

Headless Sex: Acéphalic Anatomy as Queer Eroticism

Erin K. Stapleton

Prudery is perhaps a wholesome thing for the misguided; yet whoever would be afraid of naked girls and whisky would have very little time for “joy in the face of death.”¹

There is an undeniable and obvious orientation of heteromascularity in the thought and practice of Acéphale, after Friedrich Nietzsche and through Georges Bataille. Despite this, Nietzsche, Bataille and especially Acéphale, contain a spark of potential for the absolute rejection of this fatigued, normative perspective (even if the texts they produced are blind to aspects of their most radical disruption). Nietzsche’s pain made him uniquely attentive to the materiality and immediacy of the experience of embodiment, and its effect on thought.² In Bataille’s work, this potential manifests in numerous ways, including in the account of base-materialism as antihierarchical,³ as well as more explicitly in Bataille’s inability to fully account for the relationship between eroticism and transgression that he provides, and ultimately why he fails to realise it.⁴ Instead, as in *Erotism* (and elsewhere) Bataille awkwardly valorises, but also shuns, the administrative cruelty and violence of the Marquis de Sade,

¹ Georges Bataille, “The Practice of Joy in the Face of Death,” in *The Sacred Conspiracy: The Internal Papers of the Secret Society of Acéphale and Lectures to the College of Sociology*, ed. Marina Galletti and Alastair Brotchie, trans. Natasha Lehrer, John Harman, and Meyer Barash (London: Atlas Books, 2017), 433.

² Pierre Klossowski, *Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle*, trans. Daniel W. Smith (London and New York: Continuum, 2005). Cf. Jeremy Bell’s contribution to this volume: “Pierre Klossowski: Acéphale and (A)theology.”

³ Georges Bataille, “Base Materialism and Gnosticism,” in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939*, ed. Allan Stoekl, trans. Allan Stoekl with Carl R. Lovitt and Donald M. Leslie Jr. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 45–52.

⁴ Georges Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, trans. Mary Dalwood (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986).

and Sadean sexuality (sadism, broadly speaking) by unconvincingly splitting eroticism into genres of unfulfilling transgression.

The Bataillean mantra of “joy in the face of death”—which is repeated throughout the documents collected in *The Sacred Conspiracy: The Internal Papers of the Secret Society of Acéphale and Lectures to the College of Sociology*, edited by Marina Galletti and Alastair Brotchie for an Anglophone audience—leads the reader to the question of eroticism. The fixation we have with sex, which, as Bataille noted, was one of the “three luxuries” of material life,⁵ is provoked by the capacity it provides for us to enter into the kind of communication where we sacrifice our sense of a cohesive self to access the possibility of an experience of “sovereignty, which is related to an escape from the ‘servile’ world of instrumental reason.”⁶ The relief of not holding thought together in an identity is the luxury that sex provides, and one that it shares with death. Death, like sex, is the absence of the self. Communication (the risk of the sense of cohesive self that operates by attempting to convey a part of that identity through language to another person) is a suicidal act, in that a sense of self is sacrificed, but that expenditure of the self is also a relief.

Bataille’s interest in forming Acéphale (the group) and in engaging with the Acéphale (the concept and image of a “headless man” that would stand in for the “leaderless crowd” or headless humanity)⁷ stemmed from a desire to practice anti-hierarchical, quasi-anarchist materialism that rejects established authority and civilisation. The association between authority and civilisation, for Bataille, lies at its humanist core, where “the fascination of freedom was tarnished when Earth produced a being who insisted that necessity was a law greater than the universe.”⁸ In other words, it is people, and their insistence on sustaining their individual lives, to the detriment of life in general, that creates problems. Hoarding resources with a view to sustaining one’s own life at the expense of other lives, and without the intention of (in many cases) actually putting those resources to use, creates an energetic surplus that, for Bataille, denies life in general.⁹ However, Bataille’s materialism, like his eroticism, ultimately fails by remaining unconsciously bound to the established order it resists. Acéphalic sacrifice never transpires, not because of a lack of willing

⁵ Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: Volume I*, trans. Robert Hurley (Brooklyn, NY: Zone Books, 2007), 33.

⁶ Jeremy Biles, “Does the Acéphale Dream of Headless Sheep?,” in *Negative Ecstasies: Georges Bataille and the Study of Religion*, ed. Jeremy Biles and Kent Brintnall (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 219.

⁷ Georges Bataille, “Creation of the ‘Internal Journal,’” in *The Sacred Conspiracy*, 169.

⁸ Georges Bataille, “The Sacred Conspiracy,” in *The Sacred Conspiracy*, 125.

⁹ Bataille, *The Accursed Share: Volume I*.

Headless Sex: Acéphalic Anatomy as Queer Eroticism

victims, but an unwillingness to give those participants what they desire.¹⁰ In these incidents, the misplaced locus of the gift is revealed, as it is not the giver (the person willing to be sacrificed) but the receiver (the executioner) who is put at risk in this transaction.

This Acéphalic failure reveals something about the nature of sacrifice, the possibility of transgression, and the false association between masochism and sadism. The failure of Acéphale echoes the shortcomings of Bataille's eroticism, in that neither are radical enough to really transgress the social structures they appear to resist. The locus of the gift is revealed here, not in the person willing to be sacrificed, but in the executioner, who is put at (legal, moral and social) risk in this transaction. To offer oneself to be sacrificed is akin to a masochistic erotic practice, where the masochist's body is offered as a passive site to be acted upon, but in order to access sensation it must transgress a rule and be punished. Here, the trick (and the failure) is in finding someone willing to provide the punishment, which, if it is willed, and acting in line with the consent of either the sacrifice or the masochist, is an essentially limited task. In place of a human sacrifice, Acéphale had André Masson's drawings of the Acéphale. The headlessness of the figure was representative of a gift (of sacrifice) to which there was no capacity for reception in the secret society.

