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Toward a critique of sacrificial reason: Necropolitics and radical aesthetics in Mexico

Around the time when Georges Bataille wrote his final contributions for *Documents* (1928-1931), the appearance of a series of critical conceptualizations marked the transition of the *dissident surrealists* toward a theoretical project defined as a direct attack to the epistemological system-structure upon which European modernity represented itself as *Civilization*.¹ For Bataille the important critical shift was underscored by the fact that the end of *Documents* was itself a move away from art—as if, in a sense, the project of *Documents* had dismantled the very construction of art to reveal its neurotic bourgeois character; art became suspect of subservience to its ancient cathartic function of stabilizing dangerous social and psychic energies, an operation that was normative and ideological inasmuch as it was busy in finding a remedial system of symbolic transpositions.

Completing the publication of *Documents*, and finding its subsequent articulation first with *Contre-Attaque*, then with *Acéphale*, and finally, with the formation of *The College of Sociology*, meant an important step in the process of differentiation of the mise en scène of *Ethnographic Surrealism* (or the *dissident surrealists*). There was a significant change on the register that shifted emphasis toward a theoretical practice, and taking a discursive turn was rather an intensification of the performative (political-discursive) dimension of this practice. *The College* was conceived under a conspiratorial sign: the program took the shape of a project for a *sacred sociology*; the agenda was defined as a militant re-activation of a concealed dimension of the *sacred*.² Still, the occluded *sacred* territoriality to be excavated was marked by a structure of recurrence and compulsion that worked by activating and programming the social field in relation to a chain of key terms such as *death, mutilation, violence and sacrifice*. The group around Georges Bataille engaged in a sort of counter-classification; a catalog of actions and cultural traces having the power to liberate heterogeneous elements and to crack through

the apparent homogeneity of the subject. In an extreme gesture, what was a stake was a reactivation of a *deferred or repressed memory* through which we could return to a space *before* the subject; an experiment of de-subjectivization.

These emerging critical conceptualizations were defined by a radical move away from all forms of *Idealism*: the formulation of a program for a *base materialism*, and a proposed counter-methodology assembled under the concept of *heterology*, signaled a theoretical operation that acted as a systematic process (machine) for the *de-sublimation of modernity*. Both *Base Materialism* and *Heterology* operated according to a strategic re-inscription of those examples that unsettled the logic of rational production (instrumental reason) by illuminating a *radically other* logic propelling the forces at play within modernity. Among those examples, the idea of Mexico and its indigenous root and culture, served as a recurring referential imaginary. Actually, the imagination or *Idea of Mexico* functioned as a symbolic-allegorical reservoir for revolt and revolution across the two basic camps of Surrealism. The connection between Andre Breton and Diego Rivera exemplifies the staging of avant-garde practices from the localization of Mexico, situating it as a crossroad in the international map of connections to some of the major political and cultural confrontations during the interwar period, such as the formation and expansion of the Comintern, the cultural politics of the Popular Fronts and the beginning of War World ii.

ii.

The argument that I will propose here—notwithstanding the critical gesture directed to art as failing agent for heterogeneous radicality, that is, its diminishing power to *manifest that which is nonassimilable*—postulates that there are relevant examples of artistic projects that explore, approach and account for this different logical formation operating within modernity; I'm referring to works that appear to be arguing for a register of poetic production dispersed in the social body and woven through the threads—in the specific case of our examples—of an imaginary cathexis at work in the idea of Mexico, a manifestation of a figure of aesthetics that returns in fluctuations (rotations), and that exceeds and overflows the dichotomy of rationality-irrationality on which modernity grounds itself. Exemplified in the interpretations, elaborations, readings and inscriptions of Georges Bataille, authors

like Antonin Artaud, Alejandro Jodorowsky, and Juan José Gurrola add to our examples forming a splinter rebellious to the *romance* of the sovereignty and autonomy of the subject.³

In the contemporary moment, the work of Teresa Margolles continues this critical or dissident genealogy. Her practice is also crisscrossed by the iteration of a method of radical transgressions organized by *base* material processes, and beyond that, the punctuation of a logic—or substructure—of contamination that works through the uncanny circuits operating in connection to the production (and circulation) of death. The important question underscoring Margolles's practice bridges the disjointed space of art and recuperates the de-sublimated operations advanced by the political agenda of the *Ethnographic Surrealism* at its most intractable core; that is, pointing to key mechanisms linking death and a sacrificial economy to the production of power and the borders that frame politics.

