

# **DROMOLOGIES:**

***Paul Virilio:***

***Speed, Cinema, and the End of the  
Political State***

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# **PORNOLOGIES:**

***Dworkin, Bataille, Foucault:***

***Sex/Violence/Power/Knowledge***

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***Two Essays by***

***SHAWN P. WILBUR***

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# Dromologies:

*Paul Virilio:*

## *Speed, Cinema, and the End of the Political State*

The revolution came, and we were sleeping. Or perhaps we just blinked, seized suddenly (as we are from time to time) by a sort of *petit mal*. Whatever the cause of our lapse, it seems that the world has changed—profoundly, but also almost imperceptibly. This, at least, is the story told by various threads of those philosophies we group together (however uncomfortably) under the signs *postmodernism* and *poststructuralism*. Reading the work of Jean Baudrillard, Jacques Derrida, Arthur Kroker, Jean-Francois Lyotard or Paul Virilio, one often has the sense of having missed something terribly important—some quiet apocalypse which we may sense, but never quite recall. The “when it all changed” (to borrow a phrase from science fiction writers Joanna Russ and William Gibson) remains elusive.

Great quantities of ink have been spilled in the last decade or so over the merits of the various *post-\** philosophies. Derrida and Baudrillard have attracted particular attention, with theories of the “death of the author,” the textuality of the world, and the “disappearance of the real” into “hyperreality.” Lyotard’s “driftworks” and “peregrinations” have drawn both praise and accusations of lack of rigor, and Kroker’s “panic” mix of Baudrillard and McLuhan has reopened some of the old debates about the lines between academics, the “popular,” and the avant garde.

Scholars who find promise in postmodern theory most often celebrate it as an intellectual space (if not an innocent or completely safe one) for considering “otherness,” both in ourselves and at the margins of our cultures. There is a strong sense among many of these scholars that it is at the level of language (or at least of ideas and ideologies) that cultural battles are won and lost. This makes deconstructionist readings of “social texts” seem a powerful political tool, and the Baudrillardian empire of simulacra a frightening dystopia. Of course, this emphasis on the workings of language has lead critics—rationalists and materials, from both right and left—to criticize the lack

of “real world” engagement, or hope for meaningful political action, that they see as a part of postmodernist philosophy.

It may be that these two camps are faced with a conceptual gap that is nearly unbridgeable. There are basic assumptions about what is “political” or “material” which separate them. However, there is also a field of polemics, often badly misinformed, which may be the more serious boundary between the two. In order for the “theory for theory’s sake” argument against (particularly the French) postmodernists to stand, certain facts have to be obscured or ignored, or certain ironies left unexamined. We might easily imagine (or perhaps merely recall) the English professor who will grant irony to a Swiftian “modest proposal,” but insists that Baudrillard is speaking quite literally. But we also need to remind ourselves of the real political activism of postmodern philosophers like Jean-François Lyotard—who was involved with the group *Socialisme ou Barbarisme* for some time before he became the primary purveyor of postmodernism, at least in the minds of Americans.

There is an odd story of selective publishing and translation which has had a rather unfortunate effect on the image of French postmodernists in America. The first translations of Lyotard’s early political writings have only appeared this year, almost ten years after the translation of *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. And, significantly for the reputation of postmodernism in this country, *The Postmodern Condition* was released in this country with a somewhat dismissive introduction by quasi-postmodernist Fredric Jameson—whose postmodernism is frequently indistinguishable from a sort of super-modernism. (It seems clear that, in Jameson’s view, there is little or nothing in postmodernism which is not suggested in a “proper” reading of Hegel and Sartre.) Lyotard’s most challenging work remains only intermittently in print, or has only recently been translated. Baudrillard’s early, more materialist, analyses—which ground all of his later work—are either untranslated or available only from small presses. A translation this year of his *Symbolic Exchange and Death* is a significant, but still partial, answer to this problem. The political writings of the late Felix Guattari are no longer in print—with the exception of *Communists Like Us*, a volume co-authored with Italian Workers’ Autonomy theorist Antonio Negri (himself a victim of rather

spectacular neglect by American leftists)—and little notice has been taken of the political activities of his frequent co-writer Gilles Deleuze. Negri's work is beginning to appear in American editions, but without fanfare and without much attention being drawn to his "postmodern" connections. Of course, the most puzzling of the untranslated works remains Baudrillard's *The Gulf War Did Not Happen*, which has been rather thoroughly criticized by American academics, but which has not yet been translated. Of course, the absence of the work has not prevented a great deal of "hyper-argument" about its merits, and those of its author. It is an ironic situation which, one suspects, would not dismay Baudrillard too much, as it seems to verify his sense that the real—even "real texts," it seems—are prone to disappearance into the realm of the symbolic. In that realm, Baudrillard's "scandalous" text can serve as an exemplar of "postmodernism" for those who wish to dismiss it without engaging its finer points, most often in the defense of "humanisms," "modernisms" or "Marxism's" now largely emptied of their critical content.

This sort of straw-man treatment of the "politics of postmodernism" is simply not sufficient, and points to something like a basic unwillingness to engage with potentially disturbing theoretical models—models which seem to have been judged "threatening" or "apolitical" strictly a priori. Strangely absent from much of this debate are challenges to its basic terms, or examples which cross the theoretical gap. This is particularly strange, since those examples do exist, even in translation. The work of Paul Virilio is one example of theoretical work which seems to engage more directly with "real world," material concerns, but also maintains much of the content and feel of what we generally think of as "postmodernism." Virilio has written prolifically, on a wide range of subjects, but throughout his work there are key threads which tend to unite it (although this unity may give us some problems) in a broad, fairly coherent reading of contemporary culture which focuses on the political state—or, more precisely, on its demise. But Virilio's "evil demon" is not language or the image. Instead, it is speed, and specifically speed as it is an element of warfare, and militarism in general.

There has been no English-language synthesis of Virilio's work to date, although at least six volumes of his writings have been translated

and published in this country (mostly by Semiotext(e)/Autonomedia.) Arthur Kroker's *The Possessed Individual* suggests some directions such a synthesis might follow, but Kroker's treatment is unfortunately tied to his ongoing "panic" critique, in ways which perhaps obscure the originality of Virilio's thought. However, we should not be too surprised at this lack of critical synthesis. Of the translations of Virilio's work, only *War and Cinema* has been published by a mainstream academic publisher (Verso). (Translations of his *Bunker Archeology* and *The Vision Machine*, from Princeton Architectural Press and Indiana University, respectively, have been announced for later this year, so we may eventually see better translations of some of his work.) Also, the scope and style of Virilio's work quite simply make synthesis difficult. Virilio is at once an urbanist, a historian of war and of cinema, a philosopher of speed, a theorist of human subjectivity, a postmodernist—sharing a great deal of terminology and approach with Baudrillard—and, as he frequently points out in interviews, a Christian. The potential difficulties, even contradictions, should be obvious. And he aggravates these problems by writing in a style which, as Arthur Kroker observes, is itself bound up in an "aesthetic of disappearance" and speed. In interviews, Virilio is explicit about his methods, emphasizing his interests in "trends" and "flows." He has likened his work to a ladder, composed as it is of a series of "solid" steps and gaps, or interruptions. His figure of the picnoleptic modern subject—which I borrowed at the beginning of this piece—always suspecting that it has just missed something, is not too far from Virilio's reader, forced to range across a culture now re-territorialized by the texts.

