

Céline Righi

# **New Technologies' Promise to the Self and the Becoming of the Sacred: Insights from Georges Bataille's Concept of Transgression**

2020 | Chapter in an Edited Volume | Accepted Manuscript (Postprint)

available at <https://doi.org/10.18452/22961>

Final version published as:

Céline Righi: "New Technologies' Promise to the Self and the Becoming of the Sacred: Insights from Georges Bataille's Concept of Transgression". In: Religion in Motion: Rethinking Religion, Knowledge and Discourse in a Globalizing World. Edited by Julian Hensold, Jordan Kynes, Philipp Öhlmann, Vanessa Rau, Rosa Coco Schinagl, Adela Taleb. Cham: Springer, 2020, pages 79–99. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-030-41388-0\_6



edoc-Server

Open-Access-Publikationsserver  
der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

# New Technologies' Promise to the Self and the Becoming of the Sacred: Insights from Georges Bataille's Concept of Transgression

**Céline Righi\***

**Abstract:** This article draws on Georges Bataille's concept of transgression, a key element in Bataille's theory of the sacred, to highlight structural implications of the way the self-empowerment ethos of new technologies suffuses the digital tracking culture. Pointing to the original conceptual stance of transgression, worked out against prohibition, I first argue that, beyond a critique of new technologies' promise of self-empowerment as coming at the expense of an acknowledgement of the ultimate taboo—death—is the problem of the sanitizing of the tension between the crossing of the line of the symbolic taboo and prohibition; this undermines a “libidinal investment” towards the sacred, which is central in Bataille's theory. Second, focussing on “eroticism”, since this embodies the emancipative potential of the Bataillean sacred, I argue that while a fear of eroticism marks out the digital technological realm, this is covered up by the blurring of boundaries between pleasure, fun and sex(iness) that currently governs our experience with technological devices.

---

\* Independent Scholar, London, UK  
e-mail: C.Righi@alumni.lse.ac.uk

# Introduction

Recent ethnographic and anthropological studies on the interpenetration of the sacred and the new political economy<sup>1</sup> not only provide rich empirical material to counter the “disenchanted world” thesis.<sup>2</sup> These studies bring to the fore how demands for renewed spiritualities, expressions of faith and emotional regimes focussing on happiness and well-being (e.g. the New Age movement) are intertwined with the social, cultural and symbolic order shaped by neoliberal ideology and consumerism. Scrutinizing the way consumerism and the religious entangle themselves under the auspices of the ethos of the self-entrepreneur, Gauthier and Martikainen<sup>3</sup> note that “religion and faith have become operational with respect to the widespread eschatology of self-realisation.”<sup>4</sup> By referring to the Greek term *eskhatos*, the study of the most remote point in time and space, the authors highlight the bold endeavour which fuels consumerist and neoliberal societies’ imaginary. At stake is not merely the self’s empowerment in the *here and now*, it is the promise of a human destiny akin to an immortal soul. The “eschatology of self-realisation” finds no better illustration than in manifestos written by fervent proponents of the role of digital technologies in supporting individuals’ quest towards a better life, mainly represented in the Quantified Self movement, the self-tracking culture and digital health. “Is there anything more sacred than serving at the altar of our Holy Efficiency?” Horace Fletcher’s question here, and long ago obsessive concern for self-measurement, has become the slogan of data experts who praise self-tracking digital apps for the sake of enhanced sleep, digestion, cognitive ability and so on.<sup>5</sup> Striving for perfection beyond human limitation is also the aim of many a computer scientist and Silicon Valley game designer, such as Jane McGonigal, who claims that technology and game can “help ordinary people achieve the most, cure cancer, stop climate change or end poverty.”<sup>6</sup> New technologies have become the medium through which we engage with the world (sensuously, cognitively, intellectually and affectively) and communicate with others. Connected devices, captors, sensors, have come to form “a weave of networked perception, [which] wraps every space, every place, every thing and body on earth” underlines Greenfield.<sup>7</sup> As the sacred begins to be seen as the “dynamic context, in which we have our being and becoming,”<sup>8</sup> equally, the

---

<sup>1</sup> Gauthier and Martikainen (2013a), Gauthier and Martikainen (2013b), Deane-Drumond et al. (2015).

<sup>2</sup> Gauchet (1997).

<sup>3</sup> Gauthier and Martikainen (2013b).

<sup>4</sup> Gauthier and Martikainen (2013b), p. 15. For Gauthier and Martikainen, consumerism succeeds in shaping new ways of relating to the sacred, since consumerism amplifies a modern cultural trend that has developed over centuries through the awakening of the “primacy of authenticity”, “individuation” and “increasing appeal to emotions”; all of which ascribes a central role in the subject’s life to the “self-realization” ethos. The growing attention paid to the individual as an emotional being, endowed with interiority, thinking of him/herself without referring to a supra order can be traced back to Saint Augustine according to the authors.

<sup>5</sup> Fletcher (1913).

<sup>6</sup> See McGonigal’s website: <https://janemcgonigal.com>. Accessed 01 Aug 2018.

<sup>7</sup> Greenfield (2017), p. 31.

<sup>8</sup> Kull (2006), p. 786.

ubiquitous presence of digital technologies partakes to the development of semantic frameworks interwoven with those which form the “new ordering of the sacred.”<sup>9</sup>

This article explores the relationship between the sacred and the realm of digital technologies that, nowadays, spread across all domains of social and economic life, from politics to cooking, and citizenship to running. What kind of sacred may be at play in the context of a “widespread eschatology of the self” that suffuses the digital technological realm and the use of digital devices by individuals? My aim is to disentangle an understanding of the sacred from the pervasiveness of the self-empowerment ethos in the technological realm, one that is profoundly shaping the “spirit of our time”<sup>10</sup>: a spirit that could be summarized by the phrase now sometimes seen in advertising of “know your data self”, which is itself merely the latest incarnation of the “reflexive project of the self”, held as a hallmark of modernity (Giddens 1991).<sup>11</sup> In the face of the smooth and friendly interface displayed by new technologies, I chose to draw on the intoxicating philosophical work of Georges Bataille, and especially on his theory of the sacred and the key notion of transgression. A member of the College of Sociology, a group of French intellectuals (including Michel Leiris and Roger Callois), Georges Bataille aimed to study all manifestations of the sacred; that is, impurity as much as purity, bringing forth reflection on death, excess, nudity or eroticism. Bataille’s thought-provoking analysis of the phenomena of the sacred, as seen for example in images of degradation in a cemetery or of the sacrifice of a priest in *The Story of the Eye*,<sup>12</sup> set the philosopher well outside of a definition of the Western conception of the sacred and the primacy of Christianity. Yet, Bataille’s account of the sacred is also set within the background of a critique of capitalism<sup>13</sup> understood along with notions of “loss”, “squander”, “waste” and “useless expenditure”. The concept of transgression undoubtedly hints at Bataille’s view of the reduction of human beings to the “order of things”; to an alienated condition caused by the rise of capitalist industries.

In this article, my argument is twofold. First, I show that transgression, defined as both the crossing of lines and the staging of the taboo, unveils how the self-realization ethos in the technological realm contributes to a process of resisting the inevitability of death. This can be understood through Bataille’s caveat of the “intimacy trap”. What Bataille’s account of

---

<sup>9</sup> Szerszynski (2005).

<sup>10</sup> By “spirit of our time” I refer to Max Weber, who, in *The Protestant Ethic* uses the expression “anima” to capture the Geist, the dynamics behind any capitalist forms, predispositions and distinctive devices; this “anima” amount to “a collective psycho-moral disposition”, according to Appadurai (2011).

<sup>11</sup> Giddens (1991).

