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“THIS IS NOT AN EXIT”

Some Perspectives on George Bataille’s “General Economy”
in the Age of Consumer Capitalism

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Abstract

In the past decade, the writings of George Bataille have become increasingly influential in spheres such as literary criticism, philosophy and economic theory. One particular strain of his work which has gained influence in recent times, is his theory of excess, which he calls the “general economy”. In this dissertation, I wish to apply certain aspects of this concept to consumer Capitalism.

In particular, I wish to examine Bataille’s notion of “heterogeneity” and its relevance in contemporary Western society. It will be determined that although the excessive nature of consumer Capitalism suggests that we are living in a society of the general economy, the notion of heterogeneity is becoming increasingly redundant. The reason that Bataille ascribes heterogeneity to excess, lies in the fact that his evidence is based on “archaic” societies, in which the power to expend is reserved for a small, powerful few. In a modern consumer society, excess is so widely distributed amongst the population that it can no longer be considered “heterogeneous” which, by definition, suggests something “other”, of something marginalized. This shift, from heterogeneous to homogeneous excess, helps put into context certain contemporary cultural forms, for instance: readily accessible access to sex and violence and notions of *mass* consumption. It is these excessive, yet increasingly homogeneous phenomena, characteristic of the consumer age, which I wish to explain in terms of Bataille’s general economy.

This dissertation therefore determines two major elements. Firstly, that Bataille’s general economy has resurfaced in consumer Capitalism. Secondly, that its re-emergence differs from its original context in that excess is now homogenous rather than heterogeneous. This task will be set out in three parts. Firstly, it will be necessary to introduce some concepts which underlie his notion of the general economy. This will be followed by analyzing three instances of how the general economy operates in the cultural sphere. In this analysis, which focuses on pre-industrial cultures, I will emphasize the inextricable links which Bataille makes between the general economy and heterogeneity. It will be determined from this that those who indulge in excess are always a minority of the population, often acquiring a “sacred” status. Part one is followed by an interlude in which I wish to present the author’s views on the state of the general economy at the time of his death in 1962. Unlike pre-industrial, or “archaic” societies, Bataille claims that in this particular moment of Capitalism,

both the general economy and heterogeneity are in a severe state of decline. Part two of this dissertation goes on to argue that the consumer Capitalism which followed Bataille's death initiated a re-emergence of the general economy. This debate will be presented in two parts: I will examine arguments which suggest that consumer Capitalism mirrors the general economy exactly: it is both excessive *and* heterogeneous. I will also examine arguments which suggest that although consumer Capitalism is excessive, it can no longer be considered, as in Bataille's 'archaic' societies, heterogeneous. Lastly, in support of the latter view, I will use Bret Easton Ellis's novel, *American Psycho* (1991), as exemplary of a contemporary cultural form embracing excess which is no longer heterogeneous. In concluding, it will be determined that although in some senses modified, the nature of excess in the contemporary world suggests a re-emergence of Bataille's general economy.

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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.

Signature

Date 30.08.02

Signed by candidate

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Part 1: A discussion of the General Economy

1.1 An introduction to the General Economy

I now wish to outline and differentiate between Bataille's concepts of the restricted and general economies. This will serve as background material for a more detailed discussion which will follow this sketch. In order to understand this concept of the general economy, it is necessary to understand what he terms "restricted economy" - a system which the general economy is defined against. I will now examine two major points regarding the restricted economy. Initially, it will be seen that it functions as only a specific aspect of the more general economy. Following this, it will be determined that the restricted economy is based on the notion of scarcity. In the first instance, the restricted economy is to be understood as only a "particular" aspect of a much larger economic framework. (Bataille, 1991: 39) This viewpoint is essentially reserved to the economic operations of *human* communities:

"Economic science merely generalizes the isolated situation; it restricts its objects to operations carried out with a view to a limited end, that of economic man."

(Bataille, 1991: 36)

This "particular" economics constitutes the "standard" or commonly understood idea of economics, defined in *The Oxford Dictionary* as the "(Administration or condition of) concerns and resources of a community." (Fowler, 1982: 328) The term "Community" here, is the first important aspect of the restricted economy: it deals specifically with the economic needs of people. In this sense, when Bataille uses the term "economic man", he is referring to human communities. A view of economics which pertains specifically to a peoples' resourcefulness brings me to my second point: that such resourcefulness arises only because there is a scarcity of resources available. Bataille claims, "as a rule, particular existence always risks succumbing for lack of resources." (Bataille, 1991: 39) This notion of scarcity is understood as a foundational principle of virtually all economic theory. For instance, we can go back two hundred years to the writings of political economist Thomas Malthus, who claims that populations have a tendency to exceed resources:

"Population, when unchecked, increases in geometrical ratio. Subsistence increases only in arithmetical ratio. A slight acquaintance with numbers will show

the immensity of the first power in comparison to the second ... the effect of the two powers must be kept equal." (Malthus, 1958: 14)

Almost two hundred years later, in McConnell's textbook of economics, *Economic: Principles, Problems and Policies* (1987) the same argument persists. It claims that the "blunt fact" is that "material wants" exceed:

"The productive capacity of available resources. This unyielding fact is the basis for our definition of economics: Economics is concerned with the efficient utilization or management of limited productive resources for the purpose of attaining the maximum satisfaction of human material wants." (McConnell, 1987: 3)

It can be seen here that the economy in its restricted sense pertains to the likes of human communities and secondly, that this economy is based on the notion of scarcity. However, in what follows, I wish to weigh up these two notions in relation to Bataille's general economy. It will be seen why he believes that to view the economy in terms of human activity alone is "limited" and, why the economy is in actual fact a process governed, not by scarcity but rather by excess. This will serve as the foundation of what constitutes the notion of the general economy.

Bataille claims that to understand the economy in its traditional sense is not to take into account the "play of energy that no particular end limits: *the play of living matter in general.*" (Bataille, 1991: 23) This is to say that the particular operations of "economic man" are merely a narrow viewpoint of a far larger process of economic movement operative on a much broader spectrum: namely the movement of all life on earth. In order to illustrate the connection between the restricted viewpoint to his more general viewpoint, he uses the example of changing a tyre on an automobile. When one changes a tyre, the limited action of removing it and replacing it with another one is all that needs to be taken into account. This is what Bataille terms a "restricted" application. One is not required to have an overall understanding of where a rubber tree grows, how the soils formed in which it grows, how the plant converts the sun's energy to harness its growth, and so on. Therefore "One can complete the operation without once needing to consider the whole, of which the tyre ... is nevertheless an integral part." (Bataille, 1991: 19) The economic operations of human

communities are therefore essentially part of what Bataille understands as a much greater movement of the economy. It can therefore be seen why the economy understood in this way is called “general”: it refers to the overall movement of energy upon the earth. This energy constitutes for Bataille the “real” meaning of the economy – a movement in which the economics of human beings is only one part. The general economy not only encompasses the restricted economy within its holistic movement, it also operates in defiance of the fundamental economic laws orientated around the notion of scarcity. The science of what Richardson terms making “scarce resources even out in productive activity” is made a diametric inversion of by Bataille. (Richardson, 1994: 70) He claims:

“I insist on the fact that there is generally no growth but only a luxurious squandering of energy in every form! The history of life on earth is mainly the effect of a wild exuberance; the dominant event is the development of luxury, the production of increasingly burdensome forms of life.” (Bataille, 1991: 33)

This exuberance, which is to say “a copious or excessive production or supply”, suggests for Bataille that the general economy is one of excess rather than one of scarcity. (Fowler 1982: 369) I will now examine, using Bataille’s analysis of the sun’s relationship to the earth, why he believes that terrestrial existence is one of excess. Bataille sees the sun as the exemplar of exuberance, from which all other forms of excess follow: “The origin and essence of our wealth are given in the radiation of the sun, which dispenses energy – wealth – without any return.” (Bataille, 1991: 28) The exuberance embodied in this perpetual burning away of energy is at the same time the very thing that nurtures the growth of life on earth. He also claims that because the space of the earth is finite, the sun’s energy will enable more life to grow than there is space for on the planet. He claims, “the terrestrial sphere, which corresponds to the space available to life, is the only real limit ... it is the size of the terrestrial space that limits overall growth.” (Bataille, 1991: 29) Bataille draws on the comparison of a large crowd in expectation of witnessing a bullfight to illustrate this point. The crowd desperately wants to enter the arena but there is not enough room to accommodate them. Many have to wait outside and miss the spectacle. Those disenfranchised spectators may get enraged and a fight could possibly break out. Like-wise, the earth’s surface is not of a sufficient size to house all the organisms upon it. There will always be a *surplus share* of organisms which cannot be accommodated for. The fate of this surplus is inevitably destruction.¹ This notion of destruction is precisely what Bataille means by terms such as

“excess” and “exuberance”: that which the sun makes grow but has no terrestrial space in which to grow. This inevitable remainder, summed up in the title of his book, *The Accursed Share*, is exemplary of what he sees evident in any given system: an excess which is bound to go “up in smoke”. (Bataille: 1991: 23)

“The living organism, in a situation determined by the play of energy on the surface of the globe, ordinarily receives more energy than is necessary for maintaining life; the excess energy (wealth) can be used for growth of a system (e.g. an organism); if the system can no longer grow, or if the excess cannot be completely absorbed in its growth, it must necessarily be lost without profit.” (Bataille, 1991: 21)

In relation to the restricted economy which is of particular interest and which is based on lack, it can be seen that Bataille views his theory of the general economy as revolutionary – a “Copernican transformation: a reversal of thinking.” (Bataille, 1991: 25) This argument which constitutes the introduction to *The Accursed Share*, serves Bataille’s overarching, metaphysical argument blanketing the lesser, anthropological arguments which stem from it. Now that the framework of the general economy has been established, it is these arguments which I now wish to turn to.

1.2 Cultures Exemplary of the General Economy and their links to Heterogeneity

The three volumes of *The Accursed Share* which follow, use the above argument to account for excessive aspects of human behavior on both cultural and psychological levels. For Bataille, the history of human societies constitute either an open embrace of this metaphysical principle of excess, or attempt to deny it through rigorous pursuit of a restricted economy. Societies up to and including the period of the Middle Ages – what he terms “archaic” societies, were held by him in great esteem. He believed that such societies openly embraced modes of excess and waste. The American Indian’s destruction of goods, military conquest in Islam, Aztec human sacrifice and Tibetan monasticism all serve as Bataillan examples of how material goods are liberated in glorious and catastrophic ways. This wasting of energy, manifested in public spectacles, festivals, gift giving, sacrifice, wealth, war and so on, was for Bataille, a “truthful” existence because, as he claims, “it is logical, even *inescapable*, to surrender commodities without return.” (Bataille, 1991: 25) In what follows, I wish to

examine in some depth, a few of these societies. In doing so, it will be seen how Bataille supports and enriches his theory of the general economy. It will also be seen how and why *Bataille links societies of excess to notions of heterogeneity*. Those who embrace the general economy (i.e. those who expend) are elevated and conferred this “mysterious and impersonal” force. Antithetically, those who don’t expend – those who are part of the restricted, homogeneous society, remain profane. In doing this, it will be determined that Bataille associates a sense of mystical awe to those who indulge in the general economy. Yet before I begin my analysis, I wish to briefly outline the concept of heterogeneity.

Heterogeneity:

In Bataille’s writings, what he terms “homogeneity”, corresponds to those parts of society which embody the restricted economy. “Heterogeneity” on the other hand, embodies those parts of society which correspond to the general economy. I will now briefly examine these two elements. He claims of heterogeneity:

“The very term heterogeneous indicates that it concerns elements which are impossible to assimilate ... Compared to everyday life, heterogeneous existence can be represented as something other, as incommensurate ...” (Bataille, 1998a: 126)

Heterogeneous elements, as Bataille claims, “stand out” and are “other” to the rest of society. It will be seen in the analysis of “archaic” societies that heterogeneous elements comprise of sacred and taboo elements. They are “Mysterious and impersonal” forces possessed by individuals. (Bataille, 1998a: 127) For example, kings, pharaohs, and witch doctors would fall into the heterogeneous category. Yet Bataille does not only view sacred elements of a society as heterogeneous – he also views profane elements of society as heterogeneous too. Whereas sociologist Emile Durkheim had prescribed the idea of the sacred as strictly antithetical to the profane, Bataille complicates this somewhat. (Richman, 1982: 42) He goes so far as to claim that both the exalted and the *debased* are heterogeneous elements. In this sense, the wretchedly poor, like royalty, cannot be included into productive society: “mobs, the warrior, aristocratic classes, different types of violent individual” or at least those who refuse the rule (madmen, leaders, poets) are all considered heterogeneous. He claims of heterogeneity “The beggar can sometimes be as close as the great nobleman.” (Bataille,

1998a: 128) Heterogeneous elements of society are inextricably bound to unproductive expenditure – that is to say “everything rejected by homogeneous society as waste or as superior transcendental value.” (Bataille, 1998a: 127) Heterogeneous elements are anti-social in that they are characterized by “violence, excess and delirium.” (Bataille, 1998a: 127) Heterogeneous elements are always a minority of a given population. This elevation, this sense of “otherness” exists in opposition to the everyday world – what Bataille would call the world of work, the world of the “restricted economy”, or more specifically, the world of homogeneity:

“*Homogeneity* signifies here the commensurability of elements and the awareness of this commensurability: human relations are sustained by a reduction of fixed rules based on the consciousness of the possible identity of delineable persons and situations; in principle, all violence is excluded from this course of existence.” (Bataille, 1998a: 122)

Bataille claims that homogeneous society is the productive side of a society, or the “useful part of society”. It is, for example, the worker in an industrialized society, the peasant in a feudal society or the army in a military society. Homogeneous society is relational in that it is useful only insofar as it has a “common measure” with another useful activity in that society. (Bataille, 1998a: 161) Money is a good example of the power of homogeneity in that it is the “calculable equivalent of the different products of collective activity.” (Bataille, 1998a, 123) Nothing in a homogeneous society is valid in itself. All its elements are inter-dependent and inter-relational. To take a labor force for example: one laborer’s work is not sufficient in and of itself. His work only gains significance in conjunction with the work of other laborers. Homogeneous society is inextricably bound to the notion of the restricted economy. The necessity of the interdependence of elements arises out of the fact that there is a scarcity of resources. By co-operating as part of a whole, homogeneous society can overcome this scarcity. Homogeneous society is always the majority of a given society.

I now wish to apply the concepts of homogeneity and heterogeneity to the following examples.