There are other difficulties, as well. Key texts—both by Virilio and by his colleagues and predecessors—remain untranslated, and the existing translations are said to be far from perfect. Some combination of Virilio's philosophical "speed" and the flawed translations also obscures many of the connections to other works, so it becomes very difficult to establish what the sources and influences of Virilio's work might be.

However, if we are to gain a new perspective on the political aspects of the debate concerning postmodernism, it seems useful to attempt even a partial, flawed synthesis of Virilio's work, if only to point out where more work is needed. This exploration will be an attempt at that

sort of provisional synthesis, working with the existing translations, and the small secondary literature on Virilio. Where it seems appropriate, I will also attempt to draw in other important figures—particularly Derrida, Baudrillard, and Lacan—to perhaps clarify Virilio’s position within continental thought. In the spirit of “following the trend,” I will also explore other connections, for which I offer no particular guarantees, but which seem to open up the Virilio that we have been given in translation to greater political use.

### Speed, Politics and Pure War

The volumes *Speed and Politics* (1977) and *Pure War* (1983) provide a general overview of Paul Virilio’s theoretical preoccupations. Virilio had written a considerable volume of material—including the forthcoming-in-translation *Bunker Archeology* (1975) and the untranslated *L’insécurité du territoire*—before writing *Speed and Politics*, the work which serves as the most general statement of his project for American audiences. We should lament the absence of the earlier works in translation, since Virilio understands his work as one large enterprise only artificially broken down into separate books, but until those volumes are translated, *Speed and Politics* remains the best place to start with Virilio. In it, he addresses his central concerns—the interactions of technologies of speed, military development, individual subjects and the political state—in broad, historical perspective. The interviews in *Pure War*, conducted by Sylvère Lotringer, provide useful clarifications from a later period.

While we might characterize some “postmodern” philosophers as creating “philosophies of appearance” - like Baudrillard’s screens and seductions - Virilio begins by constructing a philosophy—and a history—of appearances. His work is dominated by bodies in motion, a sort of theatrical philosophy of entrances and exits. Of course, given the “disappearance” of space—a notion which Virilio may take even further than Baudrillard—there cannot be any sort of simple “scene” within which these appearances take place. Instead, the expansion of the military “theatres” into all aspects of society, and the shift from war to the preparation for war as the dominant mode of conflict—from Total War to Pure War (Total Peace)—stagecraft takes over from

acting as the key role, and the “real” action disappears. The only possibility for the real to reassert its dominance is through interruption, accident, and the stakes of such accidents are raised with every “advance” of technology. While Baudrillard understands this as a dynamic primarily of simulation, Virilio concentrates on more material conditions. Thus, he places himself in a more traditionally oppositional position to what he calls “military intelligence” and the “trans-political.”

However, we would be missing the subtleties—and the characteristically “postmodern” elements—of Virilio’s thought if we were to assume that his “more material” subject matter assured us of some sort of epistemological ground. Although he presents us with a global narrative of speed-effects as the motor of conflict, and thus culture, he does not subscribe to any sort of traditional teleology. For instance, he follows Baudrillard and others in a rejection of labor and production as the constitutive element of culture. With Lafargue, Baudrillard, and perhaps Bataille, he acknowledges the importance of consumption—even of the production of consumption, or of destructive sacrifice—in the development of Western cultures. But, like at least Baudrillard and Bataille, he resists a story with a single, desirable end as his model. Instead, he is fascinated with a fatal end to the story, the accident, which is immanent in every technological “moment.” This is the traditional teleology in reverse, as history becomes a suspenseful tale of attempts to change states, and thus transform our accidents, before we reach an end which can only be catastrophic. This inverted teleology may owe something to the notion of “entropy.” Virilio reminds us frequently that for the fortress, as for the warrior, “stasis is death.”

We might also be cautious before we took Virilio’s accounts for “objective” studies, based in some sort of materialist epistemology. Although his invocations of the power of statistics and trends might sound comforting to some American sociologists, it seems fairly clear that Virilio is not in search of the perfect sample. Instead the “truth” of his analysis of trends is what we might characterize as the “truth of film.” In another of his favorite metaphors, one that has striking similarities to the Virilio’s methodological “ladder,” he reminds us of the film-maker who claimed that films was “true thirty times a second.” That is, each image is in some sense “true.” There was something there



to film. But the film is more than just the frames, or even the combination of the frames. The interruptions themselves constitute an important part of the illusory “truth” of the aggregate. By describing his own work in terms of developed images and gaps, Virilio discourages us from assuming any sort of truth except an intermittent one. We must determine what to do with the trend—which Virilio himself emphasizes—with terms other than truth, or so it seems.

So we return to Virilio’s global history with some cautions about its nature and use. As an urbanist, Virilio begins his story with the development of the city, which he characterizes as initially primarily a crossroads. “Traffic control” in the sense of the regulation of the passage, and the speed, of commerce, and also of military traffic, became the motivation for developing the city. And the interconnections between military, urban and commercial concerns have a long history. This early form of city was primarily a roadblock. Virilio suggests that almost all of the early functions of fortification and traffic control were devoted to slowing down traffic through or toward the city, or of barring entrance to it. These “immobile machines”—the cities that finally developed into the great European castles—were not static. They were complex engines for delivering slowness to an enemy or outsider.

Of course, these urban concentrations did not contain—did not desire or intend to contain—all of the populations of their regions. A significant population was left to roam free, particularly to roam the roads. Some of this population was composed of what Virilio will term “dromomaniacs,” a lumpen class which rules the roads, in the absence of any centralized “highway patrols.” These highwaymen will play an important role in the conflicts between urban centers. They are, as Virilio sees them, speed and motion, only in need of more or less precise targeting. The term “dromomaniac” is particularly significant, since it refers both to a particular historic social group and to a medical condition characterized by “compulsive walking.” What Virilio is describing is a “dromocratic revolution” in which speed becomes a dominant factor in Western societies. He describes “dromocrats” and “dromomaniacs”—something like his version of the bourgeoisie and proletariat—and we are left to wonder where we stand, or where we walk.

Virilio explains portions of his dromological narrative in terms of the development of “vehicles,” although he uses this term in rather novel ways. At various times, Virilio speculates on the “first vehicle,” which he most often identifies with “woman.” Both in sexual intercourse, when “mounted” by man, or in the relation of support characteristic, he believes, of the human heterosexual couple, the woman in some sense “carries” the man. The couple constitutes the simplest “war machine.” Of course, since every mode of carriage brings along its own accident, we should note here then “little death” of orgasm as the fatal accident of this particular vehicular relationship. Beyond this are more conventional forms of vehicles, beginning with the riding animal and beast of burden and extending through various wheeled, tracked and winged forms, then becoming strange again as various telecommunications forms begin to “carry” us afar in a variety of ways. That many of these earlier forms of communication techniques were in fact vehicular technologies only becomes more obvious in an era where we take certain forms of tele-presence for granted.

