

2014

Complicating Eroticism and the Male Gaze: Feminism and Georges Bataille's Story of the Eye

Chris Vanderwees

Carleton University, john.vanderwees@carleton.ca

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/sttcl>



Part of the [French and Francophone Literature Commons](#), and the [Modern Literature Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

Recommended Citation

Vanderwees, Chris (2014) "Complicating Eroticism and the Male Gaze: Feminism and Georges Bataille's Story of the Eye," *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*: Vol. 38: Iss. 1, Article 6. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.1001>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature* by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

Complicating Eroticism and the Male Gaze: Feminism and Georges Bataille's *Story of the Eye*

Abstract

This article explores the relationship between feminist criticism and Georges Bataille's *Story of the Eye*. Much of the critical work on Bataille assimilates his psychosocial theories in *Erotism* with the manifestation of those theories in his fiction without acknowledging potential contradictions between the two bodies of work. The conflation of important distinctions between representations of sex and death in *Story of the Eye* and the writings of *Erotism* forecloses the possibility of reading Bataille's novel as a critique of gender relations. This article unravels some of the distinctions between *Erotism* and *Story of the Eye* in order to complicate the assumption that the novel simply reproduces phallogocentric sexual fantasies of transgression. Drawing from the work of Angela Carter and Laura Mulvey, the author proposes the possibility of reading *Story of the Eye* as a pornographic critique of gender relations through an analysis of the novel's displacement and destruction of the male gaze.

Keywords

Georges Bataille, Male Gaze, *Story of the Eye*, Pornography, Eroticism, *Erotism*, Feminism, Angela Carter, Susan Sontag, Gaze, Vision, Surrealism, Death, Sex

Cover Page Footnote

Special thanks to Dr. Brian Johnson (Carleton University) who provided invaluable comments and suggestions during the early writing stages of this article.

Complicating Eroticism and the Male Gaze:
Feminism and Georges Bataille's *Story of the Eye*

Chris Vanderwees
Carleton University

In "The Pornographic Imagination," Susan Sontag writes, "Bataille's works, better than any other I know of, indicate the aesthetic possibilities of pornography as an art form: *Histoire de l'Œil* being the most accomplished artistically of all the pornographic prose fictions I've read" (65). Sontag wrote this essay in 1967, years prior to controversy throughout the 1980s between feminists campaigning against pornography and the counter-arguments made by feminists opposed to censorship (Keenan 38). Sontag sees aesthetic and transgressive literary value within certain pornographic narratives, citing Georges Bataille's *Story of the Eye* as a primary example. Of course, some feminist scholars disagree with Sontag's assessment of Bataille's work. Perhaps the most disparaging critic of Bataille's *Story of the Eye* is Andrea Dworkin. In *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, Dworkin argues that Bataille "stylizes violence and denies its fundamental meaning to women, who do in fact end up dead because men believe what Bataille believes and makes pretty: that death is the dirty secret of sex. In some cases, the death is literal. In some cases, it is the annihilation of female will" (176). Dworkin only recognizes Simone, Bataille's main female character in *Story of the Eye*, as "the sadistic whore whose sexuality is murderous and insatiable; ultimately she is also the exquisite victim....She is a prototypical figure in the male imagination, the woman who is sexual because her sexuality is male in its values, in its violence. She is the male idea of a woman let loose" (176). Dworkin also cites Bataille's *Erotism* as a clear example of male misogyny (117, 151). In her discussion of "force," Dworkin sees pornography in general as connected to rape and other forms of violence against women (198). Ultimately, she perceives any intellectual adulation for Bataille or *Story of the Eye* as misplaced and misconstrued. On the one hand, setting aside her essentialist analysis of gender relations, I might agree with Dworkin that Simone appears as Bataille's ideal fantasy of a woman: perpetually interested in sex, fascinated by and attracted to the scatological. On the other hand, although Simone operates as Bataille's sexual fantasy, are there no redeeming qualities in Bataille's *Story of the Eye* that feminist scholars might recuperate? And why, if such a recuperative analysis might be made, would it be beneficial for feminist scholars to consider?

Following Angela Carter's discussion of pornography in *The Sadeian Woman*, I explore these questions in relation to Bataille's *Story of the Eye*. Throughout her study, Carter analyzes the potentially subversive qualities of pornographic fiction in its ability to reveal various gender injustices. She writes

that often the despicable qualities of pornography rouse complex reactions from audiences “because sexual relations between men and women always render explicit the nature of social relations in the society in which they take place and, if described explicitly, will form a critique of those relations, even if that is not and never has been the intention of the pornographer” (Carter 20). In this sense, I argue that despite Bataille’s conscious efforts to arouse the reader, *Story of the Eye* may also function as a critique of gender relations. Further, it is important to understand Bataille’s writing on eroticism in order to assess the gender complications that arise from Simone’s character. Much of the critical work on Bataille’s *Story of the Eye* implicitly assimilates the text with his theories in *Erotism* without acknowledging potential contradictions between the two works. In *Sensible Ecstasy*, for example, Amy M. Hollywood argues, “Bataille’s erotic fictions are the key to understanding his theories of physical and emotional eroticism” (39). In *Surrealism, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, Natalya Lusty more carefully argues, “Bataille’s novel can be read as a nascent form of his theory of eroticism and its privileged relationship to ‘inner experience’ (54). To be clear, I agree, of course, that Bataille’s pornographic fiction may be understood as a precursor to his later theoretical writings on eroticism. I also agree that Bataille’s theoretical work might be better understood in relation to his fiction. What I want to emphasize, however, are what I see as important differences between representations of sex and death in *Story of the Eye* and those in the more sociological writings of *Erotism*.

