

“This is Not an Exit”: The Sacred in the Age of Consumer Capitalism

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In this paper, I will apply Bataille’s theory of the general economy to the contemporary era of consumer capitalism. I want to argue that consumer capitalism is characterized by what could be termed a “sacredless” excess. As a case study exemplary of this condition, I will use Bret Easton Ellis’ novel *American Psycho*, which couples both notions of exuberance and alienation within a contemporary capitalist context. To begin with, I will briefly sketch out Bataille’s economic theory and then go on to apply it to some select aspects of contemporary consumer society.

The Relationship Between Surplus and the Sacred in *The Accursed Share*

The Accursed Share Volume One, sets itself up in opposition to the standard, or “restricted” view of economics which can be summed up as the utilization of

limited resources in order to maximize satisfaction of human material wants¹. In Bataille's conceptualization of the economy, rather than focusing solely on resources and utility, his lens encapsulates *the play of living matter in general*. From this economic point of view, there is not a lack but rather an overwhelming abundance of energy, most of which is destined to be wasted. Bataille claims:

I insist on the fact that there is generally no growth but only a luxurious squandering of energy in every form! The history of life on earth is mainly the effect of a wild exuberance; the dominant event is the development of luxury, the production of increasingly burdensome forms of life.²

For Bataille, the history of human societies constitutes either an open embrace of this general principle of excess, or an attempt to deny it through a rigorous pursuit of the restricted economy. He is admirable of what he terms "the archaic era" in which places such as Medieval Europe, feudal Tibet, Northwest America and Meso-America openly embraced notions of expenditure. Two frequently cited examples from Bataille's book are Aztec human sacrifice and American Indian potlatches. In the former, the Aztecs would sacrifice 20,000 people a year to the gods, while in the latter, rival chiefs would destroy their own goods in front of each other as a way to achieve rank in a form of one up-man-ship "gift-exchange". Additionally, Bataille argued that eroticism – which is sexual behavior in a repressed environment or where it is independent of reproduction as an end – was also a powerful embrace of the general economy. He argued that the force of eroticism was most potent in the European Middle ages, because religious taboos on sexuality made its outpouring all the more potent. What Foucault links to the Christian world of fallen bodies and of sin³, eroticism included phenomena such as orgies of the Witches Sabbath, belief in the devil, carnivals and flagellation.

¹ C. McConnell, *Economics: Principles, Problems and Policies*, New York, McGraw-Hill, 1987, p. 3.

² « J'insiste sur le fait qu'il n'y a pas généralement de croissance, mais seulement sous toutes les formes une luxueuse dilapidation d'énergie ! L'histoire de la vie sur la terre est principalement l'effet d'une folle exubérance : l'événement dominant est le développement du luxe, la production de formes de vie de plus en plus onéreuses. » G. Bataille, *OC VII*, p. 40-41 (the author's translation).

³ M. Foucault, "A Preface to Transgression" in *Bataille: A Critical Reader*, éd. by F. Botting and S. Wilson, London, Blackwell, 1998, p. 24.

Throughout his work, it is very clear that all forms of useless expenditure are explicitly linked to the sacred – that is to say an ecstatic, rapturous otherness which transcends ordinary, profane human life. His examples of public spectacles which included gift giving, wars of passion and human sacrifice, are embraced as elements above and beyond daily reality. In its social structure, those who engage in sacred exuberance are always a minority of the population, comprising of kings, pharaohs, witch doctors, madmen and poets (but also the wretchedly poor). This segment of the population is what Bataille terms “heterogeneous”. The sense of “otherness” ascribed to heterogeneity exists in opposition to the majority of the population who are engaged in the labor and utility of the restricted economy. This is the world of homogeneity.

