates the terrorists' actions for as long as their crimes are committed in the name of the nation or the emperor.

Like the principal, Kita not only encourages young men's passion for violence, but also knows how to manipulate it to serve his political ends. Nonetheless, he stands for an entirely different figure of the master, not comparable to servants of the State (represented by the principle). Jansen describes him as "a true outsider to the social elite," who never occupied a significant government post and whose books were either promptly banned or heavily censored upon publication.<sup>256</sup> In the words of Bataille, Kita is the "heterogeneous" figure – that is to say, "heterogeneous" with respect to the State. Adopting the Deleuzian-Guattarian terminology, one could claim that the State mobilizes molecular lines to their advantage while, at the same time, keeping an eye on the preservation of rigid molar lines. It allows for deterritorialization but only with a view towards attendant reterritorialization. The fascist war-machine also relies on molecular lines to some extent (it extracts *affects* from them) but it moves on the line of flight and propels the State towards the suicidal path, the path of absolute deterritorialization. Kita is the figure of the war machine and, unlike the principal, he inspires the youth to commit the acts

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<sup>255</sup> Desser, 71.

<sup>256</sup> Jansen, 602.



of transgression that the State can no longer tolerate (Kita was one of six civilians executed for his involvement with the coup d'état).

In order to highlight the differences between Kita and the principal, it may be worthwhile to temporarily adopt the psychoanalytic perspective. Following Žižek's useful distinction between the (absent) symbolic father and the (present) obscene father, one could observe that the principal is the overly present father, prone to fits of excitement and unrestrained enthusiasm. He easily gives in to passion and goes as far as to break the rules he is supposed to uphold, all in the name of good fun. As opposed to the symbolic father *who knows* (*le sujet-supposé-savoir*), the principal is a rather simple-minded brute who only knows how to raise his voice at students in order to make his point. In contradistinction, Kita is an absent father who awakens Kiroku's revolutionary passion by literally doing nothing. Thus, he stands in for "the father who exerts his power as fundamentally *absent*, whose fundamental feature is not an open display of power but the threat of potential power."<sup>257</sup> The hero of *Fighting Elegy* first encounters his master in a café. In this scene, Kita exchanges only a few words with a girl who waits on customers and never addresses Kiroku directly. A thin and soft-spoken man, he stands in complete contrast to young hoodlums who also kill time in the same café, while looking for a good brawl to take place. Despite his quiet presence, Kita produces a powerful fascination on Kiroku, who immediately recognizes him as an outsider to the provincial town of Aizu. When Kiroku sees

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<sup>257</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!: Jacques Lacan In Hollywood and Out* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993, 2008), 180. My attempt to treat Kita as a stand in for the traditional symbolic father (the bearer of *nom-du-père*) may appear contradictory: Doesn't Kita, this revolutionary figure par excellence, epitomize the threat to the symbolic order rather than its guarantor? This question alone should inspire a separate essay so I do not purport to answer it fully in this footnote. Following Lacan's seminar on *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis* and Žižek's recent work, however, I interpret Kita's revolutionary enterprise as aiming at the creation of the new master signifier in order to reconfigure Japanese national identity and thus to produce the new symbolic order. Kita certainly did not aim at the complete destruction of the state; he aimed to "wipe the slate clean" (to borrow Žižek's favored expression) in order to rebuild a powerful corporate state in accordance with his program for national socialism. One could approach the same question in terms developed in Walter Benjamin's "On the Critique of Violence." Doesn't the 1936 revolt perfectly illustrate the principle of "mythical violence" according to which one power hierarchy is overturned only to be replaced with another power hierarchy?

Kita again, in the scene immediately following Michiko's demise, the latter is not even physically present. What Kiroku sees is the picture of Kita on a newsletter announcing the rebellion of February 26, 1936. At this sight of this still image, Kiroku finds himself completely mesmerized. Following this "encounter," the film's narrative swiftly progresses towards an abrupt finale: Kiroku announces to his friend that he must go to Tokyo, where he may propel himself into the epicenter of political turbulence and find glory in struggle that has a real cause attached to it (as opposed to the 'undirected' and spontaneous violence of small-town gangs). In the following scene, he boards a train out of Aizu and the film ends, leaving the viewer to ponder his future fate.

One can only guess what happens next. While Tadao Sato speculates that the "big fight" for Kiroku will be the Sino-Japanese war, Desser believes that it stands for nothing less than the World War II.<sup>258</sup> In any case, although Kiroku will miss the chance to meet his master and participate in the 1936 rebellion, following the failed coup d'état and Kita's execution, he will certainly have plenty of opportunities to put his passion for violence to work and jump on the bandwagon of some ultranationalist military enterprise. As Jansen notes, the attempted rebellion not only failed to dethrone those in power but actually strengthened the totalitarian state and accelerated the imperialist expansion in East Asia: "With this chapter, insubordination and violence on this scale now came to an end. The army high command became dominated by members of the faction dedicated to control and efficiency, bureaucrats and no longer ideologues. Abashed civilian ministers and the Imperial Diet granted the army huge budget increases, and within a year the China War turned attention abroad."<sup>259</sup> Kita and the rebels inspired by his work thus spearheaded a failed war machine, which undertook a radical

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<sup>258</sup> Desser, 70.

<sup>259</sup> Jansen, 599.

deterritorialization and, in the end, prompted an equally radical reterritorialization. Jansen quotes the following lines from General Ugaki's diary, which perfectly illustrate the short circuit between deterritorialization and reterritorialization: "How disgusting it is to watch these rascals, holding in one hand the matches and in the other the water hoses, setting fire and putting it out at the same time, inciting and purging young officers, pleading their cause and then claiming credit for having put them down."<sup>260</sup> This remarkable passage speaks volumes of the relationship between the State and the war machine: the former needs the latter to initiate deterritorialization in order to counter it with powerful reterritorialization.

In conclusion, I would like to underscore some similarities and differences between the youth gangs depicted in *Fighting Elegy* and secret societies discussed by Bataille and Caillois. Undoubtedly, Kiroku does not embody those sovereign qualities that Bataille never ceased to explore during his long and productive intellectual itinerary. In contradistinction to Bataille's "unemployed negativity," which cannot be subordinated to projects and which remains tied to the notion of inner experience (a kind of laceration that transpires in the subject), Kiroku's negativity allows itself to be captured by the nationalist enterprise and placed in the service of the fascist war machine. In his preamble to Caillois's lecture on "Brotherhoods, Orders, Secret Societies, Churches" (which the author could not deliver due to illness), Bataille draws a distinction between "the armed lout" and "the tragic man":

The first type is the armed lout who violently turns everything that excites him to the *outside*, who never allows for any inner conflict and looks on death as a source of external pleasure: Death, for the armed man, is above all what he is preparing for the enemy.

The second type is the tragic man who thinks throwing everything terrifying back onto others is a joke: The tragic man is essentially the one who becomes aware of human existence. He sees the violent and contradictory forces that stir him; he knows he is prey

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<sup>260</sup> Ibid.

to human absurdity, prey to the absurdity of nature, but he affirms this reality which has left him no outlet other than crime.<sup>261</sup>

This passage undoubtedly disqualifies the claims of those critics who perceive Bataille as a fascist (or proto-fascist) thinker. His conception of sovereignty cannot be equated with militarism, which puts negativity to work and accepts death of others as a fair price to pay for glorious ideals. The basic features of the sovereign can, in fact, be discerned in the figure of the tragic man who “cannot be subjugated under any circumstances,” whereas the armed lout is “only an available force, only a force in search of an *existence* to serve.”<sup>262</sup>

Nonetheless, one can also find some troubling similarities between gang fascism and elective communities formed on the basis of sacred bonds between men. The very term “brotherhood” used by Bataille and Caillois to designate an ideal type of elective community presupposes the exclusion of women. Undoubtedly, Bataille was aware that the fascist movement too demanded a similar repudiation of femininity. His colleague, Mayer, made this point clear in a lecture delivered at the Collège: “Woman is excluded, even despised, the symbol of life that is down to earth; the bonds are those of masculine order, of ‘Männerbund’ according to Blüher’s terminology.”<sup>263</sup> This point does not dissuade Bataille from unfolding an entire discourse on virility in the texts composed during the late 1930s. In “The Sorcerer’s Apprentice,” for example, he maintains that “the man who is scared by human destiny, and who cannot endure the linkage of greed, crimes, and misery cannot be virile.”<sup>264</sup> In *Guilty* (*Le Coupable*, 1944), a hybrid text located somewhere at the juncture of philosophical experimentation and autobiographical writing, he declares that inner experience—the experience of self-laceration and non-

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<sup>261</sup> Caillois, “Brotherhoods, Orders, Secret Societies, Churches,” 147.

<sup>262</sup> Ibid.

<sup>263</sup> Mayer, 269.

<sup>264</sup> Georges Bataille, “The Sorcerer’s Apprentice,” in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. and trans. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 224.

knowledge—must be virile: “To remain virile in the light demands the audacity of a mad ignorance: letting oneself catch fire, screaming with joy, expecting death—because of an unknown, unknowable presence; becoming love and blind light oneself, attaining the perfect incomprehension of the sun.”<sup>265</sup> Those men who are “aware of the tragic nature of their destiny” must be virile; women have no access to the tragic experience since they lack virility.

On this point, Deleuze and Guattari definitely part ways with Caillois and Bataille. The former effectively combat the “fascist inside” by repudiating the sort of virile rhetoric that frequently pervaded the presentations and discussions at the Collège de Sociologie. For Bataille and Caillois, one must renounce femininity and become virile in order to reach sovereignty; for Deleuze and Guattari, on the contrary, one must pass through becoming-woman in order to attain the power of the man of war:

Although all becomings are already molecular, including becoming-woman, it must be said that all becomings begin with and pass through becoming-woman. It is the key to all the other becomings. When the man of war disguises himself as a woman, flees disguised as a girl, hides as a girl, it is not a shameful, transitory incident in his life. To hide, to camouflage oneself, is a warrior function, and the line of flight attracts the enemy, traverses something and puts what it traverses to flight; the warrior arises in the infinity of a line of flight. Although the femininity of the man of war is not accidental, it should not be thought of as structural, or regulated by a correspondence of relations.... We have seen how the man of war, by virtue of his *furor* and his celerity, was swept up in irresistible becomings-animal. These are becomings that have as their necessary condition the becoming-woman of the warrior, or his alliance with the girl, his contagion with her.<sup>266</sup>

To be fair, unlike the fascist ideologues, Bataille and his colleagues from the Collège de Sociology envision a community rooted in sacred values but removed from the doctrine of “blood and soil.” Thus, although frequently accused of elitism, Caillois cannot be faulted for racism or nationalism. In “The Winter Wind,” he makes this point absolutely clear: “Just as there exists a primitive, irreducible experience of *self* constituting the basic dynamic of anarchic

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<sup>265</sup> Georges Bataille, *Guilty*, trans. Stuart Kendall (Albany: State University of New York, 2011), 17.

<sup>266</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 277-8.

individualism, the same sort of existential, inalienable basis of collective effort must be brought to light. In no case can the latter take for its affective foundation some given that is entirely retrospective, such as something decisive in a de facto manner—race or language, historical territory or tradition, on which the existence of nations depends and which feeds patriotism.”<sup>267</sup> Like their fascist contemporaries, however, Bataille and Caillois succumb to the temptation of inventing a scapegoat by designating a particular part of community as a waste to be expelled or as a sickness to be contained: “The weak member is not condemned by judgment but kept apart as a health measure, to protect an integrity. For the same reason that separating intact fruits from diseased ones in harvest is useful, armed and distant neutrality in respect to unreliable beings is a pure and simple procedure of legitimate defense that is absolutely necessary to avoid contamination. A society, like an organism, must be capable of eliminating its wastes.”<sup>268</sup> In order to protect the integrity of a community, to ensure its purity, and to endow it with a desired sense of closure and totality, the fascist movement invented an entire array of scapegoat figures: the Jew, the communist, the homosexual, the decadent artist. While expressly denouncing the fascist practice of scapegoating, Bataille and Caillois nonetheless fully committed themselves to repudiation of femininity and the cultivation of virile qualities which they saw as essential to existence of elective communities.

In the previous chapter, I invoked Caillois’s metaphor of the winter wind which functions not only as a health measure but also as a principle of natural selection, separating the strong from the weak. While in this particular text, he does not equate the strong with men and the weak with women, elsewhere he draws a fairly concrete picture of an ideal elective community purged from residues of that disease which is the absence of virility: “This elective community would be

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<sup>267</sup> Caillois, “The Winter Wind,” 37.

<sup>268</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

an order composed of men who are resolute and clear-headed, who are united by their affinities and by the common will to subjugate (unofficially at least) those of their fellows who have no talent for self-direction. It would be an association of extreme density, imposing its own architecture on the various structures already in existence and working to decompose some of these while domesticating others.”<sup>269</sup> Apart from the above reference to resolute and power-seeking men, Caillois’s deployment of the term *density* (borrowed from Durkheim’s work) involves a procedure of gendering which does not fail to produce all sorts of phallic associations: “The desire to combat society as society governs the constitution of the group. As a structure that is more solid and more condensed, it plans to attack society by trying to establish itself like a cancer at the heart of a more unstable, weaker, though incomparably more voluminous structure.”<sup>270</sup> The elective community is thus akin to a hard, agile, muscular entity within a soft and more voluminous social body. (Deleuze and Guattari put forward a strikingly similar analogy while avoiding the problematic gendering of the distinction between elective community and society: “the secret hierarchy conjugates with a conspiracy of equals, it commands its members to swim in society as fish in water, but conversely society must be like water around fish.”<sup>271</sup>) While sexual connotations in Caillois’s conception of the group may not be fully explicit, they come to the fore in Bataille’s description of the relationship between society and the army: “More precisely, the connection of society and its army could be compared to an almost absolutely consistent connection, in which a small strong male would be joined with a large weak female.”<sup>272</sup> Femininity can thus be tolerated only insofar as it is expelled from the elective community and projected onto a larger society. During harsh winter days, however, this

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<sup>269</sup> Ibid., 402n11. The text in question is “La Hiérarchie des êtres” (“The Hierarchy of Beings”).

<sup>270</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>271</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 288.

<sup>272</sup> Bataille, “The Structure and Function of the Army,” 142.

social body perishes away despite its voluminous mass, while the elective community (composed of virile men capable of withstanding the arctic wind) remains intact and stronger than ever.

Confronted with a crisis, the community gains in strength because the select few who survive the winter attain awareness of their strength and form tighter bonds with each other: “The coast is clear for those who are most able: no obstructions on the roads to impede their progress, none of the countless, melodious warblings to cover up their voices. Let them number and acknowledge each other in this rarefied air; and may winter leave them closely united, shoulder to shoulder, conscious of their strength; then the new spring will be the consecration of their destiny.”<sup>273</sup>

While these concluding lines in Caillois’s essay point towards the possibility of resistance at the time when the encroaching fascist forces appeared to pose an incontrovertible threat to liberal democracies in Europe, they also bring to mind the disturbing scene of Michiko’s demise in *Fighting Elegy*: the woman lying in a snow, without strength to get up, while the military men are marching shoulder to shoulder, with nothing or no one to impede their progress towards a “really big fight.”

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<sup>273</sup> Caillois, “The Winter Wind,” 42.



## IV

### “The Freedom of the Wild Animal”:

#### Sovereignty, Animality, Madness in Kihachi Okamoto's *The Sword of Doom*

##### Powerless Power

“Is it the destiny of the war machine, when the State triumphs, to be caught in this alternative: either to be nothing more than the disciplined, military organ of the State apparatus, *or to turn against itself*, to become a double suicide machine for a solitary man and a solitary woman?”<sup>274</sup>

In the previous chapter, I explored both of the aforementioned risks associated with the Deleuzian-Guattarian concepts of the line of flight and the war machine. On the one hand, the line of flight may propel the man of war towards the passion for abolition and, ultimately, suicide. As in the case of Japanese terrorists responsible for the 1932 assassination of the Prime Minister Inukai Tsuyoshi, the militant comes to desire nothing less than absolute deterritorialization—that is to say, pure destruction without the prospect of attendant reconstruction.<sup>275</sup> In my discussion of the self-sacrificing Tokkotai pilots, I attempted to demonstrate that absolute deterritorialization comes at the price of suicide. On the other hand, the war machine always runs the risk of being captured or appropriated by the State. Suzuki’s *Fighting Elegy* addresses this second danger, in particular, but it also brilliantly illustrates the intimate link between the two risks: the film’s protagonist, Kiroku, is the Deleuzian-Guattarian man of war, moving from one gang to another in pursuit of the ultimate “big fight” until he finally decides to take part in a political turmoil that will eventually lead Japan onto a course of military expansionism. His self-destructive lifestyle and his passion for fighting have no

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<sup>274</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 356.

<sup>275</sup> I already quoted a statement issued by one of these terrorists: “We thought about destruction first. We never considered taking on the duty of reconstruction.”

meaning, no cause, other than resistance of social authority (even with respect to this latter principle, the hero confronts a fundamental impasse since he must compromise his rebellion against the rules of society by adhering to the strict discipline and the laws of elective community). In the end, he succeeds in lending meaning to his thirst for violence only by putting his aggression to work in the service of a nationalist enterprise, thus betraying his commitment to rebellion and essentially turning his passion for abolition against himself.

Although Deleuze and Guattari underscore the emancipatory potential of the line of flight—the only line on which one can create and experiment—they nonetheless anticipate the dangers described above: “Trapped between the two poles of political sovereignty, the man of war seems outmoded, condemned, without a future, reduced to his own fury, which he turns against himself.”<sup>276</sup> Indeed, whenever the man of war joins the ranks of the State army or becomes a part of the revolutionary enterprise designed to revive the nation’s glory, he necessarily turns his aggression and his passion for destruction against himself by making it subordinate to the interests of the very same political powers that exploit and oppress him. On those rare occasions when the militant refuses to subject himself to the authority of the state, the outcome remains no less bleak. One finds a particularly effective illustration of this second alternative in *The Baader Meinhof Complex* (Uli Edel, 2008): committed to the perpetual struggle against the state, the pack of terrorists must eventually exhaust itself as its acts of destruction come to coincide with the acts of self-annihilation. In either case, the war machine has suicide as its destiny—that is to say, it can only exist without future.

Nonetheless, Deleuze and Guattari are not entirely pessimistic about the destiny of the war machine. Read in a different light, the above passage suggests that the man of war only *seems* outmoded and condemned. Perhaps, on his way towards becoming-animal (even if this

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<sup>276</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, 355.

path must have suicide as its final destination), the man of war attains the kind of freedom that cannot be taken away from him even if he comes to be subjugated by the State apparatus? After all, Deleuze and Guattari insist that the war machine always remains heterogeneous with respect to the state (even if the latter succeeds in capturing the former). Thus, after noting that the war machine opposes the State apparatus “in struggle that is lost from the start,” the two ask: “Could it be that it is at the moment the war machine ceases to exist, conquered by the State, that it displays to the utmost its irreducibility, that it scatters into thinking, loving, dying, or creating machines that have at their disposal vital or revolutionary powers capable of challenging the conquering State? Is the war machine already overtaken, condemned, appropriated as part of the same process whereby it takes on new forms, undergoes a metamorphosis, affirms its irreducibility and exteriority, and deploys that milieu of pure exteriority that the occidental man of the State, or the occidental thinker, continually reduces to something other than itself?”<sup>277</sup> It is this metamorphosis, which leads the man of war on the path of becoming-animal and thus separates him from himself, which I intend to address in the present chapter.

On multiple occasions in *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari speak of becoming-animal in (and of) the war-machine. What does it mean exactly? One must recall that, while the two famously defined philosophy as the practice of creating concepts, they never aspired to offer clear-cut definitions of their own concepts. What Deleuze terms the “pedagogy of the concept,” however, has little to do with a taste for deliberate obscurity and ambiguity. Rather, this practice aims to prevent concepts from becoming fixed categories so as to keep open the dynamic field of potentialities opened up by these philosophical creations. The concepts such as “the war machine” or “becoming-animal” have no informational or communicational value. Instead, they produce effects, liberate affects, and thus fundamentally transform the subjects who mobilize or

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<sup>277</sup> Ibid., 356.

encounter them. Gerald Bruns takes this point into account in *On Ceasing to Be Human*, a text which not only addresses the precariousness of human subjectivity but also rigorously puts into question the very distinction between humanity and animality. In his essay on Foucault, he insists that the experience of desubjectivation (i.e., the decomposition of identity) must constitute more than a mere possibility – it must produce actual transformations in the subject. At the same time, for Bruns, this operation remains “something inaccessible to definition, or maybe even to any intelligible narrative.”<sup>278</sup>

Moving on to the work of Deleuze and Guattari, he shows that the process of becoming-animal involves just such an experience of desubjectivation. Instead of producing a precise definition or a phenomenological description of this experience, however, Bruns focuses on its (micro-)political consequences: “For Deleuze and Guattari (...) non-identity is not a deprivation, not a negative, but a form of micropolitics whose structure is molecular, where non-identity is difference in itself unrelated to the bipolarity (the ‘bipolar machine’) of identity/difference; hence it is very different from macro or identity politics whose structure is molar where difference presupposes a prior identity...”<sup>279</sup> The important point to keep in mind: becoming-animal does not involve a shift from one recognizable (human) identity to another (animal) one but rather precipitates the dismantling of identities, the deviation from the binary machine. The subject following the path of becoming-animal does not face the choice of *either* staying human *or* turning into an animal but finds himself inhabiting a strange zone *in-between* the two binary poles. As Deleuze and Guattari themselves argue, “if human beings have a destiny, it is rather to escape the face, to dismantle the face and facializations, to become imperceptible, to become clandestine, not by returning to animality, nor even by returning to the head, but by quite

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<sup>278</sup> Gerald L. Bruns, *On Ceasing to Be Human* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 58.

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

spiritual and special becoming-animal, by strange true becomings that get past the wall and get out of the black holes, that make *faciality traits* themselves finally elude the organizations of the face—freckles dashing toward the horizon, hair carried off by the wind, eyes you traverse instead of seeing yourself in or gazing into in those glum face-to-face encounters between signifying subjectivities.”<sup>280</sup> Thus, becoming-animal, which transpires in the war-machine, designates the man of war’s irreducibility to the available categories and identities recognized by the State; it propels him further into the terrain of exteriority or, as Bataille calls it, heterogeneity.

At this point, I am prepared to put Deleuze and Guattari back into dialogue with Bataille as well as introduce another interlocutor in the person of Jacques Derrida. The discourse on the question of animality (and the operation of becoming-animal) will center precisely on the notion of *in-between* since each philosopher under consideration problematizes the humanity/animality distinction without at the same time positing a simple continuity between human beings and animals. André Pierre Colombat convincingly articulates this point with respect to Deleuze: “Deleuzian dualisms are always exceeded by a third term—an excess, or creative power of the paradox, that emerges in between them.”<sup>281</sup> In the preceding two chapters, I have already shown, through a close reading of *A Thousand Plateaus*, that Deleuze and Guattari’s thinking relies on the fundamental dualism between molar and molecular lines. This dualism, however, comes to be transcended in an immanent manner (or, as Deleuze and Guattari say, “from the inside”) through the introduction of the third kind of line—the line of flight, which passes between molar and molecular segmentarities and “blasts the two segmentarities apart.” In his *Dialogues* with Claire Parnet, Deleuze states: “This is why it is always possible to undo dualisms from the inside, by tracing the line of flight which passes between the two terms or the two sets, the

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<sup>280</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 171.

<sup>281</sup> André Pierre Colombat, “Deleuze and the Three Powers of Literature and Philosophy: To Demystify, to Experiment, to Create,” in *A Deleuzian Century?*, ed. Ian Buchanan (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 208

narrow stream which belongs neither to the one nor to the other, but draws both into a non-parallel evolution, into a heterochronous becoming. At least this does not belong to the dialectic.”<sup>282</sup> When Deleuze insists that his method of immanent overcoming of dualisms is not dialectical, he probably has in mind a well-known principle of “vulgar” Hegelianism: the dialectical thinking involves the operation of synthesis that produces a reconciliation between thesis and antithesis. (As much as one likes to admire Deleuze’s rebellion against the Hegelian strain in the 20<sup>th</sup> century French philosophy, it would be intellectually dishonest to attribute the aforementioned caricature of the dialectical method to Hegel himself.) In any event, what he calls a “heterochronous becoming” does not entail reconciliation or synthesis but rather the “blasting apart” or “blasting open” of the two terms or two series. What such an explosion produces is the in-between zone in which genuine becoming takes place; it releases the absolute speed that belongs to the war-machine.<sup>283</sup> Most importantly, it does not create a fixed center or middle term lodged between the two segmentarities but effects a perpetual movement of absolute deterritorialization that does not cease to produce a multiplicity of thresholds and passages—a perpetual production of difference. As Deleuze and Guattari put it: “Between the Couple of the first kind of segmentarity, the Double of the second, and the Clandestine of the line of flight, there are so many possible mixtures and passages.”<sup>284</sup>

Similarly, Derrida does not strive to eradicate distinctions and limits but rather to complicate and multiply them. In this manner, his work confounds dualistic categories by

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<sup>282</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, “A Conversation: What is it? What is it for?,” in *Dialogues II*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 35.

<sup>283</sup> *Ibid.*, 30-1. “The middle has nothing to do with an average, it is not a centrism or a form of moderation. On the contrary, it’s a matter of absolute speed. Whatever grows from the middle is endowed with such a speed. We must distinguish not relative and absolute movement, but the relative and absolute speed of any movement. The relative is the speed of one movement considered from the point of view of another. But the absolute is the speed of movement between the two, in the middle of the two, which traces a line of flight. Movement does not go from one point to another – rather it happens between two levels as in a difference of potential. . . Absolute speed is the speed of nomads, even when they move about slowly. Nomads are always in the middle.”

<sup>284</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, 205.

showing that the two terms comprising a given dualism are separated not by a single indivisible line of difference but by multiple (and continually multiplying) lines. In “The Animal That Therefore I Am,” he maintains: “Everything I’ll say will consist, certainly not in effacing the limit, but in multiplying its figures, in complicating, thickening, delinearizing, folding, and dividing the line precisely by making increase and multiply.”<sup>285</sup> In particular, he does not object to the difference between human beings and animals but, on the contrary, seeks to multiply the differences to the point that the multiplicity of proliferating differences comes to constitute the third term, which does not make itself present alongside the same or the identical. The reconfigured figure of difference (which, as we shall see, Derrida rewrites as *différance* in the context of questioning the distinction between the human response and the animal reaction) does not merely reproduce the divide between human life and animal life but points towards another conception of life of which both humans and animals may partake. Leonard Lawlor explains how the logic of the limit, operative in Derrida’s thought, produces binary terms that are not mutually exclusive and that come to be supplemented by the third term, a supplement or excess, that emerges through the operation of multiplying and complicating the limit: “Always in Derrida, the concern is with a logic of the limit—say, between evil and good—that is not oppositional, a logic in which the two poles are not external to one another. Always in Derrida, there is a search for the third genus, the third *genos*, the *Geschlecht* or *khōra*. The thought of *khōra* in Derrida always implies a kind of thickening or multiplying of the limit, turning it into limits (in the plural). But this new thought of the limit does not mean that I am [*sic*] going to reduce humans to being animals or elevate animals to human existence.”<sup>286</sup> Based on Lawlor’s assessment, one

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<sup>285</sup> Jacques Derrida, “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow),” in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, ed. Marie-Louise Mallet, trans. David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 29.