The obvious differences in these modes of transportation point to essential changes in the world, as it is organized by vectors of time-space-speed. We can fairly easily trace the “conquest of space” that involves an acceleration from the nearly static travelling of sexual intercourse to the escape velocity of spacecraft. It is harder to comprehend the subsequent “conquest of time” which telepresence, “live” satellite broadcast, and other “technologies of ubiquity” have nearly accomplished. When the time of transportation or transmission is relative, depending not on distance but on where you want to go, distant points become both nearer and sooner than those closer in strictly spatial terms. Virilio argues that what we are left with is finally only speed, the ability to manipulate the space-time matrix. This certainly seems to be the case in the virtual spaces of the internet, where speed of transmission—and the consequent ability to process greater “bandwidth”—has become the guiding criteria for nearly all hardware and software development decisions.

These “conquests” follow a particular pattern, one which seems tied to the Hegelian notion of *aufhebung*, and which surfaces in a variety of contexts in Virilio’s work—as in the work of many “postmodernists,” vulgar modernist/ postmodernist distinctions to the contrary. Again,

while he does not assume any particular “progress” in the movement, Virilio observes a tendency of the technological dynamic to trump itself. In the space between a technology—or a dimension—and its immanent accident, it is often possible to push the movement on to another level. There is a good deal of ambiguity about the relationships between these levels. There is something of Hegel’s dynamic in the movement by which the “problem” of a vehicular technology—or of space or time—is “solved,” but without doing so in a way which allows us to simply move on. The old problems are redistributed, or perhaps recombined, in new problems which are in some sense more complex. However, we have no sense that there is a golden “truth” or a fullness of “spirit” awaiting at the end of the road. Instead, there are the “choices” between the quantum collapse and reorganization of the “onward” movement, and the catastrophic collapse of the accident. Virilio is fond of quoting Marshall McLuhan, and there is something of the ambiguity of McLuhan’s “the medium is the message” in the movement he describes. Old and new forms are joined by an inability to fully resolve the old—or to resolve them *in time*.

McLuhan’s thought resurfaces in Virilio’s discussion of one of the other aspects of vehicular development—the development of prostheses of speed. Here, McLuhan’s analysis of the “extensions of man”—another kind of *aufhebung*, in which problems of the senses are realized without being finally resolved—gives Virilio a way of understanding all vehicular relationships. All “carriage” is prosthesis and, since McLuhan notes that there is an “amputation” that corresponds to every “extension” of the human subject, all travel is travel away from our “proper” (in psychoanalytic terms) self. (See the analysis of *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*, below, for a more complete exploration of the issue of subjectivity in Virilio’s work.)

All of these movements help to establish the general movement through the eras of strategy and tactics, and on into the era of Total War. Total War confronts military power with a serious threat to its expansion—the inability of normal state peacetime economics to support it. The answer is the wartime economy, and finally the perpetual wartime economy. Virilio marks the end of state politics and political economy with the perpetuation of wartime economics into peacetime—the solidification of a military-industrial complex which

possesses substantial autonomy from civilian life. In fact, so pervasive has this military power become that Virilio reserves the term “civilian” only for those actively involved against the ideology of that power, what he calls “military intelligence.” He is not anti-military, and takes a consistently postmodern “belly of the beast” position on the grounds of his opposition. To be anti-military, he says, is finally to be a “racist.” It is to hate a class of *people*, when what one ought to hate, and to combat, is an order or rationality. This is the basis for his own “epistemo-technical” work. (He provides very little explanation for that odd designation, except that it involves an engagement that is critical without being *ad hominum*.)

Total War confronts its realization, and its accident, in the form of the ultimate weapon. The atomic bomb forces another reorganization of cultural vectors which are now increasingly bound up with military technologies. What the threat of nuclear war institutes is deterrence, and the movement toward Total Peace. The logic of deterrence repeats on a global scale the lessons that were learned by warriors in a variety of other conflicts, once the production and delivery of slowness ceased to be the predominant form of battlefield management. In the charge toward, with the aim of getting “beneath,” the enemy’s guns, we see a partial model for deterrence. Death kills death. *The best defense is a good offense.*

Virilio refers to the state of Total Peace as Pure War, war carried on by other means. It is the state we occupy after war has been “realized,” once war is ubiquitous. The cost of peace in our time seems to be our cybernetic incorporation into a global war machine. And the most disturbing questions raised by this final(?) “trumping” must be: What is the immanent accident of our age, and by what slight of hand of “development” might we forestall it? The stakes have undoubtedly become quite high. The rest of Virilio’s work, concentrating as it does on various aspects of his larger narrative, only demonstrate how high.

## Endo-Colonization and Environmental Degradation

*Popular Defense and Ecological Struggles* (1978) was written in part as a response to the appropriation of Virilio’s earlier writings by members of the Italian autonomists, who had used it as a justification for a pro-

technology stance within their struggle against the Italian state. The autonomists were leftists working beyond the confines of organized socialism within Italy. In 1977, they had been involved in significant victories involving both factory workers and generally marginalized sections of the working class, such as homeworkers. In Turin, they had managed to reduce transit fares by direct action and decentralized organization. However, the autonomist movement was to be dealt a series of serious blows by the Italian state, which alleged that the Red Brigades were autonomists, and used that excuse to crack down. Intellectuals associated with the movement—which resisted the notion of leaders—were singled out and imprisoned. Antonio Negri served time for alleged involvement in the Aldo Moro affair. (The Moro affair is a favorite episode for postmodernist analysis. Baudrillard returns to the figure of the hostage, who has been removed entirely from the social fabric, and who finally cannot be returned to his proper place. The situationist Gianfranco Sanguinetti wrote a book arguing that the Red Brigades were essentially agents of the Italian state, useful for the damage they did to autonomous resistance, an assertion which has been taken seriously by a variety of contemporary leftists.)

What Virilio presents in this volume is a particularly grim picture of the ends of “military intelligence.” The first focus of the book is colonization. Virilio argues that the movement toward “decolonization” was not the abandonment of the logic of colonialism, but a change in its direction. As the world political scene has reoriented itself along the north-south axis, the colonial powers have employed the lessons of the colonial era at home. We have heard again and again the comparisons of the inner cities to jungles, or frontiers. However, we may be too optimistic if we imagine that the rest of the city not also colonized by this same logic. Certainly, the shape of the city is in part a response to the new economic imperatives of the post-war world. The suburb is a product of revolutions in mobility, but also of new notions of family and home. Some of those reorganizations have required literal or figurative demolitions. Virilio points to a general trend which has as its goal the destruction of the city. In an era in which only speed matters, the control of traffic by the city’s structure is no longer necessary or desirable. In an age of tele-presence, perhaps even the highways which

have provided so many ways to travel away from ourselves are obsolete.

