

The Resurgence of the Sacred in Georges Bataille's Contribution to *Documents*

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One of the original aspects of *Documents* is that it has brought together some of the most audacious avant-garde troublemakers, the renegades of the Surrealism, with academics and museum curators. It was the encounter of two worlds; the subtitle of the review “Doctrines, Archaeology, Fine Arts, Ethnology” made this clear. The association of ethnology and art was not in itself extraordinary in the 1920s: primitivism was very fashionable – ethnographic objects inspired the latest masterpieces, Modernist artists such as Breton and Picasso collected African masks or pre-Columbian statuettes, and Frazer’s *Golden Bough* was widely read – but *Documents* confronted for the first time actual professional ethnologists with Modernist artists. This had probably something to do with the dual personality of its principal co-founder, Georges Bataille. Defining himself as the “enemy within” the Surrealist movement, he had secretly published the innovative *Story of the Eye* (1928) under a pseudonym and was also an archivist and an expert in ancient medals at the *Bibliothèque Nationale*. He had a crucial position in the review; he directed the global display of each issue and chose the illustrations and the order of

the various articles. As a consequence, the review was marked by a tone and a style which any reader familiar with the work of Bataille can immediately identify as being characteristic of his manner.

Commentators¹ agree on the fact that Bataille used *Documents* as a way to deride André Breton's idealism. It is true that he found tempting to attack the well-established "pope of Surrealism"; nonetheless, his plan clearly extended beyond this one aim and *Documents* is certainly a milestone in his oeuvre. All his life, Bataille sought to destabilise the foundations of philosophical, political and moral western values. The following paper will show that *Documents* encapsulates all the main features of his mature philosophy and aesthetics. Bataille is known as the inventor of the notions of "heterogeneity", "scatology", "impossible" and "sovereignty", all different formulations of what he was searching for throughout his career. Although he did not already use these notions in *Documents*, examining Bataille's contributions demonstrates that he was already starting to develop the bases of his philosophy.

According to Leiris², Bataille's goal was to "escape from a childish provocative systematic negation". Whereas Dada and Surrealism had said "No" to a civilisation in which greed and imperialism had lead to war, Bataille wanted to go further in the criticism. He proclaimed a Nietzschean "Yes" to existence, in all its possibilities, even the most dreadful, the most "impossible" to bear or to imagine. As Leiris recalled it, he and Bataille had considered founding an art review, the office of which would have been situated in a bordello of the rue Saint-Denis. Had this project been realised, Bataille could have remained a simple provoker, a Surrealist dissident, a base schismatic; but far from trying merely to undermine Surrealism, Bataille wanted to renew art, to make it efficient and revolutionary. Art

¹ Rodolphe Gasché, "L'avorton de la pensée", *L'Arc*, 1971, 4: 12-18 ; Roland Barthes, "Les sorties du texte", *Colloque de Cerisy*, Cerisy, CGE, 10/18, 1972 ; Jean-Louis Houdebine, "L'ennemi du dedans", *ibid.* ; Denis Hollier, "La valeur d'usage de l'impossible", introduction to *Documents*, Paris, Jean-Michel Place, 1991, vii-xxxiv .

Michel Surya, *Georges Bataille, la mort à l'œuvre*, Paris, Gallimard, 1992.

² Michel Leiris, "De Bataille l'impossible à l'impossible 'Documents'", *Critique*, 1963, n°195-196, p. 86.

needed to be radically realistic. What was he going to replace the Surrealists' *sur*-reality with? By this time, Bataille had met Alfred Métraux who introduced him to ethnology. The presence of eminent members of the *Institut* and the *Musée du Trocadéro* among the editorial office of *Documents* brought a much broader dimension to the work of Bataille.

I will examine how Bataille expressed in his contributions his judgement on a western civilisation that he considered as being decadent, a theme that he shared with other Modernists. Secondly, I will present how the theme of decadence is bound to his interpretation of ethnological theories of the sacred, and then relate this idiosyncratic mixture of avant-gardism and ethnology with his aesthetics. His aesthetics, in my view, emerged from the desire of resurrecting the experience of the sacred through art.

Let us examine how Bataille uses *Documents* to express his disappointment and disillusionment with western society. The large coverage that *Documents* devotes to such forms of popular culture as cinema, music-hall and jazz reflects the intention of its authors to rehabilitate alternative cultures. Yet, this recurrent motif can also be interpreted as a renewal of the traditional theatre metaphor commonly used by moralists to denounce social vanity. In "Around the World in Eighty Days"¹, the review of a musical of the time, Bataille has recourse to the semantic field of the fake, the kitsch, and the grotesque to show that not only this show is unsubstantial and vulgar but also mirrors the stupidity of the audience and, more generally, of the society which generates such entertainments. Bataille denies the distinction between the show and the real world:

However, these distinctions are not important, since it is enclosed in a world depicted by valet Passepartout's puns, a world born in the mind of a sausage which would have the same feelings than the one who is eating it.