1.2 a The Aztecs

For Bataille, the Aztecs of Central America were exemplary of a culture which embraced the general economy. In what follows, I wish to determine firstly, on what grounds such a culture can be considered excessive. Secondly, I wish to demonstrate how the author links this excess to notions of heterogeneity. Bataille's main reason for using the Aztecs as exemplary of the general economy is because of their human sacrifices. Sacrifices were offered to "sun gods" in an extremely gruesome fashion and took place in the form of prolific public spectacles perpetuating throughout the year:

"Men were thrown into a furnace and pulled out with a hook to be placed on the executioners block still alive. More often than not the flesh consecrated by the immolation was eaten. The festivals followed one another without interruption and every year the divine service called for countless sacrifices: Twenty thousand is given as the number." (Bataille, 1991: 51)

The reason for these sacrifices was to ensure that the sun would continue to shine. However, Bataille determines that the sacrifices were not in any way fulfilling a "need", need "meaning real needs, such that a society would suffer if they were not satisfied." (Bataille, 1991: 45) If these victims had been put to work as slaves for example – an asset in terms of productivity and growth (a form of the restricted economy), perhaps then they could aid in the "needs" of the society. However, because their use lay in sustaining the radiance of the sun, the sacrifices entailed the surrendering of that which was potentially productive. In this sense, the practice of Aztec sacrifice is, for Bataille, a cultural expression of the general economy: a surplus of people wasted for no good use. The practice defies the logic of the restricted economy which would suggest that because there is a scarcity of resources, all energies – (in this case, energies being slave labor), must be invested in the interests of productivity. These victims were usually prisoners of war and functioned as a "surplus" to the existing population. In a restricted economy, surplus is hoarded for (later), harder times, or re-invested in the interests of growth. This universal inevitability is reiterated, for example in Karl Marx's claim that: "No society can go on producing, in other words, no society can reproduce, unless it constantly reconverts a part of its products into means of production, or elements of fresh products." (Marx, 1982: 711) But in the case of the Aztecs, surplus is destroyed instead of being "reinvested" in growth. This logic, which "conveys extreme value

placed on consumption”, defies the traditional concept of the “restricted” economy and serves as proof for Bataille’s thesis that “there is an excess of resources over needs.” (Bataille, 1991: 45)

Now that it has been determined that such practices are excessive and part of Bataille’s general economy, I wish to demonstrate how such excess is bound to the notion of heterogeneity. Obviously, the fact that humans were sacrificed to the gods is indicative that such destruction had religious overtones. It is interesting to note that when the victim was chosen for the sacrifice, they were transformed from an homogeneous element into an heterogeneous element. The victim, once chosen, becomes sacred. Although Bataille never explicitly defines his use of the term, Peter Berger’s description of the term I feel is adequate in terms of this discussion:

“One of the essential qualities of the sacred, as encountered in “religious experience”, is otherness, its manifestation as something *totaliter aliter* as compared to ordinary, profane human life. It is precisely this otherness that lies at the heart of religious awe, a numinous dread of the adoration of what totally transcends all dimensions of the merely human.” (Berger, 1967: 87)

Bataille claims that when the victim is destined to die, he crosses over from this “ordinary”, homogeneous life, to the life of heterogeneity – what he terms, “religious awe”. Hence, “Sacrifice restores to the sacred world that which servile use has degraded, rendered profane.” (Bataille, 1991: 55) Girard, in his book on Aztec human sacrifice claims:

“In the Aztec rites a certain time elapses between the election of the victim and his execution. During this time, every effort is made to gratify his desires. The people prostrate themselves before him, fight for the privilege of touching his garments. He is treated like a king, almost like a god. Yet this reverential treatment ends in brutal murder.” (Girard, 1977: 301)

In order to make more sense of this transition from the homogeneous to the heterogeneous, it is necessary to understand Bataille’s views regarding what he terms “things”, which are homogeneous elements, and what he terms “the sacred”, which are heterogeneous elements.

Bataille's "thing", amounts to Berger's notion of "profane human life", or the notion of homogeneity:

"A *thing* is what we know from without, what is given to us as a physical reality (verging on a utility, available without reserve). We cannot penetrate a *thing*, and it has no meaning other than its material qualities, adapted or not to some useful purpose, in the productive sense of the word." (Bataille, 1991: 132)

Bataille's "thing" reiterates Marx's "use value: "The usefulness of a thing makes it a use value." (Marx, 1982: 126) In other words, a "thing" is considered useful because it can contribute to the productive aspects of a society. He goes on to claim that it is not only objects with use value which can be considered things; human beings can be reduced to the status of a thing too. From this point of view, the Aztec slave and the farming implement, for example, exist on the same level insofar as they are "objects" which exist for a useful purpose in the interests of production: A "thing" is therefore involved in production but does not take place in the consumption of those goods produced (except on the most basic level, such as the fact that a slave has to eat, but only in order that he may work). In this way, a human subject is reduced to the level of an object of utility – that which "servile use has degraded, rendered profane", an implement of the restricted economy. (Bataille, 1991: 55) Yet the moment the slave has been chosen as a candidate for sacrifice, their status as an object of utility is transformed. They suddenly become elevated to the level of the priests who orchestrate the sacrifice, hence the "reverential treatment".

In the above, it can be seen that sacrifice embodies Bataille's definition of the general economy in that it is a consumption of which no use value can be attributed.² It can also be seen, that the sacred nature of such waste indicates for him that the general economy is inextricably bound up with "mysterious" aspects of heterogeneity. This foundational argument reiterates itself through various moments in history, which, for the author serves as further evidence to support his theory. The Christian church, for example, can be viewed in the same light. Bataille argues that the church is an edifice withdrawn from public utility in that it serves no purpose relative to material production. In addition, the church's interior is "accentuated in a profusion of useless ornaments." (Bataille, 1991: 132) The labor used to build the church coupled with its lack of material utility, suggests squandering of the available labor used to build it. In this sense, the church is an expression of useless energy

consumption and hence a sacred element. Bataille speaks of other examples too such as the pyramids of Egypt and Aztec architecture. In the following section, I will examine yet another aspect of the general economy and its relation to heterogeneity. This will be done through analyzing Bataille's synopsis of certain sub-arctic tribes and their notions of gift giving and rank.

1.2 b The North West American Indians

I now wish to look at Bataille's theory of "gift exchange" in order to enrich the readers understanding of how the general economy functions in society. It will be seen that the *giving* of gifts is, like the Aztec sacrifice, a form of relinquishing surplus and therefore an element of the general economy. However, it will also be seen that gift giving, unlike Aztec human sacrifice, also entails a return on what was given. In this sense, gift exchange also carries with it a sense of the restricted economy. It is not as "pure" as the destruction evident in Aztec society. I will then apply this principle of gift giving to the "Potlatches" of North West American Indian tribes. In doing so, it will be seen why the author, in keeping with his theory of the general economy, believes that the impulse to waste in gift giving, is greater than the impulse to accumulate. It will also be seen that the destruction of goods in these tribes, gives the destroyer a heterogeneous status in the form of rank. This will serve as further evidence that the general economy is tied to notions of heterogeneity.

Bataille's theory of the gift draws heavily on the work of French Sociologist, Marcel Mauss (1872-1950), whose study argued that gifts were forms of reciprocal exchange which served not only as the foundation of economic life, but as a "total" social fact –at once being religious, legal, moral and economic", containing "all the threads of which the social fabric is composed." (Mauss, 1950: 1) Mauss's evidence is based on a systematic and widespread study of gift exchange in cultures around the world including Maoris, Germanic societies, Samoans, Ancient Romans and the people of Melanesia. Mauss's theory exists in opposition to the theory that human economies were originally based on bartering – a system which is only concerned with calculation and therefore indicative of a more restricted economy. Rather, Mauss's study of the gift served to re-think this misconception: "current economic and judicial history is largely mistaken in this matter." (Mauss, 1950: 23) Mauss believed that the origins of the economy lay in the giving of gifts. In Bataille's view, the giving of a gift was a form of expenditure and in this sense, the origins of the economy are based on

exuberance. Bataille's viewing the gift as a form of excess entails that the entire "social fabric" of life is predicated upon the principle of exuberance. This obviously weighs heavily in favor of his theory of the general economy. It is for this reason that Mauss has been referred to as an "ally" of Bataille. (Shershaw, 2001: 478) But on closer examination, Mauss argues that whereas gifts appear to be voluntary and done in the spirit of generosity, essentially they are given in the interests of economic gain. In Mauss's book, *The Gift* (1925), he claims:

"We intend in this book to isolate one important set of phenomena: namely, prestations *which are in theory voluntary, disinterested and spontaneous*, but are *in fact obligatory and interested*. The form usually taken is that of the gift generously offered; but the accompanying behavior is formal pretence and social deception, while the transaction itself is based on obligation and economic self-interest." (Mauss, 1950: 1) [My Italics]

In Mauss's definition of the gift, he claims that the spontaneity of the gift is "theory" and then goes on to claim that interest in a return is "fact". In this sense, we may interpret Mauss's theory of the gift as "exchange". The "gift" aspect of the operation - that done in the spirit of generosity, appears to be secondary. However, as the *The Gift* continues, we see a blurring between the distinctions of "giving away" and "accumulating":

"The return is assured by the virtue of the things passed on, which are their own guarantees. In any society it is in the nature of the gift *in the end to being its own reward* ... Now the gift necessarily implies the notion of credit." (Mauss, 1950: 34, 35) [My Italics]

It is the above notions of "returned," to "passed on", "gift" to "reward", and "gift" to "credit" which Bataille focuses on in his reading of Mauss. We see that Mauss is essentially dealing with, on the one hand, elements of expenditure or the general economy (i.e. "voluntary", "disinterestedness" and "spontaneous") and on the other hand, elements of accumulation or the restricted economy (i.e. "obligatory and interested"). Whereas Mauss never really identifies exclusively whether the gift is giving, receiving or returning, Bataille's approach attempts to incorporate all three. (Richman, 1982: 11) ³ The paradox of that which is partially "gift" and partially "exchange" suggests for Bataille that the ritual embraces aspects of a

restricted economy (because of the calculation of expected return) and embraces expenditure (because the gift is given freely). Bataille claims of Mauss's reading that:

“Giving must become an acquiring power ... The gift has the virtue of being an overcoming of the giving subject, but in exchange for the object given, the subject appropriates this overcoming.” (Mauss, 1991: 107)

Taking this argument into account, it can be seen that it is impossible to establish whether the gift is an act of exuberance or an act of restricted economic gain. It seems to be a case of both. However, in keeping with his theory of the general economy, Bataille goes on to examine an exceptional form of gift exchange practiced by tribes of North West America. In doing so, he is able to find a way out of this paradox and re-assert the notion that the impulse to waste is more important than the impulse to acquire in gift giving. He claims: “a mode of acquisition such as exchange had not answered the need to acquire, but rather the contrary need to lose or squander.” (Bataille, 1991: 67) By examining the practices of North West American (and Siberian) tribes such as the Tlingit and the Chuckchee, he demonstrates *that aspects of the general economy* are most prevalent in gift exchange. In their practice of the “Potlatch” - a form of gift giving in which one tribe attempting to humiliate another, Bataille affirms his claim. He describes the Potlatch as follows: (Celtic myths)

‘Like commerce, a means of circulating wealth, but it excludes bargaining. More often than not it is the solemn giving of considerable riches, offered by a chief to his rival for the purpose of humiliating, challenging and obligating him. The recipient has to erase the humiliation and take up the challenge; he must satisfy the obligation that was contracted by accepting. He can only reply a short time later by means of a new potlatch, more generous than the first; he must pay back with interest.’ (Bataille, 1991: 67, 68) w/ [he]

These Potlatches, in certain instances, could become even more exuberant. Some tribes would destroy their own goods in front of a rival tribe. The rival tribe was then obliged to respond with the destruction of some of its own goods, ~~and a destruction~~ which would exceed the one prior to it. The relinquishments usually consisted of throwing copper blazons and blankets into the sea. However, they could sometimes reach feverish pitch, such as in the case of the Tlingit tribe. The chief would go before a rival tribe and cut the throats of his own delete

slaves in their presence. What is significant here is that there is nothing material to gain as there would be in normal gift exchange. One reciprocates through a further destruction of goods and in this sense it is a form of exchange which embraces the general economy. What the Potlatch demonstrates is that there is always a surplus of resources which cannot be appropriated and therefore must be relinquished without gain. As in Aztec human sacrifice, this destruction of “things” is accompanied by a sense of heterogeneity. Such squandering has the capacity to “startle ... stifle” the rival group. (Bataille, 1991: 68) This capacity confers upon the destroyer of the goods, rank. Rank “varies according to an individual’s capacity for giving” which is to say that those who waste more before others acquire a greater sense of status. (Bataille, 1991: 71) Bataille goes on to claim:

“What is appropriated in the squander is the prestige it gives to the squanderer (whether an individual or a group), which is acquired by him as a possession and which determines his rank ...” (Bataille, 1991: 72)

Rank is essentially a heterogeneous element similar to the aura of sacredness conferred upon the Aztec victim who is destined to die, or the priests who kill him. The one who gives (wastes or expends) more acquires (accumulates) greater esteem in the eyes of the receiver and in the eyes of the public in general. In the case of the Tlingit and the Haida Tribes of Northwest America, Mauss points out that the notion of rank confers upon the “giver” a mystical status. He refers to this power as “magic” or “Mana” – that which “symbolizes not only the magical power of the person but also his honor, and one of the best translations of the word is “authority” or “wealth”. (Mauss, 1950: 38)

From the above it can be determined how Bataille attempts to use Mauss’s reading of the gift as further evidence as to why the world is constantly in a state of relinquishing surplus for no good use. Although normal gift exchange seems cyclical in its play between the restricted and general economy, it can be seen that the potlatch serves as an exemption from this. It is a process based purely on exuberance. However, if there is any “use value” in this destruction, it comes to the fore through the social benefits which rank brings. The notion of rank, like the Aztec notion of the sacred, is a consequence of expenditure. And as in Aztec sacrifice, we see the link between the destruction of goods and the notion of the more-than-human figure.

