

RAYMOND SPITERI

Georges Bataille and the Limits of Modernism

ABSTRACT

Although Bataille's writings, particularly his contributions to *Documents* (1929–31), are usually considered in opposition to the idealism implicit in conventional accounts of modernism, this paper discusses the degree to which his writings manifest tendencies characteristic of modernism—modernism in a terminal state, an endgame rather than historical development. In terms of artistic endeavour, Bataille's critique of idealism focused on the process of transposition as an evasion of base material or psychological processes. However, if the scope of his writings is expanded beyond the limited period of *Documents*, then the process of transposition appears integral. Both *Histoire de l'œil* and *Madame Edwarda*: culminate in a scene of *jouissance* centred on the vision of female genitals, yet at this moment of unveiling, when corporeal reality threatens to lacerate the narrator's consciousness, Bataille tarries the encounter through a transposition. This strategy qualifies Bataille's critique of modernism: although he seeks to frustrate the process of transpositions he is unable to escape this process, and indeed relies on transpositions to render the process's collapse. The image is the matrix of Bataille's modernism, framing the movement between primordial limit-experience and transposition. It is a limit to be transgressed, an arena for an experience beyond language, and a veil over this experience. It is precisely this ambivalence that characterises Bataille's modernism.

'I will say this, be it obscure: the object in experience is at first the projection of a dramatic loss of self. It is the image of a subject. The subject tries at first to move towards its fellow being. But once it has entered into inner experience, it is in search of an object like itself — reduced to interiority. In addition, the subject, the experience of which is in itself and from the beginning dramatic (is the loss of self), needs to objectify this dramatic character. The situation of the object which the mind seeks needs to be objectively dramatized. Starting from the felicity of movements, it is possible to fix a vertiginous point ostensibly containing inwardly that which the world harbors as being lacerating, the continuous slipping of everything into nothing.'¹

Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*

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In 'Modernist Painting', his famous essay of 1960, Clement Greenberg advanced this definition of modernism:

The essence of Modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it but in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence.²

It is interesting to compare Greenberg's often cited definition with a comment by

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1. Bataille, 1988, p. 118.

2. Greenberg, 1993, pp. 85.

Maurice Blanchot, which appeared in a 1962 essay written soon after the death of his friend Georges Bataille:

The limit-experience is the response that man encounters when he has decided to put himself radically in question. This decision involving all being expresses the impossibility of ever stopping, whether it be at some consolation or some truth, at the interests or the results of an action, or with the certitudes of knowledge and belief. It is a movement of contestation that traverses all of history, but that at times closes up into a system, at other times pierces the world to find its end in a beyond where man entrusts himself to an absolute term (God, Being, the Good, Eternity, Unity) — and in each case disavows itself.³

What is fascinating in these two passages is how the process of self-criticism can lead to two dramatically different conclusions. Although Greenberg defines the essence of modernism as self-criticism, he restricts this questioning by limiting it to the ‘characteristic methods of a discipline’. In this way he avoids the radical implications of self-criticism: its goal is not to ‘subvert’ the discipline, but to ‘entrench it more firmly in its area of competence.’ There must be limits on self-criticism if the discipline itself is not to be called into question. Thus painting must respect the two-dimensional nature of the picture plane, shape, and opticality, while the role of the questioning subject — the painter — is elided in favour of the object: the picture. This is the fulcrum of Greenberg’s formalism.⁴

Blanchot also describes a type of self-criticism, but a criticism that does not avoid the unsettling implications of the process. The limit-experience — Blanchot’s term for what Bataille called ‘inner experience’ — involves putting oneself ‘radically in question’; it is a ‘movement of contestation’ that ‘disavows’ the ‘absolute term’.⁵ In contrast to Greenberg, Blanchot does not restrict this questioning to the conventions of a discipline; rather the movement of contestation is addressed to the empirical subject itself. Although Blanchot does not specifically discuss art in this context, this movement of contestation is one that would call the identity of both art and the artist profoundly into question, and open the coherence of a discipline to contending voices.

The counterpoint between Blanchot and Greenberg highlights two different ways to understand modernism. Although Greenberg and Blanchot both began their critical careers in the late 1930s, they followed divergent aesthetic (and political) paths. And whereas Greenberg became a powerful advocate for an increasingly reductive formalism, Blanchot developed a mode of critical engagement founded on the impossible exigency

3. Blanchot, 1993, pp. 203–4.

4. Given the magnitude of Greenberg’s influence on the discipline of art history, it is almost impossible to isolate a single definition of modernism in his voluminous writings, nor is that my intention here. What I am suggesting is the way Greenberg circumscribes and contains the self-critical impulse characteristic of modernism, an impulse that uproots in its quest for a more secure foundation. For influential discussions of Greenberg’s modernism see Fried, 1998; Clark, 1982; Fried, 1982; Krauss, 1993; Harris, 2005.

5. “Limit-experience” was Blanchot’s translation of Bataille’s ‘inner experience,’ a key term in Bataille’s mature writings, and it registered the shift from the first-person voice Bataille adopted in *Inner Experience* to that of the consciousness of a reader for whom the personal pronoun was the voice of another. An experience of loss is common to both terms — a loss rendered final by Bataille’s recent death.

of the literary work, an enterprise profoundly influenced by Bataille and surrealism.⁶ In place of Greenberg's emphasis on the empirical object, Blanchot focused on the slippage that occurs when the subject encounters the object in all its complexity.⁷

What was Bataille's investment in the modernist enterprise? Although Bataille's writings are frequently used to challenge the formal logic of modernism, this approach often poses a stark dichotomy between modernist purity and Bataille's ignoble desecrations, overlooking the fact that modernism, broadly conceived, was the cultural horizon that framed Bataille's writings. His writings do not simply pose an alternative to modernism but explore the ground of the modernist enterprise as limit-experience. Indeed, in contrast to Greenberg's concern with the essence of modernism, Bataille's work suggests an open, atheological modernism in which all transcendental certainty has given way to a lacerating mode of uncertainty.⁸