<sup>12</sup> Bataille (1979).

<sup>13</sup> *The Accursed Share* (1988a), in which Bataille unfolds his theoretical work on a “general economy”, was intended to include, alongside a first part (*The Consumption*), two other parts: *History of the Eroticism* and *The Sovereignty*. Bataille’s project was to juxtapose the last two parts, although published at a later stage, with *The Consumption*, and is indicative of the philosopher’s venture to bring theories of the sacred and of religion, as well as of the general economy, under a single broader theoretical umbrella. In this regard, notions such as “excess”, “sacrifice” or “flow of energy” are central, both in Bataille’s theory of economy and of religion.

transgression reveals is that, in ruling out thinking about death, the self-realization ethos suppresses any *tension* linked with the dialectical movement of transgression and prohibition. Nonetheless, this tension inherent to transgression triggers desire and “libidinal cathexis” in Bataille’s theory, which leads to the second part of my argument. Beneath the rejection of death and the fantasy of the superhuman condition, digital technologies, by eluding the limits and prohibition, shy away from eroticism; it is this notion that, for Bataille, designates the point of “calling [man] into question” and thus reveals the radical potential of the sacred. As I will conclude, Bataille’s account of eroticism in the sacred speaks against power; it could be envisioned as an emancipative space for the self that may be rekindled, while the latter is more than ever challenged by the ubiquitous presence of digital technologies. In using Bataille’s concept of transgression, key in his theory of the sacred, this article crosses the bridge between the sphere of religious study and of political economy<sup>14</sup> and finds ground in the use of a secondary source: French philosopher Bernard Stiegler’s diagnosis of the “liquidation of desire” and the problem of the “externalization of memory” in post-industrialized societies, introduced as part of the philosopher’s new critique of political economy.

Gauthier and Martikainen, introduced earlier, stand out from existing bodies of work on the relation between economy and religion such as pessimist neo-Marxist views on how late capitalism led to the decline of forms of beliefs or how the development of contemporary spiritualities are devoid of moral depth and social cohesiveness.<sup>15</sup> Contrariwise, the “changes they partially document are best understood [...] against the backdrop of wider socio-economic changes catalysed by the spread of consumerism and neoliberal ideology” claim Gauthier and Martikainen.<sup>16</sup> To the authors, the centrality of branding and marketing in the neoliberal ideology provides a symbolic framework which shapes identities, in a way that produces nowadays forms of “self-branding” or “branded persona.”<sup>17</sup> This “matrix of lifestyles” is “inextricably tied to the development of communication technologies”, claim Gauthier and Martikainen.<sup>18</sup> Aligned with this, the present article focuses on the dynamics that lurk behind the ethos of the eschatology of the self, a dominant narrative of self-empowerment, offering a theoretical scrutiny through the use of Bataille’s insights into violent excesses, death and eroticism that account for the concept of transgression.

## Transgression and the (In)escapable Human Condition

Bataille’s core notion of transgression stands between seemingly contradictory terms. Transgression designates the *crossing* of the line of what is by law, traditions or customs

---

<sup>14</sup> For a discussion on Bataille’s conception of economy, situated between a “general economy” and political economy, see Sørensen’s (2012) article, On a Universal Scale: Economy in Bataille’s General Economy.

<sup>15</sup> Gauthier and Martikainen (2013a), Gauthier and Martikainen (2013b), Bell (1976), Carrette and King (2005).

<sup>16</sup> Gauthier and Martikainen (2013a), p. 9.

<sup>17</sup> Hearn (2008), pp. 163–183.

<sup>18</sup> Gauthier and Martikainen (2013a), p. 13.

deemed socially acceptable; yet at the same time transgression must be understood as the respect of these laws without which, as Bataille argues, no societies can thrive. Transgression is bound to prohibition and yet prohibition calls for transgression. This apparent opposition does not mean that both terms overlap or that they mutually exclude one another (one violates the law then respects the law, and vice versa). Bataille's dialectical formulation aims to conceptualize the point of contact between two irreconcilable worlds of experiences: the world of things, of work, utility and individual existence, and the more intensified domain of "inner experience". Reminiscent of Durkheim's depiction of a state of "collective effervescence"—a psychical excitation to the point of delirium triggered by the religious experience of the sacred—Bataille's domain of "inner experience" is replete with intense affects. These manifest through orgy, frenzy, anguish, ecstasy or fusion. These emotionally charged intensities and the pursuit of pleasurable excess threatens the course of societies' history and their organization. In order to prevent the social order from being shattered, the violent enactment and affirmation of these intense experiences must be negated.<sup>19</sup> In line with Freud's notion of coercion in *Totem and Taboos and Beyond the Pleasure Principle*<sup>20</sup> Bataille admits that societies are structured along with socially restricted activity, codes and taboos. Libidinal intensities are no less active and boiling, but the violence that is potentially released is redirected into a higher rational and organized unity. For instance, bravery, courage and patriotism are encoded cultural values that subsume random violence under the higher cause of warfare, steering collective bounds around feelings of national pride. The "negative operation of the taboo" of killing does not suppress the emotional intensities; it gives them an acceptable cultural form in accordance with the societies' given principles.

Death—the site of prohibition with murder and contact with corpses—plays a central role within Bataille's dialectical movement of transgression, since death catalyses at once repulsion *and* attraction. Bataille recognizes that humanity is defined by its repugnance for death as well as for whatever threatens human beings' unity, such as loss of control through drunkenness, excretions, filth or eroticism. All that threatens the unity's perception (e.g. excrements, bodily fluids or a rotting corpse) is instituted as taboo. Yet, as Hegarty notes, "as much as we try to exclude what horrifies us; this exclusion creates the necessity (or desire) to approach what threatens."<sup>21</sup> How can horror at the sight of death be linked to attraction? In the fourth part, *Transgression*, of the second volume of *The Accursed Share, The History of Eroticism*, Bataille distinguishes<sup>22</sup> between the horror of death in the sense of "the dead whom it is criminal to

---

<sup>19</sup> Mitchell, and Winfree (2009), pp. 1–17.

<sup>20</sup> Freud (1918), Freud (1922).

<sup>21</sup> Hegarty (2000), p. 61.

<sup>22</sup> Later in the text, Bataille suggests the idea that, in spite of a natural repugnance for the dead, a "horrible attraction" for the dead body can be envisioned since it is a projection of our attraction not for the dead body in itself, but for murder. The hypothesis, grounded in Bataille's suggestion that "mightn't the prohibition on corpses turn out to be an extension of the prohibition on murder?" (p. 98) contributes to Bataille's effort to account for the primitive state of frenzy that combines death, eroticism and murder.

have contact, and the living, whom it is criminal to kill.”<sup>23</sup> Illustrating the latter case by the story of the Phaedra Complex, Bataille proposes his own interpretation of Phaedra’s incitement towards the transgression of the taboo of incest. According to the philosopher, although Phaedra is horrified at Hippolytus’s crime, he recognizes that in fact the crime “secretly raises and fuels Phaedra’s ardour; sexuality’s fragrance of death ensures all its power.”<sup>24</sup> The dual movement of repulsion, yet fascination, for death explains the relentless search for proximity with death through transgressive acts such as eroticism, which allows us to transcend the “dullness of existence”, the ordinary experiences of the work world. The reason is that, for Bataille, “fear in the face of horror is at its *most creative* when approaching death” reminds us Hegarty.<sup>25</sup> In other words, if one is to experience the gist of a life lived fully, one shall not rejoice at life, but at death.

