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Shakespeare and the cinema of excess

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**COMPULSORY DECLARATION**

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

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## Abstract

This dissertation examines the notion of excess in film adaptations of Shakespeare's plays. It takes its critical approach from the work of Georges Bataille, who used "eroticism" to describe a confrontation with excess that destabilises the individual's sense of identity. Bataille suggests that art can allow audiences to experience a measure of eroticism by presenting subjects that transgress established taboos and by undermining the formal conventions that allow the audience to interpret the text. This dissertation examines these ideas through an analysis of Julie Taymor's *Titus* and Roman Polanski's *Macbeth* from the perspective of Bataille's writing on transgression, taboos, and excess. By doing a comparative reading of each play and film, I will examine the meaning of excess in these plays and how this has translated to screen, as a way of demonstrating the fresh perspectives that Bataille's analysis opens up on Shakespeare's work.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction: Shakespeare, excess, and Georges Bataille

“The dream of reason brings forth monsters.” – Title of an etching by Francisco de Goya

“It is difficult for a mortal man to win against a god.” – Homer, *The Odyssey*; quoted in a book on Goya (Wilson-Bareau 19)

It takes a certain kind of madness to attempt an academic reading of Georges Bataille. This French contrarian has been variously described as “a novelist”, “a literary man”, “a philosopher”, “a poet, a historian of art, an economist, a theologian, a political theorist”, “an anthropologist”, and “a social philosopher” – and all by a single critic attempting to categorise the subject of his study for the benefit of his readers (Richardson 24). The superfluity of designations is appropriate, however; as will become clear in the course of this dissertation, the only clarity readers should expect is that, where Bataille is concerned, it is futile to expect clear and simple answers to any questions, regardless of how simple they may at first appear. As Alan Stoekl writes, “Rather than manifesting a unity, Bataille’s text is in fact *incoherent*. By this we mean that the heterogeneity of his text, rather than falling away, is tenacious to the point of disrupting any project” (“Review of Robert Sasso” 1263 [original emphasis]).

In the book on Goya quoted above, the author compares Goya to Beethoven in terms of his “potent energy and variety of his art” (Wilson-Bareau 19). More significantly for our purposes, she also compares Goya “to the ancient sea-god Proteus, whose divine force and changing appearance ... made him invincible and able to deceive mortals” (19). Bataille himself wrote about Goya in *The Tears of Eros*, comparing him to the Marquis de

Sade and declaring that “Goya, unlike Sade, did not associate pain with sensuous pleasure. However, his obsession with death and pain contained a convulsive violence that approximates to eroticism. But eroticism is in a sense an outlet, an infamous outlet for horror” (132). The word “eroticism”, invoked here quite casually, is a rich and complex term that will recur throughout this dissertation, but for the moment I would like to consider the peculiar constellation of people and ideas that have been evoked so far. Why has Bataille, in this analysis of the Spanish painter, decided to describe Goya’s work in terms of “pain”, “death”, “a convulsive violence”, and “sensuous pleasure”? Moreover, why does he link the term “eroticism” to “violence” and “horror” rather than “pleasure”, which he has specifically excluded as an element of the painter’s work? Finally, what is the significance of Goya, the painter, or De Sade, the writer, for Bataille’s own theories, and what demands does he make of each artist’s work?

It is significant that Bataille finds it worthwhile to express his ideas in the form of art and literary criticism, that he draws little distinction between the psychologies and intentions of the artists, and that he manages in a few short paragraphs to focus a variety of technical, formal, and psychological questions through the prism of a pre-existing set of ideas. It should also be noted that what Bataille is doing here is not to consider the work of artists or writers from a disinterested position, or to limit himself to questions that focus on genre or medium, but to give an idiosyncratic account of how some key ideas may help audiences respond to the same elements expressed in different forms, media, and styles.

At the end of this dissertation, I will attempt to give a clear and coherent account of my conclusions. For the moment, however, I would like to quote the book on Goya again, as this contains a disclaimer about interpretation that is as applicable to Bataille as it is to Goya, or to anyone reading Bataille today: “Every age has to interpret great artists according to its own ideals and feelings, its preoccupations and fears, in tune with prevailing cultural affinities between present and past, emphasising what is interesting and ignoring what does not stir current passions” (19). When he wrote *The Tears of Eros*, Bataille enjoyed the advantage of being an established critic and polemicist. As such, he could assume a measure of sympathy from his audience. I, on the other hand, can make no such assumption on his behalf or mine, but I hope to show why any response to Bataille should be particularly wary of the question of interpretation and coherence.

Rather than taking the entire history of art as my subject, I will appropriate Bataille’s critical approach and interpretive strategies to discuss film adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays. In particular, I want to examine the notion of excess, which plays a crucial part in Bataille’s comments about eroticism, which in turn is a term he uses in various contexts including commentary on art and aesthetics. This choice of subject matter also adds another layer of significance to the foregoing comments about interpretation, as both the critical text (Bataille) and the artistic texts (the two films) are already translations of ideas originally found in another form: Bataille’s French text and the Early Modern plays of Shakespeare. It should

also be noted that other readers of Bataille may well disagree about the correctness of my approach.

The subject of my analysis is Julie Taymor's *Titus* and Roman Polanski's *Macbeth*, two film adaptations of Shakespeare plays that overflow with violence and threatening sexuality and thus seem especially suited to an analysis of excess. By performing a comparative analysis of both plays and films based on a reading of Bataille, I will examine the meaning of excess in these plays and how this has been translated to screen in order to demonstrate how Bataille's writing adds to our understanding of an important aspect of Shakespeare's work. I will begin by providing an overview of Bataille's analysis of eroticism as a confrontation with excess and my strategy for applying relevant examples of the dynamic between taboo and transgression to the plays and films.

Bataille bases many of his arguments on an opposition between the rational domains of civilisation and society, characterised by taboos, and the irrational domain of excess, represented by the urges that taboos aim to control. In his book about *Eroticism*, he distinguishes between a natural economy that is "essentially extravagant" and a social economy based on rational principles of restraint, which applies "the narrow capitalist principle" – profit and loss, supply and demand – to all its dealings with the world (86, 60). It was this extravagance that humans attempted to escape through concentrated, conscious effort aimed at achieving specific ends – an idea that he articulates with the term "work".

For Bataille, work represents not only productive labour aimed at producing an object that can be bought, sold, and consumed, but also "the

realm of calm and rational behaviour” that “reduced everything to order” and “demands the sort of conduct where effort is in a constant ratio with productive efficiency” (53, 45, 41). By contrast, violence represents the forces that undermine “the rhythm of work regulated by rational factors” (44). Bataille suggests that the birth of civilisation coincided with the first human attempts to escape violence – that is, to escape “the excessive domination of death and reproductive activity ... under whose sway animals are helpless” (83). To do this, early humans set up taboos to “combat violence” and, in so doing, “make work possible” (42, 68). He summarises this as follows:

Man intended to curb nature when he set up taboos in opposition [to natural impulses] and indeed he thought he had succeeded. When he confined the violent urges of his own nature within bounds he thought he had done the same for the violence in the world outside himself. (67)

However, Bataille argues that people can never completely eradicate excess and that they retain “an undercurrent of violence” that leaves them vulnerable to desire and excess (40). Despite humanity’s best efforts, someone can at any moment “be mastered anew” by violence – specifically, the violence “of a rational being ... who succumbs to stirrings within himself which he cannot bring to heel” (40). Instead, societies’ attempts to limit excess gave rise to the complex dynamic he calls eroticism: a constant tension between the need for control and the urge to excess that is fuelled by individuals’ inability to categorically affirm or deny the taboo.

The Marxist critic S.C. Shershow describes this opposition between restrictions and exuberance, or restraint and excess, and then uses it

further to address the question of interpretation and the broader implications of Bataille's analysis:

Bataille elaborates ... a theoretical opposition between what he calls "restricted" and "general" economies. In brief, a "restricted" economy assumes that the central economic issue is *scarcity*, and thus emphasizes production, accumulation, and the profit or "return" that may be expected from all economic practices. A "general" economy, by contrast, assumes that the central economic issue is *surplus*; and therefore emphasizes gifts, sacrifices, and reckless expenditures, with the prospect of loss without return or reserve. (246 [original emphasis])

He represents this opposition as crucial to Bataille's work, which "announces a profoundly radical critique of traditional Western standards of representation and knowledge" (247). While Shershow casts his appropriation of this critique in Marxist terms, I would suggest that the excess in Bataille's argument cannot entirely be contained within Marxist theory, if only because Bataille's restless imagination and language offers an overabundance of interpretive opportunities. As I will demonstrate below, this boisterousness is reflected in Bataille's terms, including "eroticism", which tend to be rather idiosyncratic and amorphous; I will discuss each of the following words in more detail below, but it should be noted early on that Bataille redefines the sacred, excess, eroticism, continuity, and discontinuity in wholly counterintuitive ways.<sup>1</sup> In order to give an account of this excess, I will begin by describing Bataille's general approach before looking at specific key terms.

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<sup>1</sup> One result of this is that, in this dissertation, I will not be able to use the word "continuity" to refer to the consistency of objects, people, or time over consecutive shots of a film, and eroticism should always be read as "eroticism in Bataille's sense".

Bataille's depiction of eroticism represents one of his attempts to describe excess and its meaning. The term also reflects the exuberance of the general economy, which itself is simultaneously embodied and described in Bataille's work. Paul Hegarty, in his study of Bataille, notes that a system is generally thought of as "something external to its elements, insofar, at least, as it organises them", and he notes that Bataille's disruption of this idea has its roots in Hegel, who conceives of the system itself as "the means of truth" (20). Hegarty notes that, in this conception of a system, "truth can only come about as part of a dynamic – so the system is not static, but is systematic movement" (21). This conception relates to Bataille's project inasmuch as he uses "the general economy" to describe "a system which seeks to account for what is other (heterogeneous) and to 'be other' in the way it is written" (Hegarty 32).

Accordingly, Bataille's approach to writing and his choice of subject matter often mean that he includes elements that seem irrelevant, confusing, or contradictory. Moreover, although a text may use terms from other texts and refer to these texts explicitly, it is also a new (non-)project and may very well contradict comments elsewhere; alternatively, texts that seem to agree with one another may be written at cross-purposes. Regarding this superfluity of projects and entry points, Hegarty says:

... one of the particularities of [Bataille's] writing is that there are numerous start and end points, as well as many possible central notions. Both at the level of the content of the essays produced and that of the theories within them we can see the irreducibility of the "system" – it cannot be formed into a genuine system, but everywhere you look there are points of linkage. (7)

In *Theory of Religion*, Bataille describes this poetically as follows: “A philosophy is never a house; it is a construction site”; moreover, “the incompleteness is not restricted to the lacunae of thought; at every point, at each point, there is the impossibility of the final state” (11). This creates a series of contradictions and tensions in his writing, which in turn is amplified by the competing interpretations of each of his readers and their ideologies.

In addition to this conceptual excess, various textual habits also make Bataille’s work challenging: he constantly contradicts himself, corrects himself, or circumscribes his previous comments in a way that threatens to make them meaningless. Whereas one paragraph may have momentarily held out the promise of stable meaning – if only at first glance – the one that follows may throw the reader back into the confusion of tragedy, comedy, eroticism, laughter, and death. It should be noted, however, that Bataille is not oblivious to the effect of this manoeuvre, and may well be laughing, either with or at the reader. Thus he presents to his reader a theory that is always in flux, always provisional, and always under erasure, regardless of how forcefully each individual idea is expressed. Thus when dealing with a concept that contains a myriad of complexities, even more spring up when you begin to outline his theory and find yourself having to negotiate equally complex terms such as homogeneity, sovereignty, the sacred, and a variety of other words that have been redefined and used to express complex ideas.

This illustrates the constant tension between fragmentation and integration in Bataille’s writing. For example, Michael Richardson claims

that “Serious students of Bataille’s work need to engage with it in its totality, since Bataille hated the idea of completion or closure and his fragments and rambling ruminations are often as important as his more coherently developed work” (134). This is a paradoxical instruction, to be sure; if Bataille hated completion and closure, why should our own response seek to be conclusive and authoritative? Because each reading is a rewriting or recasting, it involves the disavowal of certain aspects in favour of others; but how is it possible to limit a collection of texts as polymorphous and resistant to interpretative strategies as Bataille’s when the author and the texts themselves so vehemently resist clarification, exclusion, and simplification?

Bataille justifies his disavowal of clear systems of knowledge in a way that reiterates the aforementioned contrast between the whole and its parts – and, typically, in a way that resists interpretation. In a characteristically convoluted phrase, he explains the importance of finding new ways to engage with the world, which should differ completely from existing philosophical systems: “What is offered the reader, in fact, cannot be an element, but must be the ensemble in which it is inserted: it is the whole human assemblage and edifice, which must be, not just a pile of scraps, but rather a self-consciousness“ (*Theory of Religion* 9). As I will demonstrate below, the exact nature of this self-consciousness remains uncertain, particularly given Bataille’s insistence that some insights only have value if they are somehow unaware of their own meaning (10).

Bataille’s interest in eroticism and excess as expressions of the general economy encourages him to write in ways that defy attempts to

assign fixed meanings to things, which in turn reflects his mistrust of clearly structured and formulated systems of knowledge. Richardson describes the character of Bataille's work by explaining that he believed "knowledge had an inherent ability to undermine itself" (vii), "refused in the most emphatic way any idea of absolute truth", and "assumed that if there was any truth at all it was that anything that claimed the status of truth was, by definition, false" (viii). In *Theory of Religion* he expresses his objections to philosophy in terms of shadows and substance, that is in a way that explicitly recalls Plato's notion of the cave and ideal forms, but he subverts this image by equating philosophical systems with shadows or "isolated opinions" and defining truth instead as a "movement of thought": "Everything invites one to drop the substance for the shadow, to forsake the open and impersonal movement of thought for the isolated opinion" (9-10). I will return to the content of this statement below, because it is noteworthy for a number of reasons, but first I would like to address the dynamic of self-undermining that is at work in these statements.

This dynamic is visible throughout Bataille's writing: having said something, having committed an idea to paper, he continually attempts to rephrase, retract, or limit its interpretation. But this also has a cumulative effect, in so far as it leaves the reader with innumerable definitions of the same terms and ways of explaining, expounding, or expressing the same thought, generally in a way that does not cohere – or, more accurately, fails to build into any discernible project. In this way, Bataille's writing recalls the strategies of deconstruction, which can also be illustrated through the intellectual tactic of erasure, where a statement is

simultaneously made and retracted but then reinscribed and left, as it were, in the text as a marker of its own absence. What distinguishes Bataille's writing from the relative discipline of deconstruction is that it does not simply refer to other texts and discourses through its use of incongruous registers and vocabularies; instead, it superimposes layers upon layers on each other without allowing any reconciliation. Whereas poststructuralists are concerned with making explicit the limits of language and systems of language, Bataille appears to want to write a vanishing text which leaves nothing in its place and, through its radically destabilising effect, may even serve to unwrite other texts.

In another fine illustration of his style, he then goes on to complicate this sentiment even further in the same extract from *Theory of Religion*, by retracting it and then qualifying both previous positions: "Of course the isolated opinion is also the shortest means of revealing what the assemblage essentially is – the impossible. But it has this deep meaning only if it is not conscious of the fact" (10). Thus the isolated opinion reveals the whole, and the whole is impossible, but the isolated opinion only has meaning if it is not conscious of "the fact".<sup>2</sup> What this means is that a philosophical system contains both truth and untruth, but truth only to the extent that it remains unaware of itself in some way; or perhaps it means that the isolated opinion only reveals the assemblage as impossible if it is unaware that it is revealing the assemblage as impossible. In this sentence, the meaning of the sentence

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<sup>2</sup> Also: What fact is he referring to in this last phrase? The fact that the isolated opinion reveals the whole, or that the whole is impossible, or that what reveals this impossible whole is only an isolated opinion rather than a deep truth? This whole sentence is a puzzle that cannot be solved.

is obscured by words, but the truth is revealed through the movement of thought or of exchange, the refusal of stable meaning, and the syntax that builds and then subverts its own meaning. Given that he has previously dismissed the value “isolated opinion”, what are his readers to make of the subsequent prevarications? After this barrage of ideas and contradictions, the reader is given little opportunity to find stable meaning in this text.