The work of Teresa Margolles moves like a dismantling or de-sublimating machine through the circulation of representations of violence, deploying an *uncanny operation* of contagion by circulating the objects, matter and remains of death and its processes: a displacement of dead parts that appear to deconstruct their own symbolic transposition and fetishization in the sphere of art. A drive for macabre play or, *Jeu Lugubre*, pulsates in works such as *Lengua* (2000), *En el Aire* (2003) *Tarjeta para picar cocaína* (1997), as well as works she produced as part of the SEMEFO group, like *Dermis* (1996), a piece that turned extreme and excessive for which the group used horse's entrails to cover a set of couches and sofas (a monstrous mocking of upholstery).⁴ What these actions and objects invoke is a perverse charting that acts as an interruption of the normative chain of symbolization of death. Aesthetic practice reverses, becoming a sort of nonsublimatory "undoing of the negation;" that is, a systematic challenge to the interdiction that weighs on the taboo field of forces normally invested in dead human parts, remains and fluids. The key logic pushing the set of symbolic displacements operates in the "making uncanny" effected by the intervention (contamination) of space and in particular art and museum space: a process of *doubling or making uncanny* of key localizations of modernity, postmodernity and hypermodernity.

The critical task of upsetting, unraveling and unfastening the *neutralization* of the power of death as a cultural-social device of control and political engineering, separates these forms of aesthetic practice from the realm of sublimatory codes through which capitalism used art as a toolbox to expropriate and

expand over (colonize) the psychic territories attributed to “the savage, barbarian, infantile, primitive and demented.” A deconstruction of the protocols of colonial warfare and colonial narratives emerges by making evident a concealed sacrificial trace implied in modern capitalism. Moreover, the trace is activated and manifests as a political phenomenon that unfolds in the violent and brutal reality of (ex)colonial territories. Thus, we could argue that a post-colonial set of problems underlines the artistic procedure making reason unstable, displacing its centrality as an organizing axiom, and doing so by bringing into play other categories such as death, expenditure, and the concealed pulsations of the libidinal economy: that is, explicitly, by underpinning the inscription of sacrifice as central to a mapping of the human. The reading that interests us would emphasize the allegorical character of this inscription—the inscription of *Sacrifice* as the very notion from which to operate the chain of discursive displacement in which death, ritual, politics, metaphysics and aesthetics sediment a different logic: another economy, non-economy, a general economy. The critical task marks the extent to which the notion of sacrifice suffers an intrinsic indetermination in its multiple manifestations, working simultaneously as: theoretical operative (device-*dispositif*), historical structure, concept-metaphor, ideological device, symbolic economy, archeological evidence, juridical foundation of the state, the “secret” grammar of power and, also, a counter-image (hieroglyph) for a project of total revolt (i.e. the dismantling of the order of representation-domination).

These examples come exclusively from the realm of art and its discourse (although all of them have heterogeneous correlates in the sphere of politics and the archive of history). Perhaps because the character —at once concealed and folded— of the problem of sacrifice as the *repressed representative* operating within instrumental reason has displaced its clear formulation (enunciation) as precisely a form of articulation that manifests mostly as (a) program(s) for a kind of radical aesthetics. The theoretical speculations of Bataille about the sacrificial order of the Aztecs; the analogous conceptualization Artaud proposed in the *Theater of Cruelty*—which was also propelled by an imagination of the mythic and ritual dimensions of indigenous culture; the initiatic pedagogy rehearsed by Jodorowsky in his *Panic Theater* and his early psycho-magical experiments with cinema; or the gestures of sexual transgression, perverted play and poetic violence that crisscross the multiple lexical and formal experiments of Gurrola, participate in a discontinuous and intermittent movement

that approaches this other non-economy or sacrificial economy⁵. The contemporary practice of Margolles emerges in the multiple planes of circulation of these estranged and un-folded (doubled) figures, a diagram of a field of forces that forms and limits the contemporary: a cartography for a de-sublimated modernity, recounting an orgy of violent representations, while at the same time dismantling them, and searching for a space that overflows into (or is expended as) pure manifestation.