He alone is happy who, having experienced vertigo to the point of trembling in his bones, and being no longer able to measure the extent of his fall, suddenly discovers the unexpected ability to transform his agony into a joy capable of freezing and transfiguring those who encounter it.<sup>26</sup>

To preserve the creative side of humanity, we must bring ourselves to a close encounter with what is most repelling and abject, opening up a window onto the sacred. The visceral repulsion, yet at the same time fascination in the face of death, triggers the libidinal investment towards the sacred. It furnishes the creative impulse that allows the subject to overcome, for a fleeting instant, the instrumental world of things, utility and rationality.

Bataille’s account of a dialectical dynamic in transgression, namely of the tension between repulsion and fascination for the ultimate taboo (i.e. death), puts into question the neoliberal promise of the technological empowerment of the self; that of a self who competes with an idealized one over boundaries. The Quantified Self movement pursues the goal of instrumenting the body, monitoring its behaviour by providing in the most comprehensive way “self-knowledge through numbers.”<sup>27</sup> Online members of this global network discuss their self-measurement efforts. All singular life activities (e.g. sleeping, walking, eating, breathing) are tracked and measured with sensors (e.g. capturing sleep patterns with REM). Apple Watch, a well-known example of these wearable fitness trackers, offers individuals-consumers an aesthetic, fun, high-performance fitness design, including tracking our heartbeat, breath and calories burned after activity. Such biometric monitors reengineer the body. Encouraged to get slimmer, fitter, healthier, one is drawn to compete with an idealized self with the aim of optimizing and maximizing our performances. In a more extreme case,

---

<sup>23</sup> Bataille (1991), p. 97.

<sup>24</sup> Bataille (1988a), p. 96.

<sup>25</sup> Hegarty (2000), p. 57.

<sup>26</sup> Bataille (1985).

<sup>27</sup> “Self knowledge through numbers” is the slogan of the organization created by Gary Wolf and Kevin Kelley in 2007, as they began the project to track all the new tracking technologies to allow users and makers of tracking tools to share their experiences on online platforms.

Evgeny Morozov, admonishing against “solutionism”, recounts the story of a Microsoft engineer who endeavoured to record every single detail of his life.<sup>28</sup> Morozov notes the development of the engineer’s quest to achieving an empowered self, from generating statistics to “taming inefficiency and unfaithfulness of human memory.”<sup>29</sup> With a small camera able to snap a picture every twenty seconds, and attached behind his neck, Gordon Bell aimed to record a lifetime: “I feel much freer about remembering something now. I’ve got this machine, that slave does it. It gives you this cleanliness” said the engineer.<sup>30</sup> The metaphor of purity being associated here with memorizing and, by contrast, implicitly, impurity being associated with forgetting speaks to a fantasy of an idealized self who competes with a God-like creature—the impure may also be understood as the sinful. Wearable captors, sensors, monitoring tools, either used by Gordon Bell to counter memory loss or by wellness-themed technological devices do not only respond to a quest for well-being; they are designed to ensure certainty over the precariousness of life, whereby a superhuman condition defies illness until the ultimate loss: death. Collective imaginaries endowing technologies with magical features are not new. Harvey traces the fetishizing tendency of technology back to the bourgeoisie’s fantasy to “annihilate space and time.”<sup>31</sup> For Harvey, such a fantasy finds explanation in the bourgeois ethos of class based on the primacy of the “I am”. The class identity of the bourgeoisie conjures up the image of will (symbolized by the “I am”) over the collective. Taking control over space and time beyond normal human capacity is also a way to gain some technological power to enforce a class’s sense of superiority.

## An Empowered Self: Defeating Death and Prohibition— At What Cost?

With these illustrations above, we see that the “eschatology of self-realisation”,<sup>32</sup> as embodied in technological devices available for individuals-users, brings the self to the point of rejecting death, yet at the expense of confronting the limits of the human condition, especially those of the human being’s finitude. In Bataille’s setting of society’s enduring structure through prohibition, the concept of transgression confronts the simulacrum of neoliberal technology’s promise of certainty. Commenting on the subversive image in Bataille’s sacred, Noys explains that: “Bataille refuses the idea that we could ever successfully quarantine death. Instead, the image [of death] is an eruption into which we are dragged and where we fall from our position of security.”<sup>33</sup> The human subject is, after all, simply mortal, and the experience of terror before death, as demonstrated by Bataille, challenges the image of an idealized self-enhanced by

---

<sup>28</sup> Morozov (2013). Morozov uses the term “solutionism” to denounce an ideology that legitimizes over-simplified ways to break down complex problems into neat, fixed, computable solutions through technology.

<sup>29</sup> Morozov (2013), p. 270.

<sup>30</sup> Morozov (2013), p. 269.

<sup>31</sup> Harvey (2013), p. 15.

<sup>32</sup> Gauthier and Martikainen (2013b), p. 15.

<sup>33</sup> Noys (2000), p. 27.

fitness trackers and devices. Mentioning the Aztecs, who expose death in the sacrifice to everyone's gaze by staging the dead not inside, but outside on the top of the pyramid, Bataille aims to stress the problem of our societies' fearful covering up of death. Contrary to the Hegelian perspective<sup>34</sup> conceiving architecture as existing in the place of, and emblemizing a victory over death, Bataille underlines the Aztec civilization's rituals that bind architecture to the visibility of death. Bataille's insight, here, echoes other philosophers and thinkers who warn about capitalist societies' tendency to evade thinking about death, by, for example, suppressing the process of mourning.<sup>35</sup> In *Precarious Life*, Judith Butler denounces the invisible censorship at play in the post-9/11 public sphere, which defines "the line that circumscribes what is speakable."<sup>36</sup> It undermines both the power of mourning and the possibility to engage with the other, with whom we are tied through the understanding of our mutual vulnerability. Interestingly, Bataille recounts in the *Accursed Share* how, for primitive peoples, mourning rites aim to soothe unbearable sentiments in the face of the ineluctable process of putrefaction,<sup>37</sup> the phenomenon of decay. Once the moment of the decomposition of the flesh, rendered acceptable by mourning rites, has arrived, "they [the primitives] think that the whitened bones signify an appeasement: these bones are venerable for them; they finally have the look of death's solemn grandeur."<sup>38</sup> In light of Bataille's depiction of the Aztecs' rituals of mourning, I suggest that these primitives were able *not* to cover up death precisely because they could tap into symbolic resources (i.e. the ancestors' rituals). Thereby, when mourning processes are suppressed, covering up death may turn out to be a necessity. In pushing the boundaries of the human condition ever further towards the "measure of earthly immortality by being cyberized,"<sup>39</sup> today's wearable well-being and fitness devices in line of the Quantified Self Movement, cover up death, but also, probably, unbearable feelings associated with the disappearance of mourning processes.<sup>40</sup>

---

<sup>34</sup> According to Hollier (1990) for Hegel "architecture has not even a hint of motion. Its main purpose, as the article 'Informe' said, is to provide what exists with a 'formal coat, a mathematical overcoat': a form that veils the incompleteness that death, in its nakedness, introduces into life."

<sup>35</sup> Castoriadis (1996); In *The Rise of Insignificance*, Greek philosopher and social theorist Cornelius Castoriadis warns that capitalist societies tend to evade thinking about death by suppressing the process of mourning. However, "working-through freedom is intrinsically linked with the working-through of mortality" (1996, p. 77) asserts Castoriadis, seeing mortality as a prerequisite for autonomy in societies.

<sup>36</sup> Butler (2004), pp. xix–xx.

<sup>37</sup> Bataille (1988a), p. 96; For Bataille, putrefaction materializes a morally unacceptable feeling for primitive peoples: the humiliation experiences at the very moment when the "visit of death" is thrust upon them. Even worse than the distress of personal annihilation through death is, according to the philosopher, the period of time when the flesh rots (see Bataille (1988a), p. 80).