The image reduces the Creation to a grotesque piece of charcuterie where the Creator is simply an eater with no other plan than to satisfy his hunger. As Bataille sees it, the western society is "an atrocious cardboard universe", a pathetic

¹ *Documents*, 1929, no. 5, p. 260-262.

imposture. Bataille claims in many articles – Leiris and Rivière make the same acknowledgement – that Hollywood is the new temple of the western world and glamour actresses are the goddesses before whom people prostrate themselves. In a world without any sense, “the game is already up” so “the lesser toy is a fair entertainment”¹. Hollywood is a mock temple and its beautiful priestesses devote themselves to having the crowds forget the misery of their condition. This society suffers from a disappearance of sacredness after “the death of God”, its decrepitude comes from the loss of spiritual values.

Another word keeps cropping up in Bataille’s writing in order to define western society, the word “senility”:

we can only point out one epoch when the human form appeared, taken as a whole, as a senile kind of mockery of all man’s grand and violent conceptions.²

Society is unable to regenerate itself. Sclerotic like an old organism, it cannot do anything but stammer and talk drivel. Bataille thinks that civilisation prevents regeneration. In “Mouth”³ he confronts animals, which can release “deep physical impulses” out from their mouth, to men who release them in the mind because of their upright posture. Creative energies come from the stomach, but because of his posture, the man has to use the mediation of his mind or keep his energies in seclusion; he becomes eventually doomed to talk drivel. Besides, old age promises an imminent death, society appears to be in danger.

we rotted with neurasthenia in our houses, our cemeteries, our pauper’s grave overwhelmed by all this pathetic jumble⁴

Next to Leiris’ article entitled ‘Disaster’, Bataille put a picture that shows the Seine in winter carrying various objects, presumably the remains of some shipwreck⁵. This image of destruction echoes with another picture that displays the corpse of a gangster sinking into the water⁶. Both pictures show the disaster of a frozen river the ice of which has been broken into pieces by a violent irruption. What is rigid

¹ “Lieux de pèlerinage, Hollywood”, *Documents*, 1929, n° 5, p. 280.

² “Figure humaine”, *Documents*, 1929, n° 4, p. 194.

³ “Bouche”, *Documents*, 1930, n° 4, p. 299-300.

⁴ “Black Birds”, *Documents*, 1929, n° 4, p. 215.

⁵ *Documents*, 1929, n° 7, p. 383.

⁶ “X Marks the Spot”, *Documents*, 1930, n° 7, p. 437-438.

and fixed seems expected to die from uncontrollable outbursts that have been contained for too long.

Above all, western society is suffocating because it claims to be superior in dignity to other societies and monopolises the status of “civilisation”. Bataille creates a meaningful comparison bringing together two photographs: dancers in the musical *Broadway Melody* and African children of the military school of Bacouya¹. At first, our attention is drawn by the discrepancy between skin colours emphasised by the white colour of the dancers’ suits and the black uniform of the children’s lieutenant; but as both groups are shown against a background of the opposite colour, the pictures appear complementary. The two groups are standing in comparable postures: the dancers are compelled by the choreography to raise their arms while the children are in standing to attention, as is required by military discipline. The display reveals Bataille’s irony – even more when, turning the page, the reader comes across Leiris’ article “Civilisation”². Discipline applies to all individuals so that they are literally made to tow the line: the children were placed so that their heads draw a clear line, individual differences were reduced to a scheme. Cruelly, their nakedness, a vestige of their freedom, will from now on serves as a soldier uniform. As for women, their dancers’ uniforms transformed them into cogs in the show business machine. Here civilisation demonstrates two features; it asserts its cultural value by forcing bodies into discipline and its faith in its superiority results in imperialism.

Aware of this prejudice, ethnologists wanted to rehabilitate non-European cultures and insisted on the necessity for the western world to decentre itself. In *Documents*, Marcel Griaule, Georges-Henri Rivière, Paul Rivet and André Schaeffner all promote a better understanding of other cultures, even if their artefacts do not fit western conceptions of what is worth displaying in a museum. For example, Schaeffner wrote:

The history of musical instruments owes to travellers, Missionaries, and ethnologists the only meticulous descriptions of objects and practices that musicographers would have been unaware of and that most of them continue

¹ *Documents*, 1929, n° 4, p. 219.

² *Ibid.*, p. 221-222.

ignoring because of the same prejudice that makes historians of art reject the expression: negro *art*, Indian *art*, Oceania *art*.¹

Their position amounted to contesting western ethnocentrism and bringing its values into perspective. Anthropology at the time contested evolutionist theories, which assumed that so-called “primitive” people remained at an early stage of humanity development whereas European civilisation had accomplished the whole process. A horizontal axis was substituted for a vertical one. Hence Alfred Métraux was one of the first anthropologists who argued that voodoo, far from consisting of barbaric extravagances, was a part of a culture in its own right (*Haitian Voodoo*, 1958). The notion of “primitive” started to be questioned; the ‘other’ replaced the ‘inferior’.

Bataille does not abolish the primitive-civilisation distinction, on the contrary, he reinforces it in order to assert the primitive peoples’ superiority. His aim is not scientific but that of a moralist. Primitives, like the “Black Birds”² for instance, reveal the absurdities of civilisation and sweep away the Europeans’ pretentiousness with laughter, Bataille claims. From their angle, civilised people are “a colony of intellectual insects, moved by an oppressive necessity” which “blocks the little holes made in the walls of the beehive in order to prevent the harmful light coming in”. Children, who do not belong to the world of serious grown-ups, are like primitives. They laugh at social convention while they read “*The Pieds Nickelés*”, which Bataille relates to the mischievous universe of the “Mexican Walhalla”³. Here, Bataille starts to shape what he would call later the world of “sovereignty”, where festivals, playfulness and games replace the serious world of work and calculation, the world of obedience. In “Factory chimneys”⁴ he praises the children’s way of perceiving the world, a magic, almost animistic way. Children are not corrupted by rationalism which reduces phenomena to abstractions; they are visionaries when they intuit that chimneys are “the *revelation* of a violent state of being”: the violence suffered by workers oppressed and trapped

¹ “Des instruments de musique dans un musée d’ethnographie”, *Documents*, 1929, n° 5, p. 248.