Sacrificial Specters

Sacrifice is only possible after accumulation. Sacrifice is superabundance, radical expenditure, exuberance and effervescence. Its operation is the de-transcendentalizing operation par excellence: it returns man to the animal by a double process of unfolding the body outside death and inside death, by splitting consciousness in a instant into the spectacle of its own destruction and dismemberment. Sacrifice maps human practice by inhabiting the gap between death and the becoming of the subject—provided that becoming-subject supposes upholding the work of death understood as the violence of negativity, to the extent that it is through this confrontation with death that the subject is cast into the incessant movement of history. The very notion of sacrament is bound up with sacrifice, like a hieroglyph in which death withdraws from the horizon of meaning, escapes utility and returns as a power of proliferation: *sacrifice is the cryptonym of sovereignty*.

The work of Georges Bataille mutinously elaborates and re-elaborates the meaning of sacrifice, sidetracking the Hegelian metaphysical apparatus in one of its fundamental categories: pushing death (the key term representative of the power of the negative) to the point at which destruction, suppression and sacrifice constitute so irreversible an expenditure that the very mechanism upon which dialectical symmetry operates is unsettled. Bataille's intervention has critical repercussions for contemporary theory on at least two key areas: on the one hand, by withholding death's signification from the production of truth; that is, by keeping from or arresting it within an economy of knowledge and meaning; and on the other, by effecting a radical digression or deviation from the tradition that modernity has, as a rule, used as a foundation for the conceptual construction of the problem of sovereignty, and as a result, the structure of power and the terms by which it defines "the political."

Bataille's inscription and re-inscription of the notion of sacrifice periodically returns to historical data and finds one of its privileged objects in the example of the Aztecs. The historical image is important: it brings about a series of colonial and post-colonial readings yet to be interpreted and traced within the work of Bataille. Still, the Aztec example is made exceptional; it undergoes a process of reification so as to constitute the example that invalidates all other examples. The exceptionalism invested in the idea of the Mesoamerican civilization echoes what is the most typified rhetorical figure of the Aztecs in textual and historical interpretations—often more an allegorical sediment than an actual description. The appeal resides in the monstrous character of the example: the uncanny logic that underscores the imagination of a world ruled by sumptuousness and blood rites; the model of a society that does not represses the sacrifice that forms (constitutes) it; the image of an empire for which the aim of accumulation and expansion is autogenic destruction and ritual expenditure. Homicidal and suicidal at the same time, the Aztecs are the case of a society based upon death and faithful to its basis to such a degree as to become ephemeral and be ready to die. By all accounts the figure of sovereignty emerging in this historical *imago* disturbed the discursive formations that are normative to modern political doctrine, and beyond that, the very structure of political economy all the way to the Marxian “mirror of production.”⁶ Bataille follows Ariadne's thread from the subterranean excavation of the labyrinth to the territorialization that grounds the pyramid: above and below the search (desire) is for the Minotaur: the operation-form that collapses that which alienates man from animal. The sacrificial contract of ancient Mexico illuminates a system that perpetuates itself in the infrasecond of an act where man is delivered back to inhabit the immanence of the animal.

The first explicit elaboration of the Aztec example occurs in “*L'Amérique Disparue*” (Extinct America), one of Bataille's earliest articles, which was published in 1928 as part of the catalog for the exhibition “*L'art Précolombien. L'Amérique Avant Christophe Colomb.*” The chain of intertextual play upon which Bataille will elaborate his critique of classic and Marxist political economy returns to the Aztec example in his later work. In chapter 1 of *La Part maudite* (*The Accursed Share*), the re-inscription of the Aztec phantasmagoria propitiates the very structure of transgression that engenders a genealogy (heterology) of polyphonic examples for demolishing history by disturbing the synchrony of homologues that instrumental reason had warded as the academic expressive code of the European

system of knowledge. As Denis Hollier has pointed out, the attack is directed at the structural mapping of modernity's subjective formation, which is allegorized in the theme of architecture as a prison—as a symbolic *dispositif* of authority, control and social ordering. Shaping, enclosing and silencing the subject in its function as a fixed and idealized superego, the architectural metaphor is divested of its idealistic occlusion through the Aztecs, whose “science of architecture enabled them to construct pyramids on top of which they immolated human beings⁷.” A knowledge that turns against itself, in the example Bataille finds the instance in which architecture is “returned to the destructive interaction that its initial function was to interrupt.” The ritualized spectacular display of death and violence staged atop the ceremonial buildings of the Mesoamerican Polis manifested the sacred logic of the contract that binds the community (a share in a common crime): in Bataille's description the overlapping of the sacred contract with the social contract sediments in the figure of the Aztecs as heroic barbarians⁸.