1.2 c Religion and Eroticism

The general economy is defined as covering topics well outside the realm of traditional economics. In what follows, I wish to examine how human sexuality functions as part of the general economy. Firstly, it will be determined why Bataille believes this energy to be excessive. This will be followed by an analysis of his claim asserting that the human repression of sexuality confers upon it its heterogeneous qualities. I will complete this section by examining certain cultural forms which Bataille uses as proof regarding the heterogeneous nature of eroticism. Bataille argues that all forms of sexual practice not done in the interests of procreation are essentially a waste of useful energy. This is what Bataille means by eroticism: a form of sexual expenditure *which cannot serve any purpose.*" (Bataille, 1993: 16) Bataille claims of his volume on Eroticism:

"Eroticism ... is contrary to acquisition ... If we behave according to reason we strive to increase our resources, our knowledge or, generally, our power ... But in the fever of sexual passion we behave in a contrary fashion: we expend our forces without counting, and we lose substantial amounts of energy without restraint and without gain ... Consequently, objects that evoke sexual activity for us are always linked to some sort of disorder." (Bataille, 1993: 177)

It can be seen in the above that Bataille's use of terms such as "resources" and "acquisition" relate to notions of the restricted economy. Terms such as "disorder" and "fever" on the other hand, relate to the more exuberant general economy. I now wish to examine the relationship between these two forces. In doing so, it will be seen that eroticism only comes about once unbridled sexual energy is restricted. It is this restriction, or repression, which serves as grounds for the heterogeneity of eroticism. It is argued that the erotic impulse, indicative of the more general economy, arises from an earlier, "animal" state of being which has been transformed into something completely other. He claims "Its object is the passage from the simple sexuality of animals to the cerebral activity of man." (Bataille, 1993: 27) In their animal form, they practiced "simple", "base" sexuality (manifested in such things as copulating on impulse and not having any regard for the dead). When evolution into humans occurred, this base sexuality was not so much done away with as much as it was repressed – that is to say, such behavior was deemed socially inappropriate and hence confined (copulation was restricted, the dead acquired respect). This transition, and the repression

which comes with it is due to the development of labor. He claims that "...they [humans] distinguished themselves from animals through *work*" (Bataille, 28: 1993). Labor not only divided humans from the rest of the animal kingdom but also necessitated restraint from unbridled sexual energy; the laborer had to restrain themselves from the gratification of instantaneous consumption which the author associates with the "immediacy" of the animal world. In this sense, the homogenous world of labor stifled sexual exuberance:

"From the start, the introduction of labor into the world replaced intimacy, the depths of desire and its free outbreaks, with rational progression, where what matters is no longer the truth of the present moment, but, rather, the subsequent results of *operations*." (Bataille, 1991: 57)

The restricted economy of labor – the homogeneous world which opposes such attraction, simultaneously *creates* the attraction for such forbidden intimacy. Bataille claims: "*Human* existence commanded an abhorrence of all sexuality; this abhorrence itself commanded the attractive value of eroticism." (Bataille 1993: 18) Bataille's thesis claims that it is *due* to restrictions in the form of prohibitions against the animalistic urges of sex and violence that there exists an attraction toward such things. This attraction creates a reactionary abhorrence yet this abhorrence in turn creates a reactionary attraction: "an object of repulsion can become an object of attraction and vice versa." (Bataille, 1993: 127) Without this restraint, there would be neither a yearning nor a disgust of sexuality. In this sense, it does not matter how "impossibly rigorous" prohibition is, *for it is the rules themselves which establish the phenomenon of eroticism*. This restraint then, distances human beings from what Bataille terms "intimacy" - a state of being in which the individual is immersed in unbridled consumption. Bataille claims of this: "if I thus consume immoderately, I reveal to my fellow beings that which I am intimately." (Bataille, 1991: 58) ⁴ It is the intimacy of consuming, squandering and wasting which brings us closer to the "truth" of our estranged animal existence. But this intimacy is repressed – banished to the realm of the heterogeneous:

"Men were able to enclose the world of animal activity within strict limits – where it was, precisely, *in its place* – but they never sought to do away with it. They could not even have intended to do so; they had to sublize it, withdrawing it from the light and confining it in darkness where it is hidden from notice. The place for filth is in the dark, where looks cannot reach it. Secrecy is the condition

for sexual activity, just as it is the condition for the performance of the natural functions.” (Bataille, 1993: 62)

The forbidden therefore manifests itself in the form of an “otherness”, in practices which exist outside of human systems of morality. Such otherness is evident in the social stigmas attached to acts such as murder, cruelty, violence and so forth. What underlies this eroticism is the notion of transgression. Transgression, Bataille claims, “opens the door into what lies beyond the limits usually observed”. (Bataille, 1986: 67) This leaping into the prohibited realm evokes all those elements of heterogeneity which are foreign to the profane world – divine notions such as “rapture”, “ecstasy” and “bliss”. It is claimed that this marginalization in the form of prohibition could no longer be seen as “simply nature”. Rather it becomes nature transfigured into “the divine”. (Bataille, 1993: 92) That which is forbidden to be practiced, spoken about or thought of is now designated to the realm of the unknown. It is precisely here where it develops “a sacred” nature: in relation to profane life, animality becomes sacred and this sacredness is due to the human denial of nature. The sacred therefore, *is* the prohibited: a “despised bestiality” which is transformed into the Divine:

“In a sense, what is sacred is precisely what is *prohibited*, is cast out of the sphere of profane life (inasmuch as it denotes a disruption of that life), it nevertheless has a greater value than this profane that excludes it, it is no longer the despised bestiality; often it has maintained an animal form, but the latter has become *divine*. “ (Bataille, 1993: 92)

Bataille draws on examples through a number of religious practices – predominantly from the Christian faith, to illustrate such heterogeneity. He claims “Christianity associated eroticism unambiguously with evil.” (Bataille, 1993: 132) For example, the orgies of the Witches Sabbath in the Middle Ages are indicative of this. Bataille claims that “nocturnal terrors and play of licentiousness” in these deeds were associated with the “Devil’s sovereignty”. (Bataille, 1993: 134) Although Bataille claims that Christianity did everything in its power to try and rid “impure” sacredness from the divine world, “Nothing could stop Satan from being divine”. (Bataille, 1986: 121) Yet it was not only “evil” which could bring about this sense of the sacred. Bataille claims: “Christian profanation, being in contact with something impure, gained access to the essentially sacred, gained access to the forbidden world”. (Bataille, 1986:

121) One could think of flagellation, for example. In the tenth and eleventh centuries, stoics such as St. Dominic Loricatus and St. Peter Damian used it as a means of voluntary penance and mortification. ⁵ Michael Foucault, who elaborates on Bataille's links between eroticism and the sacred, claims that Christianity serves as exemplary of his theory. He claims that sexuality found its greatest expression in:

“The Christian world of fallen bodies and of sin. The proof is its whose tradition mysticism and spirituality which was incapable of dividing the continuous forms of desire, of rapture, of penetration, of ecstasy, of that outpouring which leaves us spent...” (Foucault, 1998: 24)

In the above, I have attempted to demonstrate that human sexuality is part of the general economy. It was also determined that through its repression, eroticism acquires a sense of the heterogeneous. Eroticism is hence designated a space outside of the world of the restricted, homogeneous society but at the same time, this homogeneous society constitutes and embodies the prohibitions which eroticism transgresses.

Conclusion

To summarize what has been outlined so far, it can be seen through the various evidence that Bataille presents, why he believes that the world is in fact based on economic principles of abundance. The excess of growth on the planet, abundant sexuality, human sacrifice and other forms of illogical destruction all point to this. Secondly, and pivotal to this dissertation, is the recurrent theme of heterogeneity which always accompanies this excess. In all three cultural examples, namely the Aztecs, the American Indians and erotic transgression, *it is a minority of the population* who are raised above all others and acquire a mystical significance (i.e. Chiefs, Priests, Royalty, etc). What can be determined from this is that those heterogeneous aspects embodied in the general economy, namely the sacred, “mana” and so forth, only possess their power in *relation* to the vast homogeneous order. In other words, the psychological category heterogeneity can only sustain its power, its sense of “otherness”, through the vastly uniform, restricted economy out of which it arises. If, for example, everyone in society indulged in human sacrifice, everyone squandered their goods in the hope of rank, or everyone ~~was~~ indulged in a state of perpetual sexual transgression, then the social brevity of such acts would quickly dissipate. They would no longer be “other”; they would be

“same”, homogeneous. It can therefore be seen that heterogeneity can only attain its sense of overwhelming otherness when it is situated in relation to the homogeneous, restricted economy. It is this hierarchical relationship within society which characterizes Bataille’s “archaic” societies.

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Interlude: From a General to a Restricted Economy

The larger part of the rest of this dissertation intends on weighing up the similarities and differences between Bataille's "archaic" societies and consumer Capitalist societies. However, before this is done, it is necessary to show why, by the time of Bataille's death in 1962, he believed that societies of the general economy were in a severe state of decline. In doing so, it will later be seen how consumerism serves as a violent backlash from this restricted Capitalism. In what follows, I wish to examine some of the transitions from archaic to industrial societies and the impact that they have had on elements of the general economy and the heterogeneity implicit within it. In doing so, it will be determined why the author believed that "our present economic crisis" is one of despair – a period in which the likes of the sacred, rapture and bliss have been eradicated. (Bataille, 1991: 36) This will serve as a backdrop for my discussion on consumerism, in which it will be argued that certain elements of the general economy have re surfaced since the death of Bataille.

After arguing that "archaic" societies embrace expenditure, Bataille goes on to claim that this gradually changed as cultures became more industrialized.⁶ The transition from an "archaic" to a more modernized, restricted economy is epitomized for him in the ideological shift that occurred between the Middle Ages and Protestantism. The last societies of the general economy, embodied in the sumptuous lifestyle of the church of the Middle Ages (+ 500 AD – 1400's) manifested themselves in forms of "Contemplative idleness, giving to the poor and the splendor of ceremonies." (Bataille, 1991: 122)⁷ The reaction to the Middle Ages, embodied in the Reformation, entailed that "churches ceased to have the least worth or were considered a sign of the devil". (Bataille, 1991: 122) Drawing on German sociologist, Max Weber's argument that the origins of Capitalism lay in Protestant values, Bataille argues that it was specifically John Calvin's (1509 – 1564) involvement in the protestant Reformation that later determined the Capitalist work ethic.⁸ Bataille claims that the repressive mechanisms of accumulation, whose origins lie in Calvinism, served as the seeds for a society of economic restriction which was to continue to present. The denunciation of luxury evident in the Middle Ages corresponded with a new notion of the resourceful Christian. All excess had to be reinvested in the interests of growth:

"Value was withdrawn from contemplative idleness, from ostentatious luxury and from the forms of charity that maintained no productive poverty, and given to the

virtues that have their basis in utility: The reformed Christian had to be humble, saving, hard working (he had to bring the greatest zeal to his profession, be it in commerce, industry or whatever); he even had to help eliminate begging, which went against the principle whose norm was productive activity.” (Bataille, 1991: 123)

The ethos of the “hard working” and “humble” Christian served as the platform upon which contemporary Capitalism could develop. Bataille claims: “One cannot imagine anything more favorable to the rise of industry”. (Bataille, 1991: 124) Surplus in Capitalism, Bataille argues, is fanatically re-invested back into production. Excess is put back into the productive process in order to produce more. Production then becomes an exponentially predominant force. This process continues *ad infinitum*. As Shershaw claims, it is a system “in which one makes money so as to make more money and so on and so on, and so on and so on and so on and so on.” (Shershaw, 2001: 487) The emphasis on exponential growth in Capitalism drastically marginalizes the useless expenditures seen in “archaic” societies; lavish exuberance is consequently frowned down upon. Although Bataille claims that there are contemporary institutions which facilitate for useless expenditure, (manifested in “leisure” and more diluted forms of religion), Capitalism predominantly focuses on the conservation of resources and is therefore concerned predominantly with the restricted economy. Presumably, Bataille is not optimistic about this particular moment in economic history. He claims that such a system “cannot give rise to the least hope.” (Bataille, 1991: 142) Unlike “archaic” societies, it marginalizes the frenzy of squander. The strong links which are made between the heterogeneous and expenditure were also affected by this shift. With the rise of Capitalism and the wane of the general economy, the heterogeneous is sidelined. The current situation is thus diametrically opposed to the “archaic societies” of the general economy.⁹ This is evident in Bataille’s comparison, for example, between Aztecs and Capitalists:

“Their [Aztec] worldview is singularly and diametrically opposed to the activity-oriented perspective that we have. Consumption loomed just as large in their thinking as production does in ours. They were just as concerned about sacrificing as we are about working.” (Bataille, 1991: 46)

It is for this reason that Bataille associates the modern world with a kind of spiritual impoverishment in which the likes of the heterogeneous hold no place. Capitalism attempts to

“destroy the remnants of the ancient world”. (Bataille, 1991: 98) Critic of Bataille, Michael Richardson claims there is a violent repression of expenditure in Capitalism in the sense that “everything is done to divert such activity to the needs of utility rather than accept them as the pure effusion they are.” (Richardson, 1994: 76) With few heterogeneous elements left in Capitalist society, the notion of the sacred is destroyed. This new obsessive work ethic also had implications on the deterioration of Bataille’s notion of eroticism. *The Accursed Share* does not trace the decline of eroticism in nearly as much detail as it traces the decline of strictly economic expenditure. However, its deterioration naturally corresponds with the rise of Protestantism in the sense that the more one works, the less one has energy to invest in erotic pursuits. In his book *Death and Sensuality* (1962), Bataille clearly states that the greater the work ethic, the less time for sexual endeavors:

“Work endowed us with a clear and distinct consciousness of objects and science has always gone hand in hand with technology. Sexual exuberance, on the other hand, leads us away from awareness; it diminishes our perceptive powers, and anyway sexuality given free rein lessens our appetite for work, just as sustained work lessens our sexual appetite.” (Bataille, 1986: 161)

It follows then, that with the rise of Protestantism, in which work becomes the predominant ideology, excess energy which could have been put into sexual expenditure, was re-directed back into production. Bataille, backs this up by presenting statistics showing that *pious protestants* have, out of the various Christian faiths, the least sex on average in a week. (Bataille, 1986: 156) Foucault reiterates Bataille’s thesis of energy expenditure in relation to the Protestant work ethic:

“If sex is so rigorously repressed, this is because it is incompatible with a general and intensive work imperative. At a time when labor capacity was being systematically exploited, how could this capacity be allowed to dissipate itself in pleasurable pursuits...” (Foucault 1991: 294)

It follows then, that the restricted economy of the Protestant work ethic extended its reaches into the realms of sexuality too. This repression of eroticism continued to exert itself into the centuries to come. All those worldly pleasures which eroticism thrived on, continued to be considered “taboo” well into the rise of Capitalism. Daniel Bell, who has written on

Protestant ethics and their relation to contemporary Capitalism claims: “The idea of respectability – the distrust of lightheartedness, pleasure, drink – became so deeply ingrained that it persisted long after the initial material necessity was gone.” (Bell, 1978: 60) In this sense, Capitalism “carries with it the sanctity of the past”. (Bell, 1978: 60)

Although the decline of material expenditure and eroticism appeared to coincide with one another, there was another social trend which arose during industrialization, which added another dimension to the repression of eroticism: namely that sexuality was increasingly being brought into the realm of scientific discourse. In a reading of Albert Kinsey’s work, Bataille argues that although it might appear that studying sex through the vehicle of science eases its repression, it in no way liberates it.¹⁰ Despite the fact that through science, sexuality “ceased to be so completely hidden from us”, it is essentially an abstraction of the true “animality” which eroticism puts us in touch with. Bataille claims that in the Kinsey reports, “sexual activity is treated statistically like external data.” (Bataille, 1986: 151) Erotic, which the author claimed was “useless” (and hence sacred), was in this instance reduced to “a thing” - a quantification with a use value: “The Reports were based on the principle that the facts of sex are things”. (Bataille, 1986: 152) Attempting to reduce eroticism to quantifiable scientific data is, for Bataille, a project that could never succeed. He argues that as scientific knowledge on the subject is accumulated, the real, rapturous, ungraspable reality of eroticism is increasingly repressed. His reasoning is thus: objective study of sexuality is impossible because “sexual activity ... induces in a witness a feeling of participation.” (Bataille, 1996: 152) In this sense, sexuality cannot be examined objectively as the “impossible incongruity” of sacred, animalistic sexuality exists beneath the “objective” scientific facts. He claims of the Kinsey Report “... The authors themselves knew what abyss yawned beneath the facts they report”. (Bataille, 1986: 155) In this sense, although the rise of scientific discourse on sexuality in the modern era appears to bring it out of its secrecy, it essentially reduces it to something quantifiable. The Bataillan context of eroticism, being a form of intimacy which exists outside of such quantification, views this as an attempt to reduce this “animal intimacy” to the world of things.

