

“I WAS SHOT IN THE LEFT ARM BY A FRIEND”: TRANSGRESSION AND THE
POSSIBILITY OF COMMUNICATION

by

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ABSTRACT

MATTHEW HUMPHRIES. “I was shot in the left arm by a friend”: Transgression and the possibility of communication (Under the direction of DR. KENT BRINTNALL)

For my paper I will look at contemporary communities built on violence, looking specifically at how the philosophy of Georges Bataille may allow for these groups to be interpreted in the context of sacrifice. Though I will look at some issues related to sexual desire, and drawing a clear, separating line between violent and sexual desires is difficult, I will focus mostly on the relationship between observers of violence and those engaged in acts of pointless violence. To do this, I will employ the thought of Bataille, as Bataille works to understand the role of violent desire and taboo in contemporary society. Using Bataille’s thought, I will examine the ways that some contemporary communities are built around useless expenditure, focusing on the ways these communities reflect Bataille’s vision of religion. I examine three case studies – the world of deathmatch wrestling, the performance art of Chris Burden, and the Jonathan Littell novel *The Kindly Ones* – paying particular attention to the ways these cultures are centered on transgressive, wasteful moments.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: IN SEARCH OF SHOCK	1
CHAPTER 2: THE WORLD OF DEATHMATCH WRESTLING	14
CHAPTER 3: THE 'DISTINCTIVE NAUSEA' OF CHRIS BURDEN	45
CHAPTER 4: HUMAN BROTHERHOOD	74
CHAPTER 5: I TELL YOU I AM JUST LIKE YOU	105
REFERENCES	117

CHAPTER 1: IN SEARCH OF SHOCK

We are discontinuous beings, individuals who perish in isolation in the midst of an incomparable journey, but we yearn for our lost continuity.

- Georges Bataille, *Erotism*

In 2012 the website Reddit found itself at the center of a small scandal when one of their moderators became the public face of all of the darkest parts of the internet. Being a user-generated site, Reddit depends on moderators to monitor threads, and in this case the behavior of one of those moderators threatened the entire site. The moderator in question, Michael Brutsch, posted under the name Violentacrez, and had for years posted extensively on Reddit. He also controlled certain pages, doing so successfully enough that he once won a ‘Moderator of the Year’ award from Reddit, an award he proudly and defiantly produced after the controversy broke and Reddit did everything it could to distance itself from him.¹ The controversy over Violentacrez stemmed from the types of pictures Brutsch posted, as well as the threads he moderated. Brutsch controlled and regularly posted on subreddits with titles like r/jailbait and r/incest, filling the threads with images appropriate to each title. He at times monitored over 400 subreddits, many filled with the most graphic types of imagery imaginable, and he claimed he worked mostly to ensure that at no point did anyone post illegal images. For example, on the

¹ Adrien Chen, “Unmasking Reddit’s Violentacrez, the Biggest Troll on the Internet,” Gawker.com, October 12, 2012, <http://gawker.com/5950981/unmasking-reddits-violentacrez-the-biggest-troll-on-the-web> (accessed November 3, 2014).

r/jailbait thread, where Brutsch posted risqué pictures of underage girls, he claimed his primary purpose was to ensure no image meeting the legal standard for child pornography appeared on the thread.² According to Reddit, Brutsch did work to report illegal images, yet he still continued to post material seemingly designed to offend as many as possible.³ In addition to sexualized images of young girls and images of domestic violence victims, Brutsch also posted racially and sexually charged images and jokes, as well as graphic images of violence and accidents.

I begin with Brutsch not because I am interested in the typical questions concerning his case. The free speech questions of online material, as well as the ethics of anonymity online, are interesting enough, but here I am primarily interested in Brutsch for other reasons. Brutsch, it must be acknowledged, is not an isolated figure, though he is often presented that way. When exposed by a writer for Gawker Media, when the anonymous Violentacrez became the 45 year old computer programmer Michael Brutsch, he became the public face of a certain type of internet phenomenon, a type of uber-troll most wish to avoid when online, and few people would support him publically when the story first broke.⁴ When he began to appear in public, Violentacrez stood with no allies or defenders, an isolated figure with the most common defense anyone would make being something along the lines of “If the internet is to be an open, free space, we must put up with monsters like this.”⁵

²Daniel Bates, “It Helped Me Unwind From Work,” *Dailymail.co.uk*, October 18, 2012, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2219691/Reddit-troll-Michael-Brutsch-says-posted-sick-comments-unwind-work-interview.html> (accessed November 3, 2014).

³Chen, “Unmasking Reddit’s Violentacrez.”

⁴Damon Poeter, “Shed No Tears for Violentacrez,” *PCMag.com*, October 15, 2012, <http://www.pcmag.com/article2/0,2817,2411001,00.asp> (accessed November 3, 2014).

⁵Rebecca Rosen, “What Was Reddit Troll Violentacrez Thinking?” *Atlantic.com*, October 16, 2012, <http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2012/10/what-was-reddit-troll-violentacrez-thinking/263648/> (accessed November 3, 2014).

Often overlooked in this controversy is how many people enjoyed the work of Brutsch, or, really, enjoyed Violentacrez. According to Reddit's own numbers, Brutsch's subreddits were among the most popular on the site.⁶ His most popular, r/jailbait, at one point ranked as the second most popular thread on the site, and while his others never achieved that level of recognition, they did still regularly draw in thousands of daily viewers, most of whom came in to those forums one at a time, hidden by the anonymity of the internet, to look at images of underage girls, physical abnormalities, crime scene photographs, and pictures of bodies mutilated by car accidents.⁷

As one might guess, when the story of Violentacrez received its fifteen minutes of national attention, the overwhelming reaction was of outrage, directed primarily at Brutsch, along with the same comments concerning the end of American morality that accompany many news stories.⁸ Brutsch stood for a few days as the worst purveyor of filth in America. Yet it did not take much effort to discover other examples of instances of people searching out images of graphic violence. Since the explosion in accessibility in the 1990s, the internet has become a boon for the spread of graphic, violent images. So-called shock sites like Rotten.com and Goregrish.com seem to exist primarily, if not solely, to offer visitors the most offensive and shocking images possible, most of which rely heavily on violating sexual taboos and showing bodies destroyed by violence. Prior to the emergence of these sites, films like *Faces of Death* and *Traces of Death*, supposed documentaries showing moments of death and violence captured on film, found

⁶Adrien Chen, "Reddit Troll Defends Himself on CNN: I Treated Reddit as a Game," Gawker.com, October 19, 2014, <http://gawker.com/5953097/reddit-troll-michael-brutsch-defends-himself-on-cnn-i-treated-reddit-as-a-game>, (accessed November 3, 2014).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸"Reddit troll 'Violentacrez' speaks out," Youtube.com, October 18, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ks8xuYRPnWM>.

considerable audiences, and in *Impure Play: Sacredness, Transgression, and the Tragic in Popular Culture*, sociologist Alexander Riley identifies the public suicide of Pennsylvania public treasurer R. Budd Dwyer as pivotal in the distribution of violent material in the United States.⁹ In that video, Dwyer, facing federal bribery charges, appears at a press conference covered live by many local news stations. Following ten minutes of answering questions, Dwyer pulls a handgun out of a paper bag and shoots himself in the head. Cameras caught of this and Riley argues this moment helped solidify an underground of tape trading that valued shocking, violent and taboo-violating moments.¹⁰

The internet made such an underground network unnecessary, and since the emergence of shock sites it seems as though every year there is a scandal concerning people viewing images of violence. One year the scandal may concern Brusch and Reddit, and the next it may involve the spread of images taken by soldiers in war.¹¹ Though the specifics may change, at heart these controversies center around one issue: viewers searching out images of violence, particularly those images with no clear purpose. Unlike, say, the images of diseased mouths placed on the side of cigarette packages, these pictures promote no clear social goal and the viewers sit safely distanced from the moments captured. These images are not part of any obvious narrative or designed to demonstrate some political or social point in a particularly harsh manner.

Someone may seek out images of horrific violence for many possible reasons. In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag examines how some people turn to these

⁹ Alexander Riley, *Impure Play: Sacredness, Transgress, and the Tragic in Popular Culture* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010), 27.

¹⁰ Ibid. 27-29.

¹¹ John Rico, "Why Soldiers Take Photos," *Salon.com*, April 22, 2012, http://www.salon.com/2012/04/23/why_soldiers_take_photos/ (accessed November 3, 2014).

moments of violence in order to numb their emotions, to make it so they no longer have to feel anything. She writes of how “some people will do anything to keep themselves from being moved.”¹² According to this view, shock becomes a self-defeating experience, an experience designed to prevent that emotion, or any powerful emotion, from occurring again. Viewers use images of violence to desensitize, as though the emotions of modern life, such as horror, disgust, loneliness and fear, are so powerful that they must take steps to avoid them. For Sontag, this is obviously not the only reason people may turn to violent imagery, for she also believes photographs can provide a kind of haunting narrative that casts off any claims of moral innocence.¹³ Still, the idea that violent imagery is used with the intention of anesthetizing oneself to the horrors of the world is one that has a hold in contemporary culture.

In this paper I would like to examine the relationship between viewers and representations of violence, looking specifically at the ways the relationships between viewers and violence may be interpreted not in terms of numbing but through the framework of sacrifice. Though I will look at some issues related to sexual desire, and drawing a clear, separating line between violent and sexual desires is difficult, I will focus mostly on the relationship between viewers of violence and the violence being undertaken. To do this, I will employ the thought of philosopher Georges Bataille, as Bataille, as much as any other thinker, works to understand the role of violent desire and taboo in contemporary society.

Where I believe Bataille offers the most insight is in his ability to frame violence in the context of religion. While recognizing that violence can be used for profane

¹² Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003), 27.

¹³ *Ibid.*

purposes, through his attempt at reintroducing sacred practices into a world overrun with profane concerns, Bataille provides a means of seeing purposeless violence in the realm of religion. Building on the work of the early sociologist Emile Durkheim, Bataille argues that the contemporary world, with its focus on the individual and rationality, has lost contact with the sacred, leaving only the profane world of production. In *Theory of Religion*, and elsewhere, Bataille claims that religion, a notoriously tricky word to define, is the search for lost intimacy, of being lost like water in water, yet in the modern world collective experiences of the type Durkheim identifies with the primitive festival are all but lost, subsumed into the profane world, a world always focused on production and utility.¹⁴ Religion for Bataille centers on unproductive expenditure, moments of pure waste, where the sacred is present once again in the world, but the profane world stands totally opposed to this world, instead placing emphasis on production, turning all objects, including humans, into tools.¹⁵ Just as a hammer may drive in a nail, so too may a human serve as a tool in a line of production, with few moments not motivated by rational, utilitarian concerns. Bataille believes that excess most marks the world, yet accumulation drives the profane world, with the clearest taboo being against waste. It is in this way that Bataille unites sexuality, religion, literature, art, and violence into a single cause, because in all there exists the potential for waste and for individuals to lose their solid sense of self in moments of sacred communication.¹⁶

Much of Bataille's work may seem antithetical to the contemporary concerns of religion as it is practiced in the world, but for Bataille the consideration of new religious

¹⁴ Georges Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1989), 19.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 33

¹⁶ Georges Bataille, "The Notion of Expenditure," in *Visions of Excess*, ed. & trans. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 117-120.

practices is not merely an intellectual pursuit. Living in France at the time of the two World Wars and witnessing the rise of the fascists throughout Europe, Bataille believed that reconstituting the world around sacrifice, the elimination of useful things, might be the only way to prevent further catastrophe. Living in a world where virtually every major movement or idea resulted in violence inhibited only by an emphasis on production, Bataille believed that only by introducing new practices and habits that might result in a temporary loss of self could save this world. Hoping to find an unceasing sacrifice, Bataille believed that these moments could be found in religion.¹⁷

Rather than reject the sacred himself, or give it up as a lost cause, Bataille attempted to introduce new means and practices for achieving communication with the sacred. He attempted to find these practices in the presence of others, as when he created a number of secret societies, or in isolation, as when he made his controversial turn toward inner experience, but in every case he called for a rejection of the profane world and an embracing of the powerful pull towards transgression. Ultimately, Bataille wished to create a type of unceasing communication with the greatest source of loss, death. The world of production, with its constant focus on the future, minimizes the force of death, representing it as something that can be overcome, either continually postponed or ultimately conquered through the afterlife, but Bataille saw death as the ultimate representation of the sacred, and to embrace death was to embrace the final excess of life.

Bataille certainly did not shy away from images of violence himself, either in his life or his own fiction, which at times could offer horrific scenes of transgressive sexuality and violence, but he certainly did not do so to numb himself to the affects. The violence of sacrifice may be best understood as a type of anguish brought on by an

¹⁷ Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, 57-58.

awareness of the continuity of death, and Bataille hoped to foster that anguish.¹⁸ By focusing on death, often literally, Bataille believed that the fictions of modern life would recede. Death being an ever-present reality for Bataille, he urged embracing death rather than continually sequestering it within the world of production.¹⁹ How to embrace death, or to find joy in the face of death, became one of the questions guiding much of his life and work.

One of the most controversial moments in Bataille's work comes in his discussion of a photograph of a Ling Chi victim. In this photograph a young Chinese man undergoes a type of execution where parts of his body are literally cut away. With a crowd around them, a team of men work to saw away parts of the man's body, cutting away parts of his legs and chest, yet in his face Bataille sees what he considers the perfect mixture of ecstasy and agony.²⁰ Bataille gazed intently at this picture, meditating on it in order to have a mystical experience. He refers to this man as being "as beautiful as a wasp," and he carefully points out that no sadistic urge causes him to view the man's agony. With this image, he believes that the man communicates his pain and ruins in Bataille that which is most opposed to ruin.²¹ By contemplating the agony of this man Bataille hopes to regain lost intimacy, breaking the barriers of the self so that he experiences the execution of this man as though it is happening to him. Elsewhere he writes that he imagines himself in ecstasy as he contemplates his own torments, meaning he imagines himself outside of himself.²² By doing this, by focusing on the waste that is this death, Bataille comes into contact with the sacred. In "Joy in the Face of Death," he

¹⁸ Ibid., 58.

¹⁹ Ibid., 42-43.

²⁰ Georges Bataille, *Tears of Eros*, trans. Peter Conner (San Francisco: City Lights, 1992), 206.

²¹ Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. Stuart Kendall (New York: SUNY Press, 1988), 120.

²² Ibid.

writes, “Those who look at death and rejoice are already no longer the individuals destined for the body’s rotten decay, because simply entering into the arena with death already projected them outside themselves, into the heart of the glorious community of their fellows where every misery is scoffed at.”²³ By engaging in sacrificial practices where participants experience the presence of death as a shared moment of communication, Bataille believes that the moral fictions that guide the modern world may fall away.

In my paper I would like to examine how Bataille may allow for a reevaluation of the ways we view pointless violence, looking particularly at examples of communities built on a type of useless violence. In order to do this I have chosen to examine three case studies. Although each comes from a different medium, threads connect all three. The first, and most obvious, is that each is excessively violent. By this, I mean that in each case participants make a deliberate attempt to take an accepted form and introduce new levels of violence to that form. All three of my examples exist within well-defined forms, and in each case there appears to be a deliberate refocusing onto excessive violence. This brings me to my second connecting thread: in each case there is also an awareness of the importance of genre, formula, and/or category. Though in none of these cases are the traditional forms dismissed entirely, they are altered in ways that threaten to subvert those very categories. Concerning this point, the role of the creator becomes paramount, as the creator recognizes the importance of form and chooses to undermine the conventions of form. The final thread builds on the first two and is perhaps the most important. In each case the creators of the violence rely on a connection between

²³ Georges Bataille, “Joy in the Face of Death,” in *The College of Sociology, 1937-1939*, ed. & trans. Denis Hollier (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 328.

themselves and their audience. Those connections are not the same in all three cases, but in each an emphasis is placed on the relationships between audience and creator.

My first case study is the underground world of deathmatch wrestling. Roland Barthes most famously made the connection between wrestling and religion, saying in “The World of Wrestling” that wrestlers, like religious figures, provide means of categorizing the world around the issues of good and evil.²⁴ Beyond that, the small, constantly changing world of independent wrestling lends itself to a certain type of religious scholarship, as, on one side of the spectrum, are family-friendly, decidedly retro organizations like Christian Wrestling Federation that present wrestling as a type of ministry. However, I will focus on the violent subgenre of wrestling sometimes referred to as deathmatch wrestling that exists on the other end of that spectrum. Common to organizations like Combat Zone Wrestling and International Wrestling Association Mid-South, deathmatch wrestling increases the level of violence common to wrestling, and opening up the activity as a space to release the community’s desire for violence. In this type of wrestling, it is not uncommon to see everyday objects like thumbtacks, barbwire, even pencils used to draw alarming amounts of blood from performers who engage in a mixture of athletic activity and performance art piece, mimicking the traits of many sports while falling through wooden tables and literally throwing salt into open wounds for a match that all understand to be at least loosely choreographed. Though performing for an audience only a small fraction of the size of the much more popular World Wrestling Entertainment, these wrestlers mutilate themselves, scarring their bodies for an event of no practical value. In this chapter I will focus on the ways these events cultivate

²⁴ Roland Barthes, “The World of Wrestling,” in *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling*, ed. Nicholas Sammond (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 23-32.

a culture of transgression, so that even though the wrestlers themselves make very little money and attract only a small amount of attention, these events allow for small, ritualistic celebrations of violence, with fans actively participating in a way uncommon to other types of performances, athletic or otherwise.

In the second case study, I will turn to the body art of performance artist Chris Burden. More than many other forms of art, performance art draws attention to the physical presence of an artist, and few artists did so in more affecting ways than Chris Burden. Most famous for a piece where he allowed himself to be shot, Burden performed pieces that involved endangering his own life and opening himself to physical harm. Similar to the example of deathmatch wrestling, the community surrounding Burden's art is built on nausea and transgression, yet Burden works to manipulate those desires through his interaction with his audience.

As in the case of deathmatches, Burden's work relies on a peculiar connection between artist and performer based on violence. In this section I will focus on the types of connections Burden creates between himself, his work, and his audience. By placing his own body in danger, and often providing his audience with the task of either harming or saving him, Burden creates pieces that evoke what one critic calls a "distinctive nausea" based on the positioning and responsibility of his audience.²⁵

For my final case study, I will move to literature and focus on Jonathan Littell's novel *The Kindly Ones*. Presented to readers as the memoir of Nazi intelligence officer Max Aue, Littell's work of fiction begins by stressing a connection between Littell's narrator and the reader. Opening with the phrase "Oh my human brothers, let me tell you

²⁵ Peter Schjeldahl, "Performance," *The New Yorker*, May 14, 2007, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2007/05/14/performance-2> (accessed on November 2, 2014).

how it happened,”²⁶ Littell’s novel continually stresses the similarities between Aue and his reader. Much of the scholarship on Littell’s novel that deals with this connection examines the historical reality of the novel, taking Aue’s claim as suggesting that readers would have also been Nazis had they lived in Germany at the time. For my purposes, though, I will examine Aue’s claim in the context of the more personal section dealing with Aue’s transgressive desires. Focusing on the more fantasy laden sections, I will examine the ways Aue builds his familiar connection on an intense desire for transgression. Rather than connected through the profane interests of the Nazi war machine, Aue suggests it is the power of the sacred that unites all human brothers, as it is ultimately the power of transgression that forces him to see a community beyond the fascist push toward a utopia built on constant production.

In the final chapter of my thesis I hope to unite all of the sections. All three of my examples have small, limited fan bases, but that does not mean that the points made concerning them only relate to those drawn to these specific works. In the conclusion of my paper I hope to show how each example has mainstream parallels, suggesting that Bataille communities may still be maintained in the contemporary world. As Cynthia Carr demonstrates in *On Edge: Performance at the End of the Century*, transgression always depends on context, meaning that what shocks and disgust in one setting may not have a similar impact in another.²⁷ However, this does not mean that transgression is not possible. Finding means for sacrificial practices may be difficult, but the affect of transgression may still be felt, allowing for an understanding of the fundamentally

²⁶ Jonathan Littell, *The Kindly Ones*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (New York: Harper, 2009), 2.

²⁷ Cynthia Carr, *On Edge: Performance at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008) 158.

collective nature of life through renewed contact with the sacred and a denial of the slavery of the profane world.

CHAPTER 2: THE WORLD OF DEATHMATCH WRESTLING

Ultraviolence (adjective) – 1. Acts of extreme violence, often seemingly performed at random, with no clear justification nor ulterior motive. Violence for the sake of violence. 2. Wrestling matches performed for bloodthirsty wrestling fans with clear justification of inflicting pain, losing blood, and if still standing, the thrill of victory. Violence for wrestling's sake.

- From *The Best of Deathmatch Wrestling, vol. 2: American Ultraviolence*

In 1989 the then-World Wrestling Federation (now World Wrestling Entertainment, WWE) found itself in a very real legal battle with the state of New Jersey. The company based operations in Connecticut and though wrestling was coming out of the days of single company territories, largely due to the WWE's success, the WWE still staged many events in New England. Because of this, the company attempted to fight what it saw as an unfair tax burden, and in undertaking the fight Vince and Linda McMahon, owners of the WWE, fundamentally changed the nature of the unique world of professional wrestling.²⁸ At the time New Jersey had a tax specifically aimed at the broadcasting and exhibition of sporting events. The McMahons, then, as now, the largest figures in the world of professional wrestling, argued that they should not have to pay this tax, as their company did not put on sporting events. They argued that wrestling differed

²⁸ Peter Kerr, "Now It Can Be Told: Those Pro Wrestlers Are Just Having Fun," *Nytimes.com*, February 10, 1989, <http://www.nytimes.com/1989/02/10/nyregion/now-it-can-be-told-those-pro-wrestlers-are-just-having-fun.html> (accessed November 2, 2014).

from tennis matches or the Super Bowl. Rather than be seen as sports, wrestling, they argued, should be classified as sports entertainment.²⁹ The phrase ‘sports entertainment’ had been used prior to this point to describe professional wrestling, but the McMahons’ use of the term signaled a new era in the world of wrestling. As David Shoemaker demonstrates in *The Squared Circle: Life, Death, and Pro Wrestling*, fans long suspected that what they saw during a wrestling match fundamentally differed from what they witnessed during a boxing match or a baseball game, and he argues that the image of wrestling fans as dupes is largely unfounded.³⁰ Going back to the earliest days of professional wrestling, fans suspected that the outcomes were predetermined and the punches did not really land, but never before had the central backstage figures come forward to acknowledge that fact. Historically, wrestlers and bookers were so invested in maintaining the myth that numerous stories exist of wrestlers going to absurd lengths to maintain the integrity of storylines and characters, often outside of wrestling arenas. Feuding wrestlers would not travel together and performers would make sure to demonstrate the effects of in-ring injuries when in public.³¹ When the McMahons brought their lawsuit against the state of New Jersey the supposed gatekeepers of the open secret of wrestling acknowledged that the suspicions concerning their industry were true. In wrestling terms, the McMahons broke kayfabe, acknowledging the scripted nature of wrestling, yet the McMahons actually went further. They argued that fans did not suspect that the matches were staged. They *knew* the matches were staged, and

²⁹ Richard Hoy-Brown, “Historic Moments in Wrestling, part 6,” TheIndependent.co.uk, May 30, 2014, <http://www.independent.co.uk/sport/general/wwe-mma-wrestling/historic-moments-in-wrestling-part-6-vince-mcmahon-admits-wrestling-is-predetermined-9461429.html> (accessed November 2, 2014).