Rosalind Krauss has addressed the role of Bataille's thought in the revision of modernism, arguing that the operation of the *informe* or formlessness destabilises the imperative towards modernist 'opticality', giving rise to what she has called the 'optical unconscious.' Although Krauss used Bataille to rethink Greenberg, her account of the *informe* repeats Greenberg's fundamental gesture of remaining discipline specific, thereby delimiting Bataille's influence to preserve the integrity of the discipline of art history. What Bataille places in question is the mastery of the subject; yet it is this mastery that Krauss is unwilling to renounce.⁹

In place of Krauss's emphasis on the *informe*, I want to investigate here the allied notion of the image in Bataille. This aspect of Bataille's writings has been discussed at length by Georges Didi-Huberman — and to a certain extent I am revisiting material already discussed in *La Resemblance informe* — but my purpose here is to develop a better understanding of the role of transposition in Bataille's engagement with the image.¹⁰ Indeed, the image functions as the matrix of the *informe*, a matrix effectively rendered invisible in Krauss's reading of Bataille. The image stages the movement of contention that describes the *informe*; or, more precisely, it is through the image that the movement of the *informe* manifests itself.¹¹ In this context, transposition is the vehicle of this movement: a limit to be transgressed that opens an arena for experience outside language, and simultaneously acts as a veil over this experience.

6. On the importance of surrealism for Blanchot see Stone-Richards, 2007; Hill, 1997; Bruns, 1997; Mesnard, 1996.

7. A full treatment of Blanchot's complex criticism is beyond the scope of this paper, and I introduce his example largely as a foil to Greenberg's reductive account of modernism. Indeed, Blanchot's criticism frustrates definitions of modernism and postmodernism as they relate to Anglo-American art history.

8. It is beyond the scope of this essay to offer any rigid definition of modernism, beyond the general claim that modernism emerges from a crisis in representation when the act of representation is uprooted from its place in the fabric of tradition. For Bataille this crisis coincides with the death of God. For a useful discussion of modernism and the avant-garde, see Schulte-Sasse, 1984.

9. Hence the canonical character of *Formless: A User's Manual*, which seeks to "redeal" the modernist hand (see Bois and Krauss, 1997, p. 21). For a critique of Krauss see Williams, 2006; for an alternative reading of the role of the *informe* see Fédida, 1996.

10. Didi-Huberman, 1995.

11. On the movement of the *informe* see Fédida, 1996.



Aux abattoirs de La Villette. — Photo. Eli Lotar.

Fig. 1. Eli Lotar, *Aux abattoirs de La Villette*, 1929. Photograph. Illustration in *Documents*, 1, no. 6, November 1929, p. 328.

One example of Bataille's ambivalent investment in the modernist enterprise can be found in his contributions to the influential magazine *Documents*. Bataille was an editor of *Documents* from 1929 to 1931, and both the articles he contributed and the layout of the publication during this time communicate Bataille's distance from *l'esprit moderne*.¹² There is no celebration of the modern, but rather a somewhat macabre fascination with the primitive, the archaic, the violent; with impulses that perturb the ratio and measure of the modern.¹³ Yet *Documents* was also animated by a sense of crisis entirely characteristic of modernity, and this crisis framed its attempt to escape the horizon of the modern.¹⁴

Bataille's complex relation to modernity is evident in his 'critical dictionary' entry on the abattoir, published in the November 1929 issue of *Documents*. In this brief note Bataille discussed the relation of the abattoir to the temple.¹⁵ For Bataille, temples were used not only for prayer but also for killing, resulting in a 'disturbing convergence of the mysteries of myth and the ominous grandeur typical of those places in which blood flows.'¹⁶ However, whereas the temple used to occupy a central place in communal life, the chaos of the modern abattoir's killing floor is now 'quarantined like a plague-ridden ship.'¹⁷

Bataille illustrated his discussion with photographs by Eli Lotar of the La Villette abattoir: facing the entry was a formally striking full-page photo dominated by counterposed diagonals and verticals (Fig. 1). This photo could easily pass as an example of European modernist photography except for the neat procession of animal hoofs that dominate the centre of the image, an archaic element that undercuts the new vision's claim to modernity. Over the page, however, were two further photographs of the La Villette abattoir. Unlike the formal order of the first, these images are marked with the chaos and violence of the slaughterhouse (Fig. 2). One depicts a lump of hide-covered flesh, dragged across the floor to leave a bloody trail; the second focuses on the killing-floor, with butchers at work amid slaughtered cattle, the scene awash with blood and entrails. Lotar has attempted to impose some kind of order on this image — note the high angle, and the diagonals that form a parallelogram around the centre — but the violent action depicted undercuts the clean lines that came to be associated with modernist photography. The shift between these photographs, the passage from one page to the next, stages the movement of contestation that animates Bataille's modernism.

12. Two volumes of *Documents* were published between April 1929 and March 1931. For accounts of *Documents* see Ades, 1978, pp. 229-49; Hollier, 1992; Ades and Baker, 2006.

13. Cf., Krauss, 1993, pp. 157-58. Didi-Huberman, 1995, p. 14.

14. Exemplary here is Paul Valéry's 1919 essay 'The Crisis of the Mind', which registers the unmooring of cultural values in the wake of the First World War. See Valéry, 1962, pp. 23-36. Significantly, Valéry would become an advocate for modernism in France, and target of the avant-garde's efforts to escape the constraints of the modern. On this point see Guerlac, 1997.

15. Bataille, 1986, pp. 10-13.

16. Bataille, 1986, p. 11.

17. Bataille, 1986, p. 11.



Aux abattoirs de La Villette (cf, p. 329). — Photo Eli Lotar.

Fig. 2. Eli Lotar, *Aux abattoirs de La Villette*, 1929. Photograph.
Illustration in *Documents*, 1, no. 6, November 1929, p. 330.

