AN INTIMATE DESTRUCTION
TANTRIC BUDDHISM, DESIRE, AND THE BODY
IN SURREALISM AND GEORGES BATAILLE

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The dissertation addresses the influence of Tantric Buddhism on Surrealism and the work of the French writer Georges Bataille. Specifically, it explores the approaches of the two fields to the concepts of desire, death, and the separate self, and examines how the treatment of these themes in Buddhism affected their role in early twentieth century France, particularly within Surrealism and the work of Georges Bataille.

Chapter One is a historical account of the initial contacts between Europe and Tibet, focusing on the roles that European writers, explorers, and scholars played in the mythologized image of Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism that became prevalent in Europe. This chapter lays the groundwork for a later examination of the role of these myths in European art and writing.

Chapter Two explores the influence of Eastern thought, religion, and culture in the art and writing of early twentieth century Europe, focusing on the French avant-garde. The impact of Orientalism and ethnology on French interpretations of Tibet and Buddhism is examined, as is the role of Catholicism as a mediator between the exotic religion of the East and the exoticist fantasies of disaffected Westerners.

Chapter Three is a comparative study of the approaches of Buddhism and Surrealism to the concept of desire. A definition of desire within each field is developed, followed by a discussion of Buddhism as a means of liberation ‘from’ desire and Surrealism as a means of liberation ‘of’ desire. Further related themes that are explored include a comparison of the Buddhist concept of impermanence with the Bataillean idea of the informe and the role of sublimated religious urges within Surrealism.

Chapter Four focuses specifically on the French artists André Masson and Antonin Artaud, and on their interest in the role of the physical body and its transgression in their art and writing. The body is related to other biographical and philosophical aspects of Masson and Artaud, including Masson’s war injuries and Artaud’s struggles with mental illness.

Chapter Five explores the work, philosophy, and psychology of Georges Bataille as it relates to themes of Buddhism, the body, and the self. Bataille’s opposition to reason and interest in transgressive sexual and spiritual practices are related to similar themes within Tantric Buddhism. The chapter concludes with an examination of the importance of the visual in Buddhism and in Surrealism, and Bataille’s interest in the destruction of vision through his concept of the pineal eye.

Chapter Six is dedicated to the idea of duality, which is explored within the context of Tibetan Buddhism and Georges Bataille. An examination of Tibetan means of access to the sacred is followed by a study of Bataille’s idiosyncratic meditation practice, looked at in the context of his knowledge of Eastern philosophy and spiritual practice. The chapter concludes with a look at Mircea Eliade’s ideas concerning the sacred and the profane and how these relate to dualism in Buddhism, Surrealism, and Bataille.

The dissertation is intended to create a sound argument for the existence of a substantial Buddhist influence within the Surrealist milieu. While not a straightforward or formalized influence, knowledge of and interest in Eastern philosophy was a pervasive theme amongst these artists and writers, and substantially affected various aspects of their belief systems and artistic productions.
Le rire est du côté de l'immamanence en ce que le néant est l'objet du rire, mais il est ainsi l'objet d'une destruction…

…une glisse à l’immanence et toute une sorcellerie de méditations. Destruction plus intime, bouleversement plus étrange, mise en question sans limites de soi-même.

Laughter moves toward immanence, and in that nothingness is the object of laughter – but it is thus an object of a destruction…

A slide into immanence and all the magic of meditations.
More intimate destruction, stranger upheaval,
The limitless questioning of the self.

- Georges Bataille ¹

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Every soul must disintegrate to become God.

- Vivekananda ²

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² Vivekananda, Complete Works, p. 198.
INTRODUCTION: ‘FRÈRES SIAMOIS’

Only yesterday, East and West were for Rudyard Kipling nothing but twins, and twins who would never meet. The genius of Europe – its evil genius? – was to weld them together, and now we have siamese twins.

- Sylvain Lévi

In April of 1925, readers of La Révolution Surréaliste were confronted with an open letter entitled ‘Adresse au Dalaï-Lama’. It was published in the same issue as two other letters, one to the Rectors of European Universities and the other to the Pope, that left little doubt as to the Surrealist opinion of Western thought and religion. The writer set a virulent anti-intellectual tone in the first letter, where he wrote: ‘The fault is with your mildewed systems…the fault is in you, Vice-Chancellors, preoccupied with your nets of syllogism’. He then went on to lambast the Pope: ‘From top to bottom of your Roman masquerade, what triumphs is the hatred of the immediate truths of the heart, of these flames which burn with the same spirit. There is no God, Bible, or Gospel, there are no words that can stop the spirit.’

In the wake of these angry outbursts, the ethereal and beseeching tone of the letter to the Dalai-Lama was all the more striking:

We are your most faithful servants, O Grand Lama, give us, grace us with your illuminations in a language our contaminated European minds can understand, and if need be, transform our Mind, create for us a mind turned entirely toward those perfect summits where the Human Mind no longer suffers.

All of the letters, appearing in 1925 during a peak period of Surrealist interest in the East, had been written by Antonin Artaud. They were published as unsigned diatribes, and shared a dominant anti-Western theme with much of the content of that
issue. Although the individuals associated with Surrealism were anything but unanimous on any number of subjects, these letters, in their unsigned state, tacitly represented for the reader the Surrealist group as a whole.8

In his simultaneous rejection of Western spiritual hegemony and embrace of an exotic East, Artaud was expressing an attitude that had, by the 1920s, become widespread in the Parisian avant-garde. Alienated and disgusted by the carnage of World War One, and repelled by what they saw as the drab and meaningless lives of the bourgeois who surrounded them, many artists and writers of this era sought solace in the foreign and the exotic. The Buddhist imagery and philosophy of Tibet, which was becoming increasingly accessible during this era through museums, books, and the accounts of travelers, found a ready audience in these early searchers. Artists and writers such as Artaud, André Masson, and Georges Bataille utilized these ideas and images, transforming them through their own iconoclastic interpretations into something new, a fusion of the ancient East and twentieth century Paris, a ‘Buddhism’ for the modern age. The association of the East with the generally anti-rational stance of these artists was a reflection of Western needs rather than Eastern realities, an affirmation of Edward Said’s claim that the very idea of ‘the Orient’, at least as it is characterized by the West, is a Western construction.9 Avant-garde artists of the twentieth century inherited this construction, and adapted it further to suit their own needs. The result would not necessarily have been recognizable to the founder of the philosophy that came to be known as Buddhism.