³⁰ David Shoemaker, *The Squared Circle: Life, Death, and Pro Wrestling* (New York: Gotham, 2013), 23-27.

³¹ Ibid.

furthermore, they did not mind.³² When they saw wrestlers outside of the arena they knew they saw an extension of the in-ring drama, not an actual dispute spilling outside of the arena. Because of that, the fans did not watch these events as they did an actual sport. According to the McMahons, wrestling matches “are dramatizations which depict moral issues and are best classified as dramatic social satire,” and they should be no more subject to New Jersey’s sporting tax than a showing of *Field of Dreams*.³³

Beyond the legal issues at hand, the McMahons’ identification of wrestling as social satire is interesting as it suggests that fans watch wrestling in a unique way. McMahon argues that fans do not watch wrestling for the same reasons they watch basketball or football. Satire typically implies intent, and unlike those activities, if wrestling acts as social satire, the most important element is the narrative driving what essentially amounts to the mimicry of athletic action. Wrestling then exists as a type of storytelling making use of sports, rather than an athletic competition with a backdrop of social concerns.

I say all of this because I believe that within this unique activity there is an activity that challenges the norms and conventions of this world, and that the ways it does has conclusions valuable outside of the relatively small world of professional wrestling. If wrestling of the kind put on by Vince McMahon is best understood as social satire, what then of deathmatch wrestling, the extremely violent subset of wrestling that emerges largely after the WWE made their turn toward sports entertainment?³⁴ If fans watch wrestling as social satire, how do they watch matches where participants throw each other

³² Richard Hoy-Brown, “Historic Moments in Wrestling, part 6.”

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ A note on terminology: There is no agreed upon term for the type of wrestling I am discussing. The two most common terms are deathmatch and hardcore wrestling, but it has also been referred to as extreme and garbage wrestling.

through ropes of barbwire and drop themselves through flaming tables, particularly when these matches often come without a narrative grounding the action? This type of wrestling typically eschews narrative for the sake of violence, emphasizing the very real pain and suffering of the matches over any clear kind of storytelling. Deathmatch organizations do not go backwards, so to speak, to the point where they attempt to present themselves as an actual sport, yet they do not invest in the same types of storytelling as the WWE. Though narratives do exist, they are certainly not emphasized to fans, nor do the fans seem particularly to care for the traditional good guy vs. bad guy roles of wrestling. While maintaining some of the norms of wrestling, this activity challenges the very definitions of wrestling employed by figures like Vince McMahon. Deathmatch events, then, must be viewed in a different way.

In this section, I will argue that these events, which are controversial within the world of wrestling, can be understood as communal events that demonstrate how violent and sexual desires may be expressed collectively through ritualistic actions that allow for the violation of social norms. Using Bataille I wish to demonstrate how there may be an ethical value in events like these for all who participate. Like my later examples, deathmatch wrestling illustrates the possibility of reintroducing sacred practices into the contemporary world, along with demonstrating the difficulties in doing so. For Bataille, religion accomplishes the effect of detaching from the real world of things through profitless destruction, and this activity, despite its limited appeal, represents an all-consuming obsession with destruction of some the most valuable resources, including the wrestlers' bodies.³⁵

Wrestling of any sort may appear at first as an odd practice to champion from the

³⁵ Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, 57.

perspective of religion, but other writers have identified a connection between wrestling and certain aspects of religion. Roland Barthes argues in “The World of Wrestling” that wrestlers have the power of transmutation proper to spectacle and worship, allowing fans to see the differences between good and evil.³⁶ Bataille may agree with that statement up to a point, accepting the idea of transmutation as crucial to the event, but he would likely jettison any ideas of good and evil, at least not in the way Barthes uses the term in this essay. Instead, he would argue that the distinction comes not between good and evil, but from sacred and profane. Bataille, who was fascinated with contemplating images of violence and death, demonstrates how events such as deathmatch wrestling should be viewed as attempts at reintroducing sacred practices into a world that has largely abandoned them. Rather than merely present a way of understanding their appeal, I believe Bataille demonstrates that events like these, which help shatter any sense of coherent self through a collective celebration of excess and waste, provide means of creating communication in the contemporary world. This is done, in part, by appropriating many of the traits of sports while also violating some elements crucial to that category’s very existence. Though ‘sport’ can be as difficult to define as ‘religion,’ I do believe media theorist Garry Whannel hits on something when he writes, “Sports events offer a liminal moment between uncertainty and certainty; unlike fictional narrative, they are not predetermined by authorship, nor can they be predicted by cultural code or even by specialized knowledge. They offer a rare opportunity to experience genuine uncertainty.”³⁷ Deathmatch wrestling bends and twists this definition, creating its own liminal space, or really liminal spaces, between athletic competition and dramatic

³⁶ Barthes, “The World of Wrestling,” 31.

³⁷ Garry Whannel, *Fields in Vision: Television, Sport, and Cultural Transformation* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 229.

performance, as well as between stylized representations of violence and real violence, but where the culture challenges Whannel's definition is with the idea of uncertainty. Deathmatches offer an event authored collectively that dismiss moments of uncertainty in favor of moments of violence and transgressive effervescence. Whereas sports remain at the mercy of the athletes, deathmatches break free of the categories created by both sports and mainstream wrestling by turning the event over to the desires of the community. Because of the anti-utilitarian nature of these events they are easily dismissed, even within the world of wrestling, but their culture should not be overlooked. Rather than further sequester these events in our cultural landscape, Bataille demonstrates how these events speak to larger issue of human desire and illustrate the ways cultures can (and perhaps should) form around certain wasteful practices. Bataille best explains the way these activities, as much as anything, work to form communities celebrating the final expenditure of death. As their very name suggests, deathmatch events call on all, participants and viewers, to look upon moments suggestive of death and place themselves in that sacred moment.

To help illustrate exactly what happens during deathmatch wrestlers, I will describe a single match. The match I have chosen, Mad Man Pondo vs. the Wifebeater, comes from CZW's Tournaments of Death III, an event subtitled "Banned. . . My Ass," which presumably refers to attempts to outlaw events such as this. This match can be found on the DVD *The Best of American Deathmatch Wrestling, Volume 2: American Ultraviolence*. I have chosen this match not because it represents one of the more extreme examples of this culture, but because what happens in it reflects what typically happens in these tournaments. If anything, this is a rather run-of-the-mill match. The

recorded version begins with both Wifebeater and Mad Man Pondo already in the ring, along with a referee who wears a protective face visor, knee and elbow pads, and work gloves, in addition to the regular black and white striped referee's shirt. Pro wrestling shares a history with boxing, seen most obviously in "the squared circle" each uses to separate the participants from the audience,³⁸ but, rather than inside an arena or stadium, this ring is outside, and it is surrounded by only three or four rows of fans. Though I found nothing saying how many fans attended this event, most CZW events draw crowds of roughly two to four hundred. Their larger events have drawn crowds over a thousand, but this crowd does not begin to approach that number.

Pondo and Wifebeater are both veterans of the deathmatch circuit, and they distance themselves from their more high profile wrestlers of the WWE before they begin their match. Though both are fairly muscular, they lack the clean, well-developed physiques of more popular wrestlers, and their in-ring attire hardly differs from day to day clothes. Pondo wears long black shorts and a black t-shirt, while Wifebeater wrestles in worn blue jeans and boots. Wifebeater's name supposedly derives from the fact he previously wrestled in a white undershirt, but his name also demonstrates the culture's willingness to thumb its nose at social convention. It is hard to imagine a wrestler called Wifebeater having mainstream success, just as it is difficult to imagine Pondo finding success at the level of the WWE. Before one match against a German wrestler Pondo came to the ring in a shirt emblazoned with a swastika and goose-stepped his way around the ring.

One of the most common types of matches in the deathmatch world is the Fans Bring the Weapons match. This allows for direct participation in the most violent

³⁸ Shoemaker, *The Squared Circle*, 19.

moments as fans are confident of a weapon's legitimacy when they bring the instruments themselves, and the match begins with the cameras panning over the weapons in the ring. Like the moment common in torture scenes in movies where the instruments of pain are displayed to the victim, the camera lingers on the weapons, allowing viewers to imagine their possible uses. On initial viewing, a few items can be seen – stop signs, panes of glass, a microwave – but many more will be used as the match progresses.

The match begins with Pondo and Wifebeater holding light tubes. These light tubes, of the kind seen in an office workplace ceiling, are favorite tools of deathmatch wrestlers, and it is easy to see why. For the first move of the match Pondo and Wifebeater swing the light tubes like baseball bats and smash them over each other's head. The long, thin tubes break easily, and they shatter in a viscerally appealing way. They pop on impact, and the wrestlers' bodies get a small coating of glass and the powdery filament inside.

This first move causes both men to bleed a little, Pondo from his forehead and Wifebeater from behind his ear. Deathmatch wrestling, as a whole, rarely features the focus on individual moves found in more well-known forms of wrestling, so matches commonly consist of moving from weapon to weapon or spot to spot. In this match the dual light tube strike is followed with Wifebeater leaning Pondo against the ropes with his head facing outward. Fully visible to the crowd and with a camera moving in as close as possible, Wifebeater takes the remains of his light tube and digs the shards into Pondo's forehead. This is a very common scene in deathmatch wrestling, and viewers, both in person and when watching on video, can see and hear Pondo cry out in pain. One

announcer says, “He’s carving him up like a Thanksgiving turkey,” as blood begins to flow down Pondo’s face.

The rest of the match consists largely of the two men using the weapons in the ring on one another. Pondo smacks Wifebeater’s face with a stop sign. Wifebeater hits Pondo with a Wiffle Ball-style plastic bat covered with thumbtacks. Wifebeater breaks a few vinyl records over Pondo’s head as the announcers engage in some out-of-place pun-heavy commentary (“Pondo never thought he’d have a hit record”). Both of these men have been involved in some of the most notorious moments in deathmatch wrestling, with Wifebeater having taken a weedwacker to an opponent’s chest and Pondo once falling atop a board covered with sharpened pencils, so the crowd appears a little underwhelmed by some of the weapons being used. To many people, seeing a man fall face first through a shutter or see another smacked with an acoustic guitar may seem barbaric, but to these fans, those are fairly ordinary moments. It is only when Pondo kicks a group of light tubes into Wifebeater’s face that the fans become animated, shouting and chanting in unison. Hardly novel in this context, the broken light tubes create enough of a thrill to energize the audience.

For the remainder of the eight minute match, the two performers make their way through the weapons, with expectedly gruesome results. When Wifebeater hits Pondo in the face with a keyboard a few of the keys stick to his forehead. When Wifebeater’s bare back lands atop a few dozen cacti, the plants stick into his back for the rest of the match. By the time the match ends both men are bleeding heavily, and not in the self-inflicted way common to older styles of wrestling. These are not forehead cuts. Mad Man Pondo bleeds from his face, as well as his hand. Wifebeater bleeds more, with blood coming

from behind his ear, as well as his shoulder, back, and from under his arm. And being the victor of this match, winning after slamming Pondo atop a flat screen television, Wifebeater will wrestle two more times that day, ultimately winning the entire tournament after winning another Fans Bring the Weapons match against JC Bailey, and an Anything Goes 200 Light Tubes Double Hell Death Match against the Necro Butcher.³⁹

Understanding matches like these may seem insignificant, but I believe there is some value to examining them, as they are a clear example of a cultural celebration of pointless violence. In *Eroticism*, Bataille writes, “There is nothing our world to parallel the capricious excitement of a crowd obeying impulse of violence with acute sensitivity and unamenable to reason,”⁴⁰ and deathmatch wrestling exists as one example where participants minimize all other interests for the sake of unleashing that excitement. Even within the world of professional wrestling, which is itself an example of waste and excess, critics of this kind of wrestling view it as somehow more pointless. For example, a commenter on a wrestling message board writes, “It would be an interesting case study to give one of these guys – or ALL of them – a severe psycho analysis [*sic*] to determine exactly what makes them WANT to do something this idiotic and insane,” and it is not uncommon to read posts about how deathmatch wrestling is not *real* wrestling.⁴¹ Not only does this kind of wrestling incorporate the mimicry of actual sports, it does so while rejecting many of the norms that at least allow the illusion of utility. If wrestling should

³⁹ *The Best of Deathmatch Wrestling, Volume 2: American Ultraviolence*. DVD (Los Angeles: Big Vision Entertainment, 2006).

⁴⁰ Georges Bataille, *Eroticism*, trans. Mary Dalwood (San Francisco: City Lights, 1986), 164.

⁴¹ An example from an officalfan.com message board: “It [deathmatch wrestling] is not real wrestling, you are not real wrestlers, as far as I’m concerned you’re nothing but a bunch of punk kids if you do this stuff.”

be seen as “dramatic social satire,” wrestling at its highest levels presents itself as having some purpose or message, and most writing on the subject deals with wrestling in this way. For example, a recent NPR article argued that wrestling offers one of the best parodies of the modern obsessions of masculinity, highlighting a few storylines to illustrate this, but it would be hard to make this argument using only deathmatches, because the things focused on in this article – the enormous bodies, the pageantry, the long storylines – are largely absent in deathmatch events.⁴² Instead, these matches choose to celebrate moments of pain and suffering, while rejecting the norm of self-preservation, whether that norm manifests itself in terms of income, long term health, or immediate physical safety. Drawing focus to the bodies of wrestlers involved, these events offer no alternate explanation for the waste they produce. Rather than using narratives to place attention elsewhere, these events place attention on violence and its immediate effects. With this activity fans and performers alike are drawn to moments heavily suggestive of a violent death, and Bataille suggests that the appeal of these moments should not surprise even their harshest critics. In “The Notion of Expenditure,” Bataille writes of certain athletic activities, saying of them, “[T]he danger of death is not avoided; on the contrary it is the object of strong unconscious attraction,”⁴³ and this attraction manifests itself through unproductive expenditure. Bataille highlights art, monuments, certain types of sexual activity, and other activities as examples of unproductive expenditure, with the connecting thread being that in each case, rather than

⁴² Libby Hill, “Drag is Raw: Wrestling, Queens, and Gender as Performance Art,” NPR.com, April 16, 2014, <http://www.npr.org/blogs/monkeysee/2014/04/16/303652716/drag-is-raw-wrestlers-queens-and-gender-as-performance-art> (accessed November 2, 2014).

⁴³ Bataille, “The Notion of Expenditure,” 119.

accumulate or use in rational ways, resources are wasted without purpose.⁴⁴ Much like other types of unproductive expenditure, deathmatch wrestling can be “characterized by the fact that in each case the accent is placed on a loss that must be as great as possible in order for that activity to take on its true meaning.”⁴⁵

To comprehend this culture, it is important to understand it as a unique activity, as well as understand it within the world of wrestling. As indicated throughout my descriptions, the most obvious defining characteristic of the culture is violence. Bataille writes, “In the practice of life, however, humanity acts in a way that allows for the satisfaction of disarmingly savage needs, and it seems to subsist only at the limits of horror,” and this activity exists to offer means of momentarily satisfying those needs.⁴⁶ When explaining these groups to those unfamiliar with the activity, it is difficult to understate exactly how violent these matches are, or, rather, how obsessed they are with presenting themselves as violent. Though wrestlers do not kill one another (and, to my knowledge, no one has died during a deathmatch event, though many have suffered serious injuries⁴⁷), the matches themselves emphasize drawing as much blood as possible and crossing as many lines of acceptable danger as they can, putting them at odds with the increasingly clean WWE, as well as more family friendly independent organizations. Furthermore, at their most successful, these organizations attract a devoted audience centered around the organization more than any particular wrestler. Drawn in by the

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 118

⁴⁶ Ibid., 117.

⁴⁷ A possible exception to this would be CZW wrestler JC Bailey, who died in 2010 at the age of 27. Though his death has not definitively been linked to deathmatch wrestling, some see the brain aneurysm he suffered as connected to his time as a deathmatch wrestler.

event more than any participant, fans frequently chant the name of the organization at the most ecstatic moments.

Gaining national notoriety in the mid-90s, smaller wrestling organizations, such as the now-defunct Extreme Championship Wrestling, took inspiration from styles of wrestling more common in Japan and Mexico, turning the focus away from the body-building physiques of the WWE and toward high-flying matches and, most importantly, blood. While many fans loved the Lucha Libre-style of wrestling brought from Mexico, the bloody and violent matches that mimicked some matches from Japan attracted the most attention. By the end of the '90s smaller organizations began to form across the US focusing almost exclusively on this type of wrestling. As ECW struggled with a move toward the mainstream, demonstrating that these types of organizations are doomed if they try to achieve any type of mainstream success, groups like Combat Zone Wrestling and Independent Wrestling Association Mid-South featured more deathmatch events, imitating the types of bloody spectacles common to organizations like Big Japan Wrestling and Frontier Martial-Arts Wrestling.⁴⁸ They began to hold more and more deathmatches, to the point that CZW and others hold annual deathmatch tournaments, where participants are asked to perform in multiple matches, all of which are expected to be violent and bloody and take place over the course of a single day.

Following ECW's demise, these companies seemed to realize they do not need to grow beyond a certain point, which is significant when considering the motivations of the wrestlers themselves. Unlike professional athletes, who may accept large paychecks and endorsement money, deathmatch wrestlers have little financial incentive to endanger their

⁴⁸ John Hancock, "There Will Be Blood: The Brief History of Hardcore Wrestling," [wrestling101.com](http://www.wrestling101.com), April 25, 2012, <http://www.wrestling101.com/home/2012/04/there-will-be-blood-the-brief-history-of-hardcore-wrestling/> (accessed November 2, 2014).

bodies as they do. In recent discussions regarding head injuries in football, a common refrain from fans is something along the lines of “Well, they’re being paid millions of dollars,” with the implication being that physical mutilation makes some sense in the context of money. The more a player is paid the more he should be willing to damage his body, with those at the highest level most likely to endure serious physical injuries while also having their bodies turned into a commodity.⁴⁹ With professional wrestling, the opposite is true, and for this reason, in many places wrestling of this kind is effectively outlawed. Many states where wrestling still falls under the jurisdiction of state athletic commissions have essentially argued that no one can consent to certain acts and that allowing organizations to self-regulate results in wrestlers losing wages in an industry that fosters physical suffering. For example, in 2013 Pennsylvania enacted what some call The Wrestling Act, a bill that attempts to outlaw one wrestler making another bleed. Self-inflicted cuts are acceptable, but causing another wrestler to bleed could cause the wrestlers and organizations to incur fines. While effectively eliminating deathmatch wrestling in some places, bills like this reinforce the outlaw status of deathmatch organizations, further removing them from the world of work. The pressures of conformity are significant, but some groups vow to violate the law.⁵⁰ Pierre Lamarch argues that Bataille sought “the liberation of human beings from an ethos directed toward the perpetual imposition of work,” which often presented things such as children, accumulation, and the deferral of enjoyment alongside self-preservation as necessary

⁴⁹ Dan Grano, “The Greatest Game Ever Played: An NFL Origin Story,” *The NFL: Critical and Cultural Perspectives* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2014), 13-37.

⁵⁰ Gary Joseph Wilson, “PA Athletic Commission tries to bodyslam violent matches,” July 13, 2013, <http://paindependent.com/2013/07/pa-athletic-commission-tries-to-bodyslam-violent-matches/> (accessed November 2, 2014).

goods.⁵¹ Without any of these institutions, or any other comparable institutions, the presence of transgression and loss in deathmatch organizations cannot be overlooked, and various social institutions will work to limit this behavior.

Critics of deathmatches put this kind of wrestling in terms of financial utility, or really any type of utility, and on that level this activity looks absurd. This is true at all levels of wrestling, but especially so for deathmatch wrestlers, who tend to be among the lowest paid as they participate in the most dangerous form of a very dangerous activity. With little national attention and limited merchandising opportunities, this world, despite its notoriety, is not at all lucrative and organizations rarely last more than a few years. While CZW and IWA-MS have existed for over a decade, other once-notorious groups like Xtreme Pro Wrestling have long since folded. The lack of job security inherent in the world leaves many deathmatch wrestlers living a nomadic life, and they rarely have adequate healthcare, even as they mutilate their bodies.⁵² In an interview Dylan Summers, who wrestles as the Necro Butcher, repeatedly expresses his love for getting high, saying that one of the unexpected perks of small shows is that fans often bring drugs. When asked why so many wrestlers abuse drugs, Summers answered succinctly: “Well, none of us has any insurance.”⁵³

Healthcare is limited to the point the wrestlers become adept at treating themselves. One behind the scenes clip shows two deathmatch wrestlers, Masada and

⁵¹ Pierre Lamarch, “The Use Value of G.A.M.V. Bataille,” in *Reading Bataille Now*, ed. Shannon Winnubst (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2007), 62.

⁵² R. Tyson Smith, “Pain in the Act: The Meanings of Pain Among Professional Wrestlers,” *Qualitative Sociology*, 31, no. 2 (2008), 133-137.

⁵³ *Choose Death: The Necro Butcher Story*, DVD (Coplay, PA: Smarmark Video).

Danny Havoc, stitching one another's wounds,⁵⁴ and R. Tyson Smith demonstrates how wrestlers within the world of independent wrestling view injuries and health issues as rites of passage.⁵⁵ This leaves wrestlers left to mutilate and maim themselves for very little money in front of a small, if devoted, fan base.⁵⁶ For example, in the 2009 CZW Tournament of Death, wrestler Nick Gage fell through a set of light tubes tied to the ropes. Upon breaking, one of the light tubes severed two arteries under Gage's arm. He immediately left the match and was airlifted to a hospital.⁵⁷ The event itself was literally held in the backyard of one of the wrestler's parents, and the crowd was estimated at roughly 250 people. A year later, Gage was convicted of second degree bank robbery. During his trial he acknowledged that he was homeless and had been addicted to painkillers for over ten years. He attributed both to his time as a wrestler.⁵⁸

Injuries like Gage's are not at all uncommon, and become much more likely in one of the common formats within the world of hardcore wrestling, the previously mentioned deathmatch tournament. These tournaments began in Japan and typically feature at least three rounds, all over the course of a single day. Mick Foley, who gained fame in the United States as Cactus Jack, Dude Love, and Mankind, was the first American to win International Wrestling Association of Japan's King of the Deathmatch tournament, and during his matches he suffered second degree burns to his left arm and back and needed "seven stitches in my hand, nine in my eyebrow, eleven in my head, and

⁵⁴"CZW Heavyweight Champion MASADA Stitches up Danny Havoc's Back." Youtube.com, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hAFcG4ci9ew> (accessed November 2, 2014).

⁵⁵ Smith, "Pain in the Act," 136.

⁵⁶ For example, according to their own numbers, CZW's Tournament of Death III had 527 in attendance.

⁵⁷ "Nickgageinjury.wmv." Youtube.com. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vRLVuYSggyY> (accessed November 2, 2014).