This movement of contestation also motivated Bataille's critique of transposition. In 'The Big Toe', also published in the November 1929 issue of *Documents*, Bataille explored the significance of the big toe as the most human part of the human anatomy and as the most debased, always in contact with mud and filth¹⁸ Bataille's reading not only transformed the ambivalent status of the toe into a symbol for human life, but located the source of the toe's seductive appeal in fetishism in a rage against the foot's baseness:

Human life entails, in fact, the rage of seeing oneself as a back and forth movement from refuse to the ideal, from the ideal to refuse — a rage that is easily directed against an organ as base as the foot.¹⁹

Bataille then distinguished between two types of seduction, one that led to the aspiration for 'elegant and correct forms', and the other to an ignoble taste for the ugly and deformed; the latter led to a brutal fall from the ideal to the base, a fall psychologically analogous to death.²⁰ In the concluding paragraph he aligned poetry with transpositions and the aspiration for elegant and correct forms:

The meaning of this article lies in its insistence on a direct and explicit questioning of *seductiveness*, without taking into account poetic concoctions that are, ultimately, nothing but a diversion (most human beings are naturally feeble and can only abandon themselves to their instincts when in a poetic haze). A return to reality does not imply any new acceptances, but means that one is seduced in a base manner, without transpositions and to the point of screaming, opening his eyes wide: opening them wide, then, before a big toe.²¹

Bataille's article was accompanied by three photographs of hideously enlarged toes by Jacques-André Boiffard, reproduced as full-page illustrations, which emphasise the scandalous nature of vision. Their role was to exemplify the ambivalent status of the big toe suspended between ideal and disgust. This process does not simply work in the contrast between text and image, but also between the images themselves, which establish a contrast between male and female toes. The article reproduces two photographs of a male big toe: there is a slight disfiguration of the nail, but the toe appears healthy, surrounded by a symmetrical circle of flesh (Figs 3–4). The female toe, however, is grossly disfigured: the nail is surrounded by a dark ring of dirt or discoloration, the toe is framed in a way to elongate it, and the nail almost protrudes over the flesh of the toe (Fig. 5). The toe seems consumed by shadow in a way that blurs the distinction between figure and ground. Indeed, the image seems to exemplify the ignoble character Bataille celebrated in foot fetishism: 'the ugliness and infection represented by the baseness of the foot'.²²

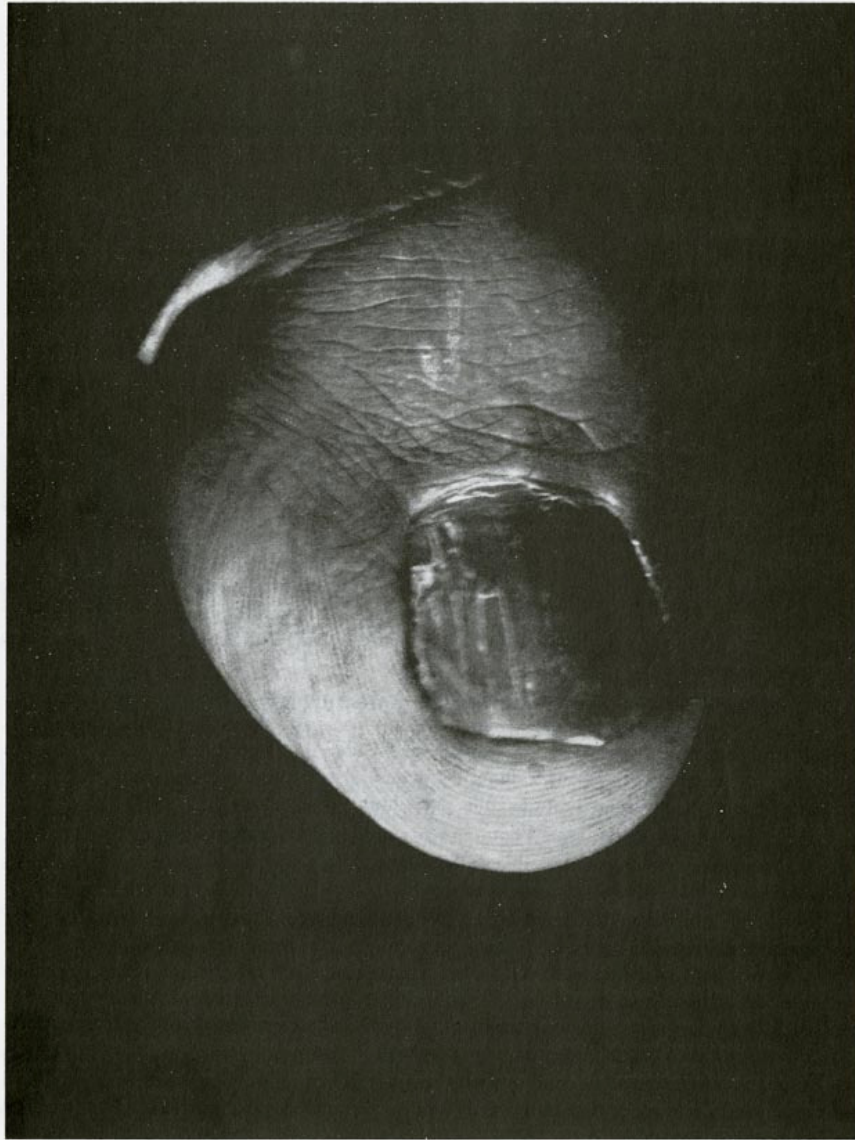
18. Bataille, 1983, pp. 20–23.

19. Bataille, 1983, pp. 20–21.

20. This concern with death frequently appears in *Documents* and suggests the influence of the Freudian notion of the death-drive on the contributors; see, for instance, Einstein, 1929.

21. Bataille, 1983, pp. 23. It would be interesting to consider Bataille's comments here in the context of the surrealists' contemporary inquiries into sexuality, see Pierre, 1992.

22. Bataille, 1983, pp. 23. A full consideration of the gendering of the images is beyond the scope of the present essay, but it is worth noting the relation of Bataille's essay to the Freudian account of fetishism as a disavowal of castration. Whereas for Freud the fetish is a substitute that preserved the belief in the maternal



GROS ORTEIL. SUJET MASCULIN, 30 ANS. — PHOTO. J.-A. BOIFFARD.