<sup>38</sup> Bataille (1991), p. 80.

<sup>39</sup> Bell and Gemmell (2010), p. 8.

<sup>40</sup> Morozov (2013) explains using the term "solutionism" to depict digital makers' obsession for statistics, algorithms and numbers to "fix" complex problems, by drawing on the domain of architecture and urban planning; and ironically echoes Bataille's insight on the covering up of death in relation to architecture.

At an ontological level, aspirations of a neoliberal technological self that envisions itself as beyond the human condition mirror Bataille's notion of intimacy, a world of no time and no duration, and therefore meaning not subjected to the fear of death. As introduced at the beginning of this article, intimacy is a state close to nature and to the animal condition, a domain of continuity in which human beings live like "water in water";<sup>41</sup> a world of no objectifying relationship.<sup>42</sup> In Bataille's ontology, transgression occurs as the relentless search for a lost intimacy, where no boundaries constrain the subject's own fulfilment. Yet, Bataille posits that attempts to appropriate and control this intimate depth lead to an impasse. "If self-consciousness is essentially the full possession of intimacy, then we must return to the fact that all possession of intimacy ends up in a trap."<sup>43</sup> Intimacy's ontological *raison d'être* is to furnish human beings both a goal ("the search for intimacy"), so as to put in motion a flow of energy unleashed by the movement towards transgression, *and* a limit. Digital technologies encourage the fantasy of "intimacy" through playful activities whereby we can indulge ourselves in a no time, no space comfort world blurring the line between fiction and reality. For instance, technical devices based on augmented reality allow individuals to experience a hyper-reality that pushes the limits of the real to the extent that it merges with the fictional. Staring at an urban landscape through 3D Google glasses is, in some way, an experience which is at once hyperrealist and fictional, where the edge between fiction and reality vanishes. Another immersive experience, virtual reality, allows the user to be "psychically present in a thoroughly self-contained, fully rendered environment, and for the most part interacts with things that do not exist in the outside", depicts Adam Greenfield in *Radical Technologies*.<sup>44</sup> The technologies' *tour de force* is to merge distinctive significations—inside/outside, fiction/reality, visible/invisible—to create an indistinct so-called empowering space for the self. In contrast, the "relentless pursuit of the mutual complicity between transgression and taboo"<sup>45</sup> re-instantiates the edge between fiction and reality, the visible and the invisible. "The sacred thing exteriorises the intimacy: it makes visible from the outside that which in reality is in the inside"<sup>46</sup> says Bataille; and this occurs through a tension, threatening the "world of things". As one is seduced by the *intimacy trap* of navigating in a world without apparent boundaries in the digital realm, however, then, in light of Bataille, there is nothing else to transgress; no need to confront with prohibition, no longer an impulse to break down the object/subject relation that throws human beings on the path towards transgression. In fact, the technological-digital realm eludes the dialectical movement. By the same token, it loosens the tension intrinsically at play between the attraction/repulsion in the face of death. What

---

<sup>41</sup> Bataille (1992), p. 9.

<sup>42</sup> The intrusion of technology into this world of "immediacy or immanence" (Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, 17), the "birth of the first tool", sets a precedent through which humanity is conceived as a means to an end. "The tool brings exteriority into the world" (Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, 27) and marks the dawn of discontinuity. See Tomasi (2008), pp. 1–12.

<sup>43</sup> Bataille (1988a), pp. 77–78.

<sup>44</sup> Greenfield (2017), p. 65.

<sup>45</sup> Hegarty (2003), p. 102.

<sup>46</sup> Bataille (1988a), pp. 77–78.

Bataille's dialectical movement of transgression teaches us is therefore that the denial of death is not just due to the "loathing of nothingness". What is avoided is also the very tension between the crossing of the line of the symbolic taboo *and* prohibition per se.

An illustration of the sanitizing of the dialectical tension between transgression and prohibition may be found at the most intimate scale. Smart devices, bandage technology and built-in sensors are designed to help women track, monitor and cope with menstruations. There is no better exemplification of Greenfield's understanding of these devices as "hinges between the body and the network"<sup>47</sup> than such an intertwining between women's bodies and devices; "cup monitors, connected to a mobile app via Bluetooth, monitor the flow rate, fluid colour and fullness of the cup throughout the menstrual cycle, thus informing the user of how their period is progressing. Data from each cycle is stored to allow the woman to track both when their period begins/ends."<sup>48</sup> Beyond the apparent convenience offered to women to control their cycle, the high degree of detailed metrics provided regarding women's cycles (e.g. flow rate, fluid colour, volume) raise questions; what is at stake may be the return of a repressed archaic fear of bodily fluids and perceived impurity as a new object of repugnance. In *The History of Eroticism* Bataille mentions the centrality of menstrual bloods in prohibition amongst primitive peoples.<sup>49</sup> Seen as the "terrible", the "sacred", Bataille notes that the distancing of the feminine and the terrifying horror of women's menstruation, as first object of repugnance, faded away over time, but I suggest that the tracking of menstrual cycles might be interpreted as the covering up of whatever threatens the representation and integrity of an idealized self. This echoes the engineer Bell's obsession with logging his life to eliminate the impurity of his memory. Bataille, however, precisely "categorises phenomena such as death, encounters with corpses, excretions, objects of horrors as things to be embraced, not willingly, but that must be addressed in their horror"<sup>50</sup> comments Arppe. Bell's project to track impurity, and the less explicit attempt at monitoring cycles for the sake of easiness, denote the impossibility of dealing with both fascination and repulsion.

So far the paper has taken us through the suppression of mourning, the challenging of death, and the illusion intimacy as an antidote to this. The following section reflects upon implications of the sanitizing of the tension between transgression and prohibition, by focussing on the problem of the vacuum of—or the undermining of—libidinal energy: a result of the way digitalism probably bypasses the power that lies in the dialectical movement of transgression. In this second part I draw, as a secondary source, on French philosopher Bernard Stiegler's problem of "the liquidation of desire" (2011).

---

<sup>47</sup> Greenfield (2017), p. 33.

<sup>48</sup> See <http://adigaskell.org/2015/11/06/wearable-technology-for-menstruation-support>. Accessed 01 Aug 2018.

<sup>49</sup> Bataille (1991).

<sup>50</sup> Arppe (2009), p. 43.

## Intensification of Desire Through Transgression vs. Liquidation of Desire in the Technological Self

Summarizing key points in Bataille's discussion of transgression, Mitchell & Winfree note: "It is desire,<sup>51</sup> therefore, and the intensification of desire, that invests transgression with significance and yields pleasure."<sup>52</sup> And what intensifies desire is precisely the fear of proximity with the prohibited object—ultimately with death—which is the point at which creativity is reached. This has an operative function: to maintain "libidinal cathexis" (i.e. the libidinal investment) towards the sacred object. As the first section has developed, however, be it with the movement of the Quantified Self or the Augmented Reality principle, it has been shown how the tension between transgression and prohibition is undermined by the denial of human mortality and the apparent comfort of intimacy, which subsequently *neutralizes* fear. Herein, it is suggested that there is no—or less—intensity to be experienced in Bataille's sense of energy and desire.

