

*Toward the Sociality of Cinema: A Metaphysics of Sex and Death*

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At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a forgotten genre reemerged: the execution film. Terrorist cells make videos of executions for political effect – the stakes couldn't be higher. For a while, I've been trying to excavate an ontology of the filmic image, one based on what it means to witness, where witnessing is taken as an activity, not a passive construction. I'd been thinking about pornography in connection with this, and came to realize that the "obscene" genres, by which I mean both sexual pornography and "gratuitous" films of violence and death, serving as representational limit cases, could stake out the two poles, or extremes, of a dialectic of (filmic) spectatorship. For help with clarifying this ontology I turned to George Bataille, and in particular his late Theory of Religion, which tries to understand religiosity as a general social structure founded on such acts of witnessing (founded on sacrifice). For him, religion can have secular contents, it is more the sacred character of the social structures and modes of relating as/to a group that drives his analysis. Filmgoing, by which I mean, communal visual experience, is one such structure that generates myth and a sacred space.

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the genre of execution films was thriving, indeed, the "genre" produced some of early film history's blockbusters<sup>1</sup>. To begin to understand this mode of viewing, I wanted to go back to the beginning of cinema, for two main reasons. One is that, in the attraction<sup>2</sup>, problems of ontology, or of desire, or of the

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<sup>1</sup> These films, unlike the execution videos of today, were fictional.

<sup>2</sup> The attraction is a concept developed by Tom Gunning and Andre Gaudreault to explain the mode of early film spectatorship. The so-called "primitive" era of filmmaking (pre-1914, approximately) was, until the 1980s, seen through the lens of later narrative filmmaking, that is, as a mass of imperfect, inarticulate

subject, that is, cinematic problems in general, are laid bare, as film was not “art” then, not encumbered with meaning (this is partly polemic, obviously) – films were ephemeral and existed *to show* in and of itself. In a way, early cinema holds the promise of a *dasein* of film precisely because it did not know what it was yet, it simply was, in and for itself. There was little space for subterfuge, for letting the desire to watch escape into narrativity or aesthetics – the execution of Czoglosz was the most popular film of all time (at a point in film history when all of time meant less than ten years). Early films are grouped around desires to see violence: the passion of the Christ, boxing matches, executions, special effects that extend or destroy the human form, rumors of wars and wars themselves. Or they are grouped around assimilating difference, a distinctly sexual proposition, violence brought close rather than held at a distance: desires to see the peoples of the world, the exotic, the erotic (kissing and dancing), the libidinousness of the human body in motion. Secondly, cinema marks a transition from the early to the late modern period, from the death of the old gods (or, *pace* Nietzsche, of God himself) to the birth of new ones. It marks the difference between rationality and all that came before, and it marks it on the corpus of the masses. If industrialization was the inscription of this new form of life onto the masses (the reorganization of life around concepts of exchange and equality, ideology and economics), the cinema was the opposite side of this, the

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anomalies, often dismissed as the products of ineptitude, naivety, impropriety. Gunning and Gaudreault properly researched and contextualized the films of this period, in the process saving the spectators of the time from charges of being simple-minded rubes. In his conception of the attraction, Gunning posits that early film required a different kind of spectatorship, one based not around narrative or suturing oneself into a story, but around presentational aesthetics, the desire to see for the sake of sight and novelty, a desire similarly expressed in other entertainments of the day such as vaudeville, the amusement park, World’s Fairs, and in particular histories, for example, the history of screen practices (such as magic lantern shows, illustrated lectures, etc), of electrical innovation, of the railway journey, in sum, as a distinctly modern configuration. Gunning follows Benjamin in many ways. The attraction, then, becomes a kind of building block, a basic unit of film spectating, of why we go to see things collectively: to be amazed, to be scared, to be transported, to be confused, etc. which narrativity, over time, has used by mainstream film as a kind of base to build on, or better, as basic elements that then get elaborated ever more baroquely into tales and stories. See Gunning’s “The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, its Spectator and the Avant-Garde.”

masses making or taking back something (the useless) from modernization. It is the first global art form, in the sense that it was an eye that could cover the globe. It is the first form that grew from the ground up, no matter how often it tried to borrow from the grab-bag of the fine arts. Cinema is the tilting point from the birth of the observer, born of the Renaissance, growing to maturity during the enlightenment, and reaching its zenith, perhaps, in Victorian notions of specialization, the mania for realism in both art and literature, and in the more general continental circulation of images, to the birth of the voyeur. To watch is much different than to look. It involves releasing your purchase on propriety, on decorum, on your body and on consciousness in ways that observing does not – it is not scientific, but erotic. Thus I will try to understand how film brooks the difference between contemplation and absorption in new ways (how it does it differently from 19<sup>th</sup> century phenomena like the stereoscope, for instance).