This chapter proposes an alternative model of eroticism, through the principle of sacrifice, that begins where Bataille falters. Bataille's eroticism relies on the experience of transgression to distinguish it from other sexual practices, but the transgression Bataille imagines remains located within a normative and, by extension, reproductive framework of heteromale desire as the consumer of the feminine-as-object, which limits it. Nothing about this relation contains the possibility of transgression because it describes the foundational site of a long-established social hierarchy. In other words, there is nothing transgressive about the violation of women and feminised bodies. However, if heteromale sexuality is removed from the erotic model entirely, a potential site for radical transgression appears. Sex between bodies for whom the construct of gender oppresses into serving a heteromale model of desire is definitively transgressive. This transgression is produced by eluding the structure of heteromale control that defines the logic and order of the sexual, rational and, by extension, reproductive world. This reconfiguration of transgression is the key to rethinking the erotic model, so that eroticism can be thought separately from the possibility of sexual reproduction and away from a myopic focus on the pleasure of heterosexual, cisgendered men.

Taking the heteromale position as that of "the head" (in more ways than one), this argument can then be extended to destabilise representational

¹⁰ See Marina Galletti and Alastair Brotchie, "Commentaries," in *The Sacred Conspiracy*, 413–20.

hierarchies that limit the potential of base-materialism by embracing headlessness. Bataille's acéphalic vision, filtered through Masson's illustration of the Acéphale, lends itself (quite literally) to the rejection of hierarchy, but also patriarchy, and maleness. Using the double entendre of being without head, extended to the point of escaping the head entirely (and therefore the binds of rationality) is, in this sense, to escape the position that masculinity holds as the keeper of the site of universal human experience. This chapter takes the acéphalic figure as a point of meditation, considering the potential of its legacy for thinking the relationship between this era of thought, and contemporary interrogations of sexuality and gender.

PART 1: Anatomy of the Acéphale

Dream, intoxication and sacrifice thus converge . . .
a fact embodied in the contradictory monster of the Acéphale.¹¹

André Masson's drawing of the Acéphale is a cartoonish facsimile of the *Vitruvian Man* (the study of male anatomy by Leonardo DaVinci drawn around 1490). Unlike the Akephaloi of the Greek and the Blemmyes of Roman mythology, who are headless by design, the Acéphale of Masson has a cauterised neck, appearing to indicate the severing of a head.¹² In its right fist, the Acéphale holds a sacred heart, and in the left, a dagger. In a surprising, whimsical turn, the Acéphale is adorned with stars instead of nipples, reminiscent of pasties worn by burlesque dancers. Its intestines are exposed beneath in the shape of a labyrinth. In place of genitalia, or more accurately, *as genitalia*, the Acéphale wears a skull, flamboyantly displayed by its parted, muscular legs.

There is nothing in this headless evocation of the Vitruvian figure that establishes the acéphale indisputably as a man, and even less as a cisgendered man. Those who might balk at the prospect of the discussion of the Acéphale as a transgender man or genderqueer figure in relation to the historical context in which it was produced should be reminded of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928) and Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928). These books, as well as numerous other texts published prior to the establishment of the Society of Acéphale (and the former, at least, Masson and Bataille would have to have been aware of), challenge notions of gender and gender non-conforming bodies precisely along these lines. Contrary to the beliefs of some conservatives, the instability of gender, and gender fluidity is a persistent phenomenon with a very

¹¹ Biles, "Does the Acéphale Dream of Headless Sheep?," 233.

¹² The Akephaloi / Blemmyes were represented in Greek and Roman mythology (respectively) as having faces either in their chest or stomach.

Headless Sex: Acéphalic Anatomy as Queer Eroticism

long history, of which this is only a small part. Given this, the Acéphale should be separated (violently, if necessary) from any assumption of inherent maleness, as feminine traits like the nipple pasties, “Sacred Heart” and dagger¹³ complicate the figure’s masculinity.

Headlessness

An ecstatic fire will destroy fatherlands
When the HUMAN HEART becomes FIRE
and iron
Man will escape his head like a condemned man escapes from
prison¹⁴

Headlessness suggests an ungovernable resistance to authority (socially and politically, as well as in a religious context), and anarchy. The head is commonly understood as the seat of reason in the dominant traditions of Western thought, and so it is not surprising that a concept and movement inspired by Bataille would have as its mascot a headless figure. Bataille’s early writing on base materialism as an anathema to both Idealism and forms of hierarchical materialism reveals an interest in experience ungoverned by or, more accurately, actively resistant to cognition.¹⁵

The concept of headlessness inhabits a unique position in modern French thought, primarily because through the use of the guillotine it was the French who industrialised the practice of decapitation. The guillotine is both the symbolic sacrifice of the noble class in service of the Revolution, and the spectre of order and governance that produces the end of heterogenous (criminalised) life.¹⁶ The link between headlessness, beheading and execution and the French guillotine is not often made explicit in acéphalic related thought, with an exception being in Bataille’s early essays, including “The Obelisk.” For Bataille, the Obelisk in the Place de la Concorde symbolises Napoleonic order, Christian primacy, and the Apollonian sacred as it appears in France, and the way life can be lived (spatially as well as temporally). The Obelisk stands in the place of the

¹³ The dagger is reminiscent of the knife used to behead Holofernes in Artemisia Gentileschi’s *Judith and Holofernes* (1620).

¹⁴ Georges Bataille, “Acéphale [from the back cover of *Acéphale* 1],” in *The Sacred Conspiracy*, 130. Cf. Georges Bataille, Pierre Klossowski, and André Masson, “La Conjuración Sacrada,” special issue, *Acéphale: Religion, Sociologie, Philosophie* 1 (24 Juin 1936), n.p.; back cover.

¹⁵ Bataille, “Base Materialism and Gnosticism,” 45.