² *Documents*, 1929, n° 4, p. 215

³ *Documents*, 1930, n° 4, p. 214

⁴ *Documents*, 1929, n° 6, p. 329-332

in the realm of mechanic exploitation. Wild animals, which are primitive as well, question all feelings of human dignity for “they are the real outlaws”, those who remind us of what we have lost: “the innocent cruelty” and “the impenetrable monstrosity you can read in their eyes”¹. Cruelty and savageness are valued as signs of independence from convention; authority has no ascendancy over them. Fierceness is true freedom, true dignity. By contrast, civilised men have learned to repress their inner wilderness and fear violence because it can trouble social stability. Instead of rejoicing like pagans at bloody sacrifices², they quarantine abattoirs, lead a boring softened life and “are reduced to eating cheese”³. Civilisation does not follow the conquest of a superiority but a loss of sovereignty.

We can see that when Bataille criticises western civilisation, he behaves more as a Modernist artist who fantasises about the savages than as a scientist. The characteristic of primitivism is precisely to believe that the primitive preserved something that the civilised man lost. Still, *Documents* went further in the criticism of civilisation than the other Modernist movements of the time. While Dada led to nihilism, and Surrealism explored the realm of imagination, Bataille, using anthropological theories, could suggest his own interpretation of the problem and offer what he regarded as a possible remedy. The article “Aesthete” enables him to strike a blow at Surrealist poets:

we have to acknowledge that this word [aesthete] is now as depreciated as words like artist or poet.⁴

He considered that they were not going far enough and that giving an artistic response to a social and cultural crisis was a ‘half-measure’ or a ‘subterfuge’.

I can say that from now on it is impossible to move back and shelter in the “treasure lands” of Poetry without being publicly called a coward.⁵

Bataille rejected the title of artist for the reason that he wanted to tackle current reality, to say “Yes” instead of confining himself to a passive revolt. Bataille indeed believed in the effectiveness of art in changing reality; it ought not to be a

¹ “Métamorphose”, *Documents*, 1929, n° 6, p. 333.

² “L’Amérique disparue”, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 1, Gallimard, 1970, p. 152-158.

³ “Abattoirs”, *Documents*, 1929, n° 6, p. 329.

⁴ *Documents*, 1930, n° 4, p. 235.

⁵ “Le jeu lugubre”, *Documents*, 1929, n° 7, p. 369.

mere compensation, it had to act here and now. According to him, the so-called Surrealistic revolution was not really subversive because it only dealt with imagination. He used ethnology as a way to guarantee art's grip on concrete reality. His remedy to the crisis that he perceived was based on anthropological theories of the sacred which I shall summarize now.

In *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912) Durkheim argues that social cohesion loosens with time as individual interest comes to prevail over that of the community; such centrifugal forces hamper society. Meanwhile individuals also have a drive that causes them to associate, so their social side needs to be stimulated. Having observed that Australian Aboriginal populations gather sometimes to engage in rituals characterised by communions of an exceptional intensity, Durkheim, who took up the sacred-profane dichotomy of ethnologists, assumed that what kept a community vivid and held together was a spiritual collective experience: the sacred. So conceived, the sacred is not to be confused with the divine; it is the part of existence which is outside of usual activities, it is the "wholly other"¹. Aboriginal festivals are marked by a fury of excitement that distinguishes these times from daily life. The exalted participants are beside themselves with frenzy, carried away by trance into another dimension. The social link is revived for individuals are temporarily released from the regulations that rule profane life. Giving a temporary break to individuals, the mystic experience of the sacred helps them to accept social constraints later on. European society would benefit from such a break but churches have lost their prestige and the Enlightenments have served to expand secularism. The western world is almost entirely profane. Still, Durkheim hoped and prayed that one day sociologists would find a solution before individualism completely atomized societies. We know that Bataille was inspired by Durkheim and Mauss, who he discovered thanks to Alfred Métraux, so I believe that *Documents* represented for him an opportunity to explore what he thought could constitute an equivalent of the sacred through the means of

¹ R. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. J. W. Harvey, New York, Oxford University Press, 1950.

writing, something which could break “our absurd silence of stammerers with an incongruous madness”¹.