Bataille inverts the stereotype of the wretched Aztecs in a radical operation that re-inscribes them as a model of the “Barbarian,” that is, those who elude “systematic conquest;” a society that finds its logic in pure transgression and aimless *dépense*. The *Aztec war machine* was conscious of the enchantment of war and sacrifice to a degree that “*wars meant consumption, not conquest*.”⁹ There is a profound unnerving of all conventional readings that attempt a categorization of the historical example:

If the Aztecs must be situated, they belong among the warrior societies, in which pure, uncalculated violence and ostentatious forms of combat held sway. The reasoned organization of war and conquest was unknown to them. A truly military society is a venture society, for which war means a development of power, an orderly progression of empire. It is a relatively mild society; it makes a custom of the rational principles of enterprise, whose purpose is given in the future, and it excludes the madness of sacrifice.¹⁰

Regardless of whether Bataille's interpretation occludes his own limited understanding of how the separation of military and religious life was inoperative in the Mesoamerican context, and in turn his failure to grasp the messianic ideology that, in the specific case of the Aztecs, propels the very

ambivalence of the sacred from its centrifugal containment into a centripetal unraveling, what is truly a stake in his reading must be understood as the launching of a counterattack against a civilizing system dominated by architecture: not only an image of social order but that which guarantees it.¹¹ For Bataille, architecture is always *Representation* at its most dictatorial ideological idealism; the covering of the site of a crime with a pile of rocks, the hiding and folding of death in discrete monuments, temples and palaces which operate as identical to the space of representation, that is, always representing something else than themselves: “a religion that it brings into space, a political power that it manifests, an event that it commemorates¹².” The metaphor of architecture is displaced into that of the *construct*, the reified presence of a structure that is never to be reduced to the building, and is meant always to expand its semantic field, that is, its symbolic mastery over the social body. The ghostly image of the sacrificial economy of pre-Columbian Mexico strikes a blow in the organic and idealized imago of society, opening up the labyrinth again: working through a negative imago as it were.

The critique of the pyramid?

The critique of Mexico begins with the critique of the pyramid.

Octavio Paz, *Postdata*, 1969¹³

Octavio Paz published *Postdata* in 1970. A collection of essays that were meant to be a reflection *after* Mexico—a further elaboration of *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (1950)—commenting on recent political developments, especially the 1968 student massacre of Tlatelolco. The closing essay of this small volume, “Critique of the Pyramid,” guards a contentious analogy to Bataille’s reading of the Aztecs. Both interpretations coincide in deploying a strategic allegorical reading of the pyramid and sacrificial logic whereupon to illuminate a manifestation of modern political violence. The discrepancy is interesting, inasmuch as it marks a radical difference in their critical relation to the civilizing project of Enlightenment, the viability of modernity and the notion of progress or development.

Octavio Paz’s essay makes a significant contribution by advancing a reading that clearly situates the phenomenon as if we were confronting a *phantasmagoric scene*: “It is a Mexico that, if we learn how to name and recognize it, we might one day finish transfiguring it: it shall cease to be that ghost

that slips into reality and turns it into a nightmare of blood. Double reality of the 2nd of October of 1968: to be an historical fact and to be a symbolic representation of our subterranean or invisible history¹⁴.” *That ghost that slips into reality, the symbolic representation of a subterranean history*, Paz underscores the ghostly presence-made-absence of an occult structure that again is given a proper name in the figure of the Aztecs. The cathexis of the historical figuration ciphers a sort of symbolic overdetermination upon the political structure or power structure. Sovereignty in modern Mexico is authoritarian and violent because it expresses a repressed content: it has an unconscious that is Other and comes from the Other. The hidden operation is the Aztec sacrificial war machine: a model of sovereignty that splits in an unbridled movement that contaminates reality, a “perpetual present in rotation” disjointed by a constitutive traumatic memory of an original *state of exception*.¹⁵ Moreover, this is also a history of usurpations—the “origin” is always folded and double—and as such is always at peril and knows itself to be provisional.