⁵⁸Tim Zatzariny Jr. "Pro Wrestler: Desperation Led Me to Rob Bank," Collingswood Patch, January 1, 2011, <http://patch.com/new-jersey/collingswood/pro-wrestler-desperation-led-me-to-rob-bank> (accessed November 2, 2014).

fourteen behind my ear.”⁵⁹ Foley did ultimately become very successful in the US, becoming one of the most popular performers of the late 90s and early 2000s. However, within the larger wrestling world, the most profitable organizations mostly ignore deathmatch wrestlers, and those who do pay attention frequently offer the most serious criticisms of the culture. Jim Cornette, a wrestling lifer who has worked as a manager and booker for over 30 years, frequently expresses his hatred for hardcore wrestling, and his attitude is representative of many wrestling fans. He writes, “These people mutilate their bodies for no compensation in parking lots and rec centers to hear the cheers of 100 or so people who this type of thing appeals to.”⁶⁰ He also describes those hundred or so fans in the parking lot as “lower class, mentally challenged college-aged (but not attending) guys who piss and moan about their depression and lot in life.” Cornette claims he would rather live next to a child molester than hardcore wrestlers, a group he characterizes as the type who would “want to scare grandma and kick the dog.”⁶¹ Cornette’s position is simple and widely held: this style of wrestling is dangerous, disgusting and dumb.

For someone coming upon this culture for the first time, it is difficult to argue with this assessment. To an outsider, the deathmatch tournament seems designed in a particularly sadistic and cruel way. In each match fans expect participants to bleed extensively, while also going through the already dangerous and demanding motions of a professional wrestling match. The winner continues to wrestle, an implicit suggestion

⁵⁹ Mick Foley, *Have a Nice Day: A Tale of Blood and Sweatsocks* (New York: Harper Collins, 2000), 364.

⁶⁰ Jim Cornette, “The Slippery Slope of Hardcore Wrestling,” Jimcornette.com, <http://jimcornette.com/cornettes-commentary/slippery-slope-hardcore-wrestling> (accessed November 2, 2014).

⁶¹ Ibid.

being that the winner, if he did receive medical attention after his match, did not leave the premises to do so. As the rounds progress, the performers come to the ring showing the signs of their earlier matches. They may wrap themselves in bandages or wear clothes already torn by barbwire or glass, and their bodies and clothes are covered in dried blood. The wounds of earlier matches are visible and easy to reopen.

A single deathmatch tests the limits of disgust in most people, so the excess of the tournament works to demolish any sense of acceptable limit. A staged athletic tournament would be useless enough, but the bloody nature makes it all the more excessive. To use just one example, to win CZW's Tournament of Death X, the wrestler Masada defeated Dysfunction in a Fans Bring the Weapons Match, "Bulldozer" Matt Tremont in a Kenzans, Whips and Whatever the Fuck We Can Find in the Back Match, and Masashi Takeda in a Barbed Wire Ropes, Light Tubes, and Panes of Glass Match.⁶² By the end of the afternoon Masada had wrestled for nearly an hour, competing in three separate matches, and he bled heavily in all three. Watching, it becomes clear exactly how far this culture will go to violate health norms.

By removing the emphasis on competition, wrestling refocuses the audience's attention. Part of that attention can be devoted to the narrative guiding the action, but as deathmatch wrestling does not have the means to involve their audience in detailed storylines (meaning, mostly, they do not have television shows to help reinforce the company's storylines) they focus primarily on the wrestlers' bodies. In particular, the ways bodies may be mutilated becomes a major source of attention and focus. Cuts and

⁶² These are the actual match titles provided by CZW, who can be somewhat creative and self-aware with their names. Earlier in the tournament Matt Tremont defeated Necro Butcher in a Get Hit...With Shit match. Also, a Kenzan is used in the Japanese art of ikebana. It is used to hold plants in place.

punctures are highly valued, and backs serve as a favorite canvas, as do arms and faces. In *Slaphappy: Pride, Prejudice, and Professional Wrestling*, Thomas Hackett includes a picture of the back of the Wifebeater. Even in black and white, his back appears as a collection of dozens of inch long scars.⁶³ In older versions of wrestling, blood typically came from self-inflicted forehead cuts, but once again deathmatches push things to an extreme. Wifebeater received these scars through his years in deathmatch wrestling, largely with CZW. The older style of drawing blood still exists (although the WWE has recently begun limiting the use of blood in televised matches) but deathmatch wrestling fans are not satisfied by these small, familiar actions. As in other areas, they demand an excess, and within their world a type of creativity exists concerning blood and pain. The need to show “real pain” becomes paramount, and small, everyday objects are favored. Thumbtacks, light bulbs, pencils, and fishhooks have a relatable, tactile appeal. Fans have likely felt the sharp sting of these small cuts, and take the wrestler’s face, body language, and shouts as expressions of real pain.

Deathmatches leave the world of utility by willfully transgressing those social constructs that would favor practicality and personal safety, including those specific to the world of wrestling and those of the larger society of which it is a part. Maintaining one’s health and working toward a comfortable future are almost always seen as positive acts. As useless expenditure calls for a “frenzied, violent, pleasurable waste,”⁶⁴ the pressures of the profane world urge a complete rejection of that waste, favoring instead work and self-preservation. Work and project are presented as means of progress, but, as

⁶³ Thomas Hackett, *Slaphappy: Pride, Prejudice, and Professional Wrestling* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006), 220.

⁶⁴ Shannon Winnubst, “Introduction,” *Reading Bataille Now*, ed. Shannon Winnubst (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2007), 22.

Shannon Winnubst argues, “[T]he work of work is not liberating. . . Reified by productive negativity as work, human beings can turn only to unproductive expenditure for their true liberation.”⁶⁵ The world of wrestling at its most popular demands physical loss, but it still draws lines that deathmatch wrestling deliberately transgresses, violating the norms of their culture which in turn already violate the norms of the larger culture. Where the larger world of wrestling works to make itself more popular and socially acceptable, deathmatch organizations maintain a focus on waste and loss. Further separating themselves from the mainstream of the WWE, deathmatch organizations develop a celebratory culture of cruelty. Bataille writes, “In his strange myths, in his cruel rites, man is in search of a lost intimacy from the first.”⁶⁶ Through their focus on loss, they indulge in a type of expenditure with no purpose, and, as Bataille writes, “if I thus consume immoderately, I reveal to my fellow beings that which I am intimately: Consumption is the way in which separate beings communicate.”⁶⁷

Getting to ecstatic moments is part of the goal of deathmatch wrestling, but it is not all the matches consist of. The moments must exist within a stable framework in order to be intelligible, echoing some of Clifford Geertz’s descriptions of the rituals surrounding cockfights in Bali. Geertz writes, “Each match is precisely like the others in general pattern,”⁶⁸ and a similar comment could be made of these matches. Because of this, while wrestling fosters a need for novelty it also, somewhat paradoxically, demands a reliance on formula and repetition. Though novelty is very important to the violence of wrestling, novelty does not work to disrupt the ritualistic aspects of these events.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 27.

⁶⁶ Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share I*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Urzone, 1993) 57.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 58

⁶⁸ Clifford Geertz, “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfights,” in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1977) 4.

Deathmatches, like all wrestling events, thrive on repetition, with all involved aware of the importance of the repetition. Wrestlers have signature moves, performed at similar times in each match, and matches must follow the structure of an athletic event. Matches at all levels must end with some sort of declaration from a referee, and fans would likely become uneasy with a match that featured no referee and no clear ending. This does not change in deathmatch wrestling. Despite the audience's awareness of the complicity of the performers, and the performers' awareness of the audience's primary interest, the wrestling cannot consist only of moments of mutilation. Just as the cockfights in Bali must begin with "a blood sacrifice . . . with the appropriate chants and oblations," the wrestling matches must begin as those before it began. Wrestling depends on formula while promoting a sense of transgression. The performers must mix performance art with the trappings of athletics, creating at least the thin illusion of athletic competition. To move away from that reality creates instances that are, at a minimum, awkward for both performers and fans and many ultimately destroy the connections fans feel with each other and the performers. The method for interpreting moments would be lost. With the framework of wrestling removed, deathmatches become even more uncomfortable and produce a clear sense of anxiety in the audience. A match between two deathmatch wrestlers, Rude Boy and Thrillbilly, provides a pair of moments demonstrating how the matches feel bound to the illusion of a legitimate activity and to formula.⁶⁹ In the first moment, Rude Boy begins to fight with a fan. In this case, the two wrestlers not only move out of the ring, they wrestle outside of the small arena when a fan does or says something to anger Rude Boy. What the fan does is not clear, but his turn to legitimate anger and desire for a "real" fight is obvious enough to his supposed opponent that

⁶⁹ *The Best of Blood*, DVD (Los Angeles: AIW Home Video, 2009).

Thrillbilly comes between Rude Boy and the fan. Once he calms Rude Boy, turning Rude Boy's attention away from the fan, they quickly readopt their staged anger at one another and resume the match. Before they redirect their attention at one another, Rude Boy is no longer the source of simulated violence; he is the potential source of real violence no longer directed in a safe arena. The formula allowed space for the unleashing of violent desire, but it also helps provide the illusion of a means of maintaining that violence.

The second moment illustrates how improvisation does not allow the participants to leave the illusion of competition. They must keep the formula intact, otherwise how can the moments be understood? Near the end of the match, which sees Rude Boy bleeding far more than his opponent, the violence suddenly becomes a health concern, with the fans, participants, and announcers unsure how to act. While laying on the mat, Rude Boy begins to vomit. Initially it is unclear if this, or his convulsions, are part of the show, and as fans continue to shout at him, Thrillbilly pretends to kick him a few times. After vomiting three times, Rude Boy shouts, "I can't breathe," a number of times and rises to his knees, clearly scared at how his body is reacting. He begins to tear his shirt away from his chest as medical personnel, who had earlier served as security, come into the ring. Thrillbilly bends down to offer help as some fans start a "Fuck you, pussy" chant and announcers make a telling comment: "Aren't there laws against things like this?" As one online reviewer describes the match's end: "It was surreal, gross, and downright scary. 'Spectacle' is the only word I could use to describe it. Not for the faint of heart."⁷⁰ To see the supposed enemies helping one another, and for the match to have

⁷⁰ Kevin Ford, "Review of The Best of Blood," <http://kford13.wordpress.com/2012/08/04/aiw-best-of-blood/> (accessed November 2, 2014).

no ending, demonstrates how an established formula, understood by performers and fans, helps provide space for the understanding of sacred violence. Fans only allow deviation from the formula, not a total rejection. Detours are allowed, but the ecstatic release of the 1-2-3 count should climax the match.

Loyalty to this formula is one way that deathmatch wrestling demonstrates its uselessness. It becomes a type of parody of sports, demonstrating how the supposed victories of sports have no real utility. Professional wrestling as a whole flaunts its uselessness, and hardcore wrestling is an even more extreme case of Bataille's notion of expenditure. To say there is no point to "sports entertainment" may seem obvious, but the anti-utility of wrestling is different than it is for other sports. Bataille identifies sports as a type of useless expenditure, with extravagant amounts of money being spent on players, uniforms, equipment, stadiums, and arenas, with a perhaps equally large amount devoted to gambling. A match between deathmatch wrestlers Thumbtack Jack and Mad Man Pondo further demonstrates exactly how formulaic these matches should be.⁷¹ The match takes place in a community center in a ring where the ropes have been replaced by barbwire. Fish hooks hang from the ropes and by the end of the match both men will have those hooks stuck in their bodies. Both will also bleed heavily. Their match will feature very few wrestling moves, but the formula calls for them to begin and end with what is more traditionally considered wrestling. They employ a tactic common to deathmatch wrestling as they tease hitting the barbwire, drawing up at the last second and expressing relief at avoiding such pain, establishing how they do not want to hurt. They then employ a series of basic wrestling moves, as though they believe that is what the audience paid to see. They throw each other toward the ropes, always stopping a few

⁷¹ *Transfusion: Thumbtack Jack in the United States*, DVD (Coplay, PA: Smarmark Video).

inches from the wires, with the audience playing its own character, shouting in feigned alarm as each gets close to the spikes. The audience acts as though they share in the pain of this moment, but their ironic shouts of fear will turn into real shouts mixing horror, disgust, and excitement, a collective exaltation at the moments of pain. Their community comes together at moments offering the most visible signs of pain, developing momentarily into the type of ecstatic moral community Bataille advocates. Winnubst writes that Bataille's sense of community is not a "moral fiction" and these communities form "around repulsiveness of violent, useless destruction."⁷² The community built during this match becomes most visible when the formula builds to moments of transgression. The match has an audience small enough that the performers can hear the shouts of a single fan, and the wrestlers can more directly interact with the fans. During this initial, bloodless section, which resembles decades of wrestling prior, Mad Man Pondo stops, turns to the crowd and acknowledges the formula. He tells them, "This is the boring parts before the good parts." The "good parts" presumably include the part where he puts a fishhook through the skin of TJ's forehead or anything that will leave the fans chanting "You sick fuck."

Reliance on moments like this create concern that, in the words of Jim Cornette, the audience grows numb, both to traditional wrestling storylines and to displays of violence. Echoing the fear mentioned by Sontag in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Cornette believes these matches effectively eliminate the audience's ability to be moved by traditional wrestling.⁷³ These concerns are not unreasonable when examining the world of deathmatch wrestling. A fair question to ask would be if, rather than opening

⁷² Winnubst, "Introduction," 22.

⁷³ Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 27.

them up to a moment of ecstatic violence, hardcore wrestling numbs fans to the affective power of this useless violence. Clearly, this is true on some level as what amazed and shocked audiences at one point may no longer do the same. Violent, bloody, hardcore, and extreme all become relative terms. The mid-90s matches of ECW look rather tame compared to the bloodbaths of CZW in the 2010s, and a fear exists that no limit has been reached. What would it mean if CZW's Tournament of Death looked tame? In other words, could these types of events be absorbed into the profane world so that the most violent moments of destruction no longer had any affect?

This is a reasonable fear, except that it overlooks the always fluid nature of transgression. While transgression may involve expenditure, waste, and loss related to a taboo, what constitutes those things may change. The audience may become numb to specific acts, but that does not mean that no actions will have that affect or that performers do not have a way of recontextualizing these events. Seeing someone hit with a chair no longer horrifies most wrestling fans, but when a performer is suspended by hooks in his back, as happened in CZW, fans realize that means of shock still exist. The world of deathmatches recognizes that their culture depends on a type of violent novelty and works to find new ways to shock and disturb its audience. Again, because the audience demands new ways of approaching violence in these matches, the structure has to have some room to change. New ways will be found to upset and appease the audience. The previously mentioned Thumbtack Jack provides an ideal example of how what was once novel becomes commonplace and something new is demanded. As his name suggests, Jack frequently appeared in matches where thumbtacks became weapons, as well as many of the other staples of deathmatch wrestling (barbwire, light tubes, actual

staples, etc.), but what helped gain Jack notoriety also demonstrates how the formula for deathmatch wrestling contains within it a self-regulatory mechanism that calls for novelty. The cover of the DVD *Transfusion: Thumbtack Jack in the United States* shows a close-up on Jack's face, his mouth open in a scream that prominently displays his signature item: a syringe. The syringe (in this case only one, though he has used multiple) pokes through his cheek, the needle visible inside his open mouth. Like Chekov's gun rule, the wrestling formula requires that a weapon introduced become a weapon used. The unwritten rule of this world suggests that the signature item of a fighter is used on that fighter more than by him, and in many matches Jack ends up with multiple syringes poking into his body. Fans direct the chant of "You sick fuck" less at the opponent willing to use the syringes as a weapon as they do on Jack for being willing to have them sticking in him, yet getting to that moment is paramount. In one match JC Bailey, who, the announcers tell us, hates needles, is stabbed in his bare foot with a syringe. As a viewer who has watched numerous hours of deathmatch footage, I will admit to having literally to walk outside my house when Bailey holds up his foot with the syringe still in the bottom of it.

The syringe also serves as a perfect example of how counterintuitive this activity is, how it works to blatantly and gleefully shirk health norms and social taboos, and how the world will produce new ways to disgust the audience. The objects the wrestlers use in the ring typically have meaning outside the ring, with syringes being a perfect example. These items have obvious health connotations. For many people, they cause a fair amount of fear (according to one psychology journal, trypanophobia, or fear of injections, is the seventh most common phobia in America) but they are other

associations. Along with being associated with health, the object has connotations of pain and death. The matches incorporate a relatable sense of pain - who hasn't gotten a shot before? - but removes any positive purpose. These syringes do not help restart a heart, provide insulin, or offer any other necessary treatment; even as a weapon they lack purpose as the person being punctured by the syringe allows it in his body. The image of a syringe used as a weapon remains striking and disturbing, but a diabetic essentially injects herself to live. At the same time, the presence of a syringe signifies sickness, reinforcing the idea of blood as a contagion. Many viewers are disturbed by the willful mixing of blood, and the health implications of the blood in the ring are never far from the center of the culture, so much so that it may be the thing that dooms it. In 2014 hardcore wrestling legend Abdullah the Butcher lost a civil suit and was ordered to pay 2.4 million to wrestler Devin Nicholson after Nicholson claimed Abdullah knowingly infected him with hepatitis C. The awareness of blood-borne illnesses is enough to make many fans disturbed by the simplest acts in these matches. Similarly, as larger, more dangerous stunts no longer draw the same response, groups like CZW have begun to go smaller, incorporating things like rubbing lemon juice and salt into wounds to disgust and shock the audience.

Straddling the line between athletics and performance art, hardcore professional wrestling (re)introduces the sacred violence of the Durkheimian festival into the contemporary world by allowing these moments to represent the fulfillment of the audience's desires. The crowds, while small, do not split along good guy/bad guy lines as at a WWE show, and instead celebrate the event and organization. To return again to the Jim Cornette criticism of hardcore wrestling, in these matches, after the biggest

moments the fans chant the name of the organization, not the names of the performers. They may chant “Fuck him up, Necro, fuck him up” before Necro Butcher suplexes his opponent through a glass door and onto the floor, but they will chant “X P Dub! X P Dub!”⁷⁴ once he does it. Similarly, during the match I mention at the beginning of the chapter, when Mad Man Pondo kicks a set of light tubes in Wifebeater’s face, the crowd doesn’t chant for Pondo, they chant “C-Z-Dub!!! C-Z-Dub!!!” Fans recognize the organization more than the individual performances, and promoters and performers work to include the fans in that organizational identity. Due to their knowledge of the structures guiding wrestling, fans know that the moment the winner’s hand is raised in wrestling represents the most fraudulent moment, not a moment of individual triumph. Organizations encourage fans to see themselves as parts of the show, and in this case, that is not merely lip service to the importance of the paying crowd. Here, the audience pushes performers to moments of excess, drawing them out of the formula for moments of extreme violence. Bataille writes, “We cannot be human until we have perceived in ourselves the possibility for abjection in addition to the possibility for suffering. We are not only possible victims of the executioners, the executioners are our fellow creatures.”⁷⁵ In deathmatch wrestling, fans are given the rare opportunity to celebrate both the executioner and the victim, and when the events reach their peak, the distinction between these roles and the audience falls away in a moment of ecstatic suffering.

In this world built on a shared secret, where fans know the outcomes are predetermined yet require performers maintain the illusion, wrestlers work to provide

⁷⁴ ECW also led the way in terms of wrestling chants. With a local and devoted crowd of only a few hundred, the fans’ chants could be organized, clever, and vulgar, and the W of their name was typically reduced to its first syllable when chanted.

⁷⁵ Georges Bataille, “Reflections on the Executioner and the Victim,” trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg, *Yale French Studies*, 79 (1991), 18.

expressions of real pain. Shouts of pain in professional wrestling are by definition untrustworthy, but when coupled with the sight of real wounds and blood, they signal a relatable sensation. However, the screams may not be so simple. The violence of wrestling walks the difficult line between real violence and representations of violence, working deliberately to obscure the distinction. What happens in the ring is, by the wrestlers and wrestling organizations' own admission, a staged representation of violence. This is no less true in deathmatch organizations. Just as viewers are not expected to believe the actor playing Brutus actually stabs the actor playing Julius Caesar, wrestling fans know that the action in the ring is at least loosely choreographed. At times real animosities might be brought to the ring, resulting in "stiff" matches, but the overwhelming majority of the time the action follows a script of sorts.⁷⁶ The organizations all acknowledge this to the point they have been able to incorporate this knowledge and use it to expand their industry. A small industry of official and unofficial behind the scenes interviews and DVDs exists, and when wrestlers appear outside of the ring they no longer appear in character. Rarely does any wrestling publication act as though the storylines and characters are not creations.

One of the results from this increased fan awareness is that, as fans learned about the staged nature of the pain, they learned about the very real pain involved. With technological advancements meeting up with a changing industry standard, fans could now see how the representations of violence involved actual, damaging violence. In a way similar to how football fans are now being asked to come to terms with the real, physical toll on the actual human bodies of players, wrestling fans learned exactly how

⁷⁶ "Stiff" matches and "shoots" are those matches where the violence is, for lack of a better phrase, more real. Performers are actually hitting one another, even perhaps actually fighting

brutal and punishing the pseudo-sport of wrestling could be. At its highest levels, the WWE today and WWF and WCW in the 80s and 90s, the job was incredibly physically demanding, while calling for constant travel. Even today, the highest paid wrestlers, those in the WWE, are contract employees who must provide their own insurance,⁷⁷ and attempts at unionizing have consistently been defeated.⁷⁸ At the lower levels, a greater level of physical sacrifice may be required, only there the pay is not rewarding or medical attention as thorough. To continue in this industry a performer must accept a level of physical pain and understand these injuries will impact the rest of his life.

By possessing this knowledge, fans receive unique messages concerning the pain involved. That which is normally avoided is willingly taken on by the wrestlers, and the relationships between fans and performers begins loosely to mirror that of the sacrificed warrior mentioned by Bataille in *The Accursed Share*. Throughout that work, Bataille demonstrates that, although the person to be sacrificed will be killed, the sacrifice becomes a central part of the community: “Concerning a warrior who brought back a captive, then offered him in a sacrifice, it was said that he had ‘considered his captive his own flesh and blood, calling him son, while the latter called him father.’”⁷⁹ For the sacrifice to take on its true value, the captive must pull closer to those who will sacrifice him. “As soon as he is consecrated and during the time between the consecration and death, he enters into the closeness of the sacrificers and participates in their consumptions: He is one of their own and in the festival in which he will perish, he sings, dances and enjoys all of the

⁷⁷ Oliver Bateman, “How pro wrestling exploits its workforce,” *aljazeera.com*, May 4, 2014, <http://america.aljazeera.com/opinions/2014/5/wrestling-labor-wwevincemcmahonultimatewarrior.html> (accessed November 2, 2014).

⁷⁸ In an interview on Steve Austin’s podcast, wrestler Terry Funk explained why, at the height of his popularity, he would take time off to film low budget action movies: “Wrestlers don’t have a union. Actors have a union.”

⁷⁹ Bataille, *The Accursed Share I*, 51.

pleasures with them. There is no more servility in him.”⁸⁰ Even though the captive’s final moments will be violent, his closeness to the community gives that violence meaning. A similar type of intimate participation occurs in deathmatch events: only wanting the wrestlers to suffer leaves the fans positioned as distant, sadistic viewers. What would be missed would be the intimacy found as all leave “the real order” belonging to the “poverty of things.”⁸¹ Fans want performers to suffer not because they hate them, but because that suffering is what creates the culture.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 60.

⁸¹ Ibid., 57.

CHAPTER 3: THE 'DISTINCTIVE NAUSEA' OF CHRIS BURDEN

It's a way of really confronting life and the passage of time and what you think about people. After all, I'm not suicidal.