Bataille also drew his inspiration from totemism theories according to which transgression defines the sacred. Several *Documents* articles deal with this, such as “Abyssinian Totemism”² by Marcel Griaule. Totemism is a system of belief in which tribes have a kinship with a totem, either a plant or an animal, or even sometimes an object, that is the emblem of the community. The relation of the members of the group with the totem are globally defined by prohibitive laws; ethnologists called them “taboos”. The profane must not try to touch, to use or sometimes to look at the totem, otherwise he risks deadly punishment. Nevertheless, during festivals, the community gathers and transgresses these laws: the totem is sacrificed and ritually eaten. Festivals commemorate the mythical time of origin, a time out of time, an eternal chaos full of energies, containing all possibilities, when nothing has any shape and everything belongs to the same fluid immanence. The sacred is the source of life but it is too intense to be bearable so the community ancestor established laws in order to protect the community. Still, sacred and profane moments alternate because the group needs to rejuvenate sometimes and recover the energies it uses to maintain itself during profane time. Bataille was fascinated by this theory according to which breaking the rules was as indispensable to life as having rules in the first place. The iconoclastic aspect of his oeuvre is a consequence of his belief in a direct connection between regeneration and transgression. He thought that western societies needed to rejuvenate and he tried to achieve this through *Documents*. Although European societies had no totem, they had taboos and he transgressed them systematically one after the other.

Sexuality is one of these taboos. Having tackled foot fetishism in “The Big Toe”³, he found illustrations for Leiris’s article “*Caput Mortuum*, the Alchemist’s Wife”⁴: portraits of women wearing sadomasochist properties, while references and

¹ “Black Birds”, *Documents*, 1929, n° 4, p. 215.

² *Documents*, 1929, n° 6, p. 316-319.

³ *Documents*, 1929, n° 6, p. 297-302.

⁴ *Documents*, 1930, n° 8, p. 461-466.

allusions to Sade permeate the whole review. Perversions, Bataille writes, are normally mistrusted by society because they undermine the civilised man's effort to affirm his dignity through a movement towards the sky, physically, and towards the elevated, morally. In reality, man can be strongly attracted to what is low, dull, and vile. If the base is taboo, then it becomes the equivalent of a sacred transgression to touch it. Desire awakens something archaic in man like a scream, something that makes him behave like a beast: "explosive impulses need to burst straight out from the mouth into vociferations"¹. Throughout *Documents*, sensuality rises to the surface with pictures of Hollywood stars more or less undressed and provocative. However, their beautiful eyes that drive men crazy can end up under the blade of a pervert lover like in *An Andalusian Dog*². Sensuality is indeed as dangerous as touching a taboo, as is shown in "Misfortune"³. Defendant Crépin is reproached with having eaten chocolate "mouth to mouth" with his lover, a striking image which leaves a feeling of uneasiness connected to tasteless black humour: such a kiss certainly did cause them to lose their own mouths! Desire carries in itself potentialities of ruining social order just as dramatically as it ruined Crépin's face. As Bataille summarizes it: "Love always have the scent of death"⁴.

This leads us to another great taboo: representations of death in its cruellest aspects are numerous in *Documents*. While ethnologists are relatively interested in sacrifices, Bataille believes they represent the essential of the sacred experience and depicts in details sanguinary Hindu rituals⁵ and refers to various sorts of mutilations causing death. He wrote "Abattoirs"⁶ and asked Eli Lotar to publish his photographs of La Villette⁷, those that respectable people would never want to see. Let us add to this the drawings that figure Aztec sacrifices⁸ and the paintings by

¹ "Bouche", *Documents*, 1930, n° 4, p. 300.

² "Œil", *Documents*, 1929, n° 4, p. 216.

³ *Documents*, 1929, n° 5, p. 275-278.

⁴ "Le langage des fleurs", 1929, n° 3, p. 163.

⁵ *Documents*, 1930, n° 6, p. 368.

⁶ *Documents*, 1929, n° 6, p. 329.

⁷ *Documents*, 1929, n° 6, p. 328, 330.

⁸ *Documents*, 1930, n° 4, p. 205, 207, 209, 211.

Antoine Caron¹ depicting men pulling out hearts from the bodies of those they stabbed. The postures of the sacrificed victims remind of the “Apocalypse of Saint-Sever”² and some of Picasso’s characters³. In these pictures, all figures are dispersed, flattened against the background, and the bodies look disfigured with the limbs sprawling disorderly apart, mouths wide open. Corpses are normally concealed because they offer the sight of decomposition, it is a sign of disaster but Bataille notes in “X Marks the Spot” that a new tendency has emerged recently:

This new habit [...] certainly represents a considerable moral transformation in the attitude of people towards violent death. It seems that the desire to watch prevails now over disgust and dread.⁴

Bataille draws a relation between the Romans’ decline and their thirst for watching death in the arena. He implies that trivializing death is a profanation: the sacred, once profaned, becomes contagious and spreads destruction everywhere. With shrunken heads and vases or masks covered with animal or even human skin, Bataille displays death in a way that opposes trivialisation. He tries to restore the taboo by stressing the horror and the ‘solemn gloom’ of death and by doing so, he restores the transgressive power of looking on it. Death puts men in the presence of the sacred, they should never watch it without a proper feeling of awe and the distinct impression of committing a sacrilege.

Furthermore, Bataille used *Documents* to flout all authorities and entities which are traditionally considered to deserve the most respect. “Human Figure”⁵ launches the attack against ancestors, “the souls of the dead” which, in many religions, are revered. Without any hesitation, Bataille multiplies degrading terms about them in a style deliberately provocative in its sarcastic exaggerations. Within *Documents*, the photographs of the bourgeois and the actors all dressed specially for a mysterious kind of ritual – wedding or theatre – look like parodies of ethnographic documents. The implicit comparison turns out to be to the detriment of those who could be our ancestors since their rituals seem absurd and grotesque.