However, while Bataille *conjures* the ghost, extending an invitation for it to prey over idealized humanity and to activate its destructive powers (an uncanny echo of the invocation that Walter Benjamin makes of Blanqui’s image while he was held a prisoner at the fortress of Taureau: “...that humanity will be prey to a *mythic anguish* so long as the *phantasmagoria* occupies a place in it¹⁶”), Octavio Paz was clearly officiating over an *exorcism*. Meant as a critical reading, the historical displacement that Paz attempts in his argument remains problematic: specifically, the fact that he transfers the very structure of violent domination to the moment prior to conquest and the imposition of colonial rule (explicitly obscuring the critique of modernity, the violence of the colonial process and the destructive historical logic implicit in the expansion of capitalism). The source of the social dysfunction that is expressed in modernity has its origins in a *mythical* ancient history: the Spaniards are a second usurpation of a first usurpation, that of the Aztecs over the civilizing glory of Teotihuacán. All forms of Mexican power—from that point till the post-revolutionary regime that perpetuated the massacre of Tlatelolco—*rotate* under this sign. And although he recognizes the presence of native culture as an internal (ghostly) otherness that cannot be extirpated without amounting to a mutilation, although he poetically advances by questioning “Which one is the original and which one the ghost?” *Critique of the Pyramid* repeats the very movement of “production of knowledge” that Bataille unsettled in his

critical annotation to Hegelian dialectics.¹⁷

Paz's essay is part of his *Labyrinth* series, a body of work that is engaged in producing a "phenomenology of *Mexicanidad*," a project that at its core is concerned with spelling an *essence* that "speaks the universal." Paz falls victim to the *Icarian solution* (transcendental movement upwards) that Bataille denounces as a false exit from the labyrinth, a move antithetical to the *base materialism* that he had argued for at the time of the surrealist debates. Such a critique would need to advance by a different route: namely, the dangerous path of engaging in a reading of the necropolitics of Mexico as part of the reading of postcolonial modernity.

Necropolitics and radical aesthetics in Mexico

The cyclical mass destruction of humans is an experience that marks the pulsations of contemporary political space. War, poverty, marginality, social violence, racism, political repression are among the zones of its manifestation. Its logic of operation is often organized along the axis of confrontation that emerges from the field of forces at play in the historical formations of empire-colony, production-distribution, territory-disposable population, domination-subordination. The iteration of this structure—which could be defined as *the production and regulation of death*—gives us reason to believe that the political paradigm of modernity could be described against the grain from the philosophical definitions of sovereignty, autonomy, subjectivity that preside over the tradition (political doctrine) of the Enlightenment. We are here facing a phenomenon that we could name (following the theorizations of Giorgio Agamben and Achille Mbembe) *Necropolitics or Necropower*.¹⁸

Normative stipulations ruling over the theorization of democracy presupposed reason as its essential and constitutive topos. Modernity is articulated and organized around a measure of rationality, and it is upon this ground that the notion of sovereignty is expressed as a project based in the struggle for autonomy; that is, in the formation and production of subjects that are created in a process of *self-institution and self-limitation*. As Achille Mbembe points out in his critical essay "*Necropolitics*," there are plenty of examples that impel us to re-think the problem of sovereignty, not as the struggle for autonomy, but rather as the "generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations¹⁹."

The historical circuits of operation where the phenomenon of necropolitics appears constant and necessary become transparent and obscene in the sphere of the colonial-postcolonial: “Colonial warfare is not subject to legal and institutional rules. It is not legally codified activity. Instead, colonial terror constantly intertwines with *colonially generated fantasies of wilderness and death and fictions to create the effect of the real*.²⁰ It is not a coincidence that it is precisely through a re-reading of Bataille’s theorization of sovereignty that Mbembe advances his intervention into a logic that depicts coloniality and post-coloniality as the territorialization where *exception* provided the structure of sovereignty, as the space whereupon “the fiction of a distinction between ‘the ends of war’ and ‘the means of war’ collapses.”