<sup>286</sup> Leonard Lawlor, *This is Not Sufficient: An Essay on Animality and Human Nature in Derrida* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 8-9.

can immediately pinpoint a fundamental similarity between Derrida and Deleuze and Guattari: these philosophers do not so much do away with dualisms as make room for excess which, in turn, disturbs these dualisms, introducing not merely an additional distinction, another limit (or, as Lawlor puts it, the third genus), but a multiplicity of limits that proliferate and resonate together to comprise a zone of indistinction in-between the two terms.

Derrida's affirmation of dualisms can be discerned in the very *style* of his writing. He rarely fails to mobilize a rhetoric of an "on the one hand, on the other hand" and the structure of his arguments frequently involves a recurrent alternation between two positions (that, one must add, do not exclude or negate each other).<sup>287</sup> Thus, in his essay on the question of the animal in the work of Lacan, Derrida not only deploys this strategy of alternation between two poles of the argument but also supplements it with the third term that exceeds binary formalization. Before arriving at this third term, Derrida begins by questioning Lacan's distinction between *human response* and *animal reaction*, which is itself dependent upon the distinction between *human language* and *animal coding* ("within the presupposition of a code that permits only *reactions* to stimuli and not *responses* to questions"). In an attempt to account for the specific risks accompanying a deconstruction of the anthropocentric tradition, Derrida imagines the following objection to his critical questioning: "In problematizing, as I am doing, the purity and indivisibility of a line between reaction and response, and especially the possibility of tracing such a line, between the human *in general* and the animal *in general*, one risks—something that

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<sup>287</sup> For a self-reflexive discussion of this textual practice see Jacques Derrida, *Mémoires: For Paul de Man*, trans. Cecile Lindsay, Jonathan Culler, and Eduardo Cadava (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 179. Derrida speaks of a "general law" of writing that "supposes a sort of invariant that in this case takes the form of a recurrent alternation, according to the disjunctive partition of 'on the one hand . . . on the other hand.' But one of the difficulties I announced arises from this: the said alternation (that, out of concern for clarity, I will be obliged to harden into an *opposition* through the rhetoric of an 'on the one hand, on the other hand') will be only the phenomenon or the form of presentation, the logico-rhetorical scheme, of this law—I will even say of the relation to the law in general. It would be necessary to go beyond the form of this schema and interrogate in its possibility that which thus sets limits on a complete binary formalization."



won't fail to cause them anxiety as they reproach me for it—casting doubt on all responsibility, all ethics, every decision, etc.”<sup>288</sup> Now, when Derrida connects the question of ethical responsibility to the question of animality, one must not forget that he critically reproduces a very traditional philosophical gesture already found in Aristotle's work. In his *Politics*, Aristotle famously defines man as a “political animal.” But man is also an *ethical* animal, whose capacity to make responsible decisions is linked to his possession of speech or *logos*. “Now, that man is more of a political animal than bees or any other gregarious animals is evident. Nature, as we often say, makes nothing in vain, and man is the only animal whom she has endowed with the gift of speech. And whereas mere voice is but an indication of pleasure or pain, and is therefore found in other animals (for their nature attains to the perception of pleasure and pain and the intimation of them to one another, and no further), the power of speech is intended to set forth the expedient and inexpedient, and therefore likewise the just and the unjust. And it is characteristic of man that he alone has any sense of good and evil, of just and unjust, and the like, and the association of living beings who have this sense makes a family and a state.”<sup>289</sup> As with Lacan, the human/animal distinction rests on different modes of access to language: whereas Lacan posits the distinction between human language and animal code, Aristotle puts forward the one between human speech and animal voice. The power of speech thus serves as a condition for the possibility of the *human* capacity to distinguish between the expedient and inexpedient, the just and the unjust. It is, therefore, precisely what enables human beings to make rational decisions and assume responsibility for these decisions. In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle asserts that a human being reveals his or her capacity to think rationally and behave

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<sup>288</sup> Jacques Derrida, “And Say the Animal Responded?” in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, ed. Marie-Louise Mallet, trans. David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 126.

<sup>289</sup> Aristotle, “Politics,” in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon, trans. Benjamin Jowett (New York: The Modern Library, 1941, 2001), 1129.

ethically through a voluntary action: “Now the man acts voluntarily; for the principle that moves the instrumental parts of the body in such actions is in him, and the things of which the moving principle is in a man himself are in his power to do or not to do.”<sup>290</sup> When the man acts voluntarily, he deliberates and produces a decision—that is to say, he makes a choice with respect to the just and the unjust, the expedient and inexpedient. It is not surprising, therefore, that, as soon as Aristotle touches upon the question of decision and rational choice, he once again invokes the question of the animal: “Choice, then, seems to be voluntary, but not the same thing as the voluntary; the latter extends more widely. For both children and the lower animals share in voluntary action, but not in choice, and acts done on the spur of the moment we describe as voluntary, but not as chosen.”<sup>291</sup>

Derrida’s ethical gesture thus consists in putting into question this conception of decision as well as casting doubt on the entire tradition of ethics that denies the right to decide to certain living beings. This deconstructive questioning, furthermore, proceeds without eradicating the difference between the animal and the human subject. Indeed, Derrida makes this very point in his rejoinder to the aforementioned objection, the response which I will attempt to summarize while preserving his characteristic “on the one hand, on the other hand” strategy. *On the one hand*, ethics necessarily presupposes a procedure of critical self-questioning—casting doubt on responsibility, on decision, etc. *On the other hand*, by calling into question the distinction between animal in general and human in general, one does not erase the difference between humans and animals, the distinction which Derrida does not wish to deny. On the contrary, it involves “taking this difference into account within the whole differentiated field of experience and of a world of life forms, and of doing that without reducing this differentiated and multiple

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<sup>290</sup> Aristotle, “Nicomachean Ethics,” in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon, trans. W.D. Ross (New York: The Modern Library, 1941, 2001), 965.

<sup>291</sup> *Ibid.*, 967-8.

difference, in a conversely massive and homogenizing manner, to one between the human subject, on the one hand, and the nonsubject that is the animal in general, on the other, where the latter comes to be, in another sense, the nonsubject that is subjected to the human subject.”<sup>292</sup> *Finally*, one must go beyond a mere questioning of the traditional conception of ethical responsibility and decision in order to develop “another ‘logic’ of decision, of the response and of the event.” Furthermore, this rethinking of ethics of decision accompanied by the multiplication of differences should lead towards another conception of life and of the living beings: “It would therefore be a matter of reinscribing this *différance* between reaction and response, and hence this historicity of ethical, juridical, or political responsibility, within another thinking of life, of the living, within another relation of the living to their ipseity, to their *autos*, to their own autokinesis and reactional automaticity, to death, to technics, or to the mechanical.”<sup>293</sup>

In summarizing the complex argument in “Say the Animal Responded?,” I am deliberately excluding a great deal of theoretical detail pertaining to Lacan’s distinction between response and reaction, which Derrida carefully considers in this essay. Later in this chapter, I will take a closer look at Lacan’s work and, in particular, draw on his theory of subjectivity to draw yet another limit, another line of difference that not only separates humans and animals but also cuts across and thus divides the very concept of “the human” in its *ipseity* (i.e., the selfsame of the oneself). In the meantime, however, I merely wish to extract something like a general schema or principle which Derrida follows in a number of his late texts devoted to the deconstruction of the question of the animal: (1) *on the one hand*, one must call into question the age-old tradition that posits a single and indivisible limit between human beings *in general* and animals *in general*; (2) *on the other hand*, one must not do away with this distinction entirely

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<sup>292</sup> Jacques Derrida, “And Say the Animal Responded?” 126.

<sup>293</sup> Ibid.

but, on the contrary, multiply the limits and differences separating humans from animals; (3) *finally*, one must search for another conception of life, the one which does not seek to establish a hierarchy between living beings on the basis of power but, on the contrary, delineate a zone of proximity on the basis of shared powerlessness. Too often, Derrida argues, the anthropocentric tendency in philosophy involves more than just a delineation of difference between humans and animals; it also seeks to establish a superiority of humans by drawing attention to specifically human powers and capabilities, which are denied to animals. In the history of Western philosophy, the essence proper to the animal has been defined negatively: the animal, according to traditional philosophical discourse, is different from the human being inasmuch as it lacks spirit, consciousness, language, sense of shame, awareness of death, etc. In the aforementioned case of Aristotle, for instance, human beings are said to possess the power of speech (*logos*) which, in turn, guarantees their participation in ethical and political life. Since animals lack this power, they must necessarily be excluded from a rightful participation in a political community and prohibited from assuming ethical responsibilities shared by members of said community.

In contrast, Derrida's conception of life follows a different logic—not the one that measures the superiority of humans and the inferiority of animals with respect to a given power or capability—but one that emphasizes a certain *powerlessness* common to all living beings. Hence, Derrida's frequent allusion to Jeremy Bentham's dictum that one cannot deny animal suffering. "Being able to suffer is no longer a power; it is a possibility without power, a possibility of the impossible. Mortality resides there, as the most radical means of thinking the finitude that we share with animals, the mortality that belongs to the very finitude of life, to the experience of compassion, to the possibility of sharing the possibility of this nonpower, the possibility of this impossibility, the anguish of this vulnerability, and the vulnerability of this

anguish.”<sup>294</sup> Central to Derrida’s effort to envision a new kind of relation to the animals is an experience of *passivity*—a vulnerability or exposure to suffering, finitude, death—as opposed to mastery. Commenting on this experience, shared by human beings and animals alike, Bruns invokes the notion of the *in-between* so dear to Deleuze and Guattari: “So here we are again at a border crossing: the anomalous space-between in which no one is anything, neither human nor nonhuman but inhuman or ahuman – perhaps one could also say ‘prehuman’ or (as many now say) ‘posthuman’: anyway, without horizons or signposts of any kind.”<sup>295</sup> Even though Bruns does not mention the names of Deleuze and Guattari here, his point resonates with his discussion of becoming-animal (mentioned earlier in this chapter). In Deleuzian-Guattarian terms, the movement of border-crossing, in the process of which one becomes inhuman or ahuman, can only happen on the line of flight which leads to a crossing of the absolute threshold—the act that dissolves human identity along with a stable sense of self. At stake in this experience of border-crossing, as Derrida already showed in his 1967 text, *Of Grammatology*, is “the dislocation of the proper in general”—that is to say, the relinquishment of essence proper to the human as well as essence proper to the animal.<sup>296</sup> As Bruns points out with respect to Foucault’s notion of desubjectivation, this experience of passivity accompanied by the abolition of the “proper in general” should not be understood as a deprivation but accepted as a condition of radical freedom—the freedom from oneself, the freedom of non-identity.<sup>297</sup> Going back to the line of questioning which opened the present chapter, I would like to argue that it is this freedom from the self-same identity that cannot be taken away from the man of war who, while condemned and outmoded, discovers a certain powerless power on his path towards becoming-animal. It is this

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<sup>294</sup> Jacques Derrida, “The Animal That Therefore I Am,” 28.

<sup>295</sup> Bruns, 86.

<sup>296</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976, 1997), 244.

<sup>297</sup> Bruns, 56, 59.

powerless power that Bataille, in his writings following the inward turn, refers to with the concept of *sovereignty*. In what follows, I will attempt to demonstrate that, with this concept, Bataille not only attempted to convey the impossible experience—that of power mixed with powerlessness, of absolute knowledge bordering on madness, of extreme joy fused with anguish, of saintliness indistinguishable from criminality, of radical freedom inseparable from vulnerability (or exposure) to finitude—but also to envision that in-between zone identifiable with neither human nor animal that Derrida was to explore in his late texts.

### **Inner Experience and Nonknowledge**

Significantly, Bruns notes that the Derridean experience of shared powerlessness is “also, at the same time, what Maurice Blanchot (following Georges Bataille) calls a ‘limit-experience,’ that is, an experience of utter passivity, as in an experience of fatigue, waiting, affliction, dying, but also of the passivity of the child.”<sup>298</sup> The concept of a “limit-experience” has a convoluted genealogy. Although Bataille himself does not invoke it, this concept undoubtedly has roots in his notion of “inner experience.” As Bruns correctly suggests, Blanchot was drawing on and expanding upon Bataille’s philosophy when he included a chapter on “The Limit Experience” in *The Infinite Conversation* (1969).<sup>299</sup> Even before Blanchot, however, Foucault offered a definitive account of what the experience in question involves by pitting Bataille’s philosophy against the then-dominant tradition of phenomenology. Whereas the phenomenological concept of *Erlebnis* refers to the everyday lived experience, Bataille’s concept touches upon the ‘unlivable’—the ‘boiling point’ of human experience that brings about transformative effects of desubjectivation:

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<sup>298</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>299</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

The phenomenologist's experience is basically a certain way of bringing a reflective gaze to bear on some object of 'lived experience,' on the everyday in its transitory form, in order to grasp its meanings. For Nietzsche, Bataille, Blanchot, on the other hand, experience is trying to reach a certain point in life that is as close as possible to the 'unlivable,' to that which can't be lived through. What is required is the maximum of intensity and the maximum of impossibility at the same time. By contrast, phenomenological work consists in unfolding the field of possibilities related to everyday experience.

Moreover, phenomenology attempts to recapture the meaning of everyday experience in order to rediscover the sense in which the subject that I am is indeed responsible, in its transcendental functions, for founding that experience together with its meanings. On the other hand, in Nietzsche, Bataille, and Blanchot, experience has the function of wrenching the subject from itself, of seeing to it that the subject is no longer itself, or that it is brought to its annihilation or its dissolution. This is a project of desubjectivation.<sup>300</sup>

I am reproducing this long passage in its entirety since one can hardly grasp the profound relation between the limit experience and the experience of shared powerlessness without reconstituting Foucault's entire discourse on desubjectivation. In many ways anticipating Derrida, Foucault follows Bataille in order to propose another logic of decision, another concept of responsibility: the subject exposed to the limit-experience *does not decide* to undergo desubjectivation but submits to subjective dissolution passively like the mystic overwhelmed by ecstatic vision. Indeed, the first part of *Inner Experience* opens with the following claim: "By *inner experience* I understand that which one usually calls *mystical experience*: the states of ecstasy, of rupture, at least of meditated emotion."<sup>301</sup> He goes on to elaborate on the relation of mystical experience to symbolic (or, as Bataille himself puts it, discursive) knowledge in terms that anticipate the late Lacan who, in the *Encore* seminar, proposes that "the essential testimony of the mystics consists in saying that they experience it, but know nothing about it."<sup>302</sup> Lacan

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<sup>300</sup> Michel Foucault, "Interview with Michel Foucault," in *Power*, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley et al. (New York: The New Press, 2000), 241.

<sup>301</sup> Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. Leslie Anne Boldt (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988), 3.

<sup>302</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XX: Encore, On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge 1972-1972*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998), 76.

stresses that mystical experience involves *jouissance* which is no mere pleasure but rather an overwhelming enjoyment mixed with anguish. Moreover, since it brings experience to its “boiling point” and exposes the subject to *jouissance*, mystical experience constitutes a traumatic event. Thus, a mystic knows nothing about her traumatic experience since trauma, per Lacan’s definition, involves a fundamental resistance—that is to say, resistance of the real to symbolization.

Similarly, Bataille stresses that the extreme limit of experience not only resists discursive knowledge, but produces a state of stupefaction in the subject, something akin to that “experience of utter passivity” evoked by Bruns: “from the *extreme limit* I descend to the most stupefied state—assuming that at rare moment I have touched the *extreme limit*.”<sup>303</sup> In one of his late texts, the third volume of *The Accursed Share* entitled *Sovereignty*, Bataille clarifies that the sovereign experience does not produce objects of knowledge. On the contrary, in bringing the subject’s symbolic functions to a halt, the experience in question dissolves all knowable objects into nothing: “The thought that comes to a halt in the face of what is sovereign rightfully pursues its operation to the point where its object dissolves into NOTHING, because, ceasing to be useful, or subordinate, it becomes *sovereign* in ceasing to be.”<sup>304</sup> As Foucault suggests, by the way of a comparison between Bataille and phenomenologists, this cessation of knowing and the attendant state of stupefaction also presupposes a certain absence of responsibility: whereas the subject of phenomenology is *responsible* for constituting a meaningful experience, the Bataillean subject attains the “extreme limit of the possible” with incomprehension or stupor. Indeed, when Bataille speaks of his pursuit of nonknowledge, he does not fail to note a certain paradox

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<sup>303</sup> Bataille, *Inner Experience*, 39.

<sup>304</sup> Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*, vols. II and III, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 204.



involved in this undertaking: should he succeed in attaining the goal of nonknowledge, argues Bataille, he cannot derive satisfaction from accomplishing this goal since, following the moment of subjective dissolution, he would no longer be a self-conscious subject presiding over the objects of knowledge: “I resolved long ago not to seek knowledge, as others do, but to seek its contrary, which is unknowing. I no longer anticipated the moment when I would be rewarded for my effort, *when I would know at last, but rather the moment when I would no longer know, when my initial anticipation would dissolve into NOTHING*. This is perhaps a mysticism in the sense that my craving not to know ceased to be distinguishable from the experience that monks called mystical – but I had neither a presupposition nor a god.”<sup>305</sup> It is crucial to note that, in the above passage, Bataille does not envision the possibility of the self-conscious subject actively willing the experience of nothingness. On the contrary, what he describes is the experience of dispossession over which the subject has no control: upon reaching the extreme limit, the subject finds himself powerless, weak, unable to know and articulate his experience in a meaningful discourse.

Now, it is precisely this state of weakness or powerlessness that leads Derrida to envision a different conception of “life and the force of life” and, ultimately, to dismantle the logic of the proper that not only determines powers and capabilities particular to men but also denies these qualities to other living beings. Thinking life otherwise, for Derrida, entails recognition of a certain weak force at the heart of life, a weak force of which humans and animals partake in equal measure. As Lawlor explains: “Understood through this loss or privation of singularity, life therefore must be conceived in terms of powerlessness. There is a kind of mortalism within life. (...) There is a kind of weakness in the heart of power, a blindness in the middle of the power of

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<sup>305</sup> Ibid., 208.

vision, a disappearance within appearance, a fault that cracks along the line of singularity and iterability (universalization: the repetition of the statement or the name), a fault that makes it necessary for us to act.”<sup>306</sup> Bataille continually emphasizes this experience of weakness, which takes many forms: madness within reason, silence at the heart of discourse, nonknowledge that dwells within knowledge, incomprehension that accompanies inner experience. Nonetheless, in order to convey the fundamental lesson of *Inner Experience*, one must reproduce Lawlor’s proposition in an inverted form: there is a kind of power at the heart of weakness. This power is sovereignty, its essential outcome is nonknowledge.

Even before he introduced a full-fledged concept of sovereignty, Bataille evoked its contradictory and indeterminate character in “The Sacred Conspiracy,” the text written during his engagement with the Acéphale group:

Man has escaped from his head just as the condemned man has escaped from his prison. He has found beyond himself not God, who is the prohibition against crime, but a being who is unaware of prohibition. Beyond what I am, I meet a being who makes me laugh because he is headless; this fills me with dread because he is made of innocence and crime; he holds a steal weapon in his left hand, flames like those of a Sacred Heart in his right. He reunites in the same eruption Birth and Death. He is not a man. He is not a god either. He is not me but he is more than me: his stomach is the labyrinth in which he has lost himself, loses me with him, and in which I discover myself as him, in other words as a monster.<sup>307</sup>

Without a single mention of the concept of sovereignty in this text, Bataille here enumerates its central features. Neither a man nor a god, the sovereign is a deformed monster. Without head and, hence, without face, he is no longer recognizable. Having crossed the absolute threshold (as Deleuze and Guattari would have put it), he has lost his human identity, the “proper” of the human, yet has not gained a properly animal essence. Having taken a wrong, twisted path

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<sup>306</sup> Lawlor, 5.

<sup>307</sup> Georges Bataille, “The Sacred Conspiracy,” in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. Allan Stoekl, trans. Allan Stoekl, Carl R. Lovitt, and Donald M. Leslie, Jr. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 181.

towards knowledge, he loses himself in the labyrinth. Just as the Deleuzian-Guattarian process of becoming-animal never culminates in an acquisition of a stable identity, the Bataillean labyrinthine passage does not have a final destination. On the contrary, it constitutes an experience which does not produce the objects of knowledge but brings about a certain loss—that of objects, of knowledge itself. This experience of loss—of one’s path, one’s head, one’s reason—is not a mere failure, however, for it brings about an essential discovery—that of sovereignty, of freedom, and of life no longer subordinated to the demands of knowledge and of understanding.

“There is in understanding a blind spot,”<sup>308</sup> writes Bataille in *Inner Experience*. The encounter with this blind spot propels the subject towards nonknowledge, which, for Bataille, constitutes an experience, an excursion to the limits of being that, in turn, leads to subjective destitution, a kind of death: “At the elusive extreme limit of my being, I am already dead, and *I* in this growing state of death speak to the living: of death, of the extreme limit.”<sup>309</sup> This form of death, as Bataille quickly goes on to note, however, is also a window that opens onto the experience of freedom: “The extreme limit is a window: fear of the extreme limit commits one to the darkness of a prison, with an empty will for ‘penal administration.’”<sup>310</sup> Elsewhere, in “Method of Meditation” (1946-54), compares inner experience, which brings about “extreme knowledge,” to emerging from “a tissue of understanding”: “In a sense, the condition in which *I would see* would be on leaving, on emerging, from ‘tissue.’ And without doubt I must say

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<sup>308</sup> Bataille, *Inner Experience*, 110.

<sup>309</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>310</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

immediately: this condition on which *I would see* would be dying. At no moment will I have the possibility of *seeing it!*”<sup>311</sup>

### “The Freedom of the Wild Animal”

At this point, it should be quite evident that, in his pursuit of sovereign freedom, Bataille once again presents himself as the philosopher of the passion for the real. Yet this passion for the real, which can be discerned in the entirety of Bataille’s oeuvre, is no longer the same as the one that guided his political activism at the time of his engagement with Contre-Attaque. As I suggested in the first chapter of this dissertation, Bataille’s “inward turn” amounts precisely to this change of direction in which Bataille maintained his search for the real. Following the turn in question, Bataille no longer externalizes (or substantializes) the real by locating it in the streets crowded with the revolutionary masses but directs his search inward. The subject’s encounter with the real, thus, no longer manifests itself as an outburst of violence, be it a revolutionary insurrection or a military battle, but rather takes the form of a rupture in the subject’s relation to the symbolic order. Perhaps the most convincing evidence of the inward turn (as it is interpreted here, in relation to the passion for the real) can be found in Bataille’s *Guilty* (1944), composed around the same time as *Inner Experience*: “The living combats of the present years arrest me less than those of the trenches, more appalling. What arrests me in the war is a means of anguished contemplation. This remains linked in me to nostalgia for ecstatic states. Today this nostalgia still seems lugubrious and sleazy. And it doesn’t have active value. I haven’t fought in any of the wars I have been involved in.”<sup>312</sup>

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<sup>311</sup> Georges Bataille, “Method of Meditation,” in *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, ed. Stuart Kendall, trans. Michelle Kendall and Stuart Kendall (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 85.

<sup>312</sup> Georges Bataille, *Guilty*, trans. Stuart Kendall (Albany: SUNY Press, 2011), 212. Translation modified.

The evidence of Bataille's inward turn can already be discerned in the writings composed during his sojourn at the Collège de Sociologie, before he began work on *Inner Experience*. In Chapter 3 of the present study, I remarked upon the distinction (found in his preamble to Caillois's lecture on "Brotherhoods, Orders, Secret Societies, Churches") between the "tragic man" and the "armed lout." As the conceptual precursor of the sovereign, the tragic man does not seek enjoyment (*jouissance*) on the battlefield but experiences it in the play of "violent and contradictory forces," the play that transpires within him and causes inner laceration (*déchirement*). He cannot relieve his agony by projecting these violent forces outward and externalizing his negativity in a battle with the enemy. Even when the tragic man's inner experience does find an outlet in a violent action, this action does not take a form of the project designed with a particular aim in view, but manifests itself as a gratuitous criminal act.<sup>313</sup>

If one were to describe the Bataillean inward turn in Deleuzian terms (so as to clarify the political import of Bataille's texts before and after the turn) one could characterize it as a shift from being-marginal to becoming-clandestine.<sup>314</sup> No longer a part of the crowd engaged in open acts of destruction, the man of tragedy realizes his acts of transgression clandestinely, through his participation in a secret society. Following Bataille's dissolution of *Acéphale* and the Collège de Sociologie, his developing affirmation of sovereign values took an even greater turn towards clandestinity. Already in 1944, he argues that the writer's vocation is not to serve as a model for engaged intellectuals but to promote "the refusal of servility" – that is to say, the refusal of work, of projects. "That is why he is not on the bandwagon of the mob, and he knows how to die in

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<sup>313</sup> Roger Caillois, "Brotherhoods, Orders, Secret Societies, Churches," in *The College of Sociology (1937-39)*, ed. Denis Hollier, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 147. Bataille argues that the tragic man "sees the violent and contradictory forces that stir him; he knows he is prey to human absurdity, prey to the absurdity of nature, but he affirms this reality which has left him no outlet other than crime."

<sup>314</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, "Many Politics," in *Dialogues II*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 139. In this particular dialogue, Deleuze and Parnet admit: "Marginals have always inspired fear in us, and a slight horror. They are not clandestine enough."

solitude.”<sup>315</sup> Unlike “the armed lout,” the sovereign does not put his negativity to use, turning it into an “available force,” a force in search of employment. Neither does he join communal projects. (In this respect, *Inner Experience*, therefore, does not constitute a sharp break with Bataille’s earlier writings but only a certain radicalization of his thought of sovereignty as well as a mutation in his passion for the real. Indeed, at one point in this text, Bataille echoes his Collège de Sociologie presentation and evokes the distinction between the military man, who negates his experience of negativity by subordinating it to project, and the man of tragedy: “The horror of war is greater than that of inner experience. The desolation of a battle field, in principle, has something more grave about it than ‘dark night.’ But on the battle field, one approaches horror with a movement which overcomes it: action, project linked to action, permits the *surpassing* of horror. This surpassing gives to action, to project, a captivating grandeur—but horror is in itself negated.”<sup>316</sup>) His sovereignty manifests itself as inner experience, invisible to others. Even if he appears to commit acts of violence and to risk his life, his destructive actions appear criminal, while his death seems senseless, not justified by any lofty goals. Adopting the Deleuzian-Guattarian perspective once again, one might add that sovereignty necessarily appears criminal from the perspective of the State, which justifies murderous-suicidal acts of violence as long as they are committed for the benefit of the nation, in the name of the emperor, or for the sake of some other cause worthy of the big Other’s approval.