However, Virilio also presents a much grimmer explanation for the destruction of the city, which takes its place as part of the occupation of the world. He reminds us of the logics that drive Pure War. As he sees it, the assault on the is completely consistent with the military's need to maintain a clear field of operations. In a particularly chilling passage he suggest that:

This Clausewitzian *nowhere* is essential, for, going beyond a resistance without body, we can already conceive of a *resistance without territory*, on an earth made *uninhabitable* by the military predator.

In this passage, Virilio finally shows the monstrous nature of military intelligence without any mitigation. The interests of the "military predator" lie precisely in making over the earth in a form which denies cover to any resistance. It seems that part of Virilio's desire is to ask us to rethink a variety of forms of environmental degradation in a political context much different from "conserving nature" in some abstract sense, or saving the whales or the spotted owl. How does deforestation serve the interests of the military? Who is served by the inefficient use of cereals as feed for stock, rather than as food for humans?

### The Aesthetics of Disappearance

Baudrillard has also claimed that communications media and the logic of capital have reduced postmodern subjects to mere "screens" on which images are projected from without (as fashion, etc...). This subject lacks even the depth of Lacan's mirror. In *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*, Virilio plots a slightly different course, one which potentially gives us new ways of understanding the hold of ideology on human subjects. His model is, as I have mentioned, the picnoleptic. The postmodern subject is in the grip of a mild sort of epilepsy. This has interesting consequences in the realm of creativity, since it has been observed that picnoleptic children, faced with absences that they cannot explain and which they must account for, will begin to recall more than actually happened. In order to leave no telltale gaps, they will insert additional details to cover their tracks. This is a sort of

deterrence in the realm of narrative and experience. The best memory is one which meets experience halfway, so to speak, manufacturing additional experiences. Virilio is not explicit about the significance of this state for political subjects—or at least the translations are less than clear—but we might imagine an extension of Virilio’s critique which asked where the additional “experiences” came from. According to what rules does the child, or political subject, “recall” what should have happened? We know the role that so-called “common sense” plays in short-circuiting critical thought and maintaining the hegemony of dominant groups. Can we discount the influence of this factor on our own “experience,” if we accept Virilio’s characterization of postmodern subjects?

The argument that he does develop is again one of increasing speed. He traces the development of vehicular relationships from the inside, marking the various amputations and extensions as they occur. He argues that we can trace the dominant diversions of various speeds of culture, from the locality of sex to the ubiquity of telepresence. Some of the transitions are surprising, as when he traces the movement out of the theatres and onto the freeways. The windshield of the automobile, he argues, is the “proper” screen for experiencing the world at a new speed. The driver is a voyeur-voyager, now dedicated to a kind of pure circulation which works against the possibility of contemplation or critical thought. In a particularly Baudrillardian sense, the real world becomes increasingly replaced by our preemptive engagements with it.

Missing from Virilio’s work thus far is a clear sense of what drives us toward our accidents, although we might consider several available models. The association between interruption and death calls to mind both Freud’s death drive and Bataille’s opposition of work and “the plethora”—his term for the natural, overwhelming excess which he believes forms the basis on which, or against which, cultures have developed. Perhaps we might wish for more engagement by Virilio of more traditionally “economic” issues, if only so that we could more easily chart his relationships with other cultural philosophers.

## War and Cinema

Virilio's study of the relationship between military technology and entertainment technologies returns us to many of the same themes we have already explored. *War and Cinema* (1984) shows the colonization of leisure time by military technologies, and the introduction of "military intelligence" into the training of the civilian eye. It is not insignificant that the motion picture camera is a descendent of the Gatling gun. The movie-goer learns to watch with gun-sight eyes. This cybernetic extension of vision is accomplished precisely at the loss of another sort of vision. It involves a new ordering of perspective, and perspectives. *War and Cinema* is among the clearest, most convincing of the Virilio translations, and poses his recurring concerns at the level of specific technological events and developments. Read with the other works, it provides specific cases which seem to confirm the trend of Virilio's work in general.

Paul Virilio is clearly neither precisely what we have come to expect from "political" theorist, nor a straw-man "postmodernist." He does not play the coy political games of Jean Baudrillard, and he has—in an expression that I suspect we might make much of—"more gravity" than Arthur Kroker or the "libidinal" Jean-Francois Lyotard. He applies something we can recognize as a sort of dialectic to technology, surely a material issue, even if Virilio wants to speak more of "means of destruction" than "means of production." His clarity of purpose is admirable, if the clarity of the translated texts is less so. Probably, we will be forced to wait for new translations—or to delve into the originals—to assess in any systematic way Virilio's contributions to political philosophy. However, against claims the postmodernism provides only relativistic, reactionary "excuses" for political inaction, we can produce at least one suggestive counter-example which I suspect can be readily recognized as such by all but the most ideologically confirmed skeptics. And perhaps this opening might be enough to begin to open up the other, less obviously political postmodernisms to political examination (rather than just cross-examination.)



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## Interruption: Memorial Day Parade, 1994, Bowling Green, Ohio

In the midst of writing this essay, I witness the local Memorial Day Parade. In this context, the incident is, at the very least, suggestive. First, the parade—like the holiday it commemorates—constitutes an interruption in the normal flow of local life, with many businesses closed. Traffic flows are also subject to interruption or redirection, as the main streets are reserved for a kind of traffic that goes nowhere in particular—that is primarily significant in its privileged status of being able to interrupt. The sidewalks are filled with “ordinary citizens” gathered specifically to witness a particular class of movement.

The active participants of the parade—those who hold the streets—represent a variety of ages and occupations, but are distinguished by the wearing of a uniform. The holiday is set aside for remembering those who can no longer be present, those who have perished “in armed service.” In their stead, however, we are presented with a strange pageant of stand-ins. A few young, hale and hearty reservists lead the parade, but they are not the main event. The survivors of war are there, representatives of the various veterans’ organizations marching “in memory” of previous service, and previous marches. The elderly and handicapped predominate among this group, as if to emphasize the costs of “armed service.” However, it is clear that what we are to remember is not a cost that was too high, but rather a debt which “we, the people”—the “ordinary citizens,” the spectators to armed might—can never adequately repay. We have “invested” too much in the business of “armed service” to abandon it now.

This is the way that we should, perhaps, understand the predominance of well-drilled children in the Memorial Day spectacle. Discipline and uniforms—a principle of uniformity—suggest the logical continuation of this sort of service. And all the milling Cub Scouts tramping along in front of the assault vehicles ought to remind us that boy scouting was initially an early training enterprise for an empire concerned about a lack of soldiers. Nor should we forget the military contexts for rifle and flag corps. the youngest children, twirling batons perhaps, are amusing because they have *not yet* mastered perfect

conformity to marching discipline. Sometimes they smile or break ranks, until they are put back on course by watchful adults.