In *Necropolitics*, Mbembe advances the deconstruction of modernity’s *romance* of sovereignty from the localization of Africa and Palestine. In a similar gesture we could advance a critical emplacement, at once key and disturbed, from Mexico (or to be more precise from “the idea of Mexico”). The critical task implies a re-inscription, or re-reading back, of a colonial- postcolonial dimension onto Bataille’s texts. Here we find a supplementary logic that operates in a discursive and aesthetic register, which identifies the production and regulation of death as a *dispositif* (device-war-machine) for political domination and historic ordering. Moreover, following the trace of the Aztec phantasmagoria that inhabits Bataille’s examples, we could intertwine a sort of disturbed genealogy (heretic history) where “the idea of Mexico” is prefigured as a reservoir of the cultural imaginary from which modernity has attempted a *return* to the multiplicity of confronted concepts of sovereignty that were taking place at its origins.

Both Octavio Paz’s *Critique of the Pyramid* and Georges Bataille’s description and interpretation of the sacrificial economy of the Aztecs are examples of a textual weaving that, although radically divergent in their final movement, converge in illuminating a fissure. The rational self-definition of the political economy and doctrine of modernity enters a hiatus or cognitive failure in the example of Mexico, and in the paradoxical model of temporality that connects past and present, life and death, politics and sacrifice in the example: these metaphors engender and reflect uncanny doubles, sinister duplications, splinters of a modernity demented by an excess of ghosts emanating from its historical formation and logic. Under this scheme necropower –as a core inscription in the social text of

Mexico—appears not only as a reality that auto-generates and reproduces in historical cycles, we will be touching upon a discursive localization (emplacement) that erases (defaces) the limits of representation of violence and prefigures the tools for its critical deconstruction.

The gap that separates “the fiction of a distinction between ‘the ends of war’ and ‘the means of war’ collapses.” The building (architectural metaphor) cracks open into a view of a *zone of disturbance* folded and doubled within modernity. What we are describing here is an operation of “making uncanny” that is engendered by a critical reading situated at the postcolony: a “making uncanny” that effects itself as the real. We are reading through *colonially generated fantasies of wilderness and death and fictions to create the effect of the real*. What is at stake is not an essence—as in Paz—that reified *radical other* consciousness that rotates *outside* progress, the promise of democracy, and modernity. Quite the contrary, what emerges is a blue print of the *colonial war machine* as the motor of the capitalist system in its core logic of formation-expansion; that is, what Frantz Fanon named the *spatialization of colonial occupation* working throughout a symbolic and psychic territorialization. In her installation, *What Else Could We Talk About?* Teresa Margolles *contaminates* a Sixteenth Century Venetian palace with traces of violence, death, mutilation and sacrifice. Blood, cloth, dirt, broken glass, tainted water: all splinters of the global war on drugs. “Making uncanny” is the process of a spectral unfolding: a shadow cast by a profound absence, an image of fissioning multiplication—doubled and doubled again—expressing an internal dissimilarity, a constitutive dismembering, and if we follow Freud closely, the source of the terror of castration (decapitation). The contaminated palace wrecks the architectural metaphor: the realm upon which to transpose this space is a labyrinth of ruins (invoking a sacrificial, sumptuous and vertiginous *Maudite* narrative), a representation that exceeds (*is nonassimilable to*) symbolic transposition; rather a pulsation and punctuation of the realm of manifestation.

¹ In this article I use the names “the dissident surrealists”, “Ethnographic Surrealism” and “Bataille’s group” to designate an intellectual, internal opposition to Andre Breton’s Surrealism. The project of *Documents*, which ran 15 issues through 1929 and 1930, drew several unconventional artistic and intellectual figures such as Michel Leiris, Joan Miró, Robert Desnos, Carl Einstein and André Masson among others. The figure of Bataille is at the center of this splitting group, becoming in his own words Surrealism’s “old enemy *from within*.” For a detailed survey of the importance of *Documents* to the avant-garde debates see: Dawn Ades, Simon Baker. *Undercover Surrealism: Georges Bataille and Documents*. London- Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press-Hayward Gallery, 2006.