**BUDDHISM**

In ancient India, 25 centuries before the appearance of Artaud’s letter, a man named Siddhartha Gautama was said to have liberated himself from the illusions of the world. As a result of his efforts he became the person who is known today as the Buddha.10 Following his realization, he began teaching a doctrine in which desire, craving, and clinging, in any of their myriad guises, are seen as the cause of all

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10 Any person who reaches enlightenment can be referred to as a Buddha; when the term is used without elaboration it is nearly always referring to Siddhartha Gautama: ‘in common with all Buddhists, the Mahāyāna speaks of “The Buddha” (using the article), meaning the fully enlightened man, Gautama…He appears amongst us in the Nirmanakāya, the Emanation Body, or Body of Manifestation, as does every spiritually enlightened being.’ Dorothy Donath, *Buddhism for the West* (NY: Julian Press, 1971), p. 11.
suffering (in the Pāli language, *dukkha*). The Buddha’s method of liberating oneself from these impurities is based on objective observation, self-discipline, and the realization of the truths of *dukkha*, *anicca* (impermanence), and *anatta* (selflessness). The Buddha discovered the key to the door that leads out of the world of suffering: complete detachment from the illusion known as the self, and the development of an ability to observe all worldly phenomena, good, bad, or indifferent, without losing the balance of one’s mind. He claimed that, by voluntarily seceding from the emotional turmoil of this world, an individual can calm the turbulent surface of the mind, thus revealing reality as it truly is, an experience which then leads to a cessation of reincarnation and eventual liberation from worldly suffering.

Buddhism, due to its prolonged history, geographic dissemination, and ability to adapt and conform to the cultures in which it exists, has assumed a vast variety of forms over the past 25 centuries. To achieve anything resembling an accurate understanding of these widely varying traditions, one must avoid what McMahan refers to as ‘a tendency toward premature totalization of non-Western traditions…which reduces the myriad, complex historical manifestations of Buddhist thought to one normative “Buddhism”’. Like all religions, despite many believers’ claims to the contrary, Buddhism functions within a historical context, affecting and being affected by contingencies of climate, politics, economics, culture, and history. Buddhism did not reach Tibet until many centuries after its inception in India, giving it ample time to mutate into forms that were very different from its infancy.

John Powers writes:

By the time Buddhism reached Tibet, the historical Buddha had faded into the mists of the distant past, and mainly functioned as an important shared symbol for Buddhists. This symbol was understood and interpreted differently by different schools of Buddhism, each of which appropriated the symbol in accordance with its own ideas…the Buddha is represented quite differently in different parts of the world.

If one hopes to achieve a cohesive study, and to avoid what Edward Conze calls ‘the indiscriminate accumulation of quotations’, it is imperative to ‘decide which one
among the numerous presentations of the Buddha’s doctrine should be regarded as the
most authentic.' While making no claims regarding its authenticity relative to other
forms of Buddhism, the only tradition that will be extensively addressed in this study is
the discipline variously known as Vajrayana, Tantric, or Tibetan Buddhism. Known as
‘Lamaism’ during the period of history addressed here, this philosophy is the result of
centuries of interaction between ancient Buddhism, shamanism, Tibet’s indigenous Bön
religion, and Tantric philosophies imported to Tibet from India centuries ago.

There are two reasons for this focus on Tantric Buddhism. First, its approach to
the issue of desire, unlike the approaches of more ascetic forms of Buddhism such as
Theravada, is compellingly similar to that of Surrealism. While most forms of
Buddhism teach that desire is a poison that must be avoided and overcome, Tantric
teachings recognize and utilize the hazardous strength of desire. While not advocating
its total liberation as did the Surrealists, Tantra trains the initiate to enter into and
confront desire as a means of recognizing its power and using it for spiritual liberation
rather than being enslaved by it. Second, both Tibet and the Surrealists were familiar
with the horrific imagery of body transgression, as can be seen in the endless depictions
of bloody deities and demons in Tibetan art, and in the metamorphoses of bodily
integrity in much Surrealist art. Both traditions recognized the impermanence of the
body and the illusory nature of the separate self, and utilized these concepts extensively
in their aesthetic expressions. The iconography of Tibetan Buddhism depicts
transgressions of the physical form in a similar manner to the writing of Georges
Bataille and much of the art of André Masson and other Surrealists. The invasion,
dismemberment, transformation, and alteration of the physical body in both Tantric
Buddhism and Surrealism will be explored in order to reveal their similar approaches to
concepts of desire, the self, and the body.

The terms ‘Tantra’ and ‘Tantric’, described by Donald Lopez as ‘notoriously
vague’, must be handled with care. Feuerstein defines Tantra as ‘a full-fledged
movement or cultural style extending over both Hinduism and Buddhism [that] seems

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to have originated around the middle of the first millennium CE.¹⁸ Tantra was transformed, over the following 12 centuries, into a vastly convoluted landscape of arcane and often contradictory texts that were used in secretive rituals throughout India and Tibet. Tantra distinguished itself from more mainstream forms of Buddhism and Hinduism through its approach to ideas of desire, indulgence, and transgression. While most Buddhist traditions advocate an ascetic path devoted to a rejection of the things of the flesh, Tantra takes the opposite path and utilises the very things which Hinduism and more traditional Buddhism reject. Tantric adepts believe that, through a skillful use of such things as meat, alcohol, and sex, one can train oneself to overcome the craving, attachment, and desire that are associated with these very things, and to reach a Buddha state in this lifetime, rather than in the thousands of lifetimes that are theoretically required in other traditions.

What is being sought is a delineation of the underlying forces that animated both the Tantric and Surrealist fascination with desire, rather than a definitive historical causality from one to the other.

DESIRE

The concept of desire is central to Buddhist philosophy, but neither it nor the human joys and sufferings to which it is related are confined to this particular philosophy. During the Surrealist era, desire was defined as ‘a longing for an anticipated or wished-for object or experience’, or as wishing or craving.¹⁹ It could also be defined as the gap between ‘the world as it is’ and ‘the world as one would like it to be’. It is the nature of this gap, as well as the nature of reactions to it at a specific point in history, that form the basis of this thesis. While this study focuses on early twentieth century Europe, the concept of desire could be addressed through the medium of any period or place; historical events as varied as the slaughters of the Roman Coliseum, the courtly love poetry of medieval Europe, or the popularity of pornography could all be profitably analyzed from the perspective of their relationship to desire.