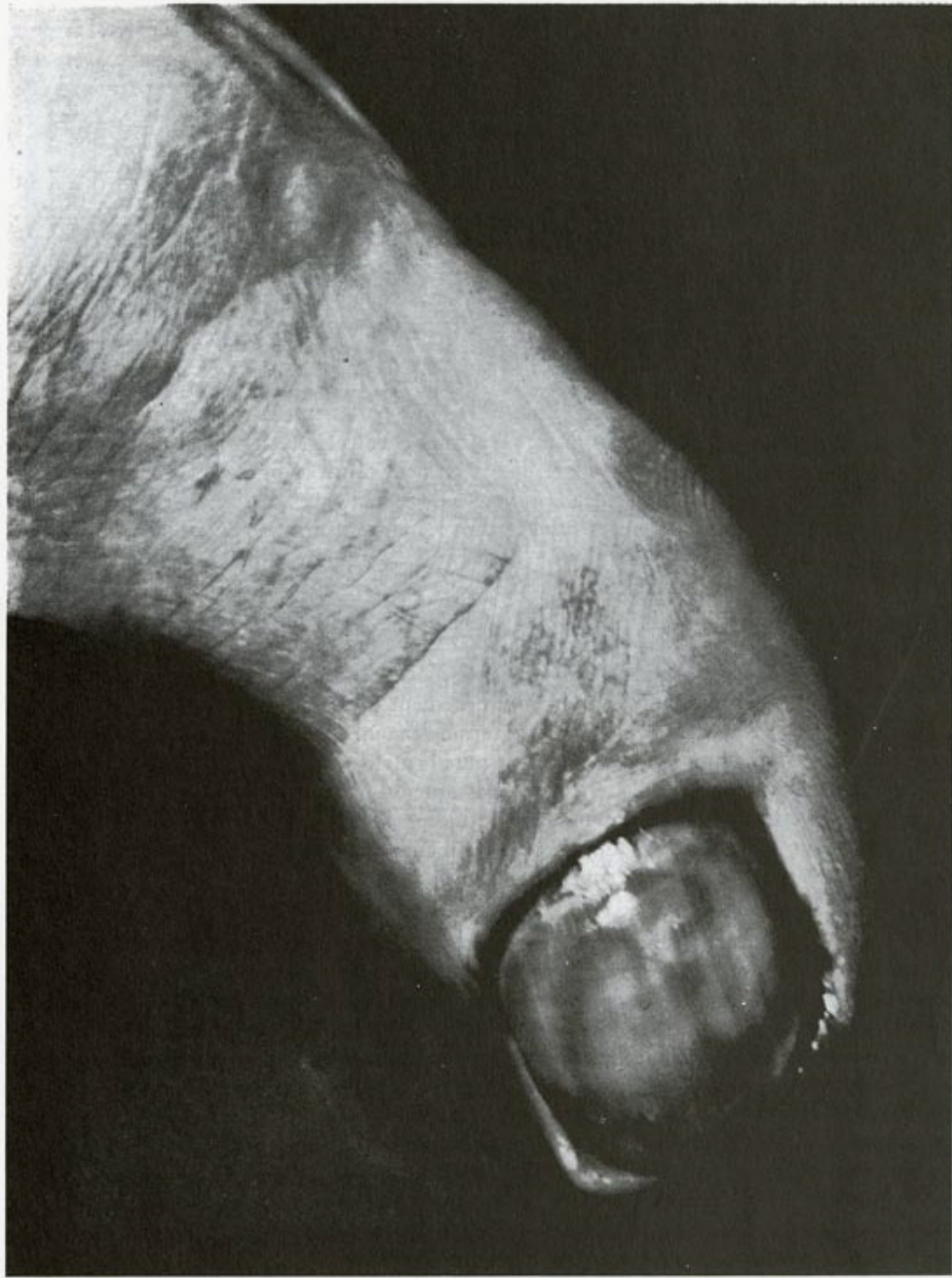
Fig. 3. Jacques-André Boiffard, *Gros orteil, sujet masculine, 30 ans*, 1929. Photograph. Illustration in *Documents*, 1, no. 6, November 1929, p. 298.

phallus, here the fetish assumes the monstrous character of the *informe*. Furthermore, as Ades had noted, Boiffard's photograph of the female toe bears a morphological resemblance to Dali's *Baigneuses* [Bather] reproduced in the September 1929 issue of *Documents* (p. 229), and may in fact respond to Dali's essay 'L'alliberament dels dits [The Liberations of Fingers]'. See Ades, 1991, pp. 147-48; Jeffett, 2006.



GROS ORTEIL, SUJET MASCULIN, 30 ANS. — PHOTO. J.-A. BOIFFARD.

Fig. 4. Jacques-André Boiffard, *Gros orteil, sujet masculine, 30 ans*, 1929. Photograph. Illustration in *Documents*, 1, no. 6, November 1929, p.299.



GROS ORTEIL. SUJET FÉMININ. 24 ANS. — PHOTO. J.-A. BOIFFARD.

Fig.5. Jacques-André Boiffard, *Gros orteil, sujet féminin, 24 ans*, 1929. Photograph. Illustration in *Documents*, 1, no. 6, November 1929, p. 298.

This example demonstrates the way that Bataille deployed illustrations (and by extension vision) as a movement of contestation. It is not that the illustrations present a direct encounter with reality, but that their juxtaposition rends the veil that cloaks the horror of the real, which for Bataille is always associated with the process of looking and the ultimate scandal of vision.²³

The difficulty of escaping the process of transposition should have been evident to Bataille from his own writing. In *Histoire de l'œil* (1928), for instance, the narrative culminates in a violent orgy in a Spanish church: here the protagonists kidnap, rape and murder a priest. Yet these events are merely the pretext for the final scene, in which Simone masturbates with the enucleated eye of the priest:

Rising to my feet, I spread Simone's thighs so that she lay stretched on her side; I then found myself before what — I imagine — I had always been waiting for, as the guillotine awaits the head it is to cut. My eyes, it seemed, were standing erect from horror; I saw in *Simone's* hairy vagina, the pale blue eye of *Marcelle*, watching me, weeping tears of urine. Threads of fuck in the steaming fur managed to give this lunar vision a final character of disastrous sorrow. I held Simone's thighs open and burning urine streamed out from beneath the eye, falling on the lower thigh . . .²⁴

At the very moment when the narrator confronts the 'truth' of sexual difference in the horror of Simone's open vagina, what he sees is a transposition. The priest's eye is transformed into that of Marcelle (who had committed suicide earlier in the narrative), the pure and devout counterpart to the debauched Simone. This encounter is carefully staged within the passage — note the parenthetical 'I imagine' — so as to underline the rhetorical nature of this transposition.²⁵

Bataille appears to have become more hostile to the process of transposition after writing *Histoire de l'œil*. One reason for this shift may relate to the polarization of the surrealist movement into antagonistic factions during 1929.²⁶ 'The Big Toe' dates from a moment when Bataille was trying to establish his own position *vis-à-vis* surrealism, which led Bataille to emphasise his distance from surrealism by underlining his *realism*. By the time the final issue of *Documents* was published in March 1931, Bataille would nuance his critique of transpositions in 'L'esprit moderne et le jeu des transpositions'.²⁷ Bataille's position is indicated in the title, for he no longer seeks to evade transposition *per se*, but the pleasure derived from the play or exchange of transpositions.