¹⁶ Jesse Goldhammer, *The Headless Republic: Sacrificial Violence in Modern French Thought* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 152.

guillotine as a kind of reversal of its power (a phallic symbol where heads were once publicly removed), even though the guillotine established, through mythic (or law-making) violence,¹⁷ the social and political order of modern France. The guillotine represents a mechanised, appealingly clinical, and efficient method by which those who are heterogeneous to the dominant and desired social order might be excised. This machinic power of destruction makes the space where the Obelisk resides, as well as the culture it represents, the product of sacrifice, and therefore sacred. The Acéphale appears as a remainder, a seditious other and a reminder (both literally and figuratively) of this law-establishing violence.¹⁸

As Marina Galletti has observed, the making-sacred of something, the sovereign experience, is “at the very heart of Acéphale.”¹⁹ Acéphale took decapitation as a “site of great consequence in the history of France,” one that symbolised a kind of establishing sacrifice.²⁰ The physical remainder, the sacrificed body (the acéphalic figure), is produced through this expenditure and provides the experiential possibility of sovereignty through anti-reason. Acéphale is opposed to “headship” of every kind,²¹ and this includes the rejection of reason, oppression and, to some extent, patriarchy in a society where “the head is taken as the organ of unproblematised male rationality.”²²

Headlessness also bears a peculiar relation to the historical appearance of women’s rights in France. In addition to the symbolic anti-authoritarianism of headlessness (echoing Margaret Sanger’s use of the anarchist slogan “no gods, no masters” in *The Woman Rebel* [1914]),²³ headlessness, and by extension the guillotine, provided unexpected support for women’s suffrage. In “The Declaration of the Rights of Woman,” Olympe de Gouges states that “woman has the right to mount the scaffold; she must equally have the right to mount the rostrum,” demonstrating that if women can be held capitably accountable for their actions, then they must also have the capacity to participate in political

¹⁷ Walter Benjamin, “Critique of Violence,” in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 1, 1913–1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (London and Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 236–252.

¹⁸ Benjamin, “Critique of Violence,” 236–252.

¹⁹ Marina Galletti, “The Secret Society of Acéphale: ‘A Community of the Heart,’” in *The Sacred Conspiracy*, 33.

²⁰ Galletti, “The Secret Society of Acéphale,” 20.

²¹ Alison Jasper, “Taking Sides on Severed Heads: Kristeva at the Louvre,” *Text Matters* 4 (November 25 2014): 175.

²² Jasper, “Taking Sides on Severed Heads,” 180.

²³ See Margaret Sanger, “The Woman Rebel,” New York University: The Margaret Sanger Papers Project, <https://www.nyu.edu/projects/sanger/documents/mswomanrebel.php>.

Headless Sex: Acéphalic Anatomy as Queer Eroticism

and public life.²⁴ While this argument was unsuccessful at the time, it establishes a relationship between marginalised bodies that are subject to the laws of the state, but excluded from participating in their establishment, and the stateless, heterogenous remainder, the Acéphale.

In traditional as well as feminist psychoanalytic terms the symbolism of the Acéphale's headlessness also suggests (a fear of, or the threat of) castration.²⁵ This relationship between male domination and decapitation has been taken up by both Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva.²⁶ In Hélène Cixous' discussion of the relationship between castration and decapitation, she describes the latter as a peculiarly feminine experience equivalent to the castration women experience when subject to a heteromasculine system of power.²⁷ This decapitation, which is in this sense the refusal of feminine thought, is a result of the fact that "men say that there are two unrepresentable things: death and the feminine sex."²⁸ Given the relationship to psychoanalysis that the members of Acéphale had, it seems that the dual headlessness and castration of the Acéphale figure suggests a dual and queered relationship to gender, as well as sexuality.

Gender

He is not a man.²⁹

The gender of the Acéphale is ambiguous. While a cursory glance at the figure and its superficial replication of the Vitruvian man suggests normative masculinity, the lack of a phallus undermines any easy association with normative maleness. In Jack Halberstam's *Female Masculinity* (1998), he traces a current of eroticism, desire and codified practices of women and nonbinary and gender-queer people who inhabit or perform masculinity in a number of ways, and for a variety of purposes, informed by gender, eroticism and social habitation. This

²⁴ Olympe de Gouges, "The Declaration of the Rights of Woman, 1791," in Darline Gay Levy, Harriet Branson Applewhite, and Mary Durham Johnson, *Women in Revolutionary Paris, 1789–179: Selected Documents Translated with Notes and Commentary* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1979), 91.

²⁵ Hélène Cixous and Annette Kuhn, "Castration or Decapitation?," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 7, no. 1 (October 1981): 41–55.

²⁶ Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1, no. 4 (1976): 20; Julia Kristeva, *The Severed Head: Capital Visions*, trans. Jody Gladding (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

²⁷ Cixous and Kuhn, "Castration or Decapitation?," 42.

²⁸ Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," 885.

²⁹ Jeremy Biles, "Does the Acéphale Dream of Headless Sheep?," 219.

is demonstrated by the photograph “Jackie II” (by Del Grace, 1994) where the model performs a facsimile of masculinity (through a pose that accentuates both the musculature and breasts of the model’s topless torso and army fatigues).³⁰ The performed physicality of the model in this image demonstrates that an apparently male ideal form can be easily simulated by a female body, disrupting the ease of association between masculinity and hegemonic, ideal humanness. This image, when compared to the Acéphale, reveals the unstable relationship between masculinity and biological maleness and, by extension, gender in general. We cannot assume that the Acéphale is a man or male, any more than we would assume the gender of any body in the absence of that body’s conspicuous and conscious representation and assertion of their gendered self.

Sacred Heart

The Catholic iconography of the Sacred Heart originated in France in the 17th century. The symbol, held in the Acéphale’s right hand, appeared from the practices of cultish Christian visionaries of France, including Marguerite-Marie Alacoque, whose visions of Jesus were inflected with eroticism entwined with mystical ecstasy.³¹ The concept of the sacred glowing heart to be worshipped also suggested the matrix of sacred and profane, where “Jesus had appeared to them and displayed his heart as a source of grace and love but also as the recipient of the wounds of human disdain and indifference.”³² Images promoting the worship of the Sacred Heart as an expression of Catholic devotion (where Jesus holds his robe open to reveal his chest) have a sensuality that alludes to the boundary where the conservative structure of religion meets the excess of the sacred.