Looked at in the light of this universality, the idea of examining Surrealism from a Buddhist perspective becomes somewhat less unlikely than it may at first appear. Few movements within the history of art, and certainly none within the

twentieth century, have addressed the issue of desire more directly than did Surrealism.\textsuperscript{20} Having accepted the torch of desire from romantic and revolutionary predecessors such as the Marquis de Sade (1740-1814), Baudelaire (1821-1867), Lautréamont (1846-1870), Rimbaud (1854-1891), and Apollinaire (1880-1918) (who wrote that ‘desire is the great force’\textsuperscript{21}), the Surrealists kept it burning brightly, utilizing means as diverse as the love poetry of Robert Desnos, the disturbing photographs of Hans Bellmer and Pierre Molinier, the calculated machine imagery of Marcel Duchamp, and the entire \textit{oeuvre} of André Breton, who wrote that ‘desire is the only master man must recognize’.\textsuperscript{22}

In their art, writing, games, and lives, the Surrealists celebrated, indulged in, and attempted to liberate ‘what endlessly remains joyously and necessarily unsatisfied,’\textsuperscript{23} The content of desire lies not in its resolution but in its frustration. One of the primary disagreements between Buddhism, Surrealism, and Georges Bataille lies in their opinions of whether this content consists of suffering or of joy, whether ‘unfulfillment’ is a blessing or a curse. Insofar as satisfaction of desire entails its extinction, those, such as the Surrealists, who were committed to its eternal pursuit made little distinction between satisfaction and repression. Both lead to the disappearance of, or at any rate to the conscious separation from, desire, the \textit{raison d'être} of Surrealism. While Buddhism presents dissatisfaction as an obstacle to enlightenment, Surrealism views it as a necessary precondition of desire. Similarly, Bataille pursued what Hollier calls ‘the awakening which requires an ever unresolved dissatisfaction’.\textsuperscript{24} Bataille doubtless shared many of the beliefs of Buddhism regarding the overthrow of mundane reality, but a more pointed dichotomy than their opinions regarding the desirability of desire would be difficult to imagine.

This curious commitment to dissatisfaction places Georges Bataille (1897-1962) [Plate 1] at the crux of the issues being considered here. His scholarship on subjects that ranged from old coins to speculative anatomy, pornographic yet exalted writing, and compulsive womanizing all expressed what Michel Leiris called ‘a violent

\textsuperscript{22} ‘Le désir, seul ressort du monde, le désir, seule rigueur que l'homme ait à connaître…’ André Breton, \textit{L’Amour Fou} (Paris: Gallimard, 1937), p. 131; translated as ‘the only rigor humans must be acquainted with’ by Mary Ann Caws in André Breton, \textit{Mad Love} (Lincoln, NE: U. of Nebraska Press, 1987), p. 88.
ardor for life combined with a pitiless awareness of its absurdity’. As a librarian at the Bibliothèque Nationale, anonymous author of the scandalous novel Story of the Eye [1928], and founder of the literary journal Critique, Bataille played a broad role in the literary culture of early twentieth-century France. His interest in Buddhism and meditation was one aspect of an eclectic range of concerns and obsessions, most of which centered around issues of desire, transgression, and the nature of the relationship between the self and the world.

BATAILLE

Bataille’s familiarity with Tibetan Buddhism is expressed in his essay ‘Le Paradoxe du Tibet,’ first published in the journal Critique in May of 1947. In this essay, a review of Charles Bell’s book Portrait of the Dalai-Lama (which Bataille read in English), he provides a summary of issues such as Tibetan history, British influence in Tibet, and the role of Buddhism and monks in Tibetan society. Interestingly, given his writings on depense, or useless expenditure, he also explores the relationship of consumption to a monastically dominated social system. From this article we learn that, despite the distortions of fact that come with any writer’s involvement with a foreign culture, Bataille did have a basic grasp of Tibet as a social and political reality.

According to Jean Bruno, Bataille was ‘interested in tantrism (from which he adopted some principles and on which he recently planned an entire work)’. Andrew Hussey notes that Bataille’s search led him to many well known writers of the time who were exploring Buddhism and related fields:

As well as reading Alexandra David-Néel and Mircea Eliade’s accounts of mystical practice amongst the Tibetans, Bataille was familiar with Romain Rolland’s biographies of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda, Essai sur la mystique et l’action de l’Inde vivante, as well as possessing a heavily annotated copy of Vivekananda’s Raja Yoga ou conquête de la nature intérieure.

28 Hussey, The Inner Scar, p. 89. See also Surya, Georges Bataille, p. 425.
The aggressively erotic nature of much of Bataille’s writing, particularly in the notorious *Story of the Eye*, has tended to obscure any similarity to such things as Buddhist philosophy or Eastern thought within the critical literature on his work. There has been an obsessive focus on Bataille’s eroticism, transgressivity, and subversive social and economic writings, with the result that ‘few contemporary readings of Bataille have engaged with the language or content of mysticism in his writings in relation to lived experience.’

Andrew John Hussey’s dissertation is one of the exceptions to this neglect of Bataille’s mystical interests, along with Jean Bruno’s previously cited *Critique* article [1963], and books such as *Georges Bataille and the Mysticism of Sin* by Peter Tracey Connor [2003]. One of the primary purposes of this dissertation is to expand the small collection of works that address this issue, and to explicitly relate Bataille’s work to various aspects of Buddhist practice with which he was familiar, particularly in the realms of meditation and visualization of horror such as those found in both Tantric practice and in Bataille’s writings. Examination of Bataille’s fascination with the visual imagery of physical transgression (expressed most fully in his book *The Tears of Eros* (first published in French as *Les Larmes d’Eros* in 1961)) provides a context that clarifies his interest in the art of Tibet, as well as the parallels between Tibetan Buddhist practice and Bataille’s own activities. For Bataille, practices of visualization and meditation were closely related to his sensitivity to the visual creations of many different cultures.

**SURREALISM**

As will be shown in Chapter Two, Asia was used by the Surrealists as a palimpsest upon which they could inscribe their desired image of a foreign and superior way of life. Conflating cultures and countries as varied as Japan, Tibet, India, and Morocco, and thereby succumbing to what Said calls ‘that seemingly inviolable overall identity of something called “the East” and something else called “the West”’, the Surrealists drafted these divergent cultures into service in their war against Western rationalism and imperialism. They succeeded, in their art, writing, and public activities, in bringing the problems inherent in East-West relationships to the attention of a somewhat wider public, but further obfuscated a genuine understanding of the East.