¹ *Documents*, 1929, n° 7, p. 349, 351, 352, 353.

² *Documents*, 1929, n° 2, p. 79, 80, 82.

³ *Documents*, 1930, n° 2, p. 65-69.

⁴ *Documents*, 1930, n° 7, p. 438.

⁵ *Documents*, 1929, n° 4, p. 194-201.

Bataille derides the “daddy-philosophers”, and claims that professors should be put into prison “so that they learn what space really is”¹, through these characters, he vehemently attacks patriarchy, the source of the western social order.

Then, he challenges a more general concept of authority defined in terms of anything positioned in a high or dominant position, his paradigm of what is “elevated” opposed to what is ‘base’ serves this purpose. Bataille demonstrates in “The Big Toe”² and “Base Materialism and Gnosticism”³ that the distinction between elevated and base progressively matched up with the Platonic hierarchy between the notions of ideal/model and degraded copy; this distinction eventually became the opposition of good and evil for the Christian theology which justified the existence of hierarchy, the power of the elevated upon the base. Politically, the authority of the State or the King, head of the nation, descends directly from God. The vertical axis of transcendence is therefore for Bataille a paradigm of authority.

Actual architectural compositions do not express anything other than the ideal being of society, that which imposes order and sets prohibitions with authority. Hence great monuments are erected as dykes that oppose majestic and authoritarian logic to all suspicious elements: the Church and the State speak to the peoples and command them to be quiet in form of cathedrals and palaces.⁴

This introduces us to figurative paradigms which Bataille was fond of: straight line, verticality, rigidity, erection, which all refer to the notions of transcendence, order, power, and hierarchy. If Bataille favours the burlesque as a device – an association of the low register with a high subject – it is because in the realm of sacredness all hierarchy must be reversed: masters and slaves exchange their parts, feet become the most seductive part of the woman body, profane order is turned upside down just like in pagan carnivals (carnival is hinted at in the illustrations of Limbour’s article “Aeschylus, carnival and civilised people”⁵).

However, sexuality, death, patriarchy and ideological control are the obvious side of European taboos. If he wants to change things radically he has to lambaste

¹ *Documents*, 1930, n° 1, p. 41.

² *Documents*, 1929, n° 6, p. 297-302.

³ *Documents*, 1930, n° 1, p. 1-8.

⁴ *Documents*, 1929, n° 2, p. 117.

⁵ *Documents*, 1930, n° 2, p. 96-102.

underlying structures too. Having found that the source of western culture is also the basis of philosophy – the *logos* – he decides to transgress it too.

In “The Lugubrious Game”, Bataille inverts the Platonic myth of the chariot of Ideas. The original allegory meant that physical condition was a fall which resulted from a lack of control over instinctual impulses. In Bataille’s version, the meaning is reversed: ideas subjugate men as brutally as they force the two wild horses to go straight. The ideas, as guardians of the straight line of logic are also “architectural guards” in visual arts and prisons in political terms; the different metaphors mingle continuously but all in all refer to a notion of righteousness and abstraction as devices of subjugation:

The great constructions of human mind are, all considered, prisons... when Picasso paints, dismantling shapes results in dismantling thought, that is to say that it prevents the spontaneous intellectual move towards idea, it makes it fail.¹

Images of prisons keep recurring throughout *Documents*, not only in Bataille’s direct contributions. Categories of mind introduce discontinuity in reality, sort out, rearrange, congeal pieces of reality according to their utility in the same way as philosophers “dress everything with a mathematical redingote”². Idealism creates shapes cut off from reality and rejects the scraps like

those whom life treated like we usually treat a piece of material (when we cut off a pair of trousers from it, for instance)³

Primitives, perverts, lunatics and mystics are like Sade, the scraps, the “excreta” of culture, they are “outlaws” because they cannot fit any category. They do not belong to the profane world, they are sacred, both soiled and holy because they are both beyond and below what can be conceived. If Bataille praises them so much throughout *Documents*, in the same way that he will theorize later a “scatology”, a “science of the excreta”, it is because they represent a challenge for systemic thought. The sacred man is regarded as the remedy to western sclerosis because he is ‘impossible’, he represents a reality which cannot be reduced into concepts. They were thrown out from Plato’s *polis*, now only they can rejuvenate the *polis* that is suffocating within its walls. Europe suffers from an overdevelopment of the

¹ "Le jeu lugubre", *Documents*, 1929, n° 7, p. 370.

² "Informe", *Documents*, 1929, n° 7, p. 382.

³ "Lieux de pèlerinage, Hollywood", *Documents*, 1929, n° 5, p. 280.

intellect and it is decaying from it; the disproportionate skull of the civilised man, the outcome of his standing-up position¹, mirrors it. Mind replaced the mouth, it absorbs everything; Bataille denounces the “intellectual voracity” of European philosophy, another sort of imperialism. Hegel’s idealism is a monism consisting of subsuming the other to the same through dialectical operation². It builds gradually a universe from which the other is banned. The separation between the profane (the idea) and the sacred (reality) has disappeared. Bataille, however, believes that a “wholly other” exists that cannot be reduced to the system of absolute knowledge. Reality is not reducible to reason and the idea of human nature is an imposture. Reality is composed of unique beings and every single individual is an anomaly in comparison with the idea of man³. There is a part of reality that reason is unable to take into account, either because it is improbable or because it is absurd. “Space can become a fish that eats another one”⁴ means that reality is so contingent – sometimes so cruel – that it will always defy the best constructions of mind. This irreducible part, accursed because philosophy and civilisation reject it, it is the sacred, the intrinsically ambivalent reality. Consequently, if Bataille wants to reach it, if he wants to exhort men to free themselves from idealism authority and recover their sovereignty, he will have to transgress all kinds of limits at a moral level, to contradict all forms of identity at a philosophical level, and to dismantle all kinds of shapes with regards to visual arts.