Bataille’s outlook on eroticism in the Capitalist age was therefore under the domination of the restricted economy in two significant ways: firstly, there is the belief that the work ethic used up a large quantity of surplus energy to be put into production as opposed to being used in practices such as sexuality. Secondly, sexuality is brought into scientific discourse (the world

of things/work) and hence does not so much “liberate” repressed sexuality as much as it turns it into another utilitarian function of the restricted economy. More generally, what can be determined from Bataille’s synopsis is a repression of the general economy in both its consumptive and erotic forms. The above demonstrates why Bataille expressed disillusionment at “our present economic crisis”. (Bataille, 1991: 36) Despite this, he at times seems to hint at some impending change in the current condition of economic restriction. For instance, he claims that it is impossible for a society to eternally re-invest surplus back into production. Accumulation of wealth must sooner or later reach a threshold where surplus can no longer be put back into growth:

“Surplus eventually contributes to making growth more difficult, for growth no longer suffices to use it up. At a certain point the advantage of extension is neutralized by the contrary advantage, that of luxury...” (Bataille, 1991: 37)

Bataille fleetingly suggests that accumulation within Capitalism might inevitably lead to “a war that already threatens”. (Bataille, 1991: 25) After living through two world wars, we can understand his anxiety regarding the expenditure of surplus in such a catastrophic fashion. He suggests, nevertheless, that war could be avoided if we divert this surplus energy into “unproductive works that will dissipate an energy that cannot be accumulated in any case.” (Bataille, 1991: 25) There is a sense in these statements, that elements of the general economy might re-emerge one day. The following chapter wishes to examine a variety of arguments which suggest that *the general economy has indeed re-arisen in the contemporary era*. I also wish to examine how contemporary consumer Capitalism is far more exuberant than the Capitalism of which Bataille speaks in the above.

Part 2: Consumer Capitalism: A Revival of the General Economy

2.1 Consumer Capitalism Presented as Excessive and Heterogeneous

Critics such as Jonathan Dollimore, argue of *The Accursed Share* that the “Book runs to three volumes yet nowhere in it does there emerge a plausible account of what society might be like if reorganized in accord with the truth of life as expenditure.” (Dollimore, 1998: 257) In what follows, I wish to offer what could be considered a “plausible account”. This will be done by examining certain arguments which are in favor of the notion that the general economy has re-surfaced in the contemporary era. It will be seen that there are theorists today who believe that both economic and erotic consumption have re-arisen in consumer Capitalist society. And in addition to this revival of exuberance, it will be seen that notions of heterogeneity, which Bataille believed the modern world had destroyed, accompany this revival. This will be achieved in two parts. I will firstly examine as to why consumer Capitalism can be considered an element of the general economy and then go on to examine heterogeneous elements within it. In the second part, I will examine why the rebellious period of the Sixties can be considered exemplary of Bataillian eroticism. It will be seen that this rejuvenation of excess was also characterized by heterogeneous notions such as the sacred and bliss. In this sense, although Bataille did not give a plausible account of this new world of expenditure, it has nevertheless, in the views of some, arisen.

2.1.a: Excessive, Heterogeneous Consumerism

I now wish to present consumer Capitalism as a revival of the general economy in contemporary society. Using the work of critics Bell and Goux it will be seen that consumer Capitalism, unlike Protestant Capitalism, is by its very nature, excessive. The major argument of Daniel Bell’s book, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (1978), is the assertion that restricted Protestant values upon which Capitalism are based take a 180-degree turn with the advent of consumer Capitalism. Due to the “technological revolution” which began in the 1920’s, the Protestant ethic has been gradually eradicated by a society fixated on “spending and material possessions”. This turnaround, Bell argues, “undermines the traditional value system, with its emphasis on thrift, frugality, self control, and impulse renunciation.” (Bell, 1978: 64) Items that were once considered “luxury” now become available to a much wider spectrum of the population:

“The cultural transformation of modern society is due, singularly, to the rise of mass consumption, or the diffusion of what were once considered luxuries to the middle and lower classes in society. In this process, past luxuries are constantly redefined as necessities, so that it eventually seems incredible that an ordinary object could ever have been considered out of the reach of an ordinary man”.

(Bell, 1978: 65)

Bell’s argument that luxuries have now spilt over into the consumption of the everyday is reiterated in an essay by Jean-Joseph Goux called ‘General Economics and Post-modern Capitalism’. Goux, like Bell argues that the shift between “luxuries” and “necessities” in contemporary society is a consequence of a society grounded in economic excess. He illustrates this by drawing on the work of political economist, Jean Baptiste Say (1767-1832). Say’s “adage”, Goux claims, states: “Supply precedes and creates demand”. (Goux, 1990: 212) This idea presupposes that people in a particular society generally have enough money to transcend the absolute basics of existence, or what would be termed “needs” (food, water, and shelter). Once these needs have been fulfilled, to which a “corresponding production could adequately respond”, the economy has the space to focus more on people’s “desires” – [Ⓢ] *people’s* that is to say things they “want”, not things they necessarily need. (Goux, 1990: 212) In consumer Capitalism, such a situation presents itself: the fulfillment of needs facilitate for the development of products which now exceed the basic requirements of a people. Products are created in the hope that they will activate the consumer’s desire, not fulfill their basic “needs”. It is luxury (i.e. products of desire, not products of need), which now constitutes the drive to produce and more importantly, the desire to consume. In this sense, in consumer Capitalism, there exists an “uncertainty regarding the object of human desire.” (Goux, 1990: 211) It is for this reason that Goux argues Capitalism “has come a long way from the Calvinist ethic that presided at its beginning” and we have now reached a point where the economy appears to resemble one of a more ‘general’ nature. We can see that Goux’s argument suggests a revival of the general economy when he claims of consumerism: “No society has wasted as much as contemporary capitalism.” (Goux, 1990: 210)

In these readings, Bataille’s theory of economic excess appears to come into play. Capitalism from such a perspective does not frantically reinvest surplus to be put back into production. Rather, surplus is now consumed by a broad spectrum of the population. This revival of consumption on such a wide scale is indicative of Bataille’s notion of the general economy in

archaic societies. It can therefore be determined that there now appears to be a greater solicitation of expenditure than there was in Bataille's "restricted" Capitalism. As was seen in my outline of Bataille's theory in the first part of this dissertation, heterogeneity always accompanies societies of the general economy. I now wish to draw on the writings of Baudrillard, and Goux to put forward the argument that such heterogeneity re-emerges in the excesses of consumerism. I will firstly examine Baudrillard's argument that the concept of rank is revived in the realm of consumer society. This will be followed by an examination of Goux's argument that Capitalist entrepreneur can be considered a 'sacred' element.

Jean Baudrillard's essay *The Consumer Society* (1970), in the vein of Goux, argues that consumer Capitalism embraces "the squandering of wealth in its general economy", essentially making it a "waste" culture, a "throwaway society". (Baudrillard, 1998: 43) However, like Bataille, Baudrillard ascribes a sense of irrationality to the process of expenditure: "waste is always considered a kind of madness, of insanity..." (Baudrillard, 1998: 44) Baudrillard, further drawing on Bataille's "potlatch" theory, argues that the waste implicit in consumerism is linked to notions of rank (and the glory and the sacred which accompany it). He claims that in consumer Capitalism, the "hero of consumption", who has taken over from the earlier "hero of production", embraces this madness. (Baudrillard, 1998: 44) Exultation is conferred upon those who engage in the frenzy of squander in contemporary Capitalism. This rank is introduced through the notion of "acquisition" – a process in which luxury items are accumulated. This is done in an attempt for one party to out-do another in the interests of status. Baudrillard argues that the desire to accumulate is "not from the growth of *appetite*, but from *competition*." (Baudrillard, 1998: 64) Accumulation therefore becomes, as has been claimed elsewhere, "an index of optimization". (Botting and Wilson, 1998: 31)¹¹ Baudrillard argues that this is most prevalent in "The great wastrels" of our era. He claims that the "heroes of production", evident in Bataille's restricted Capitalism:

"Have today given way to the lives of movie stars, sporting or gambling heroes, a handful of gilded princes or globe-trotting barons – in a word, the lives of *great wastrels* ... It is always the excessiveness of their lives, the potential for outrageous expenditure that is exalted. Their superhuman quality is a whiff of potlatch that attaches to them ... they fulfil this function by proxy for the whole social body, like the kings heroes, priests or great parvenus of bygone ages."
(Baudrillard, 1998: 46)

In this sense, we can see a revival of Bataille's archaic societies in the sense that heterogeneity is conferred upon those who expend. This revival of the heterogeneous figure also manifests itself in other forms of consumerism. In Goux's essay, he uses the example of the entrepreneur to demonstrate that consumer Capitalism embodies other heterogeneous elements, such as divinity. Goux draws on George Gilder's book *Wealth and Poverty* (1981) in order to demonstrate this. Gilder, whose book is a "legitimation" of Capitalism claims that it does not, as some suppose, lead "to vulgar and decadent civilization." (Gilder, 1981: 7) Rather, when putting money into the market, the entrepreneur "sacrifices" his or her wealth. He argues that Capitalist markets are no different from the generosity of tribal exchange. Without making a particular reference to Bataille, Gilder draws on Mauss's study of the gift in order to demonstrate that Capitalist markets, like gift exchange, entail the relinquishing of goods without being able to predetermine whether returns will be made on that which is relinquished. It is impossible to say which product will succeed, which "number will win the lottery", etc in the same way that the giving of a gift does not necessarily secure a return.

It is this notion of impossibility upon which Gilder bases his assertion of divinity. The fact that a return on what is invested cannot be determined raises the issue of *chance* implicit in Capitalism. Gilder, drawing on the studies of Charles S. Pierce's, book *Chance Love and Logic* (1998) claims that chance embodies the divine. He claims, "Chance is the foundation of change and the vessel of the divine." (Goux, 1990: 216) Chance, as the *modus operandi* of Capitalism now replaces the cold calculation of an earlier, more restricted Capitalism. Goux elaborates upon Gilder's reading by claiming that Capitalism viewed in this light is "irrational", embracing "uncertainty, the incalculable, the indeterminate" (Goux, 1991: 216) o/ It "reveals the most profound mystery of being ... therein lies its grandeur ... its harmony with the mysterious origin of things." (Goux, 1991: 216, 217) ¹² Goux admits that the notion o/ of chance is not exactly complicit with Bataille's "final argument" of the general economy – that is to say, one based purely on the notion of expenditure. The notion of chance is the play between both expenditure and accumulation in that the investor stands either to win or lose. Nevertheless, Goux claims the notion of chance "strangely echo's Bataille's notions." (Goux, 1991: 216) What is of particular relevance to this discussion is the fact that the potential for loss – that which sustains the dynamism of chance - is linked to the notions of what Goux calls "mysterious" and what Gilder calls "divine". Although the loss involved here is nothing as dramatic as, for example, Aztec human sacrifice; in essence the principle is the same: a sacred aura is conferred upon those who expend. This heterogeneous status becomes evident

when Goux claims that the investor portrays a “tragic heroism”. He is a figure who is likened to the marginal position of the “avant-garde”. (Goux, 1990: 217) Botting and Wilson, who have also written on consumer Capitalism in relation to Bataille’s general economy, refer to the entrepreneur as a “shooting star.” (Botting and Wilson, 1997: 29) In Lewis’s *The Money Culture* (1991), he claims of the high-flying entrepreneur of the 1980’s:

“You only had to spend about five minutes with these people to realize they didn’t see themselves as part of the orthodox business culture. They saw themselves romantically, as guerillas in the corporate jungle.” (Lewis, 1991: 10)

It can therefore be determined, through the readings of Goux and Baudrillard, that certain excesses of consumer society are attributed with a sense of the heterogeneous (evident in the notions of rank and the sacred). It seems ironic that the general economy of consumerism which I have presented above arose from the restrictive Capitalism which Bataille blamed for “destroying the remnants of the ancient world.” (Bataille, 1991: 98) Yet in the consumer Capitalism following Bataille’s death, there appears to be a revival of not only his notion of excess, but also of those psychological and sociological states which accompany it. In answering Dollimore then, we can see that certain elements of contemporary society echo Bataille’s notion of the general economy.

2.1.b Excessive, Heterogeneous Eroticism

I now wish to examine arguments which suggest that the general economy in the form of eroticism has also re-emerged in the contemporary era. I will argue, using various cultural examples of the sixties, that attitudes toward morality have profoundly changed since restricted, Protestant attitudes toward sexuality. The sixties proved to be an era of prolific “rebellions” and “revolutions”, evoking what Jameson calls “an immense freeing or unbinding of social energies”. (Jameson, 1988: 208) Although various forms of liberation were occurring around the world in various political, economic and cultural forms, for the purposes of this essay, I wish to focus on certain cultural and “counter” cultural movements in Europe and America.¹³ Counter culture, defined by Yingers as “A set of beliefs and values which radically reject the dominant culture of a society and prescribe a sectarian alternative”, corresponds to Bataille’s notion of eroticism. (Yingers, 1982: 19) Bataillan eroticism, entailing the attraction to that which is prohibited, always “entails a breaking down of

established patterns... of a regulated social order". (Bataille 1986: 18) This reiterates the notion of counter cultures in the sense that they deliberately attempted to violate that which was considered "taboo" by mainstream society. This becomes more clear when we weigh up their rebellion in relation to "the establishment" who considered such deeds abhorrent.