- Chris Burden

On November 29th, 2005, a graduate student in the art department of UCLA entered the classroom of visiting professor Ron Athey. Taking everyone, including Athey, by surprise, the student, Joseph Deutch, stood silently in the front of the classroom. Pulling out what appeared to be a real handgun, he put a bullet into one of the chambers before spinning the cylinder closed. He then put the gun to his head and pulled the trigger. After the gun clicked without firing, Deutch ran from the room and, when out of view of the students, set off a firecracker, which some students believed to be a gun shot. Taking less than a minute and occurring between 1999's Columbine shooting and the 2007 shooting at Virginia Tech, the incident quickly gained notoriety, with the administration at UCLA facing the immediate question of what to do with Deutch, an aspiring performance artist.⁸²

Depending on who was asked, the student's act was seen as a provocative and frightening piece of performance art or an empty-minded stunt of no real depth, but either way, it seemed only appropriate that this incident occurred on the campus of UCLA. After all, one of the most high profile members of UCLA's art department was one-time performance artist Chris Burden, an artist who gained notoriety for, among other things,

⁸² Jenny Hontz, "Gunplay, as Art, Sets off Debate," *New York Times*, February 5, 2005, http://www.nytimes.com/2005/02/05/arts/05shoo.html?fta=y&_r=0 (accessed November 2, 2014).

allowing himself to be shot. Surely if any artist could understand and appreciate Deutch's act it would be Burden, or so it seemed until Burden and his wife, sculptor Nancy Rubins, resigned their positions at UCLA following Deutch's Russian Roulette performance.⁸³

To make the claim that Burden and Rubins resigned solely over Deutch's piece overlooks other issues – a shrinking departmental budget also contributed – but each mentioned the incident in their resignation letter, claiming to be outraged the school did not expel Deutch. Burden's attitude in particular surprised many, as the man who one nailed himself to a car and dared his audience to electrocute him accused another artist of being a "domestic terrorist."⁸⁴ Refusing to view the work as a piece of performance art, Burden saw the act as inappropriate for a classroom, if not outright criminal.⁸⁵ Deutch claimed he "wanted to test whether, in this seen-it-all age, an audience still could have an indelibly shocking experience," which may seem consistent with Burden's artistic philosophy, yet Burden was so offended by the piece he gave up a position at a university, one he held for nearly thirty years.⁸⁶

Though many accused Burden of everything from hypocrisy to simply turning into an old man overprotective of his past, Burden did see a crucial difference from his performance art past and Deutch's act.⁸⁷ According to Burden, he and Deutch differed in their understanding of the role and placement of the audience. Even though the class was on performance art, the students had no reason to suspect they were in the middle of a

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Mike Boehm, "2 Artists Quit UCLA Over Gun Incident," L.A. Times, January 22, 2005, <http://articles.latimes.com/2005/jan/22/local/me-profs22> (accessed November 2, 2014).

⁸⁶ Mike Boehm, "The 'shot' heard 'round UCLA," L.A. Times, July 9, 2005, <http://articles.latimes.com/2005/jul/09/entertainment/et-ucla9> (accessed November 2, 2014).

⁸⁷ Ibid.

performance when Deutch came into the room. They had no reason to assume the gun did not hold real bullets nor that he may not turn it on them. Conversely, in most of Burden's work, the audience knowingly participated in the acts, coming to the galleries and performance spaces with certain expectations, including expectations of violence. In Deutch's piece, the audience consisted of a group of unsuspecting art students in the supposedly safe space of a classroom.⁸⁸

Such a difference is not minor and it illustrates the importance of thinking of Burden's work in relation to his audience. It also allows for a reading of the work that gets outside the typical interpretive frameworks that struggle to capture the value of these pieces. Superficially, Burden's work and Deutch's appear to belong to the same lineage, but a crucial difference emerges when thinking of the two works in conversation. Deutch has devoted time in interviews to explaining the meaning of his act,⁸⁹ and critics have attempted a similar thing with Burden's. For example, many critics have interpreted Burden's performance pieces in relation to the Vietnam War. They argue that Burden's works done in the 1970s reflects the casual brutality of war, along with American complicity in the traumas of that struggle.⁹⁰ For me, this alone is a rather unsatisfactory explanation of the work. To say that these works are about Vietnam, or anything else, may satisfy solely on an intellectual level, but these explanations undervalue the emotional content of Burden's work that exists outside a focus on meaning. Just as Deutch's explanation of his act cannot capture the terror of that moment, analysis of

⁸⁸ To be fair, Burden did perform a number of pieces dependent on the reactions of unsuspecting people. See: "Dead Man" and "TV Hijack."

⁸⁹ Valerie Gladstone, "Art or Prank?" *City Arts*, July 7, 2012, <http://cityarts.info/2012/07/17/art-or-prank/> (accessed November 2, 2014).

⁹⁰ Kevin West, "Public Offering," *W Magazine*, May 2008, http://www.wmagazine.com/culture/art-and-design/2008/05/chris_burden (accessed November 2, 2014).

Burden that focuses solely on meaning may overlook many things. These interpretations often struggle to account for the affective power of Burden's performance pieces and the interaction between artist and viewer. This is why the placement of the audience matters so much: Deutch's work ignores issues of audience desire and intent, while Burden's rest on it, approaching the issue in novel ways.

In this way, Burden's work more reflects Bataille's thought on poetry. When writing on poetry, Bataille goes beyond the traditional understanding of the word, offering a unique definition that focuses more on what poetry does, as well as what it does not do. According to Bataille, poetry "is the least degraded and least intellectualized forms of the expression of a state of loss."⁹¹ Poetry, in this understanding, "creates value out of expenditure, turning loss into gain," because poetry represents movement away from the world of meaning.⁹² In *Theory of Religion* Bataille states that "poetry describes nothing that does not slip toward the unknowable."⁹³ Poetry ultimately works toward the same end as eroticism in that it removes any sense of separation, allowing once distinct beings to feel a sense of connection.⁹⁴ Bataille writes that poetry "is the only way which a man goes from a world full of meaning to the final dislocation of meaning,"⁹⁵ and many of Burden's works offer a means away from the obsession of meaning that drives some criticism. Instead, they rest on the emotionally powerful connection built between artist and viewer, that fleeting moment where all involved partake in a meaningless act. Unlike interpretation concerning a subject like Vietnam, this moment does not require any understanding of events or moments away from this piece. By maintaining a focus on

⁹¹ Bataille, "The Notion of Expenditure," 120.

⁹² Mark Osteen, *Questions of the Gift* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 27.

⁹³ Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, 21.

⁹⁴ Bataille, *Eroticism*, 25.

⁹⁵ Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, 22.

these moments, Burden's work not only reinforces the inevitable expenditure of life, it confronts viewers with their own desire to witness useless violence. Deutch's piece requires a passive, if not unsuspecting, viewer, while Burden allows for an active viewer, while still manipulating the relationship between artist and audience. Adding the destruction of a body atop the already extravagant expenditures of art, Burden's work challenges with something akin to the affective shock of death, while forcing viewers to consider their own role in this death. As with Bataille's understanding of poetry, Burden's body art opens up a space for viewers to lose themselves, although those spaces cannot last forever and they too exist within a larger world. Bataille recognizes that "those who serve art . . . are obliged to enter as living beings into the real world of money, fame, and social position,"⁹⁶ and Burden's viewers must accept Burden's work within the context of the norms and rules governing art spaces and galleries. Peter Schjeldahl writes that Burden creates a "double bind" for viewers, daring them to participate while being aware of the "institutional taboo" against interacting with art, and he also acknowledges a "distinctive nausea" when he even thinks about Burden's performance pieces, as Burden's pieces come close to presenting death in a real, visceral way.⁹⁷ By creating this double bind, Burden creates a shared sacrifice that purposefully confronts viewers with nauseating images within the confines of a space built on profane needs.

In this chapter I would like to examine the performance art pieces of Chris Burden, paying particular attention to relationships created between Burden and his

⁹⁶ Georges Bataille, "The Sorcerer's Apprentice," in *Visions of Excess*, ed. & trans. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 15.

⁹⁷ Peter Schjeldahl, "Performance," *The New Yorker*, May 14, 2007, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2007/05/14/performance-2> (accessed on November 2, 2014).

viewers. Although similarities exist between this example and the one of deathmatch wrestling, I believe crucial differences emerge. To begin with, these activities have little audience overlap, with one controversial in the frequently maligned culture of professional wrestling and the other controversial among the limited culture of contemporary art. Deathmatch critic Jim Cornette describes the average deathmatch fan as “lower class, mentally challenged college aged (but not attending) guys,”⁹⁸ and while Cornette’s description is intentionally insulting, a similar critique is not likely for the equally limited world of performance art. That audience is likely not lower class and, if anything, is characterized as being too educated. Though some of Burden’s acts are not radically different from deathmatch stunts, such as the piece *Kunst Kick*, where he had a friend kick him down a flight of stairs, the violence of deathmatch wrestling, or wrestling in general, is seen by some in the larger culture as more problematic. The worry is that this violence may spread to other parts of life, while the violence enjoyed by Burden’s audience is typically seen as explanatory. Concerning the audiences of these two groups, and specifically thinking about the education and economic levels of the two groups, a common perception is that the violence of performance art reveals while the violence of wrestling encourages, and those are not the only important differences between the two subjects. Whereas the world of deathmatches calls for a total unleashing of desire, Burden’s art varies, at times submitting to audience desire and at times denying it. As he demonstrated with his UCLA protest, Burden believes that audience expectations matters, perhaps as much as artistic intent, and the interplay of these desires moves Burden’s work beyond simple restrictive meaning. By fostering an uneasy relationship with his audience the artist forces the audience to confront their own physical limitations alongside their

⁹⁸Jim Cornette, “The Slippery Slope of Hardcore Wrestling.”

desires, and one way to understand these desires is through the context of sacrifice. In *Theory of Religion*, Bataille writes that “the principle of sacrifice is destruction”⁹⁹ and “if sacrifice is distressing, the reason is that the individual takes part in it.”¹⁰⁰ Burden manipulates this distress by challenging his audience’s expectations and desires, demonstrating how art can capture the desire for sacred violence even as members of the community remain unsure of their roles. Bataille anticipates the double bind Peter Schjeldahl mentions when he writes, “[T]here is an aspiration for destruction that breaks out in the festival, but there is a conservative prudence that regulates and limits it.”¹⁰¹ Utilizing an understanding of the powerful force behind useless expenditure, Burden creates a unique relationship by actively denying meaning, providing little context during the events, and limiting their capacity to gain traction in the artistic cannon afterwards. Ultimately, Burden creates a religious aura around his work broken only by profane interjections guiding the world outside of it. Destroying, both symbolically and literally, his most valuable resource, he “restores to the sacred world that which servile use has degraded, rendered profane.”¹⁰²

Before going forward, I would like to provide some background I believe is necessary to understand my reading of Burden’s work. One of the most important things to note is that the performance pieces do not represent the totality of his artistic career. In fact, since 1975 Burden has done no performance pieces where he placed himself in physical danger and now devotes himself primarily to sculpture. I point this out not to demonstrate his versatility – truthfully, even at the height of his performance pieces he

⁹⁹ Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, 43.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 151.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 54.

¹⁰² Bataille, *The Accursed Share I*, 55.

did other types of work as well – but to point out that even Burden recognized a limit and end to his performance work. From a practical standpoint many artists cannot perform works that challenge corporal limitations and raise the possibility of long term injury or death for their entire life, but more than that, Burden recognized how easily he could slip into a caricature of himself if he continued to perform more body art pieces.¹⁰³ Already growing weary of the notoriety that came from some of his more dangerous works, Burden realized how easily his performance pieces opened themselves to repetition and self-parody.

Although I will describe some in greater detail later, as well as introduce new pieces throughout, I do want to cover some of Burden's performances here to illustrate the type of work he was doing. Running from roughly 1971 to 1975, Burden's performance art career consists of pieces that test his own physical limits, consciously challenge audience desire, include more humor than is often perceived, and offer images of waste rarely seen in artwork. Bataille identifies unproductive expenditures as activities which "have no end beyond themselves" and such a description fits many of Burden's pieces.¹⁰⁴ Beginning with his MFA thesis, "5-Day Locker Piece," and ending with 1975's "Doomed," Burden used his own body as a canvas, pushing it to unreasonable and dangerous points. In addition to being shot, Burden was kicked down stairs, crawled across broken glass, was nailed to the hood of a car, nearly drowned, and was electrocuted, all before an audience of volunteers. Some of the time they were even allowed them to participate, such as "Back to You," where a volunteer was instructed to push pins into his body, ultimately choosing to place them in his stomach and feet. While

¹⁰³ Frazer Ward, *No Innocent Bystanders: Performance Art and Audience* (Lebanon, NH: Interfaces, 2012), 172.

¹⁰⁴ Bataille, "The Notion of Expenditure," 118.

pushing his own body to dangerous points, Burden appears interested in positioning his audience alongside him.¹⁰⁵

For many, it would be difficult to notice anything about Burden's work before noticing the level of pain that appears to be involved. According to Burden himself, he does not believe he has an especially high tolerance for pain, which makes his works all the more remarkable.¹⁰⁶ In his most famous piece, 1971's "Shoot," he allowed himself to be shot in the arm, willingly taking on the pain of such an act, and in other pieces he at least allowed for the possibility of severe pain. Some critics, dismissive of Burden's work, refer to what he does as masochistic martyrdom art, believing it confirms the "normative codes of masculine artistic-genius-as-transcendent" by opening up a symbolic reading of the male body.¹⁰⁷ That description emphasizes a reading of Burden's body, and it is hard not to notice a mixture of sadism and masochism in these pieces as everyone present takes on the role of participant. Just as Burden accepted the pain, someone else agreed to be the one who shot him and others agreed to stand and watch, participating through their refusal to intervene.¹⁰⁸ This piece, like others, left a scar, reinforcing the physical transgression necessary to perform such a piece. Burden and his audience ignore the push towards self-preservation for the sake of something with no clear purpose. Unlike the farmer plowing for the one who eats the bread, Burden's act serves no end beyond itself.

Many of these works involve painful acts performed in front of an audience. During "Fire Roll," he lit a pair of pants on fire and then extinguished the flames with his

¹⁰⁵ *Chris Burden*, ed. Paul Schimmel (New Castle: Locust+, 2007), 54-55.

¹⁰⁶ Schjeldahl, "Performance."

¹⁰⁷ Amelia Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 129-132.

¹⁰⁸ I have been unable to find the name of the shooter in any of the literature on Burden.

body, casually going back to watching television once the fire was put out. For “Sculpture in Three Parts” he sat on a stool placed atop a stand, waiting until he would hit a point of exhaustion and fall to the floor. He describes the piece: “A sign on the stand read ‘Sculpture in Three Parts. I will sit on this chair from 10:30 am 9/10/74 until I fall off’ . . . I sat on the chair for 43 hours.”¹⁰⁹ After he fell, someone made a chalk outline of his body, giving the space the look of a crime scene, with the word “Forever” written in the center. Other works also offered similar dangers, and while he may not have burned himself badly or suffered serious injuries from the fall, he did at least create the possibility of painful repercussions.

The potential for pain in his acts also means that he allows an audience to witness his self-inflicted suffering, or at least they are presented with the option. Capturing the moment of suffering appears to be a major concern for Burden as he does work to present it most clearly to the audience. For example, no audience member could reasonably be expected to attend “Sculpture in Three Parts” for the full 43 hours, particularly when the end point was not established beforehand, but Burden made sure to capture the moment of his fall, having a rotating team of photographers on hand to document the moment he fell from the platform¹¹⁰. Pain in isolation does not appear to interest him very much; he needs an audience, and the audience becomes connected to the act itself.

As important to his work as the pain involved is the way Burden positions himself in relation to his audience, and this positioning is not the same in each piece. In some pieces Burden stresses intimacy, while at others he raises the possibility of intimacy only to thwart that desire, keeping the audience on the other side of an impossible gap. For

¹⁰⁹ *Chris Burden*, 220.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

example, during the piece “Velvet Water” the audience sat in a room adjacent to where Burden performed, and they watched on a monitor as the piece unfolded. They watched Burden throughout the work, but their reactions were mediated by the presence of the television. Looking directly at the audience, meaning also that he looks directly at a camera, Burden said, “Today I am going to breathe water, which is the opposite of drowning, because when you breathe water, you believe water to be richer, thicker oxygen capable of sustaining life.” He then shoved his head into a full bowl and inhaled deeply. He repeats this nearly five minutes, coming up gasping for breath each time, his face in agony. When he could no longer tolerate going under again, his body simply not allowing him, he collapsed to the ground. Someone then cut the closed-circuit feed and the audience was asked to leave. Photographs show audience members looking shocked, with one member looking as though she is getting up to leave with her hands covering her face.¹¹¹ Audiences are used to seeing suffering on television, but in this case the members know it involves a real, though self-inflicted, struggle, Burden desperately trying to regain his breath somewhere in their building, yet they can do little to help. Audience members may feel a desire to intervene, but, although Burden forces them to watch him suffer, he offers no means of ending that anguish.

A piece like this complicates the relationship with the audience by introducing the medium of television, placing a barrier between the artist and the audience. At other times Burden has turned exclusively to television. One piece, titled “TV Ad,” seen now between an ad for Ryko’s *Good Vibrations* compilation album and one for Safeguard Soap, showed Burden performing “Through the Night Slowly,” a piece that consists of him crawling across broken glass. Wearing only a Speedo and with his arms behind him,

¹¹¹ Ibid., 56.

for ten seconds he grunts and grimaces as he makes his way across a parking lot, and it is easy to imagine the confusion felt by viewers.¹¹² The ad does not explicitly ask viewers to do anything; they are not even asked to come witness a performance or see an exhibition. (“Through the Night Slowly” occurred 9/12/73; “TV Ad” began airing November 5th of that year.) In another television piece, he stressed a different type of intimacy by providing a complete financial breakdown for the previous year, showing he had a net profit of \$1,054 for the year.¹¹³ Bataille writes often on the type of intimacy created between victim and sacrifice, and in the ads, even though they utilize the medium of television, Burden opens himself up to his audience, suggesting a relationship build on familiarity.¹¹⁴

In these pieces Burden knowingly manipulates audience expectations and plays with the slippery connections between intimacy and distance when it comes to the relationship between artist and audience. In *The Accursed Share I*, Bataille writes, “The victim of the sacrifice cannot be consumed in the same way as a motor uses fuel. What the ritual has the virtue of rediscovering is the intimate participation at the sacrifice and the victim, to which a servile use had put an end.”¹¹⁵ The desire for this lost intimacy, which Bataille sees as a fundamentally religious desire, can only be met through destruction, an urge Burden directs at his body. However, though Burden stresses the relationship between artist and audience, but he does not always allow it to be manifested in the same way. Worried about repetition, Burden actively works to keep an aura of unexpectedness in his work. While many works bear superficial similarities, Burden

¹¹² Ibid., 290.

¹¹³ Ibid., 69.

¹¹⁴ Bataille, *The Accursed Share I*, 58.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 56.

works to alter the relationship he has with his audience. For example, during “White Light/White Heat,” he sat atop a scaffold in an art gallery just out of sight of patrons, and during “Shout Piece,” he also sat on a scaffold, only this time he sat in full view and shouted, “Get the fuck out” to anyone who entered.¹¹⁶ The similarities between the two works are obvious, but in one Burden encourages audience curiosity, in some ways encouraging them to find him, while in the other he punishes those he encounters. As each is relatively simple in its setup, the focus remains on audience/artist interaction, and in these cases Burden ensures they are different. This is worth noting as Burden is frequently presented as a single-minded artist, essentially performing variations on a single theme with his works, when some of the differences change the work he is doing.

One final explanatory note I would like to make regarding Burden concerns his relationship with the pieces after he has performed them. The unique position of his audience receives reinforcement as he refuses to recreate pieces, provides little insight into issues such as motivation and meaning, leaves few artifacts behind, and will not grant permission for them being recreated or reinterpreted. For them most part, these performances exist only in the moment, with perhaps a few photographs and items left to document them. For example, for “Shoot” all that remains are a few photographs and a short, unclear video, along with Burden’s description: “At 7:45 I was shot in the left arm by a friend. The bullet was a copper jacket .22 long rifle. My friend was standing about 15 feet from me.”¹¹⁷ The moment, so to speak, is of primary importance. Burden actively resists repeating pieces, though many of his works are structurally similar. Part of the reason for this is that repeating pieces robs them of a certain power, turning

¹¹⁶ *Chris Burden*, 62 and 205.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 210.

audience members into coconspirators in the development of an insider/outsider elitist culture. While viewers may still feel powerful reactions, they find themselves shaped by expectations of an outcome. His audience always had some knowledge of what he would do (remember again his anger at the use of an unsuspecting audience¹¹⁸) but an invitation telling you an artist will be shot lacks the visceral reaction of seeing the moment in person. Repeating the act would, according to Burden, make him an actor, not an artist.¹¹⁹ To see it repeated also would further dull the shock of witnessing, reshaping their expectations around the moment's conclusion.

Understandably, Burden works to protect his pieces, to the point he attempts to prevent others from recreating them. In 2005 the equally provocative Marina Abramovich performed "Seven Easy Pieces," a seven night reinterpretation of the most important pieces of performance art from the last forty years. She hoped to perform an updated version of Burden's "Transfixed," a piece that involved nailing him to the hood of a car, but Burden refused to allow the piece to be performed. As in the case of the UCLA student, Burden did not explain his reasons for refusal with Abramovich saying she only heard from a secretary who told her she could not perform the piece and that Burden would not contact her himself, but preventing the performance seems consistent with Burden's past.¹²⁰ In this particular case repeating the piece sanitizes it, making it part of the performance art canon.

Burden is equally reluctant to discuss his pieces; his interviews and discussions of his work are almost comically non-descript, with Burden providing minimal description

¹¹⁸ Further demonstrating the difference from Deutch's piece, Kristine Stiles points out that Burden deliberately did not perform "Shoot" on a college campus, saying "Guns on campus; that could be problematic." (Stiles, 30)

¹¹⁹ Ward, *No Innocent Bystanders*.

¹²⁰ West, "Public Offering."

and preferring to discuss technique rather than anything more substantive. Consider the letter he wrote to the editors of the avant-garde journal *Avalanche* announcing “Shoot”:

“I was going to do a piece at the Duchamp Festival. I changed my mind and the piece is going to be done tonight at F space. I will be shot with a rifle at 7:45 pm. I hope to have some good photos.”¹²¹ This minimal description of a horrific act is not anomaly, and it is not uncommon to see interviewers working extremely hard to get longer, more detailed answers, as Burden does little to provide any real insight into his work. When provided the opportunity, whether in print or in interviews, Burden works to come across as distant and detached.

On the surface those aspects of his career may not appear to relate to the overall religious aura of Burden’s work, but I believe his refusal to provide clear guiding meanings helps reinforce their religious value. Shannon Winnubst writes that the goal of “unproductive expenditure is ultimately to dissolve the elements of individualism so that community forms ecstatically.”¹²² This goal reflects Bataille’s vision of religion, and the destruction of useful objects, such as a body, fosters a type of intimacy. Alexander Riley, writing in *Impure Play: Sacredness, Transgression, and the Tragic in Popular Culture*, argues that contemporary culture lacks spaces where the impure sacred may be encountered.¹²³ This claim may seem out of step with many of the concerns mainstream culture critics have, as they often present the modern world as one overrun by unchecked sex and violence, but Riley argues the constant pressure of individualism and the need for

¹²¹ Karen Stiles, “Burden of Light,” *Chris Burden*, ed. Paul Schimmel (Newcastle: Locus+, 2007), 30.