To recapitulate, Bataille believes that order, logic and geometric shapes are the root of western cultural values. Bataille’s contributions to *Documents* appear to me as an attempt to release western thought from systemic philosophy, the dictatorship of the *logos*. The resurrection of the sacred, as we saw, is realized through, on the one hand, a transgression of social taboos and, on the other hand, a denouncement of systemic philosophy’s imposture. It raises now another issue: how can such an attempt be communicated? The use of philosophical language in

¹ "Bouche", *Documents*, 1930, n° 4, p. 300.

² "Figure humaine", *Documents*, 1929, n° 4, p. 196.

³ "Les écarts de la nature", *Documents*, 1930, n° 2, p. 79-83.

⁴ "Espace", *Documents*, 1930, n° 1, p. 41.

order to criticize philosophy would amount to a contradiction. Bataille has only one solution, he has to show the undermining of shapes in practice. Art can communicate what language cannot, he has to create a style which will resurrect the sacred without betraying it. Let us consider the main devices he uses for this purpose.

Bataille often has recourse to images of tears, destructions and openings of walls, screens or any other kinds of barriers in order to suggest the sacrifice of taboos. He celebrates Bastille day, calls for a day when all walls collapse¹ and illustrates this with a picture². Other sorts of openings punctuate the pages of *Documents*, such as the cover Bataille chose to illustrate “The *Pieds Nisckelés*”³: the three heroes suddenly erupt from behind a page of the comic like a circus lion piercing a paper screen. This *mise en abyme* gives the impression that they are getting out of the book: comic panels are transgressed. Elsewhere, images of sacrifices, mutilations and slaughters are other ways of tearing the body figure. We must add to these: various mutilations, skinned bodies, skins without bodies, severed limbs and photographs’ framing also contributes to cut off hands, legs, toes, mouths, eyes...⁴ Modern painting also rips faces and bodies, Bataille remarks:

Dali’s razor blades carve directly onto our faces horrible grimaces which can make us vomit, like drunkards, this servile nobleness, this stupid idealism that keeps us under the spell of some comical prison guard.⁵

Screams and laughs echo with rents. Laughter has a considerable power to ruin social stability and seriousness⁶, it brings the shock which society needs in order to wake up. Discordant sounds tear harmony, in the same way as sacred festivals tear the continuity of profane activities and the intrinsic incongruity of reality tears idealism. Similarly, Sade’s scream terrifies reasonable people for it has the sound of insanity, this is why it can almost set off revolutions⁷. Above all,

¹ "Espace", *Documents*, 1930, n° 1, p. 41.

² *Documents*, 1930, n° 1, p. 42.

³ *Documents*, 1930, n° 4, p. 214.

⁴ Georges Didi-Huberman devoted a book to these devices : *La ressemblance informe ou le gai savoir visuel selon Georges Bataille*, Macula, 1995.

⁵ "Le jeu lugubre", *Documents*, 1929, n° 7, p. 370.

⁶ "Les Pieds Nickelés", *Documents*, 1930, n° 4, p. 214-216.

⁷ "Le jeu lugubre", *Documents*, 1929, n° 7, p. 370.

Bataille is fond of imagining eye injuries. The eye is not only the organ of conscience and a symbol of social control, but also the highest notion in philosophy when coupled with the image of the sun; it is the organ of knowledge. Through it, Bataille wants to tear conscience, and rip intelligence. Looking straight at the sun is a symptom of insanity because rational knowledge is always indirect, as the allegory of the cave suggests. Rationalists use symbolic mediums such as language, and never look straight at the sun – the real. Staring at it symbolizes the way mystics approach reality, they experience an immediate knowledge of the whole, without passing through what Bataille terms the “game of transpositions”¹. Bataille’s sun is ambivalent, the experience of the sacred involves both the brightest light and the darkest orifice².

The striking effect of violence and destruction that emanates from his style can be interpreted as an attempt to transpose into images the forces which are freed with an exceptional intensity during sacred periods. Destruction and chaos characterize the sacred; although these periods are dangerous, they are also moments of great creativity for the sacred is the source of life and change too. In *Documents*, alteration is clearly bound up with destruction. Even if self-mutilation is a self-sacrifice – it arises from a desire to “alter” oneself³, it is a questioning of one’s integrity and an opening of the subject to the other –, destruction is not the opposite of creation. In the process of art

the destroyed object (the paper or the wall) is destroyed to such an extent that it is transformed into a new object... Art... exists through successive destructions. So as long as it releases libidinous instincts, these instincts are sadistic.⁴

The note which goes with this extract is also significant:

The word alteration has two advantages; firstly it refers to a partial decomposition similar to that of corpses, and secondly to a state of perfect heterogeneity corresponding to what protestant professor Otto calls the wholly other, that is to say the sacred...