The marchers are followed by the machines, a curious mix of “emergency vehicles.” Included are modern all-terrain assault vehicles, mounting machine guns and cannon, but also, following them, a series of ambulances, fire engines, “disaster response” vehicles, and police cars. Some of the machines, and not only the war machines, are seldom-seen. We can only imagine the uses of some of them, guess what particular “accidents” they exist to anticipate. Together, however, they form a powerful display of the potential interruptions that might mark the life of the community, even if some of those threatening event remain vague in character. In all of them, however, our fears are mobilized.

There is a certain irony in this particular parade, in which we surrender the streets to those forces to which we are already legal obliged to give way. It is as if we are called upon to bear witness to our surrender of the streets—a site once assumed to be the space in which resistance might find room to erupt. In a nation where fire hoses have been used to “put out the fire” of crowds as well as fires, the massive presence of a hook-and-ladder rig is not necessarily a politically neutral manifestation. This parade of “service” vehicles is most disturbing in the context of Memorial Day’s military focus. This year, the parade proper was preceded by a marching military figure who barked orders to the civilian crowd:

“When the flag of the United States of America passes in review, everyone WILL rise. Gentlemen WILL remove their hats. You WILL place your right hand over your heart.”

Since nearly every vehicle was decorated with the flag, strict adherence to the “order” would have meant maintaining the position (or perhaps “assuming the position”) for most of the duration of the parade. The aggressive tone of the demands, and the grim expressions of the soldiers, suggest again the opposition between those in uniform, who have paid too much, and the civilian crowd, who can never pay enough for the “service” rendered. The parade leader attempted to “discipline” the crowd, in the sense of bringing them bodily into conformity with the rite being enacted, but failing that, at least to scold them, as one may discipline children. The military personnel were

uniformly grim-visaged, often despite the children marching or riding with them. One assault vehicle's gunner kept his position "guns up" throughout the parade, as if to remind the crowd how simply the streets could be taken. By contrast, the bored, friendly local police seemed genial. The waving Shriners seemed merely out of place amid so much uniformed authority, despite their function as "emergency rescue personnel" for crippled children, and their fire engine.

This occupation of the already-occupied streets of our semi-rural town should bring home, at the very least, the ambiguity of our relation to the forces that ensure "social security." At the very least, it is a moment in which we can examine, at something like our leisure, those machines of the community which we ordinarily see only in a state of excessive speed—the machines that break the law to uphold the community, that rule the roads—as well as those dromocrats of the marching orders—soldiers, scouts, patriotic marching bands—who answer the call to abstract movement. And we are forced to experience all of this from the edge of traffic, from outside the main flow. While we are concentrated as spectators, and spectators precisely to the apparatus of accident, we may be better able to assess the kinds of conditions that dominate our ordinary existence. Under these circumstances, perhaps we have the space and the time to consider the work of a political thinker like Paul Virilio. But the question remains: is there any space left for us to occupy which is not the non-space of endless movement, of speed moving towards its limit, or, at the limit, the non-space of inertia?

## Annotated Bibliography

Jean Baudrillard. *Symbolic Exchange and Death*. London/Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1994 (France 1976). This is the key text for understanding Baudrillard's move "beyond" Marxism. It is also a text which Virilio particularly notes as one of his breaking points with Baudrillard, citing the lack of attention to military matters as its major flaw.

Paul Virilio. *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*. New York: Semiotext(e), 1991 (France, 1980). A more individual exploration of the effects of speed in culture; Virilio describes the contemporary subject as approaching a state like epilepsy.

—-. *Lost Dimension*. New York: Semiotext(e), 1991 (France, 1984). A philosophical exploration of the nature of time, space and speed in an advanced, militarized society. The emphasis on correlations with sciences of complexity makes this a particularly difficult work.

—-. *Popular Defense and Ecological Struggle*. New York: Semiotext(e), 1990 (France, 1978). A discussion of the place of "radical resistance" and the role of ecological degradation in military strategy.

—-. *Pure War*. New York: Semiotext(e), 1983. Interviews with Virilio, clarifying some of his views, particularly the relationship of Christianity to his work.

—-. *Speed and Politics*. New York: Semiotext(e), 1986 (France, 1977). One of the clearest statements of Virilio's philosophy; he traces the development of the city, alongside the development of military and transportation technologies.

—-. *War and Cinema*. New York/London: Verso, 1989 (France, 1984). Virilio makes the connection between the technologies of war and those of leisure, showing how the military technologies of an earlier era have become the pervasive technologies of leisure in our own.

## Related Readings

Arthur Kroker, *The Possessed Individual*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993. Kroker devotes a chapter to Virilio's work. It is useful as an introduction, but Kroker may have a tendency to see more of his own projects in the work of others than is 'really' there.

Manuel DeLanda, *War in the Age of Intelligent Machines*. New York: Zone Books, 1992. DeLanda parallels much of Virilio's thinking about the military and the state, but adds a unique reading of Deleuze and Guattari's "mechanic phyla" as well as dealing with computer technologies in a more comprehensive way.

# **Pornologies: Sex/Violence/Power/Knowledge**

## **Andrea Dworkin: Possessing Sade**

Sade's importance, finally, is not as dissident or deviant: it is as Everyman, a designation the power-crazed aristocrat would have found repugnant but one that women, on examination, will find true. In Sade, the authentic equation is revealed: the power of the pornographer is the power of the rapist/batterer is the power of the man.

—Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*

It would be comforting if we could simply dismiss this sort of angry, sweeping indictments of “men” and patriarchal culture as merely the outbursts of a (too-) “radical feminist.” It is tempting to respond to the “violence” of Dworkin’s rhetoric—the ways in which it will acknowledge no dissenting view—with an equal, opposite violence. The image of Sade as “Everyman” falls somewhere between the crassest sort of sexual essentialism—unabashed “man-bashing”—and pure provocation. The rage that fuels such statements leaves the reader little room to negotiate a place in relation to the text. The roles are simple: male oppressor/rapist/pornographer or female victim. It is no wonder that Dworkin, and her sometimes-collaborator Katherine MacKinnon, elicit such strong reactions.

However, reading snippets of the work of radical feminists—or hearing the catch phrases: “rape culture,” “penetration is rape,” “pornography is rape”—doesn’t give one the sense of the power of those texts. In particular, Dworkin’s work is alternately riveting and unreadable. There is a manifesto-like quality to her writing which may be traceable back to the influences of “freak” politics and the Movement on her generation of feminists. Her spelling of “Amerika” throughout most of her work seems to point in those directions. Indeed, her earliest writings, such as *Woman Hating*, seem intimately tied to the Movement doctrines of sexual freedom as revolutionary force. Although she rejects the retooled patriarchal structures of Leftist “free love”—in much the same way that Valerie Solanis did in the *SCUM Manifesto*—she posits an even more radical alternative: an androgynous, non-hierarchical society in which all blocks to desire could, and should, be abolished. There would be no need for taboos

against bestiality and incest in such a society, since the issues of power, consent and coercion would be swept away by the freeing of “natural” human sexuality. Dworkin was not alone in her vision. Raoul Vaniegem’s *The Book of Pleasures* suggested a similar “revolutionary program,” finding precedents among groups such as the Movement of the Free Spirit, a Christian heresy. And we might consider the thread of “queer” liberation that stretches back in American intellectual history to at least Whitman, and may share more than a few similarities with early American antinomian and gnostic heresies.