Beyond distinctions of fiction and theory, part of the discrepancy between these works may be due to the temporal gap between when they were written and published. First published in 1928, Bataille’s *Story of the Eye* appeared in an edition of only 134 copies with no publisher’s name, under the pseudonym Lord Auch. Due to the text’s controversial depictions of graphic violence and pornography, an edition was not published under Bataille’s name until 1967, five years after his death. Prior to the publication of the 1967 edition, there were “less than 850 copies” of *Story of the Eye* in circulation (Surya 106). Bataille’s theories of transgression and taboo were later published as *Erotism* in 1957. Although *Story of the Eye* was written approximately thirty years prior to *Erotism*, a more widespread academic reception of Bataille’s fiction would not take place until the publication of the 1967 edition. Whether or not the discrepancies between Bataille’s theory and fiction are attributable to these gaps between writing and publication is not my main concern. I do, however, think this temporal gap at least partially warrants a juxtaposition of these texts to gauge theoretical consistencies in Bataille’s works and that it is important to acknowledge the discrepancies between them.

Therefore, I will outline Bataille’s theory in *Erotism* as it pertains to *Story of the Eye* in order to shed light on some of the congruencies and discrepancies

between the two texts, especially in terms of gender. Ultimately, I argue that *Story of the Eye* reinforces some of Bataille's theories in *Erotism* while simultaneously contradicting misogynistic aspects of this text. I also contend that although Simone's character may function as Bataille's, the narrator's, and by extension, the reader's object of sexual fantasy, *Story of the Eye* complicates this fantasy and the concept of the "male gaze" through its construction of gender relations in terms of Bataille's *Erotism* and through its representations of destruction and displacement of vision.

In his introduction to *Erotism*, Bataille writes, "[e]roticism, it may be said, is assenting life up to the point of death" (11). Bataille admits that this statement is not a definition of the erotic, but it most closely captures the "meaning" of eroticism. Throughout *Erotism*, Bataille elaborates upon this preliminary statement to address eroticism and its relationship with death, transgression, taboo, and violence. For Bataille, the existence of eroticism depends on a fundamental concept: humans are discontinuous beings, always striving for a sense of continuity. He uses the example of sperm and ovum to explain this concept: "[s]perm and ovum are to begin with discontinuous entities, but they *unite*, and consequently a continuity comes into existence between them to form a new entity for the death and disappearance of the separate beings. The new entity is itself discontinuous, but it bears within itself the transition to continuity, the fusion, fatal to both, of two separate beings" (*Erotism* 14). The impossibility of experiencing or achieving complete continuity, however, is what generates a perpetual anxiety within the subject. Humans, Bataille argues, are driven by this primal yearning to experience continuity.

For Bataille, individuals experience continuity through forms of sex and death. Both sex and death are intimately intertwined in his discussion of eroticism. In sex, two individuals are "projected beyond their limits by the sexual orgasm" and are "simultaneously open to continuity" (*Erotism* 103). These individuals only momentarily experience continuity through the orgasm, as the reversion to a sense of discontinuity is immediate, creating a perpetual desire for sexual experience in each individual. For Bataille, the human need to experience continuity through sex always signals connotations of death: "we can no longer differentiate between death and sexuality. Sexuality and death are simply the culminating points of the holiday, nature celebrates, with the inexhaustible multitude of living beings, both of them signifying the boundless wastage of nature's resources as opposed to the urge to live on characteristic of every living creature" (*Erotism* 61). Bataille argues that death and sex are inextricable and, much like sexual reproduction, death is responsible for life. "The death of one being," Bataille writes, "is correlated with the birth of the other, heralding it and making it possible. Life is always a product of the decomposition of life" (*Erotism* 55). In this sense, Bataille collapses Sigmund Freud's distinctions in *Beyond the*

Pleasure Principle between Eros and the death drive. Margaret Iversen neatly summarizes the disparity between Freud and Bataille in *Beyond Pleasure: Freud, Lacan, Barthes*:

For Bataille, the binding counterpoints to the unbinding effects of eroticism and death are our actual physical separateness as well as an inward sense of self-possession and stability—in other words, the ego. The dynamic of binding and unbinding is thus preserved, but Eros is given a self-shattering quality, while death is eroticized. Life at its most intense, at its limit, encounters death. Ecstatic pleasure borders pain. It is no wonder, then, that Freud's pleasure principle, which shuns pain, seems moribund, while the beyond of pleasure makes life intensely felt at its limit. (83)

In other words, whereas Freud understands the death drive in opposition to the life drive, Bataille sees these drives as bound together. For Bataille, death brings individuals to permanent continuity through the decomposition of the body in order to produce new discontinuous beings. This further aligns with his description of the sperm and ovum as each die in continuity to give life to a new individual with its own drive for continuous experience. Bataille writes, "death, or at least the contemplation of death, brings [individuals] back to continuity" (*Erotism* 83). To clarify, an individual's drive for continuity is not necessarily a drive to die in actuality, but rather a drive to experience the limits of life or the closeness of death, for example, through contact with a corpse or a ritual sacrifice.