This all seems somewhat diffuse, so let me try to map out a bit how I will proceed. I will attempt to work through the dialectic at play in the spectating of these films, a dialectic that runs between absorption and contemplation, attraction and distraction, subject and object, between sex as a kind of death and death as a kind of sex. Bataille's notion of sacrifice will begin to emerge here, as a theoretical tool for understanding the spectator's investment in these films<sup>3</sup>, and, in the final section of the paper, as a means by which to extrapolate from the described dialectic a kind of blueprint or x-ray of a collective experience, the psyche of a society – not society per se, necessarily, although I won't shy away from the general level, but proceeding more in the sense of what Bataille calls "sacred sociology." It will attempt to begin to think a

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<sup>3</sup> The research portion of this paper has been elided in this draft. It consisted of an excavation of extant execution films from the era (pre-1910), a description of each film, and a historical contextualization.

sociology of the cinema, it will try to understand what the community of film going is, based on such roots: what Bataille calls an “elective community.” In all, the goal of my paper is to understand the attraction behind the attraction, to understand the psychic economy of early film viewership through these limit cases, not as an act of psychoanalysis, but as a self-conscious act of creative interpretation, of reading – a reading that is Nietzschean in that it is first and foremost a form of writing. I will be playing at creating a (self-consciously fictional) account of the how and why behind early film viewership, taking the role of Bataille’s sorcerer’s apprentice. The sorcerer I am apprenticed to, however, is not a man, is not even human, it is a homunculus in the image of Pandemonium, a machine whose function is to build worlds out of pure light, projected images moving in time.

### **Obscene Genres**

The category of the pornographic, at least as it is used in modern parlance, was born of a kind of return of the repressed visited upon Western culture during the birth of modern archeology. As Walter Kendrick explicates in The Secret Museum, before the late Renaissance or early Enlightenment, the problems that we now associate with the obscene were problems with representationality as such. This was a world prior to the massive circulation of images we know today - the modern conceptualization of the pornographic tried to cleanse the increasingly irreligious present through objectivity, by turning the eye of science to this newly formed area of experience that had, once, constituted a more general sphere of existence (that is, the early archaeologists could not form a sufficient apology for the sheer amount of obscene material uncovered, and hence

distanced themselves from it by casting the past as radically “other” from the present and simultaneously searching out and bringing to light, categorizing, limiting, and hence othering such representations in the present).<sup>4</sup> Pornography was born at the point where religion, specifically Christianity, was dying or being transformed by rationality.

Kendrick also points out that the fears associated with the obscene genres and pornography grew in proportion to the implementation of technologies that allowed for their increased availability and circulation. Springing though they did from the legion of low culture, such representations were almost always produced by and for the most cultivated – an obscene book was only a danger insofar as the book circulated, and the very rationalization that allowed for an explosion in printing and a corresponding increase in materials of all kinds available for mass consumption also provided a way to understand this consumption, or at least worry over it. Of course this all has to do with power – the gradual shift of knowledge from an elite to the masses as the masses were gaining power for the first time as an industrial force. The study of pornography, then, especially its Victorian incarnation, was a paranoid response, an attempt at the containment (through revelation) of biopower. The nineteenth century, the era of the birth of our favorite machine, is an era where who sees what and why was very much contested. It is the era of the mass circulation of the image, of “art” for everyone – I say art hesitantly, because the battles of the era were exactly about what constituted art, what it should and should not do, and how mechanical processes played a role in this new form of production. Was mass art art? When art was consumed by a select few, it was contained, and such problems were within the realm of those in power anyway, so there

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<sup>4</sup> It may only be with Foucault, and his *History of Sexuality*, that we have finally, under the sign of rationality, begun to understand the meaning of these representations in their historical context.

was little reason to worry. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are thus the eras of great debate about the deleterious effects of art, of its ability to infect and contaminate, of its power as a mimetic force. It is within this milieu that the cinema became the most alarming means of representation yet devised. I now want to turn to the cinema, to understand how both in its formal properties and in terms of the content of its representations it is an obscenity; to understand, on the one hand, how the apparatus produces obscenity, how it is obscenity as such (its formal dimension) and, on the other, how the images themselves functioned, how the new form of representation worked imagistically, affectively (its contents). To understand both these dimensions, one need only look at them in terms of the dialectic of distraction and attraction, or, rather, of contemplation and immersion, of distance and closeness.