It is useful to position the early writings of Dworkin in a tradition of relative openness to desire. There is rage in *Woman Hating*, directed against the power of the patriarchy—strongly connected to some category, presumably neither entirely biological or social, that Dworkin calls “man.” But there is an affirmative energy which holds out the possibility of the “androgynous.” Biology is not, it would seem, precisely destiny in this early work. But as the polemic becomes increasingly negative in later works, the status of “man” and “woman” seems increasingly reified, socially constructed relationships are increasingly conflated with biological differences.

Dworkin assumes a very uncertain position in the midst of the essentialist-constructivist debate that has been central to the discourse between various feminisms at least since Simone de Beauvoir asserted that “one is not born a woman.” The more her work is driven by an anti-pornography polemic, the more essentialist she seems to become. However, even in works such as *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* and *Intercourse* it is not clear exactly what Dworkin means by “men” and “women.” That is, it is unclear what she assumes to be the origins of these states. This ambiguity—made doubly ambiguous by her apparent shift away from the celebration of desire to its almost complete demonization—is what renders the reading of Dworkin’s work so difficult. One is alternately seduced by the strength of her storytelling and brought up short by what seem to be rash over-generalizations.

The central problem in Dworkin’s world is a rough equation of sex and violence—at least under patriarchy. This is further complicated by her willingness, like MacKinnon, to slide from violence to its representation as if the two were not separate categories. The strength

of Dworkin's narrative is that she personalizes the real problems of women's oppression. She may be without peer as a writer of deeply, personally moving social commentary. She has an eye for the horrible and heart-rending. But if we are to attempt to use this sort of "analysis" as a basis for a feminist social science, or as the basis for law, we have to be concerned about the ways in which that very personal narrative may be manipulative.

There are a large number of ways in which so subjective an approach might undercut the work's value for legal or social scientific purposes. Some of the objections usually raised, including the call to "objectivity," have been challenged by feminist critiques of the formation of "objective" and "subjective" categories within cultures. These critiques show how the Western philosophical tradition, the medical establishments, and psychoanalysis have denied women—along with non-Europeans, children, and frequently the lowest social classes—full participation in the categories of "reason" and "objectivity." These marginalized groups have served as "others" to the dominant groups—largely white, male economic elites—excluded by both actual exclusion from institutions, such as colleges, and through symbolic exclusions, such as the use of a generic, but not fully-inclusive "man" to designate human beings. The existence of others, according to these critiques, is necessary for the establishment of the privileged, core identities. "Men" cannot represent full humanity if "women" do not assume the place of "lack."

This is particularly true within the discourse of psychoanalysis, and that of sexuality in general. The feminist critique of the male/female, active/passive dichotomy is well known. Briefly, the argument is that such divisions work to uphold a certain division of power which allows the patriarchy to perpetuate itself. Women are effectively "silenced" through the enforcement of roles, or are encouraged to be culturally "silent" through their socialization. Both the carrot and the stick work to maintain the hegemony of the patriarchy. In a sense, Dworkin's argument is merely an extreme dramatization of that dynamic, and as such it is hard to dismiss. It would be hard to argue, against MacKinnon for example, that pornography was "only words." Certainly, we must be aware that in a mass-mediated culture like our own representations have some very real effects in shaping individuals and interactions.

However, to base any sort of further analysis on that dramatization, without sounding the depths of its foundations, is to invite any number of difficulties.

The problem with the rhetoric of Dworkin—if I may be so bold—is that it finally becomes the thing it hates. In attempting to talk about sexuality and violence, and finding the two inextricably linked, Dworkin becomes increasingly violent in her writing. In forcing most readers to assume the role of either rapist or victim, she effectively silences those “other voices” which other feminisms attempt to allow voice. In appropriating the (frequently isolated) work of novelists, and the life experiences of individuals, and working them all into her own narrative of oppression, she reduces the individual differences between them, even as she “personalizes” her narrative. It is hard to imagine a more violent, unforgiving, phallic, masculinist form of writing. In her displays of mastery over the culture she opposes, Dworkin engages in the “possession” of her sources, frequently through suspicious retellings of existing narratives. Perhaps this is the wily avant garde technique of plagiarism and provocation, a sort of feminist scandal in the mold of surrealism, but if so Dworkin is once again taking on the characteristics of that which she despises. Her scorn for those sources is second only to her hatred of Sade.

Still, I want to resist dismissing entirely the problem that Dworkin presents: the pervasiveness of a kind of sex-violence matrix within patriarchal culture. But, if we are to deal with Dworkin’s problem in ways which do not replicate what I have suggested is her mistake, we need to find some approach which does not involve either consenting to the silences imposed by her texts or complete rejection—the basic psychoanalytic options of introjection or abjection. One means might be to free her problem from her particular polemic. If we delve into the footnotes of Dworkin’s work, we may find other scholars who have wrestled with the same conflicts. In particular, we might want to look at the work of Georges Bataille—a writer present only in a few passages in Dworkin’s work and universally scorned there as an apologist for erotic violence. We need not, however, take Dworkin’s word for it alone.



## **Georges Bataille: Sex, Death and the Sacred**

Eroticism, it may be said, is assenting to life up to the point of death.

—Georges Bataille, *Death and Sensuality*

It is not hard to understand, given her particular prejudices, how Dworkin could disapprove of Georges Bataille. Bataille's own fascination with the "transgressive," his "pornographic" writings, and his analysis of the "use value" of Sade place him firmly, it would seem, in the realm of Dworkin's rapist-patriarch. However, there are surprising number of continuities between the works of Dworkin and Bataille. Bataille's world, like Dworkin's, has at its core a relation of sex-violence-death, and he acknowledges the way in which the roles of sacrificer and victim have been consistently mapped down onto men and women respectively. Where his analysis differs is in the ways that it associates the biological world with this relation, and in his unwillingness to finally abject the transgressive elements that he finds. Bataille's writing is not without its own sort of violence, but it is a violence which seeks to engage with an otherwise unknowable world. It is the violence of one possessed, rather than one possessing.

Bataille has been extremely influential on recent continental philosophy, and the various strands of cultural study that have grown out of the "poststructuralist" and "postmodernist" tendencies, but he has been present in America almost entirely through footnotes. Writers like Baudrillard and Foucault owe a significant debt to Bataille's work, and through them some of his ideas have gained wide circulation. However, his own work seems to have been read infrequently. Only his novels have been available with any regularity in this country, and most editions have been released by either avant garde presses or pornographic publishers. As far as I have been able to ascertain, Bataille is nearly unknown among North American sociologists, despite the fact that his work grows out of the early sociological/anthropological tradition of Mauss and Durkheim. Yet a "sociology of the sacred" is probably as close to a classification Bataille's project as we could hope to come. It is not, however, a "sociology" that lends itself to easy

instrumentalization, and this has undoubtedly blunted its potential impact in America.