This is characteristic of Bataille’s thought, and, while it may be intellectually justifiable, this is one of his least endearing traits to readers wishing to make sense of him. It also illustrates part of what will become troublesome to anyone who wishes to attempt a systematic reading of Bataille – namely that this is simply not possible.

Bataille’s preoccupation with exuberant expenditure – the excess of nature, expressed in the form of gifts, waste, and squandered resources – also affects his strategy for attempting to describe the notions of eroticism and excess. He frequently adopts a strategy of excess in his writing and encourages his readers to adopt interpretative strategies that acknowledge this stylistic or formal excess. As a result of this strategy, there is always something of the Ouroboros<sup>3</sup> about his work – the “emblematic serpent ... with its tail in its mouth continually devouring itself and being reborn from itself” – and, at the same time, there is always something left over that cannot be reconciled within the whole (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*). However,

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<sup>3</sup> The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* usefully explains that the Ouroboros “expresses the unity of all things, material and spiritual, which never disappear but perpetually change form in an eternal cycle of destruction and re-creation” – a near-perfect metaphor for Bataille’s writing.

rather than being an error or an incidental characteristic of the writing, this excess is central to his approach to eroticism.

For example, Bataille argues in his essay about Salvador Dali's painting "The 'Lugubrious Game'" that this painting expresses the frustration of being unable to make sense of something:

Intellectual despair results in neither weakness nor dreams, but in violence. Thus abandoning certain investigations is out of the question. It is only a matter of knowing how to give vent to one's rage; whether one only wants to wander like madmen around prisons, or whether one wants to overturn them. To halfheartedness, to loopholes and deliria that reveal a great poetic impotence, one can only oppose a black rage and even an incontestable bestiality; it is impossible to get worked up other than as a pig who rummages in manure and mud uprooting everything with his snout – and whose repugnant voracity is unstoppable. (Bataille, *Visions of Excess* 24 [sic.] )

It is a fine example of text that simultaneously investigates and provokes "intellectual despair". He begins by saying that such despair can either result in "a black rage" or "an incontestable bestiality" (without giving his reasons), and he ends the article by claiming that he himself would like "to squeal like a pig before [Dali's] canvases", even if by doing so he would push the "bestial hilarity" of violence "to its furthest point" (28). Together, these statements suggest that the appropriate response to an intellectual quandary is a voracious, bestial – that is, irrational – search for meaning. At the same time, it appears that he is giving his readers permission to rummage in the intellectual prison – of his own work, or Dali's, is uncertain – alongside the rest of the madmen.

Other critics have remarked on Bataille's linguistic and stylistic excess. According to Richardson, Bataille "forces us to consider the extent to which our analysis may serve to reduce and domesticate the wildness of

thought and so deprive it of the fascination appropriate to it” (vii). This is the power of excess, eroticism, and the general economy – the refusal of stable, useful, received ideas in favour of a relentless dynamism of thought. In other words, knowledge is not an idealised state to be attained but a restless and insatiable method of approaching any subject.

Allan Stoekl provides a pertinent description of Bataille’s terminology, and his project generally, in his introduction to *Visions of Excess*, when he writes that “Bataille’s ‘terminology’ itself (and his ‘theory’ as well) is fundamentally unstable, not only in these early writings, but in everything he wrote. The very term *heterogeneous*, positively valued in the early writings, later ... comes to indicate what seems to be the exact opposite” (xiv). In other words, Bataille has formulated a theory of excess which is itself excessive, which claims as its purview everything in existence, and which leaves no stable vantage point from which to make grand ideological gestures, while simultaneously acknowledging and dismissing the idea that this may be the grandest ideological gesture of all. Eroticism is only one name that Bataille gives to this complex dynamic, which itself incorporates a myriad of other, equally ambiguous and evasive notions.

When faced with this linguistic and focal excess, it may be tempting to dismiss Bataille’s writing as simply convoluted or perplexing. However, a more appropriate description might be protean: it is characterised by a persistent urge to undermine lucidity and stability, and at the instant that comprehension seems within your grasp, the argument transforms and wrests itself away. Likewise, the structure of his arguments resembles a

painting by Dalí or Escher in the sense that each of his arguments contains two or more equally valid perspectives or ways of approaching it, which are drawn with remarkable clarity but coalesce in ways that make the rational coherence of the whole impossible.<sup>4</sup> Again, this is as much an expression of eroticism as it is a way of talking *about* it. At the end of his review, Stoekl makes another important comment about the futility of attempting to consolidate Bataille's *oeuvre* into a stable system:

An incoherence of this sort (on a textual level, as well as a thematic one, since the practice of each "project" depends on its theoretical orientation...) makes a final, "profound" unity impossible, and it makes manifest, on the level of the *oeuvre*, the duality that constitutes heterogeneity, even in the earliest texts. ("Review of Robert Sasso" 1263-64)

The first step, then, is to recognise the stylistic and terminological excess at work in Bataille's *oeuvre* as an inescapable and necessary part of his programme; in other words, any discussion of Bataille's theories of excess must acknowledge that the exuberance of his writing illustrates his distrust of language and his understanding of how excess, sacrifice, communication, and the general economy are linked. Bataille's reader can learn as much about eroticism and excess from these formal and structural elements as from the content of his writing.

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<sup>4</sup> In a book about Dalí's art, Dawn Ades writes that "for Dalí perspective was a means to create not the illusion of a real scene but the reality of illusions" (17). One only needs to consider the disorienting perspective of *Christ of St. John of the Cross* to understand Ades's comments that "Dalí uses conflicting perspectives" to depict the "incompatibility" of opposing locations, thereby making it impossible for viewers to locate themselves in relation to what is depicted (18). This comparison between Dalí and Bataille is not frivolous, given Bataille's essay about the *Lugubrious Game*; Ades goes so far as to claim a close correspondence between Bataille's and Dalí's "ideas about the seduction of horror and the mechanism of repulsion" (23).

Before continuing, I would like to return to an overview of Bataille's description of eroticism. According to Bataille, every "being is distinct from all others" and "there is a gulf, a discontinuity" between individuals (12). He contrasts this sense of self-contained individuality to what he describes as "the general continuity of existence outside ourselves" (22), "a primal continuity linking [the individual] with everything that is" (15), which people experience while transgressing a taboo or experiencing some form of violence. This opposition between discontinuity and continuity describes the psychological element of eroticism in much the same way as the conflict between work and violence describes its effect in the social sphere. That is, people desperately hold fast to discontinuity because they consider all existence in individual terms – yet, at the same time, they "find the state of affairs that binds [them] to [their] random and ephemeral individuality hard to bear" and secretly "yearn for [their] lost continuity" (15). Moreover, any individual or society "can put up only a temporary resistance" to each person's "teeming energies" and "the general surge of life" (101).

Bataille considers the transgressive act a significant event for the individual because everyone who participates in it gains access to a higher mode of existence that he calls "the sacred".<sup>5</sup> This is not the realm of religious faith, but rather a state of being brought about by an intense personal confrontation with discontinuity and continuity – that is, a

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<sup>5</sup> In an essay entitled "The Sacred", Bataille describes the sacred as being "only a privileged moment of communal unity, a moment of the convulsive communication of what is ordinarily stifled" (*Visions of Excess* 242). In the rest of this dissertation I will refer to "continuity" or "the sacred" rather than "communication", and to the dynamic of thought and of a film's formal qualities rather than the *informe*. However, the alternative meanings remain as potential substitutes.

confrontation with the conflict between separate identity on the one hand and “full and limitless being unconfined within the trammels of separate personalities” on the other (21). Everyone’s urge to hold on to autonomous individuality is fuelled by a “desire for immortality”, a “tormenting desire that this evanescent thing [called life] should last” (15), but anyone who is transgressing a taboo also experiences the continuity of life, which confronts the person with the violent excess that threatens to overwhelm both individuals and society (21, 15). Eroticism, when brought about by an intentional transgression of a known taboo, represents a deliberate attempt to experience the sacred through a celebration of violent excess, and it can thus be described as “the disequilibrium in which the being consciously calls his own existence in question” (31). This is what Bataille refers to when he defines eroticism as “assenting to life *even in death*” (11, my emphasis) or “up to the point of death” (23). Eroticism in all its forms tries “to destroy the self-contained character of the participators as they are in their normal lives” (17) in order to replace “the individual isolated discontinuity” with “a feeling of profound continuity” (15).

Before I turn from Bataille’s overall project to apply his insights to artistic texts<sup>6</sup>, I need to acknowledge that, although it may be possible to use Bataille’s theories in a literary analysis while respecting his broader project, in many ways this would be anathema to Bataille himself. As

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<sup>6</sup> For the sake of convenience, I will use the term ‘text’ loosely, to refer to any artistic text whether in the form of drama, poetry, literature, film, or fine art. From this perspective, even an audience is a text that may be interpreted in different ways. Questions that relate to specific forms of artistic expression, notably drama and film, will be discussed in the course of this chapter.

discussed earlier, Bataille regarded rational discourse as part of the “economy of utility”, i.e. the world of work (*Eroticism* 130). For anyone wishing to apply Bataille’s analysis to film, then, the question arises: in what sense can a reading of film be said to be “Bataillian”? What are the necessary conditions to make such an amorphous thinker apply to what can often be such an insistently literal medium? And, if it is impossible to apply all of Bataille’s analysis to film, which elements of Bataille’s analysis are the most essential (to invoke a term he often used) or useful (a word he loathed)? Conversely, how much room does Bataille allow artists or writers to create works that reject reification, commodification, and other strategies that serve the interests of a stable society while denying excessive, transgressive impulses?

As the foregoing comments about Bataille’s ideas and approach have indicated, the only appropriate solution when attempting to apply his insights to other texts is to emphasise the dynamic above the content while remaining alert to the elusive quality of Bataille’s terms. One way to approach films from Bataille’s perspective is to consider the effects of an erotic experience (in Bataille’s sense) and the extent to which a film can provoke such an experience.

While it may not be possible to define a Bataillian aesthetics, or an aesthetics of excess, Bataille’s analysis suggests completely different ways to conceptualise violence and sex, and, as a result, how violence and sexuality are represented in literature and film. Bataille addresses the relationship between eroticism and art in several places, notably in *Literature and Evil*; *Prehistoric Painting: Lascaux or The Birth of Art*; and

*The Tears of Eros*.<sup>7</sup> In *Literature and Evil*, he writes that literature must acknowledge its “complicity in the knowledge of Evil” – that is, it must be aware of and acknowledge its transgressive aspects (vii-viii). Similarly, Bataille evokes the link between obscene art and erotic excess in *Eroticism* when he writes that “Obscenity is our name for the uneasiness [that] upsets the physical state associated with self-possession” (17-18). In other words, part of what is required of an artistic text for it to qualify as sufficiently Bataillian is that it should confront the viewer with images, events, or ideas that disturb them, but most crucially it needs to do so in a way that refuses to palliate the effect of this disturbance and that subverts the audience’s attempts to maintain the distance (or limit) between themselves and the subject of the work itself. In the rest of this dissertation, I use the term “erotically aware” to describe films that embody Bataille’s attitude towards excess, eroticism, or the function of art that is sufficiently destabilising.

Robert Macdonald argues that the key to applying Bataille’s theories to film lies in two aspects of Bataille’s writing: the need for art to encourage or enable communication (in Bataille’s idiosyncratic sense) (19)

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<sup>7</sup> Brook et al. dispute Bataille’s authorship of *The Tears of Eros* in *Death by a Thousand Cuts*, as they claim his co-author changed or mangled his meaning, or even that the whole text was faked (chapter 8, “Georges Bataille’s interpretation”, 222-242). As reasons they cite factual errors not found elsewhere in his work, such as the incorrect identification of the victim of *lingchi* depicted in the photographs reproduced in the work (225-227) and letters between Bataille and the editor of the work, Joseph Marie Lo Duca (229); as a result, they claim that the opinions expressed in the published work is more likely the work of Lo Duca himself (227-228). Much can be made of the authorship issues surrounding *Titus Andronicus* and *The Tears of Eros* when it comes to claims about ideal or accurate interpretations of Shakespeare or Bataille, but this is outside the scope of the current essay. For the moment, let it suffice to explain that any such claims should be regarded with suspicion and that the current essay does not hope to forward any such claims regarding either author.

and the degree to which the work destabilises stable “conceptual forms” and identity (9). Macdonald frames his argument around Bataille’s term the *informe*, which translates loosely as “formless” or “formlessness”. In an early fragment collected in *Visions of Excess*, Bataille defines the *informe* as “a term that serves to bring things down in the world, generally requiring that each thing have its form” (*Visions of Excess* 31). This formulation requires that the idea should simultaneously have form and no form. This kind of conundrum is typical, and Bataille does not mean for his readers to resolve it; whether the reader finds this gambit entirely convincing is a different question.

Macdonald places particular emphasis on the political and communal aspects of eroticism, or the way that communal experiences of excess or transgression allows for true communication. For example, he writes that “Bataille’s chief concern was with prioritising genuine human connectedness, part of his programme of making a space for the sacred in society, which, for Bataille creates social fusion” (Macdonald 17 [sic.]). Accordingly, he describes the *informe* as “a subversive textual strategy” that filmmakers can use to embody this kind of communication by disrupting genre, closure, and stable identity (9). He argues that filmmakers can use the notion of *informe* to subvert the received cultural meaning of texts by disrupting the reality of the film, confounding genre expectations, and subverting elements that support the suspension of disbelief. By “breaking down established conceptual forms” using the *informe*, he argues, filmmakers can encourage the audience to engage critically with these

received meanings “in order to challenge social homogeneity and open up the space for the sacred” (9).

Communication thus becomes another way for Bataille to express his notion of continuity, in so far as true communication occurs when someone is confronted with the radical instability that is implied by the *informe* and which is a crucial part of how individuals experience the sacred. In this formulation of the notion of eroticism, communication involves a confrontation with excess that takes the form of the sacred, instability, and continuity, and communication is enabled by the working of the *informe*. In other words, the sacred, instability, communication, and continuity become nearly synonymous.

In this way, an erotically aware film might be defined as one that facilitates this sense of communication by dealing with transgressive subject matter (that is, subject matter that deals with authorised or unauthorised transgressions against the taboo, or that encourages the destabilising of stable identity) and that presents this subject matter in a way that radically destabilises the audience’s expectations and their ability to subsume this disruption within accepted and predictable boundaries.

It should be obvious that what is required, then, is not some stable notion of eroticism that can be easily digested or enjoyed aesthetically, but an eroticism that destabilises the audience and the text itself. In the fragment where Bataille defines the *informe*, he claims that art “begins when it no longer gives the meaning of words” or ideas, “but their tasks” (*Visions of Excess* 31). This is why it is important to note that Bataille describes the *informe* not only as a word with “a given meaning”, but also a

term that performs a certain function: a notion that is defined by its effects rather than by any description he can give it (ibid.) In *Formless: A User's Guide*, Bois and Krauss outline the importance of this notion within Bataille's oeuvre, as well as for modern artistic movements, by pointing out that Bataille is less interested in the form and the content than "the operation that displaces both of these terms" (15).