### I. Formal properties

The cinematic apparatus performs the dialectic of distraction and attraction in every projection.<sup>5</sup> This is attested to by the practice of Lumiere, amongst others, beginning performances with a static image held on screen that then, slowly, with the turning of the crank, jerks to life, begins to move. The audience comes to understand: it

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<sup>5</sup> I use the terms attraction and distraction in place of absorption and contemplation, or closeness and distance, because they are particularly suited to the discussion of early film and because they are so imbricated within one another. Distraction usually has similar connotations to attraction, that is, a forgetting of oneself – one could say this is the cinematic situation at its most basic, the problem at hand. Distraction generally means to divert or “to draw or direct (as one’s attention) to a different object or in different directions at the same time” or again “to stir up or confuse with conflicting emotions.” This is not so far from attraction, which means “the act of causing one to approach and adhere.” Thus, distraction connotes a distance brought on by fragmentation, attraction a closeness that connotes unity. Distraction is not, then, even though I will sometimes ally it with contemplation or contemplative space, the same thing. Contemplative space, as in what is generated by a painting or photograph, is prior to cinematic perception, but also underlies and girds it. The dialectic I am describing here, then, runs thus: attraction brings the spectator in, interest in coming closer to one particular aspect, be it a content or the novelty of the apparatus itself, but the multiplicity the cinema provides, as such, the very fact of movement itself, prevents any one aspect becoming dominant and completely absorbing the spectator. He/she is always moving, latching onto one aspect/object, being brought close, and then drawn away again. Both terms, in a sense, complete each other and describe the same process or movement.

is the still photograph that makes this performance possible, it is (somehow, they may or may not understand the technical components themselves) from the still photograph that movement springs. The cinema comes at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, after more than a half-century of photographic practice, after more than a half-century of increasing distribution and circulation of still (mechanically produced) images. Just as the still photograph, then, the single frame, is the unconsciously visible reality that makes cinematic movement possible (minimal difference, almost-stillness, plus speed equals movement), the space generated by the photograph itself, culturally, the training of half a century of learning contemplative space is the girding that supports and allows, makes possible, cinematic perception. The space of contemplation is the space of distraction, of becoming distracted, slowly but surely. The photograph provided too much detail, an overabundance that caused the observer's eye disquiet, moving from one discreet entity to another – the birth of modern vulgarity in the arts. But the verisimilitude guaranteed attraction, a need or compulsion to return. Attraction and distraction in this sense were the very components of a contemplation. The photograph was still a relatively small object, able to be kept at arm's length, it occupied space differently, perhaps, but was generally of the same order as sculpture or painting, of the other arts. As the photograph was assimilated into high art or to scientific ends, came the stereoscopic slide: in the frozen tundra of two and a half dimensions, the viewer enters the scene with blinders on, brought near by the illusion of depth and the exclusion of stimuli external to the work itself. Distraction and attraction are amped up to a new level – the observer is brought into the work, attracted, by this new level of verisimilitude, guaranteed by a new space generated and a new level of privacy in viewing, but totalization is kept at a distance by