While some Bataille scholars have interpreted the inward turn as a shift in his political stance, to my knowledge, no commentator has remarked upon the shift in Bataille’s thinking on the question of the animal. Agamben, for instance, correctly notes the significance of Bataille’s

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<sup>315</sup> Jean-Michel Besnier, “Bataille, the Emotive Intellectual,” trans. Alisdair McIntosh, in *Bataille: Writing the Sacred*, ed. Carolyn Bailey Gill (New York: Routledge, 1995), 16.

<sup>316</sup> Bataille, *Inner Experience*, 45.

idea of inoperative negativity or “negativity with no use” for the theorization of the human-animal distinction. As he observes, Bataille arrived at this idea during his exchange with Kojève, who belonged to the Collège of Sociology circle and whose lectures on Hegel (delivered at the École des Hautes Études) Bataille attended. Now, Kojève insists that, for Hegel, negativity is inseparable from action, which does not merely negate the natural given but rather works upon it thus transforming “objective reality” into “subjective reality”:

In contrast to the knowledge that keeps man in a passive quietude, Desire dis-quiets him and moves him to action. Born of Desire, action tends to satisfy it, and can do so only by the ‘negation,’ the destruction, or at least the transformation, of the desired object: to satisfy hunger, for example, the food must be destroyed or, in any case, transformed. Thus, all action is ‘negating.’ Far from leaving the given as it is, action destroys it; if not in its being, at least in its given form. And all ‘negating-negativity’ with respect to the given is necessarily active. But negating action is not purely destructive, for if action destroys an objective reality, for the sake of satisfying the Desire from which it is born, it creates in its place, in and by that very destruction, a subjective reality. The being that eats, for example, creates and preserves its own reality by the overcoming of a reality other than its own, by the ‘transformation’ of an alien reality into its own reality, by the ‘assimilation,’ the ‘internalization’ of a ‘foreign,’ ‘external’ reality.<sup>317</sup>

Later in the same text, he continues this line of thought, arguing that negativity qua action constitutes the essence (the proper) of Man: “And we know that for Hegel it is precisely in this annihilation of Being that consists the Negativity which *is* Man, that Action of Fighting and Work by which Man preserves himself in spatial Being while *destroying* it—that is, while transforming it by the creation of hitherto unknown new things into a genuine Past—a nonexistent and consequently nonspatial Past. And this Negativity—that is, this Nothingness nihilating as Time in Space—is what forms the very foundation of specifically human existence—that is, truly active or creative, or historical, individual, and free, existence.”<sup>318</sup> The Hegelian subject, as Kojève correctly understands it, is not identical to an unchanging substance.

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<sup>317</sup> Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit*, ed. Allan Bloom, trans. James H. Nichols (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 4.

<sup>318</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

The subject is, on the contrary, nothing other than the restless movement of negativity qua action that dissolves all substance.<sup>319</sup> In other words, the subject is what it does. Furthermore, it is precisely through its action that it acquires historical consciousness. Indeed, Kojève suggests that the subject acquires the distinctly human sense of temporality through work: by acting upon and thus negating the natural given, the subject consigns the negated substance to the past while directing his efforts towards the future. In effecting “the passage of the world through its own negativity,” argues Jean-Luc Nancy, the subject acquires “the concrete experience and consciousness of the modern history of the world.”<sup>320</sup>

Now, when Kojève famously evokes the disappearance of Man at the end of History, he does not have the death of all human beings in mind; rather, he envisions the point in history at which the subject can no longer be conceived as the negating action. In the passage quoted by Agamben, he states:

The disappearance of Man at the end of History, therefore, is not a cosmic catastrophe: the natural World remains what it has been from all eternity. And therefore, it is not a biological catastrophe either: Man remains alive as animal in *harmony* with Nature or given Being. What disappears is Man properly so-called – that is, Action negating the given, and Error, or in general, the Subject *opposed* to the Object. In point of fact, the end of human Time or History – that is, the definitive annihilation of Man properly so-called or of the free and historical Individual – means quite simply the cessation of Action in the full sense of the term. Practically, this means: the disappearance of wars and bloody revolutions. And also the disappearance of *Philosophy*; for since Man himself no longer changes essentially, there is no longer any reason to change the (true) principles which are at the basis of his understanding of the World and of himself. But all the rest can be

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<sup>319</sup> See Jean-Luc Nancy, *Hegel: The Restlessness of the Negative*, trans. Jason Smith and Steven Miller (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 4-5. “‘Self’ cannot precede itself, because ‘self’ is precisely the form and movement of a relation to self, of a going to self and a coming to self. . . In a word: the Hegelian subject is in no way the *self all to itself*. It is, to the contrary, and it is essentially, what (or the one who) dissolves all substance – every instance already given, supposed first or last, founding or final, capable of coming to rest in itself and taking undivided enjoyment in its mastery and property.”

<sup>320</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.



preserved indefinitely; art, love, play, etc., etc.; in short, everything that makes Man *happy*.<sup>321</sup>

What takes place at the end of History, then, is not exactly the disappearance of Man but the disappearance of the proper of Man, of the negating action which is the property of Man properly so-called. As a consequence, Kojève argues, Man becomes ahistorical, like an animal that does not negate Nature but exists “in harmony” with it.

Now, Bataille, like Derrida after him, complicates this distinction between Man and Animal without completely eradicating it. If he found the thesis of “the end of History” to be so disturbing it was because he not only accepted the idea of the proper of man but also zealously strove to safeguard it from disappearing. Thus, while Bataille was quite content with human beings losing the property so dear to Kojève, namely the negating action producing useful effects on the world, he was not going to surrender art, love, play, and “all the rest” of man’s property to the animal. At the time of his exchange with Kojève, Bataille already knew that his teacher’s simple evocation of the three essential domains of human experience had to be complicated. He understood that one could not speak of love without considering eroticism, or discuss play without grasping the concept of nonproductive expenditure, or envision art without touching upon the possibility of poetry disclosing silence at the heart of discourse and painting depicting the blind spot within vision itself. Bataille evokes eroticism, expenditure, and poetry not so much to replace Kojève’s triad of love, play, and art but rather to supplement it. In his 1933 text, “The Notion of Expenditure,” he discerns such an excessive, supplementary dimension in poetry. Bataille calls it “the residual element of poetry”: “It is easier to indicate that, for the rare human beings who have this element at their disposal, poetic expenditure ceases to be symbolic in its

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<sup>321</sup> Kojève, 158-9. Quoted in Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 6.

consequences; thus, to a certain extent, the function of representation engages the very life of the one who assumes it. It condemns him to the most disappointing forms of activity, to misery, to despair, to the pursuit of inconsistent shadows that provide nothing but vertigo or rage. The poet frequently can use words only for his own loss; he is often forced to choose between the destiny of a reprobate, who is as profoundly separated from society as dejecta are from apparent life, and a renunciation whose price is a mediocre activity, subordinated to vulgar and superficial needs.”<sup>322</sup> In this text, Bataille stresses the intimate ties between nonproductive expenditure, poetry, and games. Poetry, he argues, “can be considered synonymous with expenditure.” The same can be said of games: “In various competitive games, loss in general is produced under complex conditions. Considerable sums of money are spent for the maintenance of quarters, animals, equipment, or men. As much energy as possible is squandered in order to produce a feeling of stupefaction—in any case with an intensity infinitely greater than in productive enterprises. The danger of death is not avoided; on the contrary, it is the object of a strong unconscious attraction.”<sup>323</sup> Each form of expenditure involves something more than happiness, an excess of pleasure--namely, stupefaction, suffering, degradation, and even death. At this point, one can pinpoint the stakes involved in Bataille’s objection to Kojève with greater precision: Bataille refused to surrender art, love, and play to the animal not because he considered these domains of human activity to be constitutive of man’s essence but because he perceived the residual element in each one of these domains, the element overlooked by Kojève. This residual or excessive element, the cause of anguish in man, is precisely what separates humanity from happy animality. Art, love, and play may indeed make man as happy as a clam (or any other animal) but they can also elicit *jouissance*, which mixes happiness with anguish. It

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<sup>322</sup> Georges Bataille, “The Notion of Expenditure” (1933), in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. and trans. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 120.

<sup>323</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

is precisely this experience of *jouissance*, which Bataille understands as the play of “violent and contradictory forces,” that he denies to the animal and upholds as the property of man.

Thus, as Alphonso Lingis suggests, Bataille never entirely renounced the anthropocentric presuppositions underpinning his discourse on animality: “Bataille works with a concern for the contrast between humans and the other animals that he inherited from the anthropocentrism of philosophy but that he also found anthropology to have discovered in many cultures. Even when, as in *Erotism*, he declared that ‘animal nature, or sexual exuberance, is that which prevents us from being reduced to mere things. Human nature, on the contrary, geared to specific ends in work, tends to make things of us at the expense of our sexual exuberance,’ he identified erotic glamour, exhibitionism, and games to be distinctively human ... He constructed his concept of eroticism as well as of transgression on the human-animal opposition. He equally made toolmaking, language, and laughter to be distinctively human.”<sup>324</sup> In identifying Bataille’s desire to safeguard eroticism, exhibitionism, and games as “distinctively human,” Lingis undoubtedly refers to the Kojève-Bataille debate over the course of which Bataille arrived at the conception of “negativity with no use.” It is this useless negativity, as Agamben notes, which constitutes the remnant of humanity that survives Kojève’s end of History: “The end of history involves, then, an ‘epilogue’ in which human negativity is preserved as a ‘remnant’ in the form of eroticism, laughter, joy in the face of death.”<sup>325</sup> Nonetheless, Agamben goes on to suggest, Bataille’s optimistic assertion of humanity’s endurance was challenged by the encroaching threat of World War II and the apparent “divirilization” of men who appeared to passively endure this threat like so many dumb animals: “In 1939, with the war by now inevitable, a declaration by the Collège de Sociologie betrays its impotence, denouncing the passivity and absence of reaction in the face

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<sup>324</sup> Alphonso Lingis, “Foreword: Why Bataille Now?”, in *Reading Bataille Now*, ed. Shannon Winnubst (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2007), ix-x.

<sup>325</sup> Agamben, *The Open*, 7.

of war as a form of massive ‘devirilization,’ in which men are transformed into a sort of ‘conscious sheep resigned to the slaughterhouse.’ Though in a sense different from the one Kojève had in mind, men had now truly become animals again.”<sup>326</sup> The above passage concludes Agamben’s brief discussion of Bataille. One might wonder, however, if it effectively conveys something like Bataille’s final word on the question of the animal.

Not surprisingly, in his writings following the “inner turn,” Bataille remains equivocal on this point. On the one hand, his conception of animality as immanence or immediacy retains the same association of animality with apathy and numbness. Even if the animal does engage in the struggle that places its life at risk, it does so apathetically, without comprehension of the possibility of death: “If the animal that has brought down its rival does not apprehend the other’s death as does a man behaving triumphantly, this is because its rival had not broken a continuity that the rival’s death does not reestablish. This continuity was not called into question, but rather the identity of desires of two beings set one against the other in mortal combat. The apathy that the gaze of the animal expresses after the combat is the sign of an existence that is essentially on a level with the world in which it moves like water in water.”<sup>327</sup> This formulation undoubtedly owes as much to Heidegger’s philosophy (the continuity in question referring to the animal’s absorption in its environment) as it does to Hegel’s Master-Slave dialectic. Indeed, it is with respect to the question of the animal that one can pinpoint the fundamental difference between the Hegelian master and the Bataillean sovereign. Following Kojève’s teachings, Bataille assumes that the master risks his life in order to secure recognition—that is to say, recognition of his humanity—from the other. Insofar as the sovereign gambles with his life without expecting

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<sup>326</sup> Ibid., 7-8.

<sup>327</sup> Georges Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1989), 25.

anything in return or demanding recognition from the other, he distinguishes himself from the master and exhibits a curious proximity to the animal.

Reflecting on Bataille's obsessive interest in the prehistoric cave art at Lascaux, Akira Mizuta Lippit points out that the awareness of death as well as the wish to represent it constitutes the anthropogenetic moment whereby the prehistoric man separates himself from the animal world.<sup>328</sup> Indeed, as Bataille puts it in *The Tears of Eros*, the prehistoric people “knew what animals do not know: that they would die.”<sup>329</sup> Now, sovereignty approaches this condition of animality insofar as it presupposes a forgetting of the lessons learned at Lascaux, a certain unawareness of unavoidable death:

It is insofar as we are subordinate beings, accepting the subordination of the thing, that we die humanly. For to die humanly, in anguish, is to have the representation of death that enables the dividing of oneself into a present and a future: to die humanly is to have of the future being, of the one who matters most in our eyes, the senseless idea that he is not. If we live sovereignly, the representation of death is impossible, for the present is not subject to the demands of the future. That is why, in a fundamental sense, to live sovereignly is to escape, if not death, at least the anguish of death. Not that dying is hateful—but living servilely is hateful. The sovereign man escapes death in this sense: he cannot die *humanly*. He cannot live in anguish likely to enslave him, to determine the flight from death that is the beginning of servitude. He cannot die fleeing. He cannot let the threat of death deliver him over to the horror of a desperate yet impossible flight. Thus, in a sense, he escapes death, in that he lives in the moment. The sovereign man lives and dies like an animal. But he is a man nevertheless.<sup>330</sup>

Can one find a position more diametrically opposed to that expressed in a declaration by the Collège de Sociologie? Whereas in the aforementioned declaration, Bataille denounced the animal-like absence of reaction in the face of death, he now praises the sovereign indifference towards dying as well as refusal to respond to unavoidable death by fleeing or launching

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<sup>328</sup> Akira Mizuta Lippit, “Archetexts: Lascaux, Eros, and the Anamorphic Subject,” *Discourse*, vol. 24, no. 2 (Spring 2002): 21. “The departure of humanity from the natural world is expressed, for Bataille, by a knowledge of death – by the wish to represent both death and the awareness of it.”

<sup>329</sup> Georges Bataille, *The Tears of Eros*, trans. Peter Connor (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1989), 23. Quoted in Lippit, “Archetexts,” 21.

<sup>330</sup> Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, 219.

“absurd” projects. The animal is unhistorical—here Bataille is in complete agreement with his master, Nietzsche, as well as his teacher, Kojève—but so is the sovereign. Oblivious to what the future holds in store for him, the sovereign affirms experience in the instant even if this experience involves lethal consequences.

“The animal lives *unhistorically*,” argues Nietzsche. Bataille seconds this claim when he writes that the animal lives in the moment and has no awareness of the coming death. Indeed, what Lippit has to say about Nietzsche’s conception of animality, applies equally well to Bataille’s work: “The animal’s instinctive honesty (...) also prevents the animal from establishing an awareness of the death that overtakes beings. Without memory, without history, death loses the singularity of its finitude...In this fashion the animal survives time which is essentially human. Accordingly, the animal returns to each new world as an immortal, incapable of only dying once.”<sup>331</sup> Bataille, in turn, proposes something strikingly similar when speaking of the sovereign’s relation to death: “The sovereign world is the world in which the limit of death is done away with. Death is present in it, its presence defines that world of violence, but while death is present it is always there only to be negated, never for anything but that. The sovereign is he who *is*, as if death were not. Indeed, he is the one who doesn’t die, for he dies only to be reborn. He is not a man in the individual sense of the word, but rather a *god*; he is essentially the embodiment of the one he is but is not.”<sup>332</sup> Like any living creature, the sovereign dies. Nonetheless, unaware of the limit of finitude, he lives his life as if death were nonexistent and, in so doing, approaches the infinity of the divine being. Partaking, in equal measures, of animality and divinity, the sovereign is defined by violent contradictions and does not possess a stable human essence. If, as Bataille writes, “he is a man nonetheless,” he is the one of whom Derrida

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<sup>331</sup> Akira Mizuta Lippit, “Afterthoughts on the Animal World,” *MLN*, vol. 109, no. 5 (Dec., 1994): 801.

<sup>332</sup> Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, 222.

says the following: “man is caught, evanescent, disappearing, at the very most a simple mediation, a hyphen between the sovereign and the beast, between God and cattle.”<sup>333</sup>

Sovereignty, in this respect, does not signify something like a return to a wild animality but, rather, refers to the limit-condition of man, the condition at which he finds himself torn between the powerlessness of the animal and the omnipotence of God. Indeed, in the preface to the second volume of *The Accursed Share* entitled *The History of Eroticism*, Bataille notes that his life-long preoccupation with sovereignty, eroticism, ecstasy was prompted by nothing other than his admiration for humanity: “If my perspective is apologetic, the object of this apology is not eroticism but rather, generally, *humanity*. That humanity does not cease to maintain a sum of stubborn and incompatible, *impossibly* rigorous reactions is something worthy of admiration; indeed, *nothing merits the same degree of admiration ... for humanity* would cease to exist the day it became something other than what it is, entirely made up of violent contrasts.”<sup>334</sup>

### **Being-Outside-the-Law**

While Lippit, following Nietzsche, describes the animal as honest, I would characterize it as innocent—that is to say, innocent with respect to the Law. It is precisely this obliviousness to the Law that makes for the essential affinity between the animal and the sovereign. In his 2001-02 seminar on *The Beast and the Sovereign*, Derrida takes note of this proximity while commenting on Carl Schmitt’s definition of sovereignty as “a certain power to *give*, to *make*, but also to *suspend* the law”:

it is the exceptional right to place oneself above right, the right to non-right, if I can say this, which both runs the risk of carrying the human sovereign above the human, toward divine omnipotence (which will moreover most often have grounded the principle of

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<sup>333</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign* vol. 1, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 13.

<sup>334</sup> Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, 18.

sovereignty in its sacred and theological origin) and, because of this arbitrary suspension or rupture of right, runs the risk of making the sovereign look like the most brutal beast who respects nothing, scorns the law, immediately situates himself above the law, at a distance from the law. For the current representation, to which we are referring for a start, sovereign and beast seem to have in common their being-outside-the-law.<sup>335</sup>

In the same seminar, however, Derrida complicates this point by noting that animals do not transgress the law in the same manner that human beings do: “Is the law that reigns (...) in all the so-called animal societies a law of the same nature as what we understand by law in human right and human politics?”<sup>336</sup> Here, as in his other writings on the animal, Derrida multiplies or complicates the difference separating human beings from animals by stressing, for instance, that the concept of the right cannot be simply extended to the animals but rather must be re-evaluated and interpreted. He thereby injects difference into the very concepts of right and law by proposing that, even if animal societies can be said to possess certain laws, these laws are quite different from the ones that govern human society. At the same time, in stressing the animal’s being-outside-the-law, Derrida also relies on a certain common sense according to which the animal cannot be tried in a court of law and held accountable for (human) crimes. Derrida thus appears to agree with Lacan who, while remarking on Freud’s *Totem and Taboo*, declares that “man began with law and crime.”<sup>337</sup> It, henceforth, comes as a surprise that, after emphasizing the being-outside-the-law of the animal and touching upon the difference between human laws and animal laws during the first session of his seminar, Derrida should reproach Lacan for suggesting something analogous: “Lacan is here on the side of a certain common sense, according to which the beast, ignorant of the Law, is not free, neither responsible nor culpable,

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<sup>335</sup> Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, 16-7.

<sup>336</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>337</sup> Jacques Lacan, “A Theoretical Introduction to the Functions of Psychoanalysis in Criminology” (1950) in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), 106.



cannot transgress a Law it does not know, cannot be to be criminal. A beast never commits a crime and is never in infraction of the law.”<sup>338</sup>

It is equally surprising that, in carefully tracing the development of the question of the animal throughout the history of Western philosophy and unearthing obscure and seemingly marginal references to animality in a variety of texts by thinkers ranging from Machiavelli and Rousseau to Agamben and Lacan, Derrida does not even touch upon Bataille’s conception of sovereignty. One must recall that Derrida’s earliest sustained engagements with the topic of sovereignty takes place in his 1967 paper on Bataille, entitled “From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism without Reserve” (published as a part of *Writing and Difference*). How can one then explain the lack of references to Bataille in *The Beast and the Sovereign*? Did Derrida come to perceive Bataille’s work on sovereignty as flawed or inconsequential? As a number of Derrida’s “late” texts (most notably, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason* as well as the essays collected in *Sovereignities in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan*) demonstrate, he never entirely terminated his engagement with Bataille. In *Sovereignities in Question*, for instance, Derrida pays close attention to Bataille’s concept of sovereignty, which he opposes to that of Hobbes (to whom he gives considerable attention in *The Beast and the Sovereign*): “As in Bataille, sovereignty, in the sense Bataille understands it and also wants to give it, exceeds classic sovereignty, namely mastery, supremacy, absolute power, and so forth.”<sup>339</sup> It is thus remarkable that, in *The Beast and the Sovereign*, Derrida should fail to make note of the fact that Bataille’s characterization of the sovereign as the one partaking of divinity as well as animality anticipates his own thesis. Furthermore, how can one not discern the proximity of Lacan’s

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<sup>338</sup> Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, 102.

<sup>339</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Sovereignities in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan*, ed. Thomas Dutoit and Outi Pasanen (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 117.

position (critiqued by Derrida) concerning the animal's ignorance of the law to Bataille's early invocation of the sovereign, described in "The Sacred Conspiracy," as "a being who is unaware of prohibition"? Finally, does not the thesis concerning the animal's unawareness of the law readily lend itself to the Derridean reversal whereby its privation with respect to participation in the law that, according to the Hegelian framework, would deprive the animal of freedom, would give rise to another kind of power—the power at the heart of powerlessness that exceeds classic (Hobbesian) sovereignty—and endows the animal with absolute freedom, namely freedom from alienation.

It seems to me that the absence of any references to Bataille in *The Beast and the Sovereign* has to do with something more than Derrida's unwillingness to submit Bataille (whom he often celebrates as an important precursor and a major influence) to the same critical treatment as Lacan (whose work he already subjected to a negative deconstructive reading in "The Purveyor of Truth").<sup>340</sup> Indeed, I would argue that both Bataille and Lacan concur on the point that cannot but pose a problem for Derrida. Whereas, in contesting the appellation of "The Animal" in the singular, the latter introduces the lines of difference into the very concept of animality (thereby, separating the animal from itself, as it were), the former two thinkers also introduce the lines of difference into the concept of the human. Incidentally, in a recent critique of Derrida's insistence on the "abyss" separating human beings from animals, Matthew Calarco raises precisely this question of the human subject's vulnerability to the same play of difference that prevents the notion of "animality" from acquiring the homogeneity and fixity of the concept:

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<sup>340</sup> For a particularly striking instance of Derrida's tribute to Bataille see Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 105-6n35. "Here I permit myself to recall that the texts to which you have referred (particularly "*La double séance*," "*La dissémination*," "*La mythologie blanche*," but also "*La pharmacie de Platon*" and several others) are situated *explicitly* in relation to Bataille, and also explicitly propose a reading of Bataille."

If what we call ‘animal life’ is constituted by a ‘heterogeneous multiplicity’ of entities and a ‘multiplicity of organizations of relations’ between organic and inorganic life forms, then what sense can be made of an insuperable division between human and animal? Do not ‘human beings’ belong to this multiplicity of beings and relations? Are we to believe that human beings are somehow exempt from the play of differences and forces, of becomings and relations? Are not ‘human beings’ sliding constantly along a series of differences, including those that are thought to separate human from animal, animal from planet, and life in general from death?<sup>341</sup>

While I find Calarco’s line of critical questioning to be not only legitimate but quite necessary, I do not subscribe to his conclusion: while the lines of difference traverse the concept of the animal as well as that of the human, they do not invalidate the insuperability of the human-animal divide. What they attest to, rather, is the possibility of becoming, of crossing the threshold separating humanity from animality. Furthermore, one must have the courage to assert (however distasteful this assertion may appear to the politically-correct spirit of currently flourishing animal studies) that the movement of becoming can only proceed in one direction: for Bataille as well as for Lacan, the human subject can attain the animal state of being-outside-the-law, but the animal cannot accede to the human position in the symbolic order. In making room for this possibility, moreover, both thinkers specify the heavy price to pay for that radical freedom that attends becoming-animal, namely madness. As we shall see, only a psychotic may approach the unalienated condition of the wild animal and thereby set himself apart from the rest of servile humanity.

What is at stake in Bataille’s theorization of sovereignty is, indeed, the possibility of freedom – of radical freedom which he occasionally compares to “the freedom of the wild animal.” It soon becomes clear, however, that the animal’s nonparticipation in the symbolic order is somewhat different from the sovereign’s refusal of this order. Thus, in his 1952 paper,

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<sup>341</sup> Matthew Calarco, *Zoographies: The Question of the Animal from Heidegger to Derrida* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 142.

“The Sovereign,” he traces the historical movement whereby humanity came to separate itself from the animal world and *willingly* submitted itself to the double condition of alienation and servitude:

If one historical moment seems hardly debatable, it is truly that touches on work, in which men, unlike animals, at least most of them, are reduced to slavery by their own accord. Work is on the same level with the prohibitions to which the first men seem to have been just as subordinate without being bound to them by others. Apparently, these beings at once so near and so far from us distinguished themselves from the animals through a willful supplication to laws like those prohibiting free sexual commerce and murder...we must believe that humanity has subordinated itself in its entirety, almost simultaneously, to the law of work and the major prohibitions. It has subordinated itself, it has renounced the natural sovereignty of the animals.<sup>342</sup>

Two points must be immediately made apropos of this remarkable passage. On the one hand, it makes clear that the thought of sovereignty involves thinking the possibility of exception insofar as it would presuppose the existence of some exceptional (I am tempted to say “super-human”) being capable of evading the condition of “humanity in its entirety” and escaping the alienated mode of existence governed by “the law of work and the major prohibitions.” On the other hand, it suggests that sovereignty negates the alienated condition of humanity without, at the same time, relapsing into “the natural sovereignty of the animals.” The negation in question must indeed be understood in the properly dialectical sense (conferred to it by Hegel) not as the subject’s return to his true (“natural” or “unalienated”) self but as the movement—the restlessness of the negative—which further denaturalizes the subject and submits him to the play of difference.