The pretext for the essay was a brief article by Roger Vitrac in *L'Intransigeant* entitled 'L'esprit moderne'. Vitrac had been involved with Paris Dada, and then surrealism, until

23. Didi-Huberman, 1995; Jay, 1993, pp. 211–62.

24. Bataille, 1982, p. 67. Translation modified. The emphasis is Bataille's.

25. I discuss this passage in more detail in Spiteri, 2004. See also French, 1999.

26. On the polarization of surrealist movement see Nadeau, 1989, pp. 154–65; Durozoi, 2002, pp. 176–98; Polizzotti, 1995, pp. 311–39; Suyra, 2002, pp. 112–42.

27. Bataille, 2006, pp. 241–43. This essay was only translated in 2006, some twenty years after the bulk of Bataille's contributions to *Documents* had been made available in English translation.

he broke with the movement in 1925; he later formed the Théâtre Alfred Jarry with Antonin Artaud in 1927. He was a regular contributor to *Cahiers d'Art* and also contributed three articles to *Documents* prior to Bataille's comments in 'L'esprit moderne et le jeu des transpositions'.²⁸ This suggests that Bataille's decision to criticise Vitrac was based less on animosity than a frustration with the critical language he used to describe the modernist avant-garde.

In 'L'esprit moderne', Vitrac compared the uninspired state of modern art in the early 1930s to the example of art during the period immediately prior to the First World War, when the modern spirit prevailed.²⁹ For Vitrac the *esprit moderne* was personified by the figure of Guillaume Apollinaire, the sniggers of Alfred Jarry, and the silence of Paul Valéry, in disorder, cruel lyricism and an acute sense of the future. The plastic arts became 'machines to explore thought', and he gave as an example Picasso's *Woman in an Armchair* of 1914 (Fig. 6):

[...] if one talks to me of the modern spirit, this picture automatically appears to me. It summarizes all its characteristics. In some ways it is the perfect sign of those times. When it was in Paris, I frequently went to see it (we called it *The Woman with Golden Breasts*) and, after each visit, I was equally overwhelmed and anxious because of all that it imprisoned in its limits and all that it left unlimited. A crumpled embroidery, a newspaper on the chair's arm, and, above the pegged-on breasts, a curl of unrolled hair, a knowing look, in the midst of the pupil... [Vitrac's ellipsis] It will waste my time to describe it; let me suffice with a description on which the words liberty, humour, cruelty, etc., only took hold ten years later. Today we exchange words among ourselves but rarely the examples. [...] what is lacking, what we would love to see, is a *new beginning* [*nouveau départ*], a sudden transformation which would make us forget our investigations and our vocabularies.³⁰

Vitrac would have seen *Woman in an Armchair* in the collection of Léonce Rosenberg, proprietor of the Galerie de l'Effort moderne, and it had already achieved recognition in a surrealist context by 1925.³¹ Vitrac moves from a description of *Woman in an Armchair* to a discussion of its historical significance, a movement that Bataille would consider symptomatic of the failure of *l'esprit moderne*. While Vitrac's comment 'all that it imprisoned in its limits and all that it left unlimited' sounds a note similar to the ambivalence Bataille would locate at the heart of his enterprise, Vitrac then suggests the painting's relation to surrealism ('liberty, humour, cruelty'), and calls for a 'new beginning'. It is precisely this argument that Bataille seeks to counter in his essay. In contrast to Vitrac's nostalgia for the modern spirit, Bataille distinguished between two tendencies or impulses: what he called the 'very active and sometimes very disturbing impulses' that animated the works of the pre-war avant-garde, and the 'much more unsettling images formed or deformed by real desires'. Whereas the first resulted in works that became part of the history of art, the second did not produce works of art, but

28. For a list of Vitrac's contributions to *Documents* and *Cahiers d'Art* see Vitrac, 1990.

29. Vitrac, 1990, pp. 111–15.

30. Vitrac, 1990, pp. 114–15.

31. Breton mentioned the painting in the first instalment of 'Le Surréalisme et la peinture' (July 1925), and it was illustrated in the 1928 book; see Breton, 1928, pp. 19, and plate 6.



Fig. 6. Pablo Picasso, *Woman in an Armchair*, 1913. Oil on canvas, 148 x 99 cm, collection Ingeborg Pudelko, Florence. © Pablo Picasso, Licensed by VISCOPY, Australia, 2009 (Photo © Erich Lessing).

was simply embodied in disturbing images. Here Bataille had the example of the disturbing iconography of *Documents* — big toes, abattoirs, etc. — as well as images he did not publish at the time, notably the língchí photograph that he had owned since 1925 (Fig. 7).³²



Fig. 7. *Supplice chinois*, c. 1905. Photograph. Illustration in Georges Bataille, *Les Larmes d'éros*, Paris: Pauvert, 1961, p. 232.

The problem for Bataille was that although these archaic impulses manifest in a number of fields as 'symbolic transpositions', the 'violent and impersonal emotions' that gave rise to specific symbols has been ignored in favour of the 'play of transpositions', thus ignoring primary cause in favour of the secondary effect.³³ What is more, the evasion of these archaic impulses conforms to a 'vital aspect' of human nature found in hypocrisy:

[...] this spinelessness, this cowardice, very exactly conforms to human nature, for which hypocrisy is undoubtedly a vital aspect just as the skeleton is the most vital part of the body. But, on the other hand, the very mechanism of hypocrisy could equally well be represented as a simply backwards movement taken in order to leap more effectively. No one today is interested in the *play of transpositions* other than by habit and in a more conventional and odious way than ever. It would seem that from now on we are reduced to leaping ...³⁴

In this passage Bataille reveals an awareness of the impasse his enterprise had reached in *Documents*. Although *Documents* may have set out to escape what Denis Hollier has

32. Bataille first mentions the língchí photographs in *Inner Experience*, where he dates them to his psychoanalysis with Adrian Borel. See Bataille, 1988, p. 119. They are reproduced in Bataille, 1961, pp. 232–34. For a discussion of these photographs see Elkins, 2004; Jorgensen, 2008.