² In July 1937, in issue 3-4 of *Acéphale* a “Note” appeared regarding “A Declaration Relating to the Foundation of a College of Sociology.” Its closing paragraph reads as follows: “3. The precise object of the contemplated activity can take the name *Sacred Sociology*, implying the study of all manifestations of social existence where the active presence of the sacred is clear. It intends to establish in this way the points of coincidence between the fundamental obsessive tendencies of individual psychology and the *principal structures that govern social organization and are in command of its revolutions*” (emphasis added). Some of the names associated with the College are Roger Caillois, Pierre Klossowski, Michel Leiris, Jean Paulhan, Anatole Lewitzky and Georges Bataille. Other important figures also gather under the conspiring constellation, most notoriously, Walter Benjamin and Alexander Kojève. For an annotated account of the theoretical production of “The College of Sociology” see: Denis Hollier, ed. *The College of Sociology* (1937-39). Translated by Betsy Wing, Theory and History of Literature. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988.

³ For reasons of length this text cannot elaborate on each of these examples in detail (or for that matter extend the list to include other important ones converging at a similar crossroad). The case of Antonin Artaud is critical in the proposed genealogy: contemporary to Bataille, and in his own right a dissident figure within the surrealist debates, Antonin Artaud’s allegorical reading of Mexico is perhaps the most intense and hallucinatory experiential working through the traces of the spectral structure that we are discussing here. Having said that, it is important to underline the textual evidence that links the specific formulation of the *Theater of Cruelty* to the imagination of the Conquest of Mexico: in *The Theater and Its Double*, and in a letter to Jean Paulhan from 1933, Artaud refers to his project-draft “*La Conquête du Mexique*” as the initial and exemplary formulation for the radical conceptualization of theater he was proposing. The structure of immanence/manifestation investigated throughout his life and avant-garde experiments was at that time described as an exploration of the secret and *revolutionary* logic contained on a double movement of immersion and restoration of the Mesoamerican civilizations. Artaud was the first to invoke the notion of an *Indian Revolution* in connection to a advancing a critique of orthodox Marxism. For an annotated compilation of Artaud’s texts on Mexico see: Artaud, Antonin. *México Y Viaje Al País De Los Tarahumaras*. Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2004. And, *50 Drawings to Murder Magic*. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith. London, New York, Calcutta, 2004.

⁴ Contrary to what a superficial criticism of her work would argue, Margolles’s art is not to be reduced to a shocking fetishization of death. The shock comes, rather, from an operation of the *use value* of death to reveal the logic of fetishization that is always at work in the art market. We would expect that our interpretations are

bound to encounter some opposition from the guardians of the critical legacy of Bataille. However, the *obscenity* of the violence contained in the work is misinterpreted if it is not understood from its localization and the social relations from which is produced. The critical difference here is that it is *obscene* because it reflects a political economic history of colonization, social violence and extreme poverty. Any alert interpretations of Margolles's work passes for an economical critique that evidences the "precariousness of life" for the marginal and poor populations of the global south. By localizing the *underground commerce of death* occurring in circuits of exchange such as illegal immigration, wars of occupation and the geopolitics of black markets of weapons and drugs the intervention here is one in which the work manifests as a *critical fetishization (reification)*: that is, illuminating the extreme poverty that circumscribes the centers of money and power. Thus, to dismiss it is to misread the colonial-postcolonial dimension of Bataille's legacy and, to be puritanical in the face of an aesthetic de-sublimatory act of aggression (i.e. the kind of attack to representation that Bataille valued in the example of Manet).