Bataille argues that the insatiable drive to experience continuity through sex and death interrupts the need to work. Humans, therefore, construct taboos in order to limit the drive for continuity. Inevitably, taboos must be broken in order for humans to experience continuity, instigating acts of transgression. For Bataille, transgression only occurs when a subject has internalized taboos. Consequently, "the drama of transgression occurs *within* the subject" and manifests itself as "the paradoxical combination of pleasure and anguish" (Suleiman 324). Finally, Bataille argues that humans organize transgression through rituals so that they may break taboos in sanctioned spaces, limiting the insatiable drive for continuous experience.

Bataille's theories in *Erotism* often manifest in his fiction. Although Bataille's unnamed narrator and Simone in *Story of the Eye* constantly engage in violent and sexual activity, they "are never more tormentedly aware of the Law than when...transgressing it" (Suleiman 324). At the beginning of the novel, Simone and the narrator are young, virginal, and "frightened of anything sexual" (*Story* 3). Bataille emphasizes the innocence of these characters. Both Simone and the narrator have internalized social taboos, which enables them to experience continuity through each transgressive act that they commit. Throughout the

narrative, Simone and the narrator transgress a variety of taboos related to sex, death, and violence in order to experience continuity. Bataille also demonstrates this human drive for continuity throughout *Story of the Eye* in the characters' yearning for a connection to one another. For instance, when the narrator is temporarily separated from Simone and Marcelle, he walks along the beach with a stolen revolver, contemplating his own suicide. He reconsiders the value of living by recalling the potential to achieve continuity through his relationship with the female characters:

I was merely trying to soothe a violent agitation, a strange spectral delirium....I even thought I might kill myself....But...I realized that my life *had* to have some meaning all the same, and *would* have one if only certain events, defined as desirable, were to occur. I finally accepted being so extraordinarily haunted by the names *Simone* and *Marcelle*....I could keep going only by accepting or feigning to imagine a phantasmic compromise that would confusedly link my most disconcerting moves to theirs. (*Story* 18)

The "violent agitation" is the narrator's sense of discontinuity, which leads him to consider suicide as an option. He realizes, however, that his life might have meaning in "desirable" events, that is, through sexual experiences. Simone and Marcelle haunt the narrator in his discontinuity and he is driven to achieve moments of continuity in their sexual encounters. Here, the narrator's contemplation of his lovers directly aligns with Bataille's theories in *Eroticism*. Bataille's theoretical text is also congruent with *Story of the Eye* as he constantly intertwines images of sex and death. Within the first few pages of *Story of the Eye*, for example, the narrator reveals his awareness of the similarity between the two concepts after he and Simone accidentally crash their car into a woman on a bicycle:

[W]e crashed into a cyclist, an apparently very young and very pretty girl. Her head was almost totally ripped off by the wheels. For a long time, we were parked a few yards beyond without getting out, fully absorbed in the sight of the corpse. The horror and despair at so much bloody flesh, nauseating in part, and in part very beautiful, was fairly equivalent to our impression upon seeing one another. (*Story* 5)

The narrator claims that killing the cyclist and viewing her dead body arouses a sensation comparable to his sexual relationship with Simone. Negotiating feelings of both pleasure and anguish, the narrator's reaction to the death of the cyclist exemplifies Bataille's definition of eroticism. Throughout *Story of the Eye*,

Bataille invokes eroticism in linking “piercing cries” with “violent desires,” and “sexual dream[s]” with “nightmare[s]” (21). *Story of the Eye* relates nearly every sexual act with death and nearly every death with sexual activity. Bataille constantly couples images of pleasure, seduction, and desire with anguish, horror, and fear, exemplifying his theory of eroticism in each instance.

Both Bataille’s fiction and his theories, however, receive few compliments from feminist scholars. As I have already mentioned, Dworkin sees Bataille’s *Erotism* as reinforcing misogyny and violence towards women (151). Although Susan Rubin Suleiman contends with Dworkin’s reading of Bataille, she also argues that despite the impressive *avant-garde* qualities in Bataille’s fiction, his works are limiting as they often construct a confrontation between “an all-powerful father and a traumatized son, a confrontation staged across and over the body of the mother” (329). Referring to the distinctions that Bataille draws between men and women in how they experience continuity, Carolyn Dean similarly begins to question where “women figure in the scheme of things” if women are mainly an instrument for the achievement of masculine continuity (244-45). These concerns are unsurprising, as Bataille constantly privileges the male role when outlining the parameters of continuous and discontinuous experience in *Erotism*:

The transition from the normal state to that of erotic desire presupposes a partial dissolution of the person as he exists in the realm of discontinuity.... In the process of dissolution, the male partner has generally an active role, while the female partner is passive. The passive, female side is essentially the one that is dissolved as a separate entity. But for the male partner the dissolution of the passive partner means one thing only: it is paving the way for a fusion where both are mingled, attaining at length the same degree of dissolution. (17)