33. Bataille, 2006, p. 241

34. Bataille, 2006, p. 241

called 'aesthetic metaphorization' by substituting the 'ready-made' document for the valorisation of the imagination within the modernist artwork, the document itself underwent a process of aesthetic metaphorisation through reproduction in the context of *Documents*.³⁵ It is not surprising, then, that Bataille addressed the role of the illustrations accompanying his article as being themselves implicit in the failure of *Documents*:

Thus the photographs accompanying this article (brought together more by chance than by a will that might not be entirely blind) probably reveal the extent of current powerlessness. The equality of the soul and human insipidity has always been offended by forms arranged to show, rather gratuitously it is true, the terror caused by death or decay, flowing blood, skeletons or insects which devour us. Who would take it upon themselves to make such a display in anything other than an entirely rhetorical way?³⁶

Bataille adopts an ambivalent strategy here: his aim is not merely to demonstrate the failure of his enterprise in *Documents*, of the inability to escape the aestheticisation of what should remain disturbing, but also, precisely by virtue of this failure, to embody a kind of limit-experience that incorporates an encounter with death. In a sense, the illustrations exemplify the movement of contestation characteristic of Bataille's modernism, hesitating on the vertiginous point where the scandal of the visible lacerates the image. However, the paradox that Bataille confronts here is that this experience can only be staged through rhetorical means, that is, through transposition.

'L'esprit moderne et le jeu des transpositions' included two types of illustrations that epitomise 'the terror caused by death or decay, flowing blood, skeletons or insects which devour us': first, two photographs of a Capuchin mortuary chapel decorated with human remains from the church of Saint Mary of the Immaculate Conception in Rome (Figs 8–9); and second, Boiffard's photograph of an encrusted piece of fly-paper, plus four smaller images of a fly enlarged through a microscope (Figs 10–11). A full-page reproduction of Boiffard's fly-paper photography appeared opposite the article. The flies, scattered diagonally across the image, are silhouetted against the fly-paper's translucent surface, so that their bodies appear as dark shadows against a luminous background, while their wings are impotently caught upon the adhesive surface.

This photograph is far more effective than the four microscopic enlargements of details of a fly's anatomy. These micrographs were executed at the Institut de Micrographie, and suffer from a clinical objectivity that drains the subject of its disturbing affect, a quality not helped by the circular shape of the images.³⁷

35. Hollier, 1992, pp. 20–21. Indeed, aesthetic metaphorisation could be another term for transposition, since it involves the same ambivalence of a trace that preserves while veiling.

36. Bataille, 2006, pp. 241–42.

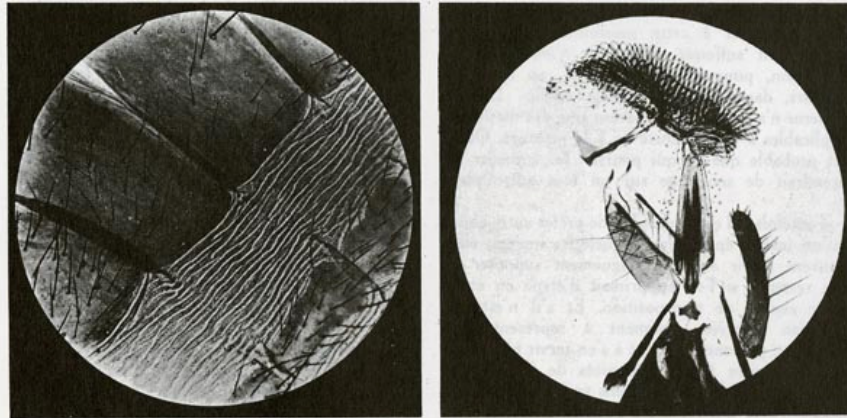
37. These photographs would have been more effective if the images had been cropped to fit a rectangular composition.



Fig. 8 & 9. *Église Sainte-Marie de la Conception à Rome. Chapelle mortuaire*, [c. 1890]. Photograph. Illustrations in Georges Bataille, 'L'Esprit moderne et le jeu des transpositions', *Documents*, 2, no. 8, 1930 [March 1931], p. 50 and p. 53. (Photo © Alinari Archives-Alinari Archive, Florence)

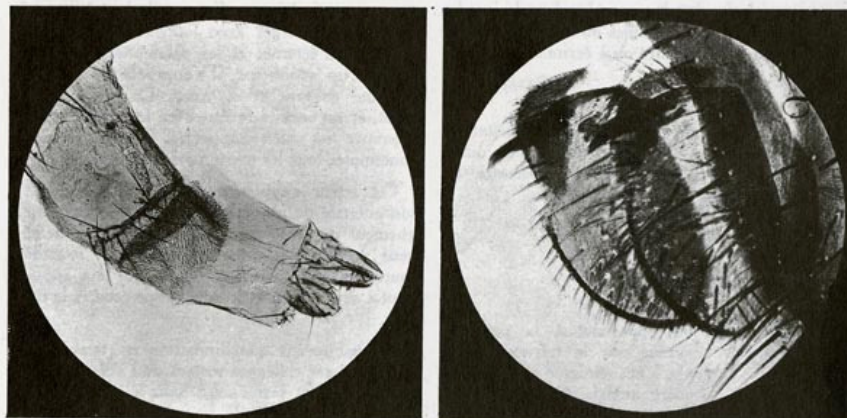


Fig. 10. Jacques-André Boiffard, *Fly Paper and Flies* (*Papier collant et mouches*), 1930. Photograph. Illustration in Georges Bataille, 'L'Esprit moderne et le jeu des transpositions', *Documents*, 2, no. 8, 1930 [March 1931], p. 48.



fétichiste aime une chaussure. Je ne crois pas introduire ici d'absurdes raffinements : je pense avec tout ce qu'il y a jamais eu jusqu'ici d'hommes écoeürés d'une fuite assez veule, assez commune, devant les horreurs multiples qui composent le tableau de l'existence, que c'est seulement dans une obscurité complète qu'il est possible de rencontrer ce qu'on a toujours cherché.