D'Emilio and Freedman claim that "To mainstream America", such counter cultures "epitomised moral decay and sexual anarchy." (D'Emilio and Freedman 1988: 307) It was precisely "mainstream America's" abhorrence which gave these transgressions their force – their sacred aura.

The question must then be asked: What was prohibited at the time, and what was transgressed? Bell argues that it was the Protestant elements of what he terms "goodness morality" which were being rebelled against – that is to say - hard work, sobriety, thrift: All those elements which Bataille claims operate in the interests of repressing eroticism. Bell argues that the rebellion of Puritanical values, evident in the 1960's could already be detected a decade before, in which advertising and product marketing, began to emphasise what he terms "fun morality". (Bell, 71: 1978) Fun morality, he argued, was essentially "centred around sex" but also alludes to all those other elements which Protestant "goodness morality" repressed, namely: "pleasure, instant joy, relaxing and letting go." (Bell 1978: 72) By the 1960's such rebellion had grown into an open negation of the Protestant work ethic.

D'Emilio and Freedman's claim that "American college students in growing numbers set themselves firmly against the establishment ... With each passing year, the volume and intensity of youth protest escalated." (D'Emilio and Freedman, 1988: 306) Books were published such as Theodore Roszak's, *The making of a counter culture* (1970) in which he argued that "The bourgeoisie is obsessed by greed; its sex life is insipid and prudish". (Roszak, 1984: 125) In this sense, it can be seen that Protestant values served as the prohibitions which were transgressed in the sixties. The rebellious nature of this period serves as further evidence that Western culture, after Bataille's death, possessed elements of the general economy. I now wish to examine some of the heterogeneous elements which accompanied this rebellion.

Because of the transgressive nature of the sixties, it followed that various cultural forms which arose, honed in on taboo – specifically the "animalistic" impulses which the stringent work ethic repressed. Many cultural trends reiterated notions of heterogeneity of Bataille's archaic societies. The Pagan "return to nature" theme for instance, embodied in notion of the

festival ("Woodstock" is the classic example) was one cultural form. Others include such leisurely pursuits as an emerging drug culture and, most predominantly, the rise of the "sexual revolution" – the supposed "liberation" of sexuality, including amongst other things, a greater freedom in attitudes toward sex. All these phenomena had attached to them elements of the heterogeneous. I now wish to look at some examples of heterogeneity which accompanied excess in this period.

In the instance of sex for example, critics such as Heath argued that a fixation on sexual climax became a major focus. Heath notes that in this particular period, the notion of "the Orgasm" is predominant. He calls it "the big O, the central fix". (Heath, 1984: 124) This revival of Reich's concept of the orgasm, namely "the capacity for complete discharge of all dammed up sexual excitation", is evident, Heath argues, in novels such as Lisa Alther's novel, *Kinflicks*. (Jefferys, 1990: 101) He claims that the novel, set in the 1960's portrays the "orgasm as central". In his discussion of the book, he argues that the chief aim of the plot is not necessarily sexual fulfillment but rather sexual climax.¹⁴ Other popular books, which linked rapture with sex, were evident in popular manuals such as Alex Comfort's bestseller *The Joy of Sex* (1972). The fixation on the orgasm (and ecstasy), reiterates Bataille's notion of bliss, the rapturous "laughter" and "sobs" which he claim accompany transgression. (Bataille, 1993, 220) Heath even goes as far as giving the notion of the orgasm religious overtones. He calls it "... The Holy orgasm" which brings one "into the kingdom of heavenly joy" (Heath, 1984: 148). Foucault too, claims that "essential thing" regarding contemporary sexuality is "To utter truths and promise bliss". (Foucault, 1978: 8) This euphoria is a consequence of transgression. It has been claimed by critic of Bataille, Scott Wilson "The point of bliss is the sacred moment when the sublimely chaste and virtuous object is sacrificed in desire". (Wilson, 1995: 74) Within the sexual liberation of the Sixties, strict Protestant ethics themselves appear to be "sacrificed in desire". It is such elements of excess which bring about the heterogeneous elements of bliss and rapture.

Within the more "serious", "highbrow" art genres of the Sixties, excesses went far beyond the simple celebration of sex. The transgressive aesthetic content of this period goes so far as to resemble those deviant practices which so fascinated Bataille in his own novels (and in his study of other writers and figures in history) - that is to say, horror, cruelty and acts of sexual deviance.¹⁵ Cultural practitioners seemed to be increasingly fascinated by anything that mainstream society considered "sexual" and "moral" atrophy. Bell, on this topic claims:

“The sensibility of the 1960’s added something distinctly its own: a concern with violence and cruelty; a preoccupation with the sexually perverse ... One found an obsessive preoccupation with homosexuality, transvestism, buggery and, most pervasive of all, public displayed oral-genital intercourse.” (Bell, 1978: 122)

Patricia Waugh, in her book *Harvest of the Sixties* (1995) argues that not only was it a period of sexual excess, but that such excess was bound up with the heterogeneous:

“Particularly in the sixties ... counterculturalists sought a new heaven on earth through a liberation of the instincts, many writers were increasingly preoccupied with the human propensity for violence, on the one hand, and a yearning for transcendent significance, on the other.” (Waugh, 1995: 58)

William Burroughs’s novel, *Naked Lunch*, (written in the 1950’s but published in 1962 by Grove Press) is exemplary of such extreme transgression coupled with the heterogeneous. Partially about opiate addiction, *Naked Lunch* is, as Burroughs’ claims, “necessarily brutal, obscene and disgusting”. (Burroughs, 1992: 12) Jefferys notes that the novel represents “everything which it seems that Burroughs found most horrifying ... Sex is associated not just with death but with deification, disability and disease, the female genitals.” (Jefferys, 1990: 72) One does not have to look far into the text to find examples of this: “ ...Castrating disembowelling, throwing burning gasoline ... Dancing boys striptease with intestines, women stick severed genitals in their cunts ...” (Burroughs, 1991: 36) In conjunction with this, *Naked Lunch* is littered with religious and ritualistic references. “The Moslems must have blood and jissom ... Christ’s blood streams in the spermament”. (Burroughs, 1992: 82) Burroughs’s novels were a pre-cursor to new trends in transgression which embodied the belief that through pain, states of transcendence could be achieved. The emergence of “body” or “performance” art in the sixties exemplified this. For example, American artist Chris Burden engaged in startling acts of self-mutilation, such as dragging himself bare-chested through broken glass and shooting a bullet through his arm. In Viennese “actionist”, Herman Nitsch’s performances, cattle were disembowelled and buckets of their blood were poured over naked actors, tied upside down to crucifixes. Nitsch, who used an array of religious symbols and paraphernalia, viewed his performances as “rituals”, often mimicking ancient rites of the past. Fineberg claims that they were done in order “to liberate the

socially repressed but natural aggressive instincts of both artist and spectator.” (Fineberg, 1995: 342) In these instances then, it can be seen that certain cultural trends in the Sixties embodied extreme transgression coupled with elements of the heterogeneous.

The rebellious cultural trends, which were initiated in the 1960's in America and Europe, serve as more evidence that Bataille's notion of the general economy had resurfaced. Firstly, there appeared to be a transgression of puritanical values – an attraction toward all that which was forbidden by such values: sexual promiscuity, hedonism and more brutal forms of transgression. Secondly, a Bataillan sense of the sacred accompanied these transgressions, not only in the sense of “liberation”, with its carnivalesque, drug-induced, Pagan and sexual forms, but also in the various artistic movements of this period, in which the mix of sex, death and religion appear to be prominent themes. In conjunction with the arguments of excess and heterogeneity made with regards to consumer culture, we can see that a “plausible account” of the general economy in the contemporary era emerges. The reason that the above excesses can be seen as heterogeneous is because those who indulge in them are a fringe element of the given society. It is the “gilded duke”, the “marginalized” trader and the counter-culturalist who are conferred their sense of “otherness” by homogeneous society. In this sense, their positions are identical to those of Bataille's archaic societies. There too, heterogeneous elements were always a small group of the population elevated above the homogeneous masses. This was seen in the notion of the priest, the king, the chief, the religious ascetic etc. In this sense, there appear to exist strong correlations between archaic societies and contemporary Capitalist society.

2.2 Consumer Capitalism Presented as Excessive and Homogeneous

Dollimore goes on to claim that a society existing in the depths of heterogeneity is an impossible one. He claims that a life which genuinely embodies the general economy – namely one which is heterogeneous – one in which we “lose ourselves without reservation”, one of “sexual ecstasy and “oblivion” is impossible to live. (Dollimore, 1998: 254, 257) The reason being is that “if Bataille is even half correct in thinking that ‘death, rapture and discontinuous individualities to which we cleave in terror”, how could life be livable? (Dollimore, 1998: 257, 258) He claims that such an existence is a “non starter”. In what follows, I wish to examine certain arguments which scrutinize the concept of heterogeneity in a consumer Capitalist world. These are arguments which suggest that the excesses of

consumerism *do not*, in fact, mirror Bataille's archaic societies. None of these criticisms, it will be seen, dispute the fact that we are living in an age of excess. Rather, the argument lies in the fact that this excessiveness, unlike the excessiveness presented above, *is not* allocated to a privileged few. Rather, excess in consumer culture is available to a wide spectrum of the population. In this sense because this heterogeneous element is available to a large portion of the population, it can no longer be considered heterogeneous, but rather homogeneous. It will therefore be seen that the following arguments present contemporary consumer culture as excessive – but no longer possessing that “mysterious and impersonal” force which Bataille claims accompanies expenditure. This will be achieved in two parts. Firstly, in a re-examination of the heterogeneity of consumption, it will be seen that Baudrillard and Goux go on to argue that rank through acquisition and “divine” entrepreneurship, lose their “deviance value” in consumer society. Because so many members of a consumer society are engaged in the excesses of acquisition and entrepreneurship, heterogeneity is increasingly difficult to attain. Secondly, in an examination of certain aspects of sex and violence *after* the sixties, it will be seen that sex and violence have become absorbed into mainstream society. In this sense, the access to the excess of transgression is now available to homogeneous society – not just a small group of artists and counter culturalists. In demonstrating how the distribution of excess itself is the very thing which paralyzes heterogeneity, it will become evident why Dollimore would consider such a society a “non-starter”.

2.2.a Homogeneous Consumerism

After painting a glorious picture of consumer Capitalism through a reading of Gilder, Goux goes on to note “several objections” to Gilder's idea that the Capitalist is “marginalized” and “divine”. (Goux, 1990: 220) Baudrillard also demonstrates that the notion of rank can be problematic in a consumer society. I now wish to examine these arguments in order to show that the notion of heterogeneity in contemporary consumer culture is increasingly under threat. It will then be determined that this “threat” is a condition of democratic societies in which heterogeneous notions such as rank and the sacred are available to an increasing amount of the population. In this sense, their heterogeneity becomes increasingly homogeneous.

It was seen earlier that Baudrillard claims there still exist “Great Wastrels” in the consumer age. Indeed, contemporary culture seems to support heterogeneous elements such as rock

stars, movie stars, billionaires and the like. However, Baudrillard simultaneously argues that consumerism encourages endless competition through the accumulation of luxurious goods on a far more general level of the populace. He claims that the accumulation of excess now takes place “where people are crowded together at much greater levels of density” and that this accumulation serves as a form of “competition” and a jockeying for “rank” between different parties. (Baudrillard, 1998: 63) The sheer number of participants engaged in consumption perpetually divides the contrasts between one act of expenditure and another. The infinite “differentiation” of new desires in consumerism, also serves to blur the boundaries between those who can expend and those who cannot. This situation is essentially the antithesis of Bataille’s “archaic” societies. In such societies, excess leads to heterogeneity. In Consumerism, it essentially leads to, as Botting and Wilson claim, “*the hyper-homogenization of economic systems*”. (Botting and Wilson, 1998: 31) [My Italics] The dissemination of rank across the population is essentially a dissemination of heterogeneity. The no longer “collective” nature of rank (exemplified by the more-than-human figure of the chief who steals the glory before his tribe) is now robbed of its heterogeneity. Baudrillard claims:

“The difference is that in our current system this spectacular squandering no longer has the crucial symbolic and collective signification it could assume in primitive feasting and Potlatch. This prestigious consumption has also been ‘personalized’ and mass–mediafied.” (Baudrillard, 1998: 46)

“Personalized” expenditure means that there is no one left to confer “mana” upon a particular wastrel. Those who in the past would have conferred this power are now all wastrels themselves, competing amongst each other for rank through acquisition. This effect on Bataille’s “sacred” can be similarly applied to Mark Gilder’s figure of the investor-cum-“tragic hero”. It will be remembered that Gilder’s traders was given their heterogeneous, “divine” status, their “difference”, “marginality” and “deviance value” through the fact that they continually flirt with catastrophic loss. Despite this, Goux, on further examination, argues that

“It is precisely at the moment when the entrepreneur must think himself into the model of the most advanced artistic genius, at the moment when the avant- garde strategy of innovation at any price becomes the paradigm of dominant economic practice, that the artistic avant-garde necessarily loses its difference, its

marginality, its deviance-value. The aesthetic avant-gardes have won. That is what paralyses them so seriously.” (Goux, 1990: 218)

In this sense, Goux argues that the “grocer” and the “poet”, the “surrealist” and the “dishevelled manager” are no longer able to distinguish themselves so easily from each other because they are all involved in the same game of risk and loss. (Goux, 1990: 218) The fact that playing the market is, in theory, available even to the “man” on the street suggests that the heterogeneity of such a practice is an illusion. In this sense, the entrepreneur is robbed of her deviance value in the same way that rank is lost: “otherness” is not as easily attainable *because a greater number of people in society have access to what was once considered “luxurious” and “excessive”*. Instead of transforming this new homogeneous society into a heterogeneous one, such a transition makes that which was once heterogeneous increasingly homogeneous, or what can be termed, “The homogeneity of heterogeneity”. Goux places such a transition into an historical framework: The fact that wealth is now distributed more widely amongst the population is predominantly due to the rise of “democratic” principles, which have abolished absolutely centralized power which previously lay in the hands of a privileged few:

o/ “It is the very result of democratic life which has weakened and dismantled these oppositions, which has made them lose their meaning of social cleavage and confined them to the realm on insular individual experience. All the examples of consumption societies that fascinate Bataille are extremely unequal, even hierarchical societies in which spectacular consumption is the tool with which the powerful maintain their position above the dazzled, miserable masses.” (Goux, 1990: 208) ¹⁶

In this sense, Goux sees the collapse of such oppositions as the major point of difference between the concept of excess in Bataille’s “archaic” societies and its meaning in consumer society. The greater distribution of wealth in consumer societies affects the *access* to excess. In consumerism, as Baudrillard claims, excess is “experienced as an everyday miracle” and this is why it loses its sense of the sacred. (Baudrillard, 1998: 32) In the same vein, the “deviance value” of the entrepreneur is absorbed into homogeneous society. It can therefore be determined that it is excess itself, or rather its distribution, which paralyses heterogeneity in contemporary society. Only when excess is restrained, designated, and reserved for the

powerful few, can it sustain its overwhelming, charismatic sense of heterogeneity. In this sense, we can see that Dollimore's claim that a society which embraces a heterogeneous existence, is an impossible one. The moment that it does, it loses all sense of heterogeneity. In order to strengthen this argument, I now wish to apply the same principles illustrated above to Bataille's notion of eroticism. It will be seen that, as in consumerism, the heterogeneity of erotic transgression quickly spills over into "the everyday" and loses its sense of heterogeneity.