Like headlessness, the Sacred Heart symbolises an eroticisation of the worship of Jesus in French Catholicism. The symbol has a lengthy political history in France, associated as it is with those who resisted the French Revolution on the basis that it produced a more secular social order.³³ The pose of Masson’s Acéphale echoes the outstretched arms of “The Sacred Heart in Triumph,” an element of the mosaic in Sacré-Cœur Basilica, unveiled in 1923

³⁰ Jack Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 37.

³¹ Michael Thomas Carroll, “The Bloody Spectacle: Mishima, The Sacred Heart, Hogarth, Cronenberg, and the Entrails of Culture,” *Popular Culture Association in the South* 15, no. 2 (1993): 47.

³² Raymond Anthony Jonas, *France and the Cult of the Sacred Heart: An Epic Tale for Modern Times* (London and Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 2.

³³ Jonas, *France and the Cult of the Sacred Heart*, 59.

Headless Sex: Acéphalic Anatomy as Queer Eroticism

(just over a decade before Masson's drawing was first published),³⁴ and this image is part of a mosaic promoting "the restoration of the Rights of God" in French cultural life.³⁵ Masson's use of the Sacred Heart in the Acéphale's outstretched right hand, then, appears as a disruption to both secular and religious cultures, suggesting a Dionysian alternative.

Dagger

The dagger appears gripped in the Acéphale's left hand as a counterpoint to the Sacred Heart. Strongly reminiscent of the dagger used to behead Holofernes in Artemisia Gentileschi's *Judith and Holofernes* (1620), it appeals to the sacred violence of beheading, both as victim and perpetrator. Again, the Acéphale inhabits duality, appearing both desiring victim and rabid executioner, reflecting the ambivalence Acéphale, as a society, had towards sacrifice, where numerous members were willing to give their lives, but no one had the will to act in service of that desire.³⁶ As Patrick Waldberg writes in his account of initiation into Acéphale, "a dagger identical to the one brandished by the headless man in the effigy of Acéphale" was used to cut him.³⁷ Crucially, Waldberg never identifies who carried out this element of the ceremony, although it is carefully apparent, on this occasion, that it was not Bataille, who was described as assisting in preparing his arm.

Star Pasties

The inclusion of what appear to be star-shaped nipple pasties is one of the more surprising elements of Masson's figure of the Acéphale. Nipple pasties had only recently gained cultural traction in the 1920s, as a way of avoiding indecency laws in the United States, and it was in the 1930s (when Masson drew this image) that pasties gained popularity in burlesque shows.³⁸ The use of stars in place of nipples is humorous and whimsical, and no doubt inspired by shows and services some Acéphale members frequented, but they also call into further

³⁴ Jonas, *France and the Cult of the Sacred Heart*, 225.

³⁵ Jonas, *France and the Cult of the Sacred Heart*, 5.

³⁶ Marina Galletti and Alastair Brotchie, "Commentaries," in *The Sacred Conspiracy*, 413-20.

³⁷ Patrick Waldberg, "Extract from Acéphalogram (1)," in *The Sacred Conspiracy*, 330.

³⁸ Rachel Shteir, *Striptease: The Untold History of the Girlie Show* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 80.

question the gendered position of the Acéphale, where the concealment of nipples in this context is a suggestion of both femininity and ambiguity.

Labyrinth Gut

O Ariadne, you are yourself the labyrinth . . . ³⁹

The labyrinthine gut of the Acéphale is both Nietzschean and ancient. Nietzsche was obsessed with the labyrinth myth, to the extent that in correspondence with Cosima Wagner, he referred to her as Ariadne, and himself as Dionysus.⁴⁰ Nietzsche also signed himself as “the Crucified” in these letters, and it is clear here that the pose of the Acéphale reflects crucifixion while representing the dual experience of discontinuous being, and the desire for continuity. While Henri Dussat’s note on the labyrinth evokes an Ouroboros,⁴¹ in Bataille’s more substantial essay on “The Labyrinth,” which takes its cues from Nietzsche, it becomes a symbol of entangled profane embodiment that stands in opposition to the pyramid or summit of the (Apollonian) sacred.⁴² The labyrinth traces the experience of discontinuous life, once the ambition of unambiguous moral (Christian) goodness, and the slavishness that is inferred is peeled from it.

Skull Strap-On

The Acéphale is not just without a head. As discussed above, the figure represents a disrupted masculinity and, in this respect, is lacking a phallus. In place of a phallus, Masson’s figure packs a skull, the symbol of death, and therefore communication, and consequently adaptation to the other. The psychoanalytic association between death, the unknown, and femininity is well-established, and designed to produce a fear of the unknown, a sense of threat. The skull crotch of the Acéphale suggests this, while the memento mori of sexuality, equating sex directly with death (in a schoolboy fashion akin to a Damien Hirst installation), also refers to Bataille’s “three luxuries” of expenditure,⁴³ of which sex and

³⁹ Nietzsche (quoted by Klossowski), *Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle*, 190.

⁴⁰ Klossowski, *Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle*, 181. See John Appleby’s chapter in this volume.

⁴¹ Henri Dussat, “The Labyrinth,” in *The Sacred Conspiracy*, 268.

⁴² Georges Bataille, “The Labyrinth,” in *Visions of Excess*, 171–77. See Brad Baumgartner’s chapter in this volume.

⁴³ Bataille, *The Accursed Share: Volume I*, 33.

Headless Sex: Acéphalic Anatomy as Queer Eroticism

death are two, and the placement of a head as genitalia implies the third (eating).

In the Acéphale as “Dionysos” illustration that featured in the 3–4 issue of the *Acéphale* journal (1937),⁴⁴ the relationship between headlessness, the feminine and genderqueer body, and volatility is made even more explicit as the skull is replaced by Medusa’s head.⁴⁵ The head of the Medusa, as both Cixous and Kristeva have noted, combines the feminine threat of castration with the threat of death that lies beyond it. The duality and relationality of castration and headlessness intermingle here as it is made clear that the Acéphale straps-on a head in place of genitals. The variation of Acéphalic genitalia suggests a flexible gender identity, as well as a focus on the technology of sexuality, including attention to a variety of sexual practices (and the tools they entail) beyond the confines of normative heteromascularity.