C'est la volonté soudaine, intervenant comme un coup de vent nocturne qui ouvre une fenêtre, de vivre, même seulement une ou deux petites minutes, en soulevant tout à coup les tentures qui cachent ce qu'il faudrait à tout prix ne pas voir, c'est une volonté d'homme qui perd la tête, qui peut seule permettre d'affronter brusquement ce que tous les autres fuient. L'esprit moderne n'a



MOUCHE-DÉTAILS (GROSSISSEMENTS : 27 (EN HAUT) ET 47 (EN BAS) DIAMÈTRES). — PHOTOS DE L'INSTITUT DE MICROGRAPHIE.

Fig. 11. L'Institut de Micrographie, *Mouche-détails* (grossissements : 27 (en haut) et 47 (en bas) diameters), [c. 1930]. Photograph. Illustration in Georges Bataille, 'L'Esprit moderne et le jeu des transpositions', *Documents*, 2, no. 8, 1930 [March 1931], p. 51.

The photographs from Saint Mary of the Immaculate Conception depict a chapel that has been decorated with the bones of dead monks, artfully arranged in ‘florid decorations’.³⁸ While the human remains signify the terror provoked by the experience of death, their incorporation into decorative arrangements cushions this encounter in favour of a more familiar and comforting image.³⁹ As a result, the illustrations demonstrate the impasse that the ‘relative paucity of interest’ generated from the manipulation of ‘sad fetishes destined to move us.’⁴⁰ As an example of transposition, the chapel incorporates the ambivalence at the heart of Bataille’s relation to modernism: the tension between an aestheticising impulse and the literal presence of death that exceeds the limits of any decorative frame. Bataille was doubtless aware of the Capuchins’ reputation as the most ascetic monastic order in the Catholic Church, who broke away from the Franciscan Order in an effort to return to St. Francis’ original vow of poverty. In this context the mortuary chapel enacts a disturbing convergence of scatological and eschatological — in the crypt of a church dedicated to the Immaculate Conception.⁴¹

Bataille then contrasts these illustrations with the example of a primitive ritual of animal sacrifice:

We are a long way from those savages who, at the time of enormous festivals, suspend the skulls of their ancestors from masts of plenty, who press their father’s shinbone into the mouth of a pig at the moment when the slaughtered beast vomits its flow of blood. We also play with endless shinbones and skulls; everywhere animal and human blood flows around us. But we do not know how to use blood or bones to break the regularity of days which are lost to us like the contents of a badly made cask.⁴²

This ritual serves as a counter example that illustrates the archaic impulses that escape expression in art. In blood sacrifice Bataille finds an example of a limit-experience that can demonstrate the affective elements absent from the modern spirit. The juxtaposition between the illustrations of the mortuary chapel with those of flies produces a tension in the article between two modes of engagement. Bataille appears to be critical of the aestheticisation of death in the mortuary chapel, the incorporation of skeletal fragments into a decorative arrangement, which apparently contravenes the prohibition against contact with human remains. Yet there is also an element irreducible to aestheticisation in the chapel: insofar as the chapel incorporates actual human remains, it embodies the finality of death as an unsurpassable limit to human existence. Rather than represent, the chapel renders the material finality of human mortality. Similarly, the images of flies evoke the process of corruption and decay associated with death, paradoxically through a similar strategy as the mortuary chapel, since what the photographs depict is the

38. Bataille, 2006, p. 242.

39. Indeed, Bataille’s writings in *Documents* repeatedly turn on a similar paradox; suffice to mention his essay ‘Le langage des fleurs’ in the June 1929 issue (vol. 1, no. 3, pp. 160–64); translated as ‘The Language of Flowers’ in Bataille, 1983, pp. 10–14.

40. Bataille, 2006, p. 242.

41. Indeed, the Spanish term *escatología* encompasses both scatology and eschatology. Another possible allusion is to the contemporary publication of *L’Immaculée conception*, a collection of automatic writing by André Breton and Paul Eluard published by Editions surréalistes in 1930.

42. Bataille, 2006, p. 242.

exoskeleton of the flies. Again, this involves a movement of contestation in which representation encounters that which is beyond representation.⁴³

Art, for Bataille, had lost its capacity to disturb or challenge its audience. The reason for this was that art too often excluded the taint of decomposition that renders the discontinuity of experience in favour of the continuity of life. Thus Bataille compared art galleries to pharmacies that provide ‘well-presented remedies for accepted sicknesses’, and questioned the passion involved in appreciating art: ‘What is really loved is loved mainly in shame and I defy any lover of painting to love a picture as much as a fetishist loves a shoe.’⁴⁴ However, Bataille did recognise that exceptional instances are possible, albeit infrequent:

It is the sudden will, intervening like a gust of nocturnal wind that opens a window, to live, even if only for a couple of short minutes, by suddenly tearing open the hangings [*tentures*] that hide what one should at all costs not see; it is a human will that loses its head, which alone can permit us to brave directly what others flee. Even in the best cases the *modern spirit* has never resulted in anything other than replacing this possibility of a humanity entirely suffocated by horror, *of no matter what* derivation, so that it enters, if necessary in the wrong way, into already established frames.⁴⁵

Although the modern spirit ‘has never put forward anything other than methods applicable to literature or painting’, Bataille left open the possibility of instances that not only suspend the play of transposition, but lacerated the image in a way that manifests an encounter with the real horror of existence.⁴⁶

At this time Bataille had not developed a conceptual or methodological framework to articulate what was at stake in modernism. While he clearly rejected the majority of what appeared under the rubric of modernism, he nonetheless held that certain works possessed ‘episodic interest’. This interest emerged not from the play of transpositions, but through a movement of contestations, what Bataille called the ‘grandiose image of a decomposition’:

It is as if we could never find ourselves confronting the grandiose image of a decomposition whose risks, intervening at each breath we take, is nevertheless the very meaning of a life we prefer, without knowing why, to that of another whose respiration could survive us.⁴⁷

He concluded by asking what would happen ‘if all types of transpositions were suppressed in stages’. Although sceptical of any attempt to ‘represent this residue’, or ‘straightforwardly using it to respond to the necessities of artistic expression’, Bataille

43. There is not room enough here to address the implications of this point. Suffice to note that this is the problem Bataille would explore more fully in *Inner Experience*, albeit in a convoluted and fragmentary manner.