¹²² Winnubst, “Introduction,” in *Reading Bataille Now*, ed. Shannon Winnubst (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2007), 30.

¹²³ Riley, *Impure Play*, 6-9.

explanatory narrative robs many things of any potential sacred value.¹²⁴ What is most lacking is an understanding of impurity in a religious context. Religion, in some form, remains, but Riley, also drawing on the works of Emile Durkheim and Roger Caillois, argues that religion has become individualized with little to no room remaining for the sacred. He writes, “Religion has certainly not died . . . but it has unquestionably become, especially in the United States, thoroughly individualized . . . and it now focuses on the pure sacred, having essentially eliminated the impure sacred and transgression from its structural framework.”¹²⁵

Suggesting the issues Riley sees as plaguing contemporary culture may be solved by a non-practicing performance artist would clearly overstate things, but I do believe an examination of Burden’s work can address some of the issues. Bataille, like many of his contemporaries, including Caillois, recognizes the religious value of art, though he reminds readers that art may be manipulated and profaned as much in the same way as traditional forms of religion. One of the common critiques concerning contemporary art, be it performance art or more traditional forms of visual art, is that the works favor a type of cultural pretentiousness over technical ability and moral value. To be able to discuss art in any meaningful way signifies a person’s cultural capital and works whose meanings are apparent and have mainstream aesthetic appeal are devalued in certain circles in favor of “difficult” work. Art may be used to maintain social status or can be turned into a tool for establishing social hierarchies. A common reaction to the paintings of artists like Mark Rothko or Ad Reinhardt, and their subsequent multimillion dollar auction sales, is, as the title of a documentary suggests, *My Kid Could Paint That*, and a recent biography

¹²⁴ Ibid., 15.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

of Norman Rockwell demonstrated that, though beloved by millions, the painter was dismissed as an “illustrator” in elite art circles, largely due to where he presented his work and its acceptance in mainstream America.¹²⁶ Rather than work to break barriers of individuality, art becomes a means of further solidifying the walls of the self, preventing any possibility for ecstatic community by being overwhelmed by profane concerns.

Burden’s work perhaps overcomes these criticisms, or at least attempts to, as it focuses on self loss rather than creation. The work relies as much on a visceral response as much as anything. Indeed, Burden’s work could be completed by nearly anyone provided he or she is willing to accept the dangers of the acts, and through his interaction with his audience, Burden reveals their role in his physical sacrifice as well as the limitations of their own body. By so boldly challenging the greatest loss of life, Burden offers a performance based on finding the ultimate source of limitations. These ideas coincide with Bataille’s thought on religion as Burden centers his art on the public destruction of useful resources.¹²⁷ For contemporary scholars such as Riley, this type of destruction and impurity should return to our current understanding of religion.

More so than the earlier example of deathmatch wrestling, the religious implications of Burden’s work are more apparent, and often they deal with the relationships formed by religious practice. Though he does not identify with any religion, a number of parallels exist in his work between traditional religious imagery and ritual, particularly those drawn from Catholicism and these connections further reveal the importance of audience interaction and sacrifice in his work.¹²⁸ The most obvious of

¹²⁶ Deborah Soloman, *American Mirror: The Life and Art of Norman Rockwell* (New York: Picador, 2013), 113.

¹²⁷ Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, 120.

¹²⁸ Stiles, “Burden of Light,” 41.

these appear in “Transfixed,” the piece Abramovich hoped to recreate. Burden describes the piece:

Inside a small garage on Speedway Avenue, I stood on the rear bumper of a Volkswagen, I lay on my back over the rear section of the car, stretching my arms onto the roof. Nails are driven through my palms onto the roof of the car. The garage door was opened and the car was pushed halfway out into the speedway. Screaming for me the engine was run at full speed for two minutes. After two minutes the engine was turned off and the car was pushed back into the garage. The door was closed.¹²⁹

With Burden stretched out and shirtless, with nails literally driven through his hands, it would be difficult to miss the similarities between this piece and images of Jesus’ crucifixion, particularly when his choice of vehicle reminds viewers of his connection to the whole of humanity (Volkswagen typically translated as “People’s car”). Yet these comparisons should not rest solely on visual parallels. Burden’s performance relies more on shock than message, returning to what Bataille believes should be witnessed in the act of crucifixion. For many, the crucifixion of Jesus represents the most obvious moment of sacrifice, but for Bataille that moment, as it operates in many forms of contemporary Christianity, misses a crucial component. He writes, “In Christian sacrifice the faithful are not made responsible for desiring the sacrifice.”¹³⁰ The violent death of Christ becomes a tool for salvation as it represents the removal of sins and failures, yet Burden’s work allows viewers, all there voluntarily, to share in the moment of mutilation. His work does not attempt to eliminate the desire for sacrifice. By focusing attention on a real, suffering body, Burden creates “a divinely manifestation of violence” that is simultaneously attractive and repulsive. Beyond that, Burden limits his time on the vehicular cross and that time is lost to history, save for a few photographs. Similar to

¹²⁹ It is typically noted that the engine of a Volkswagen is in the rear.

¹³⁰ Bataille, *Erotism*, 120.

“Shoot,” where Burden stands just for a moment in front of a blank wall, the artist presents his body for mutilation, but only for a moment. The audience does not have time to grow numb to the image or absorb it into a narrative that robs it of its initial shock. Robert Horvitz writes, by “replacing the cross with a Volkswagen [Burden] effectively transformed a religious cliché into a diabolically droll, nightmarish masque.”¹³¹

Other works deal with the audience in ways that bring to mind a Catholic confessional, but Burden alters his position with his audience enough that he challenges the assumed roles of all involved. Though he frequently forces an understanding of passivity as an active position, he also offers slightly different relationships with his audience. Many times it is the audience confessing to him, yet he also performs pieces where he appears to confess to the audience, turning to them for absolution. Pieces like “Confession” and “There Have Been Some Pretty Wild Rumors About Me” involve Burden appearing before an audience and confessing to intimate fears and desires. In the previously mentioned “Full Financial Disclosure,” Burden provided an unguarded look into his life, denying that his work served a practical function as he demonstrated it was not financially lucrative, and offered an intimate look at a private matter, taken to the point that he even includes copies of checks in the work.¹³² Equally interesting are the pieces that allow the audience to turn to Burden for intimacy. Interestingly enough, Burden’s first performance piece of note began this relationship between him and his audience, and in this case, the turn to confessional occurred without prompting. For his MFA thesis he performed a piece called “5-Day Locker Piece” that consisted of him

¹³¹ Robert Horvitz, “Chris Burden,” *Art Forum* 14, no. 9 (1976), 25.

¹³² *Chris Burden*, 58, 69, and 76.

locking himself in a storage locker, with tubes allowing him to drink and urinate keeping him alive. Though Burden claims he did not anticipate the type of reaction the piece would create, audience members would come to the locker and, speaking through the opening in the door, tell him very intimate parts of their lives.¹³³ He told one interviewer, “It was like hearing confessions. People couldn’t see me, but they knew I was there. They told me about their Army experiences, about things they’d done they were proud of, or ashamed of.”¹³⁴ In a retrospective interview Burden likened himself to a priest, a hidden, somewhat unknown authority figure who is also intimately known and understood to be present.¹³⁵ Burden notes, “I thought this piece was going to be an isolation thing, but it turned into this strange sort of public confessional where people were coming all the time to talk to me . . . I noticed that the further away you were from this, the more strange it seemed, and I noticed when people came to see me they were reassured in a way.”¹³⁶ This comment highlights a few things: he did not anticipate the turn towards confession, the piece was meant to be about isolation but ended up fostering communication, the environment felt somehow different at the locker, and most felt better when near Burden. Elsewhere he even likened his physical reality to the confessional, saying how attendees had to bend over or kneel to speak into the opening and that he existed on a different physical world than the confessor, hidden but present.¹³⁷

¹³³ Roger Ebert, “The Body Artist,” Rogerebert.com, April 8, 1965, <http://www.rogerebert.com/interviews/chris-burden-the-body-artist> (accessed November 2, 2014).

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Thomas Crow, “Artist Conversation with Chris Burden,” Youtube.com, https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=chris+burden+interview (accessed November 2, 2014).

¹³⁶ Patrick Anderson, *‘So Much Wasted’: Hunger, Performance, and the Morbidity of Resistance* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 79.

¹³⁷ Crow, “Artist Conversation with Chris Burden.”

For Bataille such a turn would have been somewhat expected. Bataille writes often of the pull toward transgression, as well as human capacity for abjection, and some critics note how the art world provides an ideal space for examining these urges. Writing in an essay on Bataille and the avant-garde theatre, Dorothy Holland notes, “Whether in times of revolt or conservation, the theatre has always been associated with a very real potential for transgression,”¹³⁸ and though Burden did not perform in any traditional theatre, he did create a similar space for Bataillean transgression. As Bataille argues throughout his work, humans find themselves drawn toward moments of continuity, where they may be lost like water in water, even as the norms of the profane world urge accumulation and discontinuity. While it may not seem initially that those who come to speak to Burden were seeking out great loss and danger, they did seek to connect with another human through a sense of anguish. Bataille argues “that human beings are only united with each other through tears or wounds,”¹³⁹ and in this piece, members of Burden’s audience appear to be attempting to gain a type of familiarity based on those shared wounds. His suffering ignites their own.

Other pieces created a similar type of connection, but there are also those that simultaneously create and deny this connection. Perhaps the best example of a piece that inverts many of the elements of his locker piece is “Jaizu,” a piece performed roughly a year later. In this piece Burden sits on near a gallery door wearing sunglasses so that patrons must walk by him to enter the rest of the gallery. He sits in front of a set of cushions and has a box of marijuana cigarettes placed between him and the cushions.

¹³⁸ Dorothy Holland, “Bodies at Play: A General Economy of Performance,” in *Reading Bataille Now*, ed. Shannon Winnubst (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2007), 199.

¹³⁹ Georges Bataille, “College of Sociology,” in *Visions of Excess*, ed. & trans. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 251.

Understandably, many people took this as an invitation to sit down. Robert Horvitz claims the piece was designed to offer an opportunity for a mystical moment, with cushions for meditative purposes, along with drugs, but once again the pull towards confession caused some people to begin telling Burden very personal things from their lives.¹⁴⁰ Burden presented the image of someone willing to listen, with the cushions and cigarettes suggesting a type of communion. However, in this case, Burden would not respond to what anyone said, nor would he give any indication he heard the person. Furthermore, his sunglasses were not in fact sunglasses, but were instead glasses painted black, meaning he could not see whomever sat across from him. Though his own reactions are not radically different from those in “5-Day Locker Piece” – in that one he did not respond to people’s attempt to speak to him – in this case, the coldness of his appearance could not be tolerated by some. According to Burden, many people walked away angry or upset.¹⁴¹

To understand the power of this piece, and further understand a religious interpretation of Burden’s work, this work could be contrasted with Marina Abramovich’s “The Artist is Always Present.” Of the same era and equally important as Burden, Abramovich has never left the world of performance art for long, and in 2010 she performed a piece that could serve as the hopeful companion piece to “Jaizu.” Even the name of the piece suggests a connection, or an unwillingness to abandon the audience.¹⁴² For “The Artist is Always Present,” she too sat in a gallery with space for an audience member across from her, only she did look at whoever sat across from her, and the reactions were striking. When she lifted her head and began to hold the gaze of

¹⁴⁰ Horvitz, “Chris Burden,” 27.

¹⁴¹ *Chris Burden*, 144.

¹⁴² As of now, I have been unable to find a meaning for the term ‘Jaizu.’

whomever sat in front of her many people broke down and gave clear indication of how emotionally powerful the moment was. A slightly tongue-in-cheek blog titled “Marina Abramovich Made Me Cry” provides exactly what the title promises, showing dozens of pictures of people who sat across from Abramovich and began weeping as she stared at them. Being stared at or ignored will always be interpreted based on the context but in this case, where the expectations of audience members are for intimacy and connection, Burden’s refusal to fulfill his role, to provide no comfort or absolution, drew a supremely negative reaction from some. Dorothy Holland notes a disruptive quality to the type of play found in the theatre, and this element occurs frequently in Burden’s work as audience expectation is undermined.¹⁴³ Rather than comfort, “Jaizu” produced a type of uneasiness in many viewers. In fact, Burden has stated that “Jaizu” was the most physically painful as during it one man became so furious with Burden’s lack of recognition that he punched him. In one retrospective, he writes, “Many people tried to talk to me, one assaulted me, and one left sobbing hysterically.”¹⁴⁴ Burden, unable to see the punch coming, took the full force of the punch in his face.

This type of reaction, though extreme, further demonstrates the power of Burden’s work. Abramovich’s pieces may uplift, but the raw emotion Burden evokes is equally important and can still be understood in a religious context. Bataille writes, “[N]othing is more important for us than that we recognize that we are bound and sworn to that which horrifies us most, that which provokes our most intense disgust.”¹⁴⁵ By placing focus on the relationship he creates with his audience, and often working to

¹⁴³ Holland, “Bodies at Play: A General Economy of Performance,” 202.

¹⁴⁴ *Chris Burden*, 50.

¹⁴⁵ Georges Bataille, “Attraction and Repulsion,” in *The College of Sociology, 1937-1939*, by ed. Denis Hollier (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988). 114.

create unpleasant emotions, Burden disrupts the attempts at making his work comforting and safe. Once again Burden is operating with a clear consideration of his audience, and an emotional reaction is unavoidable when viewing his work. While the audience is never at risk of physical injury, they are never safe, whether it be a moral danger or something less easily defined. This is consistent with Bataille's ideas concerning sacrifice, as "spectators are not passive observers, not simply witnesses to the acts of performers; they are interactive participants in the collective performance event."¹⁴⁶ Though Burden does perform a few pieces that involve directing verbal abuse at his audience, all of the performance pieces involving actual physical harm are directed at himself, giving audience members a glimpse at a moment of mutilation. They witness his own act of self-mutilation, yet the audience is never fully removed from these acts.

Audience members are in unique positions when it comes to his work, approaching with reverence pieces built around ideas of pain, waste, and death. Burden largely avoids the "How is this art?" discussion, appearing uninterested in when asked in interviews, but most of his work occurs in art galleries and spaces set aside for performance pieces.¹⁴⁷ Burden did not have to convince his audience of its status as art, yet there was clearly something different about it. As in religious ritual, his work refocused attention on to a specific object and pushed for an act of destruction. Art can, of course, "provoke dread and through symbolic representations of tragic loss,"¹⁴⁸ and perhaps Burden's work does this to an extreme, to the point of straddling the line between symbolic and literal. Literature and film provide space for violent fantasy, so that viewers and readers may confront death without the fear of an actual death, but Burden's

¹⁴⁶ Holland, "Bodies at Play: A General Economy of Performance," 205.

¹⁴⁷ Crow, "Artist Conversation with Chris Burden."

¹⁴⁸ Bataille, "The Notion of Expenditure," 120.

work threatens to remove that final barrier. Burden's work has the potential to evoke the emotion of the left hand sacred, but he does not perform these work in isolation. Self-mutilation is still seen largely as evidence of some type of pathology, but Burden shares the moment of mutilation with his audience. Later in his career, Burden performed "Show Me the Hole." In this work he reminds viewers of their role in "Shoot."

Performed in 1980, nine years after "Shoot," this piece began with Burden sitting on a theatre stage under a placard bearing his name. He wore the same jeans and white t-shirt as he wore during "Shoot." Audience members came in one at a time and sat next to him. When they sat down he would say, "In 1971, I did a performance where I was shot in the arm." He would then roll up his sleeve, say "The bullet went in here and came out here," and allow audience members to look at the two marks on his arm. He would answer no questions nor respond in any other way to whoever sat with him.¹⁴⁹ Unlike "Shoot," in this piece the audience came to Burden one at a time, but that did little to dampen people's interest. According to him, some people waited up to three hours to get a glimpse of his two wounds.¹⁵⁰ This work reinforces the realness of "Shoot," reminding them that the act did not happen in a vacuum, nor was it some type of artistic magic trick where he walked away unharmed. Occurring years after "Shoot," Burden reinforces the realness of the act by showing how it shapes his body in a way that will never change. Sociologist Mark Seltzer describes a culture surrounding wounds in the contemporary world where the physical marking "is by now no longer the mark, the stigmata, of the sacred or heroic: it is the icon, or stigma, of the everyday openness of every body."¹⁵¹

Burden, in this work, challenges the meaningfulness of wounds and offers a reminder of

¹⁴⁹ *Chris Burden*, 73

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁵¹ Ward, *No Innocent Bystanders*, 173.

their averageness, how each body is in a constant state of degeneration, always open to destruction. Far from heroic, his wounds are signs of waste and reminders of inevitable decay.

The cause of those wounds, “Shoot,” is, according to Geoffrey Sirc, a work that “takes on the seemingly incomprehensible insistence on violence and tries to understand it, not intellectually but actually, bodily, physically; a work that hopes, through such a painful personal event and its recycled representations, to reduce reflection – possibly even change in subsequent viewers, now, in the results of his experiment.”¹⁵² “Show the Hole” builds on this attempt at understanding by returning to the subject of audience desire, the title likely being something Burden had heard countless times since being saddled with “the artist who shot himself” reputation, and it demonstrates the lasting impact of unleashing such desire into the real world. When shot, the bullet’s path remains present in his skin; when he is nailed to the hood of a car, the holes in his hands never completely heal. If you die in an art gallery, you still die. Some critics have described Burden’s performance pieces as investigations based on experience, and the physical scars are some of the lasting results of this experience.¹⁵³

Building off of many of his works, including “Show Me the Hole,” Burden does have an appropriate capstone for the performance part of his career, and this piece demonstrates exactly how crucial the audience is to his work. Performed in 1975 in The Museum of Contemporary Art, this piece initially looks like one of his most innocuous. Titled “Doomed,” the piece looks almost regressive as it basically entails Burden going to a museum and staying there, turning his presence into a piece in and of itself. During

¹⁵² Geoffrey Sirc, “The Difficult Politics of the Popular,” *Journal of Advanced Composition*, 21, no. 2 (2001), 432.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 422.

“Bed Piece” he essentially moved into a museum, staying in a bed he brought in for 22 days, and others consisted of him remaining immobile in a museum setting. Yet this piece was different. “Doomed,” as the title suggests, incorporates a sense of ominous inevitability those others lack.

For “Doomed,” Burden entered the gallery with only three things: a clock, a sealed envelope, and a pane of glass. Placing the clock and envelope beside him, Burden lay down under the glass. And then he simply lay there. That’s it. Without moving or acknowledging the audience he lay under the glass, eyes open and staring directly ahead. He did not move to eat, did not appear to sleep, and did not get up to go to the bathroom (though he did reveal later that he went to the bathroom during the piece; his pants helped hide that fact).¹⁵⁴ An audience gathered, with one attendee being the film critic Roger Ebert. In a piece written on the performance Ebert notes how the crowd did not know how to act. They did not know how long they should stay or how loud they could speak while watching him. He quotes a viewer as saying, “[W]e thought the rules of the piece required us to do nothing.”¹⁵⁵

Ultimately no one stayed for Burden’s entire piece. In the end, Burden lay on the ground for over forty hours. Ebert recalls local deejays finding the whole thing comical, an example of how the artsy crowd will praise anything so long as it makes no sense, and Burden later talked about being in a battle of wills with the museum with neither understanding the other’s motivation or desires.¹⁵⁶ Burden expected at some point for the museum workers to come to him to express the need to close or to see if he needed

¹⁵⁴ Roger Ebert, “My God They Are Going To Leave Me Here To Die?” May 25, 1975, <http://www.rogerebert.com/interviews/chris-burden-my-god-are-they-going-to-leave-me-here-to-die> (accessed November 2, 2014).

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

anything. The museum workers assumed they should respect the wishes of the artist and figured he would get up when he was ready. Audience members, programmed to take a passive role in a gallery and hoping not to appear socially inept, did not want to interfere with the performance, content instead to look on as he lay on the ground for nearly two full days. Each group assumed one of the others had the ability to end the performance, that the responsibility was not theirs. It was only when a security guard, Denis O'Shae, offered him something to drink that Burden finally rose. He then smashed the clock and wrote the time of the performance down on a paper in the envelope.¹⁵⁷ "Doomed" lasted forty five hours and signaled the end of Burden's body art career.

By providing the glass of water the security guard in effect saved Burden's life, which in turn leaves the other witnesses with the weight of watching the artist die. As he continued to go without food, and also attempted to move as little as possible, he began to take on the role of a corpse, one literally kept separate from others. Dead bodies, at least in many countries, are objects meant to be isolated and kept in specific places away from human touch, and strict rules govern how to behave around them, due to the sense of contagion inherent in each one. However, for Bataille the corpse is of deep significance, as it represents "the most complete affirmation of the spirit," the final expenditure of life.¹⁵⁸ The primacy of utility ultimately shatters in the proximity of the corpse, and as it dies, "the victim and the spectator share in what his death reveals."¹⁵⁹ Many of those rules are not radically different from the strict norms guiding how to act in a museum or art gallery. Burden has said he would not have lay there until he died, but it appeared as though the mechanisms for keeping him alive belonged solely in the hands of others.

¹⁵⁷ *Chris Burden*, 225.

¹⁵⁸ Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, 40.

¹⁵⁹ Bataille, *Erotism*, 23.

Given the level of waste involved as well as the connections between artist and performer, Burden's work can be understood in the context of sacrifice. Though I do believe it is important, the religious value of Burden's art is not just through the way it occasionally, and perhaps even incidentally, mimics certain images and rituals. By understanding his art as sacrifice, we can understand them in Geoffrey Sirc's terms, as physical works attempting to comprehend the incomprehensible. By taking audiences across lines separating life from death, Burden brings the world into contact with moments infused with horror and desire without at the same time providing a means of understanding his action. By seeking out "the greatest losses and greatest dangers,"¹⁶⁰ audience members risk losing themselves in a type of intimacy common to religious rituals. Viewers are faced with their own mortality, as Burden says, "All the audience cannot but help but place themselves into my shoes."¹⁶¹ This is not necessarily an easy thing to witness, and many viewers even today struggle with Burden's work. Howard Singerman speaks for many of Burden's viewers when he says that what bothers him most about the work is that he has no sense of Burden's "politics or pathology." Singerman wants to know more, and he is likely not alone. Concerning Burden's political messages, Singerman wants to understand "Are they good or evil?" and Burden appears to have no intention of answering such a question.¹⁶² Unlike my final case study, which immediately confronts audience members with an explicitly political message, Burden chooses to remain silent on the ways his work relates to larger social or political issues. Without a framework, then, all that is the "distinctive nausea" Peter Schjeldahl writes of as viewers are left to consider their role in the moments that tear a body apart.

¹⁶⁰ Bataille, *Erotism*, 86.

¹⁶¹ Ward, *No Innocent Bystanders: Performance Art and Audience*, 172.

¹⁶² Sirc, "The Difficult Politics of the Popular," 428.