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by combining its reality with their own projections and desires. An understanding of the dynamics of this type of idealization can help to clarify both the psychological motivations of those who undertake it, and the political and social effects that it has within the culture of those who are doing the idealizing.

The Surrealists’ interest in exotic cultures, particularly the art of Africa, Oceania, and the native cultures of British Columbia, has been well documented.\textsuperscript{31} Tythacott attributes their less intense interest in Asian culture to its lack of primitivism: ‘China, Japan, and other Asian societies stood notably outside the Surrealist web of primitive desire, perhaps because they were perceived to be “civilized” and accommodated within European discourses on the exotic.’\textsuperscript{32} The highly developed technical abilities of Asian artists in painting, sculpture, and craft may have contributed to this perception of excessive refinement, and turned the Surrealists away from the plastic arts in Asia, but it did not preclude an ongoing interest in Eastern ideas.

Like the explorers who attempted to gain access to the city of Lhasa, the Surrealists interpreted such things as Tibetan Buddhism, oceanic art, and primitive cultures from a modern European viewpoint, and were attracted to them based largely on their distance from the contemporary norm, their exoticism, and their identity as Other.\textsuperscript{33}

These Europeans also recognized that the issue of individual (as opposed to collective, or objective) existence is very closely related to, and in some cases synonymous with, the question of the physical body.

THE BODY

The body is the vehicle that carries mind into the concrete world, the avatar of sexual craving, the manifestation of separate existence, and physical proof, as if any were required, of one’s lack of identity with the surrounding universe. As the crucible of craving, the incubator of individual consciousness, and the primary engine of desire, it is not surprising that the body plays such a central role in both Buddhist philosophy and Surrealist art and writing. The ascetic disciplines of Buddhist monks, their extreme practices that seek to bring the drives for food and sex and other physical indulgences


\textsuperscript{32} Tythacott, Surrealism and the Exotic, p. 6.

\textsuperscript{33} Little has changed: ‘The opening of Tibet to Western tourists in the 1980s saw the publication of numerous accounts of travellers’ experiences in Tibet, still focussing on the singularity of their experiences much as their Edwardian forebears had done, even though at its peak in 1986-7 forty thousand foreign tourists were visiting Lhasa each year.’ Shakya, ‘The Development of Modern Tibetan Studies,’ p. 3.
under control, are at odds with the orgiastic license advocated by many Surrealists and even more forcefully by Georges Bataille (although as we will see, Bataille’s definition of ‘license’ involves the maintenance of necessary proscriptions). Buddhism attempts to tame the body (or more accurately, the mind’s relationship to the body), while Surrealism attempts to set it free; their positions at the antipodes of the bodily spectrum can obscure the fact that the two modes of thought share much common ground as well, in that they both remain focused on the physical body. In their lack of indifference they exhibit a commonality as significant as the differences between their positions. The triangular relationship between desire, the body, and the individual within the practices of Buddhism and Surrealism will form a central theme within this study.

Antonin Artaud emphasized the centrality of the physical body when he wrote that ‘culture isn't in books, paintings, statues, dances; it's in the nerves and the fluidity of the nerves.’ These words represent an important stream of thought that was prominent in his world of early twentieth century Europe. A generation earlier, the idea that culture did not reside in books, paintings, statues, or dances would have sounded patently absurd to most people, the idea that it resided in ‘the nerves and the fluidity of the nerves’ even more bizarre. In this societally based definition of what constitutes culture one can see a parallel to the Hegelian definition of desire, one that downplays the centrality of interior psychological states and valorizes the reality of social standing. The twentieth century emergence in the West of philosophies such as Buddhism that focus on interior realities can perhaps be attributed in part to the concurrent decrease in the importance of social hierarchies that helped to base an individual’s conception of reality on exterior position rather than internal perception.

Buddhism and Modernism

In Masson’s Massacres one discovers echoes of Tibet’s wrathful deities, while Artaud’s pleas for liberation from his personal hell resemble the Buddhist drive for liberation from samsara. In Bataille’s frenzied meditations on darkness and chaos, and in his obsession with the déchirement (tearing, rending, or laceration) of the body, there are parallels with the Buddhist technique called chöd, in which the initiate visualizes his body being torn apart and made into an offering for all beings. These similarities indicate not only the possibility of a historical impact of Tibetan thought on the avant-

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garde of twentieth century France, but also reveal the possibility of common drives and obsessions amongst people of different cultures and periods of history. These basic commonalities exist in tandem with wide variations in the cultural manifestations through which they are expressed.

In addition to their thematic and iconographic similarities, there are profound differences between the philosophies of Surrealism and Tibetan Buddhism, one of the most significant being the latter’s utilization of desire within a very strict and traditional framework that discourages individuality and innovation. Nevertheless, Tibetan Buddhism, and the Tantric traditions that energize it, share Surrealism’s recognition of the power and creative energy of desire. Rather than waste this power by abandoning it in favor of asceticism, Tantra attempts to harness it in the service of enlightenment. This can be seen, in a certain sense, as the very ‘liberation of all desire’ that was one of the central tenets of Surrealism.

Activities such as the use of forbidden foods and defiance of caste restrictions alienated Tantrism from many other traditions, and for centuries it has been viewed with aversion by many Hindus and Buddhists. In this role of outcast, Tantra can be seen to occupy a similar role within its culture to that of Bataille, Artaud, and Masson within theirs. These individuals, like the Tantric adepts who frequently lived on the fringes of their societies, possessed the freedom that comes with having nothing to lose. This ‘outsider’ status is complex, and different in each individual case. For example, while Masson spent much of his life attempting to deal with the trauma of being severely wounded in World War One, he also achieved a great deal of fame and success, and, along with other artists such as Salvador Dalí and Joan Miró, reached a point at which he could no longer truly be identified as an outsider. Artaud, on the other hand, due to his intransigent philosophy and fragile mental condition, spent his entire life as an outsider, even, ironically, while ‘inside’ a series of mental institutions. Bataille, while maintaining a certain level of respectability in his public life as a librarian and intellectual, remained an outsider in his artistic production due to the extremely provocative nature of his writing. (Since his death in 1962, Bataille’s work has become increasingly acceptable, prompting Allan Stoekl to write in 1990: ‘There seems to be taking place…a considerable revival of interest in the work of Georges Bataille…during his lifetime Bataille was known mainly as the editor of Critique…and as an author of “erotic” or “pornographic” novels…’36).