For Bataille, the end of the archaic era began in the 1500s, when European society, through the rise of protestantism, moved increasingly towards an economy of restriction. Drawing on Weber, he argues that capital accumulation, which entailed the denunciation of luxury and the promotion of resourcefulness, thrift and sobriety, destroyed the archaic world of exuberance. With the rise of industrial capitalism, things went from bad to worse: surplus, which in the past was sacredly wasted, was now furiously re-invested back into production, so as to produce more surplus which could be re-invested in more production, *ad infinitum*. This new obsessive work ethic also destroyed the sacred realm of eroticism. Not only did more attention to work take away energy devoted to carnal pursuits – but additionally, sex now becomes an instrument of scientific measure, reduced to the homogeneous world of what Bataille termed “things”.

Consumer Capitalism

At the time of his death in 1962 Bataille had a bleak vision of the modern world: capitalism was reinvesting all surplus back into labor, while communism was trying to eradicate sovereign difference altogether. The modern world seemed bent on destroying all notions of the sacred. And yet it was around the time of

Bataille's death that a new form of capitalism was arising – consumer capitalism, in which decadence, exuberance, waste, violence and sexuality were all emerging out of the very system which he so despised.

A number of social critics point towards a kind of Batailian excess re-emerging in contemporary consumer society. For example, Daniel Bell argued that the Protestant ethic had been eradicated by a society fixated on spending and material possessions¹. This turnaround undermines the traditional value of thrift, frugality and self control, whilst simultaneously making items that were once considered a “luxury” now available to a much broader section of the population. Jean-Joseph Goux, drawing on Gilder's *Wealth and Poverty*², claims that Bataillan notions of waste and chance have re-merged through the vehicle of the stock market. Because a return on what is invested cannot be determined, the issue of *chance* becomes central to capitalism. The stock trader then, risking catastrophic loss, becomes a heroic, almost sacred figure – an image which the media has played up in films such as *Wall Street* (1987) and books such as *The money Culture* (1992). Baudrillard elaborates on this when talks of the “hero of consumption”, who has taken over from the earlier “hero of production.” These great wastrels of contemporary capitalism, in a similar vein to the American Indian Potlatch, attempt to outdo each other through competitive expenditure. He claims:

It is always the excessiveness of their lives, the potential for outrageous expenditure that is exalted. Their superhuman quality is a whiff of potlatch that attaches to them [...] they fulfil this function by proxy for the whole social body, like the kings heroes, priests or great parvenus of bygone ages.³

Bataillan eroticism also appears to have made a comeback since the 1960s through an open celebration of violence and sexuality based on a philosophy of radically rejecting social norms. Sexual liberation movements, popular novels promoting the fusion of sex and bliss, such as Alex Comfort's *The Joy of Sex* (1979) or Lisa Alther's *Kinflicks* (1976), and the rise of the billion dollar pornography industry all pointed towards an embrace of the general economy.

¹ D. Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, London, Basic Books, 1978.

² G. Gilder, *Wealth and Poverty*, New York, Basic Books, 1981.

³ J. Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society*, London, SAGE, 1998, p. 46.

Within the more “serious”, highbrow art genres, practitioners seemed to be increasingly fascinated by anything that mainstream society considered sexual and moral atrocity. A concern with violence and cruelty, and a preoccupation with the sexually perverse is to be seen, for example, in the visual art of the Viennese “actionist” Herman Nitsch, and in the novels of authors such as William Burroughs.

But is Capitalist Excess Heterogeneous?

The picture of consumer capitalism I have painted so far suggests a parallel re-emergence of Bataillan excess. However, it will be recalled that for Bataille, excess was always reserved for a minority, heterogeneous portion of the population, and it is this marginalization which gives exuberance its sense of the sacred. Yet in the context of consumer capitalism, excess, in both its economic and erotic forms, seems no longer reserved for a marginalized few, but rather available to a much wider spectrum of the population. In this sense, is it at all possible for a society which is homogeneously excessive to maintain a sense of the sacred? If we return to the above theories which suggest that exuberance has made a come back, it is significant that most of these authors also note that the loss of the sacred is the price to be paid for such wide spread luxury. For example, with regards Gilder’s notion of the heroic stock trader, Goux goes on to claim that,