The sovereign’s difference from the animal consists in the former’s capacity to choose. The sovereign *chooses* to separate himself from the human (symbolic) order governed by the law of work and prohibition, he *chooses* to transgress the laws imposed by the big Other: “between

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<sup>342</sup> Georges Bataille, “The Sovereign,” in *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, ed. Stuart Kendall, trans. Michelle Kendall and Stuart Kendall (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 188-9.

slavery and death, everyone is free to choose death.”<sup>343</sup> The animal, Bataille concedes, does not accept slavery and thus remains free, but it does not make a choice between slavery and freedom; rather, it possesses the “natural sovereignty” as though the latter constituted its natural property. Sovereignty presupposes “the negation of prohibition,” argues Bataille in the third volume of *The Accursed Share*. The animal cannot negate the prohibition which it never accepted in the first place. Oblivious to the law, the animal cannot break it; it remains incapable of crime.

Does not Lacan propose something remarkably similar with his claim that man began with law and crime? As Derrida’s careful reading of “A Theoretical Introduction to the Functions of Psychoanalysis in Criminology” (1950) demonstrates, he certainly does. “In other words, what separates Man from Beast is the Law, the experience of the Law, the Superego, and therefore the possibility of transgressing it in Crime. Basically, as opposed to the Beast, Man can obey or not obey the Law. Only he has the liberty. Only he, then, can become criminal.”<sup>344</sup> While, at this particular stage in his teaching, Lacan still utilizes the Freudian concept of the superego (which, he suggests, the animal does not possess) in order to refer to the participation in and experience of the Law, in his later seminars and texts, he introduces the concept of the big Other. Already in his 1955-56 seminar on *The Psychoses*, for instance, Lacan argues: “From the moment the subject speaks, the Other, with a big O, is there.”<sup>345</sup> The animal, insofar as it does not speak, maintains no relation to the big Other. Consequently, it also has no relation to the Law (the big Other being the locus not only of language but of the symbolic laws as well). Derrida is thus quite right to point out, in his reading of Lacan, that “the animal has neither the unconscious nor language, it does not have the other, it has not relation to the other as such, except by an effect of

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<sup>343</sup> Ibid., 188.

<sup>344</sup> Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, 147.

<sup>345</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book III: The Psychoses, 1955-1956*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Russell Grigg (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1993), 41.

the human order, by contagion, appropriation, domestication.”<sup>346</sup> The other, of course, needs to be rewritten as the big Other defined by Lacan as “that before which you make yourself recognized. But you can make yourself recognized by it only because it recognized first. It has to be recognized for you to be able to make yourself recognized.”<sup>347</sup> To be recognized by the big Other is to obtain a particular symbolic identity (be it a “political leader” or a “free-thinking intellectual” or a “strong warrior”). Furthermore, without the big Other, notes Lacan, there would be no such thing as psychosis.

In this manner, by elucidating the subject’s relation to the big Other, Lacan establishes a series of connections that bring together madness, animality, and sovereignty. The psychotic, somewhat like the animal and also much like the Bataillean sovereign, rejects the Law of the big Other. The price he pays for his insubordination to the Law is heavy, however, for he cannot acquire a stable symbolic identity. Clearly, as it is well known, the psychotic can invent an identity for himself and call himself an emperor, for example. Such an identity, however, is not recognized by the big Other—the fact that accounts for a peculiar paradox that characterizes the psychotic’s sense of self. On the one hand, his identity remains precarious and subject to sudden change; the same individual who once fancied himself an emperor may, at some point in his life, reinvent himself as a slave.<sup>348</sup> On the other hand, though his identity may be short-lived and precarious, the psychotic nonetheless possesses an unshakable certainty in the veracity of this identity which he chose for himself. In this respect, insofar as he creates his identity for himself,

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<sup>346</sup> Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, 114.

<sup>347</sup> Lacan, *The Psychoses*, 51.

<sup>348</sup> For a detailed and lucid account of Lacan’s conception of psychosis see Bruce Fink, *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Theory and Technique* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 89. Fink points out that the psychotic does not have a stable identity precisely insofar as “the imaginary [rather than the symbolic] continues to predominate in psychosis ... Insofar as the ego-ideal serves to anchor one’s sense of self, to tie it to the approval or recognition of a parental Other, its absence leaves one with a precarious sense of self, a self-image that is liable to deflate or evaporate at certain critical moments.”

insofar as he recognizes himself without soliciting recognition from the Other, the psychotic resembles the sovereign whom Derrida describes as “he who has the right and the strength in the broadest sense of the term, is he who has the right and the strength to be recognized as *himself, the same, properly the same as himself*.”<sup>349</sup> Indeed, the connection between madness and sovereignty was best articulated by Lacan himself who writes that “if a man who thinks he is a king is mad, a king who thinks he is a king is no less so.”<sup>350</sup> Sovereignty, in other words, necessarily presupposes madness as long as it involves a subjective act of self-nomination, a self-recognition that does not seek to ground itself in the recognition by the Other. The sovereign is mad insofar as he claims sovereignty as his essential property instead of perceiving it as the symbolic role bestowed upon him by the Other.

### **Sovereignty and Psychosis in *The Sword of Doom***

Lacanian psychoanalysis, therefore, does not merely confirm or reiterate Bataille’s theorization of the relationship between sovereignty and madness, but it also illuminates something not necessarily unthought but certainly not quite thought out in Bataille’s conception of sovereignty, namely the conditions of its possibility. When Bataille appears to equate sovereignty with absolute freedom—that is to say, freedom from work, from understanding, from alienation in the symbolic order—one must wonder whether this freedom can be actually attained. Bataille himself remains ambiguous on this point. In the third volume of *The Accursed Share*, for instance, he comes close to admitting that sovereignty constitutes a kind of impossible ideal, which cannot be embodied in a real, actually existing person: “Sovereignty has many forms; it is

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<sup>349</sup> Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, 66.

<sup>350</sup> Jacques Lacan, “Presentation on Psychological Causality,” in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), 139.

only rarely condensed into a person and even then it is diffuse.”<sup>351</sup> The seriousness and conviction with which Bataille writes, however, signals that sovereignty cannot be a merely theoretical fiction for what is at stake is the possibility (Indeed, as Bataille himself suggests, *The Accursed Share* in its entirety constitutes a kind of apology—that is to say, an apology for humanity “entirely made up of violent contrasts”).

Now, I would argue that, through his exhaustive account of psychosis, Lacan succeeds in offering a fairly concrete picture of the actual manifestation of sovereignty (if the latter could, in fact, find actualization in a person). It is precisely in order to lend the concept of sovereignty a greater concreteness (as well as to put my Lacanian reading of Bataille to the test) that I turn to cinema. My decision to focus on a Japanese samurai film or *jidai-geki* for the sake of illustrating a relation between animality and Bataillean sovereignty, defined as it is by its association with criminality and transgression, is obvious enough. Too many films in this particular genre center on outlaw warriors, who have a tendency to fly into murderous rage and face a certain death without exhibiting much concern either for their own lives or the lives of their opponents. Oftentimes, such nihilistic anti-heroes are explicitly compared to wild beasts as is the case with Hideo Gosha’s *Sword of the Beast* (1965), for example. Surprisingly, the film which I am about to discuss, Kihachi Okamoto’s *The Sword of Doom* (1966), features no explicit references to animals or beasts, not even to monsters. My decision to focus on this film is partly informed by the exceptional status of this fairly late example of the *jidai-geki* genre, which differs from its predecessors insofar as it reveals the utter senselessness of violence perpetrated by its samurai anti-hero, Ryunosuke Tsukue (played by Tatsuya Nakadai). Ryunosuke differs from the previous figurations of the lawless samurai insofar as his crimes are not committed for the sake of either

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<sup>351</sup> Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, 221.



honor or power, nor are they perpetrated to appease his need for revenge or satisfy his sense of personal justice; indeed, they appear to be completely meaningless when perceived against the background of the symbolic laws of his community. In this respect, though clearly not a part of the New Wave movement, this film certainly reflects the essential preoccupation of this movement, namely the preoccupation with the crisis of the symbolic, manifested primarily in the weakening of the paternal function that comes to increasingly malfunction in its regulation of the subject's relations with his community.

The film stresses the meaninglessness of Ryunosuke's transgressions in the very opening scene which depicts his apparently unprovoked murder of an elderly Buddhist pilgrim. As the old man kneels down and prays for death so that he could cease to be a burden to his granddaughter, the hero appears out of thin air and delivers a fatal blow with his sword. Thus, at the very beginning, the film effectively conveys the divided nature of sovereignty: on the hand, the hero emerges as a divine agent, an impersonal force that springs forth in response to the old man's prayer and swiftly administers death; on the other hand, he resembles a brute beast that kills with indifference, which betrays a lack of concern for the other's death. This indifference which one reads on Ryunosuke's stony face following the murder is significant since it brings to mind the apathy in the animal's gaze that, according to Bataille, betrays its incomprehension of death as well as its immersion in the world *qua* living organic whole. From the Lacanian perspective, this absorption in unbroken continuity (in which the animal moves "like water in water") refers to the predominance of the imaginary that, as Bruce Fink points out, comes to be overwritten by the symbolic in the course of "normal" neurotic development but persists uninterrupted in the case of psychosis.<sup>352</sup>

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<sup>352</sup> Fink, *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, 87-90.

Now, although Bataille believes that the essential feature of sovereignty consists in negating the prohibition against murder, it must be noted that the symbolic order does not necessarily prohibit killing. In particular, as Eiko Ikegami argues, the samurai vassalage system and its honor culture attached a great importance to the ability to use violence. “The notion of honor not only is expressed as a concern for one’s social evaluation but is profoundly connected with one’s dignity, self-esteem, and identity. One’s honor is the image of oneself in the social mirror,” argues Ikegami in a curiously Lacanian turn of phrase.<sup>353</sup> Significantly, she goes on to stress, one attains recognition of one’s honor (and thus secures one’s symbolic identity) through “the skillful use of violence.”<sup>354</sup> Thus, whenever she claims that the samurai distinguished themselves from the nonsamurai through their willingness to sacrifice their own lives as well as skill with which they took the lives of others, she invariably stresses the connection between the samurai’s attitude towards death and self-destruction to the demands of the “culture of horror.”<sup>355</sup> Most relevant to the present discussion, however, is her point concerning the instrumental function of honorific violence: the samurai, she notes, acquiesced to the risk of death not in order to experience the Bataillean “joy in the face of death,” but in order to have his identity recognized by others. Consequently, risking life in the struggle to the death was ultimately

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<sup>353</sup> Eiko Ikegami, *The Taming of the Samurai: Honorific Individualism and the Making of Modern Japan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 23.

<sup>354</sup> Ibid., 72. “Examining the process through which the samurai emerged as a social status category indicates that the skillful use of violence lay at the core of their identity and differentiated them from the rest of society. .... *The samurai revolutionized the structure of local communities, mediated conflicts with the explicit and implicit threat of violence, and finally established a new coercive way of obtaining revenue from an agricultural society.*” Doubtless, following Ikegami’s work, one read approach *The Sword of Doom* from the historical perspective as a reflection on the historical process of “taming of the samurai,” whereby the same social structure that once encouraged the samurai’s outward manifestation of violence (as the means towards securing prestige and obtaining honor) came to increasingly discourage “personal use of violence” with the growth of centralized state. Ryunosuke’s self-destructive violence tendencies could thus be understood as the expression of the samurai’s sovereign power resisting incorporation into the state apparatus.

<sup>355</sup> Ibid., 31. “The samurai distinguished themselves from the nonsamurai classes as a group of men who were willing to die for honor. The culture of honor also enhanced their military prestige and helped the landed warrior class achieve a position of political and ideological supremacy by excluding those who did not belong to this community of honor.”

useless as an end in itself; for it to produce useful effects, the struggle had to be witnessed by others: “This honor-seeking mentality was of course combined with an instrumental intention. Unless ‘recognized’ by one’s master, a brave action was useless, as it resulted neither in gaining honor nor in receiving rewards from the master. Thus, the samurai always ensured that their performances were witnessed by their comrades.”<sup>356</sup> In light of this discussion, one can now better grasp the significance of Ryunosuke’s not “behaving triumphantly” following the killing of the monk: unprovoked and not witnessed by anyone, the pilgrim’s death brings no glory and no honor to the samurai. Even more important is the fact that Ryunosuke does not even seek recognition of his identity in the first place. In this respect, he appears less as a Hegelian master who enters the struggle to the death in order to secure recognition of his power and more like a Bataillean sovereign who kills and dies literally for nothing (save for the *useless experience* of killing and dying), with no future goal in his sight. Unlike mastery, which seeks reward and recognition, sovereignty constitutes an end in itself and does not let itself be subordinated to an instrumental function.

Ryunosuke’s indifferent expression, furthermore, attests to another, equally significant link between sovereignty and madness. The psychotic, according to Lacan, experiences no guilt. Indeed, since the psychotic does not have access to the Symbolic, he cannot perceive his behaviour as either criminal or immoral. As Fink suggests, his obliviousness to morality stems from his freedom from the paternal function, his refusal of the Name-of-the-Father (i.e., the signifier that precipitates the subject’s integration into the symbolic order): “The absence of the paternal function affects all symbolic functions, and thus it should be no surprise that it affects everything we commonly associate with morality and conscience. This does not mean that a psychotic always acts ‘immorally’; rather, it means that even slight provocation can lead the

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<sup>356</sup> Ibid., 99.

psychotic to engage in seriously punishing behavior.”<sup>357</sup> Curiously, Fink goes on to note that the psychotic “is more prone to immediate action,” thus underscoring the temporality peculiar to sovereignty and psychosis—the temporality of immediacy. The psychotic’s and the sovereign’s actions, in other words, are prompted by the *present* experience as opposed to being informed by reflection on the *future* consequences of these actions. Likewise, neither the psychotic nor the sovereign experience feelings of guilt and remorse since they do not dwell on their *past* actions and do not interpret them in accordance with moral principles. Indifferent towards the law and morality, sovereignty (as well as madness and animality) combines transgression with innocence. If Ryunosuke shows neither remorse nor triumph after carrying out a gruesome act of murder, it is because he does not perceive it as an act of transgression at all.

Crucially, in the very next scene that follows the old man’s murder, the film dramatizes the relation of correspondence between the sovereign’s obliviousness to (and hence independence from) the symbolic realm of law and his refusal of the paternal function (*le nom-du-père*). Immediately after slaying the pilgrim, Ryunosuke is summoned to a meeting with his sick father, who talks to him about the upcoming fencing competition and asks Ryunosuke to yield to his weaker opponent, Bunnojo Utsugi, who sorely needs to win in order to become a new head of the Kogen clan’s fencing school. Possessed by a jealous desire for his opponent’s wife, he does not heed this advice and, in fact, kills his opponent in what is meant to be a nonviolent match. This episode thus highlights two interrelated points constitutive of the essential condition of psychosis as well as that of madness. First, it represents Ryunosuke’s father as completely lacking in authority. The father’s symbolic function is to lay down the law, to make his child accept symbolic prohibitions. Yet Ryunosuke’s father is too sick and impotent to serve in this symbolic capacity. Although one learns that at some point in his life, the father

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<sup>357</sup> Fink, 97.

too was a skillful warrior, on the two occasions that he appears in the movie, one sees him lying on a deathbed with the high-angle framing accentuating his lack of power over Ryunosuke. It is this indifference to the paternal authority that foreshadows Ryunosuke's imminent psychotic break for what is at issue in psychosis is precisely the foreclosure [*Verwerfung*] of the Name-of-the-Father, the rejection of the primordial signifier. Russell Grigg offers a rather concise and clear elucidation of the problem at hand: "Foreclosure in psychosis is the foreclosure of the Name-of-the-Father, a key signifier that 'anchors' or 'quilts' signifier and signified. Thus it is only when what is foreclosed is specifically concerned with the question of the father, as in Schreber's case, that psychosis is produced."<sup>358</sup> As Grigg goes on to suggest, the Name-of-the-Father qua primordial signifier anchors not only the signifier's relation to the signified but also the subject's relation to the symbolic universe. Indeed, as Lacan himself points out, the primordial signifier is responsible for "an original bipartition," which grounds not only the division into the signifier and the signified, but also "an initial division into the good and the bad."<sup>359</sup>

Thus, the hero's lack of respect for the paternal (symbolic) authority directly relates to the second characteristic of sovereignty foregrounded in the aforementioned scene, namely the disregard for the written and unwritten rules guaranteeing the relative stability of the symbolic community. Here one must keep in mind that, as Žižek frequently points out, "the Lacanian 'big Other' does not designate merely the explicit symbolic rules regulating social interaction, but also the intricate cobweb of *unwritten* 'implicit' rules."<sup>360</sup> Even more relevant to the present discussion is his claim that "an excessive pursuit of justice by a 'stickler for the rules', with no

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<sup>358</sup> Russell Grigg, *Lacan, Language, and Philosophy* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2008), 9.

<sup>359</sup> Lacan, *The Psychoses*, 150-1.

<sup>360</sup> Slavoj Žižek, "Class Struggle or Postmodernism? Yes, Please!," in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, by Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek (London and New York: Verso, 2000), 133n41.

understanding of the unwritten rules which qualify the application of the law, ends in crime.”<sup>361</sup>

Now, while the psychotic may very well function within a community (Schreber, for instance, was a judge as well as a prolific author) as well as follow its basic rules, he may have trouble grasping this complex of unwritten and disavowed laws constitutive of the big Other. Ryunosuke, for instance, does not understand why other members of the Kogen clan should hold him accountable for the death of Bunnojo Utsugi. “No one has grounds for a grudge against me,” he proclaims with the same stony indifference that was written on his face at the moment he took the old pilgrim’s life, “Utsugi died in a fair match.” What Ryunosuke comprehends is the official principle of samurai honor, linked to skillful and disciplined use of violence as well as affirmation of honorable death (for instance, death in a fair match). What he does not comprehend, however, is the unwritten instrumental function of honorific violence. As Ikegami notes, “honor was conceived as an index of the sovereign power of the samurai’s house, or *ie*. A strong desire for enhancing the name of one’s house was the driving force behind the warrior’s competitive behaviour.”<sup>362</sup> In other words, within the samurai honor culture, the skillful use of violence and courage in the face of death were embraced not as *ends* in themselves, but rather as *means* towards enhancing the prestige of the house or the fencing school. Ryunosuke’s transgression, therefore, consists in nothing other than his adherence to the “official” principles of samurai’s sovereign honor (even at the price of inflicting considerable damage to his house) while scorning the unwritten laws governing his community.

In the following scenes, which comprise a good first half of the movie, Ryunosuke proves himself to be somewhat capable of functioning in a society. Indeed, he even allows his sovereign power to be converted into a useful force when joins the ranks of a paramilitary organization

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<sup>361</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?: Five Interventions in the (Mis)use of a Notion* (London and New York: Verso, 2001), 34.

<sup>362</sup> Ikegami, 50.

specializing in political assassinations. Thus, after the fatal incident at the fencing competition forces him to flee his hometown, he manages to find employment as an assassin working for the Shinsen Group, a semi-official police force that supports the Tokugawa shogunate. He even manages to support a family, even though he does not officially marry his mistress (who was once the wife of his opponent, Utsugi) and they live on the brink of poverty. From the Deleuzian-Guattarian perspective, he stands as the prime example of the man of war who, once captured by the State (or, in this case, by a political organization aiming to take control over the State power), nonetheless continues to cause it problems. The root of these problems, of course, lies in Ryunosuke's developing psychosis, which makes impossible his complete subordination to the rules of his organization.

His descent into psychosis, however, is not smooth and slow. Indeed, as Lacan points out, the development of illness is never gradual, "there are always surges and phases."<sup>363</sup> Some decisive event must trigger a psychotic break. What usually takes place in such an event is the encounter with the symbolic father, with *Un-père* or "One-father."<sup>364</sup> Fink clarifies this point: "It is the encounter with the One-father, with the Father as a pure symbolic function (and this often takes the form of an encounter with a particular person, male or female, who plays or tries to play a symbolic role), that leads to the triggering of psychosis—that is, to a psychotic break. Lacan makes this into a very general thesis, inviting us to try to verify it by seeking dramatic encounters with such a One-father at the origin of *every* psychotic break."<sup>365</sup> Ryunosuke encounters the symbolic father-figure in the person of Toranosuke Shimada, a skillful swordsman and fencing instructor played by Toshiro Mifune. When on one cold winter night, the

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<sup>363</sup> Lacan, *The Psychoses*, 17.

<sup>364</sup> Needless to say, for both Freud and Lacan, this bearer of symbolic authority cannot be equated with the biological father presiding over the nuclear family.

<sup>365</sup> Fink, 106.

Shinsen Group mistakenly attacks Shimada, Ryunosuke witnesses the latter's sword-fighting skill the likes of which he has never encountered before. Crucially, Shimada also presents himself as a legislator of the law, who does not merely mete out an appropriate punishment to his attackers, but also demands that they formally state their reasons for the fight and calls for a fair combat. Here again, the camera focuses on Ryunosuke's stony visage depicted in close-up. This time, however, his face is paralyzed by absolute dread, as he watches his fellow group members dispatched one by one without joining the fight himself. Grigg helps to illuminate the significance of this scene when he remarks that, according to Lacan, "psychosis occurs with 'particular frequency' when the father 'functions as a legislator,' whether as one who actually makes the laws or as one who poses as the incarnation of high ideals."<sup>366</sup>

If only Ryunosuke was a neurotic, he would have in all likelihood developed a transference relationship with Shimada—the relationship of the kind students develop with their teachers, or analysands with their psychoanalysts. Ryunosuke, however, cannot form such a relationship since, in psychosis, the primordial signifier responsible for the paternal function is foreclosed. In "On a Question Prior to Any Possible Treatment of Psychosis," Lacan writes: "For psychosis to be triggered, the Name-of-the-Father—*verworfen*, foreclosed, that is, never having come to the place of the Other—must be summoned to that place in symbolic opposition to the subject."<sup>367</sup> Since the psychotic has no access to the symbolic big Other, however, the signifier Name-of-the-Father fails to reach its proper place in the subject's relationship with the symbolic network. For this reason, from the Lacanian perspective, the psychotic, like an animal, cannot be treated as the subject. It is precisely this point, furthermore, which attests to Lacan's and Derrida's fundamental difference with respect to the question of the human-animal distinction.

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<sup>366</sup> Grigg, 18.

<sup>367</sup> Jacques Lacan, "On a Question Prior to Any Possible Treatment of Psychosis," in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), 481.



Lacan, unlike Derrida, does not hesitate to draw the line of difference dividing humanity into subjects and nonsubjects and, thereby, clarifying the condition of underpinning the possibility of becoming-animal, which is also the possibility of radical freedom. This point also attests to Lacan's proximity to Bataille, who maintains that one cannot attain "freedom of the wild animal" without succumbing to the "derangement" that culminates in the cessation of self-consciousness. This is what Žižek gets at when (adapting the Lacanian perspective) he writes: "True, we can call this – the distance from the Other – also 'psychosis,' but what is 'psychosis' here if not another name for freedom?"<sup>368</sup>

Is psychosis synonymous with freedom? As I will illustrate in a moment, *The Sword of Doom*, in concretizing the relationship between sovereignty and madness, also problematizes Žižek's answer to this question. After depicting Ryunosuke's psychotic break, the plot of the film progresses swiftly: Ryunosuke murders his mistress and then flees a duel arranged with Utsugi's brother. This unexpected display of cowardice on his part (earlier in the film, he actively sought after the opportunity to have this duel) has a double significance. On the one hand, perhaps for the first time in his life, he faces the limit of his sovereignty. The encounter with Shimada precipitates Ryunosuke's first brush with the paternal law with the signifier of the Name-of-the-Father that, while presenting itself to him as impenetrable and mysterious, nonetheless confronts him with the possibility of his own death. At this point, he can no longer treat death with indifference, like a sovereign, but flee from death like an ordinary human being. On the other hand, the film appears to dramatize the onset of paranoia and the attendant fears of persecution. In such case, as Fink points out, the psychotic does not engage in conflict with the Other (the State, family, academic institution, etc.) but displaces his aggressiveness onto others: "the conflict seems to be with others his or her age--rivals, competitors, or lovers. They are not all

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<sup>368</sup> Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, 41.

trying to garner approval from the same authority figure; rather, one of them is usurping the psychotic's place. The familiar phenomenon of *persecution* clearly falls in the category of imaginary relations, and is predominant feature in paranoia (one of the psychoses). As Lacan says, 'It is insofar as [the patient] has not acquired ... the [symbolic] Other [language with its underlying structure] that he encounters the purely imaginary other. This other negates him, literally kills him.'"<sup>369</sup> Haunted by the paranoid fear of persecution, Ryunosuke turns into a mad killer who becomes completely indiscriminate in his conflicts with others, directing his aggression towards his opponents as well as his allies, and who thereby can no longer function as a part of political organization at the end of the film. Thus, after he makes a pact with the Shinsen Group's leader to assassinate one of the members of the group, he experiences visual and auditory hallucinations that prompt him to flee into murderous rage and turn against his entire gang. Crucially, among his past victims' voices that resound during the moment of hallucination, Ryunosuke also hears Shimada's authoritative words, "Fool! The sword is the soul! Study the soul to know the sword. Evil mind, evil sword!" One would be hard-pressed to find a better illustration of the Lacanian thesis concerning psychosis in the entire history of world cinema. This thesis, the fundamental lesson on the seminar on *The Psychoses*, is conveyed by a pithy formulation: "*what has been rejected from the symbolic reappears in the real.*"<sup>370</sup> What has been thus rejected or foreclosed is, of course, the Name-of-the-Father that reemerges (in Ryunosuke's encounter with the real) as the hallucinatory manifestation of Shimada's threatening voice. Incapable of negating this ghostly presentation of paternal authority, Ryunosuke goes on a bloody rampage, indiscriminately slaying whoever appears on his path. While the film's finale suggests that Ryunosuke, being seriously wounded and facing a large crowd of opponents,

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<sup>369</sup> Fink, 96.

<sup>370</sup> Lacan, *The Psychoses*, 46.

cannot possibly survive this fight, it nonetheless does not depict the moment of his death. Instead, the film ends abruptly with a freeze frame that leaves the audience with the final image of Ryunosuke's face, this time not stony and indifferent but disfigured by madness and fury. In thus avoiding a representation of the hero's demise, the film in a sense immortalizes him. Ryunosuke cannot avoid death but, as Bataille put it, he can nonetheless escape it by not dying humanly. In this final moment of derangement, he regains his nonknowledge of death and, in shedding the fear of mortality, he "lives and dies like an animal."