PART 2: Acéphalic Eroticism

Eroticism opens the way to death.

Death opens the way to the denial of our individual lives.⁴⁶

The headlessness and castration of the Acéphale, as well as the suggestive strap-on it wears, indicate a queer sexual as well as gendered flexibility. The Acéphalic figure, as a symbol of the secret society (as well as Bataille’s thought more generally), reflects the possibility of an approach to eroticism that lies beyond what was perhaps imagined by its creators. Bataille’s eroticism, and his understanding of the relationship between eroticism and sexuality, was ambitious in its use of transgression, but was nevertheless limited by the blinkers of heteromascularity, which, given that it lies at the heart of Western culture, cannot imagine the experience of its borderlands. If the Acéphale is taken as an anti-hierarchical, decapitated and symbolically castrated genderqueer figure, whose sexuality is not governed by the confines of social acceptability or obvious association with genitalia, it provides a grounding through which to think a queer sexuality that eschews normativity entirely.

Being without head, as well as being without phallus (where death’s head replaces the representation of a biological phallus), suggests the Acéphale’s restriction to non-normative sexual practices. This is crucial here, as queer theory

⁴⁴ See Georges Bataille, Roger Caillois, Pierre Klossowski, André Masson, and Jules Monnerot, “Dionysos,” special issue, *Acéphale: Religion, Sociologie, Philosophie* 3–4 (July 1937), n.p., front-matter.

⁴⁵ Cf. André Masson, “Dionysos,” in *The Sacred Conspiracy*, 186.

⁴⁶ Bataille, *Erotism*, 24.

and theories of sexuality are located in the anti-normal,⁴⁷ or what lies outside of the heteronormative assumption that sexual acts are simply an expression and extension of biological reproduction and drive. Biological (or sexual) reproduction, and the naturalised social associations and structures attributed to it, are centralised in culture. As a result, heterosexual sex practices are socially sanctioned (although the form of that sanctioning varies widely between cultures and histories) and accounted for, and, by extension, can only be considered normative (and not transgressive).⁴⁸ Even where the sexual practices of heterosexual individuals vary widely and are not routinely practiced in a way that explicitly relates or refers to the possibility of reproduction, their existence is treated publicly and culturally as if they do. In other words, heterosexuality is made legitimate wherever and however it is found.

By comparison, encounters considered to be queer sex, are not. This includes sexual encounters between two or more people of the same sex, with and between transgender, non-binary and genderqueer people, as well as any and all other configurations aside from normative sexual acts between a cisgender woman and cisgender man. Depending on the bodies and tools involved, these practices are socially considered to be anything from abnormal to abhorrent, to not being acknowledged as sex at all. Common to all acts and desires that lie on this spectrum, is that they tend to exclude the possibility of sexual reproduction. As a result, queer sex and queer desire lacks the capacity to be co-opted into a mainstream social structure that valorises sexual reproduction and therefore cannot be normalised.

Transgression

A sacred that consists in outbursts of the violation of the rules of life.⁴⁹

The inability to assimilate into normativity that queer sexuality and the Acéphale share allows each to access the possibility of eroticism, which is only able to be accessed through transgression. Transgression is the violation of a rule or limit which both illuminates and reasserts the delineation of that limit. As Bataille established, eroticism cannot exist without transgression (crossing a line both to highlight and evade its power) and there is nothing more

⁴⁷ See Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (New York: Free Press, 1999).

⁴⁸ Gayle Rubin, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," in *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

⁴⁹ Denis Hollier cited in Galletti, "The Secret Society of Acéphale," 38.

Headless Sex: Acéphalic Anatomy as Queer Eroticism

historically or socially taboo than choosing to have sex without the possibility of biological reproduction. This is because, in crossing that boundary, the rule is both articulated and called into question. After Bataille, Michel Foucault argues against sexuality being an expression of animality, insisting that sexuality demonstrates our distinction from animality, and argues that desire and sexual expression as it is coded by language is a decidedly human trait—more so than rationality—and as much as transgression.⁵⁰ He describes sexuality bound by the limitation of language, observing that modern (post-Victorian) sexuality is “characterised” by “the violence done by such languages” that separate sexualities into categories and annotations, the violation of which (as transgression) is communication.⁵¹

At the time of *Acéphale*, eroticism, particularly in a Western cultural context, was defined by heteromale desire even more exclusively than it is today.⁵² This association produced (and continues to produce) naturalised (and mythologised) association between human sexuality, eroticism, and reproductivity. The term “sexual” itself refers to the biological capacity for reproduction in that it evokes its (binary) opposite in asexual reproduction, implying that to be sexual, and therefore erotic, is to be necessarily reproductive. This is exemplified by Bataille’s theory of eroticism (and its limits), where the sexually erotic experience exceeds biological reproductivity, but remains tied to it through the limited relation of normative heterosexuality.⁵³ For Bataille, this normative heterosexuality is also informed by an explicit and unwavering relation between masculine sexual dominance (through violation) and feminine submission. Bataille locates the experience of eroticism in the violation of the submissive feminine body, which he refers to as a “transgression.”⁵⁴ Here, a conceptual disconnect is revealed between Bataille’s characterisation of transgression, and the normative model of erotic desire that it remains tethered to.

This suggests an alternative that begins by releasing Bataille’s framework of eroticism from its heterosexual straitjacket. Bataille’s eroticism relies on the experience of transgression to distinguish it from other sexual practices, but the transgression Bataille imagines remains located within the sexual-as-reproductive framework of heteromale dominance. The reconfiguration of transgression, then, is the key to rethinking this erotic model, so that eroticism

⁵⁰ Michel Foucault, “A Preface to ‘Transgression,’” in *Bataille: A Critical Reader*, ed. Fred Botting and Scott Wilson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1998), 25.