Contemporary French philosopher Bernard Stiegler takes on the question of the "liquidation of desire"<sup>53</sup> as a characteristic of the crisis of hyper-industrialized economies. Although Stiegler does not engage directly with the sacred, his thesis is that the weakening of the libidinal dimension lies at the heart of the individuals' use of standardized technical cultural objects, and thus the individuals' meaningful existence more broadly is of interest here. For Stiegler, technical objects designed by creative industries push individual-consumers to comply with a particular form of conscious time, aligned with short-term selling motives. In Stiegler's approach, cultural technical objects are also "temporal objects"; that is, objects that exist only for as long as that temporal interlude passes (e.g. a film or a programme), "where the attention of the viewer is also vital to the very existence of the object,"<sup>54</sup> summarizes Rossouw. These objects do not only capture the individual's attention,<sup>55</sup> they disrupt fundamental human needs, namely the "individuation" process by which the individual becomes a "singular being". Individuation, a process that engages both the psychic and the

---

<sup>51</sup> Bataille is influenced by Kojève's (1969) "anthropogenic desire" and phenomenological existentialist reading of Hegel's dialectic. Kojève stresses how the existential forces of desire, and the lack of struggle for recognition, instantiate the self as subject. Yet Bataille is also loyal to Freudian concepts of "repression", "transference", "displacement" and "sublimation" in positing the dual movement in transgression, the suspension of the taboo as displacement that opens up to new gratification (i.e. pleasure and desire).

<sup>52</sup> Mitchell and Winfree (2009), p. 84

<sup>53</sup> Stiegler (2011), pp. 52–61.

<sup>54</sup> Stiegler (2011), p. 53.

<sup>55</sup> Sadin (2015).

collective, was already theorized by French philosopher Gilbert Simondon.<sup>56</sup> Notably, Stiegler draws on Simondon's concept of a "pre-individual fund" which he notes as also being similar to Heidegger's "already-there of historicity" in *Being and Time*.<sup>57</sup> Pre-individuality is made up of knowledge, traditions and experiences accumulated through the group's history, and continuously reactivated through interaction between personal and collective memories. "To construct means to individuate what is already there as pre-individual potential" asserts Stiegler.<sup>58</sup> Central in the individuation process is the phenomenon of memory, which Stiegler considers intrinsically linked with the development of technical objects. Therefore, Stiegler also draws extensively on Husserl's distinction between primary retention (the perception of the "now" of a musical melody) and secondary retention (the recollection of the past melody through imagination).<sup>59</sup> And Stiegler suggests that with the advent of technologies of reproduction, such as the monograph, a tertiary retention is possible which offers a support for the "prosthetic exteriorization of memory."<sup>60</sup>

The externalization of human memory becomes problematic when the narrowed temporality along which technological cultural objects are designed takes over the constant back and forth between the psychic and the collective as an activity which instantiates the "singular being" in the individuation process. The interference, or coincidence, between the temporal "flux"<sup>61</sup> of the cultural objects (e.g. TV programmes) and "the time flow of the conscience of which they are the objects" results in the subjugation of the individual's conscious and unconscious time. In listening to music on Spotify or connecting on YouTube, there is, according to Stiegler, no longer an opportunity for the self to "select" between different forms of memories and, importantly, to imagine. The example of Gordon Bell's project to record and upload every single life moment illustrates Stiegler's notion of "prosthetic exteriorization of memory": the engineer's belief that a camera placed behind his neck will yield "the freedom to memorize less and think creatively more" is misleading.<sup>62</sup> Following Stiegler, Bell's memory-prosthesis object, in fact, deprives the self of a libidinal energy that accompanies the imaginative

---

<sup>56</sup> Simondon (1992), pp. 297–319.

<sup>57</sup> Stiegler (2009), p. 48.

<sup>58</sup> Stiegler (2009), p. 48

<sup>59</sup> Husserl (1991).

<sup>60</sup> Stiegler engages with the work of French palaeontologist André Leroi-Gourhan to theorize the human animal as primarily technical; the structure of the human body and brain is shaped by his technical milieu. Likely, for Stiegler what constitutes the phenomenon of hominization is the exteriorization of memory through the technical object, understood as "memory-object". Technics are forms of the materialization of experience; they are the "spatialization of the time of consciousness beyond consciousness".

<sup>61</sup> Stiegler uses Husserl's definition of the term "flux", which means the time of the object's passing, such as a melody, film or radio broadcast.

<sup>62</sup> Bell and Gemmell (2010), p. 87.

investment in memory selection, and which is vital for the formation of a “primary narcissism”, another term to designate desire. As Stiegler puts it: “The industrial temporal objects replace collective imaginaries and individual stories knotted together in a collective and individual process of individuation with mass standards, which tends to shrink the singularity of individual practices and their exceptional characters.” Carrying on, Stiegler admonishes:

There is no desire for banality. [...] I can only desire the singularity of something to the extent which this mirrors the singularity that I am, about which I am still ignorant and which this thing reveals to me.<sup>63</sup>

Stiegler’s idea of desire as being intrinsic to the process of becoming a “singular being” in my view mirrors Bataille’s venture to establish the “libidinal cathexis” as a propelling force in transgression. In both approaches, a *tensional* process precedes a libidinal engagement, setting up the “singular being” for Stiegler, and the subject’s experience of touching upon the sacred for Bataille. In drawing on individuation theory, Stiegler is influenced by Simondon’s foundational idea of the conflicting structure of “pre-individual fund”. In his review of Gilbert Simondon’s *The Physio-Biological Genesis of the Individual*,<sup>64</sup> Gilles Deleuze stresses the gist of pre-individuality as a state of asymmetry between “disparate scales of reality”, or “heterogeneous orders” exist in the system of the fund as “potential energy, as a difference of potential distributed within certain limits.”<sup>65</sup> Importantly, for Deleuze, such “difference”, from which derives the “potential energy”, brings about “the process of emergence or the tension (also called signification).”<sup>66</sup> Giving voice to Simondon’s own words, Deleuze quotes that a *difference* “emerges when a process of individuation reveals the dimension through which two disparate realities together become a system” or “that by which the incompatibility within the unresolved system becomes an organising dimension in its resolution.”<sup>67</sup>

Why are Deleuze and Simondon’s comments on the “pre-individual fund” important for us? Because individuation is above all a compelling process, which calls for a “resolution” out of the “tension and dynamic phase-shift.”<sup>68</sup> More than a “resolution”, as Stiegler argues in *The Theatre for Individuation*, it is a decision; “this decision of reading consisted in positing the necessity of situating, as a transductive and thus also individuating element.”<sup>69</sup> Going back to Stiegler’s critique, I propose that: as technical “temporal objects” become hyper-synchronized with the individual’s time of consciousness, what they disrupt is the compelling *tension* constitutive of individuation. Even though a “pre-individual being, is perfectly provisioned

---

<sup>63</sup> Stiegler (2011), p. 58.

<sup>64</sup> My translation. The original French title is: Gilbert Simondon’s *L’individu et sa genèse physico-biologique* (1966). The original French text is: *L’individu et sa genèse physico-biologique*.

<sup>65</sup> Deleuze (2001), p. 44.

<sup>66</sup> Deleuze (2001), p. 44.

<sup>67</sup> Simondon (1992), pp. 310–311.

<sup>68</sup> Stiegler (2009), p. 48.

<sup>69</sup> Stiegler (2009), p. 48.

with singularities that correspond to the existence and distribution of potentials”,<sup>70</sup> the “process of emergence” of a “singular being” out of individuation is nonetheless at risk. Personalized devices that adjust to each individual’s specific needs may bring individuals to fantasize about the freedom to set themselves free from the constraints of remembering or selecting between memories. By quantifying, storing information, wearable trackers take charge of micro-instants of decisions; meant to make life easier, these smart objects, in fact, interfere with complex dynamics. Morozov is right when he underlines that, “digital networks, app trackers or life-logs mark the zone of our spiritual pasture and allow our individuality to emerge.”<sup>71</sup> Yet the detailed account of Simondon’s individuation, expanded by Stiegler, highlights what is at stake: the need for a tensional force in the process of the construction of the “singular being”, which puts in motion a libidinal energy. This brings us back to this article’s argument regarding the sanitizing of the tension in the digital realm. Namely, that it is this tension that makes up the gist of Bataille’s concept of transgression—bringing forth a libidinal response to the fear of approaching prohibition, and an intensification of desire by touching upon experiences of anguish and proximity with taboo.