In aiming at elucidation of the series of relations tying together sovereignty, animality, and madness, the above analysis of *The Sword of Doom* also serves as a response to the question posed at the beginning of this chapter: what happens to the sovereign man of war once his power has been captured and appropriated by a statist organization? It demonstrates that, insofar as he stays on the path of becoming-animal, the path that inevitably leads towards subjective destitution, the sovereign retains the "freedom of the wild animal," which cannot be taken away from him even if enters into the service of a particular military or political institution. Even if, as Deleuze and Guattari argue, the man of war appears to be without future, destined for either death or capture by the State, he does not let himself be captured without creating a considerable capture for the State. Furthermore, in losing battle against a statist organization and dooming himself to death, he in a sense escapes death by not dying humanly—that is to say, by meeting his demise without either knowledge or fear of death. Nonetheless, while illustrating the psychotic's freedom from alienation in the big Other, the film also problematizes Žižek's simple equation of psychosis with freedom. While one certainly attains freedom in psychosis, one does not, however, have *freedom to choose* to undergo a psychotic break. As the film makes clear, Ryunosuke does not make a conscious decision to "live and die like an animal," but rather

passively experiences or suffers through his descent into madness. Precluding the sort of romanticization of madness one occasionally encounters in Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*, Lacan states this point clearly in his seminar when he asserts that, "surely, *nobody goes mad through wanting to.*"<sup>371</sup>

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<sup>371</sup> Ibid., 15.

## The Erotic Community in Yasuzo Masumura's *Blind Beast*

### From the Politics of Destruction to the Politics of Subtraction

In the preceding chapters, I have explored the two figurations of Bataille's sovereignty and, accordingly, two seemingly incompatible figures of political subjectivity: on the one hand, the mass sovereignty that, during the time of Bataille's engagement with Contre-Attaque, expressed itself in popular revolts unfolding in the streets; on the other hand, the sovereignty of the solitary subject who affirms absolute freedom even at the cost of madness and death. Doubtless, for most scholars, Bataille's inward turn consists precisely in the transition from one form of sovereignty to another. The turn, furthermore, raises a crucial question concerning the status of the political in Bataille's thought: does Bataille's abandonment of the concept of popular sovereignty in favor of sovereignty that grounds itself in the possibility of inner experience and nonknowledge serve as an indication of Bataille's turning away from the political as well as his growing indifference towards the figure of community?

As I have already indicated in my first chapter, Jean-Luc Nancy's work provides an important corrective to a simplistic partitioning of Bataille's corpus into two periods (one political, one unpolitical). *The Inoperative Community* (1986), Nancy's influential exploration of the question of community in Bataille's work, begins with a concise definition of the political: "the political is the place where community as such is brought into play."<sup>372</sup> Therefore, if, as Nancy suggests, Bataille never ceased to think the possibility of community in all its different forms, he also never completely turned away from the exigency of the political. This is precisely

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<sup>372</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, ed. Peter Connor, trans. Peter Connor et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), xxxvii. Later in the text, he elaborates: "The political, if this word may serve to designate not the organization of society but the disposition of community as such, the destination of its sharing, must not be the assumption or the work of love or of death....If the political is not dissolved in the sociotechnical element of forces and needs (...), it must inscribe the sharing of community."

what Maurice Blanchot asserts in *The Unavowable Community*, the text that not only continues his prolonged engagement with Bataille, but also initiates a dialogue with Nancy. In an effort to interrogate the division of Bataille's work into two discontinuous periods, he writes: "It is clear that (approximately) between 1930 and 1940, the word 'community' imposed itself on his research more than during the following periods, even if the publication of *La Part Maudite* and, later, of *L'Erotisme* (which gives precedence to a certain form of communication) prolongs nearly analogous themes which however cannot be subordinated to what came before (...). One can say that the political exigency was never absent from his thought, though it took on different shapes depending on the interior or exterior urgency."<sup>373</sup> Nancy, in turn, offers a more concrete and quite convincing account of Bataille's intellectual itinerary: on the one hand, in noting Bataille's preoccupation with community, he foregrounds an element of continuity persisting throughout Bataille's voluminous output; on the other hand, he allows for the existence of different periods in Bataille's work that, in turn, can be distinguished with respect to Bataille's evolving conception of community.

As Christopher Fynsk notes in his excellent foreword to *The Inoperative Community*, according to Nancy's account, Bataille's thought progresses from one figuration of community—the community of militants that strives to realize a new type of society through destruction—to another form of community—the community of lovers that entirely separates itself from society: "He [Nancy] shows the limits of Bataille's thought of community ... by demonstrating that as Bataille loses faith in the possibility of realizing in society a modern form of community that

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<sup>373</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*, trans. Pierre Joris (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill, 1988), 4. The first version of Nancy's *The Inoperative Community* was published as a journal article in the spring of 1983. Blanchot's *The Unavowable Community* came out later during the same year. Nancy's text (which, in addition to "The Inoperative Community," also included "Myth Interrupted" and "Literary Communism") was finally published as a monograph in 1986. Throughout this period, the two thinkers clearly engaged in a dialogue with each other, a dialogue that centered largely on the question of community as posed Bataille's work.

would recover something of the commonality of experience characteristic of more primitive social forms (though without repeating the ‘immense failure’ of prior hieratic structures), he progressively isolates the community of lovers, separating them from society, and losing sight of the fact that their union communicates in its turn the separation that Nancy sees as (un)grounding community.”<sup>374</sup> In advancing this argument, Nancy, at once, divides Bataille’s oeuvre into different stages and foregrounds a fundamental continuity in his thought. The element of continuity resides in the fact that, for Bataille as well as for Nancy, “the question of the community is ... inseparable from a question of ecstasy.”<sup>375</sup> Henceforth, Nancy goes on to argue, “for Bataille, community was first and finally the community of lovers.”<sup>376</sup> Blanchot indirectly confirms this point when he emphasizes a number of similarities linking the two different conceptions of community in Bataille’s thought: the community formed by *people* revolting in the street and the community formed by *friends* or *couples*:

Assuredly there exists an abyss no rhetorical deceit can bridge between the impotent power of what one cannot refer to except by that so easily misunderstood word – the people (do not translate it as *Volk*) – and the strangeness of that antisocial society or association, always ready to dissolve itself, formed by *friends* or *couples*. Certain traits however distinguish them while bringing them together: the people (above all if one avoids sacralizing them) are not the State, not any more than they are the society in person, with its functions, its laws, its determinations, its exigencies which constitute its most proper finality.... That ‘arid solitude’ [of the anonymous forces] is precisely what justifies the comparison with what Georges Bataille has called ‘the true world of lovers,’ sensitive as he was to the antagonism between ordinary society and ‘the sly loosening of the social bond’ implied by such a world that is, precisely, the oblivion of the world...<sup>377</sup>

As Blanchot suggests, the “arid solitude,” which is precisely what the community of people and the community of lovers have in common, comes at the price of opposition to the State and a refusal of social organization. Bataille’s name for this opposition is transgression. Indeed, as I

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<sup>374</sup> Christopher Fynsk, foreword to *The Inoperative Community*, by Jean-Luc Nancy, ed. Peter Connor, trans. Peter Connor et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), xvii-xviii.

<sup>375</sup> Nancy, 6.

<sup>376</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>377</sup> Blanchot, 33-4.

have shown in the previous chapter, Bataille's concept of sovereignty cannot be dissociated from transgression of the law and thus from a certain figuration of criminality. Bataille never completely renounced this conception of "a criminal and transgressive countersovereignty" (to borrow an expression from Derrida) and it is this constant preoccupation that constitutes an element of cohesion and continuity linking together his various 'early' and 'late' texts.

The sovereignty of people, however, is not quite identical to the sovereignty of lovers. As I have argued in the first chapter, through a comparative analysis of Bataille and Badiou, people manifest their opposition through destruction that, for Bataille of the Contre-Attaque period as well as for Badiou of *Theory of the Subject*, constitutes the necessary prerequisite for the production of the new—the new truth (for Badiou) or the new form of community (for Bataille). (But is Bataille's passion for novelty so distinct from Badiou's? In *Being and Event*, Badiou speaks of "the coming to light of an indiscernible of the times, which, as such, is neither a known or recognized multiple, nor an ineffable singularity, but that which detains in its multiple-being all the common traits of the collective in question: in this sense, it is the truth of the collective's being."<sup>378</sup> Is not this "truth of the collective's being" so different from "the arid solitude of the anonymous forces," occupying the whole space yet without a proper place, hence indiscernible and unrecognizable?) The shift of interest from the community of people to the community of lovers would thus entail a shift in a political stance that, in accordance with Badiou's terminology, one may characterize as a transition from the politics of destruction, which aims at the annihilation of the existing symbolic order, to the politics of subtraction, which presupposes a withdrawal from or a nonparticipation in the symbolic laws of society.

What necessitates such a shift in Bataille's thought? Nancy's work provides a dual response to this question. On the one hand, like many other commentators, he makes note of

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<sup>378</sup> Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (New York: Continuum, 2005), 17.



Bataille's flirtation with the fascist ideal of heterogeneous (or ecstatic) community and his subsequent recognition of the risks involved in trying to beat the fascists at their own game: "For Bataille the pole of ecstasy remained linked to the fascist orgy ... or at least to the festival (whose element of ambiguous nostalgia returned, after him, in 1968) to the extent that it represented ecstasy in terms of the group and the political order."<sup>379</sup> Thus, as I have suggested in the first chapter, Bataille's turn away from political activism, grounded in the affirmation of destruction and effervescence, could be understood as a consequence of his disillusionment in the face of the encroaching threat of fascism and the Left's apparent inability to withstand it. On the other hand, however, Nancy suggests that something other than a historical crisis was responsible for Bataille's turning away from the generic communism of his Contre-Attaque period: "it was impossible for him to link the forms of sovereignty—or ecstasy—to the egalitarian community, indeed to community in general. These forms—essentially the sovereignty of lovers and that of the artist, the one and the other and the one *in* the other set apart from the orgiastics of fascism, but also from communist equality—could not but appear to him as ecstasies, and if not properly speaking 'private' (what could such a thing mean?), then at least isolated, without any hold—any noticeable or articulable hold in any case—on the community into which they nonetheless had to be woven, realized, or inscribed, lest they lose, fundamentally, their sovereign value."<sup>380</sup> Bataille's turn away from the politics of destruction, therefore, had to do with something more than his disappointment with the communists' inability to mobilize a collective resistance to fascism at the particular historical moment; it had to do with the communists' *essential* incapacity to realize the idea of ecstatic community, to make room for lovers and artists. The communist community based on egalitarian principles necessarily had to fall short of ecstasy.

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<sup>379</sup> Nancy, 20.

<sup>380</sup> Ibid.

Nancy's argument thus appears to indirectly substantiate the interpretative strategy, advanced in the preceding chapters of my dissertation, which approached Bataille's "inward turn" against the background of his "passion for the real." As Badiou argues, "the passion for the real is always the passion for the new"—new humanity, new knowledge, new forms of community. This passion is inscribed in the Bataillean motto that, as Nancy continually stresses, is expressed by the following ethical maxim: "we can only go farther." Now, the politics of destruction, as Badiou notes, certainly strives to go farther, aiming to come face-to-face with the real by means of purification, a kind of purgation or wiping the slate clean. While Badiou's *The Theory of the Subject* largely subscribes to this principle of purification, his later text, *The Century*, addresses its fundamental impasse: the subject committed to destruction cannot come face-to-face with the real unless he takes this pursuit of the real ever farther, to the point of accepting death: "The logic of purification, as Hegel astutely remarks, amounts to bringing about the nothing. Ultimately, death is the sole possible name of pure freedom, and 'dying well' the only thing that escapes suspicion. The maxim—all in all a rather simple one—is that strictly speaking, and despite the theatre proceeding *a contrario*, it is impossible to seem to die. This is why our century, aroused by the passion for the real, has in all sorts of ways—and not just in politics—been the century of destruction."<sup>381</sup> In following the path of destruction, argues Badiou, the passion for the real becomes indistinguishable from the obsession with identity and authenticity. In other words, it comes to substantialize the real.

As I am writing these lines, I cannot help but recall an anecdote related to me by a classmate whose acquaintance used to keep a photograph of a massive explosion pinned to a wall of his room. Accompanying the photograph there was a caption that simply read: "the real." Though quite trivial, this anecdote makes clear that the subject who seeks the real in destruction

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<sup>381</sup> Alain Badiou, *The Century*, trans. Alberto Toscano (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), 54.

cannot help but localize and thus substantialize the real. From this perspective, the real is something one can point a finger to and say: “Here it is! The real resurfacing amidst the explosion in the trenches! The real coming to the fore as the revolutionary masses are battling the police in the streets!” The real, however, is just as irrepressible as it is insubstantial, which is why it is better conceived of as a point of inconsistency in the symbolic field rather than a monstrous reality erupting amidst spectacular destruction. In *Guilty* (1944), Bataille self-critically addresses the passion for destruction that characterizes some of his early writings and thus moves away from a substantialization of the real: “The living combats of the present years arrest me less than those of the trenches, more appalling. What arrests me in the war is a means of anguished contemplation. This remains linked in me to nostalgia for ecstatic states. Today this nostalgia still seems lugubrious and sleazy. And it doesn’t have active value. I haven’t fought in any of the wars I have been involved in.”<sup>382</sup> It is precisely around the time of publication of *Guilty* and, just a year before it, *Inner Experience* that Bataille turns away from the politics of destruction to pursue the passion for the real through what Badiou calls the “subtractive orientation.”

Whereas the subjective figure of destruction seeks to confront negativity in death, the subtractive orientation “attempts to measure the ineluctable negativity” and constitutes “a differential and differentiating passion devoted to the construction of a minimal difference.”<sup>383</sup> What does it mean, in Bataille’s case, to measure negativity? If, as Badiou notes, “it is impossible to seem to die,” is it possible to produce a minimal difference between dying and not-dying? The famous opening of Bataille’s *Erotism* hints at an answer to these questions:

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<sup>382</sup> Georges Bataille, *Guilty*, trans. Stuart Kendall (Albany: SUNY Press, 2011), 212. Translation modified.

<sup>383</sup> Badiou, *The Century*, 54-6.

“Eroticism, it may be said, is assenting to life up to the point of death.”<sup>384</sup> In eroticism, therefore, the subject stages the minimal difference between dying and not-dying by taking life to the maximum point of intensity; he comes face-to-face with negativity not by actively seeking death but, on the contrary, by intensifying life. In this manner, he confronts death within life itself and thus, at the same time, escapes death. “Eroticism opens the way to death,”<sup>385</sup> writes Bataille but, in exposing the subject to death, it liberates him from it: “Assenting to life even in death is a challenge to death, in emotional eroticism as well as physical, a challenge to death through indifference to death.”<sup>386</sup>

One discovers a remarkably clear illustration of this admittedly difficult problem—the problem of staging the minimal difference in and through the erotic experience—in Bataille’s novel, *The Blue of Noon* (1945), written shortly after the publication of *Inner Experience* and *Guilty*. In its final chapter, Bataille describes a nocturnal adventure taken by the protagonist, Troppmann, and his lover, Dorothea (Dirty): walking towards a hotel in the city of Trier, the two stumble upon the graveyard. Fascinated by the starlit sky and the hundreds of graves lying ahead of them, the two experience a sudden surge of erotic passion:

I stopped and lay on top of her, heavy and still, panting like a dog. Abruptly I clasped her naked buttocks. I fell on her with my full weight. She uttered a terrific scream. I clenched my teeth as hard as I could. At that moment we began sliding down the sloping ground.

Farther down, the rock formed an overhang. If I hadn’t stopped our slide with my foot, we would have fallen into the night, and I might have wondered with amazement if we weren’t falling into the void of the sky.<sup>387</sup>

In describing the experience of sliding towards a certain death and, at the very last moment, saving oneself, the above passage renders concrete Bataille’s turn away from the impasse of

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<sup>384</sup> Georges Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, trans. Mary Dalwood (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986), 11.

<sup>385</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>386</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>387</sup> Georges Bataille, *Blue of Noon*, trans. Harry Mathews (London: Marion Boyars, 1986), 120.

destruction: rather than seeking to come face-to-face with the real through participation in violent outbreaks of destruction and thus embracing absolute freedom at the price of accepting the risk of death, Bataille now envisions something like a brush with the real, which manifests itself in inner experience rather than in the streets or the trenches. Rather than celebrating war and revolutionary violence, he embraces mysticism, poetry, and eroticism that make possible that “wild turmoil,” which, according to *The Tears of Eros*, constitutes the end of human existence: “The response to erotic desire—and to the perhaps most human (least physical) desire of poetry, and of ecstasy (but is it so decisively easy to grasp the difference between eroticism and poetry, and between eroticism and ecstasy?)—the response to erotic desire is, on the contrary, an end.”<sup>388</sup> By thus acceding to the “wild turmoil” in erotic ecstasy, the subject can be said to “to measure the ineluctable negativity”: he comes close to derangement without, in the end, succumbing to psychosis; he approaches the void of death without, in the end, falling into it.

### **Ecstasy and Communication**

Apart from clarifying the relation between eroticism and the experience of negativity, the above passage from *Blue of Noon* also suggests the conditions of possibility for ecstasy: it cannot be attained by the subject alone for it presupposes a relation to or, as Bataille puts it, a *communication* with the other. Already in *Inner Experience*, he foreshadows the significant role which the concept of eroticism will take on in his later texts: “At the extreme limit of the ‘possible,’ it is true, there is nonsense ... but only of that which had a prior sense, for *supplication*—arising from the absence of sense--fixes, in short, a sense, a final sense: this is fulguration, even ‘apotheosis’ of nonsense. But I don’t attain the extreme limit on my own and, in actual fact, I can’t believe the extreme limit attained, for I never remain there. If I had to be the only one having attained it (assuming that I had ...), it would be as though it hadn’t occurred.

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<sup>388</sup> Georges Bataille, *The Tears of Eros*, trans. Peter Connor (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1989), 19.

For if there subsisted a satisfaction, as small as I imagine it to be, it would distance me as much from the extreme limit. I cannot for a moment cease to incite myself to attain the extreme limit, and cannot make a distinction between myself and those with whom I desire to communicate.”<sup>389</sup>

As the words concluding the above passage indicate, the Bataillean concept of communication has nothing to do with a communicative exchange that aims solely at the transmission of information. Anticipating the idea of erotic fusion explored on the pages of *Erotism*, Bataille suggests that communicative exchange fails at the moment when partners in exchange come to be indistinguishable from one another, at the point when (to paraphrase Rimbaud’s motto) *I* becomes *the other*.

Eroticism occupies a special pride of place in Bataille’s philosophy insofar as, more so than any other form of nonproductive expenditure, it reveals the necessity of relation to and communication with the other. (This is not to say, however, that other forms of nonproductive expenditure preclude the possibility of communication and demand absolute solitude. Mysticism, for instance, is often associated with ascetic solitary life but it also involves a communication with the unknowable God. As for poetry, it too can be said to involve something like a communication of bliss between the writer and the reader, a communication divorced from informative value. In this respect, Roland Barthes’s *The Pleasure of The Text* is, perhaps, the most Bataillean of this author’s books, not only because it mobilizes such concepts as *the impossible* and *useless expenditure*, but, above all, because it painstakingly explores the blissful nature of communication between the writer and the reader.<sup>390</sup>) As Bataille often asserts, upon reaching the farthest point of experience, the subject would not be able to comprehend it since, at

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<sup>389</sup> Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. Leslie Anne Boldt (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988), 42.

<sup>390</sup> Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), 4. “I [the writer] must seek out this reader (must ‘cruise’ him) *without knowing where he is*. A site of bliss is then created. It is not the reader’s ‘person’ that is necessary to me, it is this site: the possibility of a dialectics of desire, of an *unpredictability* of bliss: the bets are not placed, there can still be a game.”

this point, the most profound knowledge would be indistinguishable from nonknowledge, a “final sense” would spill over into an “apotheosis of nonsense.” Now, as Suzanne Guerlac points out, while the erotic experience also precipitates a liquidation of individuality (insofar as it involves a fusion of the subject and the other), it also allows the subject to experience this state of loss while retaining consciousness: “Although radical fusion may, as Bataille declares, be the ultimate meaning of eroticism, the presence of an erotic object is required, at least initially. In eroticism it is a question of losing oneself knowingly, it seems, and not too completely after all.”<sup>391</sup> Insofar as Bataille’s theory of eroticism explores the possibility of intimate communication with the other, which brings about a dizzying experience of fusion (or, as Bataille calls it, *continuity*) yet allows for a degree of conscious knowledge, it focuses primarily on what Bataille calls “individual love” (and what Guerlac characterizes as “a heterosexual eroticism *à deux*”) and devotes only a few dismissive lines to the phenomena of orgies: “Whereas the orgy gives an experience, or event, of negation of limits, it does not give it to us as meaning. The erotic object does. ... In the possession of the erotic object man comes into consciousness—of loss, of death, and of himself as erotic subject.”<sup>392</sup> Love unveils finitude, as Nancy stresses in *Inoperative Community*; it brings about the nothing without, however, bringing about the subject’s death. In order to accomplish this task, however, it requires the presence of the other.

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<sup>391</sup> Suzanne Guerlac, “‘Recognition’ by a Woman!: A Reading of Bataille’s *L’Erotisme*,” *Yale French Studies*, vol. 78 (1990): 91.

<sup>392</sup> *Ibid.*, 92. While Guerlac and a number of other commentators bring attention to the fact that Bataille identifies the erotic subject with a man and the object with a woman, in what follows, I self-consciously opt for more gender-neutral terms such as “the other” or “the beloved.” While the text of *Erotism* is certainly filled with objectifying evocations of “a woman,” I find that dwelling on Bataille’s obvious disregard of political correctness contributes very little to theorization of eroticism. For this reason, I would call for a productive misreading of *Erotism* grounded in the Lacanian theory of sexuation. As in Lacan’s Seminar *On Feminine Sexuality*, the man-woman relation should be conceived in structural terms, instead of being mapped onto biological sexes. Indeed, there is no essential reason for arguing that a “woman” evoked on the pages of *Erotism* cannot be a homosexual (or even heterosexual) man. If, as every reader of this text knows, the erotic experience destabilizes the subject’s sense of identity, one can hardly argue that Bataille supposed that the lovers consumed by erotic fusion would be holding on to their (heteronormative) gender roles.

“Ecstasy itself is empty when envisaged as a private exercise, only mattering for a single individual,” writes Bataille in *Inner Experience*: “What I wanted: profound communication between beings to the exclusion of the links necessary to projects, which discourse forms.”<sup>393</sup> Already in this 1943 text, Bataille hints at the possibility of the community of lovers by noting the lovers’ separateness from the world of projects, from the society at large governed by the relations of production and exchange. He elaborates in this possibility in *The History of Eroticism*, which explicitly characterizes the community of lovers as a “society of consumption” and sets it apart from the State here defined as a “society of acquisition.” As Bataille argues, “love joins the lovers only to spend.”<sup>394</sup> Even though, earlier in the text, he proposes that, the historical emergence of individual love was made possible by “the relative abundance of resources,” his claim certainly does not imply that only the rich and the affluent are capable of individual love, as though being in love required a certain amount of money and material possessions. What the lovers constantly spend in their amorous union is not material wealth but *jouissance*, the only substance recognized by psychoanalysis, which, as Lacan stresses, is never lacking and can never be exhausted. Indeed, as Bataille himself puts it, “in desire nothing else counts any more, and the object gives the subject what it lacks in order to feel replete with the totality of being, so that at last it no longer lacks anything.”<sup>395</sup> The mention of the totality of being, attained in love by the subject who is defined by a certain lack, invariably brings one back to the question of Bataille’s ontology that, in chapter 5 of the present dissertation, I compared to Lacan’s ontological theses. As I have already noted with reference to *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, the lack of being (*manque à être* that can also be translated as *want*

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<sup>393</sup> Bataille, *Inner Experience*, 92.

<sup>394</sup> Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*, vols. II and III, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 162.

<sup>395</sup> *Ibid.*



to be) is the heavy price that the subject accepts upon entry into the symbolic domain of law and language. In the process of undergoing alienation in the big Other, the subject comes to be ‘petrified,’ stripped of that part of his being that contains his jouissance. Yet, as Marie-Hélène Brousse suggests, that part of being (which Bataille calls *the accursed share*) can be regained in love: “Lacan speaks of want-to-be, which implies lack. Want-to-be is, perhaps, better in English, because it explains why the other side of transference is love. What does love give? Love gives being. The object you love gives you some being; your love gives you being.”<sup>396</sup> Love, in other words, grants the subject access (temporarily, at least, since Bataille points out that the amorous union cannot ever reach permanent stability) to the inexhaustible reservoir of jouissance, from which the lovers are free to consume as much as they want.

Bataille does not merely anticipate Lacan’s ontological thesis, however, but also develops its political implications: “The State cannot in any way *use* up that part of ourselves that comes into play in eroticism or in individual love, for it cannot rise above interest (the generality of interest), and a share of ourselves (precisely the *accursed share*) cannot in any way be given within the limits of interest.”<sup>397</sup> There exists, in other words, the accursed share, that part of the subject’s being that cannot be alienated in the big Other and, therefore, cannot be subjugated to the laws governing the social order. In (re)activating this element, therefore, love also frees the subject (or, at least, part of the subject) from its subjection to the symbolic. Hence, as Nancy astutely suggests, Bataille’s late turn towards thinking the community of lovers did not, in any way, entail the turn away from thinking the political. On the contrary, it enabled him to outline the conditions of a possibility of separation from the State.

### **The Clandestinity of Lovers**

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<sup>396</sup> Marie-Hélène Brousse, “The Drive (I),” in *Reading Seminar XI: Lacan’s Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Richard Feldstein, Bruce Fink, and Maire Jaanus (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), 104.

<sup>397</sup> Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, 160.

Apart from disclosing the political implications of the study of eroticism, *The History of Eroticism* also clarifies how the erotic experience adheres to the logic of minimal difference (involved in thinking the politics of separation) insofar as it presupposes what, following Deleuze, one might call *becoming-clandestine*. As I have already noted above, while Bataille's late texts continue to link sovereignty to the transgression of prohibition against killing, they no longer associate this form of transgression with killings committed out in the open (in the course of war, for example, or during a revolutionary uprising), but link it to the figure of criminality which presupposes secrecy. Now, in *The History of Eroticism*, Bataille also foregrounds clandestinity as a characteristic of the world of lovers: "clandestinity is not at all necessary to individual love, but it often increases the intensity of feelings."<sup>398</sup> Further on, in the same text, he goes on to suggest that clandestinity may, after all, be quite essential to the community of lovers insofar as it presupposes a negation of the social order:

Individual love is not in itself opposed to society; yet, for lovers, what they are has no meaning unless it is transfigured in the love that joins them; otherwise, it is unavoidable meaninglessness – an unreality truer, alas, than the only reality. Lovers, in any case, tend to negate a social order that contests more often than it grants their right to live, that never yields to such a trifling thing as personal preference. Under difficult conditions, the element of transgression essential to the sexual act, its brutally erotic character, the overturning of the given order and the silent horror that are connected with it, even if the lovers cannot bear them, take on the value in their eyes of hideous emblems of their love.<sup>399</sup>

The act of negation, in this case, is quite different from destruction. On the contrary, it presupposes the act of separation which, while letting the state remain undisturbed, involves a withdrawal from society as well as a clandestine existence at the distance from the state. In this manner, separation produces new space without annihilating the old one. And it is precisely in erotic experience that Franco Rella discerns such a transfiguration of space. In his reading of the

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<sup>398</sup> Ibid., 157.