Nevertheless it is important to consider the subject matter that the work confronts us with and the taboos that distinguish permitted transgressions from those that may exceed all bounds, and also the way in which it confronts the viewer and the extent to which it disrupts the stable limits that define the world of work (that is, the limits between individuals).<sup>8</sup> This task may prove to be more difficult than it initially seems, because the primary way in which a work of art performs the task of eroticism, according to Bataille, is to make it impossible to find a stable meaning for the text.

A film does not qualify as erotically aware simply by portraying images or acts of violence, excess, and degradation; it needs to do so in a way that discomfits rather than titillates the audience and that resists easy

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<sup>8</sup> For example, the same rape is represented two versions of a story: Ingmar Bergman's *The Virgin Spring* and Wes Craven's *The Last House on the Left*. But whereas the former is regarded as a thoughtful rumination on violence, the latter is often dismissed as exploitative. Similarly, in Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon*, what is separately described as a rape by two male characters – one a witness and the other the perpetrator – is later described as something completely different by the ostensible victim, a woman whose version of the same story radically subverts the preconceptions of both the audience and the two male narrators. This of course says nothing about the ability of different audiences to respond differently to the same film and to come to their own conclusions about a text or their own interpretations of events.

reification or commodification. Only in this way will a particular text be excessive in Bataille's sense, by provoking a deep and unsettling feeling of anguish in the viewer. As a result, Bataille's view on aesthetics gives additional importance to the film as performance: a text should not only represent the dynamic of taboo and transgression, violation and excess, or discontinuity and continuity, it also needs to challenge the audience in a way that undermines their attempts to stabilise or fix meaning into unchanging categories.<sup>9</sup>

The origin of the anguish that Bataille demands of art is twofold. One aspect of eroticism's effect is social: the natural excess of its participants threatens the possibility of productive labour, so societies need rules and structures to allow their members to release excessive impulses in ways that could be controlled. As a result, societies have developed complex systems of authorised transgression, where transgression becomes "a conscious infringement of the law" (*Eroticism* 74), which is often permitted or "even prescribed" (63). Bataille contends that there is "no prohibition that cannot be transgressed", going as far as to say that the "taboo is there in order to be violated" (63).

The second main effect of eroticism affects the individual, in so far as it describes the emotional response that violence and excess provokes in us. According to Bataille, there is something "at once solemn and terrifying"

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<sup>9</sup> In Macdonald's words: In "the often uncanny moment" when the *informe* "reveals that cinema's photographic verisimilitude and narrative coherence are provisional and fragile, it breaks the logical continuity and illusion of coherence of realism" and in so doing "encourages an awareness of how identity and ideology are constructed through these cinematic conventions, intertextually disrupting their power to interpolate subjectivity and to set social agendas" (119).

about violence that “fascinates us and disturbs us profoundly” (45). The combined effect of these conflicting emotions is anguish, which demonstrates our retreat from “the blind surge of life”, a “refusal or withdrawal” in response to “the dizzying succession of new birth and inevitable death” (85).

The reasons for the potency of this feeling are manifold, but an important part is the general human ambivalence towards it. Anguish, for Bataille, is a complex and highly ambiguous experience humans both long for and abhor – he describes it evocatively as “the luxury of a beloved torment” (61) – and it provokes a crisis in the consciousness of anyone who is transgressing a taboo. This crisis lasts as long as the transgression continues. It is important to understand the precise nature of this psychological disturbance, because it leads to one of the most important concepts in Bataille’s view of eroticism – namely that there are some insights that only become available by transcending self-imposed limitations and by surrendering to excess.

The question that arises is whether films can embody a strategy of representation that acknowledges eroticism or excess in a meaningful way. In particular, can film adaptations of Shakespeare’s work adopt a Bataillian approach to excess and thereby represent and critique the ideas and depictions in those texts? Moreover, is it possible for them to respond more comprehensively to the excess in Shakespeare’s texts? In the rest of this thesis I will consider two specific films in order to explore this question of aesthetic excess, and consider the effects of adopting such a strategy when

adapting a text for film and when formulating a critical response to such films.

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## Chapter 2: *Titus/Titus Andronicus*: From sacrifice to massacre

“War is to man as childbirth [or motherhood] is to woman” – Italian Fascist slogan (Eatwell 3)

“Ah, that this sight should make so deep a wound and yet detested life not shrink thereat!” (*Titus Andronicus* 3.1.247-248)

Having described Bataille’s ideas and his mode of argumentation, I will discuss how each play and film reflects different elements of eroticism and the extent to which Bataille’s description of eroticism can add to our understanding of how each filmmaker represents the violence and sexual transgressions that subsist in the plays’ subject matter. I will also examine the various strategies that the film adaptations use to interpret and represent excess, the effects of this confrontation with excess, and the way in which each film has been able to incorporate and interrogate this, especially in light of the comparisons that may be drawn between the four texts in question.

In terms of their subject matter, both *Titus Andronicus* and *Macbeth* depict acts of transgression that may disturb viewers enough to let them experience a measure of eroticism as an experience of continuity and the sacred. However, there are also thematic and formal ways in which such a confrontation can be encouraged, and these formal aspects are as important as the transgressions that are enacted on screen or on stage. In order to give sufficient weight to both form and content in relation to *Titus Andronicus*, I will begin by addressing the play’s thematic content in terms of its language and the representations of taboos, transgressions, violence, excess, discontinuity, and death. I will argue that Taymor’s adaptation of the film deals with these in a way that is sufficiently self-aware and disruptive to be

an enactment of Bataille's notion of eroticism. By describing the significance of eroticism in both subject matter (the play) and its representation or performance (the film), I hope to demonstrate that *Titus* is an excellent contemporary example of how an erotically aware text challenges the audience and confronts them with the meaning of excess. In doing so, I hope to demonstrate why an awareness of Bataille's approach to violence, sexual transgression, and excess adds significantly to a study of these features of Shakespeare's texts.

### The Play

Addressing the film's subject matter, Julie Taymor describes *Titus Andronicus* as "the greatest dissertation ... ever written on violence" in all its forms. The tension between society and representations of violence cannot be resolved, because violence continues to offend and disturb audiences – especially when it is associated with sex. This is also borne out by the history of sex on film.<sup>10</sup> The extent to which a film objectifies the characters that are victims of violence affects the viewer's emotional and moral response to a film, and it remains an important aspect of how ratings bodies like the British Board of Film Classification gauge which audiences

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<sup>10</sup> Linda Williams, in her book about the history of sexuality in American film, compares the shock of seeing violent sex in films like *Last Tango in Paris* and *In the Realm of the Senses* to the experience of watching a public screening of hard-core pornographic films like *Deep Throat*. She notes that, "Though it has recently become possible to speak of the sensuous pleasures of embodied viewing and of the shock of cinematic 'attractions,' it has not been easy to understand the sensual experiences of cinema outside the often crude parameters of the vocabulary of shock and sensation" (1).

should be allowed to see a film.<sup>11</sup> More broadly, how a filmmaker frames violence is an important consideration when judging a film aesthetically and ethically, particularly in so far as the film encourages viewers to empathise with the victims or to find vicarious pleasure in the violence on screen.

*Titus Andronicus* is a famously violent play. Its history is littered with attempts by critics to defend the Bard against his own bastard creation, to critically disown the play, as it were – as if, by comparing its language, structure, and other formal aspects to those of other Shakespeare plays, it would be possible to ascribe it to an impostor and exclude it from the canon.<sup>12</sup> Even the play’s defenders have often resorted to the argument that it was nothing more than a flawed first attempt by an inexperienced playwright – an early mistake that does not represent Our Shakespeare at his best.<sup>13</sup> For example, in 1768, Edward Capell ascribed Shakespeare’s motives for writing the play to youthful folly and a desire to pander to the audience: “Now Shakespeare, whatever motives he might have in some

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<sup>11</sup> Recently, the British Board of Film Classification banned *The Human Centipede II (Full Sequence)* for its depiction of sexual sadism for its own sake; according to the BBFC, what caused them to ban this film was its representation of “the victims in the film” as objects, which exist solely to be “brutalised, degraded and mutilated for the amusement and arousal of the central character, as well as for the pleasure of the audience” (BBFC).

<sup>12</sup> Critics who rejected sole authorship of *Titus Andronicus* to Shakespeare included Edward Ravenscroft (in an essay dated 1686), Charles Gildon (1710), Lewis Theobald (1733), John Upton (1748), Samuel Johnson (1765), George Steevens (1778), Edmond Malone (1790), G.G. Gervinius (1850), Gerald Massey (1866), Edward Dowden (1881), and John Dover Wilson (1947). See *Shakespearean Criticism, Volume 4: Titus Andronicus*, 609-684.

<sup>13</sup> Critics who dismiss it as an early work include Benjamin Heath (1765), August Wilhelm Schlegel (1808), M.C. Bradbrook (1951), and James L. Calderwood (1971). George Steevens, for example, proclaimed that the play “offers not a single interesting situation, a natural character, or a string of quibbles, from the first scene to the last” (qtd. 616). See *Shakespearean Criticism, Volume 4: Titus Andronicus*, 609-684.

other parts of it, at this period of his life wrote certainly for profit; and seeing it was to be had in this way (and in this way only, perhaps) he fell in with the current” for violent plays, such as *Tamburlaine* and *The Revenger’s Tragedy* (*Shakespearean Criticism* 614).

The violence of *Titus Andronicus* has featured prominently in the complicated explanations for why the Bard’s reputation needed to be defended against this play. Capell wrote that “every one (in short) who has had to do with Shakespeare, unite all in condemning [*Titus Andronicus*], as a very bundle of horrors, totally unfit for the stage, and unlike the Poet’s manner and even the style of his other pieces” (*Shakespearean Criticism* 615 [sic.]). William Hazlitt, describing the play in 1817, wrote that “In its kind it is full grown, and its features decided and overcharged. It is not like a first imperfect essay, but shews a confirmed habit, a systematic preference of violent effect to every thing else ...” (*Shakespearean Criticism* 618). Not only do terrible things happen to characters in the play, its language has also been criticised for fixating on the more gruesome elements of events. This is borne out by the repeated references to body parts and other images of dismemberment, as well as by repeated references to hunting and other images that portray nature as a threat. In other words, the text of the play is characterised by a type of linguistic excess, an overdetermination of meaning, in the form of repeated, almost obsessive references to the same objects. This is particularly noticeable in the *leitmotif* of the pit, as well as in the images of dismemberment, hunting, and nature as a force that threatens the safety and stability of civilisation. In this sense, the imagery of the play recalls Bataille’s analysis

of taboo and transgression where he describes the Earth as a devouring mother, nature as an untamed wilderness characterised by violence and excess, and the mother as a figure associated with violence.

In each play, characters attempt to experience continuity or are forced to confront it in different ways, either as victims or perpetrators of violence, either transgressing a taboo themselves or suffering anguish as a result of taboos that have been violated. A closer examination of these paragons of excess, whose lives are overwhelmed by violence, may reveal how an openness to excess can bring about a fuller understanding of transgression and the sacred.

In *Eroticism*, Bataille comments about the ways in which images of the mother have traditionally been associated with death – in other words, the taboos that associate the mother with images of death. This sheds new light on the representation of Tamora as someone who is brought into Rome as a caged beast, only to be set loose upon the city. Later, Lucius describes her as a beast not fit for burial within the city limits:

As for that ravenous tiger, Tamora,  
No funeral rite nor man in mourning weed,  
No mournful bell shall ring her burial;  
But throw her forth to beasts and birds to prey.  
Her life was beastly and devoid of pity,  
And being dead, let birds on her take pity. (5.3.194-199)

It is important to note that, although Lucius knows Aaron has been the main instigator of his family's suffering, he singles out Tamora's corpse for posthumous retribution as if it were the source of a contagion. In particular, he denies her the customary ceremonies and rituals (funeral rites, mourning weeds, burial) afforded to citizens, and stipulates that she should be left at the mercy of merciless, bestial nature.

What starts off with a sacrifice (a controlled and prescribed transgression against the taboo forbidding murder) soon devolves into a massacre – what Bataille might describe as an uncontrolled outbreak of violence which threatens the very existence of the social order. In this sense, *Titus Andronicus* is a good illustration of what happens when transgression exceeds the bounds set by custom. It almost represents a “return ... to animal violence” (*Eroticism* 65) that turns Rome into a “wilderness of tigers” (*Titus Andronicus* 3.1.53). I would argue that the violence that erupts reflects the instability of Titus’s Rome; in so far as society maintains the world of work by imposing strict rules governing transgression, violence can only exceed these boundaries if society itself is already in question.

Throughout the play, Tamora is described in terms that emphasise her status as the violent mother of violent children. Tamora starts the play as the mother pleading for the life of her children, but undergoes several incarnations in the course of the play: the mother who wishes revenge for the death of her offspring, who urges her children to commit acts of violence and in so doing turn Rome into a “wilderness of tigers”, who wishes to kill an unwanted infant, and who finally devours her own sons – although unwittingly. As a result, the play presents a deeply conflicted and disturbing image of motherhood that is associated with death, corruption, and insatiability. Tamora herself urges her sons to kill Bassianus with the instruction, “Revenge it as you love your mother’s life, or be ye not henceforth called my children” (2.2.114-115), and frames her desire for revenge in terms that call attention to her status as a grieving mother

(1.1.107-123; “Your mother’s hand shall right your mother’s wrong”, 2.2.121). Titus acknowledges the danger of threatening a female bear’s cubs, particularly when the bear is “in league” with “the lion” (4.1.96-100). Likewise, Lavinia compares Tamora to a tigress with two cubs (Chiron and Demetrius), whose breast-milk had turned her offspring “to marble” (2.2.142-144) and denounces her as a “bestly creature” without “grace” or “womanhood” (2.2.182). Even Aaron refers to Tamora as “the devil’s dam” after she gives birth to their illegitimate son (4.2.67). The link with the mother as destroyer is made explicit when the nurse informs Aaron that Tamora wants him to “christen” the child with his “dagger’s point” (4.2.72).

However, the cannibalistic feast that Titus prepares for Tamora makes the connection between mother and devourer unavoidable. Before Titus cuts their throats, he tells Chiron and Demetrius that he plans to “make two pasties of [their] shameful heads, and bid that strumpet, [their] unhallowed dam, like to the earth swallow her own increase” (5.2.189-191). And with his last words, before he kills Tamora, he exclaims, “Why, there they are, both baked in this pie, whereof their mother daintily hath fed, eating the flesh that she herself hath bred” (5.2.59-61).

When Bataille describes established taboos regarding motherhood, childbirth and menstruation, he argues that “horror and shame were attached both to our birth and to our death” (*Eroticism* 56). He suggests, perhaps unconvincingly, that societies have traditionally identified the corpse – “the terrifying face of death, its stinking putrefaction” – with birth, the “sickening primary condition of life” (56). Moreover, he compares the “horror” provoked by “the thought of a corpse” to the disgust provoked

by human waste and by the “obscene” “aspects of sensuality” (57). This leads Bataille to identify two sets of taboos related to our fear of corruption and decay – primary taboos surrounding death and burial, and secondary taboos regarding childbirth and menstruation. As I will discuss later in this section, Tamora is associated with burial, violence, and motherhood throughout the play, and these eventually build to a disturbing association between Tamora as mother and as harbinger of death (for example, in her guise as Revenge in Act 5).

Bataille contends that the “custom of burial” is related to the taboo “concerning the dead and death” (*Eroticism* 43). The corpse reminds us of our mortality and “a violence which [eventually] destroys not one man alone but all men” (44). The survivors share an “awe of the dead”, which arose because “Death was a sign of violence brought into a world which it could destroy” (46). The “violence” of death and corruption thus “constitutes a supernatural peril which can be ‘caught’ from the dead body”, so they “bury the corpse” to protect themselves “from its contagion” (46). The “formidable aggressive forces” that bring about “the body’s decomposition” are “threatening” (46), and the taboo “which lays hold on the [survivors] at the sight of a corpse is the distance they put between themselves and violence, by which they cut themselves off from violence” (44). He also claims that this is one of the earliest taboos and that its origin “coincided with the beginnings of work” (44).