Here, Bataille argues that women are essentially passive participants in sex, losing themselves as a means for men to achieve continuity. The “female side” experiences dissolution prior to the “male partner” and she is dissolved separately. In the female’s dissolution, the male is able to “derive meaning and sense from her imaged annihilation...with his experience of continuity predicated on her prior and total self loss” (20). Referring to the act of experiencing continuity through sex, Bataille sees “the female partner...as the victim, the male as the sacrificer” (*Erotism* 18). It is precisely this gender divide in *Erotism* that leads many scholars to discount Bataille’s usefulness for feminists and feminist theory. Karla L. Schultz is one of few critics who find Bataille’s theories productive in discussing feminist issues. In “Bataille’s *L’Erotisme* in Light of Recent Love Poetry,” Schultz discusses various poems written by women such as Margaret

Atwood, Marge Piercy, Adrienne Rich, and Anne Sexton in relation to Bataille. More specifically, she juxtaposes Bataille's theories of eroticism with images of sex and death in contemporary women's poetry and explores whether or not her examples might demonstrate what Hélène Cixous calls *écriture féminine* (Schultz 85). Schultz sees the potential for women to write themselves and their bodies more effectively by utilizing Bataille's theories of eroticism, but ultimately moves from her examples to argue that "the configuration of love and life, stressing the 'we' rather than the 'I,' appears to be more characteristic of women's poetry" (79). Although I find this generalization about women's poetry troubling, I appreciate Schultz's attempt to recuperate Bataille's theories for feminist purposes.

Like Schultz, I contend that there are salvageable qualities in Bataille's works for feminism. Although Bataille's theories might more generally align with his pornographic fiction, I contend that *Story of the Eye* contradicts the specific constructions of gender in *Erotism*. While Dworkin only sees Simone as Bataille's misogynistic sexual fantasy, I suggest that in order to better understand the complexity of Simone's actions throughout the text, she might be thought of as an object of the "male gaze," a concept that Laura Mulvey describes in her essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." Obviously, Mulvey discusses the gaze of the camera, which is unique to cinematic narratives, but her analysis also serves to describe the system of viewing power in textual fiction. In "The Situation of the Looker-On: Gender, Narration, and Gaze in *Wuthering Heights*," Beth Newman notes that much of literary analysis is based in the language of sight (e.g. "point of view") and explores the transposition of gaze theory onto Emily Brontë's fiction. Newman concludes that Mulvey's theory is "not likely to function as monolithic" in terms of a simple transposition to literary texts, but rather elucidates what she calls "narrational looks" or focal points within textual narratives (1036-37). Sarah Stanbury similarly argues that female characters in literary works are often "the center of all lines of sight – like an image, in fact" (40). Further, Ladelle McWhorter writes, "pornographic works are primarily visual, even if they are discursive. They are visual in that they conjure up images of women, body parts, scenes of the enactment of male power; and they are visual in that they stand as icons, representations, of eroticism itself" (119). Therefore, the visual aspects, narrative looks, and exchange of gazes between characters in literary pornography are what make Mulvey's theory so relevant to the genre.

Mulvey argues that a spectator watching a film identifies with the main male protagonist and "projects his look onto that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence (34). Mulvey's description of the male gaze serves well to characterize the affect of the

unnamed narrator's first person account of sexual acts involving Simone in Bataille's *Story of the Eye*:

The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact....Woman displayed as sexual object in the leitmotif of erotic spectacle: from pin-ups to strip-tease...she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire. (33)

For Mulvey, the cinema allows male viewers to experience pleasure through "scopophilia," the pleasure in looking. Pornographic literature is "visual in that [it] conjure[s] up images of women, body parts, scenes in the enactment of male power" (McWhorter 119). Mulvey's description of the male gaze operates through the visual qualities of pornographic literature to generate this pleasure in looking. This concept also functions through the viewer's identification with the gaze of the camera, the narcissistic pleasure derived from the spectator's identification with elements of the self that are discerned from the screen. Similar to the experience of the viewer, most pornographic literature invites the reader to identify with the first person account of the action. *Story of the Eye*'s narrator, for instance, conveys the action of the novel in an impassive tone, one device that Bataille employs which may lead the reader to identify with the first-person account. Sontag writes that pornography often employs a tone of emotional flatness as "[t]he arousal of a sexual response in the reader *requires* it. Only in the absence of directly stated emotions can the reader of pornography find room for his own responses" (54). Similarly, Bataille's male narrator is never given a name, as readers must be able to insert their own in the process of identifying with the first-person narrative.

In *Erotism*, Bataille discusses the function of the detective novel as a form of "organized transgression" where readers may easily identify with the protagonist. Bataille writes that detective novels "hold and excite the reader and make him identify himself with the hero as he peruses his adventures. 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" (*Erotism* 86). Pornography functions in a similar fashion, becoming an "organized transgression" in Bataille's terms. The reader is able to experience eroticism and transgression at a distance through identification with the first person account of the action. Therefore, Simone becomes an object of the reader's male gaze by extension of the narrator's description of her "pink and dark flesh" (*Story* 4), which is essentially on display throughout the narrative.