<sup>399</sup> Ibid., 159.

second part of *The Accursed Share* devoted to eroticism, he observes: “In the embrace, in the amorous and erotic hold, an unprecedented space opens up, where ‘we breathe an air that has never been breathed before,’ and where ‘the world appears in a new way.’”<sup>400</sup>

In the second chapter of this dissertation, I have discussed the “Don Juanesque dimension” of the militant politics to which Bataille was committed at the time of Contre-Attaque. It entailed a tragic heroism in the face of certain death and thus presupposed an ethical disposition that required the militant subject to greet his demise joyfully, by entering into a potentially fatal combat with a more powerful enemy instead of accepting survival at the price of servitude. Thus, the “Don Juanesque dimension” manifested itself in a properly ‘virile’ response to the threat of death which, as Susan Rubin Suleiman suggests, had to take place in the open, in the form of a mass revolt unfolding in the streets. The erotic subject, however, is less like Don Juan and more like Jack the Ripper, operating clandestinely and separating his victims from the social order without seeking out the heroic “struggle to the death.” “*Secrecy is, alas, only too easy, and there is not a libertine some little way gone in vice, who does not know what a hold murder has on the senses,*” writes Bataille, quoting de Sade, as though aiming to stress the inseparability of eroticism, criminality, and clandestinity at the very beginning of *Eroticism*.<sup>401</sup>

Naturally, unlike the legendary serial killer, the erotic subject does not (necessarily) murder his lovers, yet, as Bataille insists, his sexual acts have the character of transgression and inspire horror. Indeed, the sexual act described in “Method of Meditation” cannot but call to mind the violent crimes through which Jack the Ripper ‘liberated’ his victims from the relations of exchange governing the world of prostitution: “I see a woman, I draw her out, strip her from

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<sup>400</sup> Franco Rella, *The Myth of the Other: Lacan, Foucault, Deleuze, Bataille*, trans. Nelson Moe (Washington: Mazonneuve Press, 1994), 98.

<sup>401</sup> Bataille, *Eroticism*, 11.

the sphere of objects linked to activity...”<sup>402</sup> In separating the beloved from the sphere of objects, the amorous subject can be said to *sacralize* her. Indeed, Bataille goes as far as to stress the religious and even “sacramental” character of eroticism. Shortly before drawing a comparison between erotic and mystical experience, he argues, for example, that “Through the beloved appears ... full and limitless being unconfined within the trammels of separate personalities, continuity of being, glimpsed as a deliverance through the person of the beloved.”<sup>403</sup> In order to appear as such, however, the beloved must first be separated from the sphere of objects, since “Objects are identified with discontinuity, whereas mystical experience, as far as our strength allows us to break off our own discontinuity, confers on us a sense of continuity.”<sup>404</sup> This act of separation is precisely what turns eroticism into a “domain of violence, of violation.”

Incidentally, while filling his study of eroticism with numerous comparisons between the erotic act and the act of violence, Bataille privileges a particular instance of murder, namely sacrifice.

Sacrifice is here comprehended in strictly theological terms as the ritual designed to extract the victim from the profane realm of discontinuous beings and turn him into an infinite, sacred being. “The victim dies and the spectators share in what his death reveals. This is what religious historians call the element of sacredness. This sacredness is the revelation of continuity through the death of a discontinuous being to those who watch it as a solemn rite. A violent death disrupts the creature’s discontinuity; what remains, what the tense onlookers experience in the succeeding silence, is the continuity of all existence with which the victim is now one.”<sup>405</sup>

Thus, Bataille argues, insofar as eroticism and religious sacrifice negate the limited (discontinuous) character of human existence, propelling human beings into a total continuity

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<sup>402</sup> Georges Bataille, “Method of Meditation,” in *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, ed. Stuart Kendall, trans. Michelle Kendall and Stuart Kendall (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 85.

<sup>403</sup> Bataille, *Eroticism*, 21.

<sup>404</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>405</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

between (or a “blending” of) beings, these two domains exhibit an essential affinity: “The whole business of eroticism is to destroy the self-contained character of the participators as they are in their normal lives.”<sup>406</sup> The aim of eroticism is not purely negative, however, for, as Rella points out, in annihilating the ‘thingish’ (as Hegel and Kojève would have put it) part of a human being, sacrifice produces a “space of communication,” a sacred space removed from the laws of exchange.<sup>407</sup>

Apart from having a religious meaning, however, the ritual of sacrifice also possesses an economic and political significance, which could not have been lost on Bataille: removed from profane reality, the sacrificed victim acquires independence from (or, better, becomes heterogeneous to) the economic reality governed by the relations of productions and exchange. “Eroticism always entails a breaking down of established patterns, the patterns, I repeat, of the regulated social order basic to our discontinuous mode of existence as defined and separate individuals.”<sup>408</sup> In eroticism, then, the subject’s freedom is accomplished not through a violent destruction of the big Other but through jolting the symbolic functions regulating the subject’s relation with the symbolic order. In what follows, I focus on *Blind Beast* (Dir. Yasuzo Masumura, 1969), a rather late example of Japanese New Wave Cinema, which illuminates the relationship between the Bataillean conception of eroticism and the politics of separation. Apart from elucidating the inseparability of eroticism, criminality, and clandestinity—the three terms related to each other precisely insofar as they presuppose separation from the social order—the film’s merit lies in not just confirming the Bataillean thesis but also in producing something akin to a phenomenology of erotic experience: with remarkable clarity and consistency, this film

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<sup>406</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>407</sup> Rella, 89.

<sup>408</sup> Bataille, *Eroticism*, 18.

renders concrete that “jolting” effect that eroticism has on the subject’s experience of time and space.

### ***Blind Beast* and Eroticism in Japanese New Wave Cinema**

Apart from evoking the Bataillean aesthetics of eroticism, Masumura’s *Blind Beast* also illustrates another kind of “inward turn” that took place over the course of the development of Japanese cinema during the 1960s—the turn from enthusiastic celebration of political activism in the streets to the fascination with the erotic experience in the bedroom. Although affiliated with the mainstream and not quite as committed to promoting militant forms of political activism as his contemporaries, Nagisa Oshima and Yoshida Yoshishige, Masumura first secured recognition for the biting social satire of such early films as *Giants and Toys* (1958) and *The Black Test Car* (1962) only to refashion himself later on as a specialist in the soft-core erotic films known in Japan as *roman poruno*. Clearly, as Nina Cornyetz suggests, this ‘turn’ (which was also followed by other New Wave directors such as Koji Wakamatsu as well as Oshima himself) was not motivated solely by the ‘organic’ development of Japanese film aesthetics but, above all, by the relaxation of censorship codes during the 1960s as well as by purely commercial concerns as the erotic films quickly proved to be more commercially viable than traditional dramas. “With the lifting of wartime censorship of all kinds (aimed, undoubtedly, at political censorship first and foremost) came the beginning, tentative gestures toward portrayals of sex (and kissing) and nudity in Japanese films...Overwhelmingly, (heterosexual) sex is depicted without then-conventional notions of romance and beauty, but animalistically and often with brutality and sadism toward the woman.”<sup>409</sup> As the present discussion of *Blind Beast* will make clear, Masumura’s film undoubtedly participates in the specific visual economy of the *roman poruno*

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<sup>409</sup> Nina Cornyetz, *The Ethics of Aesthetics in Japanese Cinema and Literature: Polygraphic Desire* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 99.

genre; not only does it represent an eroticized female body but, more significantly, it features often brutal and sadistic scenes depicting male domination over women. Nonetheless, I hope to demonstrate that, by turning towards eroticism, Japanese New Wave filmmakers did not necessarily abandon their progressive political convictions in favor of embracing campy erotica (at best) or propagating sadistic misogyny (at worst). As Cornyetz herself points out, the New Wave directors frequently adopted a self-reflexive stance towards the erotic tendency in Japanese cinema, simultaneously citing and critically commenting on the dominant cinematic representations of female nudity. For instance, Hiroshi Teshigahara's *Woman in the Dunes* (1964), she argues, participates in just such a self-reflexive commentary by citing "developing codes of violent, homosocial filmic gazing in order to subvert those visual technologies."<sup>410</sup> While my own reading of *Blind Beast* suggests that the film under discussion performs a similar critical gesture of citation and commentary and, in so doing, illuminates the political potential of erotic cinema, it largely bypasses engagement with the "gaze theory" as it draws on Bataille's philosophy and Lacan's psychoanalysis to examine the effects of erotic experience on the subject.

The film's narrative commences with an act of transgression as Aki, a young photo model, finds herself imprisoned in a secluded artist's studio after being kidnapped by Michio and his rather overprotective mother. Aki's occupation is significant to the present discussion since, while she does not exactly sell her body, she offers it to the spectator's desiring gaze in exchange for money. Even more than prostitution, the profession of modeling illustrates the antagonistic yet intimate relationship between the economy of exchange and nonproductive expenditure. Significantly, in a voiceover narration featured at the beginning of the film, Aki explains that she does not view herself as a successful fashion model, stressing her particular interest in the art of

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<sup>410</sup> Ibid., 96.

erotic photography. Presented at the very beginning of the film, the series of black-and-white photographs reflect a distinctly sadomasochistic aesthetic, depicting Aki's fetishized body as nude and bound, photographed against a neutral white (or, at times, stark black) background. This soft-core erotic photography is clearly distinct from pornography focusing on the act of copulation; indeed, it aims to convey (or elicit) expenditure of the nonproductive sort, locating desire on the side of perversion and thereby divorcing it from what Bataille would describe as a healthy animal sexuality. A similar point can be made apropos of the aesthetic of eroticism prominent in Japanese New Wave cinema—the very aesthetic that is self-reflexively 'cited' in these black-and-white photographs featured at the beginning of *Blind Beast*. What these photographs share with mainstream erotic cinema is precisely that paradoxical amalgamation of two seemingly opposing tendencies: on the one hand, the preoccupation with sexual perversion (inevitably represented as 'edgy' or 'subversive') and agonistic expenditure; on the other hand, the apparent adherence to the generic conventions that define marketable soft-core pornography, the refusal to overstep the boundaries dictated by good taste and censorship, and the concern with achieving fame and profits.

As Barthes observes, in affirming nonproductive expenditure, modernity cannot eschew appropriation by the economy of exchange. Speaking specifically of modern literature, he argues: "Our modernity makes a constant effort to defeat the exchange: it tries to resist the market for works (by excluding itself from mass communication), the sign (by exemption from meaning, madness), sanctioned sexuality (by perversion, which shields bliss from the finality of reproduction). And even so, modernity can do nothing: the exchange recuperates everything, acclimating what appears to deny it: it seizes upon the text, puts it in the circuit of useless but legal expenditures: and behold, the text is back in a collective economy (even if only



psychological): it is the text's very uselessness that is useful, a potlatch."<sup>411</sup> Indeed, even though Aki views herself as somewhat of an outsider to the fashion industry and a champion of edgy erotic art, she cannot avoid fame and recognition, as the images of her eroticized body gain wide circulation in a "collective economy." Thus, during a conversation with her kidnapper, she is surprised to learn of her fame among schoolboys (who clearly do not find the sadomasochistic aesthetic disturbing enough to stop them from enjoying the images of Aki's naked body). Michio's act of kidnapping, therefore, extracts her from the world of fame and exchange, concealing her beauty from the paparazzi's cameras and disengaging it from the economy that converts useless expenditure into profit. As the film's narrative unfolds, the sadistic act of violence that puts this narrative into motion—the staple of numerous 'sexploitation' films that emerged during the late 1960s and flourished throughout the 1970s—will come to be presented as an act of liberation rather than that of domination. In separating his beloved from what Bataille describes as "the discontinuous existence"—that is to say, the existence of an individual who enjoys a relative autonomy at the cost of subjecting himself to the demands of the symbolic order—and propelling her into the sphere of ecstasy, Michio's act of transgression perfectly illustrates the intimate link between violence and eroticism described by Alphonso Lingis: "Violence is the abrupt wrenching out of discontinuous existence. Violence violates what we call our person—our separate and discontinuous existence, source of its own acts, responsible for what we ourselves say and do."<sup>412</sup>

Erotic beauty, argues Lingis, is idle beauty. What Michio's act of transgression involves, then, is precisely this gesture of making-idle. Separated from the society of exchange (and of spectacle) and propelled into the inoperative sphere where only ecstasy rules, Aki's beauty can

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<sup>411</sup> Barthes, 23-4.

<sup>412</sup> Alphonso Lingis, *The Imperative* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998), 147.

no longer be appropriated as the means towards fame or profit but comes to be affirmed as an end in itself—that is to say, as long as it remains idle instead of being put to work or put on display. It is this crucial point that Guerlac misses in her reading of Bataille’s *Erotism* when she maintains that “[t]he erotic object must be not only a woman, but a woman as object, or, in other words, a prostitute.”<sup>413</sup> To be sure, she admits that, for Bataille, “autonomous women” are more desirable than prostitutes who are “destroyed as ends in themselves.” Nonetheless, she immediately goes on to stress that the “passivity of the prostitute ... is necessary for philosophical reasons. In relation to autonomous, desiring women (woman as subject) Bataille writes, man ‘cannot avoid struggle which would lead to destruction.’ It is in order to avoid such struggle that, Bataille concludes, ‘we [i.e., men] must ... place this object equal to ourselves, to the subject, in the frame of the dead object, of the infinitely available object ...’ The prostitute is portrayed as a work of art, something like a living still life, a *nature morte*.”<sup>414</sup> Given the fact that Bataille consistently defines eroticism as a kind of intensification of life to the point of death, which involves subjective destitution as well as the obliteration of the individual’s links to the social order, can one suppose that, in evoking the risk of destruction inherent in erotic union with the other, he would concern himself with providing a recipe for avoiding such a risk? If, as Lingis insists, “eroticism is the inner experience of being violated in sexual contact, and of violating another,”<sup>415</sup> can one really imagine that Bataille aimed to supply men with tips on enjoying a kind of risk-free erotic experience—that is to say, erotic experience deprived of the very essence of eroticism—in the manner of a doctor who advises his patients to drink decaffeinated coffee for health reasons? Moreover, can one argue that, upon his discovery of nonproductive

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<sup>413</sup> Guerlac, 92.

<sup>414</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>415</sup> Lingis, 148.

expenditure in the domain of eroticism, Bataille would come to associate this very *nonproductive* expenditure with sex for money?

“Conflict is life,” argues Bataille in the 1936 essay entitled “The Threat of War”: “A living man regards death as the fulfillment of life; he does not see it as a misfortune.”<sup>416</sup> Penned some two decades later, his *Erotism* fully adheres to this principle in maintaining that eroticism brings the subject as close as possible to the experience of death and, thereby, precludes the understanding of eroticism as a risk-free or conflict-free experience. It constitutes nothing less than a violent experience of wrenching the subject away from the society of production and the balanced economy of exchange as opposed to the calculated pursuit of sexual gratification in exchange for money. While his evocation of “the infinitely available object,” may certainly remind the reader of a prostitute, I would argue that it refers to something rather less literal, namely the impossible object of the drives, the object of *jouissance*. I say ‘impossible’ because, strictly speaking, the object of the drives does not exist. As opposed to desire, which temporarily latches onto the object and promptly abandons it after obtaining a desired satisfaction from it, the drives do not cease to derive enjoyment from the infinite supply of *jouissance*. Whereas desire can only be partially satisfied through a continuous repetition of sexual acts that bring a limited pleasure to the subject, *jouissance* is limitless or, as Néstor Braunstein points out, not lacking: “If desire is fundamentally lack, lack in being, *jouissance* is positivity, it is a ‘something’ lived by a body when pleasure stops being pleasure. It is a plus, a sensation that is beyond pleasure.”<sup>417</sup> Furthermore, whereas sexual desire may find a temporary satisfaction in the encounter with the object (‘temporary’ because the object in question is only an inadequate stand-in for object *a*, the phantasmatic object that can never be encountered), “the drive is a factor that, on finding closed

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<sup>416</sup> Georges Bataille, “The Threat of War,” trans. Annette Michelson, *October*, vol. 36 (Spring, 1986): 28.

<sup>417</sup> Néstor Braunstein, “Desire and *Jouissance* in the Teachings of Lacan,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Lacan*, ed. Jean-Michel Rabaté (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 104.

the regressive path to the encounter with the lost object—the object of desire—is left with no alternative but to press forward, ‘truly without perspectives of ever ending the march or of reaching the goal.’”<sup>418</sup> As such, the drive as well as *jouissance* remain irreducible to the calculus of sexuality. If *jouissance* can be said to satisfy the drive, this satisfaction produces neither limited pleasure nor a calming effect, but rather an ecstasy of immeasurable intensity which carries experience to its boiling point. In pursuing the comparison between Lacan’s ‘*jouissance*’ and Bataille’s ‘ecstasy,’ however, one must also keep in mind that, in each case, the experience of affect is presented as not only immeasurable but also as aimless, useless, or nonproductive. Thus, while Lingis’s conception of eroticism takes this dual nature of Bataillean ecstasy into account, it also offers a rather characterization of *jouissance* as, at once, limitless and aimless: “Voluptuousness is an outpouring that goes on and on without an end in view where the lover would recover himself or herself and stand back in himself or herself. Voluptuous pleasure is its aimless cravings, in its torments.”<sup>419</sup> It is only insofar as she does not cease to recover herself throughout the outpouring of erotic voluptuousness that the beloved presents herself as “the infinitely available object.” One would commit the grave mistake, however, in supposing that Bataille’s account of eroticism assigns a price tag to voluptuousness; for Bataille, such infinite readiness to bask in erotic ecstasy can be neither put to work nor measured in money.

Even if one accepts Guerlac’s interpretation and agrees that the figure of the beloved evoked on the pages of *Eroticism* may potentially refer to a prostitute, one would have to qualify this reading by noting that Bataille’s idea of prostitution bears little resemblance to the widely-held views on this occupation. To be a prostitute, in this Bataillean sense, would mean to have an impossible profession: to make oneself infinitely available to erotic caresses yet, at the same

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<sup>418</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>419</sup> Lingis, 147.

time, avoid the usual commerce with the pimps and the johns, to give pleasure for pleasure's sake without expecting anything in return. Incidentally, following the act of abduction in *Blind Beast*, Aki finds herself in an analogous situation: Michio demands that she stays in her role as a model and assist him in developing "the art of touching," which, he claims, is meant exclusively for the blind. Since, at this point in the film, Aki still searches for the means of escaping from her kidnapper, she accepts this 'job' in order to appease Michio and gain his trust. If her new modeling position can indeed be described as a 'job,' however, it certainly does not involve the usual duties and compensations associated with this profession. Not only does she not receive any payment for allowing Michio to use her body as a model but, perhaps more importantly, she as well as Michio's art inspired by her beauty remain in complete anonymity, neither bought nor sold, nor exhibited for anyone to see. Indeed, Michio's blindness is significant here for it serves as a guarantor of Aki's anonymity, her nonparticipation in the economy of spectacle and speculation.

Understood from this perspective, Aki's role in this strange space of bliss and privacy is best described with the lines culled from Lingis's remarkable passage describing the dual character of the erotic body, which, when placed in the sphere of ecstasy, is located somewhere at the intersection of inoperative anonymity and exhibitionism. Bearing an unmistakable influence of Bataille, this passage deserves to be quoted in full:

The erotic body is liberated of the roughness of work and the scars and hardening it effects. It shows neither the coarseness of the laborious body nor the crispness of the managerial body. It is liberated too of hungers, problemed digestions, excretions, the reproductive processes. It exhibits, at whatever age, the youth of sleepless nights and inexhaustible effusion of energy heedless of sound nourishment. It is liberated of the evidence of the tendons and thongs that flex the skeletal mechanism. It is a body that floats, is spirited and ethereal.

At the same time this delicate and ethereal body is shielded and armored in its finery. The frailty of its diaphanous garb, the white linen trousers and mirror-polished shoes, the thin gold chains dangling in the way of its movements constitute a barrier that

the forces of implements cannot cross. It is a body set apart, ostentatiously exhibited outside the paths and directions of industry, feral, divine and demonic.<sup>420</sup>

In working on his sculpture and producing something akin to Aki's double set in stone, Michio strives to create just this perfect erotic body described by Lingis: hard and inanimate, it is impervious to hunger and disease; forever immobilized, it cannot be put to work. True, exquisite and delicate, this body is also an object of art; this object, however, is not intended for either sale or exhibition. Should the artist complete it, this object will not see the light of day but remain forever imprisoned in the dark studio, ostentatiously exhibited but set apart from the relations of exchange. It is insofar as she comes to double (or mirror) such an immobilized and inoperative object that she retains something essential of her past occupation as a photo model—namely that frozen quality that Guerlac associates with prostitution (and which, incidentally, Deleuze linked to the aesthetics of masochism in his early essay on Sacher-Masoch). Indeed, during her photography sessions, the model becomes a living object of art and she lets her beauty be petrified, turned into a *nature morte*, forever immobilized in the state of ageless youth that knows neither work nor corporeal deprivations inflicted by sleeplessness, disease, and hunger.

Prior to and following the act of kidnapping, therefore, Aki's exquisite body is presented as the object of art. Whether depicted in a photograph or represented by a sculpture, her beauty is conveyed as, at once, frozen and ecstatic. Nonetheless, the film posits a clear difference between these two representations of eroticism. Photography is a strictly a visual art. Now, whereas sculpture too can be surveyed (or gazed at) from a distance, the film presents it as the artform for the blind, the art that presupposes touching, indeed caressing, as opposed to viewing. As such, it is the artform most suitable for rendering the qualities of voluptuousness and intimacy that Lingis associates with eroticism. This distinction becomes particularly significant at the very end

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<sup>420</sup> Ibid., 144.

of the film when Aki comes to not only recognize but, more importantly, derive intense pleasure from Michio's art of touching. "People pity the blind," she tells Michio and adds: "What a big mistake! I pity those who have sight. They can never know the tactile ecstasy of our caresses." With these lines, the film engages in a very specific critique of visual arts that, of course, include not only photography but cinema as well. Merely looking at beautiful nude bodies and observing the lovers caressing each other, it appears to argue, is not sufficient for attainment of erotic pleasure. One must experience the tactile sensation upon touching the lover's skin in order to know true bliss; one must relinquish one's scopophilic pleasure to feel the overwhelming ecstasy of caressing.

The erotic caress is neither the act of subjugation by means of which the subject dominates the object (as Guerlac's essay suggests) nor is it the act of labor designed to bring about productive results. On the contrary, it belongs on the side of inoperative communication rather than work and discourse:

The caressing hands are not exploring or gathering information from the forms of the body they uncover. They pass repetitiously, obsessively, over flesh they do not manipulate, not knowing what they are doing or what they are seeking. The caressing hand is not outlining the shape of the skeleton nor measuring the width and bulk of the limbs of the body denuded of its physical form. The caress is not a manipulation advancing toward an objective; it is aimless. The hands lose their power to grasp and dominate what they take hold of and their power to move themselves. The caressing hand is not governed by a will that moves it; it is moved – solicited, agitated by the nudity of the other. It is moved—affected, afflicted, tormented.

The erotic nudity does not fit in, is unjustified and intrusive, is inexpressive and exhibitionistic. The caress is not speaking to the other; one describes it badly when one speaks of the body-language of eroticism. There is no conversation, no dialogue, nothing is being indicated, no information being exchanged in two lovers embracing and caressing one another. There is no appeal and no demand and no response that is responsible. The caresses violate and profane a concealed, clandestine zone, without discovering a secret or forcing someone out of secrecy. They pass everywhere over the body of the beloved, without leaving traces or inscribing forms, passing again and again over the same surfaces as over virgin territory.<sup>421</sup>

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<sup>421</sup> Ibid., 146.

The caress, then, involves a communication without a dialogue—without, that is, an exchange of information. Furthermore, in violating the intimate regions of the other’s body, the caress neither exposes nor dominates. According to a properly dialectical logic, the erotic caress profanes a “concealed, clandestine zone” inhabited by the lovers, while simultaneously preserving it.

### **Blindness and Death**

Undoubtedly, during the first half of the film, the two lovers do not form anything like the inoperative community in which caress takes precedence over work and ecstasy overshadows reason. Following the act of kidnapping, Michio spends many hours and days touching Aki’s body and, while he clearly derives erotic pleasure from this occupation, he does it primarily to explore her form with the aim of producing an adequate sculptural representation of her body. Likewise, while Aki allows herself to be caressed, she does so with a specific aim in mind, as she attempts to gain Michio’s trust and searches for opportunities to escape from his studio. As the film’s narrative progresses, however, the two learn to give up their respective aims and seek aimless *jouissance* in erotic union: Michio learns to let his hands wander and caress Aki’s body aimlessly, while Aki learns to find bliss in his caresses and give herself to him without any ulterior motives in mind.

In developing this rather contrived plot twist so characteristic of many other sexploitation films that depict the (female) victim’s growing affection for her (male) oppressor, the film conveys the essential aspect of Bataille’s theory of eroticism. The crucial point in the film comes when Aki explains in a voice-over that, at the same time as she was falling in love with Michio, she, too, began to go blind. From a Batailleian perspective, this experience of going blind is significant not only in relation to eroticism but, more generally, to sovereignty and non-knowledge. In the previous chapter, I have already explored the connection between sovereign



non-knowledge and madness. Now, as Jay painstakingly demonstrates in *Downcast Eyes*, Bataille develops this connection through a whole host of visual metaphors that, for the most part, revolve precisely this experience of going-blind.<sup>422</sup> At times, as Jay notes, Bataille's obsession with blindness comes through in his writings on war, which speak of blinding explosives; at times, it manifests itself in Bataille's identification with his blind and paralyzed father, who died insane and completely alone in 1916. It is in evoking the experience of staring directly into the sun, however, that Bataille discovered a particularly apt metaphor for the blinding effects of nonknowledge. In the early text entitled "Rotten Sun," he describes the significance of solar imagery in the Platonic tradition within which the "sun must have the poetic meaning of mathematical serenity and spiritual elevation." To this model of rational heliocentrism Bataille immediately opposes his own passion for the real, which demands that one stare into the sun directly even at the cost of madness: "If on the other hand one obstinately focuses on it [the sun], a certain madness is implied, and the notion changes meaning because it is no longer production that appears in light, but refuse or combustion, adequately expressed by the horror emanating from a brilliant arc lamp. In practice the scrutinized sun can be identified with mental ejaculation, foam on the lips, and an epileptic crisis."<sup>423</sup> The very metaphor of "mental ejaculation" suggests, at this fairly early stage in Bataille's intellectual itinerary, a certain conflation of madness and eroticism, of sovereign nonknowledge and ecstasy.

Shortly after publication of "Rotten Sun," Bataille develops these connections in his evocations of the pineal eye, located at the summit of the head and exposed to the blinding sun. Echoing the traditional association between the subject's knowledge and the mind's perception

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<sup>422</sup> Martin Jay, *The Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century Thought* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993).