The survivors perform “rites of mourning to appease” the deceased, because they “perceive in the horror aroused by corruption” “a hatred projected towards them” (56). This “threat of violence” embodied by the

corpse was only dissipated by “the drying up of the bones”, which signals “the pacification of [the deceased’s] spirit” (47). The dried bones become “objects of reverence” because they “put an end to the close connections between decomposition ... and death” (46). They “draw the first veil of decency and solemnity over death” because they are “free of the virulent activity of corruption” (56).

The importance of death and burial rites is signalled at the beginning of the play, when Titus enters the Andonici tomb with his remaining sons and their dead brothers. Titus’s first words are, “Hail, Rome, victorious in thy mourning weeds!” (1.1.70), and ritual becomes a key issue in this speech. Titus reproaches himself for allowing his sons “unburied yet” to “hover on the dreadful shore of Styx” (lines 86-88), to which Lucius responds by asking to sacrifice one of Tamora’s sons in order to appease the “manes” (line 98). It is unclear where this idea of human sacrifice came from, as there appears to be little or no evidence that the Romans practiced such sacrifice. In a study of Roman burial rituals and gladiatorial contests, Donald Kyle notes that “while human sacrifice was a motif in Roman literature, and while some groups within the Empire did practice it, Rome did not routinely perform human sacrifice in a conventional sense” (36); moreover, while it is unclear “whether Latins ever practiced human sacrifice in prehistory”, “by historical times any such Roman traditions had normally been stylized via effigies and surrogates” (37). Nevertheless, the ideas of sacrifice and cannibalism are significant throughout the play, which may indicate to modern viewers that the “Rome” depicted is highly fictionalised. It is less a factual Rome than a way to embody specific ideas –

a strategy that has rich potential for a study of eroticism, since the relation between the events on stage has less to do with some external, factual reality than it does with the imaginative reality of ideas, anguish, and excess.

This symbolical excess is also represented in the image of a Rome in mourning, an image which prefigures the upheavals and excess to come. The extent of the transgressions in the play, suggesting a place where the social order is at risk of being completely overturned, can be attributed at least partly to the fact that the play begins with a dead sovereign. According to Bataille, “the whole of society was under the sway of violence” for “long as the king’s body” is subject “to an active decomposition” because his death proved that “The barrier that had not saved the king from the ravages of death could not withstand the excesses that constantly endanger the social order” (*Eroticism* 67). The purpose of “funeral rites and festivities with their ordered ritual” is to allay the “minor disturbance” that usually accompanies “the subsequent sense of rupture”, but “if death prevails over a sovereign whose exalted position might seem to be a guarantee against it, that sense of rupture gets the upper hand and disorder knows no bounds” (*Eroticism* 66).

For Bataille, the same principles that affect the taboos around burial are reflected in taboos regarding childbirth, which – like death – is an expression of violence, “something excessive and outside the orderly course of permitted activity” (54). Bataille suggests childbirth and death share a degree of corruption and decay, and identifies “links between excreta, decay and sexuality” that correspond to the links between corruption and

death (58). Quoting St Augustine's dictum that "we are born between faeces and urine", he argues that "The sexual channels are also the body's sewers; we think of them as shameful and connect the anal orifice with them" (57-58).

Here especially it is important to note Bataille's tendency to consistently complicate matters – for himself, for the reader – by insisting on factual, scientific, or anthropological evidence for his arguments. Far from being a reliable basis for an argument, however, these can often turn out to be as untrustworthy as his language. While his arguments about taboos surrounding motherhood and childbirth are useful in this context, I would hesitate to claim that this view is supported by anthropological evidence.

Bataille suggests that "degradation is one of the effects of violence" (54). Because "blood in itself is a symbol of violence", several secondary taboos "spring from the general horror of violence" associated with blood and degradation, including "the taboos associated with menstruation and the loss of blood at childbirth" (53-54). From this, Bataille draws another comparison – this time between the corpse and the mother. Childbirth, like death, is "a rending process" that wrenches us out of our predictable lives and reveals the excess of nature (54), so the mother and the corpse are reminders that "life is the huge movement made up of reproduction and death" and that it "brings forth ceaselessly, but only in order to swallow up what she has produced" (85-86). This leads Bataille to draw the following conclusions about reproduction:

Life is a swelling tumult continuously on the verge of explosion. But since the incessant explosion constantly

exhausts its resources [through extravagant spending], it can only proceed under one condition: that [the beings] whose explosive force is exhausted shall make room for fresh beings coming into the cycle with renewed vigour. (59)

In this sense, then, reproduction itself becomes a symbol of the general economy, producing ceaselessly and without any concerns for restraint or usefulness. As mentioned earlier, Tamora represents the threatening mother, but she is also a sexually assertive woman. This duality – transgressive sexuality and the threat of contagion which the taboo aims to control – is constant, and is one more way in which the dynamic of eroticism is embodied in the play.

An important image in this regard is the pit, which recurs throughout the play. In Act 2, Scene 2, when Chiron and Demetrius meet their mother in the woods, Tamora claims that Lavinia and Bassianus had threatened to throw her into a pit filled with all manner of creatures that, according to Jonathan Bates, “are associated with evil, foreboding and death” (*Titus Andronicus* 174). At the end of this scene, Tamora tells her sons to dispose of Bassianus’ body in “some secret hole” (2.2.129), which turns out to be the same hole Quintus and Martius will fall into in the next scene.

Moreover, in so far as the pit that Aaron digs to trap Martius and Quintus is described as both a womb and a grave, something you come from and return to, I would argue that in the course of the play the pit becomes closely associated with these taboos and the experience of continuity that results from eroticism. Almost every character mentions this particular pit: Tamora refers to it as “this abhorred pit” (2.2.98); Chiron calls it simply “the hole” (2.2.186); Aaron refers to “the loathsome pit” (2.2.193);

Saturninus first calls it a “hole” (2.2.246), then a “gaping hollow of the earth” (2.2.249), and finally a “wound” (2.2.262); Quintus refers to it as a “subtle hole” (2.2.198); and Martius calls it an “unhallowed and bloodstained hole” (2.2.210), a “detested, dark, blood-drinking pit” (2.2.224), and a “fell devouring receptacle” (2.2.235). Likewise, Lavinia begs Tamora to be “a charitable murderer” and to throw her into “some loathsome pit” rather than allow Chiron and Demetrius to rape her (2.2.178, 176). Later, when Tamora appears to Titus in the guise of Revenge, she deliberately invokes this injury by referring to a “hollow cave”, “lurking place”, “vast obscurity”, “misty vale” (5.2.35-40), and “guilty caves” (5.2.52).

Although many commentators have pointed to this wordiness as a flaw, the tautological and descriptive excess is integral to the play’s meaning.<sup>14</sup> The first thing to note is the frequency with which the pit is described in words that evoke the flesh. Three people refer to the pit as “mouth”: Quintus describes the pit for the benefit of the audience, then

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<sup>14</sup> Regarding the language, Charlton complains:

In *Titus Andronicus* the standard of moral currency most in use is “honour”.... But it is utterly impossible to define the content of the moral concept implied, and quite impossible therefore to assess its potency as a moral agent in motivating action. Titus is “dishonoured” because his sons do not immediately obey his edict, and no less “dishonoured” because Bassianus, with what appear to be highly honourable intentions, marries Titus’ daughter.... The audience, with more justice than Falstaff, may well enquire “what is this honour?” The play gives no answer, for nothing consistently recognisable as “honour” animates its action. (*Shakespearean Criticism* 641)

Martius compares it to the mouth of the river Cocycus<sup>15</sup> (2.2.236), and, finally, Aaron includes it in the letter he writes to incriminate Martius and Quintus (2.2.273). Martius also refers to “the ragged entrails of this pit” (2.2.230). It should also be noted that these body parts are vulnerable and suggest an ability to suffer injury: mouth and gut are made of soft tissue and are vulnerable to violent penetration of different kinds. More important is the way that Quintus’ description recalls the image of a *vagina dentata*:

What subtle hole is this,  
Whose mouth is covered with rude-growing briars  
Upon whose leaves are drops of new-shed blood  
As fresh as morning dew distilled on flowers?  
A very fatal place it seems to me. (2.2198-202)

Martius explicitly associates the bloodstained pit with a maiden when he says, “So pale did shine the moon on Pyramus when he by night lay bathed in maiden blood” (2.2.231-232), a combination of images that suggests the deflowering of a virgin girl. Once this underlying feature becomes clear, it becomes tempting to read the pit generally as a symbol of reproduction and childbirth.

Although this may seem a deeply misogynistic streak in both the play and this analysis of its features, it remains to be seen how Taymor’s film deals with these elements in the play – that is, whether the film adopts a feminist critique of these ideas or supports their misogynistic potential instead.<sup>16</sup> As I will argue, *Titus* interrogates these ideas by urging the viewer

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<sup>15</sup> In Roman mythology, Cocycus is the river in the Underworld that runs directly into the Styx.

<sup>16</sup> Linda Williams makes an excellent point about the androcentric perspective of Bataille’s work, dismissing his idea of orgasm as “a little death” as “a finite, masculine concept of sexual pleasure as climax and crescendo – the quintessentially French and male concept of orgasm as a

to take a more nuanced stance towards each character, complicates their response to characters by heightening the tension between sympathy and loathing. By portraying both the sympathetic and the disturbing aspects of the characters (especially Titus, Tamora, Aaron, and Lavinia), Taymor urges a more complex response. Her film allows us to engage with the unsettling effects of the excesses depicted at the same time that it urges us to acknowledge and interrogate our own complicity in questions about violence and sexual “transgressions”.

There are plenty of violent incidents in Shakespeare’s play, both on and off stage, and many of these seem to repeat or parallel one another. For example, Chiron and Demetrius do not enact Lavinia’s mutilation on stage, Aaron cuts off Titus’ hand in view of the audience. Likewise, Bassianus and Saturninus’ father, the previous emperor of Rome, dies before the start of the play, and later Lucius kills the new emperor Saturninus on stage. This is not to suggest that any of the off-stage violence is more or less important than what is enacted for the audience; rather, I would suggest that the sheer excess of the violence in the play is what simultaneously makes and unmakes the play, and that this is a key part of what makes the play fascinating. For example, it is easy to miss the absurd tit-for-tat of Tamora and Titus each losing three sons to their feud. By the end of the play, the body count is so high that it is unlikely that the audience will even remember all the deaths. By the same token, it is easy to gloss over Titus’ comment about having left for the war against the Goths

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kind of finite *petite mort*” that “comes up against the lessons of Kinsey, Masters and Johnson, and feminist sexological revisions of female sexual pleasure as potentially infinite” (168).

with “five-and-twenty valiant sons” (1.1.82), suggesting that he had already lost 21 children in the course of the war.

One result of the play’s depictions of violence and other acts of transgression is that it provokes reactions of horror and anguish from an audience, which can be used to confront viewers with an experience of excess. However, there are also thematic and formal ways in which this confrontation is encouraged, albeit not in an unambiguous or straightforward way. After all, that is the question this dissertation attempts to answer: can or does the film provoke this kind of confrontation in its audience?

In *Titus Andronicus*, characters confront eroticism in different ways, but their responses to this are conflicted: sometimes they are victims, at other times they themselves are perpetrators of violence, either transgressing a taboo themselves or suffering anguish as a result of taboos that have been violated. In this case, Titus is a significant figure. The first time Titus appears on stage he is presented as an experienced soldier, familiar with war and fearless in battle, and yet by the play’s end he has committed a number of violent, disturbing, and treasonous acts. Once his family capture Chiron and Demetrius, he quickly enacts revenge on Tamora; moreover, to the extent that he retakes control of events when he kills the two boys and Lavinia, his actions represent his return to the traditional role of patriarch. However, it is unclear what this means in terms of his final state of mind: does Titus, by enacting a more deliberate sense of selfhood, in some way reflect the characteristics of someone who has realised the significance of eroticism and excess, or has his suffering in some way

enabled him to embrace death and the meaning of continuity within the schema of transgression and taboo?

Another character in the play who could serve as a consistent figure of excess is Aaron, since he has celebrated transgression from the outset. By contrast, Tamora is initially appalled by Titus's "cruel, irreligious piety" (1.1.133); later she is equally taken aback by his willingness to kill his own child and his revelation about how he disposed of Chiron and Demetrius. Tamora, as critics have pointed out, is remarkably inconsistent in her desire for revenge, at least in so far as the plot of the play is concerned.<sup>17</sup> Aaron, rather than Tamora, seems to be the driving force behind the machinations against the Andronici, and he reveals his own disinterest in the traditional motivation of the revenger throughout the play. It is less that he wishes to revenge his mistress's loss than it is to inflict pain for sport, revelling as he does in every "excellent piece of villainy" he manages to carry out (2.3.7). Although Aaron tells Tamora that "vengeance is in my heart, death in my hand, blood and revenge are hammering in my head" (2.2.48-49), his motivations elsewhere seem much more spontaneous, as when he addresses the audience before chopping off Titus's hand:

O, how this villainy  
Doth fat me with the very thoughts of it.

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<sup>17</sup> Bolton (1933) points out that although "the savage Queen of the Goths promises herself the pleasure of torturing the entire Andronicus family", "the sufferings that have been theirs through Act II, III, and IV, are by no means the work of the malignant queen" (*Shakespearean Criticism* 635). Likewise, Bowers (1940) notes that the "outlines of the play are blurred because it is really [Aaron] who has devised the methods of revenge, and is abetted instead of commanded by Tamora, the chief person injured" (*Shakespearean Criticism* 638).

Let fools do good and fair men call for grace,  
 Aaron will have his soul black like his face. (3.1.203-206)

These lines are rich with irony, as I will discuss below, and there are additional reasons the audience may not want to take Aaron at his word in these scenes – or later, where he deliberately tries to inflict anguish in Lucius and the Goths with tales of “murders, rapes, and massacres, acts of black night, abominable deeds, complots of mischief, treason, villainies ruthful to hear yet piteously performed” (5.1.63-66). Aaron could be said to be performing his blackness here, in so far as he knowingly opposes “conscience”, or the “popish tricks and ceremonies” (5.1.75-76) which he has seen Christians (i.e. white Europeans) perform, by acting in all the ways proscribed by Christian morality. This recognition of performance as something that is enacted and viewed is reflected in his language, which emphasises that these ceremonies are meant to be observed (5.1.77, with a play on the meanings of “observe” as both “enacted” and “witnessed”).

Aaron himself suggests this reading – that is, one where his acts of villainy are a response to his blackness and the way that it affects people’s judgement and treatment of him. After confessing his many misdeeds, a Goth soldier challenges him: “What, canst thou say all this and never blush?” (5.1.121). Aaron’s response – “Ay, like a black dog, as the saying is” (5.1.122) – rehearses both his own villainy and the common prejudice that assumes villainy in someone whose face cannot perform the same signs of guilt as his white counterparts. Likewise, in the scene quoted earlier, he made a similar comment, linking do-gooders and “grace” with “fools” and “fair men,” whereas he would prefer to “have his soul black like his face” (3.1.205-206). Of course it is more complicated than this: in the lines

quoted from Act 5 he is performing his villainy for a rapt audience, and in the quote from Act 3 he himself has chosen to accept the role of a stage villain or that of the racist stereotype to which he is referring. This is only one example of the frequent and startling changes of perspective towards its characters that the play affords the audience: even Aaron, a Machiavellian or Marlovian anti-hero, is occasionally granted a measure of sympathy.