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All of these men, despite their respective searches for experience beyond the mundane, were aggressively outside of any religious structure. One needs only to look at Masson’s drawing of a bloodthirsty priest with the head of a bull\(^{37}\) [Plate 2], or to read Artaud’s capitalized plea for ‘THE ABOLITION OF THE CROSS’,\(^{38}\) Bataille’s blunt ‘I loathe monks’\(^{39}\) or the horrifying final scene of Histoire de l’œil (Story of the Eye, 1928)\(^{40}\) to be convinced of this. Nevertheless, in their challenge to conventional morality, their passionate search for an escape from bourgeois reality, and their embrace of exotic and little-understood philosophies and aesthetics, artists such as Artaud, Masson, and Bataille can be seen to play a similar role, in a modern, secular, French context, to that of the Tantric adepts of India. Their aggressive rejection of organized religious structures did not entail an atheistic or rationalist view of the world. Bataille made this exceedingly clear in the first issue of Acéphale when he wrote ‘NOUS SOMMES FAROUCHEMENT RELIGIEUX’ (we are fiercely religious).\(^{41}\)

The religion to which he refers, however, was not concerned with obedience or with purity, but rather with the courage to reject the morality of one’s own society, and to accept whatever sacrifices or consequences that might arise from this rejection. A harrowing path, to be sure, and one to which few were called. The occult nature of this type of pursuit, whether in ancient India, Tibet, or modern France, only served to intensify the feelings of isolation that its devotees experienced. Increased levels of alienation led to further veering from the norm, a common dynamic leading, in different eras, to the creation of secretive Tantric sects, hermit-monks who lived in almost total isolation, or contemporary death cults such as Acéphale.

The balance of similarities and differences between such widely divergent historical eras can, when properly parsed, help to reveal the common underlying drives that helped to animate them both. An understanding of these drives, primarily desire and the escape from the self, is a central goal of this dissertation.

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**Research and Literature**

37 ‘Jamais Rassasiés (dessin de la guerre d’Espagne)’, 1937. Based on the date and title, the drawing appears to be a condemnation of the priesthood for its collaboration with the Franco regime during the Spanish Civil War. See Michel Leiris and Georges Limbour, André Masson and His Universe (Genève-Paris: Editions Des Trois Collines, 1947), p. 80.


40 Although the scene is fictional, it could only have been written by someone with a profound hatred of priests. Georges Bataille, Story of the Eye (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1987) p. 72-85.

An understanding of the motivations that existed within both Tantric Buddhism and Surrealism, primarily desire and the escape from the self, is central to the purpose of this dissertation. The two fields reveal an unexpected similarity of approach to desire, despite the fact that they are often seen as unrelated or even as contradictory.

Tibetan Buddhism is a religion, while Surrealism, generally interpreted as a movement in art and literature or as a transgressive philosophy of living, concerns itself primarily with the transcendence of duality, especially between dream and waking, and with an inquiry into the unknown. The purpose of this dissertation is to bring these two disciplines into a (perhaps unexpected) relationship through a consideration of their approaches to desire, particularly as it relates to the physical body and to death.

The dissertation provides a delineation of the sources of Buddhist knowledge that were available in Paris in the early twentieth century, within the context of the avant-garde and subcultures that were amenable to the influx of foreign influences. It strikes a balance between critiques of Orientalist generalizations of Asian culture and acknowledgement of the genuinely innovative thought processes and artistic pursuits that were undertaken by Europeans at that time.

The primary thesis presented in this dissertation is that both Buddhism and Surrealism are animated by the question of desire, both what it is and what the proper response to it should be. By examining the visual productions of both early Tibet and twentieth century Europe, and by looking at the attitudes of both eras to issues such as the self, the physical body, and the inevitability of death, insight is gained into the similarities and differences between the two. In addition, the dissertation attempts to reconcile ‘eternalist’ doctrines with concerns surrounding poststructuralism and postmodernism and the role of societal and external factors in the mediation of human experience. The sometimes contentious dichotomy between structuralism, in which human experience is always subject to the same laws, and ideas of ‘slippage’, in which nothing is set or ongoing and everything is subject to constant change, reflects a lack of recognition in the existent literature that there is common ground between the two fields. The theme of impermanence that is a central part of postmodernist theory is quite similar to themes found in most forms of Buddhism, and the two paradoxically reinforce and cancel one another in their demonstration that constant change is, in effect, unchanging.

Knowledge of early European interactions with Tibet can be gained through the reading of many primary works by Western explorers and scholars that were written between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Charles Bell, the British
ambassador to Tibet, wrote a number of books detailing his relationship to the Dalai Lama and his involvement in the complex relationship between Britain and Tibet. Sarat Chandra Das, one of the explorers who helped to surreptitiously explore and map Tibet for the Raj, recounts his experiences in *Journey to Lhasa and Central Tibet*. Alexandra David-Néel, a French writer and explorer, wrote many books on Tibet that have become classics of the genre. A deeper understanding of the art and philosophy of Tibet can be gained through the works of writers such as W.Y. Evans-Wentz, Fosco Maraini, and Giuseppe Tucci. The fact that, with the exception of Sarat Chandra Das, all of these writers are European, highlights the fact that what is being examined in this dissertation is specifically the European image of what Tibet was. Given the profound differences between the two cultures, and the level of idealization that was often present in European interpretations, this image is a subject that is quite independent from a study of the totality or ‘reality’ of Tibetan culture, something that would be far beyond the limitations of this dissertation.

In addition to these historical sources, many contemporary works address the creation of a Tibetan mythos by modern Western culture. In France, Henri de Lubac and Lionel Obadia have written on many aspects of the relationship between Tibet and the West. Writers such as Stephen Batchelor, Peter Bishop, Thierry Dodin, Herbert V. Guenther, Peter Hopkirk, Frank J. Korom, and Orville Schell have all produced works that address the issue as well.