Bataille's wrote numerous works, on a broad range of topics, but nearly all of them deal in some way with the central problems of eroticism and transgression. It is hard, therefore, to speak about Bataille's thought without mentioning works of fiction together with works of philosophy, together with works on art history and "general economy." And it is hard to separate these works from the life of the writer, since Bataille repeatedly foregrounded the importance of personal "inner experience" in his work. In general, Bataille's life/work is not only focused on an analysis of transgression, but it is itself transgressive. "Excess" is the unifying element here. Bataille is as concerned with conjuring up "the other" in his analyses—with giving speech to that which we ordinarily silence—as Dworkin seems to be to reifying that silencing.

The overall argument of Bataille's work is spread somewhat unevenly through various texts, with each partial explanation filling out the whole from some new direction. However, his basic arguments can be found in *Death and Sensuality: A Study of Eroticism and the Taboo* and *The Accursed Share*, a three-volume work on "general economy." The first text delves into the potential origins of eroticism, both historically and organically. In it, Bataille develops the theory of the natural world that drives the rest of his work, and explores its implications through a series of case studies—among them one of several analyses of Sade. In the second work, Bataille focuses on more macro-scale analyses, suggesting how various systems of exchange—from potlatch to the Marshal Plan—are manifestations of certain warring tendencies within civilizations based on work and consumption.

*Death and Sensuality* takes as its central problem eroticism, "assenting to life up to the point of death." For Bataille, life, specifically as it is tied to reproductive sexuality, and death are promiscuously interconnected. That is, death is present—and particularly so—at those moments we most closely associate with the giving of life, and death is disturbed by the irruption of new life. The problem, which taboos seek to address, is one of boundaries. That which threatens to cross a boundary, particularly to symbolically obscure the line between life and death, threatens the individual and society which build identities on the basis

of those boundaries. Significantly, for Bataille, those boundaries are more social than natural, and they are maintained through signifying practices. It is probably not a coincidence that Bataille gives credit to Jacques Lacan in the acknowledgements for *Death and Sensuality*. There is ample indication that Lacan's notion of unstable, "decentered" ego/subjects was at least compatible with Bataille's dynamic of taboo and transgression.

The biologicistic basis for Bataille's whole system is fascinating. He begins by noting that the natural world is excessive. He points to the fact of reproduction as an indication that, rather than being ruled by some absolute scarcity of resources, life is driven toward a consumptive production of more life. But this drive toward life is not unconnected with an intimacy with death. In support of his assertion, he moves to an analysis of reproduction at the cellular level. Pointing to the two primary modes of reproduction—sexual and asexual—he describes the central role of an annihilating violence to each. The terms of this argument are "continuity" and "discontinuity."

In asexual reproduction, the creation of the two identical causes a rupture in the "identity" of the "parent." While both "children" as in some sense continuous with the (no longer existent) "parent," they are no longer continuous with each other. Since the biological material, the "identity," of the parent is now split between the children, the parent is no longer continuous with itself—to the extent that we can even talk about the existence of the parent after reproduction. The potential paradoxes of "identity" in this exceeding and rending of the original self present Bataille with one instance of the "death" that naturally accompanies new life.

Sexual reproduction presents a similar set of problems of continuity. In the fusion of sperm and egg, the death of the parents is foreshadowed in the obliteration of separateness. Rather than a violence of rending, there is a violence of merging. The combination of egg and sperm is a sort of decomposition of the individual parts—foreshadowing, if only symbolically, the decomposition of the parents' bodies. This particular, human, form of reproduction has the closest association with death, with decomposition being the linking factor. Bataille points to taboos which show that the period during which dead bodies are considered abject is the period during which they are

rotting. This period marks something like the opposite of sexual reproduction, since the biological processes which mark decomposition involve the proliferation of new life out of the matter of the corpse, at a time when the individual is thought to have passed into non-life. Dry bones can mark the place of a deceased individual, but the irruption of life from a “dead” body threatens the notion of the individual by calling into question the line between life and death and the relationship of the individual to the continuity of life.

The space of mixture, excess and possibility that is left open by death and sensuality is what Bataille calls the “plethora.” It marks the always-excessive nature of things, which human civilizations have attempted to cover up through careful systems of management and classification. In *Death and Sensuality*, Bataille subsumes most of these systems under the category of “work.” It is important to understand that, according to Bataille’s scheme, the uncertainty of the life-death, and therefore the sex-death, boundary need not be a problem under all social conditions. It is specifically the attempt to organize the natural plethora of the world through work that is incompatible with the sorts of uncertainty that are Bataille’s focus. In this way, he is not so different from the Dworkin of *Woman Hating*, who can imagine an entirely different sexual economy freed from patriarchal hierarchy and oppression.

Having established the basic conflict between work and the plethora, and having identified eroticism as the privileged site for this conflict, Bataille spends the rest of *Death and Sensuality* exploring the means by which various cultures have managed to survive the contradictions. Taboo and transgression are the major terms of this analysis. Taboos are the structures which protect society from inherent contradiction. They establish the core identity of the culture by establishing precisely what must be abjected. Transgression is then the means by which the desires and frustrations masked, or set up, by taboo are released in socially-sanctioned ways. Bataille makes clear that the rules of transgression are frequently as rigid as the taboos they break. Transgression does not involve absolute freedom. In fact, transgression and taboo work together to make certain expressions, which might more seriously threaten a society, nearly unthinkable.

Bataille sets up an opposition between cultures within which ritualized transgression—that is, sanctioned violence against taboo—is able to diffuse the various threats to the realm of work, and those, like our own, in which the spaces of transgression are no longer widely recognized, and where the conflicts must be worked out in other ways. Bataille’s own “pornographic” writing, his championing of Sade, his early associations with the Surrealists and later ones with the Acephale (“headless”) group, might all be seen as attempts to create spaces for the “irrational”—that is, that which can not be contained within the Enlightenment, work-driven mode of “rationality.” Significantly, Bataille and his closest associates were as concerned with the “sacred,” and with religious experience, as with any other form of social experience. The sublime, excessive, conflicted space of the sacred bears at least symbolic, metaphoric resemblances to the spaces of passion, or orgasm (the “jouissance” or bliss of much French philosophy). For Bataille, the need for these spaces is great, since the ritual structures by which cultural tensions were managed have been largely lost in the desacralization of our cultures.

*The Accursed Share* is Bataille’s macro-level analysis of various approaches to managing the problem of the plethora. Not surprisingly, he finds that cultures with a sharper sense of the sacred nature of taboo have been more able to create spaces in which tensions could be released. Following the incorporation of work into the structures that had previously supported religion—a la Weber—societies have been less able to create spaces of transgression, and have instead been forced to create modern forms of warfare and a whole range of oppressions. The plethora, denied by economies of scarcity, resurfaces as “woman,” the “primitive,” “nature,” “the masses,” the “reds.” It is a classic example of the return of the repressed, or of the “normal” function of deviance. And transgression takes the form of sexual abuse, class war, imperialism, overheated consumption. Or sex is stripped of its sacred character without anything being added in its place to deal with the potential irruption of violence from the symbolic world into the physical world.