CHAPTER 4: HUMAN BROTHERHOOD

If the terrible massacres of the East prove one thing, it is the awful, inalterable, solidarity of humanity.

- Jonathan Littell, *The Kindly Ones*

Midway through *Erotism*, Georges Bataille identifies the difficulty in capturing the power of violence in language. He writes, “Common language will not express violence.”¹⁶³ Rather, anticipating the argument Elaine Scarry will make years later, Bataille recognizes something inherent to our traditional uses for language that make it an ill-equipped tool for expressing the reality of violence. For Scarry, at issue will be language’s inability to fully capture the affective force of violence, even by artists. She writes, “Alarmed and dismayed by his or her own failure of language, the person in pain might find it reassuring to learn that the artist . . . ordinarily falls silent before pain.”¹⁶⁴ For Scarry, this happens because “resistance to language” is “essential” to what pain actually is, an argument Bataille foreshadows as he argues that “since language is by definition the expression of civilized man, violence is silent.”¹⁶⁵ In his understanding, as well as Scarry’s, common language may explain violence, giving it a rationale or goal, turning violent behavior into a tool for political or personal purposes, but it will likely fail to capture the emotional component of singular moments in ways that satisfy the speaker

¹⁶³ Bataille, *Erotism*, 186.

¹⁶⁴ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, (New York: Oxford Press, 1985), 86.

¹⁶⁵ Bataille, *Erotism*, 186.

or listener. In Bataille's understanding, one of the ways it fails at this is by effectively silencing the voice of the perpetrator of violence.

For understandable reasons, the voice of aggressors are less often looked to when searching for discussion of violent actions, and Bataille does not argue that perpetrators of violence should be sympathized with or their voices valued over that of victims. Instead he argues that, when they are heard, their voices are typically absorbed into the official apparatus driving their actions. Like soldiers in war, expressing one's self in the moment of aggression becomes nearly impossible for obvious practical reasons, and in the aftermath most use the voice of some authority to justify their actions, effectively making their actions not their own. Hannah Arendt reflects this when she writes in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* of the use of language in the Nazi military, saying, "The net effect of this language system was not to keep these people ignorant of what they were doing, but to prevent them from equating with their old, 'normal' knowledge of murder and lies."¹⁶⁶ The perpetrator of violence can explain the ends of his actions, its justification, but not the sensation of the moment of pain inflicted upon a fellow human, because language acts as a "shield against reality," allowing people to escape the full horror of their actions.¹⁶⁷ Bataille writes, "As a general rule the torturer does not use the language of the violence exerted by him or in the name of an established authority; he uses the language of the authority, and that gives him what looks like an excuse, a lofty justification."¹⁶⁸ For Bataille this represents a serious and important loss. The lack of a voice in this situation leaves the excessive nature of violence, as well as its sacred

¹⁶⁶ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 86.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Bataille, *Erotism*, 186.

quality, largely absent. Violence becomes expressed in terms of utility, not in terms of waste, and rather than recognizing violence as belonging to the whole of humanity, violence belongs to other, lesser civilizations.¹⁶⁹ The civilized person's capacity and desire for violence remains unexamined. In the same section Bataille imagines a scenario where a torturer describes his own actions, saying, "I rammed my flailing fists into his face; he fell down and my heel finished off the work; disgusted, I spat into a swollen face. I could not help bursting into loud laughter: I had just insulted a dead man." However, Bataille finds no satisfaction with these lines, largely because "[i]t is unlikely that a torturer would ever write like that."¹⁷⁰

In some ways, Bataille is necessarily correct here as the common definition of torture implies a particular goal. The website for the International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims states "[i]t can be stated that torture is the intentional infliction of severe mental or physical pain or suffering by or with the consent of the state authorities for a specific purpose."¹⁷¹ The torturer, at least according to this definition, exists only as a tool, acting out the desires of some authority. The torturer, like the official state executioner, performs actions based on the desires of others, turning his language into another tool for expressing the rhetoric of the state. Coming up against the "double opposition" of reason and the "silent contempt for the words used about it," violence actively resists language from the perpetrator by paradoxically silencing that individual's emotions and desires.¹⁷²

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 181.

¹⁷¹ *International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims*. <http://www.irc.org/> (accessed November 2nd, 2014).

¹⁷² Bataille, *Erotism*, 187.

If the torturer is unlikely to speak as Bataille wishes, then perhaps literature can fill the void. In *Erotism*, he writes, “Following upon religion, literature is in fact religion’s heir. A sacrifice is a novel, a story, illustrated in bloody fashion.”¹⁷³ In ways similar to how athletic and artistic spectacles allow people to witness acts of violence and waste, literature provides space for the voice of the torturer and means to capture the excessive nature of violence. According to him, “Most often, human destiny can be lived only through fiction, as it is in fiction that a state of loss can best be experienced.”¹⁷⁴ Representing an imaginative space potentially free from the lofty justifications of the state, literature may provide means to activate the voice of the perpetrator. The novel has the power to open up the perpetrator’s voice, and in this last section I will focus on one such novel, moving from the realm of actual violence to imagined violence, but keeping a focus on the issues of intent, form, community, and waste. I will examine closely Jonathan Littell’s novel *The Kindly Ones*, looking both at issues specific to this work and at the larger ways that the novel illustrates the value of Bataille’s understanding of literature. While obviously not involving actual physical harm in the way wrestlers and performer artists do, this novel attempts to capture the most notorious violence of the 20th century, but it does so in ways equally expected and unique. The connection between this novel and Bataille’s thought on violence and language is noteworthy, if for no other reason than Littell has acknowledged Bataille’s influence on his text. In an interview, the author of *The Kindly Ones* references Bataille when he says, “The perpetrators have no voice, or if they do speak, it is with the voice of the state.” He goes on to say, “Perpetrators do speak – some of them at great length even . . . But the more I read the

¹⁷³ Ibid. 87.

¹⁷⁴ Bataille, “The Sorcerer’s Apprentice,” in *Visions of Excess*, ed. & trans. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 16.

perpetrator's text, the more I realized they were empty."¹⁷⁵ In effect, Littell wishes to write a perpetrator-driven novel that does not attempt to relocate blame or justify personal action as being driven by someone else. He aims to write the novel Bataille wishes his torturer would write. As Hannah Arendt argues in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, many Nazis after World War II worked to create a complicated web of responsibility, always moving responsibility for any of the actions to some other person or organization, though Hitler himself was rarely blamed.¹⁷⁶ The perpetrator's text often reflects this redirection. Littell's work does not do this, making it fundamentally different than other books dealing with World War II and the Holocaust.

What I will argue in this final case study is that Littell uses his novel as a form of sacrifice. By disrupting the traditional Holocaust narrative through an inversion of the typical perspective of the form and infusing the narrative with elements more common to the most violent forms of horror, Littell attempts to form a connection between himself, his fictional narrator, and the reader. Intentionally subverting what is sometimes referred to as Holocaust tourism, Littell forces the reader not only to witness the violence but to witness it from the perspective of the perpetrator who refuses to sympathize with his victim. Beginning with the opening line, where the narrator refers to the readers as his "human brothers," he stresses a connection between himself and his reader, leaving neither in a safe, elevated position. Unlike other works focusing on the Holocaust, which Littell believes perversely aim to comfort and ensure readers of their own moral superiority and ability to conquer the issues that led to World War II and the Holocaust,

¹⁷⁵ Samuel Blumenfeld, "Interview with Jonathan Littell." *Le Monde*, November 17th, 2008. Found at <http://thekindlyones.wordpress.com/littell-interview-with-samuel-blumenfeld/> (accessed November 2, 2014).

¹⁷⁶ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 85-86.

Littell's novel forces readers to confront their own capacity for violent desires.¹⁷⁷

Rejecting any narrative that absolves individuals while blaming an amorphous State, Littell's narrator writes, "But then we forget that the State is made up of individuals, all more or less ordinary . . . But the ordinary men that make up the state . . . now there's the real danger. The real danger for mankind is me, is you."¹⁷⁸ I will argue that Littell makes this argument not to make any type of Nazi defense, as some of his harshest critics have claimed, but to make a particularly Bataillean argument about the need for literature that expresses the most forbidden human desires. As a writer who actively resists moralizing, Littell does not allow his reader to view the evil in his work as belonging to a separate world, an idea that parallels Bataille's view on the monstrous. Bataille writes, "There exists in a certain form of moral condemnation an escapist denial. One says, basically, this abjection would not have been had there not been monsters. In judging so violently, one subtracts the monsters from the possible."¹⁷⁹ Littell not only wants to reintroduce the monstrous, he aims to force readers to contemplate the very limits of the sense of self and morality as they enter a brotherhood with those monsters. Adopting some of the same traits as traditional Holocaust literature, largely in order to undermine that genre's goals, Littell's novel seeks to subvert testimonial literature by giving voice to the most base desires of an individual man while also universalizing those desires. Without absolving the fascists of any blame, Littell does seek to force readers to recognize themselves and their desires in the narrator, understanding that the monster

¹⁷⁷ Blumenfeld, "Interview with Jonathan Littell."

¹⁷⁸ Littell, *The Kindly Ones*, 21.

¹⁷⁹ Bataille, "Reflections on the Executioner and the Victim," 19.

does not “exceed the limit of the possible,” but rather the monster’s “excess precisely defines this limit.”¹⁸⁰

With stakes such as these, it should not surprise that few novels in recent years caused the type of literary controversy as did *The Kindly Ones*. Originally published as *Les Bienveillantes* in France in 2006, the novel won the Grand Prix du roman de l’Academie francaise and Prix Goncourt, two of France’s most prestigious literary awards, a fact that only increased the controversy surrounding the work. Something of a surprise best seller, the book became a national sensation in France, prompting high profile debates and turning the author into a minor, if reluctant, celebrity. As the novel gained more and more attention, it inevitably attracted detractors and a backlash ensued, leaving the novel stuck with primarily polarized opinions. Richard Golson is correct when he points out, “Nowhere has the novel left viewers indifferent.”¹⁸¹ Evidence for this claim can be found on the website fullreview.com where, of the 16 A+ - F professional reviews listed on the site, eight are either D or F and five are A or A+. The praise has been hyperbolic, and the criticisms have been equally as harsh with the work being deemed pornographic, exploitative, poorly researched, impenetrable, the work of a fascist sympathizer, and the work of a mentally ill writer.¹⁸² Writing in *The New Republic*, Ruth Franklin, a provider of one of the F ratings, writes, “A review cannot convey how deeply unpleasant the experience of reading *The Kindly Ones* is. This is one of the most

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Richard Golson, “The American Reception of Max Aue,” *Substance: A Review of Theory & Literary Criticism* (2010): 174.

¹⁸² Ibid.

repugnant books I have ever read.”¹⁸³ Critic Alan Cheuse, while offering some praise for the novel, claims that parts the novel made him want to vomit.¹⁸⁴

The Kindly Ones reads as the fictional memoir of Max Aue, a Nazi intelligence officer. The memoir is purportedly written long after World War II, after Aue has changed his name, taken on a new identity, and led a conventionally successful life while keeping his Nazi past hidden. Now an old man with a wife, children, and grandchildren, Aue attempts to retell the story of his time in the German military. Starting with the Babi Yar massacre in the Ukraine and going through the fall of Berlin, Aue’s narrative documents his time as what one critic referred to as a “Nazi Zelig” where he happens to be present at many of the war’s most pivotal moments (another, less kind, referred to him as a Nazi Forrest Gump).¹⁸⁵ As a character, Aue is meticulous, documenting things to an almost absurd level of detail, and he remains throughout a firm believer in the rigid boundaries provided by fascist ideology. In fact, Aue requires strict observance to social conventions and structures, believing that everything from dress to language should follow clear, organizationally approved guidelines. For example, after being spoken to by a subordinate in what he feels was an overly familiar way, Aue remarks on his offense at the “brutality of the *du* form,”¹⁸⁶ demonstrating the level of civility he demands by those within the Nazi organization. He respects and demands adherence to the various hierarchies and structures of Nazi life. In the novel’s closing pages, as Berlin literally collapses around him, Aue finds himself confronted by a man who has long hunted him. When that man threatens to kill him, Aue responds, “You haven’t even shaved

¹⁸³ Ruth Franklin, “Night and Cog,” *The New Republic* (2009): 43.

¹⁸⁴ Alan Cheuse, “Review of *The Kindly Ones*,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 8, 2009.

¹⁸⁵ Golson, “The American Reception of Max Aue.”

¹⁸⁶ Littell, *The Kindly Ones*, 815.

Kriminalkommissar Clemens, and you want to pass judgment on me!”¹⁸⁷ Aue, who dreamed of living an academic life, demands obedience to Nazi codes of conduct, referring to the man by his rank even as he chastises him, which makes Aue’s personal life all the most shocking.

Though they may attract the most criticism, as unnerving as the scenes of violence may be, perhaps even more so are scenes of Aue’s sex life. Identifying Aue as a homosexual would appear obvious, as he has numerous sexual encounters with men, an act that in and of itself violates Nazi standards and the utopian vision of a fascist future, but Aue complicates this by maintaining a specific sexual interest outside of this identification. Sexual desire for him is both amorphous and specific, aimed at one particular person but willing to accept substitutes. He writes, “In high school I quickly learned that there was no homosexuality, as such; the boys made do with what there was, and in the army, as in prisons, it was certainly the same.”¹⁸⁸ Aue, who is always penetrated when having sex, maintains a sexual focus on his twin sister, Una, believing that a sexual union will allow them to reunite in a single being. Aue’s desires exist outside the norms of Nazi life, yet at times Aue attempts to present homosexual desire as an extension of soldier bonding.¹⁸⁹ He further associates his sexuality with ideological allegiance by noting how he joins the SS after being caught having sex with a man, stating bluntly, “And that is how, my ass still full of sperm, I resolved to enter the Sicherheitsdienst.”¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 924.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 192.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 197.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 74.

Despite the controversies, and the temptation to reduce the novel to its most shocking parts, those who read *The Kindly Ones* solely for the disturbing moments will surely be disappointed. Aue maintains the structures of testimonial literature by detailing the day to day activity of his life, offering readers the appearance of intimacy and familiarity through a constant adding on of details, keeping intact the ends and goals associated with this genre.¹⁹¹ Aue pushes to extreme both the banal and the base, leaving readers overwhelmed with personal detail. The novel is difficult, with most versions nearly a thousand pages, and filled with historical minutia and the unique concerns of an SS officer, who, as an organization, appear as the height of pettiness and bureaucracy. For every moment of brutal violence, readers must wade through a five page section on troop movements, the needs of German factories, or the various linguistic families of the Caucus Mountains, often presented as a single paragraph and filled with references contemporary readers could not reasonably be expected to know. It would oversimplify the novel to separate these sections along sacred/profane lines, but in these sections there is clear emphasis on production. As Aue says, “In any case, a real National Socialist knows nothing but movement and progress,” and Aue builds much of the novel on documenting that movement and progress.¹⁹² Aue makes numerous attempts at ensuring maximum production and efficiency, to the point that though he does attempt to minimize the numbers of deaths in the Holocaust, he only does so because he believes it is wasteful to do otherwise. He writes, “[P]roduction has to be rationalized, the camps have to be organized in a flexible manner so that a range of orders can be dealt with as they come in,

¹⁹¹ Leigh Gilmore, “‘What Was I?’: Literary Witness and Testimonial Archive,” *Profession*, (2011): 77-79.

¹⁹² Littell, *The Kindly Ones*, 595

and above all the workers have to be guaranteed a vital minimum substance.”¹⁹³ The human beings lost only have value to him in the moment because they can serve as tools for the German military. Even passages on subjects like language serve similar profane ends, and frankly, these passages, while they demonstrate the scope of Littell’s research and the meticulousness of his narrator, are exceedingly dull, the boring parts before the good parts, to use the language of deathmatch wrestler Mad Man Pondo. In these sections, Littell makes readers aware of their desire to return to the violence of war or Aue’s sexual life. However, while dull, they do work toward one of Aue’s chief purposes. In a review titled “None of Us is Immune From Becoming a Nazi,” critic Wu Ming writes, “To read *The Kindly Ones* is to become the stunned witness of an *overflow*: drop after drop, trickle by trickle, the river gets swollen with data, anecdotes, memories, dreams and citations – the water rises on the sides until it *breaks out*.”¹⁹⁴ Ming is correct to use the term overflow as it reflects the excessive nature of Aue’s text, while also serving as an apt metaphor for the work Aue does. Single pieces of data may seem innocuous in their own right, but none of these pieces exist in a vacuum. Every discussion matters and it is added to the whole. Aue obsesses early in the work over issues of culpability, arguing, to continue Ming’s metaphor, that whomever contributed to the overflow is equally to blame. Looking specifically at the issue of mass executions, he wonders if the person who pulled the trigger deserves more or less blame than the one who issued the order. And what of the person who transported the victims? These questions give deeper significance to some of the more tiring sections: discussions on linguistic families may

¹⁹³ Ibid., 583.

¹⁹⁴ Wu Ming, “None of Us is Immune From Becoming a Nazi,” review of *The Kindly Ones* by Jonathan Littell, http://www.wumingfoundation.com/english/outtakes/the_kindly_ones.htm (accessed November 2, 2014).

seem trivial, but the consequences may be horrific. If language experts determine a language has a Semitic origin, those speakers will be killed. Aue fully demonstrates the banality of evil by subtly connecting the arguments made by bureaucrats and academics to the most brutal actions of war.¹⁹⁵ The moments that end in mass graves may begin with a discussion between two academics in a coffeehouse.

Because he allows his narrator to identify these connections, some critics accuse Littell of essentially offering a defense of Nazi actions, lessening any feelings of culpability. A critic in the German publication *Die Zeit* asks, “Why should we . . . read the work of an idiot who writes terribly, is riddled with sexual perversions, and who is disposed to elitist racial ideology and an ancient belief in destiny?”¹⁹⁶ Though I will argue Littell does aim to create a type of universalist argument, where the actions and desires of Nazi followers do not radically differ from others, I do not think he does to assuage Nazi guilt. While certainly aiming to provoke, I do not believe Littell’s work paints him as a Nazi apologist. Rather, the value of Littell’s work, and works like it, comes in its ability to provide means of witnessing true horror outside of a narrative of progress. In addition to demonstrating how slippery claims of moral superiority may be, Littell works to capture the true horror of this historical moment and allow readers to see themselves in it, and to see a way out of it. And the path out is not through a rejection of fascism. Littell argues that history has effectively proven fascism as a flawed, horrific system, and he takes issue with those works that devote energy to denouncing Nazism, as he considers that a misleading, futile task aimed at reassuring readers of their own moral

¹⁹⁵ Littell, *The Kindly Ones*, 298-318.

¹⁹⁶ Iris Radisch, “In the Beginning there is a Misunderstanding,” review of *The Kindly Ones* by Jonathan Littell, February 18, 2008, <http://www.zeit.de/2008/08/L-Littell-Radisch/komplettansicht>, (accessed November 2nd, 2014).

superiority.¹⁹⁷ Instead, he attempts to identify the elements that allow fascism to emerge: the profane focus on production and self. In an essay on *The Kindly Ones*, Liran Razinsky writes, “In asserting one similarity after another, a constant attack is effectively mounted against all forms of solid identity and their maintenance.” According to Razinsky, the work ultimately attempts to fracture “the otherness of evil.”¹⁹⁸ By challenging the basic notion of identity, Littell’s work shatters the notions of separateness that inform many the ideologies driving World War II.

To do this, Littell adopts a project very similar to Bataille’s turn toward inner experience and treats literature as a type of mystical experience. Littell’s own accounts of what motivated him to write this novel do offer some insight on what he hoped the work accomplished. Having been born into a secular Jewish family long after World War II, Littell maintains that his own Jewish heritage is incidental and that the novel is not meant to be an exploration of Jewish suffering.¹⁹⁹ In an interview in *Le Monde*, he stated, “The Shoah . . . remained a fairly abstract event for Jewish Americans” and that the event has little impact on him and his family. Instead, America’s involvement in Vietnam, along with Littell’s own humanitarian work with Action Against Hunger, forced him to consider not his role as victim, but his role as aggressor: “My big fear as a child was that they’d send me to Vietnam when I’m eighteen to kill children.”²⁰⁰ Here he gives evidence that, despite his Jewish heritage, he had little fear of being a part of a slaughtered group; rather he feared being willing to kill if called upon. Aue raises this worry early on when he writes, “If you were born in a country or at a time when nobody

¹⁹⁷ Blumenfeld, “Interview with Jonathan Littell.”

¹⁹⁸ Liran Razinsky, “On the Similarities of Perpetrators,” in *Writing the Holocaust Today: Critical Perspectives on Jonathan Littell’s The Kindly Ones* (New York: Rodopi, 2012), 50.

¹⁹⁹ Blumenfeld, “Interview with Jonathan Littell.”

²⁰⁰ Christopher Caldwell, “...And Less Than Kind.” *Culture & Civilization* (2009), 79.

comes to kill your wife and your children, but also nobody comes to ask you to kill the wives and children of others, then render thanks to God and go in peace.”²⁰¹ Littell’s own novel reflects a real fear, one that flips the typical fears of Holocaust narratives, and critic Mary Anne Garnett identifies this inversion as a trend in recent Holocaust literature. She writes, “This hypothetical ‘what would I have done?’ for those born after the war is perhaps replacing the ‘how could this happen?’ and the guilt of previous generations.”²⁰² No longer concerned with what would place them in a position to be killed, writers like Littell show more interest in considered what systems would allow them to inflict suffering themselves.

Indeed, as much as anything, Littell’s work offers a challenge to the 20th century field of Holocaust literature by inverting roles and incorporating what Peter Kuon calls “the splatter-aesthetics of contemporary action and horror films.”²⁰³ By doing so, he offers an attack on what is sometimes derisively referred to as “Holocaust tourism.” Using P. R. Stone’s Dark Tourism spectrum, Holocaust tourism should represent the darkest form of tourist consumption, but as the consumers are less and less likely to have personal connections to the places of trauma, irreverence seeps in, as do conflicting narratives.²⁰⁴ For Littell, one of the issues with Holocaust literature, and tourism, is that a heavily sanitized version of events is introduced and a progressive narrative presented where the events of World War II may be mastered and conquered. As Laura Hodes

²⁰¹ Littell, *The Kindly Ones*, 20.

²⁰² Mary Anne Garnett, “Official Stories? Representing the Occupation and Shoah in Recent Prize-Winning French Novels.” *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies* (2008), 356.

²⁰³ Peter Kuon, “From ‘Kitsch’ to ‘Splatter’: The Aesthetics of Violence in *The Kindly Ones*,” in *Writing the Holocaust Today: Critical Perspectives on Jonathan Littell’s The Kindly Ones* (New York: Rodopi, 2012) 36.