Story of the Eye, however, complicates the concept of the male gaze through various sexual images and metaphors pertaining to vision. Further, Simone does not so easily assimilate into the passive female roles that Bataille outlines when referring to continuous experience in *Erotism*. When Simone, the narrator, and Sir Edmund attend a bullfight in Spain, the sight of the matador's closeness to death, as the bull charges through his cape each time, provokes the narrator to describe the arousal of both pleasure and anguish similarly embodied in Bataille's description of eroticism: "any spectator has that feeling of total and repeated lunging typical of the game of coitus. The nearness of death is also felt in the same way" (*Story* 56-57). The bullfighting also arouses Simone and she demands that Sir Edmund bring her the testicles of the bull that has just been defeated.

When Simone returns from having sex with the narrator, Sir Edmund has retrieved the bull's testicles: "on Simone's seat, lay two peeled balls, glands the size and shape of eggs, and of pearly whiteness, faintly bloodshot, like the globe of an eye" (*Story* 62). Throughout *Story of the Eye*, Bataille interweaves the globular images of eyes, eggs, and testicles. In "The Metaphor of the Eye," Roland Barthes describes the slipperiness of the signs and signifiers within Bataille's pornographic narrative:

The Eye seems, then, the matrix of a new trajectory of objects which are in a sense different 'stations' of the ocular metaphor. The first variation is that of the eye and egg; this is a double variation, both of form (in French, the two words, *oeil* and *oeuf* have a common sound and a differentiated sound) and of content (although absolutely discrepant, both objects are globular and white). Once posited as invariant elements, whiteness and rotundity permit new metaphorical tensions.... sanctioned by current French usage which calls the testicles of certain animals *eggs*. (241)

Bataille links images of eyes, eggs, and testicles throughout *Story of the Eye* to form a chain of sliding signifiers, a series of uncanny exchanges. Therefore, Barthes's observation complicates a number of aspects pertaining to Simone's use of the bull testicles. Simone bites into the first testicle to the "dismay" (*Story* 64) of the narrator. She simultaneously consumes and destroys an image of male genitalia. Further, the testicle, for Barthes, also signifies an eye. In his short essay "Eye," Bataille writes that the eye is a cannibal delicacy and that the eye itself is an "object of such anxiety that we will never bite into it" (17). As Simone bites into the testicle, she simultaneously bites into an eye within *Story of the Eye*'s system of exchange between signifiers. This generates anxiety within the narrator and presumably in the reader through the simultaneous destruction of male genitalia and vision embodied in the sign. Ultimately, Simone consumes the

“male gaze.” Further, the testicle contains semen, but as Barthes suggests, also denotes the French signifier of “egg” (*oeuf*) in novel’s system of metaphor exchange between white globular objects. The bull testicle, then, also operates as a metaphor of unification between signs, between the sperm and ovum (egg) in continuity, similar to Bataille’s example in *Erotism*. Consequently, when Simone bites into the eye, she also consumes an image of continuity. Notably, she consumes this continuity for her own satisfaction without “sacrificing” herself for the male narrator’s experience of continuity.

Further, Simone embodies continuity the moment she inserts the “second pale globule” (*Story* 64) into her vagina. Following this, she proceeds to masturbate and experiences “unmeasured horror coincided with a brief orgasm” (*Story* 64) as the bull kills the matador and dislodges his right eye from his head. Simone independently achieves an experience of sex and death equivalent to Bataille’s definition of eroticism. In “A Preface to Transgression,” Michel Foucault refers to the matador’s eye, dangling from its socket: “In the distance created by this violence and uprooting, the eye is seen absolutely, but denied any possibility of sight” (35). Simone’s orgasm coincides with the disruption of the matador’s vision, the loss of the male gaze under a “blinding sun” (*Story* 64). Judith Surkis also notes that this scene marks the instant where “opposites coincide in their simultaneous transgression; the analogous spheres cross the limits of their ‘normal’ positions: the testicle is intruded, the eye extruded. Boundaries between inside and outside are visibly disrupted, imaged before the narrator’s eyes” (27). Bataille’s exchange of signs between eggs, eyes, and testicles also allows for the scene to be read as the simultaneous extrusion and intrusion of eyes. One eye dangles from the matador’s head while Simone inserts another eye into her vagina. In this scene, Simone complicates Bataille’s theories in *Erotism* as she actively experiences continuity through the sacrifice of a male’s gaze. She paradoxically exists as an object of the male gaze, while revelling in the destruction and displacement of it.