It is precisely at the moment when the entrepreneur must think himself into the model of the most advanced artistic genius, at the moment when the avant-garde strategy of innovation at any price becomes the paradigm of dominant economic practice, that the artistic avant-garde necessarily loses its difference, its marginality, its deviance-value. The aesthetic avant-gardes have won. That is what paralyses them so seriously.¹

The entrepreneur is therefore robbed of their deviance value because a greater number of people in society have access to what was once considered “luxurious” and “excessive”. Baudrillard agrees when he argues that the sheer

¹ J.-J. Goux, "General Economics and Postmodern Capitalism", *Yale French Studies*, 1996, no. 78, p. 218.

number of participants engaged in the game of rank and expenditure, perpetually divides the contrasts between one act of expenditure and another. He claims:

The difference is that in our current system this spectacular squandering no longer has the crucial symbolic and collective signification it could assume in primitive feasting and Potlatch. This prestigious consumption has been 'personalized' and mass-mediatized.¹

Historically, Goux attributes this loss of the sacred to the rise of "democratic" principles, which have abolished absolutely centralized power. In archaic societies, expenditure lay in the hands of a privileged few, who used such exuberance to dazzle the miserable masses. It was this heterogeneous/homogeneous divide which was able to evoke the aura of bliss and rapture which has now been lost precisely because such a divide no longer exists.

In a similar vein, sexuality in the postmodern era has fallen prey to the same process. Unlike Bataille's eroticism, in which the sacred lay in sexualities ability to transgress prohibitions, contemporary sexuality, Heath claims,

has been dragged into the public domain, where, the abundance of representations – images, discourses, ways of picturing and describing sex now makes it "the definition of a new mode of conformity."²

Eroticism, now commodified exhaustively through representation, manifests itself in an array of media (advertising, TV, horror films, the internet), of which pornography is arguably its most exemplary form. As Seltzer argues, pornography, by definition, makes private desire publicly visible³. This is the exact opposite of eroticism which, Bataille claims, is confined to the darkness and made divine through secrecy and prohibition. Pornography thus destroys this "darkness" and desecrates the divisions between that which is sacred and that which is profane. Its lack of sacredness is summed up in Sontag's observation that pornography "disdains fully formed persons and reports only on the motiveless tireless transactions of depersonalized organs"⁴. The mediatization of sexuality– of which

¹ J. Baudrillard, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

² S. Heath, *The Sexual Fix*, London, Macmillan Press, 1984, p. 3.

³ M. Seltzer, *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America's Wound Culture*, London, Routledge, 1998, p. 90.

⁴ S. Sontag, "The Pornographic Imagination", in G. Bataille, *Story of the Eye*, London, Penguin, 1982, p. 89.

pornography is only one manifestation – signifies its increasingly public, desacralized nature.

American Psycho

The above portrayal of a world which is excessive but clearly lacking in sacred qualities is captured in novels such as Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*, first published in 1991. The story tells of a 1980s Wall Street psychopath golden boy who, through the excesses of consumerism and sexual violence, attempts to attain a sense of the sacred. However, the consumer-crazed world in which Patrick Bateman lives makes it impossible to set himself apart from the rest of society through useless expenditure. In this sense, the book's dead-pan style, which appears at odds with the luxurious and often excessively gruesome content, captures the condition of Bataille's general economy in the age of consumer capitalism.

A chief characteristic of the novel is the characters' exuberant displays of wealth in an attempt to outdo each other through rank. However, in the vein of Baudrillard, because all the characters have access to similar amounts of surplus, their displays of wealth do not set them apart, but rather make them indistinguishable from each other. For instance, the majority of characters wear expensive designer clothing described in minute detail, evident in the following example. Scott Montgomery wears

a double breasted navy blue blazer with mock-tortoiseshell buttons, a prewashed wrinkled-cotton striped dress shirt with red accent stitching, a red white and blue fireworks print silk tie by Hugo Boss and plum washed wool-trousers with a quadruple-pleated front and slashed pockets by Lazlo.¹