### The film

As mentioned at the start of this chapter, any response to a film that adopts a Bataillan perspective must consider the extent to which the film in question succeeds in resisting conventional interpretative strategies. *Titus* raises numerous issues regarding spectatorship: when Saturninus confronts Bassianus and Lavinia after they elope, Aaron and Tamora watch the events in the piazza from the palace balcony above, as if watching a stage performance. Saturninus attempts to intimidate the newlyweds by turning on the lights, in the manner of a theatre director using spot lighting to manage the stage. In this way, the remains of the piazza now become the “stage” for various dissemblances on the part of Tamora, Saturninus, and the Andronici, turning the piazza into an amphitheatre.

Of course it is not enough to acknowledge the fact that issues exist surrounding the ethics of spectatorship; it is also necessary to examine the possible effects of such an acknowledgement. Thus the question that arises with regards to artificiality is whether the film allows a genuine experience

of eroticism or simply a prettified approximation – the performance of eroticism made safe, as it were, by its artificiality. A Bataillian reading of the film needs to consider whether this artificiality serves to turn the film into an object of rational enjoyment (in other words, that denies the power of eroticism), or whether it is part of a greater strategy that encourages viewers to confront excess. Next I will argue that the artificiality works to create a distance between the viewer and the events and ideas depicted but that the effect of this distance is to circumvent the misogynistic potential of the text. In other words, the film reveals the true meaning of eroticism by foregrounding the artificiality of this view of women and by evoking a certain amount of anguish, and that the meaning of eroticism that is revealed relates less to the specific act that is made taboo than to the nature of the taboo as an attempt to limit transgression.

*Titus* shares with Polanski's *Macbeth* a certain aesthetic sheen that foregrounds the artificiality of the film as artefact. This artificiality is evident in a number of elements in the film. Firstly, there are several instances where the actors move or act in deliberately theatrical ways, for example the soldiers' stylised movements as they march during the title sequence, with the men looking more like mechanical toys than real people with limbs and blood and flesh. At the end of this sequence, the soldiers, who are covered in blue paint or dust, perform a short dance, after which one row reveals themselves to be Titus's sons. Directly after this, the four brothers, Quintus, Mutius, Martius, and Lucius, are shown sitting in the baths, along with some mutilated or wounded soldiers, where they remain motionless like statues. Later, when the clown and his daughter bring Titus

the news that Quintus and Martius are dead, the girl puts out chairs for the Andronici and then begins to dance with her father to the sound of carnival music. Later, before Titus orders his followers to petition the heavens by shooting arrows at the sky, Hopkins enters the frame doing a ludicrous dance that simultaneously recalls the scene with the clown and the soldiers' dance during the opening credits. Likewise, when the clown's daughter packs out the chairs so that the clown can reveal the two heads and Titus's hand, the four Andronici – Titus, Lavinia, Lucius, and Marcus – sit with their backs to the audience without moving, in a way that recalls the scene in the communal baths. The unreal or artificial movements of the actors in these instances suggest that they are playing characters who are not quite human or who have been overwhelmed by their experiences.

This sense of the characters' inhumanity echoes the language of the play and the filmmaker's strategy of relentlessly singling out body parts – a face, a leg, a hand, a torso – either by highlighting their absence or by presenting them out of context, variously as props or as part of the *mise-en-scène*. In the scene at the communal baths near the beginning of the film, a soldier with a missing leg calls to mind statues with missing limbs, reminiscent of the Venus de Milo – a motif that is invoked elsewhere, such as in the gigantic hand that seems to be a remnant of a larger statue and which features prominently in the scene where Saturninus confronts Bassianus and Lavinia immediately after their marriage. Likewise, one of the walls of the Andronici tomb is decorated with the relief depicting an enormous face, and, after Young Lucius visits the woodcarver's shop, he brings Lavinia two wooden hands to replace her own. To a certain extent,

perhaps, her own experiences of violation bring her a share in the suffering of her brothers and their fellow soldiers, with missing limbs standing in for a loss of agency. Taymor also references missing limbs in the first Penny Arcade Nightmare, which presents Alarbus's dismembered corpse first as "the torso and limbs of a classical roman marble sculpture" and then as the torso of a living man (*Titus: The Illustrated Screenplay*, 65 [sic.]).

*Titus* reprises the play's obsessions with violent images, particularly dismembered bodies, in ways that are not entirely determined by the events of the play. The film also disrupts the distance between the viewer and the film, and deliberately makes it difficult for an audience to engage with the film purely as entertainment. The artifice of the theatre is also present in the combination and fluidity of certain characters; one example is the clown, and another is the boy from the opening scene. The clown is the same character who carries the boy, Young Lucius, into the arena, and who covers the bodies of the dead Saturninus, Titus, Tamora, and Lavinia with plastic after the banquet scene; meanwhile the boy starts off as a child in an unidentified modern country, is carried into the film to take the role of Young Lucius, and ends the film by walking into the sunset, carrying Aaron's child, as a figure belonging to neither world. Particularly with regard to this boy, important questions of individuality and identity are left unresolved. Is he the same child throughout? Is the whole play a figment of his imagination? When he carries the infant out of Rome, is he the boy from the opening scene again, or is he still Young Lucius, or is he someone altogether different? Perhaps to some extent, then, this character represents the loss

of individuality – i.e. continuity – that according to Bataille is the result of eroticism.

Apart from acting styles and cinematography, there is also the highly stylised use of colour. In the election scenes, a palette of reds, whites, greys, and blacks on the part of the tribunes complement the yellow-and-red flags of Saturninus and Bassianus's white-and-blue flags. Later, when Tamora and Aaron meet in the forest, they are clothed in bright red and dark blue, which contrasts sharply with the green of the surroundings. Also, as Titus and his followers enter the family tomb, and after Alarbus is killed and the other onlookers leave Titus and young Lucius alone in the tomb, the scene is filmed in heavy chiaroscuro, the physical shadows echoing and emphasising the reference to the ghosts of the dead ("shadows"). Again, this motif is repeated when Titus confronts his three remaining sons and his brother, the bright colours of the election scene giving way to a muted palette of greys and blacks, with Titus's blood-red cloak taking on the hue of the mausoleum walls. Likewise, when Titus's followers shoot arrows at the Emperor's palace and when Titus slits the throats of Tamora's sons, these scenes are filmed in similar high contrast.

The music blends styles and eras in an often disjointed way, varying ragtime jazz, metal music (in the arcade scene), and a more traditional orchestral score; moreover, in the scene with the tribunes and the stones, for example, the orchestral score is insistent and loud enough to be noticeable, rather than subtle. This, together with the inclusion of violent video games mixing time periods, and the indeterminate time and place in which the framing scenes take place, suggest that the events of the film

occur outside time rather than in any identifiable historical period. The film contains numerous examples where elements are introduced from non-diegetic sources – that is, elements that cannot possibly be included within a strictly realistic view of the world depicted on screen. This is particularly noticeable in the montages which do not originate from the play. The film’s blending of time, which is explicitly signalled in the published screenplay, is also an example of theatrical artifice: “All of the buildings in the film are present-day ruins of the ancient Roman empire. Time is blended. In costume as well. It is simultaneously ancient Rome and the second half of the twentieth century” (Taymor 20). Then there are moments where sound appears to be diegetic but comes from no identifiable source, such as cheering of the crowd in the arena when Young Lucius first sees Titus and the steps of the soldiers marching through the Colosseum.

In addition, the film uses and interrogates received ideas about Rome in sophisticated ways. The source is very much a Roman play, inasmuch as its story evokes widely held beliefs about ancient Rome and its culture – arguably even more so than *Julius Caesar* or *Antony and Cleopatra*. Much of *Titus Andronicus* alludes to received ideas about Classical Rome’s brutal punishments, blood-thirsty conquest, and sexual licentiousness, as well as the renewed awareness among sixteenth-century audiences of the myths and rituals of the ancient Romans. The German critic Ulrici, commenting on the play, wrote that “the historical basis on which the whole rests is the later times of the Roman Empire, which were so abundant in dark deeds, and every kind of horror, that the sober history outstrips the boldest fancy” (*Shakespearean Criticism* 618-19).

These ideas have less to do with historical fact than with the requirements of the play. These notions and prejudices about Rome have become so entrenched that contemporary films and television shows – such as *Gladiator* (dir. Ridley Scott, 2000), *Rome* (BBC/HBO), *Spartacus: Blood and Sand* (2010) and its off-shoot, *Spartacus: Gods of the Arena* (Starz Media, 2011) – can trade on these *idées fixe*, confident that most viewers will recognise and enjoy the milieu. In the play, references to Rome are limited (if only for historical reasons) to the Rome that existed before Shakespeare's time. However, the setting takes on additional significance in Taymor's film due to her acknowledgment of the city's more recent history during World War II, including the ways in which the received ideas about ancient Rome were used for political ends by Mussolini's fascists. The film combines this astutely with an increased emphasis on the meaning of the Colosseum as an area of death, or a place where spectacles of violent death were enacted for the pleasure of the spectators in order to win political favour, much as all manner of mainstream "action" movies have come to be for modern viewers.<sup>18</sup>

Finally, montages – or what is referred to in the special features and in the script as "Penny Arcade Nightmares" – are used in three important places in the film: during the confrontation between Tamora and Titus after the marriage of Saturninus; when Lavinia draws the names of her attackers

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<sup>18</sup> The first time Taymor shows the audience the Fascist Colosseum, it is during the unfurling of the mourning flags announcing the death of the previous emperor. Very soon after this, the Colosseum again features prominently when Titus slays Mutius, and it also features prominently in the confrontation between Saturninus, Bassianus, and the Andronici after the wedding celebration.

in the ground with a staff; and when Tamora and her two sons appear to Titus in the guise of Revenge, Rape, and Murder. The first features images of sacrifice and dismemberment, which make the link between the deaths of Titus's son Mutius and Tamora's son Alarbus more explicit; the second combines images of tigers and an image of Lavinia as Marilyn Monroe; the third features prominent images of wild animals and a Ferris wheel, as well as superimposed images of Anthony Hopkins, as Titus, in the bath. These montages have the effect of creating a distance between the viewer and the film, thereby contrasting the literalness of the violence in the language of the play with the stylised violence on screen.

To summarise, the most important formal aspects of Taymor's approach for this analysis are the issues of spectatorship, her use of montage and her choice of images, the heavily stylised representation of violence, and the dislocation that occurs regarding setting and period. The effect of locating events in an uncanny yet familiar space does not allow the audience to reconcile the violence within the modes of an action film or a period piece, but places the viewer in the position of being unable to rehabilitate the violence within the modalities of either genre.

In the next chapter I will consider the distancing strategies of another, very different film, namely Roman Polanski's *Macbeth*. However, as I hope to demonstrate, both films employ strategies to unsettle the viewer, and heighten the anguish occasioned by the tension between taboo and transgression.

## Chapter 2: *Macbeth*

“I am in blood/ Stepped in so far that, should I wade no more,/ Returning were as tedious as go o’er./ Strange things I have in head that will to hand,/Which must be acted ere they may be scanned.”  
*Macbeth* 3.4.135-39

In the previous chapter I discussed how the characters in *Titus Andronicus* transgress specific taboos in often spectacular, exuberant ways; I also argued that, as a result, the play contains events and ideas that have the potential to be profoundly disturbing. *Macbeth* features similar excesses, but its excesses are of a different kind and are represented differently.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, the play itself has had a very different cultural and critical reception: whereas the earlier play only recently regained some of its initial popularity, *Macbeth* has remained popular on stage for most of its existence and consequently has a much richer history of interpretation and performance. It has also been the subject of serious academic scrutiny for much longer, and essays on *Macbeth* continue to make regular appearances in Shakespeare journals. As A.R. Braunmiller states in his introduction to the play:

*Macbeth* seems always to have been a popular play on stage and in print. It is one of Shakespeare’s most frequently performed plays since 1660 in England and later in other places and has often been revised, reimagined, and adapted to other media..., travestied, burlesqued, used as a starting-point for satire, and employed in political cartoons and commercial advertising. (Shakespeare, *Macbeth* 57 [sic.]

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<sup>19</sup> I will examine the character and style of the violence in the course of this chapter. For the moment, let it suffice to mention that the earlier play’s violence is more overtly Ovidian and Senecan, whereas in *Macbeth* – especially in Polanski’s adaptation – it is more naturalistic, despite the supernatural elements. However, it should be obvious that this issue is more complex than this brief summary allows and will need to be discussed in more detail below.

One of the most critically acclaimed film adaptations of this play was directed by Roman Polanski and released in 1971. As I will argue in the rest of this chapter, the play provides several opportunities for audiences and productions to examine the meaning of violence, excess, and transgression, and the film explores these ideas in a cinematically literate way without sacrificing or glamorizing the original text's disturbing or uncanny elements. Although Polanski's film differs in key aspects from *Titus*, I will argue that Bataille's views on eroticism allows us to re-evaluate the meaning of *Macbeth*, and that the film gives audiences various opportunities to confront the Bataillian implications of the text.

As in the previous chapter, I will begin by discussing the elements of the play that might be understood as "erotic" under Bataille's terms. I would suggest that part of what is so disturbing about the play is the inclusion of supernatural elements like ghosts, witches, apparitions, prophecies, and visions. Other unsettling elements include a complex and perplexing attitude to gender and sexual identity, as well as escalating levels of violence that threaten the body politic. These elements are embodied both in the events and the language of the play, the latter of which is characterised by doublespeak and the frequent use of paradox, oxymoron, and incongruity. I will then discuss these elements in more detail in relation to Polanski's film adaptation and examine the different ways in which this film encourages an experience of eroticism as Bataille describes it.

While some of these strategies share elements with the depiction of excess in *Titus Andronicus*, there are significant differences that will need to be addressed. Consequently I will also investigate the nature of these differences and the unique character of the excess in *Macbeth*, both in the play and the film. My aim will be to examine whether the film allows or encourages the audience to respond to the excess and transgression in a way that provokes an experience of eroticism (again, in Bataille's sense) and the extent to which it is successful in doing so.

### The play

In terms of its plot and characters, *Macbeth* resembles *Titus Andronicus* in several ways. Both texts stand out among Shakespeare's works for the high number of on-stage deaths, the excessive, obsessive way in which these are portrayed, and the anguish it provokes in the characters.<sup>20</sup> However, as mentioned earlier, there are considerable differences in the kinds of excesses portrayed and how they are dealt with. In particular, the high seriousness with which *Macbeth* treats its ideas differs significantly from the depiction of similar subject matter in earlier plays, including *Titus*

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<sup>20</sup> *Richard III*, for example, contains a similar number and variety of violent deaths, but these acts of violence do not have the same effect on their perpetrator, Richard of Gloucester, as the violence has on Macbeth and Titus. Similarly, *Hamlet* and *King Lear* feature eponymous characters who experience anguish as a result of violence, but in neither case are the characters themselves responsible for the violence that disturbs them so profoundly.

*Andronicus*.<sup>21</sup> *Macbeth* is considered a great mature work, so perhaps it is not surprising that it presents a much less exuberant excess than *Titus Andronicus*, and that it requires performers and audiences to engage with the play's characters, ideas, and subject matter more earnestly. As I will argue below, the solemn attitude to violence in *Macbeth* challenges us to confront some of the implications of excess that *Titus Andronicus* may have suggested but left unexplored. However, it also raises the issue of whether this serious tone changes the text's ability to explore eroticism, as Bataille describes it, and whether it still allows the text to provoke the experience of excess or of confrontation with the sacred that Bataille demands from art.

One important type of excess that plays a central role in both plays is war. *Titus Andronicus* begins after Roman soldiers have conquered the Goths, and the first scenes of *Macbeth* show King Duncan putting down a rebellion with violence; additionally, both plays lead to situations where war threatens to break out again in response to the actions of the protagonists. This concern with the meaning and use of war is reflected in the depiction of *Titus* and *Macbeth*.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Richard Loncraine's version of *Richard III*, starring and co-written by Ian McKellen, is another film that could be included in this list and in this study.