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University of Michigan, has been particularly significant, both in his writing and in the development of other scholars through his teaching. In 1975, Edward Said set the stage for contemporary considerations of East-West relations with the publication of his seminal book *Orientalism*. Although he focuses primarily on the West’s relationship to Arabic cultures, Said’s insight into the use of ‘exotic’ cultures as canvases on which to express one’s own preferred visions has informed the methodology and conclusions of the present dissertation.

There are a small number of writers, of particular importance to this dissertation, who make mention of Surrealism within a broader concern for the interaction of the East and the Modern West. These writers include Nadia Choucha, Denis Hollier, Louise Tythacott, and Simon Elmer. Writers who address the influence of Buddhism and the East on Surrealism and/or Georges Bataille as a primary theme include Marguerite Bonnet, Robert McNab, Andrew John Hussey, and Jacquelynn Baas. In her book *Smile of the Buddha*, Baas presents one of the very few book length studies of this subject. Although not focusing solely on Surrealism (the book covers artists ranging from Monet and Van Gogh through Laurie Anderson and Richard Tuttle), this book presents a convincing case for the presence of Eastern philosophies, including Buddhism, within the lives and work of a broad range of twentieth century and contemporary artists. In addition to these groups, many works dealing specifically with the histories of Buddhism, Modernism, Surrealism, and Georges Bataille were consulted, and can be seen in the bibliography.

With the exception of passing references in other works, this dissertation is the first attempt to address the relationship of Tibetan Buddhist thought to Surrealism and Georges Bataille systematically. Various aspects of Eastern thought have frequently

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been related to Modernism by many authors. Similarities between the nonrationalism of Zen and the absurdism of Dada are common in the literature, as is recognition of the common strain of rebellion against reason that can be found in many schools of Buddhism and in Modernism. However, these observations have always been made within the context of other concerns, and have never served as the primary focus of an extended work.

With the exception of the few works mentioned above, the issue of Buddhism’s influence on Georges Bataille has not been addressed within the art historical literature. One of the primary original contributions of this dissertation is a consideration of Bataille’s relationship to Buddhism and Tantric practice, both in terms of their affinity with his writing and his utilization of them in his life and meditation practice. As with his relationship to Surrealism, Bataille’s involvement with Buddhism was not straightforward or devotional. His utilization of Buddhist thought and technique was idiosyncratic at best, and frequently oppositional. Perhaps for this reason, historical writing on Bataille tends to focus on other aspects of his work and to shy away from any connections he might have had to religious tradition. It is not the claim of this dissertation that Bataille thought of himself as a Buddhist; in fact, he quite explicitly did not. Rather, the dissertation concerns itself with themes of horror, bodily transgression, and self-transcendence that exist within various Buddhist traditions as well as in the life and writing of Bataille.

As a background to and augmentation of this study of Bataille, the dissertation highlights the role of Eastern thought and Tibetan Buddhism in Surrealism in the era and culture of which Bataille was a part. It also explores the centrality of eternal themes such as desire, death, and suffering, acknowledging both that these themes appear in all times and places, and that they are mediated and transformed by each culture that expresses them.

Judith Butler, in a self-criticism of her work *Subjects of Desire*, wrote that ‘if it were to have been a comprehensive treatment, it most certainly would have included a chapter on the work of Georges Bataille’.49 The present study, particularly in Chapters Four and Five, will attempt to redress this lack, and to explore the connection between Bataille’s historical identification with the concept of desire and his more psychologically and spiritually motivated pursuits.

In addition to gaps in the scholarship on Bataille, the broader field of Surrealism exhibits a lack of research on Asian influence, both spiritual and political. In the words

of David Bate, ‘the extent to which Orientalism and active interest in colonial and anti-colonial politics were part of surrealism is a neglected area.’

This dissertation is intended to recognize the little that has previously been written on the relationship between Buddhism and Surrealism, while building upon these precursors to explore more broadly the affinities of Eastern tradition to both Surrealism and Modernism. It affirms the similarities that exist between Buddhist ideas of impermanence and more recent theories of constant change and ‘slippage’. It explores the common ground between structuralist theories of eternal human drives and contemporary beliefs about culturally mediated mental constructions. It foregrounds the role of the physical body in theories of the self and its destruction, and situates this body-centred mindset within both Buddhism and Surrealism. Finally, it relates all of these varied concerns to the central issue of desire: its role in the philosophy of Buddhism, its animating power within Surrealism, and its central position within the art and thought of both of these traditions.

While the historical influence of Tibetan Buddhism on Surrealism is addressed in the first chapter, this is not to imply that that influence is definitive. Limited evidence, in the form of writings, archives, and artworks, does exist to show the familiarity of some of the Surrealists with Tibetan themes. However, the primary task of this dissertation is an exploration of the philosophical and aesthetic parallels that animated both movements, with the historical evidence intended to support this. The vast literature on Tibetan Buddhism is brought into contact with the ever growing literature on Surrealism in an attempt to highlight the common themes that the two fields share, and to explore the meanings and implications of these commonalities.

Utilizing both contemporary works and the primary writings of the Surrealists and Georges Bataille, the structure of the dissertation progresses from the historic and ethnographic towards the personal and psychological, beginning its journey with an overview of the relationship between Europe and Tibet, progressing through a comparative exploration of Buddhism and Modernism, and ending with a study of the role of duality in Tibetan Buddhism and the work of Georges Bataille. Its progression is also vaguely chronological, albeit with frequent digressions, beginning in the seventh century with the advent of Tantric Buddhism, taking a grand leap to the nineteenth century when Tibet first made its entry into widespread Western consciousness, and progressing from there through to World War Two, at which point the direction of the major social and philosophical impacts of Surrealism had been largely determined. The

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50 Bate, *Photography and Surrealism: Sexuality, Colonialism and Social Dissent*, p. 113.
analysis of Bataille’s work will utilize a broader chronology, taking into account his later writings on eroticism, as well as his earlier mystical pursuits.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

Chapter One is a historical exploration of the roots of contact between Europe and the Buddhist societies of Central Asia, focusing on Tibet. It begins with a brief overview of the influx of Buddhism from India to Tibet, and the resultant development of Vajrayana Buddhism in Tibet. It continues with a critical examination of Tibet’s relevance to Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and a look at its role as a site for Western construction and fantasy.