⁵¹ Foucault, “A Preface to Transgression,” 25–26.

⁵² In recent history, this could hold the further qualifier of heterosexual male sexuality, but this descriptor is inappropriate, as well as inaccurate prior to the 19th Century (See Jeffrey Weeks’ *Sex, Politics and Society: The Regulation of Sexuality since 1800* [London and New York: Routledge, 2014] for an extended discussion of this).

⁵³ Bataille, *Erotism*.

⁵⁴ Bataille, *Erotism*.

in sexuality can be separated from both sexual reproduction and the dominant narrative of heteromascularity. Luce Irigaray provides a model of eroticism that defines and exceeds, and therefore, transgresses the limit of culture, and the linguistic models of subjecthood, separation, and recognition that rigidly define it. In her work, “woman always remains several, but she is kept from dispersion because the other is already within her, and is autoerotically familiar to her,” and therefore, women’s bodies and sexuality between them, excluding the intervention of men, is the locus of the erotic model.⁵⁵ This reconstitution of eroticism can only be established through this separation of sexuality from reproduction. It takes the AFAB⁵⁶ body, in particular, as a body whose represented (and assumed) reproductive capacities have been used to both rarefy and oppress it, as a body that expresses this separation, in a radical sense, in sexual practices with others of its own kind. Sexual encounters and practices between bodies that have been perceived to be female, in particular, cannot be accounted for by heteromasculine frameworks for understanding sexual attraction. They exist in the liminal, both pre- and post-linguistic experience that “polymorphous perversity or, to put it simply, the ability to take sensual pleasure and enjoyment in each other’s bodies. The ability in fact to do more than just fuck.”⁵⁷

Bataille locates transgression in the violation of women’s bodies, and specifically in the marriage contract, where women’s bodies are subject to violation in service of the communication between men.⁵⁸ This is echoed by Irigaray in “Women on the Market,” where the distinction between women’s “use” and “exchange” value in solidifying men’s relationships is defined.⁵⁹ The possibility that bodies perceived to be female might not be women, and also might not have the reproductive capacities or desire associated with them is never discussed. The relationship between eroticism and transgression has focussed on the transgression of domination and heterosexual masculinity over a passive and submissive feminine body. The violation of women’s bodies is the central point around which power relations are organised and cultural and linguistic

⁵⁵ Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 31.

⁵⁶ AFAB: Assigned female at birth. The use of these terms is aligned with the definition in Susan Stryker’s *Transgender History* (New York: Seal Press, 2008), and refers to the assignation of a gender based on a medical observation of external genitalia, common practice in most locations.

⁵⁷ Dennis Altman, “Gay Lib – Come Out! 1972,” in *After Homosexuality: The legacies of Gay Liberation*, eds. Carolyn D’Cruz and Mark Pendleton (Perth: UWA Publishing), 157.

⁵⁸ Also discussed in Irigaray’s *This Sex Which Is Not One* in the chapter “Women on the Market,” which is read as a Marxist analysis of sexual difference, but is also anthropologically modelled and implies Irigaray’s reading of Bataille.

⁵⁹ Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, 171.

Headless Sex: Acéphalic Anatomy as Queer Eroticism

relations are designed. The abuse of women, and the use of their bodies as objects of consumption is the founding operation of culture. Nothing precedes this first exchange. Neither Bataille's nor Irigaray's description of this sexual economy allow for the possibility of women having agency over their own bodies, desires or sexual practices either, and this denial suggests that the possibility of agency for bodies that are perceived to be female is situated entirely outside of this structure.

It is clear in *Eroticism* that the definition of the erotic makes Bataille uneasy. Despite the casual appearance of violent misogyny in his fictional works, Bataille attempts to distinguish eroticism from sexual violence through emotion and fantasy, and neither approach is convincing. This is the necessary failure of a heterosexual man who remains in a position of power and authority over those who he engages with sexually, both in terms of the economic power over the female sex workers he engages, as well as the relationships he has with various women.⁶⁰ By definition, Bataille has no access to the modes of desire characterised by true transgression that he attempts to theorise. This is why his definition of eroticism falls short in the question of how it comes to be, and ultimately why his imagining of the relation between eroticism and transgression fails. Bataille's account of how the conditions for eroticism are created are flawed because they remain bound to the fetishisation of male violence and heterosexuality (after the Marquis de Sade). While he retreats from this, to some extent, by insisting that there is a distinction between physical and emotional eroticism, with the former remaining selfish, and the latter remaining non-violent, he differentiates the association between the fantasy of (sexually motivated) murder in de Sade from the limitations of actual eroticism.

The reason this never seems to work is that the subjugation and violation of women is not a limit of either Western or contemporary culture, it is a founding operation of that culture, as well as *the* foundation or framework, implicitly or explicitly, of every other dynamic relationship in everyday experience.⁶¹ It is not a transgression to sexually violate a woman, it is an affirmation and confirmation of the core on which our culture is founded. Therefore, Bataille's model of violation cannot constitute transgression, and therefore is excluded from the

⁶⁰ See Michel Surya, *Georges Bataille: An Intellectual Biography*, trans. Krzysztof Fijalkowski and Michael Richardson (London and New York: Verso, 2002), which discusses Bataille's sexual relationships with women in relation to the development of his thought on eroticism.

⁶¹ See Robin Dembroff, *Real Men on Top: The Relations of Patriarchy* (Oxford University Press, 2022 [Forthcoming]). In which they argue that patriarchy pre-exists ontologically prior to gender difference, and how an individual stands in relation to systemic patriarchal values defines their position in society.

possibility of eroticism. In other words, the transgression Bataille describes is paradoxically not transgressive within the definition he provides for it.