²⁰⁴ Debra Kamin, “The Rise of Dark Tourism: When War Zones Become Tourist Attractions,” *theatlantic.com*, July 15th, 2014, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/07/the-rise-of-dark-tourism/374432/> (accessed November 2nd, 2014).

demonstrates, there has been a recent push in Holocaust art, principally literature and film, to present the Holocaust as a space and time capable of producing hope and an idealized future.²⁰⁵ Hodes specifically highlights *The Reader* and *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* as particularly noxious examples,²⁰⁶ and in recent years a cottage industry of fabricated Holocaust narratives have emerged, providing readers with works still filled with terrifying levels of human suffering yet maintaining what some see as an optimistic message, one typically centered on the idea that the Holocaust, and what led to it, can be overcome. Littell's novel differs in the "lack of redemption it offers not only for its narrator, but also for humanity."²⁰⁷

Though some Holocaust works do feature the voices of perpetrators, rarely do they show characters like Aue. Liran Razinsky argues that *The Kindly Ones* "constitutes a transgression of the 'genre' of testimonial literature," owing mostly to Aue's voice as perpetrator. He is neither the "one-good Nazi," the single conscience-riddled character standing apart from his group not unlike the "one-good Jew" Hannah Arendt discusses in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, nor is he an over-the-top Hollywood villain. Drawing on the works of Yuval Harari, Razinsky argues that Aue operates as flesh and eye witness, providing readers with detailed historical accounts as well as graphic sensory descriptions, all while never sounding sadistic or apologetic.²⁰⁸ Echoing Aue's one-time boss, Adolf Eichmann, who claimed "Repentance is for little children," Aue states "I

²⁰⁵ Laura Hodes, "Furious Responsibilities," review of *The Kindly Ones*, by Jonathan Littell, *The Jewish Daily Forward*, <http://forward.com/articles/103563/furious-responsibilities/> (accessed November 2nd, 2014).

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ Razinsky, "On the Similarities of Perpetrators."

do not regret anything.”²⁰⁹ Yet Littell’s work does transgress the norms of testimonial literature in ways beyond having an unapologetic narrator.

While keeping one foot in the world of testimonial literature in order to undermine it, Peter Kuon is correct when he makes a connection between *The Kindly Ones* and the type of transgressive, shock horror films that focus on explicit images of violence and sexuality with the expressed interest in exposing and violating taboos. Analogous to the ways these films challenge the structures and limits of Hollywood horror films, *The Kindly Ones* seeks to disrupt the conventions of testimonial literature centered around trauma. Each focuses on transgressing their respective genre, and each does so in a similar way. Catherine Coquio argues that “Littell’s refusal to pity victims marks the radical, transgressive aspect of his project” and that he believes “limit-experience is the only possible form of piety.”²¹⁰ Seeing him as a part of a literary lineage including Genet, Bataille, and Blanchot, Coquio believes Littell’s work puts the entire genre of Holocaust literature at risk. At the very least, his novel reveals the limits of that genre, much in the same way as the shock horror films reveal the limits of their mainstream counterparts. In Bataillean terms, *The Kindly Ones* embraces eroticism. In “Bataille’s Queer Pleasure,” Shannon Winnubst argues that “eroticism is the persistent attraction to that which humans must – ontologically as humans – abhor.”²¹¹ Bataille frequently expresses this idea, and literature offers one way to explore this conflicting sense of attraction and repulsion. Setting aside moral lessons and attempts at comfort,

²⁰⁹ Littell, *The Kindly Ones*, 5.

²¹⁰ Catherine Coquio. “Oh my human brothers, let me tell you how it happened. (Who is the Perpetrator Talking To?)”, in *Writing the Holocaust Today: Critical Perspectives on Jonathan Littell’s The Kindly Ones* (New York: Rodopi, 2012) 77.

²¹¹ Shannon Winnubst, “Bataille’s Queer Pleasure,” in *Reading Bataille Now*, ed. Shannon Winnubst (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2007), 82.

The Kindly Ones, like the most shocking horror films, urges indulgence at the moments when other works call for restraint. Approaching violence in the same ways pornographic films approach sex, these films leave nothing unexposed, focusing often on excessive violence and torture, also demonstrating the lines their mainstream counterparts will not cross. Many times these films do incorporate historical moments drawn from war, as in T. F. Mou's *Man Behind the Sun*, which takes the Rape of Nanking as its subject, but they are starkly different than, say, Stephen Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* or *Schindler's List*. Theatre director Anne Bogart identifies Spielberg's films as examples of "fascistic art," which she defines as "a story that has everyone feeling the same thing," and in traditional war films violence is presented as a tool necessary for a narrative of progress.²¹² Similar to Littell's argument against the state of contemporary Holocaust literature, these filmmakers claim to object to violence and horror being used to comfort and reinforce ideas of progress. For them, the conservatism in horror must be upended by using the tools it provides against itself.

Operating under the principle that no taboo should be avoided, these films forsake any commercial prospects for the sake of shock and disgust. Taking films like *Salo, or the 120 Days of Sodom*, *Cannibal Holocaust*, and *I Spit on Your Grave* as inspiration, films like the *August Underground* series, *The Bunny Game*, and *A Serbian Film* aim to produce the most disgusting, unsettling experience possible. For example, Srđan Spasojević's *A Serbian Film* includes scenes of the rape of a newborn, incest, and coprophagia, along with numerous explicit, violent deaths and a bleak, if inconclusive, ending. These scenes imply little, allowing viewers to see the actions performed in as

²¹² Anne Bogart, "Stories are Dangerous," <http://trbq.org/trbq-podcast-10-stories-are-dangerous/> (accessed November 2, 2014).

much detail as possible. The director of the film argues that he is waging war against “the cinematic fascism of political correctness,” and while many critics and viewers find that defense disingenuous, most will acknowledge that it is impossible to watch something like *A Serbian Film* without some emotional response.²¹³

By limiting commercial potential and deliberately including material that would not be allowed in an R-rated movie, these films push the violence of horror to an excessive point, just as Littell enhances the violence of Holocaust literature, robs the genre of any moral value, and augments the most anguishing elements to a degree designed to make readers disgusted. One of the central concerns of a genre like Holocaust literature is how literature can capture an event of the magnitude of the Holocaust, and Littell attempts to do so by focusing on the horror of it, while also refusing to recognize the horror as something that must be overcome or atoned for. He provides no space for the victims to be pitied and certainly does not offer them a satisfactory or triumphant conclusion. The scenes common to this genre are minimized – in fact, there are few scenes in concentration camps – but Littell continually shocks the reader with moments of violent transgression.

Much like these horror films, *The Kindly Ones* forces viewers to watch constant violations of the human body. For every character, including Aue, the body is not a stable object, but rather an uneasy space always open to being shot, burned, punctured, split open, or otherwise destroyed. Identity, system, and order are disturbed as physical and literary lines are continually crossed, and readers are made to witness the full limits to which a body might be pushed, including scenes where bodies are pushed into death.

²¹³ Eric Gordy, *Guilt, Responsibility, and Denial: The Past at Stake in Post-Milosovic Serbia* (Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 177.

The shock of this, which I see as akin to that of the horror genre more than confessional literature, appears to be at the heart of Littell's aim with the work. Clearly echoing Bataille and his obsession with the Ling Chi photograph, Littell has claimed that his novel grew from an obsession with a photograph of Zoya Kosmodemianskaya.²¹⁴ Kosmodemianskaya, a Soviet partisan, was tortured and hanged, and a series of frontline photographs, which became very famous in the USSR and turned her into one of the first Soviet heroines, shows her hanging with her shirt open, her breast exposed. For Littell, this photograph mesmerized him because of "the gap between the beauty of the girl and the horror of the scene, that dead body in the snow, torn apart by dogs."²¹⁵

Kosmodemianskaya's photograph produces a powerful mixture of violence and sexual urges for Littell, and her presence haunts his novel. Peter Kuon argues that Kosmodemianskaya, though never referred to by name, appears continually in *The Kindly Ones*.²¹⁶ Much like the reader, Max Aue's role is only to observe, meaning he watches far more than he participates. Being neither a front line soldier nor a high ranking official, he neither initiates orders nor carries out their final, bloody moments, but he is surrounded by death. Most do not affect him much but one death in particular does, and Kuon sees this as one attempt by Littell to insert Kosmodemianskaya's execution into the novel.²¹⁷ During a series of executions, Aue watches the death of a young woman he had no particular interest in prior to that point. Without ceremony, the woman is hanged and her body becomes a mirror for Aue. After the hanging, German soldiers toss her body into the snow where, in addition to the physical signs of death already present,

²¹⁴ Kuon, "From Kitsch to Splatter," 17.

²¹⁵ Razinsky, "On the Similarities of Perpetrators," 17.

²¹⁶ Ibid.

²¹⁷ Ibid.

hungry dogs mutilate her body. Yet Aue observes, “She seemed fabulously beautiful to me,” and thinking about her “made me lose my footing.”²¹⁸ This woman haunts Aue throughout the book, mixing beauty and horror in his mind in a way that makes him aware of the violation of the act.

The death of this woman is not merely an attempt by Littell to demonstrate the brutal efficiency of the Nazi system. Her death signals a momentary change in Aue’s perspective, the horror of death fully overpowers him. However, it does not do so because of her innate humanity or any sense of moral worth. What causes Aue’s awareness is a sense of shared filth and disgust. In a novel filled with mirrors, doubles, and twins, this dead woman becomes one of the most important as she forces Aue to reconsider his finite being. Her death calls into question the borders and rules that govern his life. Appropriately, this revelation comes during a scene of transgressive sex. After masturbating while hanging himself, Aue describes the moment of sexual release, describing his orgasm as a nameless, faceless, but clearly female shape: “[w]hen it came, burying its nails into my wrists, it emptied itself, and I began howling, bellowing, and bashing my head against the floor, I was past all restraint, I bashed my head and sobbed.”²¹⁹ The page long sentence goes on to describe how when he watched this female form he no longer saw his sister, the constant source of sexual desire, but instead saw a woman he had helped hang earlier. Thinking of that woman, he asks, “Had she too come when we hanged her and soiled her panties when she fought and shuddered, strangled, was she coming, had she ever come before?” Aue’s first realization of this woman’s humanity, the first time he questions the rightness of killing her, only arrives by

²¹⁸ Littell, *The Kindly Ones*, 180.

²¹⁹ *Ibid*, 911.

imagining her orgasming while soldiers kill her. He ends by saying, “[i]t ruined everything, if one could do that, hang a girl like that, then one could do anything, nothing could be assured, my sister could be happily pissing in a toilet one day and the next be emptying herself as she suffocated on the end of a rope, there was absolutely no sense to it, and that is why I wept.”²²⁰ For the first time, Aue recognizes a real connection between himself and a war casualty. Through the shared experience of hanging, one to the point of death and one to the point of intense orgasm, they develop a type of communication. Bataille writes, “Ecstasy is communication between terms . . . and communicating possesses a value these terms didn’t have: it annihilates them.”²²¹ Aue’s realization only comes after a point of complete anguish, one that empties him completely. He describes the hanged woman as “fabulously beautiful” just as later he will write of his sister, “I imagined Una standing in front of the mirror, naked or wearing a gown, she must have found herself fabulously beautiful.”²²² The lines between individuals begin to break down due to this shared mixture of beauty, horror, abjection, and fear.

Though the action within it is the most removed from the war, the chapter titled “Air” is perhaps the most pivotal to understanding the work and its narrator. In this chapter, Aue, wounded and sick, fulfills a long-held fantasy and essentially retreats to a womb, losing all sense of individuality in a space outside of time. His role in the German military is momentarily lost while he lives within this sacred space. At many points in the novel Aue expresses a desire to return to his mother’s womb and to reunite with his sister in a single being, and, for once, he has nothing preventing him from doing so. Even the limitations of the physical world cannot contain him. Reflecting the work being

²²⁰ Ibid., 911-912.

²²¹ Georges Bataille, *Guilty*, trans. Stuart Kendall (San Francisco: Lapis Press, 1988), 30.

²²² Littell, *The Kindly Ones*, 879.

done by the novel itself, Aue, understanding he cannot achieve the full extent of his desires in the real world, retreats into a fantasy, one where he may violate all taboos. For Bataille, violation is the essence of eroticism and in this part of his story Aue most turns himself over to eroticism, engaging in extravagant waste well outside the structure of fascist life.²²³

In “Air,” Aue is on leave and retreats to his sister’s country manor. He arrives to find it empty, his sister and brother-in-law having long since fled. Here Aue, already mentally and physically exhausted, can fully immerse himself in a world of fantasy, momentarily casting off the concerns of his position, and the world he concocts becomes one of high culture and filth, mixing nostalgia for childhood with the products of unspoken adult fantasies. Combining elements of the elite culture of Germany with transgressive imagery and action, Aue intermingles the scatological and taboo with the products of his social status, drawing no distinction between these two typically separate worlds. For example, when imagining a stately dinner with his sister, he describes seeing his sister “in a long white dress . . . lying on the ground, on the carpet, prey to uncontrollable convulsions and diarrhea. Black shit oozed through her dress, the inner folds must have been full of it.”²²⁴ Rather than be disgusted by these moments, Aue presses forward, continuing the dinner and drawing the fantasy further and further into the realm of the taboo. He not only imagines scenes where he has sex with his sister – most notoriously atop a guillotine with the blade just over their heads – he also imagines a world where they literally live off of one another, eating one another’s excrement and drinking their own urine to survive.

²²³ Bataille, *Erotism*, 16.

²²⁴ Littell, *The Kindly Ones*, 876.

These desires are not new for Aue, and he first tells himself he must “control my disgust, my rising nausea” but eventually he gives himself over to them fully.²²⁵ For much of “Air” Littell fills the chapter with scenes of impossible sexual acts that force the reader to question what happens in reality and what occurs solely in Aue’s mind. By fully unleashing his fantasies, holding nothing back to the point his body constantly expends fluids, Aue loses himself in a space that to him most resembles a womb, the safe space where no line of separation exists between himself and his sister. For him, though he loathes his mother and very likely killed her, Aue imagines the womb as an Edenic space where he and his sister reunite as one being.

However, it is in this section that the connection to the Kosmodemianskaya photograph reappears and Aue connects his own sexual desires with the realities of fascist action. For the first time Aue strays from his chosen role, a role that, not uncoincidentally mirrors the role of the reader. Now he must participate, and without the structures of fascist life to guide him, the horror of participation completely overtakes him, and the source of his shift comes through an obsession with women, whom he sees as possessing a type of purity and a group who exist somewhat on the margins in Nazi life, relegated almost solely to concerns over production. Confronted with two worlds, the horrors of the sacred and the horrors of the profane, Aue conflates the two. He writes:

I tried to imagine my sister with her legs covered in liquid, sticky diarrhea, with its abominably sweet smell. The emaciated evacuees of Auschwitz, huddled under their blankets, also had their legs covered in shit, their legs like sticks; the ones who stopped to defecate were executed, they were forced to shit as they walked, like horses. Una covered in shit would have been even more

²²⁵ Ibid., 876.

beautiful, solar and pure under the mire that would not have touched her, that would have incapable of soiling her. Between her stained legs I would have nestled like a newborn starving for milk and love, lost. These thoughts ravaged my head, impossible to chase away, I was having trouble breathing and didn't understand what was invading me so brutally.²²⁶

This passage reflects a number of Aue's (and Bataille's) obsessions. Even a casual reading of *The Kindly Ones* would reveal Aue's obsession with excrement and defilement. At moments of danger or heightened sexual intensity Aue frequently has the desire to defecate.²²⁷ As mentioned, in "Air" he imagines a scene where he eats Una's excrement and he often has dreams filled with it as well. This obsession is not insignificant as this physical expenditure leads up into death. Coquio argues that defecation serves as a metaphor for the whole novel, and Aue uses it to tie together many disparate entities.²²⁸ The act of defecating simultaneously provides pleasure, induces fear, allows a person to stay alive, and must be regulated in order to maintain clear social boundaries. Taboos regarding where and how to defecate abound throughout the novel, and in moments where Aue is closest to death he often violates these rules. Most notably, in the opening chapter, the sole chapter dealing with Aue's life outside of World War II, he describes his current difficulties in going to the bathroom, saying, "A distressing and painful problem, and somewhat new one for me; it used to be the opposite . . . I've been reduced to taking enemas, a repulsive procedure, albeit effective."²²⁹ Now living in a world driven only by production – Aue has children and grandchildren and runs a successful lace factory – Aue finds no excess. These rules and transgressions are explicitly tied to fascist life to the point that when he is outside that world, his body

²²⁶ Ibid., 879.

²²⁷ For examples, see *The Kindly Ones* 114, 144, and 380.

²²⁸ Coquio, "Oh my human brothers," 77.

²²⁹ Littell, *The Kindly Ones*, 5.

behaves differently.

Furthermore, it is during the association that he imagines his sister suffering in the same way as Holocaust victims: in a way that is beautiful, horrific, animalistic, violent, sexual, solar and pure. In these moments of association, the victims of Germany share the same base needs as Aue and his sister, and Aue is shocked out of any complacent attitude. This moment represents one time when Aue leaves the profane world of production, and enters into a sacred space. According to Bataille, “The sacred demands the violation of what is normally the object of terrified respect. Its domain is that of destruction and death.”²³⁰ In these moments Aue’s entire world is momentarily destroyed and the fictions that allow him to live with his own actions fall away. Though he has defended fascist ideology throughout the piece, offering no apologies for the belief system, he does leave that world through what amounts to a mystical moment. And Aue wants to achieve these moments, yet he mistakenly believes he can reconcile them with his profane life into one coherent whole. He even attempts to make witnessing executions a type of sacred practice. He does so with a specific purpose in mind, and it speaks to the value of Littell’s novel. Concerning his decision to witness executions, Aue writes, “By inflicting this piteous spectacle on myself, I felt I wasn’t trying to exhaust the scandal of it, the insurmountable feeling of transgression, of a monstrous violation of the Good and the Beautiful.”²³¹ Other officers had suggested a deep immersion in the violence of executions in order to numb themselves to it, but Aue seeks the opposite. He aims at reclaiming a feeling of transgression in all of its horror: “I was trying desperately, but in vain, to regain . . . that initial shock, that sensation of a rupture, an

²³⁰ Georges Bataille, “War and the Philosophy of the Sacred,” in *The Absence of Myth: Writings on Surrealism*, ed. & trans. Michael Richardson (New York: Verso, 2006), 117.

²³¹ Littell, *The Kindly Ones*, 178.

intimate disturbance of my whole being.”²³² However, this will not work, as these executions are firmly placed within the Nazi world of production. Rather than reexperiencing “that initial shock, that sensation of a rupture, an infinite disturbance of the whole” he only felt “a dull, anxious kind of excitation.”²³³ Staying within the strong boundaries of Nazi life, Aue finds himself unable to initiate the disturbance he longs for. Only by violating these norms, by doing things completely wasteful, can he disturb his whole being. By attempting to regain “that initial shock” within the Nazi foundation, Aue tries to disturb his entire being within the confines of what is essentially his job. He hopes to find this rupture in exactly the place where he is most productive, something Bataille warns against. In *Theory of Religion*, Bataille writes, “[I]t is not a question of showing the powerlessness of the man of works; it is a question of tearing *man* away from the order of works.”²³⁴ To return completely to the moment of disturbance, Aue must be willing to violate the norms of Nazi life, and witnessing these executions does not allow that as they can too easily be reconciled with the conventions of fascist production.

Reflecting again the intermingling of horror and Holocaust literature, *The Kindly Ones* as a novel also works as a disturbance of a whole being. From the very beginning Aue (and Littell) attempt to create a connection with the reader. While many of the criticisms of the novel focus on the violence and sexuality throughout, one of the most truly unsettling parts of *The Kindly Ones* is Aue’s attempt to create a sympathetic connection with the reader. The novel begins by imploring, “Oh my human brothers, let

²³² Ibid., 178.

²³³ Ibid., 179.

²³⁴ Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, 89.

me tell you how it happened.”²³⁵ Some critics focus on Aue’s desire to tell the reader “how it happened,” allowing one of the minor architects of an atrocity to lay claim to an official version of events, but equally important is Aue’s attempt to extol his “human brothers.”²³⁶ Not only does he create a familial connection, using a term that could also apply to the bonds forged during war, but he also appeals to his and the reader’s very humanity. In this regard he echoes Bataille, who writes, “By destroying the integrity of existence in myself and others, I open myself to communion – I attain a moral summit.” This communion, though, is not through a rejection of evil but “a willing of evil. It is a voluntary pact with sin, crime, and evil.” By imploring his “human brothers” Aue calls into existence Bataille’s pact, reminding readers of their own desires and the fact that they are guarded by “a relentless fate that requires that while some live, others die.”²³⁷

Without question, Aue does attempt to provide a defense for individual Nazis by arguing that context determines one’s sense of appropriate behavior and that it would be naïve to argue that a person simply cannot perform actions equal to or worse than the actions of average German soldiers in World War II. Aue writes early in the book of how, during war, “the citizen in question simultaneously loses another right, one just as basic and perhaps even more vital to his conception of himself as a civilized being: the right not to kill.”²³⁸ War already violates the basic right to life Aue believes most readers believe they possess, yet he believes it also robs them of the freedom to make the decision not to kill in the name of some moral principle. This distinction is important for

²³⁵ Littell, *The Kindly Ones*, 2.

²³⁶ Sarah Janben, “The Perpetrator as Totalitarian Subject: Allegiance and Guilt in *The Kindly Ones*,” in *Writing the Holocaust Today: Critical Perspectives on Jonathan Littell’s The Kindly Ones* (New York: Rodopi, 2012) 165.

²³⁷ Georges Bataille, *On Nietzsche*, trans. Bruce Boone (St. Paul: Paragon House, 1998), 26.

²³⁸ Littell, *The Kindly Ones*, 17.

him as it removes moral distinctions between he and the reader. Even as he claims, “What I did, I did with my eyes wide open”²³⁹ thus removing the common “following orders” defense, he asserts similarities with the reader.

Richard Golsan writes, “Aue addresses his readers as his ‘human brothers,’ implying not only a fraternal bond with his fellow humans, but a universality to his actions.”²⁴⁰ From the outside Aue positions himself and the reader as equals, something he believes the reader might not like. The very next line negates each section of the opening line: “I am not your brother, you’ll retort, and I don’t want to know.”²⁴¹ Oddly enough, many readers may find Aue’s attempts here to be among the least troubling of his claims to brotherhood. Following well-known psychological experiments such as the Milgram Test and the Stanford Prison Experiment, many will admit to believing that, placed in the proper circumstances, the average man or woman will be willing to foster, prolong, overlook, or directly inflict suffering. Accepting the violence of war is one thing, but what of Aue’s other traits? What of eating excrement? What about the incestuous desire he holds towards his twin sister? Aue discovers the thrill of transgression early, as during his teenage years he would ejaculate his male lovers onto pictures of his mother as well as watch with barely hidden joy as his mother and stepfather ate food that he had placed in his anus only hours before.²⁴² Is Aue claiming readers would also perform these actions? Is he asking readers to not only accept their capacity for violence but also their intense desire for transgression?

Truthfully, I believe he is, but for a specific reason. In these actions Aue sees the

²³⁹ Ibid., 18.

²⁴⁰ Golsan, “The American Reception of Max Aue,” 82.

²⁴¹ Littell, *The Kindly Ones*, 2.

²⁴² Ibid., 372.

very humanness he references in his open line. These transgressions, which pull on him in powerful ways, break down the barriers of his existence. In my reading of the novel that is the ultimate source of Aue's sense of brotherhood. When initially released, Littell's novel came with a single page appendix showing exactly how the nation's military mirrored the German one (for example, colonel equaled SS-Standartenfuhrer, sergeant equaled SS-Scharfuhrer, etc.). With this chart he shows the structural similarities in military, which can be expanded into the culture without much difficulty. This type of brotherhood is fairly easy to accept as it is based on an understandable premise: militaries work to achieve a goal. Certain actions will be undertaken in the service of that goal, and those actions may not be morally defensible outside the context of that goal. That is not terribly difficult to accept. These defenses reify the need for military goals, which supports one of the most common components of an individual's self: national identity. In other words, I may provide a small caveat for German actions, while still condemning them, as doing so allows me to maintain my own sense of national identity.