Before continuing further, it is important to discuss Marcelle’s function in relation to Simone and the narrator’s transgressions in *Story of the Eye*. Marcelle is often an unwilling participant in sexual acts between Simone and the narrator, being that she is a “pure,” “timid,” and “naively pious” girl (*Story* 7, 11). Within the first few pages of the novel, Simone and the narrator rape Marcelle. From this point on, Marcelle becomes an object of desire for Simone and the narrator, as they need the presence of her shameful gaze to experience satisfaction from sex. Marcelle invokes shame constantly, as she continually blushes at the sight of Simone and the narrator (*Story* 12, 14, 28). When Marcelle witnesses the chaotic spectacle of Simone’s orgy, she locks herself in a wardrobe from the shame at being aroused. Brady Brower writes that Marcelle’s embodiment of shame

becomes necessary for Simone and the narrator to experience continuity through their transgressive acts:

Marcelle's importance resides in her embodiment of the shame that reinstates a prohibitive dimension otherwise absent from the sexual play of Simone and the Narrator.... Only with the thought of Marcelle and the reaction she would have when seeing them 'making it' are the two lovers able to achieve sexual gratification. Marcelle's function as internalized prohibition is amplified by the fact that she is inaccessible to the two, owing to her incarceration in an asylum.... In her absence, she is likened to a ghost, a spectral lack [who]...marks the punitive force that the Law introduces into the scene of transgression. (81)

The narrator makes this point clear when describing the inability to have sex without the thought of Marcelle: "Obviously Simone and I were sometimes taken with a violent desire to fuck. But we no longer thought it could be done without Marcelle" (*Story* 21). Simone and the narrator cannot properly experience continuity together without Marcelle, or at least the persistence of Marcelle's ghost. As Brower writes, Marcelle essentially becomes the embodiment of shame, reinforcing the existence of internalized taboos which when transgressed create a sense of continuity within Simone and the narrator. According to Bataille's *Erotism*, humans cannot achieve continuity through transgression unless there is an internalized taboo to be transgressed. Bataille writes, "sexuality with shame...gave birth to eroticism" (*Erotism* 31). Simone and the narrator exemplify Bataille's observation, as they are able to feel eroticism and continuity in transgressing taboos so long as they internalize Marcelle's embodiment of shame. This allows Simone and the narrator to experience continuity as they transgress the taboos that Marcelle denotes, but as Marcelle denotes taboos, she also simultaneously limits transgressions through her shameful gaze. Essentially, Marcelle becomes a representation and embodiment of the internalized taboos that Bataille discusses in *Erotism*.

After Marcelle commits suicide, this gaze is especially evident. Marcelle hangs herself in the wardrobe in which she shamefully masturbated during the orgy. The narrator cuts the rope around Marcelle's neck and places her body on the floor. Simone and the narrator proceed to have vaginal intercourse for the first time next to Marcelle's dead body, once again exemplifying Bataille's theory of eroticism in sex and death. McWhorter notes that this sexual act also marks "the first time that one body actually covers another in any of the novel's sex scenes, and thus it is the first time that, figuratively speaking, the reader-voyeur's vision of either participant is obscured" (120). By extension, this scene marks the novel's first challenge to the male gaze through its obstruction. After sex, Simone

becomes irritated with Marcelle's dead body, but "[t]he eyes are more irritating than anything else. Even when Simone drenched the face, those eyes, extraordinarily, did not close" (*Story* 51). Marcelle's eyes remain open, continuing to emit a gaze. Marcelle's eyes, however, are dead and her death leaves both the narrator and Simone "blind" (*Story* 51), which consequently leads McWhorter to argue that "the eye—even the living eyes of Simone, the narrator, and the reader him or herself—can no longer function as the origin of the theoretical gaze" (120). This scene ultimately disrupts the theoretical gaze, the male gaze. The narrator internalizes this image of Marcelle's eyes drenched with urine, an image that returns to him at the end of the novel.

Simone also complicates both representations of vision and Bataille's *Erotism* as she aligns with Carter's interpretation of pornography and the Marquis De Sade's construction of his female protagonists. Carter observes that most pornographic narratives depict women who "do not normally fuck in the active sense. They are fucked in the passive tense and hence automatically fucked-up, done over, undone" (27). Contrary to Carter's observation, Simone is not fucked, but fucks instead. She takes an active role throughout *Story of the Eye*, as McWhorter observes:

Simone...is the most lustful and most violent of characters. It is she who is most fascinated by the goring of the toreador Granero, she who seduces the ill-fated priest, she who entreats Sir Edmund, once the priest is dead, to cut out his eye for her erotic enjoyment. Simone is by far the nastiest, most savage, least human character in the story. She is no victim; rather, she victimizes, and most of her victims are male. (118)

Simone's inhuman qualities compare to those of Juliette, the Marquis De Sade's prominent female protagonist. Carter views the inhumanity of De Sade's female characters as an exercise of their freedom or their recuperation of it: "A free woman in an unfree society will be a monster. Her freedom will be a condition of personal privilege that deprives those on which she exercises it of her own freedom. The most extreme kind of this deprivation is murder. These women murder" (27). In *Erotism*, Bataille sees women as sacrificing themselves for the experience of male continuity. Simone, however, complicates this notion when she seduces, rapes, and murders a priest at the end of *Story of the Eye*. As a woman, Simone does not sacrifice herself for male continuity, but literally kills the priest as a sacrifice for her own experience of eroticism:

Simone squeezed [the priest's throat], a dreadful shudder ran through that mute, fully immobilized body, and the cock stood on end. I took it into my hands and had no trouble fitting into Simone's vulva, while she continued

to squeeze the throat. The utterly intoxicated girl kept wrenching the big cock in and out with her buttocks.... At last, she squeezed so resolutely that an even more violent thrill shot through her victim, and she felt come shooting inside her cunt. Now she let go, collapsing backward in a tempest of joy. (80-81)