the superabundance of detail, by the uncanniness of the dimensionality and the perceptual strain involved in being immersed, so closely, in a static, yet deep, vision. The stereoscope becomes the mass art *par excellence* of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but as the dialectic again starts to be mastered, enter cinema. Cinema displaces the depth and reality-effect of the stereoscope into movement, the private vision into a communal one (we are speaking of the cinematograph, not the mutoscope or kinoscope here). The visions become all encompassing not due to size, assuredly the stereoscope seemed larger than the first projected images, but because of community, social inclusiveness. The cinema draws people together, it projects into a social, not a private space. It grows large by being a shared experience. It becomes a form of relation. This is getting ahead of ourselves, though. For the cinema, the attraction is movement, the novelty of realistic movement, which forms the basis for all that cinema can do (the special effect). The distraction is the ultra-abundance of possibly meaningful objects set into motion – while there might be no more objects in an early film, with its (stereotypically) static shots and limited length, than in a stereograph, the very fact of movement guarantees a vulgarity unsurpassed by earlier media. Movement guarantees that more exists than the eye can take in, at least on one viewing. Little surprise then that early films were repeated over and over. Their length was guaranteed by technical limitations, but these limitations were of the eye as well as of the apparatus; distance was guaranteed in early film by bewilderment. The opening up of the image to a social dimension, however, allowed both attraction and distraction to be regulated by an experiential feedback loop, creating a space unlike that of previous contemplation, or, rather, a new kind of contemplation: mechanical or modernist, one predicated on disjunction, fragmentation, and speed.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The discourse that grew up around the stereoscope in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century was one of “What exactly are

Distance and nearness became closely related, predicated on one another, and the zone of contemplation moved from the individual cogito relating to itself via a (semi)private experience to a social experience that helped form a realm of contemplation. The social becomes the guarantee of cinematic experience, and hence the cinema becomes the first truly mass form: that is, it generates its own sociality, its own mass, it doesn't simply distribute itself into what already exists (as did the stereoscope and the mass of industrialized labor).

This thumbnail explication is, in a sense, only intended to make evident that the cinema is predicated on a kind of death. The dialectic I speak of, which in some ways I'm relating to a dialectic running throughout art/technological discourse during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, is in fact fundamentally new, or rather, uses said discourse as a basis, uses the technological facts of the previous century (the frozen nature of still photography) as a basis, and explodes out from there. The fixing and mastery of "the real," of images reproducing the world in detail by pure reflection, rather than refraction (absent of consciousness), this death of the real, the revelation of the world to the world (en masse) as object, the masses, or rather, the individual observer as subject to the newly objectified world viewed, this is the necessarily flexible base onto which cinematic emulsion is poured. The dialectic of the cinema is a confusion of the modes of subject and object, a

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we seeing?" That is, the main social arena for debate about the stereoscope was centered on what the nature of the image was, exactly, since it could only be viewed by one person at a time. Even in the case of multi-viewer stereoscopes, it is a question of what is seen, because the nature of the apparatus is such that it relies on the individual perceptual system for its effect. Put more simply, in stereoscopy your head is as much part of the apparatus as is the card and viewer, for the effect is formed within your brain, not "out there" somewhere. It requires two eyes set just so to view properly. Thus discourse often centered around trying to discover what an ideal stereograph would be, in an attempt to create a shared, communicable experience: how far should the images be set, what parallax, what photographic conditions, etc. creates the "ideal" view. Cinema displaced all this idealism into a communal realm, allowing it to be worked out between actual perceivers, rather than in the realm of discourse. Stereoscopy turned to philosophy to understand itself as a medium; cinema was from the start phenomenological and existential (that is, socially based in what is, rather than what should be).

reversibility that runs from one to the other and back, a liminal state (what Bataille designates as spirit, or, alternately, as the subject/object). For Bataille, relationality to death is the guarantee of humanity, of human history, even – not the work of mastering death, as for Freud, but something more general, a relation with death. Work is the main means of establishing this relation, and sacrificial modes, or holy spaces, are the means of maintaining the relation: sex (for oneself) and death (of others for “oneself”) are ways of reestablishing intimate, imminent relations with Bataille’s real, the pre-human realm of “profound continuity,” an animal state prior to subject and object, in which time is abolished and we are like “water in water,” a pre-history. The sacred and sacrifice are means of leading us back to this origin, this authentic foundation that serves as guarantee of humanity only insofar as it can be contained through contact – it serves as the foundation of the real, but we, as humans, want to extend our longevity (the real foundation of work, the reality of work as such, putting off the inevitable, distancing ourselves from chaotic continuity through endless elaboration of our environment). Thus life becomes the setting up of barriers to death (or continuity), which, paradoxically, is what generates desire; work delays the vortical fall into the abyss, which is all that is ever really wanted (to become part of the continuity of others beyond where others can be distinguished). The festival is the space of the suspension of work, where all is permitted. Religiosity is the management system for these desires, or was, for thousands of years. Sex and sacrifice bring us close to our desire, and enjoyment is in proportion to the edge of the abyss, to the immanence of death and a return to pure otherness – the rest of life becomes a way of managing this contact to extend it for the longest possible time.