This is followed by an account of the European explorers who reached Tibet prior to 1950. These explorers, whose motivations ranged from religious fervor and patriotic zeal to curiosity about a ‘forbidden land’ and desire for personal glory, undertook tremendous hardship and personal risk in their attempts to reach Tibet, usually with the ultimate intention of crashing the gates of Lhasa. While their efforts can be seen, with some validity, as intrusive and motivated by various degrees of imperialism, as a group these early explorers were instrumental in the development of twentieth century European views of Tibet, both through their presence in that country and through their talks, writings, and publicity upon their respective returns to Europe.

One of the aspects of Tibetan Buddhism that fascinated many Europeans was its apparent similarity to Catholicism. Travellers, writers, and theologians speculated on the possible causes for this similarity, putting forth theories ranging from a forgotten European presence in ancient Tibet to ‘demonic plagiarism’.

An alternative explanation is found in the ‘archetypes’ of Carl Jung, whose theory of the collective unconscious would explain how similar forms and activities appear in geographically and temporally divergent cultures with no historical contact between them. Bishop writes that ‘Jung’s studies in Eastern religion marked a fundamental turning-point in the development of his ideas’, and attributes Jung’s interest in synchronicity and a-causal reality to his studies in Buddhism.51

The purpose of Chapter Two is to create a broad context within which the role of Buddhist philosophy in Europe can be examined. Here, Chapter One’s focus on Europeans in Tibet is reversed as we begin to look at the role of Tibet and Buddhism within France. Numerous sociological, religious, and historical factors will be considered, including the influence of French imperialism in Indo-China, the upheavals

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51 Bishop, Dreams of Power, p. 42.
caused by World War One, and the social unrest and interest in exoticism that resulted in part from these events.

The role and significance of the Catholic Church, in its relationship to Buddhism and to Surrealism, is subtle but unmistakable. As a motivating influence for many of the earliest Europeans to reach Tibet beginning in the thirteenth century, as well as a formative influence in the childhood and education of most of the Surrealists, Catholicism plays an important role in both periods of history. Many Europeans who wrote on or traveled in Tibet, including Odoric of Pordenone, Guillaume de Rubrouck, and Arthur Schopenhauer, commented on the structural similarities between Catholicism and Tibetan Buddhism. These similarities will be used to deepen understanding of the role of sacred iconography and transgression in the two religions, as well as to examine how Catholicism may have served as a bridge that allowed Surrealists access to Buddhism, both historically and imaginatively.

Many books, teachers, societies, museums, and other public manifestations of Buddhism and Tibetan culture existed in France in the early twentieth century. Books by European visitors to Tibet such as Sven Hedin, Alexandra David-Néel, and Charles Bell were influential in the European reception of Tibetan ideas and culture, as were museum and ethnographic collections and exhibitions. The high profile of French museums and other institutions encouraged public awareness of the existence of Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism, and facilitated the introduction of the French public to Asian art and culture.

Most of these institutions played a significant role in the research that was undertaken for this study. The collections of the Musée Cernuschi and the collections and library at the Musée Guimet were all utilized, specifically regarding what books and artworks were available to the public during the early twentieth century. The Trocadéro no longer exists, the majority of its collection having migrated to the Musée de l’Homme and then to the Musée Quai Branly, both of which were visited. The archives at Quai Branly and at the Archives Nationales were also visited in an attempt to confirm the presence of Surrealists and other artists at these institutions.

In Chapter Three the relationship of Eastern religion in general and Tibetan Buddhism in particular with Surrealism is explored, with a focus on their respective approaches to the concept of desire. As was mentioned above, the connection of Buddhist philosophy with Surrealism may sound quite tenuous at first, given the commonly held generalizations about these two fields of thought. While Buddhism is associated with distant lands, contemplative monks, and asceticism, Surrealism is
related in the minds of many to controversial objects posing as art, or in its most debased form, essentially as ‘anything weird’. A look beneath the surface of either of these fields, however, reveals the limited nature of these views. Surrealism, while certainly not averse to weirdness and the bizarre, was in pursuit of the marvelous, not simply the strange, and in its pursuit of the greater reality that extends beyond the mundane world within which we live, was traveling a similar path, albeit in a very different vehicle, as was Buddhism. Buddhism and Surrealism share a common interest in issues of transgression, bodily experience, impermanence, and death, as well as exhibiting a number of significant differences. Surrealism, having appeared in a European culture very influenced by Hegelian ideas of society and the self, exhibits a more socially based definition of the self than does Buddhism, marking it as very much a European phenomenon.

Similarly to Surrealism's definition of the self, European philosophies based on Hegelian dialectics present a much more interpersonally based interpretation of desire than does Buddhism, positing desire as a social function rather than as a purely psychological phenomenon. As the nineteenth century drew to a close in Europe, interest in Hegel was at a low ebb. The replacement of social standing and status by comfort and self-satisfaction as a dominant world-view, something that had been occurring throughout most of the nineteenth century, continued into the twentieth. Like the machines and ingenious inventions that characterized the age, the cult of the individual that had been growing for several hundred years assumed a new form, built for speed.52

In keeping with this ethic of self determination and high velocity, the movement that problematically came to be known as Modernism tore up the script of the preceding several hundred years and attempted to start anew. Few Modernists would have admitted the depth of their debt to the past they despised, although one of the ways the movement attempted to recreate its world was through a paradoxical return to ancient ways of thought. A fascination with tribal art, primitive aesthetics, and a philosophy that refused to recognize the dominance or even the value of progress, linearity, and rational thought, grew up in the place of what was formerly a staid and largely predictable cultural milieu. A dominant characteristic of this nineteenth-century worldview, closely related to its linear thought, was its faith in the permanence of its

own accomplishments and the continual, inexorable progression of humanity from ignorance, superstition, and primitivism to a ‘higher’ state of reason and wisdom. Ironically, the demise of this culture was in itself a reflexive negation of its belief in permanence, and a reassertion of the inevitability of change: an idea taught by Buddhism centuries before, emphasized by Nietzsche in his writing on the idea of the eternal return more or less as it was occurring, and reiterated by Bataille in his musings on the inevitable fall of everything that rises.

In Chapter Four, the influence of Tibetan Buddhist iconography and physical culture on André Masson and Antonin Artaud will be examined. Tantric iconography, particularly the transgression and modification of the body seen in many Tibetan sculptures, thangkas, and images of wrathful deities, will be explored and compared with the violent imagery and body issues seen in Masson’s and Artaud’s works. Both men’s styles of composition are far more anarchic than the geometric order of most Tibetan art, but this dichotomy only makes the similarity of subject matter all the more striking. As symbols of destructive mental states, agents of catharsis, or representations of duality and its transcendence, the demons being crushed and tormented beneath the feet of a fearsome protecting deity play a similar role to the many victims of violence found in the painting and writing of both Masson and Artaud.