<sup>22</sup> *Macbeth* is described variously by the captain as "brave Macbeth" (1.2.16), by Duncan as a "worthy gentleman" (1.2.24), and by Ross as "that Bellona's bridegroom" (1.2.54). From the start, however, this sense of Macbeth as honourable is complicated by the reference to Bellona, the Roman goddess of war who was either the sister or the wife of Mars, who in turn was primarily identified as the god of destructive war. This phrasing also reminds the reader about Lady Macbeth, and in so doing casts Macbeth as Mars and Lady Macbeth as Bellona herself. This would only be evident on a second reading of the play, however.

It is worth returning here to Bataille's comments about war. In *Eroticism* he claims that, like other forms of organised transgression, war is conducted according to "a few essential rules", such as "the marking off of hostile groups and a declaration of hostilities before the conflict" (76). The result of this is to prevent "a return to animality where all limits are removed"; for example, the soldiers do not attack anyone fighting on their own side or resort to cannibalism (80). In other words, the violence of the battlefield is like authorised transgression generally, in so far as it only suspends the participants' sense of their discontinuous existence rather than destroying it. By contrast, the violence that erupts in *Macbeth* and in *Titus Andronicus* threatens to overwhelm the participants completely, which is why it seems to force these experienced soldiers to confront the meaning of erotic excess in a new way, as what Bataille describes as the complete destruction of the limits between individuals.<sup>23</sup>

As soldiers, *Macbeth* and *Titus* will have had numerous opportunities to confront the general effect of transgression as Bataille describes it – that is, they should have had many occasions to experience this notion of continuity as the dissolution of the boundaries that support the sense of separate, individual existence. However, the violence that erupts during the course of each play exceeds the boundaries of authorised transgression by

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<sup>23</sup> See Bataille's claim that eroticism "always entails a breaking down" of the "established patterns" of the "social order [which are] basic to our discontinuous mode of existence as defined and separate individuals" (*Eroticism* 18-19). He qualifies this statement by admitting that generally "our discontinuous existence is ... only jolted" by eroticism, whereas it needs "to be jarred and shaken to its foundations" and that people unknowingly want "to bring into a world founded on discontinuity all the continuity such a world can sustain" (*ibid.*).

some margin; as such, it has the potential to confront characters with the complete annihilation of the world of work and all forms of individual subjectivity. This is part of the reason that the violence in both plays has such a marked effect on Macbeth and Titus: because it threatens to exceed all bounds of reason, this level of transgression no longer serves the purpose of society by giving people an opportunity to experience limited violence without permanently endangering social stability. Instead, the plays depict excess in its most unbridled, threatening, and Dionysian form, and this excess threatens to overthrow all social structures and norms,<sup>24</sup> because the sovereign's death unleashes excessive violence that cannot afterwards be brought back under control.<sup>25</sup> *Macbeth* and *Titus Andronicus* each involve the death of two sovereigns: Duncan is murdered at the start of Act 2 and Macbeth is killed at the play's conclusion, whereas both Saturninus and his father die in *Titus Andronicus*. Although the characters' speeches at the end of the plays suggest that control has been restored, the closure provided at the end of both plays is tenuous and unconvincing, given the persistence of disruptive influences in the worlds the plays depict. The inconclusiveness of the ending in Polanski's adaptation is discussed in more detail below; in relation to the ending of the play itself, it should be noted that, although the tyrant has been killed and the rightful heir has regained the throne, the

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<sup>24</sup> In *Titus Andronicus*, the new emperor is killed, along with most of the Andronici, and Titus's only remaining descendent is proclaimed the new ruler; Macbeth kills Duncan, gaining the throne for himself, but fails to secure it for one of his own descendants, instead paving the way for Banquo's line to replace his own and Duncan's.

<sup>25</sup> Bolton's comments regarding *Titus Andronicus* are discussed in the previous chapter. On some level, then, the violence in *Titus Andronicus* is less the result of the sacrifice than the general attitude and atmosphere of violence that permeates the Roman state.

witches who facilitated the tyrant's reign are not killed or removed but remain somewhere in the periphery to provoke further mischief. As a result, the danger they present to the stability of the world of work is not eliminated by the ending of the play.

However, again, there are significant differences between the threat to the common weal in *Macbeth* and *Titus Andronicus*, because the violence seems to emanate from different origins and follows a different course of action in each play. Although it might be convenient to identify the sacrifice of Alarbus as the act of violence that sets the rest of *Titus Andronicus* in motion, the violence that erupts has a convoluted progression and is fraught with confusion about the chief agent of violence in each case. By contrast, Macbeth commits the crime of regicide – the ultimate act of treason, prohibited in every society<sup>26</sup> – and he does so exclusively out of political ambition and personal weakness. Likewise, it seems clear that Macbeth is the prime agent of violence, despite the atmosphere of violence that exists at the start of the play.<sup>27</sup> As a result, the investigation of the nature, meaning, and effect of violence is much more concentrated and focused, which also adds to the sombreness of the play's tone. Moreover, in *Macbeth*, the state is threatened first by treason and civil war and later by the

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<sup>26</sup> Possible exceptions to this rule can be imagined, as long as the situation meets a very strict set of conditions; for example, the conspirators in *Julius Caesar* put forward many possible arguments why it may be moral or necessary to kill a sovereign leader. However, none of these potential situations applies in Duncan's case. Indeed, one of the consequences of the war is to legitimise Duncan's rule, as this is an important societal and political 'use' of violent conflict.

<sup>27</sup> Moreover, the violence that has erupted before the start of the play has been communal and widespread, and though this too was prompted by a single man's actions, the original perpetrator of violence (the traitor Cawdor) is executed before the end of Act 1.

emergence of a king who himself is unjust, ruthless, and exceedingly violent. It could be argued that this threat is inherently more dangerous to the state than threats from outside forces (as with Tamora and Saturninus) because it originates from inside the body politic, rather than being the result of outside forces (for example, conquered nations who have gained political influence within the nation).<sup>28</sup> This example of unauthorised transgression illustrates how a transgression, once started, can be difficult if not impossible to bring back under control.<sup>29</sup>

Having considered the general approach to excess and transgression in both plays, I will now consider specific instances from *Macbeth*. *Macbeth* reiterates imagery that appears in *Titus Andronicus*, particularly images of nature as an untamed, wild and dangerous wilderness, and recurring references to blood. In *Macbeth*, this is made more complex by extending the scope of the representation to include supernatural elements. Throughout the play, the witches are associated with weather as a force that threatens people's lives. For example, the first witch asks whether they should meet "In thunder, lightning, or in rain" (1.1.2), and, in lines that are not included in Polanski's film, the witches talk about harassing a sailor with bad weather – in effect, punishing him for his wife's rudeness by

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<sup>28</sup> Braunmuller, in his commentary on the play, makes it clear that the battle in Act 1, Scene 2 "condenses three conflicts – Macdonald's rebellion, and invasions by Sweno and by Canute" (103). Cedric Watts, in the Wordsworth Classics edition, suggests that *Macbeth* "invites approval of a successful rebellion against a monarch; but it makes clear that King Macbeth is to be regarded as an exceptional case" (11).

<sup>29</sup> As mentioned in the previous chapter, Bataille admits the possibility that a "limited licence" for transgression may cause "unlimited urges towards violence [to] break forth", and taboos have added importance during moments of authorised transgression because "it is harder to limit a disturbance already begun" (*Eroticism* 65).

sending storms that threaten to wreck his ship (1.3.10-25). The heath is often depicted as being overcast or covered in mist, which is suggested by the verbal links between this speech and Macbeth's description of the weather when they first arrive at the heath:<sup>30</sup> Macbeth's comment that "So foul and fair a day I have not seen" (1.3.6) is obviously meant to recall the witches' similar statement that "fair is foul and foul is fair" at the start of the play (1.1.10), which in turn recalls the witches' comment about "the fog and filthy air" (1.1.11). The complexities of these utterances are discussed in more detail below, but for the moment it is important to note that the witches are also said to vanish into thin air, turning incorporeal like the fog (1.3.78-80). The result of these textual associations is to create a strong connection between the threatening aspects of nature and the witches as agents of the supernatural, both of which threaten the individual's sense of self by denying attempts to control them through rational means.

The language of the play is also characterised by a type of linguistic excess: in this case, frequent examples of paradox and other utterances that contain contradictory meanings. This happens regularly throughout the play, for example in phrases like "fair and foul" or "nothing is but what is not" (1.1.10, 1.3.140-41), but some of the most memorable examples are the ambiguous statements of the witches. Banquo acknowledges the

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<sup>30</sup> One notable example is Akira Kurosawa's adaptation of the play, *Throne of Blood*, where fog or mist features prominently as a signifier of uncertainty and of the supernatural, or of the dislocating or confusing aspect of the heath. For example, Kurosawa's film includes an extended scene of Macbeth and Banquo marching through a forest in the mist, and substitutes a clearing in the forest for the heath, while ensuring that the mist never clears completely while the two men meet with the witches.

indeterminate state of the witches when he asks them, “I’ th’ name of truth, are ye fantastical or that indeed which outwardly ye show?” (1.3.50-52). Apart from invoking “truth”, his comments also point out the incongruity of the witches, beings of flesh and blood who represent something outside or above nature, existing and moving in a different way to normal human beings. This double nature of the witches is emphasised by their characteristically ambiguous language; they respond to Banquo’s challenge by calling him “Lesser than Macbeth, and greater” and “Not so happy, yet much happier” (1.3.63-65) – self-contradictory statements that, while accurate, tell him nothing about his own fate. In other words, the textual or linguistic strategy is itself characterised by excess, expressed in a situation that can be described as one thing and its opposite. In this sense, paradox is perhaps the figure of speech best associated with excess.<sup>31</sup>

As suggested earlier, part of what makes the supernatural aspects of the play so disturbing is that they are indecipherable and untrustworthy; they make it as difficult for the characters to act as for the audience to judge how to respond to these supernatural elements. Soon after meeting the witches, Macbeth adopts their use of paradox when he describes their speech: he calls their prophetic utterances “supernatural soliciting” and states they “cannot be ill, cannot be good” (1.3.129-30). This, like Banquo’s comment that half-truths are more effective than outright lies (1.3.121-124), acknowledges the extent to which paradoxes can confuse or deceive,

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<sup>31</sup> Hyperbole is another linguistic key to the excess in the play, as can be seen in Duncan’s comment that “More is thy due than more than all can pay” (1.4.21). For the purpose of this essay, however, I will focus primarily on paradox.

distort the whole truth, express a deeper truth than tautologies, or some combination of the previous.<sup>32</sup> The verb “solicit” itself has a multitude of meanings, which depend to a great extent on how and why someone is being solicited; as a result the word itself does not so much reveal the purpose of their speech as obscure it.<sup>33</sup>

Banquo, upon first seeing the witches, describes them in language that suggests the dichotomy between the natural and the supernatural:

What are these,  
So withered, and so wild in their attire,  
That look not like th' inhabitants o' th' earth  
And yet are on 't? (1.3.37-40)

Although the witches have human features and physiology, their dress and their appearance make them look “wild”, like animals or something even more “fantastical” (1.3.38, 52), so that the witches themselves appear paradoxical. Elsewhere in this scene, Banquo expands on this description by calling into question the witches’ gender, saying that “You should be

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<sup>32</sup> Another example from the same scene is given in Angus’s lines explaining the paradox of the Thane of Cawdor’s current state: “Who was the thane lives yet, but under heavy judgement bears that life which he deserves to lose” (1.3.107-09). In this case, the title of “thane” is what lives on, even though the person who most recently bore it has been condemned to death.

<sup>33</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives 24 meanings for the verb “solicit”. Other contemporary meanings of the term include “To incite, draw on, allure, by some specious representation or argument”, “To court or beg the favour of (a woman), esp. with immoral intention”, “To affect (a person or thing) by some form of physical influence or attraction”, “To conduct, manage, or attend to (business, affairs, etc.)”, “To stir up, instigate (rebellion, etc.)”, and “To urge or plead (one’s suit, cause, etc.)”, but it also means “to bribe” or to “disturb, disquiet, trouble; to make anxious, fill with concern”. In other words, even the specific goal of the witches’ language is left vague. As the rest of Macbeth’s speech indicates, he cannot determine what they wish to accomplish by telling him their prophecy.

women, and yet your beards forbid me to interpret that you are so” (1.3.43-45).<sup>34</sup>

The confusing and paradoxical nature of this language expands elsewhere to encompass other characters. In an early line from the play, Ross describes the combat between Macbeth and Cawdor with the phrase “rebellious arm ’gainst arm”, where the context rather than the syntax indicates Cawdor’s (rather than Macbeth’s) arm is “rebellious” (1.2.56).<sup>35</sup> Macdonald is “merciless”, “worthy to be a rebel” because “the multiplying villainies of nature do swarm upon him” (1.2.9-12), with the latter image in particular suggesting natural excess as threatening and uncontrollable. Similarly, when the Captain describes the progress of the battle, he uses images of storms, swelling, and springs (1.2.25-28) – images which again invoke the destructive forces of nature.<sup>36</sup>

The indeterminacy of language is echoed in the unreliability of the play’s conclusion, particularly in the light of Malcolm’s speech in 4.3.38-141 and Macduff’s response to its confusing doublespeak, that “Such welcome and unwelcome things at once/ ‘Tis hard to reconcile” (4.3.139-40), which suggests that Malcolm’s speech here is a longer, more subtle form of the

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<sup>34</sup> More deserves to be said about this use of gender uncertainty to introduce excess, but Polanski and Tynan do not include these lines in the script, and neither of the three witches are filmed wearing beards. Instead, I will discuss this in relation to Lady Macbeth’s speech from Act 1, Scene 5 (“Come you spirits...”).

<sup>35</sup> In Polanski and Tynan’s script, these lines are changed to “...that Bellona’s bridegroom, bold Macbeth, confronts the king rebellious arm ’gainst arm”, thereby changing this to describe a fight between Macbeth and the king of Norway. However, the confusing syntax remains, and the epithet of “rebellious” may well be applied to Macbeth later in the play, so that perhaps this is an inadvertent foreshadowing of his character arc.

<sup>36</sup> This part of the dialogue is not included in Polanski’s film, but other similar lines are used in relation to the witches.

witches' doublespeak. As suggested above, there is also something sinister and false about the new king crowned at the end of *Macbeth*, at least in so far as there are different ways to interpret Malcolm's self-description in 4.3.

The uncertainty of the play's closure is suggested by Malcolm himself, when he discusses the possibility that he himself could simply be another unjust ruler waiting to take the place of the one before him:

But for all this,  
When I shall tread upon the tyrant's head,  
Or wear it on my sword, yet my poor country  
Shall have more vices than it had before,  
More suffer, and more sundry ways, than ever,  
By him that shall succeed. (4.3.45-50)

Of course, Malcolm later claims that he was talking in jest, in order to test Macduff; but regardless of how convincing the audience finds his retraction, it is a strange and dangerous rhetorical strategy, in so far as it raises possibilities that it cannot afterwards conclusively contain or refute. Macduff certainly seems unconvinced, at least at first. Malcolm also uses various terms that suggest excess, both in terms of number ("more vices, "more suffer", "more sundry ways") and transgression ("tread upon the tyrant's head" and "wear it on my sword").

As mentioned at the start of this chapter, the violent events in both *Titus Andronicus* and *Macbeth* are put in motion by the death of the king, someone "whose exalted position might seem to be a guarantee against" death (*Eroticism* 66). Again, it is important to note that the sovereign's inability to withstand the natural excesses of death despite his "exalted position" suggests that civilisation (the world of work) and language may itself be annihilated by these excesses. These forces are only temporarily

suspended rather than decisively brought under control by the closure offered at the ending.