<sup>423</sup> Georges Bataille, "Rotten Sun," in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. Allan Stoekl, trans. Allan Stoekl, Carl R. Lovitt, and Donald M. Leslie, Jr. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 57.

of “clear and distinct ideas,” Bataille stresses the intimate link between nonknowledge (which, as I have stressed, constitutes the “most profound” form of knowledge, knowledge in the real) and blindness. At the same time, rejecting the idea of a disinterested pursuit of knowledge, he eroticizes the subject’s experience of attaining nonknowledge. (Conversely, Bataille also discovers an epistemological significance of eroticism: the erotic experience, one might say, punches a hole in the field of knowledge, allowing the subject to fall into that hole, into the abyss of nonknowledge). Thus, in “The Jesuve,” he writes:

Now I have given all these explanations only to say finally that when I imagined the disconcerting possibility of the pineal eye, I had no intention other than to represent discharges of energy at the top of the head—discharges as violent and as indecent as those that make the anal protuberances of some apes so horrible to see. I was not conscious of it originally, but my imagination did not go on without giving me horrible brain-transport, accompanied by an intense satisfaction; this eye that I wanted to have at the top of my skull (since I had read that its embryo existed, like the seed of a tree, in the interior of the skull) did not appear to me as anything other than a sexual organ of unheard-of sensitivity, which would have vibrated, making me let out atrocious screams, the screams of a magnificent but stinking ejaculation.<sup>424</sup>

The operation of unknowing is, then, the most erotic experience of which the subject is capable insofar as it produces a “magnificent ejaculation,” which transpires within the mind itself and produces intense anguish immediately accompanied by bliss—the very definition of *jouissance*.

The notion of the pineal eye conflates a whole series of images constituting an extensive metaphoric chain.<sup>425</sup> Like the Lacanian concept of the Real, this paradoxical, or better, impossible object allows itself to be construed as, at once, consistency and inconsistency: on the one hand, it is an opening, a lack, a dark hole at the top of the skull that violates the architecture of one’s body and makes one lose one’s head; on the other hand, it constitutes an agitated organ

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<sup>424</sup> Georges Bataille, “The Jesuve,” in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. Allan Stoekl, trans. Allan Stoekl, Carl R. Lovitt, and Donald M. Leslie, Jr. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 77.

<sup>425</sup> See Roland Barthes, “The Metaphor of the Eye,” in *Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972), 241. Without focusing on the notion of the pineal eye, Barthes thoroughly examines the eye’s position in the metaphoric series constructed in Bataille’s *Story of the Eye*.

producing overwhelming jouissance. Rosalind Krauss elaborates on these multiple meanings by focusing on Bataille's operation of rotation, which dissociates the eye from the "mental axis" (associated with reason and clear perception) and displaces it onto the "biological axis" (linked to base the functions of excretion and copulation). Significantly this operation of rotation also involves the process of becoming-animal insofar as it presupposes a reorientation of the body from the vertical onto the horizontal axis as well as a transformation of human speech into inarticulate bestial cries that, significantly, resemble those "atrocious screams" accompanying a "magnificent but stinking ejaculation" described by Bataille in "The Jesuve." In her discussion of Bataille's brief article entitled "Mouth" (composed as a dictionary entry and published in a Surrealist periodical *Documents*), Krauss argues:

To lower the mental, or spiritual, axis onto the biological one is to think about the real transformation of articulate sounds into bestial ones at the moments of man's greatest pain or pleasure, and to see these in their true operation as excretory. The summit of the body is thus given an opening that has nothing to do with the ideational, but is rather a hole resembling the anus. In *Documents* this text was illustrated by a full-page photograph by Boiffard of a mouth, wide open, wet with saliva.

This idea of a hole at the top of man's head—one that functions to deidealize, de-rationnate, dis-equilibrate—led Bataille to try to construct the mythoanatomical legend of the pineal eye. Bataille conceived of this gland at the summit of the human structure as a blind spot.<sup>426</sup>

Krauss's description of the pineal eye as a "blind spot" is significant here for it also serves as an apt characterization of the Lacanian real understood not only as consistency and fullness—that of

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<sup>426</sup> Rosalind E. Krauss, "No More Play," in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1985), 80.

jouissance which is never lacking—but also as a dark hole within the symbolic itself, a point of inconsistency that renders the big Other incomplete and causes the subject’s symbolic functions to malfunction. Indeed, the Bataille myth of the pineal eye is nothing other than a kind of precursory literalization of the Lacanian concept of the real—an operation whereby the lack in the symbolic structure comes to be inscribed on the architecture of the human body in the form of a monstrous eye that opens itself up, agitated and vulnerable, to the lethal sun.

Already in one of his earliest published texts, “The Solar Anus” (1927), Bataille confesses to his desire to identify with this blinding sun. Crucially, at the outset of his intellectual itinerary, he indicates that the limit-experience precipitated by the confrontation with the real presupposes a communication with the other. Thus, Jay points out, the sun with which Bataille identified “was a sun that loves the night and seeks to copulate with it.”<sup>427</sup> Just as the sun loves the night, so does the subject join the beloved in an ecstatic union. Incidentally, in this text, Bataille identifies the night with the woman: “I want to have my throat slashed while violating the girl to whom I will have been able to say: you are the night.”<sup>428</sup> Herein, in this brief text from 1927, Bataille arrives at the crux of his theory of eroticism, which he will develop in the subsequent writings. It is precisely this thesis, furthermore, that *Blind Beast* illustrates brilliantly in underscoring the lethal effects produced by the erotic experience. As Aki notes, the moment of falling in love and succumbing to ecstasy also coincides with the moment of blindness, which, as I have noted above, Bataille associates with madness and dissolution of identity.

“The whole business of eroticism is to destroy the self-contained character of the participators as they are in their normal lives,” argues Bataille in the passage already quoted above. Such a dissolution of identity, however, does not culminate in a solitary madness of the

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<sup>427</sup> Jay, 223.

<sup>428</sup> Georges Bataille, “The Solar Anus,” in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. Allan Stoekl, trans. Allan Stoekl, Carl R. Lovitt, and Donald M. Leslie, Jr. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 9.

kind that I have discusses with reference to *The Sword of Doom*. On the contrary, eroticism precipitates subjective destitution in the service of fusion. In this case, the erotic coupling of two formerly discontinuous (or, to use the Lacanian parlance adopted in the previous chapter, *alienated*) beings succeeds the abolition of identities. Indeed, as Bataille continually stresses, “the final aim of eroticism is fusion.”<sup>429</sup> *Blind Beast* undoubtedly corroborates this thesis as it depicts the two lovers becoming increasingly oblivious to the social world which exists beyond the confines of the dark artist’s studio while getting entirely immersed in the intimate space where only ecstasy matters. The film, however, goes further in elucidating the point that is only implicit in Bataille’s text: the complete fusion with the beloved must remain an *impossible* final goal of eroticism. For this goal to become actual, the culmination of erotic experience would have to coincide with death.

Following her descent into blindness, Aki narrates the inexorable working of the drives pressing her towards ever greater *jouissance* with her thirst for *jouissance* becoming more and more indistinguishable from the thirst for self-annihilation: “So much pleasure only spurred an ever increasing demand for more sensation. Seeking greater satisfaction. An unquenchable desire for ever more pleasure.” As Aki confesses, in her (literally) blind passion for extreme sensation, she attains the kind of bliss the likes of which she has never experienced before. The thirst for *jouissance*, however, is unquenchable just as a complete union with her lover is unattainable, which is why, as Aki goes on to explain, endless caresses eventually appear insufficient. In this manner, the film appears to illustrate Nancy’s two central and closely linked propositions on the subject of love: “love is the impossible” and “love unveils finitude”:

Love offers finitude in its truth; it is finitude’s dazzling presentation. (...) Or perhaps love itself is eclipsed in this outburst, at once because it does not stop coming and going, never being simply present, and because it is always put into play farther off than everything

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<sup>429</sup> Bataille, *Eroticism*, 129.

that would have to qualify it (sublime love, tender love, foolish love, implacable love, pure love, abandoned love). Nietzsche's Zarathustra says: 'Great loves do not want love—they want more.'<sup>430</sup>

*Blind Beast* offers a spectacular illustration of this thesis: caught up in pursuit of the impossible love, of that elusive 'more' that stands for jouissance itself, the two lovers turn from caressing and touching to biting and clawing. And when these relatively mild forms of erotic violence prove to insufficient in bringing Aki to the heights of ecstasy, she begs Michio to start using whips and knives so as to intensify the sensation of pain mixed with enjoyment. At the very end of the film, the two lovers are depicted as languishing and passive, aware of their lives slowly draining away from their bodies. At this point in the narrative, Aki asks Michio to make the ultimate sacrifice: "If we are to die anyway, make it an ecstatic death for me. Bring me to tears of joy." The film concludes with a spectacular double suicide which I will discuss in greater detail in a moment. At this point, I must merely emphasize that the erotic experience (as it is depicted in Masumura's film and characterized in Bataille's text) constitutes more than an inconsequential sensation of thrill as it exposes the subjects to their finitude and confronts them with the fact that experience finds its fulfillment in death.

In his *Compulsive Beauty*, Hal Foster brilliantly explores the above point by examining the surrealist *poupées* of Hans Bellmer against the background of Bataillean theory of eroticism while, in the process, putting Bataille in dialogue with Freud. Following his famous discovery of the beyond of the pleasure principle, Freud tended to present Eros and the death drive as two separate and opposed forces: "Starting from speculations on the beginning of life and from biological parallels, I drew the conclusion that, besides the instinct to preserve living substance and to join it with into ever larger units, there must exist another, contrary instinct seeking to dissolve those units and to bring them back to their primaeval, inorganic state. That is to say, as

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<sup>430</sup> Nancy, 99.

well as Eros there was an instinct of death.”<sup>431</sup> As Foster points out, however, Freud at times stresses the inseparability, indeed complementarity, of eroticism and the death drive. In *Civilization and its Discontents*, for instance, he alludes to instances of masochism that reveal the intimate link between Eros and Thanatos, “a union between destructiveness directed inwards and sexuality—a union which makes what is otherwise an imperceptible trend into a conspicuous and tangible one.”<sup>432</sup> Thus, he goes on to conclude: “The desire for destruction when it is directed inwards mostly eludes our perception, of course, unless it is tinged with eroticism.”<sup>433</sup> Bataille, for his part, goes even further than Freud in treating eroticism and death drive as intimately entwined rather than separate forces. (Conversely, one could follow Lacan in proposing that every drive is, in fact, the death drive and insisting that this point is made clear by Freud himself.)

“Eroticism, it may be said, is assenting to life up to the point of death.”<sup>434</sup> This opening sentence of Bataille’s *Erotism* can certainly be approached as a revision of Freud’s understanding of the death drive as “tinged with eroticism.” Even more striking is the affinity between Bataille’s insistence on “our obsession with a primal continuity linking us with everything that is”<sup>435</sup> and Freud’s characterization of the drive as “*an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things.*”<sup>436</sup> Foster articulates this comparison convincingly: “Although Bataille nowhere cites *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in *Erotism*, it is difficult not to hear an echo of the death drive theory there: eroticism as a return to the continuity of death, a transgressive move that is also entropic. (Implicitly Bataille ‘corrects’ Freud: the death drive is

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<sup>431</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Civilization and its Discontents,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), 118-9.

<sup>432</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>433</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>434</sup> Bataille, *Erotism*, 11.

<sup>435</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>436</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Beyond the Pleasure Principle,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), 36.

not general to life but specific to humans.)”<sup>437</sup> Bataille can also be said to ‘correct’ Freud in another way: the latter frequently presents the death drive as a ‘conservative’ instinct whose aim consists in returning the organism back to the primordial inorganic state. Indeed, the Freudian account grounds itself in the principle of entropy insofar as it presents the death drive as the tendency towards an ever greater quietude and diminution of energy. Such a characterization of the death drive as a gradual relinquishment of the organism’s struggle to preserve its life is quite different from the idea of ecstatic death so frequently evoked in Bataille’s texts and vividly depicted in *Blind Beast*. As Freud maintains, “the organism wishes to die only in its own fashion” and “struggles most energetically against events (dangers, in fact) which might help it to attain its life’s aim rapidly—by a kind of short-circuit.”<sup>438</sup> Although the aim of all life is death, as Freud consistently argues, life strives to adopt ever more circuitous paths towards this final goal rather than taking a lethal leap towards death. Bataille proceeds in the opposite direction: the death drive constitutes *intensification* rather than an entropic diminution of experience. Significantly, Foster introduces this point in the course of reading Bataille’s *Erotism*: “Thus Bataille defines eroticism as an ‘assenting to life up to the point of death,’ which might be understood here as an intensifying discontinuity to the point where it touches upon continuity once again.”<sup>439</sup> Not a gradual draining away of life, then, but a lethal leap towards ecstatic death—such is Bataille’s alteration of the Freudian thesis. Significantly, both Bataille and Freud arrive at their respective figurations of the death drive in the process of engagement with eroticism. Rather than severing the ties between Eros and Thanatos, the two thinkers suggest that the death drive manifests itself precisely at the moment of greatest intensification of erotic experience rather than its abolition.

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<sup>437</sup> Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1993), 262n40.

<sup>438</sup> Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 39.

<sup>439</sup> Foster, 114.



As I have noted above, Freud discerns the presence of the death drive “tinged with eroticism” when he turns his attention towards perverse (masochistic, to be precise) sexual behavior. Indeed, it is precisely when he considers perverse eroticism that Freud demonstrates a strong affinity with Bataille. In such instances, Foster’s distinction between Freudian *sublimation* and Bataillean *desublimation* appears to collapse, momentarily at least. Foster articulates the aforementioned distinction in the following terms:

Freud never defines sublimation in clear distinction from repression, reaction-formation, idealization, and so on. But very simply one can say that sublimation concerns the diversion of sexual drives to civilizational ends (art, science) in a way that purifies them, that both integrates the object (beauty, truth) and refines the subject (the artist, the scientist)...

Yet this is a path that can be trodden in the opposite direction too, the way of *desublimation*, where this binding is loosened. In art this may mean the (re)erupting of the sexual, which all surrealists support; but it may also lead to a (re)shattering of object and subject alike, which only some surrealists risk.<sup>440</sup>

Whereas Foster seeks to emphasize a fundamental difference between Freud and Bataille with respect to the question of sublimation, I argue that the route of desublimation—a deviation from “the pained path of civilization”—was suggested by Freud himself. In *Civilization and its Discontents*, for instance, he provides a common characterization of the effects of the sublimation on the subject: “One gains the most if one can sufficiently heighten the yield of pleasure from the sources of psychical and intellectual work.”<sup>441</sup> On the very next page, however, he adds that pleasure derived from sublimation pales in comparison with ecstasy associated with desublimation:

At present we can only say figuratively that such satisfactions seem ‘finer and higher.’ But their intensity is mild as compared with that derived from the satiation of crude and primary instinctual impulses; it does not convulse our physical being. And the weak point of this method is that it is not applicable generally: it is accessible to only a few people. It presupposes the possession of special dispositions and gifts which are far from being

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<sup>440</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>441</sup> Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, 79.

common to any practical degree. And even to the few who do possess them, this method cannot give complete protection from suffering.<sup>442</sup>

Following the discussion initiated in the previous chapter, one can effectively characterize such a special disposition as sovereignty. Like Bataille, Freud stresses its exceptional character: only a few individuals can attain access to the experience of limitless bliss of highest intensity that convulses their very being. Their access to *jouissance* comes at a heavy price, however, for Freud stresses that such exceptional individuals are condemned to either severe punishment or existence apart from the social order. Significantly, he associates this transgressive form of enjoyment, at odds with social norms, with a pursuit of uninhibited erotic *jouissance*: “An unrestricted satisfaction of every need presents itself as the most enticing method of conducting one’s life, but it means putting enjoyment before caution, and soon brings its own punishment.”<sup>443</sup> Here Freud not only anticipates Bataille’s account of unrestricted expenditure but also supplies his own distinction between socially sanctioned reproductive sexuality and transgressive eroticism, which he locates on the side of perversion. “The feeling of happiness derived from the satisfaction of a wild instinctual impulse untamed by the ego is incomparably more intense than that derived from sating an indistinct that has been tamed. The irresistibility of perverse instincts, and perhaps the attraction in general of forbidden things finds an economic explanation here.”<sup>444</sup> The perverse manifestations of Eros are ‘forbidden,’ Freud goes on to explain, insofar as they inhibit the type of social organization required by the developing civilization: “... in the course of development the relation of love to civilization loses its unambiguity. On the one hand love comes into opposition to the interests of civilization; on the other, civilization threatens love with substantial restrictions. This rift between them seems

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<sup>442</sup> Ibid., 79-80.

<sup>443</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>444</sup> Ibid., 79.

unavoidable. The reason for it is not immediately recognizable. It expresses itself at first as a conflict between the family and the larger community to which the individual belongs. ... The more closely the members of a family are attached to one another, the more often do they tend to cut themselves off from other, and the more difficult is it for them to enter into the wider circle of life.”<sup>445</sup> While Freud here appears to speak of a traditional nuclear family, in insisting on the lovers’ opposition to the larger community, he appears to anticipate Bataille’s and Blanchot’s distinction between the community of lovers (governed by the economic principle of nonproductive expenditure) and the society of production. One’s access to the world of lovers, as Freud and Bataille both suggest, comes at the price of separation from the social order that, in turn, produces dual consequences: on the one hand, a freedom from *subjection* to the big Other, on the other hand, a destitution of the *subject* (that is to say, the subject of the signifier, which exists only in relation to the symbolic structure).

### **A “True Woman”**

So far, it appears as though the entrance into the world of ecstasy presupposed only a simple reciprocity between the lovers, an erotic fusion heightened to the point of deathly passion. Nonetheless, one can hardly ignore the fact that, in Bataille’s texts as well as in Masumura’s film, it is the woman who is represented as responsible for the intensification of erotic ecstasy to the point of death—that is to say, responsible not only for bringing the limit-experience to the boiling point but also for ultimately crossing the limit. Foster confronts this issue in his Bataillean reading of Bellmer’s *poupées*, dolls which evoke both an eroticized female body and a dismembered body convulsing in pain. If the death drive must be conceived of as the instinct “to escape from the outline of the self,” manifesting itself most strikingly in the desublimated representations of the dismembered body, why is the body in question coded feminine? “The

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<sup>445</sup> Ibid., 103.

*poupées* produce misogynistic effects that may overwhelm any liberatory intentions. They also exacerbate sexist fantasies about the feminine (e.g., associations with the fragmentary and the fluid, the masochistic and the deathly) even as they exploit them critically.”<sup>446</sup> The problem must be addressed in the context of the present discussion since, as I have been arguing, *Blind Beast* engages in self-reflexive ‘citation’ of the generic conventions of the *roman porno* genre not only for the sake of critically interrogating the often misogynistic effects of erotic cinema but also to unearth its political potential.

In order to address the film’s figuration of the female body as dismembered, one must consider the space of Michio’s studio, a hermetically closed off yet spacious room constituting a polygonal space with eight sides. Each wall in the studio is adorned with innumerable sculptures representing severed female body parts—clusters of legs, arms, breasts, ears, noses, eyes, lips and navels. Moreover, placed at the center of the room, there lie two enormous sculptures, each representing a headless woman, one lying on her back and the other one overturned on her stomach. In this manner, the narrative space prefigures and mimics the spectacular double suicide with which the film concludes. Indeed, when Michio consents to Aki’s plea for ecstatic death and proceeds to chop off her hands and legs, the film narrative completes the identification between the living woman and the inanimate sculptures that reflects Michio’s fantasy of feminine ideal. Every time he severs one of Aki’s limbs, the film cuts to his final masterpiece, the sculpture modeled on Aki’s body, and shows cold hands and legs made out of clay falling to the ground. In turn, although not captured on film, Aki’s own dismembered legs and hands become objects that join this grotesque art exhibit.

Such a narrative space constitutes an ideal *mise-en-scène* for something like a ‘theater of castration’—the term used by Krauss to describe Bellmer’s work: “And Bellmer, attending a

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<sup>446</sup> Foster, 122.

performance of *The Tales of Hoffman* in the early 1930s, watching its hero maddened by his love for a doll who ends in dismemberment, found himself identifying with this story of identification, saw himself endlessly returning to this fantasy, this theater of castration.”<sup>447</sup> While Bellmer’s endless reenactment of the fantasy of dismemberment is indicative of the death drive exerting its force on his artistic output, it nonetheless differs from the “repetition compulsion” evident in Michio’s obsessive making and remaking of female body parts. The difference in question amounts to the famous Freudian distinction between “acting-out” and “working-through.” Bellmer’s artistic productions constitute a self-reflexive examination of the death drive’s intimate links with eroticism.<sup>448</sup> Michio’s creative work, on the contrary, amounts to a blind acting-out of his polymorphous perverse fantasies. Indeed, his tendency to sublimate his sexual desire by treating inanimate statues as objects of love (and, conversely, treating flesh-and-blood women as works of art) illustrates rather precisely the Lacanian thesis on perversion put forward in the *Seminar I*: “The intersubjective relation which subtends perverse desire is only sustained by the annihilation either of the desire of the other, or of the desire of the subject. ... The other subject is reduced to being only the instrument of the first, who thus remains the only subject as such, but the latter is reduced to being only an idol offered to the desire of the other.”<sup>449</sup> It is precisely because the pervert treats the other as an instrument or idol, argues Lacan, that “perverse desire finds its support in the ideal of an inanimate object.”<sup>450</sup> It is no wonder, then, as Deleuze points out in his reading of Sacher-Masoch’s *Venus in Furs*, that the masochist finds a perfect embodiment of his love ideal in the frozen statue: “Women become

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<sup>447</sup> Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1993), 172.

<sup>448</sup> See Foster, 262n38. Bellmer is quoted as saying: “I agree with Georges Bataille that eroticism relates to a knowledge of evil and the inevitability of death.”

<sup>449</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book I: Freud’s Papers on Technique, 1953-1954*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. John Forrester (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1988), 222.

<sup>450</sup> *Ibid.*

indistinguishable from cold statues in the moonlight or paintings in darkened rooms... The scenes in Masoch have of necessity a frozen quality, like statues or portraits; they are replicas of works of art, or else they duplicate themselves in mirrors.”<sup>451</sup>

Curiously, Masumura’s film self-consciously solicits such a psychoanalytic interpretation. Thus, in her attempt to understand the psychic motives for Michio’s creative impulse, Aki assumes a role similar to that of the analyst, who not only appears to know something about his repressed desires but also prompts him to transform his intersubjective relation to the other. Upon hearing Michio confess that mother is the only woman he has ever known, she observes: “Now I know why you make such gigantic figures. They’re from a baby’s perspective. You love to nestle in their arms like a baby.” Indeed, before the artist’s studio comes to be transformed into the erotically charged space of ecstasy, it functions (for Michio, at least) as a space of imaginary plenitude. As a perverse subject, Michio creates his works of art in an attempt to (re)produce the dream of the mirror stage—the stage in human development that logically precedes the Oedipal conflict and the advent of castration complex. The actual conditions of Michio’s life before his relationship with Aki certainly corroborate this line of interpretation: he is utterly dependent on his overprotective mother (he even shares his bed with her) and the father is conspicuously absent from the picture (he died before Michio’s birth). Lacking any experience with other women and uninterested in the outside world, Michio designs his studio as if it were a fortress meant to protect his privacy and his intimacy with his mother. In this Imaginary realm, sexual difference and the attendant threat of castration must be disavowed so as to guarantee the illusory sense of unity and bodily integrity. Indeed, in constructing this elaborate space so as to safeguard this comforting illusion, Michio falls prey to a double misrecognition. On the one hand, he claims to derive a sense of comfort and pleasure from

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<sup>451</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty*, trans. Jean McNeil (New York: Zone Books, 1989), 69.

touching these statues that remind him of the female body yet his artistic creations cannot but attest to the lingering anxiety connected to what Lacan calls the fantasy of the body in pieces. The latter fantasy, in fact, constitutes the obverse of that imaginary sense of unity that emerges during the mirror stage. As Lorenzo Chiesa argues, “the ‘orthopedic’ action of the unity provided by the specular image of the body does *not* follow a stage in which the baby experiences his body as fragmented.”<sup>452</sup> The aggressiveness manifesting itself in the anxiety-ridden fantasies of the fragmented body is, in other words, the obverse of the ego’s narcissistic disposition. The conflicting coexistence of aggressiveness and narcissism, furthermore, does not resolve itself following the subject’s alienation in the symbolic Other but persists throughout the subject’s life. Indeed, as Lacan made clear, the mirror stage is not a mere phase that one overcomes and puts behind oneself. Conversely, the imagos of the fragmented body do not cease to torment the subject even during his adult years. In his essay on “Aggressiveness in Psychoanalysis,” for example, Lacan discerns the aforementioned images in “tattooing, incision, and circumcision rituals in primitive societies,”<sup>453</sup> whereas in “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function,” he stresses that “this fragmented body ... is regularly manifested in dreams when the movement of an analysis reaches a certain level of aggressive disintegration of the individual.”<sup>454</sup> While Michio may perceive his creative work as a desexualized artistic activity, which constitutes an integral part of his effort to shelter himself from the external world as well as from an internal trauma, his statues also serve as an outlet for the repressed anxiety which, I would argue, involves the original fantasy of the fragmented body now overwritten by the Oedipal castration

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<sup>452</sup> Lorenzo Chiesa, *Subjectivity and Otherness: A Philosophical Reading of Lacan* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2007), 18.

<sup>453</sup> Jacques Lacan, “Aggressiveness in Psychoanalysis,” in *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), 85.

<sup>454</sup> Jacques Lacan, “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function,” in *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), 78. Undoubtedly, the moment of “aggressive disintegration of the individual,” described in this early essay as a crucial moment in an analysis, corresponds to what the late Lacan calls “subjective destitution,” the culmination of the analytic process of traversing the fantasy (*la traversée du fantasme*).

anxiety. Krauss discerns just such an amalgam of the fantasy of body in pieces, which perturb the ego's narcissism, and the castration anxiety in the context of her reading of Freud's essay on

"The Uncanny":

Both the animism of primitive peoples and the narcissism of the infant, he notices, populate the world with extension of themselves, with projections in the form of doubles or cast shadows (shades). The 'double,' Freud says, 'was originally an insurance against destruction to the ego, an energetic denial of the power of death,' which, he continues, 'has its counterpart in the language of dreams, which is fond of representing castration by a doubling or multiplication of the genital symbol.' But as infantile grandiosity yields to the all-too-obvious facts of helplessness, the subject's own creation becomes a Frankenstein monster. So that the ideas that 'have sprung from the soil of unbounded self-love, from the primary narcissism which holds sway in the mind of the child as in that of primitive man,' form the basis for a turn of events: 'when this stage has been left behind the double takes on a different aspect. From having been an insurance of immortality, he becomes the ghastly harbinger of death.' He becomes a ghost, a ghoul, a spook.<sup>455</sup>

Undoubtedly, the protruding legs, breasts, and lips covering the walls of Michio's studio perform precisely this function of representing castration by means of multiplication of the organ. His entire artistic output, therefore, is characterized by a profound ambivalence: his sculptures serve as idealized representations of feminine beauty designed to bring pleasure to the one who touches them while, at the same time, embodying monstrous figurations of the castrated body, the body in pieces.