What this also suggests is that to use women's bodies as a conduit to violate a limit in a relationship between men is not oriented towards sexuality or pleasure. In the structure of this transgression, the sexual act is incidental to the transgression of the relationship, and women's bodies alone being the medium or material through which the transgressive act is communicated. The violation of a women's will is not transgressive in the slightest. And if the sexual act itself is simply the medium rather than the violation of a limit, then it is not primarily sexual (as we often see with contemporary descriptions of rape, rightly removing rape from the realm of the sexual and into the realm of violence) and therefore by definition, by the structure of this communicative act itself, it cannot be erotic.

Coda: Masochism

Rebellion can only manifest from a position of submission.

If normative sexual encounters, driven by the sexual framework of desire dictated by heteromascularity, cannot offer the possibility of eroticism, the question becomes, how might the conditions for an erotic experience be produced? What are the transgressive possibilities for eroticism? How might the limits of life be articulated and the experience of the "profound continuity" of life in general be reached?⁶² As Jack Halberstam has noted, "masochism is an underused way of considering the relationship between the self and other, self and technology and self and power in queer feminism."⁶³ The use of the term "queer" in reference to sexuality and sexual practices is crucial here—in the origins of its reclamation in the 1980s and early 1990s, where it was used as shorthand for anything that was not just outside what was considered "normal," but actively against, or anti-normal.⁶⁴ In general, queer sexuality and practices, by definition, transgress socially normative codes of sexual behaviour, and so must contain erotic potential. Acéphale is, in a sense, unsustainably apolitical, and therefore demands consideration of encounters between individual subjects, as well as of how those encounters are framed socially. However, the active refusal of normativity alone does not guarantee the headlessness of

⁶² Scott Wilson, "Frenzy, Feeder, Falcon: Eroticism in the Twenty-First Century," in *Georges Bataille and Contemporary Thought*, ed. Will Stronge (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 13.

⁶³ Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 135.

⁶⁴ See Warner, *The Trouble with Normal*.

Headless Sex: Acéphalic Anatomy as Queer Eroticism

transgression, and so here I will briefly consider how the specific dynamics of a potential for eroticism might be formed. For this, I will use the familiar example of BDSM⁶⁵ practices, with a focus on masochism in order to model a form of transgression within a sexual encounter that has the potential to produce an erotic experience through the violation of a rule, boundary or contract.

Scholarship around contemporary BDSM practices tends to focus on the world-building gesture of these sexual practices themselves, according to a “triptych” of principles of trust, risk and consent.⁶⁶ While obviously there is an acknowledgement that BDSM practices are driven by a sense of “desire,” the investigation of what gives rise to this erotic potential remains vague, and the link between fetish practice and erotic potential is largely unexamined. While these practices vary widely, they are largely characterised by the transgression of a limit that provides these practices with erotic potential. In “A Preface to Transgression,” Foucault observes that Bataille’s characterisation of experience, and transgression in particular, is paradoxical in that transgression is achieved through the repetitious violation of a contract. This repetition, as Foucault describes, is inherent in the experience of transgression itself, and is what provides the possibility of eroticism from a sexual encounter. The question becomes, then, where that transgression lies.

In the case of contemporary BDSM practices, it is generally assumed that the site of transgression is relatively clear (and, paradoxically, pre-planned and agreed upon through the formation of a contract). In the case of dominant-submissive practices, the dominant applies pain, discomfort or humiliation (or any combination of the three) to the body of the submissive, and this is a transgression of social norms. Crucially, though, the dominant, or more accurately, the agential body acting in service of a submissive (their dominant), does not transgress. Any breach of the contract by the dominant is in essence reverting back to a normative heteromale framework of desire, where submitting bodies (where a submissive body is framed as feminine, regardless of their gender) are subject to the violation that lies at the centre of culture, excluding the possibility of transgression, and therefore, erotic potential. The only position that holds the power of transgression within this erotic economy, then, is the submissive, who must, in some sense or another, break a rule in order to access the sensation (discipline) they seek from their dominant.

This understanding of the erotic economy of transgression has its origins in Deleuze’s reading of the sadomasochistic relationship described in *The Venus in*

⁶⁵ Alexandra Fanghanel, “Asking for It: BDSM Sexual Practice and the Trouble of Consent,” *Sexualities* 23, no. 3 (March 2020): 269–86. This article uses a generic, “overlapping” definition of BDSM which I replicate here, as “Bondage/Discipline/Dominance/Submission/Sadism/Masochism.”

⁶⁶ Jonas, *France and the Cult of the Sacred Heart*, 225.

Furs (Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, 1870).⁶⁷ In a rare acknowledgement, Deleuze cites Bataille's work on Sade, using his position that Sade writes with the language of the "victim" rather than that the sadist as a starting point to complicate the sexual economy of masochism.⁶⁸ Using this as a position from which to elaborate on the historical and literary terms of masochist and sadist, he notes that "the ultimate paradox is that such a contract should be initiated, and the power conferred by the victim himself."⁶⁹ Ultimately, this argument demonstrates that, contrary to popular terminology, the sexual system of the sadist and the erotic economy of the masochist are separate, and even mutually exclusive. When considered as separate systems, masochism is an expression of transgression, resistance to rule and to sedition, while sadism is an expression of adherence. Sadism is a fascistic administration fetish that requires, by definition, for its victims to be unwilling.

The most important feature of sadism is repetition without variation: applying the rule without variation. Sadism is the fascism of bureaucratic indifference,⁷⁰ de Sade's "libertine" requires another body for mastery, where the sadist's victim holds the evidence of their crimes, and the expression of their fetish, and without the victim's (unwilled) recognition of their mastery, they have none.⁷¹ In other words, the sadist applies a rule without variation (and therefore without the possibility of transgression), while a dominant articulates and applies the boundaries of a rule in service to the masochist's (submissive) desire, accessed through transgression.

The desire to disappear into life in general, and to destroy the experience of individuated, discontinuous being that the death head and headlessness of the *Acéphale* symbolises is the essence of the (rebellious) masochist. *Acéphale* is a symbol that contains the fragments with which an anti-hierarchical materialism can be pursued, particularly in relation to anti-normative sexuality. The truly transgressive is only that which is not socially sanctioned, and the only position from which the experience of eroticism becomes possible.