2.2.b. Homogeneous Eroticism

In what follows, I wish to present an argument which suggests that the counter cultural practices of the Sixties lost their sense of heterogeneity in the decades which followed. Firstly, I will examine how transgressive elements in the Sixties – particularly sex, became more and more "acceptable" to mainstream society in the decades to come. As critic Patricia Waugh argues, from the Seventies onward, counter culture gradually fell prey to "commercial appropriation." (Waugh, 1995: 75) I will argue that the proliferation of sex in the media elevates it to such an acceptable level, that it is no longer something that can be transgressed – for it is no longer forbidden. In this sense, the various transgressive elements of ~~the~~ ^{delete} contemporary Capitalism are characterized by the fact that they can no longer be considered "sacred" as such. To substantiate this argument, I will examine two contemporary cultural forms which embody this notion of "sacredless" excess. Firstly, I will show how contemporary pornography is representative of an excess which is no longer concealed, or as Bataille would claim, is no longer "confined to the darkness". Its public nature – indicative of its cultural acceptance, eradicates the heterogeneous space to which it was once confined. Secondly, using contemporary horror movies, it will be seen that even the most extreme forms of transgression – the likes of rape, torture and murder, ⁻ are now also available for ^{-/} public consumption on a broad scale. Their unconcealed excessiveness is also characterized by a lack of heterogeneity. In this sense, it will be determined that contemporary forms of eroticism again affirm Dollimore's stance that a heterogeneous existence is an implausible one.

It will be remembered that in my discussion of the sixties, sexual discourse in popular culture was saturated with a sense of bliss and rapture. During this period, drawing such forbidden subjects into public discourse still had an air of transgression about it – hence the sense of rapture which Heath saw evident in novels such as *Kinflicks*, which depict sex as "sacred and

binding". However, as sex became increasingly prevalent in dominant discourses, as it becomes an all-encompassing national obsession, it begins to lose its deviance value. Heath goes on to argue that the sheer abundance of sexual representation in the media paralyzes any sense of heterogeneity it may have had. He claims that the abundance "of representations – images, discourses, ways of picturing and describing..." makes sexuality "the definition of a new mode of conformity." (Heath, 1984: 3) The pattern which emerges is virtually identical to Goux's argument regarding the homogeneity of the Capitalist entrepreneur. Those counter culturalists whose rebellious practices caused such an outrage in the sixties "have won" so to speak; this is what "paralyzes them so seriously." (Goux, 1990: 218) Following the commodification of sex, it becomes increasingly difficult to indulge in such practices whilst maintaining their transgressive force. These once heterogeneous acts now became increasingly homogeneous through their acceptance and distribution into mainstream society. With the death of these "prohibitions" and "taboos", it follows that the notion of the sacred, which is so bound up with them, dissipates.

Transgression's newfound position in the commercial market manifested itself in a variety of different forms. It was particularly evident, Waugh argues, in the medium of television, which began to forward an "astonishingly progressive questioning and loosening of authority", depicting content which was once reserved to "subcultures of teenage rebellion." (Waugh, 1995: 25) It also became increasingly evident in literature, film and theatre.¹⁷ One of the most obvious indicators was the proliferation of sexual discourse in the media. Although, since the mid-nineteenth century the erotic had attracted entrepreneurs, it mostly remained a "marginal, illicit" industry. (D'Emillio and Freedman, 1988: 327) However, following the "sexual revolution", increasingly lax attitudes toward sex facilitated for a vast new field of commercial exploitation. D'Emillio claims "The Capitalist impulse seized upon sexual desire as an unmet need that the market place could fill ... " (D'Emillio and Freedman, 1988: 327) Sexual imagery became increasingly incorporated into mainstream life as "Advertisers broke new ground in their use of the erotic to excite consumers." (D'Emillio and Freedman 1988: 328) This extended into other forms of popular culture: visual entertainment media was one, including talk shows on sex; newspapers were another, offering scintillating details of the sex lives of the population. A whole new body of "prescriptive" sexual literature arose: books on sexual function and dysfunction, "How-to do" manuals and so forth. There was also the rise of pornography, which by the 1980's had become a multi-million dollar industry.

One of the best illustrations of contemporary sexual excess which lacks sense of prohibition is pornography. Pornography understood as “the explicit description of exhibition of sexual // (w) activity” involves sex in the public domain— for and before others. (Tulloch, 1990: 1182) Such a public display of sexuality, a display in which nothing is concealed, suggests a sexuality of which there is nothing left to prohibit. In relation to the sacred - that which Bataille argues is “confined to the darkness”, and which secrecy and prohibition make divine, pornography in effect destroyed this “darkness”. In this sense, it signifies a destruction of the divisions between that which is sacred and that which is profane. This is pointed out by Seltzer, who claims that pornography “makes private desire publicly visible – indeed binds private desire to public visibility.” (Seltzer, 1998: 90) This lack of prohibition essentially points to a cultural form in which there is nothing left to transgress. This is evident in the argument that pornographic aesthetics lack the sense of “rapture” and “bliss” which Bataille claims is implicit in acts of transgression. The mechanical and repetitive nature of pornographic content – that which Sontag claims “...disdains fully formed persons (psychology and social portraiture) ... and reports only on the motiveless tireless transactions of depersonalized organs” pertains to this lack. (Sontag, 1982: 89) In this sense, eroticism in pornography is reduced to a “thing” in a similar way that Bataille’s readings of the Kinsey reports reduce sex to a “thing”: By robbing sex of its unknowable, inassimilable nature and exposing it to the light, it loses all sense of the sacred. ¹⁸ In this sense, it can be seen how pornography is indicative of how/consumerism commodification of sex turns a once c/ (consumerist) heterogeneous practice into something banal and homogeneous.

The repetitive and methodical exposure of taboo; of leaving no room for anything hidden—leaving nothing left to transgress, is evident in other contemporary aesthetic forms. ¹⁹ For instance, the 1980’s birth of the “Splatter film”, a genre of horror movies which “regularly offer descriptions and depictions of gore which go far beyond what one finds in the tradition” reiterates a similar phenomenon. (Carol/ 1990: 211) In relation to the work of Burroughs and Nitsch for example, who in the sixties were confined to a marginal avant garde position, extremely horrific content has now been popularized to the point where it can be accessed at the local video store. The fact that “Splatter” films “are resplendent on video rental shelves today, and most have spanned sequels to the twelfth degree” are an indicator of how “un” transgressive the horror which was so dear to Bataille had become. (Arnzen, 1994: 177) Examples abound, *Friday the 13th*, *Halloween* and *Nightmare on Elm Street* being a few of them. Like pornography, the relentless repetition of transgression in the “Gore for gore’s

sake” aesthetic of these films, essentially destroys the notion of transgression itself. (Arnzen, 1994: 178) Carol, whose book on horror argues that it always commands our “attention” and “fascination” claims that the content of these films portrays “the extreme gross fury visited upon the human body as it is burst, blown up, broken and ripped apart; as it disintegrates or metamorphoses; as it is dismembered and dissected; as it is devoured from the inside out.” (Carol, 1990: 211) The splatter film ethos has been elaborated upon with the rise of the Internet.²⁰ Web sites consisting of film clips and photographs of accident victims, torture victims, scenes of cannibalism and the like, are now all available for public consumption. In this sense, again we see the repetition of excess *ad infinitum*. No longer being confined to the avant-garde (in the case of the sixties) or the Aztec Priests (in the case of Bataille), violence’s commodification now becomes a feature of the everyday.

This state reflects, what Foucault claims of transgression in the contemporary era, namely, “denatured – cast into an empty zone where it achieves whatever meager form is bestowed upon it by the establishment of its limits...” (Foucault, 1998: 24) This, in a sense, appears to be a “condition” of contemporary Capitalist society – a kind of stalemate position in which the need to be excessive remains but the rapture which accompanies it has been lost. It can therefore be seen in the above examples that the commodification of erotic excess in contemporary Capitalism paralyzes the heterogeneity which originally accompanied such excesses. Essentially, it is the *amount* of people who have access to such material which disallows the potential for transgression. And with the negation of transgression, comes the negation of those ecstatic and rapturous states which accompany it.

Conclusion

In the above, I have attempted to answer Dollimore’s question: “what society might be recognized in accord with the truth of life as expenditure.” (Dollimore: 1998: 256) I presented contemporary Western society as representative of Bataille’s general economy in two ways. Initially, I used various criticisms to present consumer Capitalism as being both excessive and heterogeneous. In this presentation, the excessive elements were, as in Bataille’s “archaic” societies, reserved to a small portion of the population. This model, suggested that Bataille’s societies of the general economy and the contemporary state of the general economy were remarkably similar. In this sense, since Bataille’s death, the general economy appears to have resurfaced. In the second instance, this assertion was modified somewhat. Using Dollimore’s assertion that an existence based on perpetual heterogeneity is

an impossible existence, I attempted to show that although consumer Capitalism is excessive, it is no longer heterogeneous. In demonstrating that excess, in both its economic and erotic forms, is no longer reserved for a marginalized few, but rather available to the entire population, the very definition of “heterogeneity” becomes redundant. This signifies the most pivotal difference between Bataille’s concepts of the general economy applied in *The Accursed Share* (which is to say, applied to archaic societies and restricted Capitalist societies) and applied to post-modern, consumer Capitalism. What can be determined from it is that a society of the general economy – in which excess is distributed broadly amongst the population can, indeed, exist. Consumer Capitalism serves as proof of this. As for such a culture being wracked with ‘rapture’, “death” and “discontinuous individualities”, it can be seen that the very nature of widespread excess annihilates such a possibility.

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American Psycho: An Illustration of Homogeneous Excess

In the third and last section of this dissertation, I wish to look at a novel to support the notion that contemporary culture is excessive but not heterogeneous. Although one novel does not prove my hypothesis correct (indeed, there are other contemporary art forms which could prove contrary), it serves to demonstrate that the notion of sacredless excess is at least *evident* in contemporary society. I will use Brett Easton Ellis's novel, *American Psycho* for this case study – the reason being that it extensively covers excess in both its erotic and consumptive forms. *American Psycho* is a novel which deals with the excesses of the late 1980's - a period in American economic history in which a number of people, as Lewis claims "with no special skill or preparation, got rich, very young." (Lewis, 1992: 13) The year in which the novel is set is 1987 – the high point of the "high rolling" Eighties. This period is significant in that it was a turning point for the decades excesses. On "Black Monday" – October 19, 1987, the New York stock exchange virtually collapsed, serving as an indicator that the excesses of the Eighties had reached their zenith. Amidst this backdrop, *American Psycho* portrays the life of Patrick Bateman, a handsome, sophisticated, twenty six year old Wall Street broker whose highly paid job serves as a basis for his luxurious, sumptuous lifestyle. His character reflects the excesses of the Eighties in his day-to-day obsession with the deliberation of and purchasing of luxury consumer goods. As the title of the book suggests, Patrick is also a psychopath. When not pre-occupied with economic consumption, he spends his time and energy fantasizing - and committing, various acts of rape, torture and murder. It is these two aspects of the general economy, consumerism and eroticism, which I will focus on in this analysis of *American Psycho*. By applying the findings of the previous chapter, it will be seen that *American Psycho* is devoid of the heterogeneity (sacredness, rank, rapture, bliss, etc) which Bataille believes is inextricably bound to the general economy. The novel demonstrates that because excess is no longer "marginal" in such a society, it can no longer be other. We constantly see Patrick attempting to set himself apart through acts of expenditure and repeatedly, we see these attempts fail. In the excessive world which surrounds him, his own acts of excess barely stand out. In demonstrating this, *American Psycho* serves as a case study of what Goux and Baudrillard point out as regards consumption, and what Foucault and Waugh say about eroticism: namely that contemporary Western society can be considered excessive, but no longer sacred.

3.1 *American Psycho* 1: Consumerism

In what follows, it will be seen that the economic expenditures in *American Psycho* evoke the opposite of what Bataille claims of expenditure. Unlike the sense of rapture and sacred bliss which is evoked in Bataille's archaic societies – or even Gilder's "divine trader" or Baudrillard's "great wastrel", the characters in *American Psycho* only attain elements of homogeneity and alienation through expenditure. The reason for this, as was demonstrated above, is that in consumer Capitalism the differentiation and distribution of excess paralyzes heterogeneity. I will examine this lack of heterogeneity in the following ways: It will be seen that the descriptions of excess lack rapture as well as serving to alienate and homogenize characters as opposed to setting them apart. It will also be seen that the inability to attain heterogeneous elements such as rank and the sacred are a consequence of this homogeneity. In demonstrating how these excesses inhibit, rather than liberate, it will become evident how *American Psycho* functions as an example of the condition of excess in consumer Capitalism.