In a sense, life is the enjoyment of our demise, or, in a more Lacanian sense, the continual search for an originary state always already lost to us.

How does this relate to cinema? Let us imagine the pre-modern world, the pre-industrialized world, as a world, representationally speaking, where we moved like “water in water.” This is not the case, but I am using this as a fiction after-the-fact; we, in the post-modern period, cannot but enter this space except through imagination, our world is not their world, nor can it ever be again (representationally). Thus my analogies here are meant to be of another order, a once remove from Bataille’s own. The world of pre-mechanical, or rather, automatic, representational creation knew the human, as such, as its entirety. With automatic representation, as with the development of the tool and through work for Bataille, we (the West, or the masses, or humanity – this is left intentionally fuzzy) begin to discover ourselves as object. That is, the image begins to attain consciousness. The globe begins to shrink and see its own reflection. We begin to see ourselves reflected everywhere, frozen, dead, and we long for those too, those who are us but removed from us, those others of us who could very well be us, we begin to desire life for them as well. Life for the image. Representations move from being iconic, holy in themselves, that is, in the service of something (religion, or continuity in general) to being profane, the vanity of man. The rise of science and the decline of traditional religion are commensurate with this transformation of the public into a public in the thrall of its own image. In the mirror of photography, we begin to look, to see ourselves as pure objects in a way impossible for Bataille’s past (his originary moment of human as pure object), not that we become more objectified, but that the ideal or aesthetic enters into it, we are once removed from the original remove – the new element in the equation

are the masses. The automatic image opens the possibility for a global hermeneutic, for a community of man as such based on and in the image. Time, that which man “invented” to become man, or which was granted to him through work and the tool, at any rate, his key to self-conception, is reinvented in automatic representation. The post-human age is marked most distinctively by the transformation and deformation of the (Newtonian, enlightened) conception of time. With the photograph, a new kind of time is suggested and a new kind of death lurks there; we as humans go scrambling back to the drawing board (literally redrawing our conception of the human). The work of automatic representation both grants us this new conception of death and holds the keys to an authentic relationality with it, or the hopes of one: that is, cinema becomes the religion of this new kind of death, a way to interact with it and enjoy it as well as extend it.<sup>7</sup> The 20<sup>th</sup> century becomes the interaction of these two realms, the “real” and the image. The masses begin to remake themselves in light of this new humanity, thus granting even more power to the image, making it more real all the time, constituting an immaterial world that runs parallel to the material one.

The cinema is thus uncanny in a way other media are not. From the beginning, the dream of total cinema existed; that is, the formal properties of the cinema were imagined long before they were actualized, and these formal properties were imagined as a way to increase verisimilitude, as a way of naturalizing the uncanniness in a more perfect reflection (the addition of sound, of color). In this early period, however, the cinema could be justifiably condemned for being both too verisimilar and not verisimilar enough. Gorky famously decried the cinema as a dead, sealed-off world of ghosts;

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<sup>7</sup> As work extends and prolongs, makes possible, the enjoyment of the festival or of such regulated accesses to continuity, so narrativity, within the “life” or history of cinema, extends the attraction: narrativity is the work that allows the enjoyment of the pure sensation of the attraction to continue.

religious organizations and moral uplift groups decried it as being too lifelike, too vulgar, as holding power over the audience (mimetic power) due to this verisimilitude. My point being that ideas of contemplation involved a kind of death that the cinema needed for its affective power. Early cinematic spectatorship, this uncanny realm, needs to be understood as a realm of ghosts, of haunting. The cinematic object, in its confused state, mirrors what Bataille calls a subject/object, or a spirit – an animate entity that is nevertheless not fully human. The cinematic subject, I would avow, is in the same position, caught in the dialectic of distraction and attraction: part active viewing subject, part acted upon (viewed and positioned) object. The difference is a subtle one, both screen and auditorium are possible only because of this uncanny state of being, but it is different. Those on the screen are more properly ghosts, those in the audience more properly zombies – the screen holds the animated dead, the audience the semi-animate undead. Understanding early film spectatorship is an enterprise that calls for a theory of ghosts and of man caught at twilight, just this side of the vortical abyss of animal night.