What is potentially more troubling for some is the idea that Aue's entire memoir aims to create an understanding of humanity based on transgression, and it is this call towards perversion that creates a kind of intimacy that other Holocaust novels do not. Accepting that Aue's wild transgressions may be more beneficial than what he, and by extension Littell, see as moral grandstanding may seem counterintuitive, yet Bataille provides a way of reading works such as *The Kindly Ones* that demonstrates these benefits. What Littell sees as most problematic about the traditional type of Holocaust narrative is that it presents waste and death as things to be avoided or conquered. They

often present an implicit vision of utopian world free of death, suffering, and waste. For Bataille, this type of thinking is completely in line with the goals of the profane world. He writes, “Future time constitutes this real world to such a degree that death has no place in it.”²⁴³ Instead of focusing attention on what Bataille sees “the great affirmer, the wonder-struck cry of life” that is death, these works advance political and social goals aimed at overcoming what led to the events of World War II. They reaffirm stability, whereas Bataille, and Littell, understand the ways in which death represents a type of intimacy whose “measureless violence is a danger to the stability of things.”²⁴⁴ The deaths and acts of transgression work to disrupt and shock readers, reminding them of their own inevitable death and of the violence necessary for true intimacy. Bataille writes, “Paradoxically, intimacy is violence, and it is destruction, because it is not compatible with the positing of the separate individual.”²⁴⁵ Rather than continuing to build, or develop further profane ends, Littell’s novel works to recreate that intimate violence by maintaining a focus on waste and death. He establishes this as a type of purpose early in the work. Drawing the readers to what is most terrifying, Aue breaks the dead of the war down into the most impersonal ways - “a dead German every 40.8 seconds, a dead Jew every 24 seconds” - before reminding the readers of the humanity lost.²⁴⁶ Aue identifies this practice as “a good meditation exercise” and says, “I invite you to continue on your own, until the ground opens up beneath your feet.”²⁴⁷ For Aue, reflecting on death in this way opens a person to a type of mystical experience where the deaths of others are experienced in an intimate, personal way. Aue says he has no need

²⁴³ Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, 46.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 47.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 51.

²⁴⁶ Littell, *The Kindly Ones*, 16.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

for this as “for a long time already the thought of death has been *closer to me than the vein in my neck*,”²⁴⁸ yet others cannot achieve this closeness in the ways that he has.

Other means must become available, and one potential space for this intimacy is literature. Bataille reminds his readers that “Mystical states are available to me”²⁴⁹ but they will only come when “we expend our energy without restraint and with no profit to ourselves.”²⁵⁰ As the sacred practices of religion are increasingly absent, this loss may be best found in literature, where desires may be released unchecked by any limitations.

Though Aue is convinced that any reader will find him “a truly bad man . . . an evil man, a nasty piece of work in every respect,”²⁵¹ he also aims to produce a sensation of rupture that reminds his readers that he is also their human brother, “a man like other men . . . a man just like you.”²⁵²

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

²⁴⁹ Bataille, *On Nietzsche*, 44

²⁵⁰ Georges Bataille, “Happiness, Eroticism, and Literature,” In *The Absence of Myth: Writings on Surrealism*, ed. & trans. Michael Richardson (New York: Versa, 2006), 203.

²⁵¹ Littell, *The Kindly Ones*, 21.

²⁵² Ibid., 24.

CHAPTER 5: I TELL YOU I AM JUST LIKE YOU

Quickfire, are we bound to be alone or be together like a stone is with a stone?
Moonface, “Quickfire, I Tried”

When *The Kindly Ones* was released in France in 2007 it sold very well, to the point that Littell’s publisher, Editions Guillimard, momentarily stopped printing the most recent Harry Potter book in order to meet demand.²⁵³ Guillimard initially expected a limited run, printing only 12,000 copies, but by the end of the year it had sold over 700,000 in France alone, turning Littell into an unlikely celebrity. Suddenly this author, completely unknown only a year before, became a major cultural figure in France to the point that the newspaper *Le Figaro* named him man of the year and others noted how he had become the latest in a long line of American figures beloved in France.²⁵⁴

Given that level of success, an inevitable bidding war between American publishers occurred, and some speculated that Littell’s American publisher, Harper Collins, paid over one million for an English language edition.²⁵⁵ Unfortunately for them, neither the acclaim nor the controversy accompanied the novel to the United States, to the point that, according to Nielson Bookscan, only 17,000 of the book’s initial run of

²⁵³Charles Bremner, “France Falls in Love with American’s Nazi Novel,” *The Times*, October 28, 2006, <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/1727445/posts>, (accessed November 6, 2014).

²⁵⁴Jonathan Littell, *Le Figaro’s Man of the Year*,” *Parislogue.com*, December 31, 2006, <http://www.parislogue.com/travel-tips/jonathan-littel-le-figaros-man-of-the-year.html> (accessed November 5, 2014).

²⁵⁵Bremner, “France Falls in Love.”

150,000 sold.²⁵⁶ Unmoved by the acclaim or the scandal, American audiences were, if anything, largely indifferent to Littell's work. In 2010 the filmmaker John Waters listed the novel as among his favorite works, noting that it is "harrowing, repulsive, and witty," but few American readers seemed interested in the work.²⁵⁷

I point this out to illustrate one final connecting thread between my three case studies: All have small audiences, at least in the United States. While Littell may have found a large audience in France and a few other countries (including Israel),²⁵⁸ American readers ignored the work, and at best Harper Collins expectations of over one hundred thousand sold appears wildly optimistic. Their expectations for a blockbuster appears as influenced by the controversy surrounding the novel as much as anything, yet it is hard to imagine a book such as Littell's becoming a best seller in America. Littell himself says he did not expect to make any money off the novel,²⁵⁹ and based on the American reception alone, his expectation was not unreasonable.

Still, of all of my examples *The Kindly Ones* may have the largest audience in the United States. While wrestling can draw crowds in the tens of thousands at live events, to say nothing of the millions watching on television on a weekly basis, deathmatch wrestling rarely draws more than a few hundred. Although matches receive a second life on DVD releases and streaming websites, there is nothing to suggest that groups like Combat Zone Wrestling have anything approaching the WWE's audience. For the case of Chris Burden, the audience is even smaller, and, beyond that, his performance pieces

²⁵⁶Rachel Deahl, "As 'Kindly Ones' Sinks, 'Every Man Alone' Rises," *Publisher's Weekly*, July 27, 2009, <http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/new-titles/adult-announcements/article/6548-as-kindly-ones-sinks-every-man-dies-alone-rises.html> (accessed November 6, 2014).

²⁵⁷John Waters, "Favorite Novels," *The Week*, May 21, 2010, <http://theweek.com/article/index/203141/john-waters-6-favorite-books> (accessed November 6, 2010)

²⁵⁸Golsan, "The American Reception of Max Aue."

²⁵⁹Blumefield, "Interview with Jonathan Littell."

stopped long ago. He has undertaken no performance pieces in decades, and since 1975, the year of “Doomed,” he has done no pieces where he placed his own body in danger. Beyond those facts, even at his height, Burden had a small audience. According to some accounts, only ten people witnessed “Shoot”²⁶⁰ and remaining visual evidence shows his pieces were seen by very few people. His work could have easily been lost to history, as Karen Styles points out that “Shoot” occurred a few years before Burden began attracting notoriety and “the artist who shot himself” nickname.²⁶¹

It must be acknowledged that all three have small audience, but I do not believe that negates any insights drawn from these examples. I deliberately chose all three because they represent a type of limit experience. Catherine Coquio asks of *The Kindly Ones* if readers are “undergoing initiation into a limit-experience” and a similar question could be asked of Chris Burden’s body art and the collective experiences found in deathmatch wrestling.²⁶² Driven to moments of ecstatic horror, each of these cases allows for a collective celebration of death, pushing images of waste to excessive points. These extreme moments make up the purpose of these works but similar experiences can be found in other, less obviously extreme works. The most intense emphasize certain traits, but these traits may appear as often in more well-known examples.

For deathmatch wrestling, the most noticeable mainstream counterpart would be WWE-style wrestling, but other, more indirect comparisons could be found. As the world of sports media becomes larger, opening games and leagues to a type of scrutiny rarely seen only decades before, fans are becoming more aware of the level of physical

²⁶⁰“Chris Burden: The Artist Who Shot Himself,” Artlark.com, April 11, 2014, <http://artlark.org/2014/04/11/chris-burden-the-artist-who-shot-himself/> (accessed November 6, 2014)

²⁶¹Styles, “Burden of Light,” 30.

²⁶²Coquio, “Oh My Human Brothers,” 77.

loss associated with all types of athletic competitions. A 2014 Time Magazine cover article asked “Is football worth it?” while featuring a cover photo of a high school football player, Chad Stover, taken moments before he suffered an on-field injury that would kill him.²⁶³ Injuries like Stover’s may still be anomalies, but no football fan can reasonably claim to be unaware of the level of physical harm that comes from playing this game as every year stories detail the level of brain trauma inherent in football. Perhaps not consciously considering it, fans are still expected to reconcile their love of the spectacle of football with the norm of self-preservation, and although the case of deathmatch wrestling allows viewers to witness the conflict more easily, it could still be found in American football. From a Bataillean perspective, rather than attempting the mental gymnastics necessary to enjoy a game while also condemning its existence, it might be more appropriate to indulge in the wastefulness of it. With bodies being destroyed amidst a backdrop of huge financial waste, with more and more high profile college and professional teams playing on tax-funded fields, might the proper Bataillean response to revel in the excess of it. Facing similar questions concerning the World Cup in South Africa, David Chidester asks if rather than attempt to sell the South African people on the dubious claims that the multibillion dollar stadiums will ultimately be useful, if instead they should simply have a festival where they are blown up.²⁶⁴ Essentially, Chidester asks if the games should stop trying to incorporate utilitarian goals and instead fully embracing excess. Reinterpreting athletic competitions through the lens of sacrifice allows the role of audience desire to be seen in a clearer way. In a way

²⁶³ Sean Gregory, “When Football Isn’t Worth It,” *Time Magazine*, September 18, 2014, <http://time.com/3397085/the-tragic-risks-of-american-football/> (accessed November 6, 2014).

²⁶⁴ David Chidester, *Wild Religion: Tracking the Sacred in South Africa* (Oakland: University of California Press), 10.

similar to how deathmatch wrestling also allows for a full unleashing of violent desire, professional sports, beyond just football, could be seen as a means of excessive waste where the emphasis is placed on producing the greatest loss of resources possible.

As wrestling exists in the liminal space between athletic competition and scripted drama, many of the same observations made concerning deathmatch wrestling could be made regarding many forms of reality television. It is only appropriate that the WWE produces a number of reality shows as professional wrestling lends itself perfectly to reality television as both mediums work in the cloudy space between real and scripted. Just as it is insulting to assume professional wrestling fans are unaware that the matches have predetermined endings, fans of reality shows do not need to be told that the shows do not represent reality. What is more important is the way reality shows allow for a willing documentation of personal humiliation in much the same way that deathmatch wrestling allows for physical mutilation. In that activity, fans push wrestlers to more and more dangerous positions, and fans of reality shows, while unable to immediately alter narratives, can push the actions to points of degradation, asking participants to document humiliation publically.

Chris Burden's performance art also creates parallels to some reality shows. I can attest to speaking to a number of people about Chris Burden's work and hearing a similar comment: "That sounds like *Jackass*."²⁶⁵ Though MTV's *Jackass* show was very popular, enough to spawn four movies and a number of spin off shows, when I have heard people make such comments they typically do so to dismiss Burden's work, as though if Chris Burden should be considered a great artist then so should Johnny

²⁶⁵ One post on Tumblr featured a selection of Burden's work with the caption, "I'm Chris Burden and welcome to *Jackass*." (<http://coleoptera-kinbote.tumblr.com/post/35779821854>)

Knoxville, Steve O, etc. After all, on *Jackass*, those performers participated in acts where they opened themselves to the possibility of great physical harm, often to a greater extent than Burden did. For example, one of the first Jackass acts involves Knoxville being pepper sprayed and shot with a taser, all in a piece titled “Self Defense.” In a moment that echoes Burden’s most notorious piece, Knoxville also shoots himself to test the effectiveness of a bulletproof vest in a part of the bit MTV refused to air.²⁶⁶

Truthfully, I do not believe the *Jackass*/Burden comparison is an unfair one, and in fact may be more appropriate than comparisons to contemporary performance artists. Director Spike Jonze, who was involved in the *Jackass* show and movies, claims that learning about Burden was “revelatory” for him and Knoxville, and he believes *Jackass* blends lowbrow comedy and conceptual art.²⁶⁷ *Jackass* rather gleefully casts off intellectual assessments (though, during an interview on *The Daily Show*, Johnny Knoxville did proudly declare that *Jackass 3* premiered at the Museum of Modern Art), and it also casts off interpretive frameworks. The stunts of *Jackass* build to moments that mix humor and disgust, all while working to blur the lines between the audience’s desire for violence and their discomfort seeing certain acts performed. Without providing a narrative framework for the action, the creators of *Jackass* leave audiences as witnesses to acts of physical torment disguised as comedy. A common moment in *Jackass* scenes is the moment when the primary performer rolls on the ground in pain, with the others standing nearby and laughing, and many of the films end with somewhat somber scenes spliced into the credits showing how stunts have gone wrong and led to serious injuries.

²⁶⁶Eric Ditzian, “‘Jackass’ Star Opens Up About Infamous Gun Stunt,” *Mtv.com*, October 15, 2010, <http://www.mtv.com/news/1650118/jackass-star-johnny-knoxville-opens-up-about-infamous-gun-stunt/> (accessed November 5, 2014).

²⁶⁷Dennis Lim, “Another Dimension of Idiocy,” *NYTimes.com*, October 8, 2010, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/10/movies/10jackass.html?_r=0 (accessed November 6, 2014).

The line between degradation and comedy is nearly nonexistent, perhaps made only by the laughing of the performers, and while they may not perform in art spaces, they do allow for the question of audience culpability to be raised.

Regarding *The Kindly Ones*, one appropriate companion could be the realm of film and television. As I mention in my section on the novel, I believe *The Kindly Ones* mirrors some of the work being done in extreme horror films, but I think there are examples that could be drawn from works with larger audiences. Television's current obsession with the antihero suggests a willingness to develop empathetic relationships with amoral figures. *Breaking Bad*'s Walter White, *Sons of Anarchy*'s Jax Teller, and *Deadwood*'s Al Swearingen may not participate in the same transgressions as Max Aue but they do allow viewers to participate vicariously in prohibited acts. Playing the titular character in *Hannibal*, Mads Mikkelsen's serial killer frequently expresses a need to create a human connection while also attempting to universalize his actions. These works allow viewers to live in a way they would not in their day to day lives, and for Bataille that ability to sustain that type of fantasy allows viewers to engage in transgressions they would otherwise resist. Concerning detective novels, he writes, "The gratuitous nature of the novels and the fact that the reader is anyway safe from danger usually prevent him from seeing this very clearly, but we live vicariously in a way that our lack of energy forbids us in real life."²⁶⁸

Regardless of whether these other examples map perfectly atop my earlier case studies, I do believe that Bataille's call for sacred practices can be found in the contemporary world. Writing in "Attraction and Repulsion I," Bataille identifies "societies of advanced civilization in which we live" as the type of society where "the

²⁶⁸Bataille, *Erotism*, 86

sacred seems at least initially in the process of disappearing.”²⁶⁹ Bataille means to initiate “the transformation of depression into tension” by recentering focus on “that which is disgusting and debilitating.”²⁷⁰ What is important to note is that what constitutes disgusting and debilitating Bataille remains possible. Even though Bataille does identify a few items as belonging to the loose category of “untouchable and unspeakable” – “corpses, menstrual blood, pariahs” – it is not necessary to think of Bataille’s understanding of transgressive as prescriptive. Though the taboo on waste remains, the means of violation may change. As Cynthia Carr notes in *On Edge: Performance at the End of the 20th Century*, transgression is always dependent on context, meaning it changes over time and is based on cultural lines. Carr, a theatre critic for *The Village Voice*, writes specifically about performance art and punk music in the 1970s and 80s, and strongly objects to the idea that transgression can be prescriptive. Acts that at one point shock and disgust lose their power to shock eventually, and she most clearly objects to the idea that violent performance is in and of itself transgressive. Concerning the notorious punk singer GG Allin she writes, “People seem to confuse ‘transgression’ with violence. Probably the worst act I’ve ever seen was a supposedly ‘transgressive’ GG Allin show. He’d jam the mike up his ass and then try to club someone in the first row with it, while howling his wish to rape. . . This ‘transgresses’ nothing. Just reinforces the violence already sanctioned in the culture.”²⁷¹ For Carr acts in isolation cannot be considered transgressive: they must be looked at in the context of their cultural norms. Reflecting Burden’s fear of becoming an actor, performing the same acts time and again, Allin’s act no longer shocked, according to Carr, because it

²⁶⁹Bataille, “Attraction and Repulsion I”, 104

²⁷⁰Ibid., 111.

²⁷¹Carr, *On Edge*, 158.

existed within a culture that sanctioned and celebrated it. Rather than pushing for new means of shock and disgust, as I believe deathmatch performers will do, Allin merely repeated what he was expected to do in that setting. Taken out of that culture, out of Carr's specific surroundings of New York punk rock and art scenes, the actions may regain their sense of transgression. The Drive-By Truckers' "The Night GG Allin Came to Town" provides a nice, comical illustration of this as it details the shock an older couple in rural Tennessee felt even reading about Allin's act.

If transgression can change, and if there is an ethical value in reintroducing sacred practices, what then of Violentacrez, the man posting images of car crashes and underage girls on Reddit? In finding value in practices like deathmatch wrestling, artists like Chris Burden, and novels like *The Kindly Ones*, and seeing elements of those practices occurring again in more mainstream entertainment, is a defense being made for figures like Michael Brustch and those who post the most violent, taboo-violating photographs they can find online? Does Bataille offer a defense for Brutsch's obsessions and actions? Should all collective acts of sadism be seen through the lens of sacrifice? This is a fair concern, and one many have regarding the work of Bataille. For example, Stephen S. Bush wonders about the ethics of "instrumentalizing others by reducing their horrible suffering to a means for achieving one's own ecstasy."²⁷² Bush specifically worries about the mechanisms within Bataille's ethical practices that could prevent attempts at communication from sliding into acts of sadism.²⁷³ The case of Violentacrez may appear a perfect case to illustrate Bush's worries as drawing a line between Bataille's use of the Ling Chi photograph and Violentacrez publishing shocking images requires something

²⁷²Stephen S. Bush, "The Ethics of Ecstasy," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 39, no. 2 (2011), 307.

²⁷³*Ibid.*, 305

beyond the typical condemnations directed at Brutsch. Condemning Brutsch over his use of those photos because he does not have, or wish to gain, the consent of the photographed is all well and good, but the Ling Chi victim grants no more consent than do the people in Brutsch's images, and Bush also worries about Bataille's disinterest in considering the context of the photograph. Bush writes, "He [Bataille] dehistoricizes the execution and ignores any dimension of political power, thus undercutting the possibility of responding to the photographs with a sense of injustice."²⁷⁴ Viewers are not to look upon these photos with any historical context, nor are they presented in a way designed to create sympathy for the man being killed, and for Bush this presents a problem. From his perspective, Bataille presents "a meditational practice with gains too uncertain and risks too overwhelming to endorse," and the risk he sees inherent in Bataille's philosophy is the unleashing of sadism.²⁷⁵

Bush raises reasonable concerns, and, if anything, they demonstrate the difficulties in advocating certain practices for fear that they could easily slip into sadistic activities. The trouble with something like *Violentacrez* is that, while everything I know of them suggests they should be condemned from a Bataillean perspective, Bataille does at least offer a way to see practices similar to those performed by Brutsch as a means of communication. Bataille does write that it is not from any sadistic urge that he looks at the Ling Chi photograph, as sadism would not break him open in any way.²⁷⁶ In *Guilty*, Bataille writes, "Rather than eat, my desire is to be eaten," as he wishes to take the anguish of death upon himself.²⁷⁷ Ecstasy comes in imagining himself being tormented,

²⁷⁴Ibid., 303.

²⁷⁵Ibid., 318.

²⁷⁶ Bataille, *Inner Experience*, 120.

²⁷⁷ Bataille, *Guilty*, 14

and that seems radically different from what Brutsch and his followers are doing. In that instance, unlike the case studies I use, the goal is to relegate suffering to a few individuals, to build a dividing line of the self based upon those who suffer and those who do not, mocking or otherwise taking enjoyment in their suffering as it is theirs alone. While it may still lead to practices many consider of questionable value, Bataille's call for sacrifice should not be seen as a single call for sadism. For Bataille, the stakes of sacrificial practice could not be higher: He aims to challenge the commitment cultures have to promote the idea of the individualized self as it is in that commitment that true sadism is fostered. By denying the bond of communication, individuals may continue to push for profane ends, turning others into tools only valuable in the ways they can reach certain ends. The case of Violentacrez demonstrates that so long as the emphasis remains on accumulation and individuality, no practice can escape the profane world. Sacrifice does not occur when the sacrificed object is still being used as a tool, even if that act shares cursory similarities to the act of sacrifice. The stakes are not the same.

Jesse Goldhammer writes, "[F]or Bataille, sacrifice is a useless practice; its violence and destructiveness ontologically tear individuals apart, allowing them to forge unique communal bonds with others similarly sundered, anguished beings."²⁷⁸ This version of sacrifice involves a collective identity built on an unrecoverable loss, and runs counter to the typical political and social goals of modern liberalism, returning to the concerns of religion. Bataille writes in *Erotism*, "Our only real pleasure is to squander our resources to no purpose, just as if a wound were bleeding away inside us; we always

²⁷⁸Jesse Goldhammer, "Dare to Know, Dare to Sacrifice," in *Reading Bataille Now*, ed. Shannon Winnubst (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2007), 23.

want to be sure of the uselessness or the ruinous of our extravagance.”²⁷⁹ Rejecting the focus on individual rationality inherited from Enlightenment thinkers, Bataille calls for total loss: loss of property, loss of energy, loss of money, ultimately loss of self. This loss can only occur when the push toward utility and individuality is ignored. What Bataille hopes to foster are communities centered around moments of sacrifice, not communities built on accumulation. Goldhammer writes, “Rather than gather due to concentrations, elevations, formalizations, idealizations, institutionalizations, or centralizations of power, members of Bataillean communities are united by that which repulses them: abjection generated by sacrificial loss.”²⁸⁰ The communities envisioned by Bataille understand the communal value of transgression, of how witnessing an act prohibited can leave one “like water in water.” Instead of being united by political or social goals, Bataillean communities, of the kind potentially found in small, violent wrestling shows, the moments created by an obscure performance artist, and a transgressive novel, are formed by the shared sense of loss resulting from transgression. By acting without purpose, these groups reject the generally accepted good of social progress, if only for a moment. Drawn in by what repulses them, they become lost in the moment of sacred violence.

²⁷⁹ Bataille, *Erotism* 170

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 18

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