¹ "L'esprit moderne et le jeu des transpositions", *Documents*, 1930, n° 8, p. 489-492.

² "L'anus solaire", *Œuvres Complètes*, vol. 1, Gallimard, Paris, 1970, p. 79-86.

³ "La mutilation sacrificielle et l'oreille coupée de Van Gogh", *Documents*, 1930, n° 8, p. 457.

⁴ *Documents*, 1930, n° 7, p. 396.

Violence cannot be avoided, passing from a profane state to a sacred state cannot go without any damage. Bataille draws an analogy with history and considers revolutions as sacred moments. Several years later, in 1936, Bataille would head the first text of *Acéphale* with a quotation from Sade:

An old and corrupted nation which will bravely free itself from the yoke of its monarchist government in order to become a Republic will only be able to maintain itself with a lot of crimes; because it is already criminal and if it wanted to pass from crime to virtue, that is to say from violence to peace, it would fall into an inertia which would certainly result in decay.¹

Violence is vital because “violent movements manage to free from a deep ennui”². This is applicable to language. Time erodes words, they become like the “shoe of the dead woman”³ – useless. Violence must be introduced into language in order to regenerate it. Since the sacred cannot be expressed with language as discursive thought would then take it over, the ideal dictionary would give the “*besogne*” of words⁴ instead of their meaning. The word *besogne* implies both the idea of hard work and sexual intercourse: words have to rub themselves against each other, almost like in a fight, in order to give birth to new meanings. Phrases such as “bright sacrilege” or “peaceful slaughter” create a friction between words which should remain separate according to logic. Requiring imagination and intuition instead of reason, antitheses avoid a discursive takeover by referring to what is between and beyond words – the sacred. Such a device corresponds to a kind of sacrifice of language; words are altered by the context in which they are put and opened to heterogeneity. Pictures are submitted to a comparable device; clashes of images prevail over what they display individually. Butcheries and comic pictures are brought together with masterpieces of medieval religious jewellery and zoomorphic drums; such discrepancies offend common sense and academic classification. As we saw previously, music-hall dancers appear under a very different light when placed next to children enrolled in an army⁵. Reality is also a juxtaposition of clashing elements. Even if Bataille has not yet started to develop

¹ "La conjuration sacrée", *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 1, Gallimard, Paris, 1970, p. 442.

² "Le jeu lugubre", *Documents*, 1929, n° 7, p. 369.

³ "Esthète", *Documents*, 1930, n° 4, p. 235.

⁴ "Informe", *Documents*, 1929, n° 7, p. 382.

⁵ *Documents*, 1929, n° 4, p. 219.

the notion of “heterogeneity” as another way to term the sacred (the impossible, improbable, unpredictable reality), it is obvious in *Documents* that he is already trying to reach it through violent antitheses.

Bataille also deliberately resorts to the horrible, the disgusting and the obscene in order to fight the dictatorship of the *logos*. The article “shapeless”¹ implies that Europe’s deepest phobias arise from the disappearance of boundaries. We feel a spontaneous and almost uncontrollable disgust when facing the image of a corpse covered with insects that feed and reproduce upon it. No distinctions exist between what is dead and what is alive, between plurality and singularity, “being is put into question”². The mixed and the ambiguous embody in our imagination the notions of impurity. The common physical reactions of stepping back, screaming or even vomiting reveal the desire to separate ourselves from impurity, which is perceived as a threaten; our fear of being contaminated by it is proportionate to our daily efforts to fight against chaos. The article “Dust”³ demonstrates that tidiness and cleanliness are related to the human obsession for logic. Stating that the universe is “something like a spittle”⁴, dismisses all efforts by assuming that reality is absurd. Bataille intends to resurrect the sacred and, to do so, he has to reduce the discrepancy between art, representations and shapeless immanent reality. The commonly shared terror of being eaten appears at the sight of Boiffard’s close-ups. A mouth comes to the viewer as if to swallow him⁵. The sight of internal organs causes anxiety; their shapelessness defy the representation of a whole body delimited by its skin, an intellectually appeasing idea. Bataille deliberately multiplies the most troubling images in order to upset reassuring accepted ideas. Another reason why eye contact arouses such powerful phobia may be that it abolishes distance between what is seen and what sees. The dread of eye contact like the dread of being eaten finds a common point in the refusal to see the separated subject annihilated. F. Adama Van Scheltema in “The Sacred Feminine

¹ “Informe”, *Documents*, 1929, n° 7, p. 382.

² *L’Erotisme, Œuvres Complètes*, vol. 10, Gallimard, Paris, 1987.

³ *Documents*, 1929, n° 5, p. 278.

⁴ “Informe”, *Documents*, 1929, n° 7, p. 382.

⁵ “Bouche”, *Documents*, 1930, n° 4, p. 300.

Centre”¹ sheds a light on the fact that feminine womb is an almost universal symbol of the sacred. It is interesting to parallel this with *Story of the Eye* (1928), where the female sex constitutes the foresight of all transgressions. We can infer from all of this that the sacred causes strongly troubling emotions because it corresponds to a return to the primordial immanence out of which the subject was created thanks to an inaugural castration. In the last instance, the use of horrible and obscene aesthetics enables Bataille to question the subject.