We are, then, in a religious space, placed there by the cinematic apparatus. It is not the same kind of religion as the major world religions, it is, instead, closer to primitive religion, magical religion, animism or spirit veneration. Unlike them, it is more often than not unreflected on, that is, seemingly dismissed by its own practitioners, passed off as mere entertainment. But it is religious. It is elevated to that position, given its power, because of its communal character. Film viewing is an act of individual spiritual hermeneutics accomplished phenomenally or sensually rather than intellectually, but this individual work is only possible because of the group, which feeds it in unconscious ways. The additive elements constitute a group hermeneutic, which is not to

say anything substantial because the mass hermeneutic is not, by definition, a stable or rational one, it vacillates, is fragmented, it runs along the dialectic explicated above, or rather, is always constituted by singularities lighting and then going out at various points on this dialectic. In this hermeneutics of the sacred, the cinematic apparatus constitutes (or, at the very least, constituted) a sacred space, which is what the religious and moral groups intuitively understood about it, saw as a danger, even if they didn't understand it in such terms. It is a profane, or secular, sacred space, one which knows of no divinity except man himself.

## II. Contents

In the previous section, my desire was to show how the formal properties of the apparatus, at least in this restricted period (as a historical foundation), produced a sacred space. It is within contents rather than form, however, that it is easiest to see the mark of sacrifice and religiosity – that is, in death and sex we know we are close to the holy (or the continuous, the immanent). Of course, the contents under inspection here are limit cases, and chosen, so it should come as no surprise this is the case. That said, the contents of individual films are the source of specific affect and meaning on the part of the spectator – while the formal elements of cinema contribute to this, and are not necessarily separable from content on some levels (black and white versus color, for example), form is pervasive and, I hoped to suggest, undergirds any specific content with a certain system within which affects are deployed. Here I want to suggest some of the psychological mechanisms at work in the particular contents I am addressing. Genre functions as a kind of mid-level between the ground zero of attraction (what gets people into the theater in the first place, the film as event) and the metaphysical aspirations of

cinema as a space of complex mirroring, of fulfillment. Different kinds of contents do different kinds of things, and here I want to address the general dynamic, also running along the established dialectic, of viewing films of death and explicit sexuality.

Films of death generally lie at the distractive end of the dialectic and move toward attraction, while films of explicit sex lie at the attractive end and move toward distraction. Films of death lie near the desire for a freeze frame, to fix the moment when something changes, when life becomes death in some obvious way: the moment of the single frame. Death films, that deal explicitly only with the moment of death, its preparation and aftermath, invoke the compulsion to repeat, to view over again, as a way of bringing near that which is distant in its immanence, that which we can only imagine by way of the effects traced on an other. In watching an other be executed, we push the immanence of death away from us, to make it an object of knowledge, a scene for our understanding. Of course, there is no understanding to be had aside from a possible sacrificial meaning; that is, there is no deeper knowledge to death outside of structures that can make it intelligible for the others who are witnessing, not being victimized. As in Freud's version of the fort-da game, we watch as a way of assuring ourselves we know when "something" is there, and when it has gone – the act of mastery, never completed or always false, pushes us toward attraction, that is, toward coming close or bringing that which is distant near. In watching films of death, we are looking for the deepest facts of existence in the most staged of settings (in that an execution is always for others – the idea of a secret execution, then, is absurd, for punishment is always a very secondary goal). Films of death can be allied with taboo against transgression, with otherness as such made manifest and held at a distance, with a search for clarity and an understanding of bodies

as discreet entities. They are about the spectator assuring him or herself by othering another – distancing otherness in oneself, that which is immanent in all of us, our future death, or for Bataille, death that haunts every now but which lies unpotentiated. The content of execution films is the work of making that which is most near to us distant so it can be understood and assimilated (the authenticity of this process being left aside for now); it generates the pleasure of a distinct and separate ego by casting out of ourselves, provisionally, perhaps unconsciously, that which guarantees the impossibility of wholeness or of rational bodies.