Part of Macbeth's inner struggle is between his Christian beliefs and his newfound ambition: instead of storing up treasures in heaven through religious piety,<sup>37</sup> he decides to engage in violence, which requires him to repeatedly break from societal constraints and morals. As a result, Macbeth comes to face death with a different attitude – mostly because, for him, the meaning of death has changed. This change can be illustrated by contrasting two speeches from Act 5. He delivers the first after Lady Macbeth commits suicide, after Seyton informs him, “The Queen, my lord, is dead”:

MACBETH                    She should have died hereafter.  
 There would have been a time for such a word.  
 Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow  
 Creeps in this petty pace from day to day  
 To the last syllable of recorded time,  
 And all our yesterdays have lighted fools  
 The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle.  
 Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player  
 That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,  
 And then is heard no more. It is a tale  
 Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
 Signifying nothing. (5.5.16-27)

This seems to suggest that death is simply the last, meaningless event at the end of life, which itself is a series of meaningless events. This negative and dejected attitude is appropriate, given that Macbeth is lamenting the death of his wife, but it reveals a very particular view of time and of human life as following a predetermined and unavoidable course. In this speech, time is made up of syllables and death is only “a word” (5.5.20,

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<sup>37</sup> In the Bible, see Matthew 6:20 for an expression of this sentiment.

5.5.16); moreover, each word (like death and, presumably, war, famine, childbirth, and mourning) has its appropriate time. The passing of time (“Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow”, 5.5.18) is both “petty” and subservient (“creeps”, 5.5.19); like those “imperfect speakers”, the witches (1.3.68). The person who speaks these lines is a poor actor (“player”, 5.5.23), “an idiot” (5.5.26) who “struts and frets” for his allotted hour and is then forgotten (5.5.24-25). This is the subject of scholars rather than soldiers: the words are written down (“recorded”, 5.5.20) for scholars to read by candlelight, possibly in dusty rooms decorated with an appropriate *memento mori* – but even the people who read these tomes are “fools” (line 22). Alternatively, the lines might also refer to the playwrights who write the lines for the particular actor who will perform the pre-determined story set down for them (lines 25-26).

However, this fatalism is belied by his defiance at the end, where Macbeth accepts Macduff’s challenge even after the witches’ duplicity has been revealed:

I will not yield  
 To kiss the ground before young Malcolm’s feet,  
 And to be baited with the rabble’s curse.  
 Though Birnam Wood be come to Dunsinane,  
 And thou opposed being of no woman born,  
 Yet I will try the last. Before my body  
 I throw my warlike shield. Lay on, Macduff,  
 And damned be him that first cries “Hold, enough!”  
 (5.10.27-34)

It should not surprise us that Macbeth feels less dejected when he imagines himself away from dusty rooms and back on the battlefield. Unlike the “poor player” who “struts and frets” on stage, and who “creeps” like “the last syllable of recorded time” (5.5.23-24, 19-20), Macbeth “will not

yield” but will use (“throw”) his “warlike shield” as a defensive weapon and continue fighting until the end (5.10.27, 32).

As in *Titus Andronicus*, this suggests that a special importance lies in characters’ attitudes towards their own death, which may fruitfully be explored within the context of Bataille’s theories. Other important instances of this include the prince of Sutherland’s comment on the death of Cawdor:

Nothing in his life  
Became him like the leaving it. He died  
As one that had been studied in his death  
To throw away the dearest thing he owed  
As ’twere a careless trifle. (1.4.7-11)

Cawdor’s attitude to death is similar to the one in Macbeth’s final speech, and as described here it can be usefully compared to Lady Macbeth’s refusal to confront the consequences of her actions: “Consider it not so deeply.... These deeds must not be thought after these ways; so, it will make us mad” (2.2.33, 36-37). Although Lady Macbeth is the primary agitator for killing Duncan, it is Macbeth who performs the transgression, and whereas Lady Macbeth is overcome by anguish, Macbeth gradually comes to a deeper understanding of the sheer excessive exuberance of the cycle of life and death and subsequently accepts his fate.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Of course, the question remains: to what extent is he only acting the part that was written for him? If he was fated to die at Macduff’s hands, would he have been able to prevent it by not fighting, or was his defiance in the face of death part of his fate? This is the kind of paradox that is beloved of science fiction and older forms of myth, but it cannot easily be decided. Because Polanski’s film adaptation emphasises character over fate (see Harper, “Polanski vs. Welles on Macbeth: Character or Fate?”), I have elided this question in my analysis but it should be acknowledged.

I would argue that, much like Titus, Macbeth has fully surrendered to excess by the end of the play, and that both characters approach their deaths more like themselves than what they had been for much of their respective plays. By contrast, Lady Macbeth is undone by her inability to accept the true meaning of excess, namely the inevitability of death and the futility of a life ordered according to the principles of an economy of limits and status. It is significant that Macbeth embraces his fate at the moment he realises how the witches' prophecies have betrayed him – that Birnam wood has indeed come to Dunsinane, that “Macduff was from his mother's womb untimely ripped” (5.8.15-16) – because it suggests that his acceptance of eroticism is at least partly conscious.

### The film

Like the earlier text, *Macbeth* provides filmmakers with various thematic and formal opportunities to encourage viewers to confront continuity and excess as Bataille describes these. However, the two films differ significantly in how they approach the violence and the excess in the texts, and in their overall presentation of their own textuality.

Polanski's adaptation reflects the seriousness with which *Macbeth* treats its subject matter, both in the style of the film and in its resistance to elements that could subvert the primacy of the language. Braunmiller describes Polanski's version as “the most distinguished cinematic version of the play”, although he points out that contemporary critics initially had reservations due to Hugh Hefner's involvement (Shakespeare, *Macbeth* 86).

The film might strike some present-day audiences as staid or old-fashioned, at least in so far as it makes no attempt to modernise the text or update it to another context or period; it certainly has none of the spectacular, perhaps ostentatious interventions of Taymor's adaptation of *Titus Andronicus*. It is possible that the more canonical and esteemed nature of *Macbeth* makes it more difficult to play with the text in the way Taymor does, and the film is certainly much more resistant to the temptation to inject non-diegetic elements than Taymor's. At the same time, the two films share important elements and strategies that reveal them to be more closely aligned than a superficial analysis may at first suggest.

The purported earnestness of Polanski's adaptation is signalled early on by the very deliberate pacing of the opening scene. In addition to the seriousness of the adaptation, there are various elements in the opening that reward scrutiny. Although this sequence covers a very short scene (Act 1, Scene 1), it lasts three minutes and involves little action and less dialogue: the witches walk onto a beach; ritualistically bury a noose, a dismembered hand, and a dagger; speak a few lines; and then walk into the distance. These shots are book ended by shots of the beach itself, framed in widescreen and in long shot, which gives the viewer the impression of being in control of the image. I will discuss this in more detail below, in relation to other scenes and in the context of Bataille's views on detachment and aesthetics, but this also has the effect of inviting the audience to view events from a more detached, historical perspective – as if to suggest that, by watching events from a greater distance and from a

vantage point that affords a greater field of vision, the viewer will have more information than any of the players.

Several aspects of film-making contribute to the feeling of languidness in the opening. At the start, a series of shots appear to show the dawn gradually giving way to an overcast morning, as a seagull flies over the beach. This framing is repeated twice: once before the credits, as the witches walk away, and again after the credits, when the mist or fog lifts to reveal that the beach is covered with the aftermath of a battle, as a soldier walks towards camera from centre frame. In these shots, the lines in the frame are simple and elegant, and the top and bottom half of the frame (showing the sky and beach, respectively) are well balanced. This framing adds to the spacious, languid quality of the opening, especially since the shots themselves contain very little movement, leading the audience to expect a stately pace for the rest of the film. A different way to adapt these first scenes would have been to start with a messenger riding through a violent battle sequence in order to reach the king with news of the conflict, or to show the opposing armies engaged in heavy battle. This would arguably have been a more cinematic, spectacular opening. Instead, Polanski gives us only the end of a battle, filmed in long shot and from above, creating a strong sense of distance from the supposed glory of battle.

There also appear to be relatively few camera movements and cuts: after the seagull flies out of frame to the right, the camera pans down to focus on the foreground but with the beach and the sky still in shot. At this point the witches walk into frame from the right and begin to speak. There

is a short inset of the seagull flying, followed by a series of close-ups of the witches as they perform their ritual, during which the camera pans down when the witches bury the various items; then it pans back up to show their faces while they speak. By the time the dialogue is finished, the camera has returned to the initial view of the beach, where it stays as the witches walk unhurriedly into the distance, up towards the centre of the frame. Once the witches have reached the middle of the frame, more mist begins to blow in from the right and build until it covers the screen entirely, at which point the credits roll.

At the end of this sequence, very little has happened to move the plot along or to overwhelm the viewer with a sense of awe. Instead, although the camera and the actors move slowly, the scene covers only nine lines; two lines (7-8) are omitted, further shortening an already short scene. Indeed, most of the scene has no dialogue: the first human sounds are grunts, and two minutes go past before the witches first speak lines from the play. The sound design in this sequence, like its cinematography, is sparse: at first the only audible sounds are the waves against the beach, a seagull, and the witches moving, grunting, digging, spitting, and pouring the blood over the buried hand.

The credit sequence seems to invoke and emphasise the authority of the source text by drawing attention to Shakespeare as the author and its status within the canon of English literature: the typeface used for the film title and the names of the actors explicitly mimic the appearance of text produced on an old typewriter or printing press so that the title sequence resembles the frontispiece in an older edition of Shakespeare's plays. The

importance of the film's origins is emphasised by the text, "The Tragedy of Macbeth by William Shakespeare", that appears after the film's official title has been on screen for a moment. By contrast, the film's marketing renders it simply as *Macbeth*, or as "Roman Polanski's Film of 'Macbeth'," thereby shifting the authorship significantly.

Yet, at the same time, the primacy of Shakespeare's text is immediately subverted or put in question when the script, co-written by Polanski and Kenneth Tynan, makes a significant change to the text of the play. Instead of starting with the first witch's question, "When shall we three meet again?", the film starts with the important oxymoron, "Fair is foul and foul is fair, / Hover through the fog and filthy air" (1.1.1, 10-11).

Moreover, as Jack Jorgens points out, this ostensibly languid opening contains a great many images, references, and elements that expand the scope of the scene and disrupt the continuity:<sup>39</sup>

The supposed "long take" from the sunrise to Cawdor's appearance actually consists of many shots: the sunrise presented with what seems to be time-lapse compression, a seagull in the sky, several shots of the witches burying the emblematic hand, rope, and dagger, the long parting walk into the mist which remains to cover the battle and serve as a background to the titles until the mist clears to show soldiers cleaning up the littered battlefield by dispatching survivors, a panning shot with Duncan as he rides with others along the beach, several shots of the bloody captain and listening Duncan, and finally Duncan riding to Ross who has Cawdor lashed behind his horse on rails. (277)

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<sup>39</sup> Jorgens was responding to Norman Silverstein, who had criticised Kenneth Rothwell's article on the opening scenes in *Macbeth*. See Jorgens, "The Opening Scene of Polanski's *Macbeth*"; Rothwell, "Roman Polanski's *Macbeth*: Golgotha Triumphant"; and Silverstein, "The Opening Shot of Roman Polanski's *Macbeth*".

Jorgens here is responding to Norman Silverstein, who had criticised Kenneth Rothwell's article on the opening scenes in *Macbeth*. All three articles suggest that the first sequence deserves close scrutiny, as indeed does the complexity of these first scenes: the editing, the use of sound, and the cinematography all contribute elements that go beyond the words of the play. As I will argue below, the combination of sounds encourages the audience to form a complex association between nature as uncanny and upsetting and the mechanical, inhuman sounds of violence that Polanski will exploit throughout the rest of the film, whereas Polanski uses editing to suggest the compression of time in a way that both encourages the sense of historical scope and emphasises the supernatural elements that contradict this sense of control.

The witches' arrival is preceded or perhaps presaged by the cries of a seagull and a strange, mechanical sound that is initially difficult to identify (it turns out to be the witches' cart, which has a squeaky wheel). The next sounds are the noise of the second witch shuffling and grunting as she walks into frame from the right. There is a strong aural similarity between the sound of the seagull and the wheel, making them difficult to distinguish, so that the one recalls the other. The result is an uncanny aural association between nature (represented by the gull) and the mechanical (the wheel of the cart). The fact that this takes place during the first scene with the witches heightens the disconcerting aspect of the association, and gives it a very sinister aspect.

What is more, the seagull appears to be flying in a straight line over the course of two subsequent shots, despite the large time difference

indicated by each shot: the gull is visible, briefly, in the pre-dawn shot, swooping down and flying towards the right-hand side of the frame, and then continues to fly along the same unbroken trajectory in the second, post-dawn shot of the beach. In more literal terms, the filmmakers superimposed the start of the post-dawn shot (showing the gull flying) over the end of the pre-dawn shots; however, the effect is to create the impression that the gull has managed to transgress the continuity of time and space, which in turn turns the seagull into an uncanny symbol of nature as something that exceeds rational understanding.

The sequence with the gull is only one of several time cuts where an unobtrusive cut between shots suggests, but also hides, the passage of time. Another such cut during the credit sequence begins when fog or mist rises as the witches walk up the beach, away from the camera. When the mist has overtaken the witches, the sound of their cart stops and is replaced by the sound of battle: swords clanging against each other, battle cries, the sound of hooves, horses neighing; when the mist dissipates many hours later, the witches and most of the soldiers have disappeared, so that all that remains on the beach are a number of corpses and a last few soldiers. This adds to the unnatural quality of the fog or mist that rises during the credit sequence, because it appears to behave unnaturally, creating the sense that this mist is a non-diegetic, cinematic device rather than the visual representation of a purely natural phenomenon. As mentioned earlier, the play associates fog or mist with the witches and suggests that they can move in an incorporeal form, as does the time-lapse cut of the witches and the fog in the opening scenes.

Despite the complexity of the opening scene, it is much less frenetic than the opening of *Titus*, and its effect is very different: rather than explicitly challenging the audience to respond to the film in a way that is self-aware and conscious of the film as a text, Polanski leaves this complexity for viewers to discover and explore for themselves. Nonetheless, the languidness of the opening does invite the audience to respond more critically to the subject matter and its representation on screen; in this sense it has much in common with Akira Kurosawa's earlier adaptation of the play.<sup>40</sup>

Without rewatching the film, the viewer may initially believe that Polanski has not added much material to the film that was not present in the play. However, upon closer viewing, the viewer will discover many elements that are not suggested either by Shakespeare's images or the traditional stage directions, particularly in the opening scene. Apart from the purely cinematic interventions, the film also uses additional imagery to suggest the thematic link between hands, blood, and violence. The opening scene includes several visual symbols or signs of violence that recall images or events from the play but that are not explicitly part of the narrative: the dismembered hand in the opening scene, the hanging body of Cawdor when Macbeth leaves the room after Malcolm announces his successor. According to Jorgens, "That noose buried in the sand suggests Macbeth has affinities

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<sup>40</sup> In a scene from *Throne of Blood* (1957), the figures representing Macbeth and Banquo ride endlessly through a misty forest like characters from *Waiting for Godot* before accidentally stumbling upon the witches, who live in some unspecified and hard-to-find part of the forest. Like Kurosawa's film, Polanski's adaptation gives audiences time to reflect on their own experience as watching a film, in much the same way as the theatre of the absurd.

with both the other traitor Cawdor and that archetypal figure T. S. Eliot called ‘the hanging man’” (178).