Krauss's discussion also brings me to the second aspect of Michio's misrecognition, namely his refusal to recognize himself in the form of the other. In treating inanimate objects as objects of his love and, conversely, idealizing his beloved woman as an object of art, Michio misrecognizes the other as a mere instrument or plaything of his desire, turning a blind eye to the fact that the bodies he molds out of clay function as reflections of the idealized and dismembered figurations of his own self. The ego *qua* imaginary construct, stresses Lacan, lies outside itself and attains the sense of self-contained identity only in the image of the other: "The body in

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<sup>455</sup> Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*, 177.



pieces finds its unity in the image of the other, which is its own anticipated image ... The subject is no one. It is decomposed, in pieces. And it is jammed, sucked in by the image, the deceiving and realised image, of the other, or equally by its own specular image. That is where it finds its unity.”<sup>456</sup> While the ego strives to discover the model of a desired unity in the other, it also tends to project a fragmented image of the self onto the latter. In such instances, a narcissistic identification with the other tips over into a murderous aggressiveness. Thus, love *qua* narcissistic phenomenon constitutes what Lacan calls *hainamoration*, an amalgam of *haine* (hate) and *enamouré* (being in love). Chiesa explains:

The subject who, when considered as an ego, is nothing but the consequence of an alienating identification with the imaginary other, wants to be where the other is: he loves the other only insofar as he wants aggressively to be in his place. The subject claims the other's place as the (unattainable) place of his own perfection. It goes without saying that, for the same reason, this ambivalent relationship is also self-destructive. Lacan had already pointed this out in his doctoral thesis on self-punishing paranoia: in certain forms of paranoia, by attacking an admired person with whom she ideally identifies, the psychotic is actually attacking herself: in this way she punishes herself for not being able to achieve her ideal image. In self-punishing paranoia, the psychotic ‘strikes in her victim her own exteriorized ideal.’<sup>457</sup>

The artworks populating Michio's studio reflect the subject's tendency to project a fragmented image of the self onto the other. The heaps of limbs that he obsessively creates do not so much reveal his disinterested (sublimated) appreciation of the beautiful forms as they attest to the fact that, as the subject, he is lacking, incomplete, decomposed.

Thus, in sculpting the female body as fragmented or dismembered, Michio evokes the lack of being, which he refuses to recognize in himself and must project onto the other. If Aki is comparable to the figure of the analyst, as I have suggested earlier, it is insofar as she confronts Michio with the lack in question and thus gives rise to an outbreak of anxiety that culminates in

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<sup>456</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954-1955*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Sylvana Tomaselli (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1988), 54.

<sup>457</sup> Chiesa, 20.

the accidental killing of Michio's mother. In this respect, the film depicts her not only as the victim but also as the femme fatale par excellence who continually manipulates the male protagonist and eventually leads him onto the path of self-destruction. Far more intelligent and cunning than Michio, she is capable of easily gaining his trust and confidence and then deceiving him on several occasions (at one point, she almost succeeds in making an escape and only Michio's mother's sudden appearance stops her). Moreover, the film continually depicts the male hero as an overgrown child who knows nothing about women prior to meeting Aki, and is only interested in his art. He easily succumbs to Aki's seductive charm and thus falls prey to her scheme designed to estrange him from his possessive mother. The film itself certainly encourages this line of interpretation, as the mother's remarks make painfully clear. At one point in the film, she scolds him for falling in love with Aki: "You idiot. Can't you see she's fooling you? When you let down your guard she'll escape." And then later, in a different scene: "You have no idea about the outside world. You know nothing about women." Thus, in a way, the mother functions as a "voice of reason" within the narrative, eventually eliminated (literally killed off), however, to allow for the formation of the couple and the emergence of a maddening, destructive love affair. Thus, following the death of the mother, Michio proclaims himself "the beast" who is free to transgress: "Yes, the beast who killed his mother. I can do anything now." Prior to entering into an erotic union with Aki, Michio must first go through a traumatic experience and tarry with anxiety. The following lines from Rella's *The Myth of the Other* help to illuminate this point: "The basis for this communication is the wound, the laceration, and in this opening to the world and to the other there is the necessity of ripping things from the real order, from their poverty, and of offering them back to the divine."<sup>458</sup> Thus, while Michio's act consists in transporting Aki from the exterior space of production and exchange into the interior

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<sup>458</sup> Rella, 93.

space of intimacy, Aki's intervention lies in yanking Michio out of his imaginary universe and exposing him to anxiety so as to make possible their eventual union in the space of communication.

The conflict between Aki and Michio's mother, then, seems inevitable for the latter strives to preserve Michio's infantile fantasy at all costs whereas Aki punches holes in it, renders it inconsistent by disclosing the fragility of the imaginary construct that props up Michio's subjective position. In this respect, she embodies the idea of a "true woman" that Jacques-Alain Miller discerns in Lacan's corpus. Right away, one must stress that, in speaking of a true woman, Miller manages to avoid the essentialist conception of femininity. In a carefully worded definition, he states that "we call subjects who have an essential relation to nothingness 'women.'"<sup>459</sup> Clearly, he does not view biology as a woman's destiny; on the contrary, every subject can potentially be 'a woman' as long as this subject maintains a certain structural relation to nothingness, to lack, to the Real. It is precisely for this reason, argues Miller, that "the truth in a woman ... is measured by her subjective distance from the position of motherhood."<sup>460</sup> To a mother defined as the *one who has*—the one who possesses something that functions as a substitution or a compensation for the lack in the Symbolic—Miller opposes a true woman who embodies that very lack. Such a woman does not complete a man, does not serve as a mirror reflection of his narcissistic ego, but, on the contrary, functions as a continual source of anxiety insofar as she embodies a lack of identity. Miller argues: "In addition to the lack of identity, there is a lack of consistency, which can be observed in testimonies to a feeling of corporeal

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<sup>459</sup> Jacques-Alain Miller, "On Semblances in the Relation Between the Sexes," in *Sexuation*, ed. Renata Salecl (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 14.

<sup>460</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

fragmentation.”<sup>461</sup> This point helps to clarify the fragmentation of Michio’s sculpture that accompanies the dismemberment of Aki at the very end of the film: this finale signals a transformation of Michio’s narcissistic love for idealized (and, therefore, not lacking) woman into a true love which exposes his narcissistic ego to the risk of transformation and even dissolution. Chiesa distinguishes between the two kinds of love as follows:

Commentators have often stated that Lacan’s early works present us with a uniquely pessimistic notion of love, which is easily reducible to imaginary narcissism. I would claim, rather, that, already in his first theory of the subject, love transcends the imaginary order due to its proximity to the emergence of the ego-ideal. More specifically, I believe that, even though it is legitimate to speak of imaginary narcissistic love, it is nevertheless important to point out how, for Lacan, the object of narcissism is not, strictly speaking, the same as the object of love. ... He suggests that the loved object does not merely correspond to the object upon which I project my ideal ego (the latter is indeed projected onto *all* objects, since it constitutes them), it is not simply the object toward which my aggressive narcissism is directed. On the contrary, *the loved object is that object which causes the ideal ego to be projected in a particular way....*To put it in simpler terms, we could conclude that at this stage, for Lacan, to love somebody means to expose one’s narcissism to the influence of the beloved.<sup>462</sup>

I would argue that *Blind Beast* dramatizes just such a transformation of the beloved from the object of narcissism into the object of love. At the end of the film, Michio no longer identifies with a woman who holds a promise of imaginary completeness but with a woman who embodies a lack. The broken sculpture at the end of the film thus functions as a reflection of Michio’s own fragmented identity.

In comparing a true woman to Euripides’s Medea, Miller defines her as someone who possesses a special knowledge—knowledge in the Real—which proves to be disconcerting to a man. As I have suggested in the previous chapter, such knowledge in the Real corresponds to Bataille’s idea of nonknowledge, defined as “that which results from every proposition when we

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<sup>461</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>462</sup> Chiesa, 23.

are looking to go to the fundamental depths of its content, and which makes us uneasy.”<sup>463</sup> Furthermore, insofar as she holds the key to such a disconcerting knowledge, the woman is comparable to the analyst, whose job consists precisely in prompting the subject to “traverse the fantasy” and to confront “the real cause”—the lack precluding the possibility of that imaginary wholeness that the ego strives to constitute.<sup>464</sup> In so doing, as Miller argues, a “true woman explores an unfamiliar zone, oversteps all boundaries, and if Medea offers us an example of what is bewildering about a true woman, it is because she is exploring uncharted territory, beyond all limits.”<sup>465</sup> The forbidden knowledge to which a true woman holds the key invariably precipitates anxiety. Indeed, as Joan Copjec suggests apropos of Freud’s famous dream of Irma’s injection, the subject defends himself from anxiety by a flight from knowledge. Following the terrible sighting of strange white scabs growing down in Irma’s throat, “Freud no longer wants to know; his primary desire is a desire *not* to know anything of the real that provoked in him so much anxiety.”<sup>466</sup> Now, the act of a true woman consists precisely in uncovering the forbidden knowledge that gives rise to anxiety and, in so doing, exposing the subject to the lethal encounter with the Real.<sup>467</sup> Incidentally, in his *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, Žižek insists that “the act as real is ‘feminine,’ in contrast to the ‘masculine’ performative, i.e., the great founding gesture of a new order ... The very masculine *activity* is already an escape from the abysmal dimension of the

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<sup>463</sup> Georges Bataille, “The Consequences of Nonknowledge,” in *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, ed. Stuart Kendall, trans. Michelle Kendall and Stuart Kendall (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 112.

<sup>464</sup> For a succinct characterization of this process see Adrian Johnston, *Time Driven: Metapsychology and the Splitting of the Drive* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2005), 78. “The analyst presides over the process whereby the Cogito-Ich is made to emerge through ‘subjective destitution’: In being lead to a confrontation with its ‘real cause’ through ‘traversing the fantasy,’ the symptom-laden ego is divested of its determinate, Imaginary, and essentially neurotic features. What remains, according to Lacanian theory, is the empty void of subjectivity (\$ as Cogito). Symptoms and fantasies are produced in the desperate attempt to fill this ‘hole in the Symbolic.’”

<sup>465</sup> Miller, 19.

<sup>466</sup> Joan Copjec, “Vampires, Breast-Feeding, and Anxiety,” *October*, vol. 58 (Autumn, 1991), 27.

<sup>467</sup> As Miller puts it, “she sacrifices what is most precious to her in order to pierce man with a hole that can never be filled”; in this respect, “she is man’s ruination.”

feminine *act*.”<sup>468</sup> From this perspective, man’s incessant activity constitutes nothing other than an attempt to flee from the knowledge in the real. I would argue, furthermore, that Bataille’s work in many ways prefigured this argument in stressing that man’s obsession with *projects* signaled his desperate efforts to avoid exposure to *nonknowledge*.

From the Lacanian perspective, one may inquire: How does anxiety transform the relation between the sexes? Conversely, from the Bataillean perspective, one may ask: What role does anxiety play in relation to eroticism? One ought to recall that, as Copjec stresses, anxiety involves an encounter with the little fragment of the real, *object a*. At the same time, one must keep in mind that, following Miller, woman “functions within male fantasy as *objet a*.”<sup>469</sup> One might wonder, then, as to what makes the encounter with *object a* in anxiety so disconcerting given the fact that the subject already maintains a certain relation to the said object in his fantasy. Copjec provides an answer to this problem: “The danger that anxiety signals is the overproximity of this object a.”<sup>470</sup> What takes place in anxiety, then, is a reconfiguration of fantasy along with a structural displacement of the *object a* in relation to the subject. Thus, if Lacan’s formula for fantasy is  $\$ \diamond a$ , then a modified formula for fantasy which has undergone a transformation under the pressure of anxiety would have to be  $\$ a$ , with the elimination of lozenge  $\diamond$  signaling the absence of a safe distance separating the subject from the object. Žižek supplies a concrete illustration of the effects of object a’s overproximity to the subject in his reading of Michael Haneke’s film, *The Piano Teacher* (2001). Here is an oversimplified account of the film’s ending: when the heroine gives in to the persistent advances on the part of her student and writes him a letter (a contract of sorts) detailing the conditions of the sadomasochistic relationship,

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<sup>468</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and out* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 46.

<sup>469</sup> Miller, 23.

<sup>470</sup> Copjec, 27.

which she wishes to form with him, he expresses disgust and then responds with a brutal rape. As Žižek puts it, “it is she who in fact opens herself up, laying her fantasy bare to him, while he is simply playing a more superficial game of seduction. No wonder he withdraws in panic from her openness: the direct display of her fantasy radically changes her status in his eyes, transforming a fascinating love object into a repulsive entity he is unable to endure.”<sup>471</sup> In light of my preceding discussion, such a modification of the love object can undoubtedly be interpreted as a transformation of the beloved from the one who holds a promise of imaginary plenitude to the one who embodies the lack that precludes the possibility of this plenitude. At the same time, the film illustrates the failure of love: when the beloved can no longer function as the object of narcissism for the male subject, she does not become the object of love but turns into a monstrous creature that brings about an outbreak of anxiety. This is how Žižek interprets Haneke’s film:

In his (unpublished) seminar on anxiety (1962-3), Lacan specifies that the true aim of the masochist is not to generate *jouissance* in the Other, but to provide its anxiety. That is to say: although the masochist submits himself to the Other’s torture, although he wants to serve the Other, he himself defines the rules of his servitude; consequently, while he seems to offer himself as the instrument of the Other’s *jouissance*, he effectively discloses his own desire to the Other and thus gives rise to anxiety in the Other—for Lacan, the true object of anxiety is precisely the (over)proximity of the Other’s desire. That is the libidinal economy of the moment in *The Piano Teacher* when the heroine presents to her seducer a detailed masochistic scenario of how he should mistreat her: what repulses him is this total disclosure of her desire.<sup>472</sup>

While *The Piano Teacher* illustrates a failure of eroticism, with the relation between the sexes crumbling away under the pressure of anxiety, *Blind Beast* depicts its triumph. What the film illustrates is precisely that fusion between the lovers that, as Bataille claimed, constituted the final aim of eroticism. Eroticism, one might say, presupposes an alternative direction taken by

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<sup>471</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!: Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates* (London and New York: Verso, 2002), 20-1.

<sup>472</sup> *Ibid.*, 21-2.

the subject in the face of anxiety. Instead of fleeing from the encounter with the Real and avoiding that overwhelming enjoyment (*jouissance*) that arises as a consequence of such an encounter, the subject develops a passion for the Real and enjoys the enjoyment.

What is at stake here is more than a simple hedonism. Indeed, as Badiou shows in *The Theory of the Subject*, the subject's stance taken in the face of anxiety involves political and ethical consequences. Conceived of as the excess of the Real over the Symbolic, anxiety constitutes a veritable "interruption" of the entire social apparatus and thus announces a possibility of the new: "Now as far as anxiety is concerned, it is from the point of view of the real in excess rather than from that of the failing law that it functions as interruption—and therefore as revelation. ... Anxiety is the submersion by the real, the radical excess of the real over the lack, the active failure of the whole apparatus of symbolic support provoked by what reveals itself therein, in a cut, as unnameable encounter. Here, again, it is necessary to 'channel' its effect, since anxiety destroys the adjustment to the repeatable. It short-circuits the relation of the language-bearing subject to the real. Anxiety, then, is the sign of that which in the subject forces the legal space."<sup>473</sup> One must pause at the word 'revelation' in the above passage, for revelation is precisely what *may* occur following the subject's confrontation with the lack of being. Miller argues: "For some, this occurs through identification with the symptom. They no longer have the hope of ridding themselves of the symptom. Instead, they have turned themselves into a symptom. They are their own symptom, and in this case the feeling of the end of analysis translates the revelation of the *jouissance* of the symptom. It is the revelation of this *jouissance* which eliminates their lack of being."<sup>474</sup> It is precisely this revelation, I would insist, that occurs in erotic experience which exposes the subject to the *jouissance* of the drives; instead

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<sup>473</sup> Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, trans. Bruno Bosteels (New York: Continuum, 2009), 146.

<sup>474</sup> Miller, 26.



of taking an anxious flight from jouissance, the subject learns to enjoy it and, furthermore, to take this enjoyment as the basis for a new form of community, the community of lovers.

For Badiou, such an alternative to the incapacitating effects of anxiety is courage, one of the four subjective figures (the other three being anxiety, superego, and justice) that calls for a positive and productive disruption of the symbolic space: “Courage positively carries out the disorder of the symbolic, the breakdown of communication, whereas anxiety calls for its death.”<sup>475</sup> Although it is rarely mobilized in discussions of eroticism, courage is, perhaps, an apt word to designate the erotic subject’s steadfast refusal to flee from the overproximity of the beloved or panic in the face of overwhelming jouissance. Instead of approaching the beloved as a mere instrument (as Michio does early in the film) or, what’s worse, treating her as an abject monstrosity that must be punished or eliminated (as Walter Klemmer does in *The Piano Teacher*), the erotic subject aspires towards the experience of fusion in which the two lovers may share in the infinite reservoir of jouissance. One might object to my apparently positive reading of the film that concludes with the act of double suicide: Does its finale not depict the lovers’ tragic succumbing to the death wish rather than their affirmation of enjoyment? In order to respond to this question, one ought to follow Rella’s example and adopt the Nietzschean perspective on Bataille’s theory of eroticism. From this perspective, the opening line of *Eroticism*—“Eroticism, it may be said, is assenting to life up to the point of death”—could be translated as “Of eroticism one can say that it is the affirmation of life even in death.”<sup>476</sup> In this respect, the ending of *Blind Beast*, which depicts the lovers seeking to experience the highest ecstasy that life has to offer and willing to die for it, differs dramatically from that of *The Sword of Doom*, which represents the hero’s nihilistic succumbing to the passion of destruction. (This

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<sup>475</sup> Badiou, 160.

<sup>476</sup> Rella, 101.

being said, I still maintain that the two films present the spectator with two different figurations of sovereignty, the latter intimately related to expenditure, pure loss, death.) If eroticism may be said to drive the subject towards the symbolic suicide, it simultaneously involves the affirmation of life, saying yes to life even in death.

As I have explained earlier in this chapter, the subjective disposition particular to the erotic phenomenon possesses political consequences inasmuch as it grounds a new type of community. Throughout my discussion, I have been paying attention to a figuration of space specific to such a community of lovers, a space of ecstasy in which the others are treated as objects of love as opposed to a space of work in which the others are treated as instruments. In conclusion, I wish to briefly hint at the possibility of a different relation to time within the community of lovers. Giorgio Agamben points towards this possibility in his discussion of the Aristotelian notion of pleasure, conceived of as heterogeneous in relation to temporality *qua* homogeneous continuum. The time of pleasure is the instant. Rather than presupposing a teleological movement towards a gradually heightened perfection, pleasure presents itself as perfect and complete “within each now.” Moving from Aristotle to Benjamin, Agamben concludes:

Just as the full, discontinuous, finite and complete time of pleasure must be set against the empty, continuous and infinite time of vulgar historicism, so the chronological time of pseudo-history must be opposed by the cairological time of authentic history. True historical materialism does not pursue an empty mirage of continuous progress along infinite linear time, but is ready at any moment to stop time, because it holds the memory that man’s original home is pleasure. It is this time which experienced in authentic revolutions, which, as Benjamin remembers, have always been lived as a halting of time and an interruption of chronology. But a revolution from which there springs not a new chronology, but a qualitative alteration of time (a *cairology*), would have the weightiest consequence and would alone be immune to absorption into the reflux of restoration. He who, in the *epochē* of pleasure, has remembered history as he would remember his original home, will bring this memory to everything, will exact this promise from each

instant: he is the true revolutionary and the true seer, released from time not at the millennium, but *now*.<sup>477</sup>

Agamben's conclusion cannot but bring to mind Bataille's assertion that only the instant is sovereign. And it is in the erotic experience that the subject comes to enjoy the sovereignty of the instant. In the community of lovers, time is liberated from its subservience to projects. Thus, if the erotic phenomenon opens up "an unprecedented space" (as Rella argues), it also liberates an unprecedented time—the time of the miraculous instant in which the erotic subject finds himself transported in the domain beyond utility that presents the possibility of "dealing freely with the world" as opposed to the injunction of working upon the world.<sup>478</sup> It is this new conception of time, the time of pleasure and love, that one must think in order to develop the principles guiding the politics of separation.

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<sup>477</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History: On the Destruction of Experience*, trans. Liz Heron (London and New York: Verso, 1993), 115.

<sup>478</sup> Rella, 99.

## Afterword

### On Yasuzo Masumura's *Red Angel*

In order to assess the implications of Bataille's turn to the theorization of eroticism, it may be worthwhile to briefly compare Suzuki's *Fighting Elogy* to another New Wave film made in 1966, Masumura's *Red Angel*, which, incidentally, reflects on the same turbulent period in Japanese history. Set in 1936, *Red Angel* picks up at the point where *Fighting Elogy* leaves off—the beginning of the Second Sino-Japanese war. The two films cast a reflective gaze on Japanese history of the 1930s from the vantage point of the distinctly New Wave sensibility: while Suzuki, the master of the *yakuza* cinema, draws on his fascination with street gangs and rebellious teenagers to depict the proliferation of pack fascism that played a crucial part in the development of Japanese militarism, Masumura, the specialist in the *pink movie* genre, tells a story of a nurse's romantic involvement with a wounded soldier in her care and a doctor in charge of a hospital.

Nonetheless, the two films provide strikingly different outlooks on the collective mentality of the Japanese during the 1930's. Whereas *Fighting Elogy* pokes fun at the macho bravado of young hoodlums thirsting for a "big fight," *Red Angel* shows men already broken by war, either crippled by wounds or paralyzed by anxiety in the face of imminent death. Against the background of death and destruction, the female protagonist, Sakura Nishi, appears as the agent of healing, who nurses the wounds of disabled soldiers but also gives them the emotional support and affection that they sorely need. In spite of Sakura's healing powers, however, her lovers die one by one: soldier Ohara, whose arms have been amputated in a war hospital, commits suicide shortly after making love to Sakura; doctor Okabe dies in the trenches immediately after he and Sakura profess love to each other.

Not surprisingly, most critics interpret *Red Angel* as a grim and pessimistic antiwar tract. Desser, for instance, writes: “Masumura’s point is that the saving essence of woman is not enough in time of war....Even the priestess is unable to save men betrayed by the very system in which they live.”<sup>479</sup> Contrary to the apparent validity of this reading, however, I would like to insist that *Red Angel* is a resolutely optimistic film insofar as it depicts the potential of eroticism to free men from crippling anxiety and to expose them to what Bataille calls “joy in the face of death.” Indeed, Ohara commits suicide but not because he realizes that he will never make love to a woman again (as Desser argues) but because he has experienced the highest ecstasy with Sakura and knows that this singular experience can never be repeated again. Indeed, just as Bataille does in *Erotism*, Masumura presents eroticism as the fulfillment of life. As Ohara makes clear in his suicide note, once he has attained this maximum point of intensity in experience, it no longer makes any difference whether he lives or dies. Death has no hold over him.

Unlike Ohara, Dr. Okabe has no physical disabilities; instead, he suffers from psychic wounds. Confronted with rows of crippled bodies and piles of discarded limbs on a daily basis, he suffers from anxiety and impotence and finds his only solace in shots of morphine. After Sakura develops an intimate emotional bond with Okabe, she prompts him to resist his morphine addiction and overcome his impotence. Towards the very end of the film, the two are fused in erotic union just as their military base comes under attack by Chinese troops. Even though the two lovers have never been as close to dying as they are now, the anxiety that has been tormenting them for so long gives way to erotic fusion and bliss. At this point, death cannot touch Okabe even though his body will perish once his union with Sakura comes to an end. The figure of sovereignty presented in this film is not shrouded in the rhetoric of virility; instead of

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<sup>479</sup> David Desser, *Eros Plus Massacre: An Introduction to the Japanese New Wave Cinema* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), 120.

heroically affirming the passion for destruction, it radiates a kind of blissful indifference towards death. In this respect, Alain Badiou's frequent characterization of the subject—the subject of politics but also the amorous subject—as “the immortal” resonates with Bataille's work as much as with Masumura's film. Thus, I conclude with the following lines from Badiou's *Ethics*, which stress that the subject defeats death and comes face-to-face with immortal truth not only in great revolutionary ventures and heroic military enterprises, but also in love that liberates him from servile occupations with projects, which provide only a temporary respite from anxiety, and transports him into an unprecedented space of unlimited eroticism:

An immortal: this is what the worst situations that can be inflicted upon Man show him to be, in so far as he distinguishes himself within the varied and rapacious flux of life. In order to think any aspect of Man, we must begin from this principle, in so far as he distinguishes himself within the varied and rapacious flux of life. In order to think any aspect of Man, we must begin from this principle. So if ‘rights of man’ exist, they are surely not rights of life against death, or rights of survival against misery. They are the rights of the Immortal, affirmed in their own right, or the rights of the Infinite, exercised over the contingency of suffering and death. The fact that in the end we all die, that only dust remains, in no way alters Man's identity as immortal at the instant in which he affirms himself as someone who runs counter to the temptation of wanting-to-be-an-animal to which circumstances may expose him. And we know that every human being is *capable* of being this immortal – unpredictably, be it in circumstances great or small, for truths important or secondary. In each case, subjectivation is immortal, and makes Man.<sup>480</sup>

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<sup>480</sup> Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (London and New York: Verso, 2001), 12.

## Filmography

*The Baader Meinhof Complex* (dir. Uli Edel, 2008)

*The Black Test Car* (dir. Yasuzo Masumura, 1962)

*Blind Beast* (dir. Yasuzo Masumura, 1969)

*Empire of Passion* (dir. Nagisa Oshima, 1978)

*Fighting Elegy* (dir. Seijun Suzuki, 1966)

*Giants and Toys* (dir. Yasuzo Masumura, 1958)

*In the Realm of the Senses* (dir. Nagisa Oshima, 1976)

*Night and Fog in Japan* (dir. Nagisa Oshima, 1960)

*The Piano Teacher* (dir. Michael Haneke, 2001)

*Red Angel* (dir. Yasuzo Masumura, 1966)

*Sword of the Beast* (dir. Hideo Gosha, 1965)

*The Sword of Doom* (dir. Kihachi Okamoto, 1966)

*Woman in the Dunes* (dir. Hiroshi Teshigahara, 1964)

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