The distance between the worlds of Bataille and Dworkin is not, I think, as great as Dworkin would have us believe. Both see the connections between sex, violence and death as central to the conflicts

in contemporary culture. Both acknowledge the ways in with sex, and the sex-gender matrix have become important sites for cultural conflict management, as well as the violence which comes with unresolved conflict. However, it may be Bataille who provides the explanation that is most useful for a feminist polemic—at least for feminists whose goal is finally to reduce sex-gender inequalities. The sacred character of Bataille’s eroticism—its “radical otherness” in contemporary philosophical jargon—suggests the possibility of re-thinking erotic relationships in ways which begin to deal with the conflict and violence that the world of work assigns them. Sex becomes radical in a way that Dworkin understood in the 1970s, before ‘fucking’ became for her only a word for the possession of women by penetrative force through intercourse.

This “hopeful” reading of Bataille, however, should not be mistaken for some sort of call for innocence, or a return to some “primitivism” regarding the erotic. The sort of sacred space that Bataille calls for must be an explicitly transgressive one, and transgression always carries with it certain dangers. To transgress is to enter the realm of the gods, or at least to leave the human realm. For individuals constituted by the discourses of work, progress, psychoanalysis, and capital, the sacred may well be best designated by the label “psychotic” or “schizophrenic.” The darkness of Bataille’s work is certainly a reflection of the gulf between the contemporary world and the “primitive” societies that Bataille drew inspiration from. The potlatch of the Tlingit is almost unthinkable for contemporary Americans, given the radically different meanings of plenty and consumption in our society. However, Bataille does provide us with a less personalized narrative, despite his emphasis on “inner experience,” and also a variety of essays (attempts) at drawing out the significance of his rethinking of nature and the erotic. Through him, we may be able to return to the important questions raised by feminists like Andrea Dworkin. The sacred may be no less difficult to instrumentalize than rage, but at least Bataille has some more explicit grounding in familiar disciplines, despite his interdisciplinarity. Certainly, both Bataille and Dworkin ask very interesting questions about what can be considered “sexual deviance.” Bataille does not finally refute the notion that “Sade is Everyman.” Instead, he examines more fully what that might mean. But if sexuality is

traditionally a sacred space, is it more “deviant” to find it played out in a pornographic film or strip joint, or diffused through glamour magazines and automobile advertisements? Why, if this is a “Rape culture,” does pornography occupy such a privileged—one might say fetishized—place in radical feminist critiques?

### **Michel Foucault: Subjection and the Limit**

I would be remiss in ending an examination of writing on sex and transgression without at least mentioning Michel Foucault. Foucault’s work follows Bataille’s, both in terms of intellectual history and in terms of influence, although there are significant differences in the way the two writers deal with “sexuality.” Foucault’s overall project was to show the ways in which power was diffused in modern societies, so that its force did not come as much from centralized authority, which could impose its will, as from systems of discourse in which individuals participate, and through which they partake of some fraction of power and autonomy. For Foucault, the human “subject”—used here in the psychoanalytic sense—is not an autonomous thing apart from culture. Instead, individuals are subjected—indeed, are required to participate in their own subjection—in order to participate in society as individuals. Discourse, which for Foucault is the key term for systems of linked power/knowledge, is the tool through which we fix our individual boundaries, but it is not an innocent tool. It has a specific history, and represents the product of certain conflicts of interest.

Foucault examined the ways in which legal and medical discourse “created” certain kinds of subjects, such as criminals and the insane. However, his most focused work on the work of discourse is probably his three-volume *History of Sexuality*. In particular, the first volume presents a clear overview of Foucault’s understanding of power. What is most important to the examination of sexuality in relation to Dworkin and Bataille is that Foucault insists that “sexuality” as such is an invention, and a fairly recent one. It represents only one modern discourse by which the articulations of bodies, and human subjects, may be understood. Although this may be implicit in Bataille’s discussion of the role of work in creating erotic tensions—making the life-death boundary a particularly important site for cultural stress—Foucault’s

analysis deals more directly with the questions of agency that haunt Dworkin's work.

Reading Dworkin, I find myself constantly looking for some position in relation to the text which does not finally recapitulate the rapist-victim model. The choice is finally one of either "inside" or "outside" the text—as disciple/victim/possessed or as (frustrated?) opponent/aggressor/possessor. This forced choice is what constitutes the violence of the text, as well as the violence of the philosophy behind it. And in Bataille's terms it is a philosophy of rending. The reader must assume one of two predetermined roles. Foucault denies the inside/outside distinction, and the simple oppressor/oppressed model which goes with it. Without "blaming the victim," Foucault looks for the ways in which individuals are driven to participate in their own oppression, and to uphold the values that oppress them. And, through the notion of limits and "limit experiences," Foucault provides a rationale for the impulse which draws individuals back to the spaces of the sacred and of flux, of which sexuality has been a privileged example. If power is more fluid and distributed than Dworkin or Bataille believe, then it is likely that it is even less able to completely still the conflicts which it engenders, leaving individuals to confront these conflicts in personal ways. We know now how Foucault addressed the sex-violence-death matrix in his later years, engaging in S/M practices despite his possible knowledge that he was HIV-positive. This seems to be "assenting to life up to the point of death," and may represent for us the final denial of the inside/outside, theory/practice splits in Foucault's life-work. The irruption of AIDS into the foucauldian narrative certainly encourages us to look beyond innocence or simple oppositions for our grounding in examining matters of eroticism.

A foucauldian analysis of Dworkin's work might well be one way to approach the problem of how she becomes, at least in her relationship to her readers, that which she hates. Foucault presents a model of power that is both more disturbing, in its suggestion that we take part somehow in our own oppressions, and less so, in that it at least suggests that we are always already in possession of some access to power, if only as some node in a network of discourse. But Foucault also gives us a more recognizable standard on which to base social scientific research. He requires that we historicize our notions of



deviance carefully, and make clear our grounding assumptions, but he still provides the possibility of normative assumptions around which studies might be based.

None of the approaches to the question of violent eroticism provide anything like neat answers, or trustworthy methodologies upon which we might build follow-up studies. However, they do prod us toward acknowledging and dealing with the more “radical” claims of feminist critics, if not precisely on their own terms. Social scientists and cultural studies scholars alike have been unfortunately slow to critically engage with the ideas of writers like Andrea Dworkin, except in fairly simple introject/accept or abject/reject ways. Perhaps by putting the polemics of Dworkin and other into play with the anthropological and philosophical critiques of writers like Bataille and Foucault, we can build a more sympathetic, if also more conflict-ridden, base from which to explore the difficult issues of sex, violence, power and knowledge.

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