## Fun and Sexy Data: Are We Afraid of Eroticism?

Technical cultural objects undermine the libidinal energy, as I have presented in the previous section by drawing on Bernard Stiegler’s diagnosis of a “liquidation of desire.”<sup>72</sup> Nonetheless these objects have never been so widely hailed as smart, fun and sexy. In this last section, I argue that behind a sexualization of individual users’ relationships to technological objects lurks a fear of eroticism insofar as Bataille ascribes to the notion a radical potential for transgression. In Bataille’s endeavour to redeem the self from being reified by means of rationalization and utility, eroticism offers a powerful means to reconnect with—not human nature—but a point of “intensity”, reminiscent of the “inner experience”. How is this possible? Eroticism is distinct from a definition of sexuality that reduces sexual activity to its mere reproductive function. Although eroticism necessitates the sexual attraction that animals display, it supersedes the animal nature, since it is “characterised by a reserve unknown in animals. In truth, the feeling of embarrassment in regard to sexual activity recalls, in one sense at least, the feeling of embarrassment in regard to death and the dead” asserts Bataille in *The Tears of Eros*.<sup>73</sup> In the erotic act, humans develop an awareness of sex as something other than a natural function. The lovers depicted in *The Accursed Share*’s second volume, *The History of Eroticism*, touch upon the limit of “impossibility”, the “feeling of sin” and the experience of anguish before death, which exceeding pleasures have thrust upon them. Later on, Bataille describes the “suffocating sexual anguish” and the “violent and uncontrolled explosions” associated with eroticism; be they stifled by the set of laws in marriage, or unleashed in the

---

<sup>70</sup> Deleuze (2001), p. 44.

<sup>71</sup> Morozov (2013), p. 346.

<sup>72</sup> Stiegler (2011).

<sup>73</sup> Bataille (1989), pp. 32–33.

ritual orgy. Like Bataille's dual movement of transgression, there are "two movements in eroticism. One is in harmony with nature; the other questions it. We can't do away with either. Horror and attraction intermingle. Innocence and the explosion both serve play"<sup>74</sup> posits Bataille in *Guilty*.<sup>75</sup>

The divide between eroticism and sexuality in Bataille's aforementioned account challenges the current trend that alludes to sex(iness) in the digital technological realm. In a prescient sentence of *To Save Everything Click Here*, Morozov ironically says that: "The future belongs to data-sexual."<sup>76</sup> A new kind of man, endowed with intellectual curiosity and high cognitive ability for whatever is concerned with data, has become the attractive pole of libidinal energies, not so long ago turned towards the urban, intellectual male, obsessive with grooming and personal appearance: the metrosexual.<sup>77</sup> Another contemplator of the impact of new technologies on societies' subjects posits that data has become the object of sexual libidinous investment *as such*. "Data are not just being absolutized—they are becoming sexualised and fetishised. [...] Dataism is displaying libidinous—indeed, pornographic—traits" bemoans Byung-Chul Han.<sup>78</sup> The philosopher's admonition echoes John Doyle's (2012) newspaper article on the regressive tendencies of a narcissistic culture displayed on social media (Facebook, Pinterest) and of digital communication.<sup>79</sup> For the journalist, the hypersexualized culture of our societies is the by-product of a "pornography of narcissism" deployed through the consumption of digital technology. The latter forces individual consumers to live no less than a return to tribalism: "back to the cave" and to the primitive crudeness of pornography. "After every advance in communication technology comes pornography. This pattern is repeated. As soon as cavemen drew, they drew about sex. [...] What was submerged, hidden or in the shadows suddenly emerges into the light. Crudeness comes back", asserts John Doyle.<sup>80</sup>

Yet, the sexualization of our engagement with digitalism is not at first fully evident; it is disguised by the sense of lightness, fun, smartness and sexiness attached to the use of digital objects. Fun originates in the hacker culture, where humour associated with the smart intellect of the clever trick, reminiscent of the mathematical genius, is highly valued. Researchers and the digital media industry's communities have also purposefully carved out the notion of fun in order to conceptualize attractive interface designs for individuals-users.<sup>81</sup> Likely, The International Organization for Standardization states that the technological user's experience

---

<sup>74</sup> "Play" in Bataille's original French text is "mettre en jeu", which literally means to put one's self in play. "Play" shall be understood in the context of the example of the lovers, whose encounter is, for Bataille, coincidence, gamble and risk rather than calculation.

<sup>75</sup> Bataille (1988), p. 109.

<sup>76</sup> Morozov (2013), p. 227.

<sup>77</sup> Morozov (2013), p. 226.

<sup>78</sup> Byung-Chul (2017), p. 59.

<sup>79</sup> Doyle (2012).

<sup>80</sup> Doyle (2012).

<sup>81</sup> For instance, researchers have designed models to measure different arrays of affects and emotions (love vs. hate) in users' interaction with the digital objects.

shall be fun, enjoyable and pleasurable. In *The Semantics of Fun*, Blythe and Hassenzahl identify fun as aligned with distraction. “Triviality, repetition, [and] spectacle” abound in fun, which “seems to stand for the fleeting enjoyment and volatile experiential aspects.”<sup>82</sup> Fun is also allied with pleasure and drive<sup>83</sup> in a more complex and intermingled way, especially with the recent trend of the gaming movement.<sup>84</sup> The latter heightens attention and combines intense engagement and persuasiveness. In *Gamification by Design*, Zichermann and Cunningham point out the interrelationship between the playful experience of fun in gaming and that in sex and drive. They write: “Games marry the desire-drive of sex with the predictability of duress—except without force, and when successful, driven entirely by enjoyment.”<sup>85</sup> The concept of fun in the technological industry adds “superficial pleasantness”. The sexiness ascribed to the overall experience with technical objects, through fun, is precisely what the philosopher Byung-Chul Han debunks when he compares the relationship between the “dataist” and the digital realm in terms of the sexual reproductive function of “mating”. What the philosopher means is that sex, as “reproductive sex”, is predicated on fun, sexiness and smartness, which we read as sexy, but which is actually reduced to the animal instinctual function, interestingly akin to Bataille’s notion of “reproductive sex”.

Fun could, nonetheless, display a dark side of smartness and play, asserts Olga Goriunova in *Fun and Software*, reminding us that fun has its roots in the laughter of Nietzsche’s *Gay Science*. “Tragic fun” could provide us with the condition to “stare at the limit of the possible.”<sup>86</sup> It would mirror Bataille’s view of erotic activity, “capable of arousing irony [...] into laughter.”<sup>87</sup> In the same way, although Doyle warns against the regressive tendency of the “pornography of narcissism”<sup>88</sup> as we engage with social media and apps, pornography could be endowed with a more subversive role. The etymology of pornography indeed reveals the transgressive experience associated with the term. From the Greek *pornographos*, pornography designates the “ancient obscene painting, especially in temples of Bacchus”. Yet also, in 1873, the Medical Archives proposed *porniatria* for the expression “social evil hospital”. Finally, in an ancient context, *porniatria* was paired with *rhyptography*, “genre painting of low, sordid or unsuitable subjects”, including “obscene pictures”. The etymology of pornography echoes Bataille’s insight of the obscene, the naked, even the prostitute—notwithstanding that

---

<sup>82</sup> Blythe and Hassenzahl (2003), p. 67.