⁶⁷ The novel *Venus in Furs* inspired term "masochism" which was first used and defined by Richard von Krafft-Ebing in *Psychopathia Sexualis* (New York: Pioneer Publications, 1947) who named it after the author Leopold von Sacher-Masoch.

⁶⁸ Gilles Deleuze, *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty*, trans. Jean McNeil and Aude Willm (Boston: MIT Press, 1989), 17.

⁶⁹ Deleuze, *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty*, 93.

⁷⁰ This was illustrated most clearly in Pier Paolo Pasolini's adaptation of *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom* (1975). See *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom*, directed by Pier Paolo Pasolini (1975; Italy: Criterion Collection, 1998), DVD.

⁷¹ Carolyn J. Dean, *The Self and Its Pleasures: Bataille, Lacan, and the History of the Decentered Subject* (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1992), 176–77.

Headless Sex: Acéphalic Anatomy as Queer Eroticism

Selected Bibliography

Altman, Dennis. "Gay Lib – Come Out! 1972." In *After Homosexual: the legacies of gay liberation*. Edited by Carolyn D’Cruz and Mark Pendleton. 155–58. Perth: UWA Publishing, 2014.

Bataille, Georges. *Erotism: Death & Sensuality*. Translated by Mary Dalwood. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986.

Bataille, Georges. *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939*. Edited by Allan Stoekl. Translated by Allan Stoekl, Carl R. Lovitt, and Donald M. Leslie Jr. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

Bataille, Georges. *The Accursed Share: Volume I*. Translated by Robert Hurley. Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2007.

Bataille, Georges, et alia. *The Sacred Conspiracy: The Internal Papers of the Secret Society of Acéphale and Lectures to the College of Sociology*. Edited by Marina Galletti and Alastair Brotchie. Translated by Natasha Lehrer, John Harman, and Meyer Barash. London: Atlas Press, 2017.

Benjamin, Walter. "Critique of Violence." In *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*. Edited by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings. Vol. 1. Harvard: Belknap Press, 2004.

Biles, Jeremy. "Does the Acéphale Dream of Headless Sheep?" In *Negative Ecstasies: Georges Bataille and the Study of Religion*. Edited by Jeremy Biles and Kent Brintnall, 217–38. New York: Fordham University Press, 2015.

Carroll, Michael Thomas. "The Bloody Spectacle: Mishima, The Sacred Heart, Hogarth, Cronenberg, and the Entrails of Culture." *Popular Culture Association in the South* 15, no. 2 (1993): 15.

Cixous, Hélène. "The Laugh of the Medusa." In *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1, no. 4 (Summer 1976): 875–893.

Cixous, Hélène, and Annette Kuhn. "Castration or Decapitation?" In *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 7, no. 1 (Autumn 1981): 41–55.

Dean, Carolyn J. *The Self and Its Pleasures: Bataille, Lacan, and the History of the De-centered Subject*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992.

Erin K. Stapleton

Deleuze, Gilles and Leopold von Sacher-Masoch. *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty* and *Venus in Furs*. Translated by Jean McNeil. New York: Zone Books, 1989.

Dembroff, Robin. *Real Men on Top: The Relations of Patriarchy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022 (forthcoming).

Fanghanel, Alexandra. "Asking for It: BDSM Sexual Practice and the Trouble of Consent." *Sexualities* 23, no. 3 (March 2020): 269–86.

Foucault, Michel. "A Preface to Transgression." In *Bataille: A Critical Reader*. Edited by Fred Botting and Scott Wilson. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1998: 24–40.

Goldhammer, Jesse. *The Headless Republic: Sacrificial Violence in Modern French Thought*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005.

De Gouges, Olympe. "Declaration of the Rights of Woman, 1791." In *Women in Revolutionary Paris, 1789-1795: Selected Documents Translated with Notes and Commentary*. Edited by Darline Gay Levy, Harriet Branson Applewhite, and Mary Durham Johnson. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1979: 87–96.

Halberstam, Jack. *Female Masculinity*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1998.

Halberstam, Jack. *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011.

Irigaray, Luce. *This Sex Which is Not One*. Translated by Catherine Porter. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985.

Jasper, Alison. "Taking Sides on Severed Heads: Kristeva at the Louvre." *Text Matters*, no. 4 (November 25, 2014): 173–83.

Jonas, Raymond Anthony. *France and the Cult of the Sacred Heart: An Epic Tale for Modern Times*. London and Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.

Klossowski, Pierre. *Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle*. Translated by Daniel W. Smith. London and New York: Continuum, 2005.

Von Krafft-Ebing, Richard. *Psychopathia Sexualis: A medico-forensic study*. New York: Pioneer Publications, 1947.

Headless Sex: Acéphalic Anatomy as Queer Eroticism

Kristeva, Julia. *The Severed Head: Capital Visions. European Perspectives*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012.

Levy, Darline Gay, Harriet Branson Applewhite and Mary Durham Johnson. *Women in Revolutionary Paris, 1789–1795: Selected Documents Translated with Notes and Commentary*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1979.

Rubin, Gayle. “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality.” In *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2012.

Surya, Michel. *Georges Bataille: An Intellectual Biography*. Translated by Krzysztof Fijalkowski and Michael Richardson. London and New York: Verso, 2010.

Shteir, Rachel. *Striptease: The Untold History of the Girlie Show*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Stryker, Susan. *Transgender History: The Roots of Today’s Revolution (Second Edition)*. New York: Seal Press, 2017.

Warner, Michael. *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life*. New York: Free Press, 1999.

Weeks, Jeffrey. *Sex, Politics and Society: The Regulation of Sexuality since 1800*. London and New York: Routledge, 2014.

Wilson, Scott. “Frenzy, Feeder, Falcon: Eroticism in the Twenty-First Century.” In *Georges Bataille and Contemporary Thought*. Edited by Will Stronge, 11–32. London and New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017.