⁵ During the post-war years and taking part of what in Mexico is identified as "*Generación de Medio Siglo*" or "*Generación de la Ruptura*," Alejandro Jodorowsky (Chile, 1929) and Juan José Gurrola (Mexico, 1935-2007) are fascinating examples of this counter-genealogy and, already, unmistakably and consciously indebted to the figures of Bataille and Artaud, as well as a specific local and radical deviation from the surrealist legacy. Jodorowsky arrived to Mexico in 1960 and soon became the catalyst for the new avant-garde languages of experimentation in visual art, theater and film. Moreover, his influence is strategic for an emergent formation of dissident cultures given that he officiated as a sort of instigator and guru for *Counterculture*, still to this day, having vast repercussion in the realms of theory, criticism and politics. As Cuauhtémoc Medina argues in his short essay "*Recovering Panic*", the Panic world (el Mundo Pánico) was conceived as a "sacred trap": Jodorowsky's work "pushed counterculture into paroxysm with the ambition of advancing a critique of the social totality, and doing this, by deploying an arsenal from outside the European Enlightenment." His happenings "...suggested, in effect, a violent de-sublimation: a succession of iconoclast acts mixed with unforeseen actions and rants, sexual referents and mayor destructive operations of objects and images." Juan José Gurrola extends these lines of investigation and friction, acting as an important and direct link to the contemporary generation of artists in Mexico. An emphasis on violence, erotic and moral disorder as well as traces of the "sacrificial economy" clearly separates these works from other forms of Pop art, *Fluxus* art experimentation in the international scene, and more programmatic or instrumental forms of counterculture as revolution. See: Olivier Debrouse, Cuauhtémoc Medina. *La Era De La Discrepancia. Arte Y Cultura Visual En México 1968-1997*. México: Dirección General de Publicaciones y Fomento Editorial de la UNAM- Editorial Turner México, 2006, p.97-103.

⁶ A dense process of inscription inevitably screens textual and historical interpretation of the Aztecs acting as the metonymic trace for Mesoamerican civilizations. The precipitated and violent *foreclosure* of the historical continuity of these peoples left behind a copious archive of descriptions and artifacts created and classified by the agents of colonial domination. Bataille "reads" the Aztecs from within the protocols of supplementation that form the ghostly or phantasmagoric trace in the text. Thus in using the term *imago* the intention is to point to the fact that what is at stake here is an "*unconscious representation*" of history, an acquired imaginary set rather than

an image: a stereotype through which, as it were, the “subject” views the Other. An imago works beyond mental images; it is experienced also as feelings and behavior, it is both, affective and familial.

⁷ Bataille, Georges. *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*. Translated by Robert Hurley. 3 vols. Vol. 1 - *Consumption*. New York: Zone Books, 1991. p. 46

⁸ The chain that links the architectural metaphor throughout the texts of Bataille is critically annotated and explored by Denis Hollier in his book: *Against Architecture: The Writings of Georges Bataille*. Translated by Betsy Wing. Cambridge Massachusetts, London England: The MIT Press, 1989. p. 48

⁹ Bataille, Georges. *The Accursed Share*, Vol. I. p.49.

¹⁰ Ibid. pp. 54-55

¹¹ Recent interpretations suggest that in the *Mexica* case what is occurring is a moment of de-coding (abstraction) of the sacrificial system common to the all Mesoamerican cultures. The Aztec war machine is both nomadic and imperial, provisional and in radical dissemination. It is a political instrumentalization of the logic of sacrifice under a messianic ideology that both expands and *expends* empire: a historical-political construction that suggests the stipulations of a *state of exception*.

¹² Hollier, Denis. *Against Architecture*, p.31.

¹³ Paz, Octavio. *El Laberinto de la soledad-postdata-Vuelta al laberinto de la soledad*. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1999. p. 305

¹⁴ Ibid. p.291. Emphasis added.

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 290.

¹⁶ Walter Benjamin, “Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century. [Exposé of 1939]” in Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project*. Translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002. pp. 14-15, my emphasis

¹⁷ Paz, Octavio, *Postdata*, p. 289.

¹⁸ The notions of *Necropolitics* and *Necropower* must be understood as a critical development that takes its cue from Michel Foucault’s fragmentary analysis of *Biopolitics* or *Biopower*. In his book, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Giorgio Agamben illuminates to what extent the notion of sovereignty as power over “life” is implicit in the history of western thought and to which degree this definition is in turn determinate by the idea of the sacred and its intrinsic relation to prohibition (taboo). In the context of our discussion what is relevant in this

elaboration is pointing to the colonial sphere as the exemplary case of sovereignty as state of exception: Agamben establishes a direct relation that connects a state of emergency linked to colonial war to the creation the concentration camp and experiments that extend it to the entire civil population. The critical implications of his central theses imply a hidden matrix that connects these forms of political control, and the *nomos* (law) of modernity. See: Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen. Edited by Werner Hamacher & David E. Wellbery, Meridian. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1988

¹⁹ Mbembe, Achille. "Necropolitics." *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 11-40, p.13.

²⁰ Ibid. p. 25.