Films of explicit sex, on the other hand, lie at the attractive end of the dialectic; they take what is distant from us, others and other bodies, and bring them closer. The pornographic is notoriously absorptive. Pornography is transgression, it breaks the taboo of indiscrete bodies and causes erotic confusions. Whereas films of execution show the ends of the legal, pornography, during this era at least, was strictly illegal – it is the denial of legality, of the rule of law as such and of the discretion of bodies. As opposed to the freeze frame desire for fixing a moment of knowledge, as with the executions, pornography is interested in movement, in continual sensual distraction; it is a (more mature, adolescent rather than infantile) phallic mode of pleasure.<sup>8</sup> It is a realm of illusion, of pure fantasy, founded, paradoxically, on explicit acts and “real” events; it is more “real” than films of execution because private and participatory – the realities of

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<sup>8</sup> I want to emphasize here the reversibility and imbrication within each other of both ends of the dialectic; it is often argued, for example, that pornography does want to fix something, it wants to make visible the moment of female orgasm to male viewers, as a visual guarantee or content to their necessarily empty phallicism. Thus a kind of death enters into and is necessary for an erotics, and an erotics is necessary for an experience of death as well – the freeze frame of an execution cannot involve us like a motion picture of it can, it cannot implicate us sufficiently. Thus, we are back to formal problems and the fact that both modes, distraction and attraction, exist at the same time in different registers, making film viewing a complex enterprise and resistant to rationalization (exactly my point and what I want to tease out better via the Bataille).

continuous existence are laid bare and brought to us, by us, rather than placed “out there” somewhere, in a space of others. Pornography is a space of exploring and understanding, tactilely (and again, I’m not claiming authenticity here – that is, something free of value, or problems, or representing a good) the self as other, it is about bringing that which is distant (other bodies, other kinds, sexual difference in general) closer and reveals a desire for confusions of bodies, of self and other, a desire to be at risk or at stake as a spectator. In films of explicit sex, we start close and wind up at a distance, due to the impossibility of achieving union with an image, the erotic contact we desire always alludes and returns to ourselves – we wind up farther from the image, closer to ourselves. In films of explicit (albeit virtual) death, we start at a distance, at a denial of that which comprises all of us, the immanence of death, and try to understand it as only it can be understood, placed onto others and at a remove from us; we end up absorbed, however, close to the image in that it is revealed as all we have of death, as experience, an image, hence the compulsion to repeat. We come to understand that there is no understanding except as it will be embodied for ourselves. The failure of both kinds of images send us in opposite directions: the failure of understanding death leads us to sex and its promise of manageable (that is, limited) continuity, whereas the failure of understanding or actualizing sex via the image sends us back to death, or rather, back to the pleasures of discreet bodies and the guarantee of a future they provide (a renewed sense that the ego is sufficient and encompassing).

## **Toward a Sociology of the Cinema**

Cinema has a secretive, subaltern aspect that film history proper ignores or seeks to efface. Any history needs a corpus of texts, a sample from which to draw from. The idea of a sample is laughable in film history, as anyone who has researched early film even a little will know – that which still exists, as film or as a scant description in a producer's catalog, has almost always done so through no other means than sheer luck. That is, film preservation is still in its infancy, and it would have had to have been fully grown by the late teens to have a chance at ensuring anything like a representative sample. I belabor this point only insofar as I want to highlight something about film history, about doing film history: that it is an act of imagination. By this I don't mean to suggest that it is written like fiction, that it is purely invented, each film that does survive assuredly has a history, and a context, that can be understood in and of itself. But the elaboration of the context might tell us very little, and it might also elide any attempt at meaning. My point is that film history is, in a way, closer to theology than to science. It is concerned with understanding the facts of a system, but a system that is not verifiable, that needs to be taken mostly on faith, faith being what fills in the spaces between the films; film history refers back to the same texts, the ones that have survived, and filmic pre-history is a kind of mythic storehouse, with the film historian, as she who immerses herself in these artifacts, in these traces, emerging as something more than an investigator and interpreter and a bit less than a priestess. Films are relics, parts of the body of a mode of belief that has perished or been transformed; films from this period, the period of ephemera, before anyone knew enough to take cinema seriously, exist as ghosts of a world reinventing itself. The image before it could imagine, a postfacto fiction of ideal

vision – the voyeurs of the world first went crazy for images of the body of Christ. We might understand why, historically - but what does it mean? What I'm trying to get at is that film from this period demands of us that we say something, but, as in religion, it is the demand that is foregrounded, because what can be known is almost next to nothing. Early film is about the demand of film, it is about film as power... it is about a demand that can only be answered, in some sense, by a story. This tells me that the demand is strong, that film is very powerful indeed, because stories are mankind's oldest method for warding off the void, the nothing, the traumatic. The spectators of early film were the furthest thing from babies... and yet, we could not see film *qua* film until the first histories cast this period aside, set it apart, and created a narrative about narratives. Bastardizing Lacan, the mirror stage arrived all in a piece, that is, the mirror stage is what was until it could be shattered by industrial practice, narrativity, call it what you will. There exists within cinema the minoritarian mode, though, that calls back to early film, the film as/of mirrors, the space of dazzlement and forgetting, of new ways of knowing.