<sup>83</sup> Introduced by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, drive, although translated by Strachey as *Trieb*, distinguishes itself from instinct. Lacan (1990) suggests that *Trieb* shall be understood as “drift”. Indeed, “Drive is not of the order of hunger or thirst, appearing on the basis of the natural rhythms of the body. Drive emerges as a constant force that expresses itself as a continual demand for satisfaction” (Dravers 2011, p. 123). In *Suffocated Desire* (2011) which I quoted earlier, Bernard Stiegler uses the Freudian term “drive” as opposed to desire to criticize the way consumerism, brands and digital technologies appeal to individuals’ compulsion to buy and consume at the expense of more highly symbolic and culturally oriented activities.

<sup>84</sup> Ferrara (2012).

<sup>85</sup> Zichermann and Cunningham (2011), p. 41.

<sup>86</sup> Goriunova (2014), p. 9

<sup>87</sup> Bataille (1989), p. 66.

<sup>88</sup> Doyle (2012).

Bataille did not write on pornography per se—all these are figures that draw the erotic path towards the sacred. For Bataille, the prostitute,<sup>89</sup> endowed with luxury and lust, forms a figure whose meaning is that of loss, since the prostitute “exerts a dangerous fascination, that prefigures death and finally attracts more and more.”<sup>90</sup> The idea of loss, key in the philosopher’s conception of eroticism, is present in nudity and nakedness, which also push the self beyond the confines of the self, through obscenity. “Stripping naked is the decisive action. [...] Bodies open out a state of continuity through secret channels that give us a feeling of obscenity. The term obscenity signifies that which disrupts the physical state associated with self-possession” describes Bataille in *Eroticism*.<sup>91</sup>

How does such a “brutally erotic character” entailed in Bataille’s depiction of the obscene, the naked, the prostitute, or the intense enactment of love, debunk a digital realm that predicates sexiness on fun? Bataille’s eroticism is a matter of “sorcery” or “diabolical play” since it *threatens* “the regulated social order basic to our discontinuous mode of existence as defined and separate individuals”. It requires the sacrifice—albeit a temporary one—of our relationship to objects from the economic world. When engaging in eroticism,

“the lover-become-thing into the moral and economic ‘world of things’ ceases to be a distinct economic object, an object to which a value itself is attributed. [...] It must be destroyed as an object to return to its ‘meaningless intimacy,’”<sup>92</sup> explains Gemerchak. Bataille’s commentator carries on: “The path to erotic intimacy requires a temporary sacrifice of our ties to economic goods, or particular pleasures altogether, even pleasure itself, as a prerequisite for the search for nothing but Desire itself.”<sup>93</sup>

Although digital movements, such as the gaming movement, bring sexiness into play within the technical object, they locate sex and pornography far away from their subversive potential. They bring sexiness into play in the individual-user experience of the technical devices, only to the point that any reference to the sexual dimension complies with calculation, productivity measures and utility through playful-fun engagement with technical devices. The digital technological realm brings pleasurable experiences muddled with desire (i.e. gaming experiences); what is searched for is not desire, but the “desiring-fun.”<sup>94</sup> I argue that the “liquidation of libidinal energy”<sup>95</sup>—as I have explored in the previous section—is counterbalanced by the simulacra of pleasure and fun, that plays out as sexiness, whilst

---

<sup>89</sup> In the *History of Eroticism* (1991) the philosopher’s insight on the figure of the prostitute follows considerations on frenzy and the ritual orgy as multiple embodiments of eroticism relegated by Christianity to the side of the impure (i.e. the profane) and a definitive object of reprobation, such as paganism’s celebration of the Sabbath, “like an essence of evil” (Bataille 1991, p. 133).

<sup>90</sup> Bataille (1988a), p. 133.

<sup>91</sup> Bataille (1987), p. 18.

<sup>92</sup> Gemerchak (2003), p. 201.

<sup>93</sup> Gemerchak (2003), p. 201.

<sup>94</sup> Goriunova (2014).

<sup>95</sup> Stiegler (2011).

stripping off the obscene, erotic and transgressive element from the sexual. It covers up a fear of eroticism, since the latter, imbued with danger, “calls [man’s] being into question”,<sup>96</sup> and thus reveals its radical potential and emancipative dimension.<sup>97</sup>

## Conclusion

In the first part of my argument, I have shown that technologies’ promise of certainty invites the self to resist death, and how this is revealed through Bataille’s view of the intimacy “trap”: the site of an all-powerful subject, yet denying individuality and singularity to the subject. I have highlighted how eroticism is marginalized, although sexuality is brought into play with an aesthetic of fun and smartness in the digital realm. As this article has presented, Bataille works at the edge of states of death, desire and sex, bringing an almost “fundamental coincidence of filthy nature and desire, death and life.”<sup>98</sup> Yet, Bataille succeeds in bringing together intense and seemingly irreconcilable states (life vs. death), since the transgressive movement towards the sacred, the search for a “lost intimacy” which eroticism embodies, is relentlessly worked out against the background of prohibition. The fruitful potential of Bataille’s movement of transgression is to work out the way human beings confront boundaries, taboos and prohibitions: it seems that the more enduring these boundaries are, the more a libidinal flow of energy comes into play within the “co-dependence between taboo and transgression.”<sup>99</sup> Meanwhile, prohibition should not be confused with “sameness” (i.e. the reproduction of the same). When the dialectical movement of transgression is only concerned with prohibition, it “is necessarily a paralysed place without substance” clarifies Gauthier.<sup>100</sup> Furthering my scrutiny of the way the digital technological realm both refers to sex(iness) *and* strips the relationship to sexuality down to its obscene-subversive elements—characteristic of eroticism as transgression in Bataille’s theory of the sacred—I propose that prohibition is not so much eluded as replaced by “sameness”. What remains is the fulfilment of the procedural rules.<sup>101</sup> It is also possible to understand “sameness” as a “reproductive function”, precisely what Byung-Chul Han’s *Psychopolitics* debunks: “The digitus is starting to play the part of the phallus.”<sup>102</sup> Without the artifice of sexiness, fun and play, what remains is the phallus; that is, the representation of power for the sake of power. Qualitative and ethnographic studies

---

<sup>96</sup> Bataille (1987), p. 29.

<sup>97</sup> Bataille’s sacred entails an emancipative feature, which brought Caillois (1950) to depict a “radical sacred” in Bataille’s theory. Bataille’s sacred emancipative dimension interestingly echoes Castoriadis’ concept of radical imagination. Grounded in the work of the psyche that generates a “spontaneous flux of representations, affects and desires” (Castoriadis 1987, p. 26) the radical imagination is the catalyst by which individuals-subjects break away from the deterministic logic of the social order. In doing so, Castoriadis envisions the shattering process of calling into question the power of the “other” (e.g. kings, chiefs, elites) as fundamental in the establishment of autonomous societies.

<sup>98</sup> Gemerchak (2003), p. 186

<sup>99</sup> Roberts-Hughes (2017), pp. 157–168.

<sup>100</sup> Gauthier (2009), p. 142.

<sup>101</sup> Graeber (2015).

<sup>102</sup> Graeber (2015), p. 60.

encompassed in Gauthier and Martikainen’s twin books *Religion in Consumer Society* and *Religion in the Neoliberal Age*<sup>103</sup> in regions as diverse as the United States, Germany or Ireland have explored new trends such as “entrepreneurial spirituality”, “ecumenical alterglobalism” within Christianity or the “re-branding” of Judaism. For Becci these studies “raise critical questions about the recent practical and discursive developments in the field of religion against the background of the cultural success of economic thinking.”<sup>104</sup> Yet, unfolding Bataille’s concept of transgression to uncover dynamics into play underlines a timely need to complement this empirical body of work on the mutations of the sacred explored in various areas with a reflection upon the way imaginaries that surround movements (e.g. Quantified Self Movement or Augmented Reality principle) and inform individuals’ lived experiences are also deeply intertwined with issues of power.