A major indicator in the novel which suggests that expenditure does give its practitioners a sense of heterogeneity, is in the style of writing. The excesses of consumerism are described in a dead-pan fashion, reflecting a style likely to be found in fashion brochure advertising. This is illustrated, for example, in the following profile of Patrick's acquaintances. Sean wears a:

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

Nicki wears:

"A wool crepe skirt and wool and cashmere velour jacket and draped over her arm is a wool and cashmere velour coat, all by Louis Dell'Olio. High-heel shoes by Susan Bennis Warren Edwards. Sunglasses by Alain Milkli, Pressed leather bag from Hermes." (Ellis, 1991: 42)

This style, which repeats itself endlessly through the novel, led critics such as Woolf to exclaim, “It was the single most boring book I have ever had to endure.” (Woolf 1991) Caveney and Young call it “flat, affectless prose.” (Caveney and Young, 1992: 5) What is significant about these descriptions is the fact that the luxurious detail which they describe is excessive. However, there is none of the “intimacy”, “bliss” and “rapture” which Bataille attributes to expenditure in these descriptions. In fact, quite the opposite is true. Such descriptions in fact abstract human qualities in the characters. Brand names completely swamp any potential for personalities to emerge, lending to an impending sense of alienation – that beneath the brand names, no “person” exists.²¹ Not only is this expenditure alienating, it also tends to create a sense of homogeneity. Critic Paul Coughlin, experiences the characters as “interchangeable ... their physical presentations are virtually identical.” (Coughlin, 2000: 2) Young claims:

“Ellis’s use of detailed dress-code to obliterate rather than to define character in the traditional sense ... eventually turns upon the impossibility of anyone distinguishing one character from another.” (Young and Caveney, 1992: 103)

Ellis uses a number of rhetorical devices to illustrate the homogeneous “interchangeability” of those who expend. Product brands and names of people increasingly become mixed-up as the novel progresses - contributing to an overall lack of identity and individuality. For instance, the shoe brand “Susan Warren Bennis Edwards” becomes shoes by “Warren Susan Allen Edmonds” and then shoes by “Edward Susan Bennis Allen”. Bateman asks if such a thing as an “Italian Thai” restaurant can exist. This homogeneity is echoed in the appearances of the characters. They all spend a great deal of time deliberating upon the luxury garments they wear, and yet they all look so similar that they cannot be distinguished from each other. For instance, Patrick is mistaken by his lawyer as “Davies” and as “Donaldson”. Patrick calls “Paul Owen”, “Marcus Halbestrum”, and so on. Patrick claims of his colleague at one point, “Even though I am more handsome than Craig, we both look pretty much the same.” (Ellis, 1991: 250) So although consumption is used to demarcate the differences between one character and another, it inevitably creates not a sense of definition, but rather a sense of sameness.

The reason that excess causes a great degree of homogeneity and alienation can be couched in what was argued in the chapter above. In Bataille’s archaic societies, only a privileged few

could afford luxury and their luxury enabled them to stand head and shoulders above the rest of society. But in consumer society, as was seen in the criticisms of Bell, Goux and Baudrillard, expenditures are now available to a much broader range of the population. The idea of “differentiation” of desires now disperses the hierarchy which maintained these “privileged few” in power. As products cater for more and more specific “desires”, the difference between one desire and the next leads increasingly to homogeneity. One such instance of this can be seen in the way that Ellis plays with the notion of rank in the novel. Indeed, many of the characters seem to be obsessed with rank – especially through the notion of acquisition. We can see Patrick’s obsession with wealth and its relation to status when he claims of his friend, “The only thing that didn’t bore me, obviously enough, was how much money Tim Price made.” (ibid. 282) Characters use the luxury items they consume to try and outdo each other. Yet because they all consume so similarly, outdoing each other becomes an almost impossible feat.²² This notion is satirized in the following incident in which Patrick and his associates are comparing their business cards. Patrick claims:

“I decide to even the score a little by showing off my new business card. I pull it out of my Gazelle skin wallet (Barney’s, \$850) and slap it on the table, waiting for reactions”

“‘Cool coloring’, Van Patten says, studying the card closely.”

“‘That’s bone’, I point out. ‘And the lettering is something called Silian Rail’”

After showing his, Patrick’s friend David Van Pattern, responds by showing his own card:

“A brief spasm of jealousy courses through me when I notice the elegance of the color and the classy type. I clench my fist as Van Patten says, smugly, ‘Egg-shell with Romalian type ...’. He turns to me.

‘Nice’, I croak, but manage to nod.”

Timothy Price, revealing his, follows:

“Even I have to admit, it is magnificent. Suddenly the restaurant seems far away, hushed, the noise distant, a meaningless hum, compared to this card, and we all

hear price's words: 'Raised lettering, pale nimbus white' ... Price pulls it out and he's acting nonchalant, I don't see how he can ignore its subtle off-white coloring, its tasteful thickness. I am unexpectedly depressed that I started this." (ibid. 44, 45)

It can be seen here, that the contrasts between one act of expenditure and another are perpetually divided, serving to blur rather than distinguish expenditures. In Mary Harron's film adaptation of the novel, the absurdity of the incident is enhanced by the fact that every business card shown looks exactly the same. (Harron, 2000) The notions of "eggshell", "off white", "nimbus white" and "bone" expose the obsessive fixation on "choice" in consumer society. Yet it is these minor details which confer upon the characters their different statuses in terms of rank. Sometimes fixation on minor details reaches the point of insanity, suggesting an underlying psychosis, or "cracking up" beneath the coolly detached descriptions of people and places. For instance, whilst browsing through the video store, Patrick screams: "*There are too many fucking movies to choose from*" (ibid. 112). At another point, Patrick has an hysterical outburst at a pizzeria: "A pizza should be yeasty and slightly bready and have a cheese crust!" (ibid.106) In this sense, it becomes evident that Ellis is critical of the fact that in consumer culture, there is *too much* choice – what Young terms "a sensory overload which affects us all." (Caveney and Young, 1992: 110)

If we are to take *American Psycho* as an illustration of a society based on exuberance, then it can be argued that such a society is a failure in terms of attaining the glorious attributes which Bataille claims it should possess. In can therefore be seen in the above that *American Psycho* affirms the notion that expenditure has lost its sense of heterogeneity in contemporary culture. Nearing the end of the novel, Patrick claims of himself:

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

This is a far cry from the heterogeneous, sovereign existence of the individual who squanders. The democratic principles which have diluted Bataille's archaic "hierarchical" societies serves to dilute the notions of rank, the sacred and bliss which accompanied these

societies. The consequential alienation and homogeneity implicit in excess therefore demonstrate that a culture in which the general economy is embraced wholesale, is one which on the contrary to boasting what Dollimore claims of ‘discontinuity’ and rapture’ leaves one with a sense of homogeneity and alienation.

3.2 *American Psycho* II: Eroticism.

This second critique of *American Psycho* largely echoes the above critique on consumption. It will be seen that the excessive eroticism in the novel (manifested in Patrick’s psychopathic acts of cruelty and murder) inevitably cannot bring about heterogeneity. However, I wish to demonstrate that when Patrick first begins indulging in this behavior, he *does* seem to attain a sense of heterogeneity which he could not achieve through economic consumption. But as the sex and horror become increasingly prolific in the text, the transgressions begin to lose their sense of heterogeneity. The horrific deeds begin to be portrayed in the same dull, repetitive style as products consumed. Because these acts, like consumer acts, begin to dominate the text, they are no longer “other”, but rather homogeneous. In this sense, the transition mirrors that of eroticism from the sixties to the eighties, namely that because there is nothing left to transgress – erotic excess is emptied of its sacred content. The “eroticism” in the novel therefore operates along the lines of pornography and splatter movies in contemporary society, namely that it is repetitive and explicit – and essentially dull and homogeneous. In demonstrating this, it will again be determined that the novel is making an indictment on the excesses of contemporary society. By showing that notions of the “sacred”, “rapture” and “bliss” are no longer achievable through erotic transgression, *American Psycho* is representative of a society in which excess is no longer heterogeneous.

In the previous section, it was seen that Patrick could not attain heterogeneity through economic consumption. This was clearly evident in the “business card” incident, in which homogeneity, not heterogeneity, dominated proceedings. Yet as the novel progresses, we see Patrick using other avenues to attain a sense of heterogeneity. For instance, he deliberately contrasts himself with people from much lower economic brackets. In doing so, he is able to dramatize his wealth in stark contrast to their lack thereof. In doing so, he can confer upon himself a sense of rank which he could not achieve amongst his peers. Regarding the doorman of his building he claims:

“I was confronted by a new doorman, my age but balding and homely and fat ... it struck me that I was infinitely better looking, more successful and richer than this poor bastard would ever be ...” (ibid. 138)

This behavior is reiterated with his dealings with beggars (ibid.130) and sales clerks (ibid. 112). At one point he tauntingly asks two prostitutes, who he has invited up to his apartment, if they've ever traveled overseas, gone to college or know the broker firm he works for. “I also mention, after pouring them another drink, that I went to Harvard, and then I ask, “Ever hear of it?” (ibid. 171) In using what Weldon claims are “the poor, the powerless, the wretched”; Patrick is able to, in a sense, create a simulation of the cruelly hierarchical societies of Bataille’s “archaic” cultures. (Weldon, 1991: 65) This gives him a sense of otherness but at the same time gives the reader an indication as to how pathetic and desperate Patrick’s character is. The notion of attaining a sense of heterogeneity through the domination over others, serves as the principle upon which Patrick begins to contemplate murder. In one instance, “a girl” working at the video store doesn’t confer upon Patrick the rank he believes is due to him: “She hands me the tapes without even looking at me, refusing to recognize who I am ...”. This causes Patrick to think: “The things I could do with this girl’s body with a hammer, the words I could carve into her with an ice pick.” (ibid. 112) Not only does this imagined violence give Patrick a sense of power, it also serves as a transgression of taboos. Through negating prohibitions in such a way, there is an accompanying sense of excitement which is introduced into Patrick’s monotonous life. In a sense, such excitement can be related to Bataille’s notion of the sacred – that which “is expelled from a society that reduces itself to homogeneity.” (Bataille, 1997: 121) Violence is a way for Patrick to escape his homogeneous existence and enter into the sacred realm. This is evident in the dramatic difference in the style of the writing, once violent murders start to take place. A sense of animation is depicted in Patrick which stands out in relation to his usual dead pan, reporter style narration. This rapture in the monotony of the text is evident in the first murder we read about. After gouging out a beggar’s eye and stabbing him in the stomach, Patrick claims:

“Afterwards, two blocks west, I feel heady, ravenous, pumped up, as if I’d just worked out and endorphins are flooding my nervous system, or just embraced that line of cocaine, inhaled the first puff of a fine cigar, sipped that first glass of Cristal.” (ibid. 132)

We can see that murder restores feeling in a world which otherwise is in a state of “depersonalization”. (ibid. 283) Even the products related to – the cocaine, the champagne, the cigar, are not described in the run-of-the-mill way that products are usually depicted in the novel. They are equated with the “rush” that the murder gives him. The term “ravenous” perhaps reiterates the animal intimacy which transgressive eroticism restores to the transgressor. This is reiterated in other murders. Patrick claims during one murder that he is “screaming like a banshee” behind his cape. (ibid. 166) In another instance, just before killing a child, “something unspoken”, “a weird kind of tension” occurs between him and a snowy owl at the zoo. (ibid. 297) At any rate, it can be seen that Bataillan heterogeneous elements are evident in these transgressions. Patrick’s erotic excesses give to him a sense of rank, the sacred and rapture which he could not attain through economic expenditure.

Although so far, I have presented erotic transgression in the novel as heterogeneous, there is another element in the novel which suggests the opposite: Namely that such transgression is actually homogeneous. In what follows, I will attempt to show some of the homogeneous elements of expenditure in the book. It will be seen that by the end of the novel, the homogeneity of excess in the novel is the prevalent theme. The reason, it will be seen, is that as the excesses become increasingly prolific, they fail to stand out – to be “other” from Patrick’s otherwise homogeneous world. As the violence increases, it proportionally weakens as a vehicle of transgression. In consequence, the violence shows a marked loss in the notions of rapture and bliss which were illustrated above. I will determine these homogeneous elements of excess as follows. Firstly, I will examine the element of pornography in the novel. It will be seen that it serves as an example of excess which is no longer transgressive. It will also be seen that the metaphor of impotency in the novel – both metaphorically and literally – serves as exemplary of this inability to attain bliss and rapture through transgression. In a similar vein, it will be seen that the descriptions of violence in the novel begin to lose their sense of “bliss”. As they become more and more repetitive, such acts of transgression become as meaningless as economic consumption. It will therefore be determined that like the economic excesses in the book, erotic excesses become homogeneous through their tedious and infinite repetition. The novel therefore serves as indexical of the notion that in contemporary Capitalism, the general economy is excessive, but no longer heterogeneous.

Sex in the novel is described in the literary style of hard-core pornography, depicting a complete absence of what could be termed “seduction”. For instance, Patrick hires movies with titles such as ‘Inside Lydia’s Ass’, ‘Vibrator Bitches’, etc. The significance of the pornographic motif in the novel is that it suggests lack of prohibition. Always brightly lit, the sex scenes suggest that Patrick exists in a world in which there is nothing left to prohibit. For instance, Patrick is about to have sex with, and then murder, two women. He describes the setting as “Silence. Arctic, frigid, utter silence. The light burning over us in the apartment is cold and electric ... Sex happens -A hard-core montage.” (ibid. 303) Elsewhere whilst having sex he claims “every halogen bulb in the bedroom burns...” (ibid. 173). In another instance, he claims his partner is “just a shape ... even with all the halogen lamps burning.” (ibid. 133) And again, “both of them on my bed, all the lights in the room burning.” (Ellis, 1991: 288) In this sense it can be seen that nothing is confined to shadow – suggesting a world in which nothing needs to be hidden. Without secrecy – a world in which everything is permitted, no transgression is possible. Pornography therefore operates both metaphorically and literally in the novel. It is indicative of the dilemma facing Patrick’s erotic life: without anything left to transgress, elements such as rapture and the sacred become redundant.

The inability to attain heterogeneity through excess is further reiterated in the metaphor of ejaculation in the novel. This is evident in the following: Patrick claims, “I know I won’t have enough time to masturbate over the scene where the woman is getting drilled to death by a power drill since I have a date with Courtney at seven-thirty at Café Luxembourg.” (ibid. 69) Whilst having sex with Courtney, he claims “I bring myself to orgasm so weak as to be almost nonexistent and my groan of a massive but somewhat expected disappointment is mistaken by Courtney for pleasure and momentarily spurs her on as she lies sobbing beneath me on the bed.” (ibid. 103) In these examples, we can see that excess does not bring about the Bataillian notion of rapture or “fissure” through excess. Such inability is carried over into the murders themselves. After Patrick kills the child in the zoo, he ponders “How useless, how extraordinarily painless it is to take a child’s life.” (ibid. 299) This insufficiency is reiterated in the torture of a “nameless girl”. He drills her teeth away but “it fails to interest me.” (ibid. 328) At one point, Patrick is feeding a rat, which he has deliberately starved, on one of his victims. “I can already tell it’s going to be a characteristically useless, senseless death, but then I’m used to the horror.” (ibid. 329). What is significant in this is the fact that expenditure, in its most extreme and unrestricted forms, exemplified here through the likes of torture, rape, murder and cannibalism, is insufficient in terms of attaining the sovereignty,

sacredness and intimacy of which Bataille speaks. These attributes were far more potent and effective when Patrick's transgressions were limited in number and had the sense of being dangerous and risky. Yet, as the text progresses, these restrictions are dismantled and the force of the transgressions are weakened.