A common prejudice about Bataille consists of stating that his aesthetics is only base, obscene and nihilistically destructive. Nonetheless, Bataille acknowledges the ambivalence of the sacred and the necessity of boundaries, even if he transgresses them. Ethnologists of the time conceived the sacred as awesome and attractive, seductive and appalling. *Sacer* in Latin meant “which is both soiled and holy”, the left being accursed and the right blessed. Still, prohibition makes the sacred precious and therefore paradoxically attractive. “Taboos are made in order to be transgressed”, Mauss said. According to Bataille, prohibition even creates desire by pointing at the object; removing it from the world of banality gives it a particular aura. This connection between desire and sacred engenders Bataille’s particular aesthetic:

When you really love something, you love it shamefully and I challenge any aesthete to love a painting in the same way that a fetishist loves a shoe.²

“The Big Toe”³ develops the theory of “base seduction”; Bataille’s aesthetics demonstrates an attempt to integrate squalor into aesthetic. It has to repel the viewer but putting the being into question is also supposed to entail an experience of paradoxical enjoyment. Cannibals or Kali’s worshippers who lick the blood that was shed during sacrifices awake Europeans’ disgust. However, Bataille implies that so-called “civilised” people can also experience equivalent excitements, when they when they give way to their fascination for certain monstrosities: circus

¹ *Documents*, 1930, n° 7, p. 377-382.

² "L’esprit moderne et le jeu des transpositions", *Documents*, 1930, n° 8, p. 490-491.

³ *Documents*, 1929, n° 6, p. 297-302.

freaks¹ or crime stories², for example. Fetishists are therefore not so eccentric when they are seduced by the foot of a beautiful woman. Her foot lowers her, yet she would not be attractive if she was not beautiful too. Seduction originates in “a back-and-forth movement from ordure to ideal and back to ordure”. Ambiguity, coexistence of opposites which does not convert into Hegelian synthesis, is at the root of Bataille’s conception of art and is common to all the artists he celebrates: Ingres³ suggested that he could not reach beauty without passing through ugliness. Bataille hates nothing more than lack of ambiguity:

irremediable ugliness is as detestable as certain beauties: beauty which does not conceal anything, which does not hide lost shamelessness, which never contradicts itself and remains eternally standing to attention like a coward.⁴

Bataille’s sense of beauty includes its contrary: “extreme seduction borders probably on horror”⁵. Ambiguous beauty opposes the perfect features of harmony, it is a cut-throat blow into an eye. The same applies to Bataille’s writing style: vulgar words and obscene images erupt in finely crafted sentences, wrote in the direct tradition of the purest classicism. The paradigm of fetishists’ desire also means that art actually has to tug straight at our heartstrings. In Bataille’s work the uncanny mingles with the familiar in order to upset the reader’s sensations. The impression produced is what Bataille refers to constantly in his oeuvre – anxiety. He writes about his own and he resorts to the bizarre in order to make his audience anxious too; such effect plays a part in his strategy of recreating the sacred in the sense that anxiety is a mixture of attraction and repulsion. Inspired by the ambivalent sacred, Bataille produced an aesthetics in which the other of ideal beauty has to emerge from it in order to respect reality’s cacophonous real nature.

Bataille agrees with the ethnologists that Europeans’ ethnocentrism prevents them from understanding other societies’ art but he agrees with the Surrealists when he adds that it prevents Europeans from questioning their own culture.

¹ "Les écarts de la nature", *Documents*, 1930, n° 2, p. 79-83.

² "Œil", *Documents*, 1929, n° 4, p. 216.

³ "Dessins inédits d’Ingres", *Documents*, 1929, n° 6, p. 310-311.

⁴ "Le jeu lugubre", *Documents*, 1929, n° 7, p. 369.

⁵ "Œil", *Documents*, 1929, n° 4, p. 216.

Although he uses the concepts of scientific theories he does so without a scientific purpose, his goal is essentially that of a moralist. Rationality appears to him as being the prerogative of the western civilisation so he draws the conclusion that European ethnocentrism and systemic philosophy are one and the same thing. Nevertheless, as a Modernist, he distinguishes himself in praising new ways of exploring reality based on the theories of the sacred. His philosophy is paradoxical because it is non-conceptual; in the main, it is a practice which can only be communicated through the sacrifice of taboos, which are in the context of western civilisation: laws, conceptual language and academic art. He tries to point at reality, which is outlaw. Bataille's aesthetic tries to communicate in European terms an equivalent of the ambivalent sacred. He intends to exhort men to sacrifice stable ideas and systems. Systemic philosophy is the greatest pride of the human mind but it results from an anthropocentric view. Bataille opposes Hegel and argues that reality is fundamentally irrational; he also reveals the moral and political implications of imperialistic rationalism. He asserts that the outcasts of society, the pariahs, the fetishists, the lunatics and the criminals belong to the same world as the good, upright, and proper. Reality conjugates opposites but idealism denies this fact and society quarantines a whole part of humanity. However when the pariahs will awake and rebel, destruction, despair and chaos will follow. Bataille's anarchist aesthetics is an attempt to rehabilitate the base in order to reconcile it with the elevated before it is too late. His celebration of sacrifice in art is a way to warn philosophers. It is time for western civilisation to face things as they are and not as they should be, even if it has to sacrifice its peace in order to become clear-headed. Bataille's effort to think the unthinkable, to include the accursed share, the left sacred, into philosophy will lead him several years later to formulate his "science of the wholly other": heterology.