Just prior to this scene, the narrator refers to the priest as a “pig” (*Story* 75) multiple times, emphasizing the priest’s deviance, but also his animal status as a sacrifice for Simone. Prior to the rape and murder of the priest, Bataille’s *Story of the Eye* replaces the Eucharistic hosts and wine in the church with bodily fluids. Simone forces the priest to urinate into the chalice of wine, drink from this chalice, and then forces him to ejaculate into the ciborium of hosts (*Story* 77). Here, Simone also replaces the symbolic Christian sacrifice with the pagan ritual of the literal sacrifice of life in the death of the priest. This directly contradicts the misogyny of Bataille’s theory pertaining to human continuity, reversing the relations between passive female victim and active male sacrificer. Although the priest surely experiences continuity in both orgasm and death, he is ultimately sacrificed for Simone’s erotic and transgressive fulfilment.

Following the priest’s death, Simone demands that Sir Edmund cut an eye from the priest’s head. Again, Simone appears responsible for the destruction of a male’s gaze. Simone, herself, “gaze[s] at the absurdity and finally [takes the eye] in her hand, completely distraught; yet she ha[s] no qualms, and instantly amuse[s] herself by fondling the depths of her thighs and inserting this apparently fluid object” (*Story* 83). Simone gazes into the dead eye, holding it in her hand, but also inserts it into her anus and finally into her vagina. Essentially, she pleases herself with a dead gaze, as it becomes a sexual fetish between her and the narrator. Brower writes, “[t]he final obscenity, the prying of the priest’s eye from its socket and Simone’s insertion of it into her vagina literalizes the novel’s pornographic purpose of fucking the eye” (84). Simone’s insertion of the eye into her vagina, however, is not necessarily for the reader’s scopophilic pleasure. When the narrator loses track of the eye in the midst of sex and relocates it as he spreads Simone’s legs, he experiences shock and horror:

Now I stood up and, while Simone lay on her side, I drew her thighs apart, and found myself facing something I imagine I had been waiting for in the same way that a guillotine waits for a neck to slice. I even felt as if my eyes were bulging from my head, erectile with horror; in *Simone’s* hairy vagina, I saw the wan blue eye of *Marcelle*, gazing at me through tears of urine. (*Story* 84)

The narrator experiences shock and horror at the displacement of vision and the uncanny return of Marcelle's shameful gaze looking back at him from Simone's vagina. Although much of *Story of the Eye* might be interpreted through the Freudian concept of the uncanny, this instance in the novel is perhaps the most significant. For Freud, the uncanny is not only the unsettling experience of an encounter with what is both familiar and unfamiliar, but also an encounter closely linked with "a morbid anxiety connected with the eyes and with going blind," which often manifests as "a substitute for the dread of castration" (137). In other words, Simone's actions in the logic of Freudian psychoanalysis may function as a symbolic castration of the narrator in her reversal of the point of vision. As the narrator experiences horror at the reminder of internal taboos through Marcelle's shameful gaze, Simone experiences pleasure from the vaginal consumption of this gaze, climaxing at the sight of the narrator's shock. The narrator's shock functions as the catalyst for Simone's pleasure, reminding her of internalized taboos so that she might experience continuity in transgression. At the expense of the male narrator, Simone simultaneously takes pleasure in the reversal of the gaze through which she has been rendered an object. It is this scene where the priest's eye is enucleated which leads Martin Jay to argue that Bataille's *Story of the Eye* challenges "the primacy of sight" as "the time-honored function of the penetrating gaze, able to pierce appearances to 'see' the essences beneath, is explicitly rejected" (18). Ultimately, the eye remains in Simone's vagina and gazes back at the narrator, consequently interrupting and inverting the reader's scopophilic pleasure through identification with the first person account and the symbolic act of castration.

Simone both contradicts Bataille's theories in *Erotism* pertaining to gender relations and challenges the male gaze that renders her an object for viewing pleasure. *Story of the Eye* becomes what Carter calls a work of "moral pornography" as it offers a critique of gender relations. For Carter, whether this critique is conscious or unconscious is unimportant. Of course, I do not contend that *Story of the Eye* is necessarily a feminist work, but rather that it exemplifies Carter's definition of "moral pornography" through its unconscious complication of gender. Unlike Dworkin, for example, Carter sees powerful potential within pornographic narratives:

[T]he pornographer has it in his power to become a terrorist of the imagination, a sexual guerrilla whose purpose is to overturn our most basic notions of these relations, to reinstitute sexuality as a primary mode of being rather than a specialized area of vacation from being and to show that the everyday meetings in the marriage bed are parodies of their own pretensions, that the freest unions may contain seeds of the worst exploitations....The pornographer as terrorist may not think of himself as

an ally for women; that may be the last thing on his mind. But he will always be our unconscious ally because he begins to approach some kind of emblematic truth. (21-22)