Within the text, the proliferation of horror starts to reach a point where it is more the norm than the exception. Horror becomes the "everyday" reality of Patrick Bateman. As the number of murders increases, the reader begins to realize that Patrick never can, and never will, get caught. A detective questions Patrick but this amounts to nothing. (ibid. 277) He confesses all his atrocities to his lawyer but his lawyer thinks he is joking. (ibid.388). In the chapter, 'Manhattan Chase', police helicopters follow Patrick to his office, but this incident also fades into obscurity. Throughout the novel, we hear Patrick plainly confessing to people in conversations that he is a psychopath but they unfailingly mis-hear or misunderstand or laugh at him. The fact that he cannot get caught gives one the sense that he cannot transgress *anything*. Finally, this inability to attain a sense of heterogeneity through excess is re-affirmed in the reversion to the dead pan style of writing. Elizabeth Young claims of the novel's excesses that they lack the "shock", disturbance, even loss, which are proper to ecstasy, to bliss." (Young and Caveney, 1992: 120) For instance:

"I'm wearing a Joseph Abboud suit, a tie by Paul Stuart, shoes by J, Crew, a vest by someone Italian and I'm kneeling on the floor beside a corpse, eating the girl's brain, gobbling it down, spreading Grey Poupon over hunks of the pink, fleshy meat." (ibid. 328) "Things are lying in the corner of my bedroom: a pair of girl's shoes from Edward Susan Bennis Allen, a hand with a thumb and a fore-finger missing, the new issue of Vanity Fair splashed with someone's blood." (ibid. 345)

In the beginning of the analysis of the eroticism in *American Psycho*, I forwarded the argument that it had the potential to enable Patrick to transcend the homogeneous world of consumption. His acts of cruelty and domination offered him a sense of power which economic consumerism could not offer. Yet, as these acts proliferate, they start to mimic the same pattern as that of consumerism. By the end of the novel, there is no longer any contrast between the freedom of erotic expenditure standing out against the homogeneity of consumerism. Rather, on a textual level, they merge together and become one and the same. Products and erotic transgressions are described with equal weight and measure. It can therefore be seen that *American Psycho* is representative of the state of the general economy

which I have presented in the above pages. In both its erotic and consumptive excesses, various elements in the novel suggest that Ellis is making a critique of the excesses of contemporary Capitalist society. In the last lines of the novel, Patrick reads a sign above a door which claims "THIS IS NOT AN EXIT". (ibid. 399) This phrase seems to sum up the contents of the novel, - namely, that excess in contemporary Capitalism is no longer a way in which we can attain release. In all manners of trying, Patrick fails to attain the heterogeneity he so desperately seeks. The reason being that in a world already immersed in expenditure, using expenditure to set oneself apart is a futile exercise. In this sense, it can be seen that *American Psycho* is exemplary of a text which embodies the condition of the general economy in consumer Capitalism: Homogeneously excessive.

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Conclusion

In the above, I have attempted to argue in favor of the following two themes: Firstly, that various contemporary arguments suggest that the general economy has re-emerged in Consumer Capitalism; secondly that these new forms of the general economy differ in that they are no longer heterogeneous. It was seen that in Bataille's notion of the general economy, excess, in both its consumptive and erotic forms, is always conferred upon a marginal, heterogeneous component of society. This figure is invariably set apart from the rest of society and often imbued with religious significance. After outlining how the excesses of this archaic world came to an end with the rise of industrial Capitalism, it was proposed that the next stage of Capitalism – namely consumerism, revived what was essentially a repressed general economy. The initial argument for this, presented the marginalized figures of the entrepreneur, wastrel and counter-culturalist. However, on further investigation it was seen that these figures were not really marginal at all. So many other members of the consumer population were doing what they were doing, namely being entrepreneurs, competing with each other for rank, transgressing Protestant ethics, etc. This suggested that such a position, by definition, could no longer be considered “other”. It is for this reason that excess in the modern world can no longer have a “sacred” or ‘divine’ character. So, although Bataille's general economy appears to have re-emerged in consumer society, its sense of heterogeneity has been lost.

In examining *American Psycho*, it was seen how certain contemporary cultural works reflect the condition presented. In the novel, we can see a very severe form of excess brought about by the consumerism. The fanatical economic acquisitions and commercial availability of transgressive material attest to this. Yet, as was demonstrated, none of these things inevitably offer any sense of Bataille's notion of heterogeneity. Rather, they aid in the construction of a homogeneous reality. The novel therefore serves as an illustration of the condition proposed in this dissertation. Indeed, the notions highlighted in novels such as *American Psycho* are echoed in other contemporary works. We think of the “sacredless” excess of directors such as Michael Heneke or artists such as Damien Hirst, who also forward a kind of sterile exuberance in their work. Nevertheless, although these examples prove that such trends are prevalent, it must be remembered that what I have presented here is only one particular outcome of Bataille's general economy. Another point of view of the current state of the general economy is that it is not “general” at all. It will be remembered that Bataille's notion

of the general economy is that it is excess *which cannot serve any purpose*. With the commodification of excess in its erotic and consumptive forms, surely this excess now has a purpose – has a use value. The kind of revenue that consumerism and eroticism generate in the modern world places them firmly in the world of “things”. In this sense, it is precisely the components of Bataille’s general economy which now constitute the components of a restricted economy. This, for example, is another strain of contemporary thought regarding the application of the general economy to consumerism. At any rate, I hope to have offered in this dissertation, some reasons as to why Bataille’s work has gained the influence that it has today.

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Appendix

¹ Charles Darwin's "survival of the fittest" hypothesis operates upon exactly the same principle as Bataille's notion that lack of space is a reason for destruction. Darwin claims that "Every being, which during its natural lifetime produces several eggs or seeds, must suffer destruction during some period of its life, and during some season, or occasional year, otherwise, on the principle of general increase, its numbers would quickly become so inordinately great that no country could support the product." (Darwin, 1929: 73)

² In Michael Richardson's reading of Aztec sacrifice he argues that there was indeed use value. Richardson draws on Christian Duverger's text on Aztec sacrifice in order to offer evidence which detracts from the "purity" of Aztec expenditure. He suggests that such sacrifices, which he calls a "technical means of domination", were linked to colonial expansion and hence have a use value. see Richardson 1994

³ For further discussion on the paradox, or impossibility of the gift, see Derrida 1992. Also see Roland Barthes' discussion on the phrase "I love you" and its relationship to the impossibility of the gift in *A Lovers Discourse* (1990).

⁴ Bataille uses William Blake's poem 'The Tiger', as exemplary of how animals embody the "immense power of consumption of life". See Bataille 1991

⁵ Bataille lists examples from other cultures too. For example, Aztec human sacrifice, exclusive rites of incest in Egyptian dynasties and primitive taboos pertaining to cadavers and menstruating women all serve as links between violence and sacred adoration. See Bataille 1993

⁶ The Industrial Revolution, which was a complicated series of events, is difficult to date. From the 16th century, industrial techniques became more elaborate, however it was the 17th century and the discoveries of the Scientific Revolution, which made the Industrial Revolution possible. 1760 is the date commonly taken for the start of the revolution (Gay, 1966: 107)

⁷ An exemplary form of expenditure in the Middle Ages was the Gothic cathedral, which reached its zenith in Europe between 1150 and 1250. Chief instigator of the Gothic cathedral, Abbot Suger wanted to design churches which “outshine the splendor of all others” (Janson, 1991: 355) Describing the church of St-Denis as “miraculous” and “most sacred”, one can make a link between Bataille’s assertions of wasted labor on religious adoration on a scale as grand as the Egyptian pyramids.

⁸ French born John Calvin was instrumental in formulating this philosophy of restraint. He denounced the humanistic idea that worldly pleasure was honourable, rather adopting the Greek philosophy of Stoicism, which preached “impassivity in the face of pleasure and pain.” (Simon, 1967: 59) His “Blue Laws”, written for tavern goers, are a good example of the moral criteria which assisted economic reforms: “[He] shall not allow any dissoluteness like dancing, dice or cards, nor receive anyone suspected of being a debauchee” (Simon, 1967: 60). Calvinists believed that a citizen demonstrated his fitness for salvation by being law-abiding, industrious, sober and thrifty. Edith Simon claims, “These same virtues served so well to help the rising bourgeois capitalist on his path that so many historians have suggested that Calvinism was one of the main sources of capitalistic spirit.” (Simon, 1967: 167)

⁹ Bataille makes the exception of the bourgeoisie, as they could afford luxury goods. But he claims that the manner in which the bourgeoisie spend this luxury is debased – namely they spend “behind closed doors.” This goes against the practice of expenditures in archaic societies, which were done for the public. Bataille claims: “As the class that possesses the wealth – having received with wealth the obligation of functional expenditure – the modern bourgeoisie is characterized by the refusal in principle of this obligation. It has distinguished itself from the aristocracy through the fact that it has consented only to spend for itself and within itself – in other words, by hiding its expenditures as much as possible from the eyes of the other classes” (Bataille, 1998b: 176). A clear illustration of this can be seen in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s book, *The Great Gatsby* (1926), particularly in Gatsby’s “little parties”. They are reserved for the upper classes (“well dressed” Englishmen, “wealthy Americans”, celebrities, etc) and far away from the “eyes and ears of the lower classes”. (Fitzgerald, 1990: 43) Tony Tanner sums up the debasement of extreme wealth to the world of “things” when he claims of the novel that it represents “the sort of devouring, self-pleasuring and hypocritical

materialism that the stupendous and ruthless success of nineteenth-century capitalism fostered and enabled” (Tanner, 1990: x)

¹⁰ Alfred Charles Kinsey (1894-1956) was a zoologist who founded the Institute for Sex Research at Indiana University. “The Kinsey Reports”, which he was most famous for, were an analysis presented in accurate and straightforward language, on thousands of interviews on men and women’s sexual experiences.

¹¹ An extreme example of the notion of acquisition and its relation to rank is evident in the Western art market in the 1980’s and early 1990’s. For instance, Australian beer tycoon Alan Bond bid \$53.9 million for Vincent van Gogh’s *Irises* in 1987. In 1990, prices reached their peak when Japanese paper mogul Ryoei Saito paid \$ 78.1 million for *At the Moulin de la Galette* and \$82.5 million for Vincent van Gogh’s *Portrait of Dr Gachet*. The highly publicized, “mass mediafied” instances of these exorbitant purchases illustrate the links between acquisition, expenditure and rank. *litature*

¹² A whole new body of literature has arisen regarding chance and Capitalism. See, for example Williams’ book *Trading Chaos* (1995). The blurb on the inner sleeve claims “Chaos theory now stands at the cutting edge of financial decision-making methods” (Williams 1995)

¹³ For further discussion on the counter cultural trends of the 1960’s, see D’Emilio and Freedman 1988, Waugh, 1995, Willis, 1987, Jameson 1988.

¹⁴ The quote: “...Laverne had achieved her goal of the Ultimate Orgasm” is indicative of a social climate in which fixation on sexual rapture is central. (Heath, 1984: 93)

¹⁵ See the following works by Bataille: *The Story of the Eye* (1963), *The Use Value of DAF de Sade* (1985), *Literature and Evil* (1973), *The trial of Gilles de Rais* (1991)

¹⁶ Although this notion of “democratic life” is applicable within Capitalist democracies themselves, from a global point of view, the division between rich and poor is still vast. If we compare, for example, the United Kingdom’s population of 59.8 million and its gross domestic product per head, of 25, 500 U.S. dollars, to, for example, Kenya’s population of 30.6 million with a gross domestic product per head of 301 U.S. Dollars, a dramatic

difference in wealth becomes apparent. Perhaps these 2002 figures suggest that Bataille's theory, from a global perspective, is still well entrenched (Fishburn, 2002: 36).

¹⁷ Waugh uses the example of a 1975 play called *Teeth n' Smiles* as a major indicator regarding counter-culture's increasing marketability. The narrative of the play portrays a "jaded protest rock band in the countercultural year of 1969. The band is exploited by their entrepreneurial manager, for whom they are 'just merchandise'. (Waugh, 1995: 17) For Waugh, the narrative of the play illustrates how the concept of rebellion had increasingly become "subsumed by Capitalism" since its tumultuous rise in the sixties.

¹⁸ Pornography also corrupts Bataille's notion of eroticism in the sense that it possesses a use value. In "Eroticism", Bataille argues that it is part of "the accursed share" because "*it cannot serve any purpose*". (Bataille, 1993: 16) However the notion of "sex industry" and "Millions of dollars" seems confer upon it a very definite use value. The marketing of eroticism is therefore another way in which excess destined to be squandered is recuperated in a restricted economic form.

¹⁹ At the same time, contemporary genres exist which, it can be argued, attempt to react to this annihilation of prohibition. Certain contemporary artists reiterate, in light of Bataille, the necessity of concealment, prohibition and restraint in order for such things to maintain potency. We think of film directors such as David Lynch, who have used the idea of concealment; "withdrawing into the darkness" in an attempt to regenerate the notion of eroticism and transgression in an era where such things appear have been exhausted. Films such as *Blue Velvet* (1985) and *Twin Peaks* (1988) in which violence and sex play between the notions of concealment and revelation (through the use of metaphors such as voyeurism, curtains, trees etc) serve as evidence of this reaction.

²⁰ See www.rotten.com

²¹ This obsessive fixation on products reiterates Marx's notion of commodity fetishism. Marx argues that once objects with a use value become commodities in a cycle of exchange, these objects become alienated from the labour used to make them. In this sense, "the relations between men themselves assumes ... the fantastic form of a relation between things." (Marx,

1982: 164) This “mysterious character” of products is reiterated in *American Psycho* in the sense that goods substitute people.

²² A similar principle is applied to the notion of Gilder’s “Divine” trader. Patrick, unlike Gilder’s trader, is not a “divine” “avant-garde” romantic existing on the fringes of society. Rather, Patrick works because, as he claims, “I want to fit in” (Ellis, 1991: 164). In this sense, Ellis is suggesting that being a Wall Street broker is an homogeneous, rather than a heterogeneous position. The “chaos” and “risk” involved in such a job does not set him apart because everybody else in the novel does the same thing. This is further dramatized when the reader discovers that Patrick’s family has so much money that he actually does not need to work at all.

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