44. Bataille, 2006, p. 242.

45. Bataille, 2006, pp. 242–43.

46. Bataille, 2006, p. 243.

47. Bataille, 2006, p. 242.

did acknowledge that some works do respond to ‘these sad but ineluctable necessities’.⁴⁸ The problem, however, was to recognise the impossibility of isolating ‘this new point of view’ that ‘can only as always be added to others.’ In this context Bataille’s irritation with Vitrac’s nostalgia for the pre-WWI avant-garde is understandable: rather than valorise a historical moment, Bataille wanted his audience to attend to the affective movement provoked by certain artworks, their ability to include elements of decomposition that remain unassimilable within the formal coherence or unity of the work.

During the 1930s, Bataille developed a language to address these experiences through his writings on expenditure, laughter, eroticism, anguish and non-knowledge, culminating in the 1942 publication of *Inner Experience*, the first book Bataille published under his own name.⁴⁹ While *Inner Experience* is beyond the scope of the present paper, I want to turn to a contemporary text of Bataille’s, the erotic narrative *Madame Edwarda*, clandestinely published under the pseudonym Pierre Angélique in 1941.

One of the central tableaux in the narrative is when Madame Edwarda, a prostitute working in a *maison close*, exposes her genitals to the male narrator:

I was pulled out of my dazed confusion by an only too human voice. Madame Edwarda’s thin voice, like her slender body, was obscene: ‘I guess what you want is to see the old rags [*Tu veux voir mes guenilles*]’, she said. Hanging on the tabletop with both hands, I twisted around towards her. She was seated, she held one leg stuck up in the air; to open her crack yet wider she used fingers to draw the folds of skin apart. And so Madame Edwarda’s ‘old rag and ruin’ loured at me, hairy and pink, just as full of life as some loathsome squid [*une pieuvre répugnante*]. ‘Why’, I stammered in a subdued tone, ‘why are you doing that?’ ‘You can see for yourself’, she said; ‘I’m GOD’. ‘I’m going crazy —’ ‘Oh, no, you don’t, you’ve got to see, look . . .’. Her harsh, scraping voice mellowed, she became almost childlike in order to say, with a lassitude, with the infinite smile of abandon: ‘Oh, listen, fellow! The fun I’ve had . . . [*Comme j’ai joui!*]⁵⁰

This scene makes explicit themes already implicit in *Histoire de l’œil*, particularly the relation between the scandal of the visible and the sacred. The narrative does not seek to describe what the narrator actually sees when Madame Edwarda exposes herself; rather Bataille introduces two transpositions to convey the impact of this scandalous vision: first the term ‘*guenille*’, and then the simile of a ‘loathsome squid.’ *Guenille* translates

48. Bataille, 2006, p. 243.

49. Towards the end of the 1930s Bataille returned to some of the issues that had concerned him in *Documents*. He reprised the theme of ‘L’esprit moderne et le jeu des transpositions’ in an essay published in *Cahiers d’Art*, ‘The Sacred’: ‘The moment had probably come to designate the crucial element towards which an obscure and uncertain search was directed, through the detours of the creation of forms or verbal invention. The great “quest” of what has been given the poor name “modern spirit” was certainly not obsessed with a “grail” as easily accessible as the “beautiful”; it distanced itself with distrust, sometimes even with an ostentatious distrust, from all the paths leading to the “true,” and seemed to have only equivocal feelings about the “good,” going from profound modesty to insulting rage, from affirmation to an equally trenchant negation. The conditions of the search were. Moreover, obscurity and the limitless character of the goal that it had resolved to attain. Long torment and abrupt violence alone bore witness to the fundamental importance for all life of the “quest” and its indeterminable object’. Bataille, 1983, p. 240.

50. Bataille, 1989, p. 150.

literally into English as ‘worn rag’, but as a literary figure can also refer to the human body; Bataille’s use of it in this context is idiosyncratic, since it does not normally have obscene connotations. The simile of a loathsome squid, by contrast, does draw on the vulgar association between female genitals and marine life. These transpositions not only stage what remains inexpressible for the narrator in his encounter with the scandal of the visible, but this unnameable experience manifests the sacred: Madame Edwards’s claim to be God. In a characteristic manoeuvre, Bataille asserts the identity of the highest and the lowest: God and a prostitute’s genitals.⁵¹

In both *Histoire de l’œil* and *Madame Edwards* Bataille seeks to render a limit-experience through the image of female genitals; or, rather, female genitals, made to appear scandalously present in the narrative, act as a screen for an encounter with a primordial limit-experience. This encounter cannot be described directly, but only implied or suggested through the veil of the image: the encounter is what lacerates this veil. And the movement from limit-experience to image is also the movement from what precedes or frames art, to art itself. It is in this sense that we can speak of modernism as an endgame, as the perpetual oscillation between limit-experience and aesthetic transcendence.⁵²

The significance of Bataille’s modernism is not simply as an alternative to the model of historical development. Rather, it articulates the tendency within modernism to confront its own limit; indeed, that the appearance of progress can only emerge on the foundation of limits. This limit is not simply formal — pace Greenberg or Krauss — but something that is manifested as a shattering experience. However, the experience of modernism’s limit has profound implications on the relation between artistic endeavour and the political imaginary of modernism. It is perhaps no coincidence that Bataille was developing his ideas during the 1930s, a time when European society was confronted with the fallacious choice between Hitler and Stalin. Whereas the progressive tendencies in modernism placed emphasis on the transcendental image, on the ability to found a new utopian language of colour or form, Bataille’s modernism revolves around immanence, as an experience grounded in an encounter with material reality. Indeed, modernism as a terminal state may be characterised in terms of a failure to maintain the political imaginary of earlier modernist culture, a tendency that would become more evident during the Cold War period.

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51. On this point see Currie, 2009.

52 It is worth considering this point in the context of Clark’s provisional definition of modernism in *Farewell to an Idea*, where he identifies three characteristic feature in modernism: i) a recognition of the social reality of the sign; ii) the simultaneous belief that the sign was grounded in some experience of World/Nature/Sensation/Subjectivity; and iii) Modernism lacked the social and epistemological basis on which these two beliefs could be reconciled. Clark, 1999, pp. 9-10.

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