## References

- Appadurai, Arjun. 2011. The ghost in the financial machine. *Public Culture* 23 (3): 517–539.
- Arppe, Tiina. 2009. Sacred violence: Girard, bataille and the vicissitudes of human desire. *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory* 10 (2): 31–58.
- Bataille, Georges. 1979. *The story of the eye*. London: Penguin.
- . 1985. The practice of joy before death. In *Visions of excess, selected writings, 1927–1939*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- . 1987. *Eroticism*. London: Marion Boyars.
- . 1988. *Guilty*. Venice, CA: Lapis Press.
- . 1988a. *The Accursed Share*. Vol. I. New York: Zone Books.
- . 1989. *The tears of eros*. San Francisco: City Lights Books.
- . 1991. *The accursed share, vol. II. The history of eroticism, and III sovereignty*. New York: Zone Books.
- . 1992. *Theory of Religion*. New York: Zone Books.
- Becci, Irene. 2015. Religion in the neoliberal age: Political economy and modes of governance. *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 30 (1): 153–155.
- Bell, Daniel. 1976. *The cultural contradictions of capitalism*. New York: Basic Books.
- Bell, Gordon, and Jim Gemmell. 2010. *Your life, uploaded: The digital way to better memory, health, and productivity*. Springfield, VA: Penguin.
- Butler, Judith. 2004. *Precarious life: The powers of mourning and violence*. New York: Verso.
- Byung-Chul, Han. 2017. *Psychopolitics. Neoliberalism and new technologies of power*. London: Verso.
- Caillois, Roger. 1950. *L’Homme et le Sacré*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Carrette, Jeremy, and Richard King. 2005. *Selling spirituality: The silent takeover of religion*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Castoriadis, Cornelius. 1987. *The Imaginary Institution of Society*. Cambridge, MA: Polity Press.

---

<sup>103</sup> Gauthier and Martikainen (2013b), Gauthier and Martikainen (2013a).

<sup>104</sup> Becci (2015), p. 153.

- . 1996. *La Montée de l'Insignifiance, IV, Les Carrefours du Labyrinthe*. Paris: Seuil.
- Deane-Drumond, C., S. Bergmann, and B. Szerszynski. 2015. *Technofutures, nature and the sacred*. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate.
- Deleuze, Gilles. 2001. Review of Gilbert Simondon's *L'individu et sa genèse physico-biologique* (1966). *Pli* 12: 43–49.
- Dravers, Philip. 2011. The drive as a fundamental concept of psychoanalysis. In *Psychoanalytical notebooks: Issue 23, our orientation*, ed. Natalie Wulfing, 117–149. London, UK: London Society of the New Lacanian School.
- Ferrara, John. 2012. *Playful design – creating game experiences in everyday interfaces*. Brooklyn, NY: Rosenfeld Media.
- Fletcher, Horace. 1913. *What it is, or how i became young at sixty*. New York: Frederick A. Stokes.
- Freud, Sigmund. 1918. *Totem and taboo*. New York: Moffat, Yard & Co.
- . 1922. *Beyond the pleasure principle*. London/Vienna: International Psycho-Analytical.
- Gauchet, Marcel. 1997. *The disenchantment of the world: A political history of religion*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Gauthier, François. 2009. Bataille, Heritier de Mauss: la radicalisation de l'énergétique du sacré. In Georges Bataille, *Interdisciplinaire: Autour de la Somme athéologique*, ed. Martin Cloutier and François Nault. Montréal: Les éditions Tryptique.
- Gauthier, François, and Tuomas Martikainen. 2013a. *Religion in the neoliberal age: Political economy and modes of governance*. Farnham, UK: Ashgate.
- . 2013b. *Religion in consumer society. Brands, consumers and markets*. Farnham, UK: Ashgate.
- Gemerchak, Christopher M. 2003. *The sunday of the negative. Reading Bataille, reading Hegel*. New York: SUNY.
- Giddens, Anthony. 1991. *Modernity and self identity: Self and society in the late modern age*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Goriunova, Olga. 2014. *Fun and software. Exploring pleasure, paradox and pain in computing*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Graeber, David. 2015. *The utopia of rules: On technology, stupidity, and the joys of bureaucracy*. New York: Melville House Books.
- Greenfield, Adam. 2017. *Radical technologies. The design of everyday life*. London: Verso.
- Harvey, David. 2013. The fetish of technology: Causes and consequences. *Macalester International* 13 (7): 3–30.
- Hearn, Alison. 2008. Meat, mask, burden': Probing the contour of the branded 'self'. *Journal of Consumer Culture* 8 (2): 163–183.
- Hegarty, Paul. 2000. *Georges bataille: Core cultural theorist*. London: Sage Publications.
- . 2003. Undelivered: The apace/time of the sacred in Bataille and Benjamin. *Economy and Society* 32 (1): 101–118.
- Husserl, Edmund. 1991. *On the phenomenology of the consciousness of internal time (1893–1917)*. Vol. IV. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- John, D. 2012. Digital technology and the pornography of narcissism. *The Globe and Mail*, 23 February.

- Kojève, Alexandre. 1969. *Introduction to the reading of Hegel*. New York: Basics Books.
- Kull, Ann. 2006. Mutations of nature, technology, and the western sacred. *Zygon* 41 (4): 785–792.
- Lacan, Jacques. 1990. *Television*. London: Norton.
- Mark, Blythe, and Hassenzahl Marc. 2003. The semantics of fun: Differentiating enjoyable experiences. In *Funology. Human-computer interaction series*, ed. M.A. Blythe, K. Overbeeke, A.F. Monk, and P.C. Wright, vol. 3. Dordrecht.: Springer.
- Mitchell, A.J., and J.K. Winfree. 2009. Editor’s introduction. In *The obsessions of Georges Bataille: Community and communication*, ed. A.J. Mitchell and J.K. Winfree, 1–17. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Morozov, Evgeny. 2013. *To save everything, click here: The folly of technological solutionism*. London: Allen Lane.
- Noys, Benjamin. 2000. *Georges Bataille: A critical introduction*. London: Pluto Press.
- Roberts-Hughes, Rebecca. 2017. Transgression and conservation: Rereading Georges Bataille. *Journal for Cultural Research* 21 (2): 157–168.
- Sadin, Eric. 2015. *La vie algorithmique: Critique de la raison numérique*. Paris: Éditions l’Échappée.
- Simondon, Gilbert. 1992. The genesis of the individual. In *Incorporations*, ed. Jonathan Crary and Sanford Kwinter, 297–319. New York: Zone Books.
- Sørensen, Asger. 2012. On a universal scale: Economy in Bataille’s general economy. *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 38 (2): 169–197.
- Stiegler, Bernard. 2009. The theater of individuation: Phase-shift and resolution in Simondon and Heidegger. *Parrhesia* 7: 46–57.
- . 2011. Suffocated desire, or how the cultural industry destroys the individual: Contribution to a theory of mass consumption. *Parrhesia* 13: 52–61.
- Szerszynski, Bronislaw. 2005. *Nature, technology and the sacred*. Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Tomasi, Alessandro. 2008. The role of intimacy in the Evolution of Technology. *Journal of Evolution and Technology* 17 (1): 1–12.
- Zichermann, Gabe, and Christopher Cunningham. 2011. *Gamification by design: Implementing game mechanics in web and mobile apps*. Sebastopol, CA: O’Reilly.