I do not know what I want when I conceive of what a proper "sociology of cinema" would be. I only know I am very dissatisfied with the way sociology has approached cinema until now: either as an industry (which it assuredly is) or as one amongst other mass art forms (rather than as progenitor of these other forms), a propaganda machine which tends to reflect mass desire and be reflected by it in rather simple, hazy terms. I'm not claiming an application of Bataille is any less simple or hazy. What I'm calling for, it seems, is an investigation of how mass desire functions, specific to the cinema. An investigation that would answer the questions: "What is the subjectivity of a zombie?" "What does it mean to be a subject and an object at the same

time as one is interacting with objects that behave like subjects?” “What does it mean that an audience gathers to watch ghosts be murdered over and over?” And on and on, a thousand such questions.

In the end, I can only signal a starting point – working out sacrifice on one side of the screen, how an image can function in place of a sacrifice, or as constituting a sacred or religious space, and sociology on the other side, what it means to see, to desire, and how this affects what is seen and the world around us. I feel I’ve made a gesture toward the first part of that, and look forward to digging deeper, learning more and elaborating more. The second part directs me, somewhat intuitively, I must admit, to Bataille’s notions, contained in his later work on sociology, of the acephalic social organization or society, and the notion of elective communities. What is the nature of a social organization that is without a leader, that comes together of its own will, and is firmly heterogeneous? Like Bataille, I sense the religious here, but cannot understand what that means, and I don’t understand Bataille well enough yet on these points to apply it to something that is, of course, also an industry, also a form of art, etc. But cinema is also unreal, vastly mythical. The cinema is a machine capable of making modern myths, of reinventing mythology. Bataille, more than others, takes the burden of myth seriously, treats it with respect rather than as another word for “story,” or “legend.”

*Life plays itself: Life risks itself.* Destiny’s plan is revealed. What was only a dream figure becomes myth. And *living* myth. Myth, which the dusty remains of the intellect know only as dead and consider to be a touching error of ignorance, figures fate and becomes *being*. ...

Myth ritually lived reveals no less than true being: In it life appears no less dreadful, and no less beautiful than the beloved woman on the bed where she lies naked. The shadowy light of the sacred place containing the real presence is more oppressive than that of the room enclosing the lovers; what proffers itself for knowledge is equally foreign to laboratory science in the sacred place and in the bedroom. Human existence when it is brought into the sacred place meets with that figure of destiny fixed by the

capriciousness of *luck*: The *determinate laws* defined by science are the opposite of this game of fantasy that makes up life. This game draws away from science and coincides with the frenzy that generates figures of art. But whereas art acknowledges the final reality and the superior character of the real world that constrains man, myth enters into human existence like a force demanding that *inferior* reality submit to its rule. ... Myth is born in ritual acts concealed from the static vulgarity of a disintegrated society, but the violent dynamic belonging to it has no other object than the return to a lost totality. Even if it is true that the repercussions are critical and transform the face of the world ... its political repercussion can only be the result of existence. That such projects are vague is only the paradoxical expression of how disconcertingly new is the direction necessary at the paradoxical moment of despair.<sup>9</sup>

Cinema is living myth, certainly more related to modes of being than modes of art. It forms and is formed by the masses, as is myth, as is politics (fascism and cinema both fulfill the desire for mythic transport). For those of us who love cinema, can we not consider the space of rapture generated by a star's visage, or even the image as such, a space of the beloved? A sacred space? Where Bataille called for, and enacted (albeit in a fragmented, a-totalizing way) a "sacred sociology," I desire, and hope to understand the stakes of, a "sacred cinematology."

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<sup>9</sup> From "The Sorcerer's Apprentice" reprinted in The College of Sociology 1937-39, Denis Hollier ed. pp.22-3.