This is not only present in the opening scenes. In the first shot Macbeth, eight minutes into the film, he watches Cawdor’s supporters being hanged from makeshift scaffolds. This reminds us of the punishment for insurrection and treason, and signals that Macbeth – and the play generally – will give serious consideration to the act of treason and its possible consequences. Again Polanski inserts a number of shots that are not in the play or strictly required by the plot, and there is no dialogue for at least a minute: Macbeth watches the hangings, Banquo arrives, and they both set off for home. Apart from their expressions, there is nothing to suggest his thoughts or Banquo’s; however, the next scene starts with a shot of the heath and then the camera pans to the right to show the two men riding towards it in the rain, while jarring, medieval-sounding music plays over the sound of rain and hoof-beats. In the context, then, with the preceding shot of the hangings and the approaching scene with the witches on the heath, the tone of this sequence is serious, introspective, and unnerving. This sense of thoughtfulness is emphasised by the fact that Macbeth’s first line is spoken in voice-over to himself, rather than as dialogue to Banquo<sup>41</sup>. Moreover, as a result of the preceding shots, what might pass as a fairly innocent comment about the weather in the play – “So foul and fair a day I have not seen” (1.3.26) – is clearly meant to be taken in its broadest sense.

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<sup>41</sup>In fact, it is ten minutes into the film before Macbeth speaks his first lines of dialogue, which he directs towards the witches. If nothing else, this certainly indicates Polanski’s confidence that the audience will wait for the main character to become an active driver in the narrative.

As discussed in the previous chapter, there are suggestions in *Titus Andronicus* that the closure provided by the events of the final act cannot be trusted. As outlined above, Malcolm's speech in Act 4, Scene 3 suggests that there are also questions about the character who is crowned king at the end of *Macbeth*, at least in so far as there are different ways to interpret Malcolm's self-description. Moreover, Polanski deliberately heightens the uncertainty of the play's ending by adding a coda that shows Macduff visiting the heath and, presumably, Macbeth's three witches. In this way, the film suggests that the violence may break out anew now that the villainous sovereign has been replaced by what may prove to be an equally dubious ruler.<sup>42</sup>

Like Taymor's film, *Macbeth* disrupts the comfort of convention through its formal aspects, although it does so in a way that is perhaps less obvious or successful than *Titus*. However, despite the significant stylistic differences between the two films, *Macbeth* adopts several approaches that I argue maintain and encourage the formal distance between the viewer and the film. These techniques include the use of voiceover, the theatrical performance style, and the staging of specific shots. As with *Titus*, however, this artificiality does not necessarily allow for the disruptive, destabilising aspects of eroticism. Next I will consider the degree to which Polanski's approach to the film retains the destabilising function of the *informe*, and whether it allows the viewer to confront the violence and excess within the

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<sup>42</sup> In this sense, it could be argued that violence and excess threatens to overwhelm the rule of any sovereign who gains power by killing their predecessor. To my knowledge, Bataille does not address this issue explicitly, but it does suggest that wars of succession may represent another possibility for unlimited violence to occur.

text in a way that reflects Bataille's description of continuity, eroticism, or the sacred.

Perhaps the most distinctive aspect of Polanski's adaptation is how he chooses to film the monologues. Most of these are filmed in voice-over, but occasionally the characters speak the lines out loud, either to themselves or directly to camera, thereby breaking the illusion of realism. Occasionally, a monologue will switch between voiceover and spoken dialogue. This approach to the soliloquies allows Polanski additional leeway with the dialogue, plot, and the pacing of scenes. The subtle combination and contradiction between these realistic and overtly filmic strategies is a defining stylistic choice, particularly when considered in conjunction with the cinematography, framing, and *mise-en-scène*, which in turn often introduce elements that are not indicated in the play itself and therefore reveal other important aspects of Polanski's approach to the play.

One example is how Polanski films Macbeth's speech from Act 1, Scene 7. When Macbeth begins to speak, he is standing in the banquet hall next to Duncan and the rest of the assembled guests. The king proposes a toast to the health of the household, but Macbeth does not notice or acknowledge because he is lost in thought – something which is brought home to the audience because the use of voice-over allows us to hear exactly the thoughts that are distracting the character on screen. While Macbeth continues his voice-over, the king leans in towards Macbeth to get his attention, but Lady Macbeth stirs her husband out of his reverie by rising to drink the king's toast. When a wind blows open the windows and blows out all the candles, the camera pans right, away from the gathering, and

the scene in the banquet hall ends when a servant brings in a torch to relight the oil. Macbeth, alone, then continues his monologue in a new scene, which is set on the balcony in a different part of the castle. After Macbeth says that “we but teach bloody instructions which, being taught, return to plague th’ inventor” (1.7.8-10), Polanski cuts first to a shot of horses bolting out of a stable, then to an establishing shot of Dunsinane Castle in the early evening. He then cuts back to Macbeth, who continues his soliloquy but speaking it out loud, as if talking to himself.

This short sequence shows a number of important characters, including Duncan, Banquo, Fleance, and the Macbeths, and takes place in two locations. By contrast, in the play, the soliloquy takes place in a single setting and with only servants in the background. The decision to cut between settings and different times allows Polanski to add a shot of horses bolting from a stable (an effective albeit clichéd image), while setting part of the soliloquy on the balcony gives him the opportunity to frame part of the speech against a backdrop of rain. Both of these additions recall the idea of threatening nature that runs throughout the play, and this allows Polanski to suggest an extended duration for the speech and hence for the character’s thought=process. Rather than happening over the course of a single speech, Macbeth’s decision to kill Duncan stretches across the course of an evening. His actions are much more deliberate, and it requires a great deal more consideration on the part of Macbeth.

Other shots recall images of nature in their representation of a violence that can break forth unexpectedly and overwhelm those who observe it. An earlier shot of bear-baiting is followed by a shot of a hawk or

another “tamed” bird of prey flying at the behest of his master. There is also a striking sunset in the scene when Macbeth looks out of the window shortly before the scene with the two murderers in the forest, just before the murder of Banquo. This in turn is followed by a second scene of bear-baiting, before the second banquet; after the murderers are killed, there is a shot of servants dragging away the carcass of the dead bear. This image is unsettling, given that the bear is both a dangerous animal and a natural being who does not belong in the city.

Another noteworthy instance where someone speaks their soliloquy out loud to camera is when Macbeth, seeing Lady Macbeth’s body after she has thrown herself from the parapet, speaks the famous soliloquy from Act 5 Scene 5. In this case, Macbeth turns away from the parapet and says “Out, out, brief candle”, continuing until “signifying nothing” (lines 22-27). In both this and the aforementioned soliloquy, the actor’s performance combines elements of realism and a more theatrical style; the same applies to the actress portraying Lady Macbeth, whose role allows for more histrionics than she delivers, although she is nonetheless prone to a more overtly theatrical performance than many more recent adaptations.

The question of artifice is important here. Compare the carefully posed blood on the grooms’ hands with the earlier scenes of violent struggle between Macbeth and Duncan. The generally washed-out palette of the film contrasts with the striking use of colour in particular scenes. Despite the limited colour palette, the casting of unattractive actors (particularly the ones playing Duncan and Macduff), and a production design that is characterised by harsh, rough-hewn lines and textures, the film is still

beautiful to look at. Even the film's ugliness can seem artificial at times, something put on for aesthetic effect.

The effect of these choices is to create a film that has a stylistic excess, where the violence and sexualities depicted are made more unsettling by a film that does not allow viewers to reconcile the formal artificiality with the visceral subject matter. As such, *Macbeth* – like *Titus* – presents opportunities for viewers to experience the anguish of eroticism within the context of a filmic text that already contains disturbing and unsettling elements.

## Chapter 4: Conclusion: Embracing excess

“It is not really a question of solving this enigma. But however true it is that we lack the means to solve it, we cannot just turn away from it; it invites us at least to dwell in its depths.” – Bataille, *The Tears of Eros*, 50 [sic.]

“We’ll teach you to drink deep ere you depart.... There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in our philosophy.” Hamlet to Horatio, *Hamlet* 1.2.175, 1.5.174-5

Popular books about screenwriting – usually with titles like *Sell Your Script!* or *Screenwriting for Dummies* – often claim that you should be able to summarise the story in a single sentence.<sup>43</sup> This is often framed as an important part of being able to sell your script to potential producers. While it may be easy to deride the reductive impulse behind this advice, there are weighty financial considerations for adhering to the strictures of the formula. Similarly, there are many forces working on academics and researchers to produce self-contained, focused essays that meet publication requirements. Part of the writing process for a dissertation or an academic article is to write an abstract, which assumes that articles can be effectively summarised within the space of a few paragraphs and which, like the aspiring script-writer’s pitch sentence, allows the writers to “sell” their articles to a journal or a set of reviewers. More generally, editors and reviewers prize a writer’s ability to be economical with language and freelance writers and editors are often paid by the word.

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<sup>43</sup> For example, the author of *Teach Yourself Screenwriting* tells aspiring script-writers that they should be able to summarise their stories “in one sentence using no more than 25 words” (Frensham 51).

It would be difficult to find an idea that is more antithetical to the project of this dissertation. To speak of conclusions in the context of Bataille's work is to invite folly. Any analysis of Bataille's thought can only consider a certain number of his texts if it wishes to be thorough, because each text rewards close attention by revealing increasingly complex layers of meaning. This is exacerbated by Bataille's penchant for adopting a different starting-point in each text, the significant differences between texts, and the competing ideas, impulses, and definitions in any single text. Critics who wish to do justice to Bataille's ideas struggle to do so without quoting large sections of his work verbatim, significantly simplifying ideas according to their own agenda, eliding some of the textual uncertainties that litter his work, or adopting his prevarications.

However, if it is impossible to fix the exact meaning of Bataille's ideas, it remains possible to describe the general character and shape of an argument that takes Bataille's analysis as its starting-point. Although it should be acknowledged again that there is no truly "Bataillian" reading that presents a comprehensive and cohesive account of all his attitudes and ideas, this should not stop us from approaching other texts using some of the implications and insights from Bataille's work. As I hope to have demonstrated in this dissertation, the questions that arise as a result of Bataille's analysis are complex and often contradictory, if not impossible to answer definitively; but once they are raised, they become difficult to resist.

The following are some of the questions that arise from Bataille's work and which this dissertation has investigated: what determines whether

an artistic text manages to provoke its audience into experiencing the sense of continuity that Bataille describes as the defining characteristic of eroticism? Secondly, what questions or factors determine whether the images and ideas represented on film or in text reduce eroticism to purely intellectual or visceral entertainment? Finally, to what extent can an intellectual understanding of eroticism help us to formulate a response to films dealing with violence and transgressive sexuality, before it also becomes another way to forestall and contain the power of eroticism?

By raising these questions I hoped to demonstrate the richness of Bataille's theories and the type of questions that further investigation of eroticism in film continue to raise. These questions cannot be answered definitively – they must be continually explored. This is not (only) because of Bataille's committed obscurantism but because of the nature of eroticism itself – the multiplicity of questions that arise as part of an investigation into excess is an expression of eroticism in action. Moreover, the interplay between the rational comprehension (with all the restraint and control this entails) and the excesses within his works generates much of the vibrancy of Bataille's thought, and it quickly becomes a part of any texts his ideas are used to scrutinise.

I would like to return for a moment to the question of usefulness in order to ask how useful an understanding of Bataille's ideas is for anyone studying Shakespeare. The amorphous nature of Bataille's argument means that there is an inherent contradiction in a project that purports to present an analysis of excess in the form of an academic essay. This is one more example of the contradiction between the economy of utility, which

requires that this dissertation meet the requirements of a post-graduate degree, and the exuberant excesses in Bataille's work and within excess generally. How is it possible to give an adequate account of a concept that is defined by its resistance to boundaries and rationality, and at the same time comply with the strictures of an academic analysis?

I am not certain that it is possible. There will always be something outside the strict purview of a well-structured and disciplined academic article about Bataille that demands our attention.<sup>44</sup> This dissertation, in particular, has been a journey into excess. By the time you read this, I will have made countless edits to every chapter, produced a final document of more than 20,000 words, and accumulated a great many documents that have served in themselves as "products" at different stages of the writing process. Of course, this is not unique to my project; it can easily be shown to be part of the writing and redrafting process generally. More significantly, I have needed to exclude much material and many questions which exceeded the scope of my original project, and by doing so I had to ignore many aspects of Bataille's theory that may have led to a vastly different approach and to completely different conclusions. This, to me, seems inevitable. I would suggest that the ideal Bataillian reading – the one most closely following Bataille's own practices – is neither possible nor, in the end, desirable. It is impossible to marshal Bataille's linguistic, stylistic, and conceptual excesses within the limits set out for an academic essay without doing violence to his ideas and his work, because Bataille's excess

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<sup>44</sup> This insight has been Bataille's most important heritage to modern thought, via Derrida and other post-structuralists.

infects everything: ourselves as readers, the subject of his writing, and our responses to his work and to the world around us. In the same way, Shakespeare's texts often contain elements that threaten to break out and overwhelm the rest of the text. As such, the works of both writers resist attempts to limit their meaning and disruptive potential, and Bataille in particular does so in a way that is deeply opposed to abbreviation and clarity.

Although mainstream films often exploit the commercial aspects of eroticism, even films intended for mass consumption may make use of the destabilising effect required by eroticism, for example by undermining closure required for consumption or disrupting the audience's enjoyment in some way. In other words, films made with the stated aim of being consumed as commercial objects may successfully avoid the reification required of them – despite themselves as it were, either by their subject matter or by some aspect of their audience response. In doing so, these films may very well retain elements that cause the viewer to feel anguish rather than the titillation the marketing campaign promised them.

As I have suggested throughout this dissertation, a Bataillian perspective on eroticism or excess demands that we distinguish between depictions of violence that acknowledge its fascinating and abhorrent aspects (for example, *Sálo, Or the 120 Days of Sodom*, David Cronenberg's *Crash*) and less nuanced representations that attempt to exploit the audience's fascination with violence without evoking anguish (*The Passion of the Christ* and any number of mainstream action films). As my discussions of *Titus* and *Macbeth* have aimed to show, however, it is never a question of

satisfying a predetermined set of fixed requirements, but a constant tension between conscious and unconscious disruption of ideas and between intellectual distancing and anguish. This is similar to the tension between taboo and transgression, in so far as they can never be resolved. I would argue that the key to understanding all sides of this question is anguish: in order to impart something of eroticism to the viewer, the experience of watching the film needs to simultaneously attract and repulse the audience.

A Bataillan reading of a film might focus on how it resists ways of reading that attempt to turn eroticism into a thing – that is, the text's refusal to turn transgression, continuity, or eroticism into a safe object for study or appreciation. This implies that such a reading would need to consider a film's ability to resist conventional interpretation, regardless of how sympathetic it might be to Bataille's ideas. If, like the caves at Lascaux, much within Bataille's own work remains difficult to explore, this may be the result of its deliberate inaccessibility as well as the shifting and multi-faceted nature of the subject at hand.

Instead of offering a final, conclusive analysis, I would like to quote from Albert Skira's foreword to Bataille's book on the Lascaux caves,

*Prehistoric Painting: Lascaux or the Birth of Art:*

The truth is that the Lascaux paintings mysteriously shift and change. They are not painted on a uniformly flat surface and cannot always be viewed from a normal angle, from squarely in front a few yards away, like ordinary pictures. These cave artists took every possible advantage both of the uneven surface of the rock wall and the perspective in each of the various rooms. At every step things change, almost beyond recognition.... What is the ideal point of vantage? Each visitor will have the one he prefers; the men of Lascaux must have had theirs, and this we strove to make our own. (5)

Despite my reservations about parts of Bataille's argument, and my personal desire that he were more disciplined and decisive in his use of language, it remains appropriate that an analysis of excess retains some elements of excess both in its formal and textual qualities. Bataille's frequent repetitions, as he obsessively goes over the same ground, indicate an attempt to capture in words something elusive, something that is never entirely contained within the limits of language.

Likewise, Shakespeare's work continues to elude his readers and those who adapt his work for different mediums, but rather than being a flaw or a hindrance, it is a crucial part of his value both as a commodity and as a focus for critical and creative work.

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