The intense focus on luxurious details of characters' dress, which repeat themselves *ad nauseum* throughout the text, serves to obliterate rather than to define characters in the traditional sense. It becomes increasingly difficult for the narrator to distinguish his friends from each other, often confusing their names. This theme, in which expenditure evokes a sense of alienation rather than intimacy,

¹ *American Psycho*, New York, Vintage Books, 2000, p. 42.

is pervasive at every level of consumption in the novel. In one scene, Patrick and his friends show off their business cards to each other in what seems like a mock-potlatch ceremony. The cards, which are all essentially white in color, are described as “eggshell”, “off white”, “pale nimbus white” and “bone”. The “pale nimbus white” card, with its “subtle off-white coloring and its tasteful thickness”¹, dazzles the audience to which it is presented, although for the reader, the cards all seem pretty much the same. This comical scene trivializes the notion that rank can be attained through expenditure. A far cry from the spectacle of American Indian potlatches, Patrick’s consumer-obsessed world in which excess is normalized, prohibits the world of the sacred.

The protagonist quickly moves from conspicuous consumption to sexual violence in order to break away from the profane world of things. While at first, this shift seems to plunge him into the world of the sacred, highlighted by the few rapturous moments in the text, his horrific deeds soon become as dull and repetitive as his other consumer habits. In this sense, the eroticism in *American Psycho* is the exact antithesis of that seen in the novels of Bataille’s hero, the Marquis de Sade. Whereas Sade’s characters are able to sustain bliss throughout 1000-page novels, Bateman’s libertine adventures are marked by a distinct lack of rapture. This is conveyed through a literary style very similar to hard-core pornography. For instance, Patrick is about to have sex with, and then murder, two women. He describes the scene as “Silence. Arctic, frigid, the light burning over us in the apartment is cold and electric [...] Sex happens – a hard-core montage”². The inability for sexual acts to be transgressive is additionally made manifest through the emphasis on brightly lit rooms. In virtually every sex scene, halogen lamps burn – nothing is confined to shadow, all is visible, suggesting a world in which desire becomes public and in which everything is permitted.

The inability to attain the sacred through sex repeats itself in the realm of murder. During the murder of a young woman, he claims: “ I can already tell it’s

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

² *Ibid.*, p. 288.

going to be a characteristically useless, senseless death, but then I'm used to the horror."¹ Nearing the end of the novel, consumer products, body parts and sex all merge on a single textual plane and are treated with equal weight. For example, Patrick says

I'm wearing a Joseph Abboud suit, a tie by Paul Stuart, shoes by J. Crew, a vest by someone Italian and I'm kneeling on the floor beside a corpse, eating the girl's brain²

and further:

Things are lying in the corner of my bedroom: a pair of girl's shoes from Edward Susan Bennis Allen, a hand with a thumb and a fore-finger missing, the new issue of *Vanity Fair*.³

American Psycho can be read as a critique of consumptive and erotic practices in the age of late capitalism. Ironically, it is this world in which the consumer is God, in which choice offers freedom from conformity, that the individual is placed firmly within the realm of homogeneity which they so desperately wish to escape. The lack of bliss, which characterizes this homogenous world, is reflected in Patrick's assessment of himself when he claims:

It is hard for me to make sense on any given level. Myself is fabricated, an aberration. I am a noncontingent human being. My personality is sketchy (*Ibid.*, 377) [...] Reflection is useless, the world is senseless. [...] Surface, surface, surface was all that anyone found meaning in. (375)

In the last lines of the novel, our protagonist reads a sign above a door which claims "THIS IS NOT AN EXIT"⁴. The phrase seems to sum up both the theme of the novel as well as Bataille's theory of exuberance in a postmodern economy – namely, that excess in a world in which excess is the norm, no longer guarantees passage from the world of homogeneity to the world of the sacred.

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 329.

² *Ibid.*, p. 328.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 345.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 399.