In “Happiness, Eroticism and Literature,” Bataille’s own views on erotica or literary pornography communicate that this genre often works with forms of defamiliarization: “Erotic literature can undoubtedly dwell on the description of the most blissful states, but its impulse generally involves the suggestion of greater attractions. But clearly it cannot be confined to the portrayal of feminine beauty; it always calls forth the intervention of an *irregularity*, whether it be distressing or ridiculous” (199). Bataille’s *Story of the Eye* conveys horror, ridiculousness, and irregularity in such a way that Simone does not become the ultimate male fantasy, but rather, any objectification of her character in the novel is so ludicrous as to be self-parodying and therefore defamiliarizing. Perhaps feminist scholars might reconsider Bataille’s *Story of the Eye* in light of Carter’s statements on the progressive potential within some pornographic narratives. I do not wish to discount or discredit the entirety of Dworkin’s analysis or any other important feminist analyses of sexual violence within pornography, however, I agree with Suleiman when she rephrases Sontag’s observations of *Story of the Eye* in “The Pornographic Imagination,” arguing that Bataille’s pornographic fiction must be read “for all those aspects of fictional narrative that designate it, directly or indirectly, as constructed, invented, filtered through a specific medium: in short, as *text* rather than as life itself” (Suleiman 322). An analysis of Simone’s character demonstrates that Bataille’s theories in *Erotism* might need to be distinguished from his fiction when discussing constructions of gender, and that his fiction may not be a simple expression of misogyny, but rather holds potential for a wider critique of gender relations. Further, Simone’s consumption, disruption, and inversion of the male gaze may call for a feminist reconsideration of Bataille’s *Story of the Eye* and the transgressive possibilities of pornographic fiction.

Works Cited

- Barthes, Roland. “The Metaphor of the Eye.” *Critical Essays*. Trans. Richard Howard. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1972. 239-47. Print.
- Bataille, Georges. *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*. Trans. Mary Dalwood. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986. Print.
- . “Eye.” *Visions of Excess*. Ed. Allan Stoekl. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1985. 17-19. Print.
- . “Happiness, Eroticism, and Literature.” *The Absence of Myth: Writings on*

- Surrealism*. Ed. and Trans. Michael Richardson. New York: Verso, 2006. Print.
- . *Story of the Eye*. Trans. Joachim Neugroschel. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1987. Print.
- Brower, Brady. "Story of the Eye: Fantasy of the Orgy and Its Limit." *American Imago*. 59.1 (2002): 73-89. Print.
http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/american_imago/v059/59.1brower.html
- Carter, Angela. *The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History*. London: Virago, 1997. Print.
- Dean, Carolyn J. *The Pleasures of Self: Bataille, Lacan, and the History of the Decentered Subject*. Ithica: Cornell UP, 1993. Print.
- Dworkin, Andrea. *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*. New York: Penguin, 1989. Print.
- Foucault, Michel. "A Preface to Transgression." *Bataille: A Critical Reader*. Ed. Roy Botting and Scott Wilson. Malden: Blackwell, 1998. 24-40. Print.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Trans. and Ed. James Strachey. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1961. Print.
- . "The Uncanny." *On Creativity and the Unconscious*. Ed. Benjamin Nelson. New York: HarperPerennial, 1958. 122-61. Print.
- Hollywood, Amy M. *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2002. Print.
- Iversen, Maragaret. *Beyond Pleasure: Freud, Lacan, Barthes*. University Park: Penn State UP, 2007. Print.
- Jay, Martin. "The Disenchantment of the Eye: Surrealism and the Crisis of Ocularcentrism." *Visual Anthropology Review*. 7.1 (1991): 15-38. Print.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1525/var.1991.7.1.15>
- Keenan, Sally. "Angela Carter's *The Sadeian Woman*: Feminism as Treason." *The Infernal Desires of Angela Carter: Fiction, Femininity, Feminism*. Ed. Joseph Bristow and Trev Lynn Broughton. New York: Longman, 1997. 37-57. Print.
- Lusty, Natalya. *Surrealism, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. Burlington: Ashgate, 2007. Print.
- McWhorter, Ladelle. "Bataille's Erotic Displacement of Vision." *Panorama: Philosophies of the Visible*. Ed. Wilhelm S. Wurzer. New York: Continuum, 2002. 117-27. Print.
- Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*. Ed. Patricia Evans. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990. 28-40. Print.
- Newman, Beth. "The Situation of the Looker-On: Gender, Narration, and Gaze in *Wuthering Heights*." *PMLA* 105.5 (1990): 1029-41. Print.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/462732>

- Schultz, Karla L. "Bataille's *L'Erotisme* in Light of Recent Love Poetry." *Pacific Coast Philology*. 22.1-2 (1987): 78-87. Print.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/1316661>
- Sontag, Susan. "The Pornographic Imagination." *Styles of Radical Will*. New York: Doubleday, 1991. 35-73. Print.
- Stanbury, Sarah. *The Visual Object of Desire in Late Medieval England*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2008. Print.
- Suleiman, Susan Rubin. "Transgression and the *Avant-Garde*: Bataille's *Histoire de l'oeil*." *On Bataille: Critical Essays*. Ed. Leslie Anne Boldt-Irons. New York: State U of New York P, 1995. 313-34. Print.
- Surkis, Judith. "No Fun and Games Until Someone Loses and Eye: Transgression and Masculinity in Bataille and Foucault." *Diacritics*. 26.2 (1996): 18-30. Print. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/dia.1996.0019>
- Surya, Michel. *Georges Bataille: An Intellectual Biography*. New York: Verso, 2002. Print.