Due to the misfortune of his mental affliction, his interest in Eastern philosophy, and his idealization of the Dalai Lama and Tibet, Antonin Artaud can serve as an emblematic fulcrum from which to examine the relationship between psychology and Tibetan ideas within the artistic milieu of his time. Existing at the point where the transgression of Surrealism coincided with a burning European interest in foreign transcendent states, and simultaneously living with a very fragile mental condition, Artaud documented his reality in an outpouring of writing and drawing which today serves as a valuable resource for both historical and psychological inquiries into the events and mindsets of his day.

Artaud’s art and writing can serve as a vehicle for a comparison not only between Buddhism and Surrealism, but also between both of them and the schizophrenia from which he apparently suffered. Like Buddhism, schizophrenia can be used as an effective explanatory trope for the modernist era, as is ably shown by Louis Sass, who presents the compelling theory that schizophrenia, far from being a fall away from reason and into an animal-like state, is in fact an alienation from the emotions, instincts, and the body into an ‘exaggerated cerebralism’ so profound as to
become dysfunctional. Particularly in terms of the dissolution of the self, schizophrenia bears a vital relevance to the themes of the present study. The primary difference, of course, and one which was frequently overlooked by the Surrealists, is that in the case of Buddhism and Surrealism the dissolution of the self is something which is sought, while in the case of schizophrenia it is not only undesirable but, by all reports, a source of great anguish.

In Chapter Five, Bataille’s relationship to the concepts of transgression and libertinism will be addressed within the context of Tantrism. The intention of this approach is to show that neither Tantrics nor Bataille were simple libertines, but rather were exploring the nature and possible spiritual uses of transgression. In this role, their relationship to interdiction was far more subtle than simple rebellion. In his biography of Bataille, Michel Surya writes that ‘Bataille very quickly sensed the importance of interdiction and taboo. He never wanted these to be reversed or abolished, or even their realm to be reduced’.54

Bataille’s views on interdiction and taboo (as well as those of his contemporaries such as Michel Leiris and Roger Caillois) were influenced by the writing of Emile Durkheim, and by Marcel Mauss’s theories of the sacred and its relationship to transgression.55 These views were expressed not only in his writings but also in his founding of the secret society Acéphale, a group that was intended to reignite the power of the sacred within contemporary society.

Acéphale was one manifestation of Bataille’s intense interest in the nature of consciousness, and in spiritual techniques such as meditation and yoga,56 although the states of ‘chaos’ and ‘mental turmoil’ in which he claimed to practice them bore little resemblance to the common image of those arts.57 Based on frenzy, passion, and a contemplation of violence and disaster, Bataille’s meditations were modified by him to suit his own obsessions.

55 Surya writes that Bataille ‘had read the anthropologist Marcel Mauss, even if he had not followed his courses, and Alfred Métraux had discussed Mauss with him at length. Mauss therefore encouraged him indirectly.’ ibid., p. 173.
Much of Bataille’s knowledge about arcane subjects such as yoga and meditation was gained through the books that he borrowed from the Bibliothèque Nationale over a period of many years. The record of these loans, compiled by Jean-Pierre Le Bouler and Joëlle Bellec Martini, is very useful for determining the breadth of Bataille’s interests and pinpointing what subjects were occupying him at various times.

The effort that Le Bouler and Martini put into this exhaustive bibliography is indicative of the critical interest in Bataille that has been growing since his death in 1962. Books by noted scholars such as Denis Hollier, Michel Surya, Michele Richman, Fred Botting and Scott Wilson have all contributed to a growing awareness of the seminal importance of Bataille’s writing. However, given the ‘unavowable’ nature of Bataille’s work, and his emphasis on experience as opposed to rational deliberation, the value of this tide of critical inquiry must be viewed as a mixed blessing, or perhaps as a double-edged sword. In a sense, intellectual analysis of Bataille’s work undermines the very thing that he was trying to convey, a paradox that is fully explored in Nick Land’s book *The Thirst for Annihilation*. One must ask, in the same spirit of transgressive inquiry that Bataille maintained throughout his life, whether this growing canon of intellectual commentary raises readers to a new level of understanding, or merely buries them beneath the weight of their own (and others’) intellects. A naked confrontation with the work of Georges Bataille, unmediated by the endless permutations of analysts and critics, would probably afford a less thorough intellectual grasp of the issues with which he wrestled, but would perhaps be a more direct route to the visceral engagement with existence that Bataille pursued, the engagement with ecstasy that he longed for, and the exaltation that he lived.

Bataille’s interest in exaltation and ecstasy, as well as his conflation of these things with abjection, is demonstrated by his fascination with the concept of the ‘pineal eye’. Based on the pineal gland, which is located in the centre of the brain directly behind the traditional seat of the third eye, the idea of the pineal eye was related to Bataille’s theories about the unnatural posture of humans, the divine yet perverse nature of the sun, and the overcoming of reason by primal instinct.

This focus on the crown of the head bears a resemblance to the Indian chakra system (a modified version of which is present in Tantric philosophy) and its relationship to the transcendence of individuality. While Bataille would not have used the word ‘transcendence’, he was equally interested in the concept of the separate individual and its destruction, an interest that was manifested in both his inner and outer world. The idea of the illusory nature of the separate self is central to Buddhist
philosophy, and was a driving force in many of Bataille’s projects and beliefs. While it would be rash as well as pointless to attempt to label Bataille as ‘a Buddhist’, there is a case to be made that various techniques and philosophies of Buddhism had an effect on Bataille’s activities and beliefs. He did, at any rate, say that ‘I feel closer to Buddhism than to Catholicism,’ \(^{58}\) a statement that, coming from a man who at one time planned to become a priest, \(^{59}\) says something about his views of Buddhism, the depth of his apostasy, or perhaps both. Buddhism was used as a generating force, rather than followed as an ideology, and thus was transformed from an Eastern belief system into (paradoxically, given what was just said regarding the place of the self in this system) a far more individualistic thought process within Bataille’s idiosyncratic mind. In this, he was simultaneously rebelling against, and a product of, a Western worldview. This view traditionally values the individual over the group, creating alienation but at the same time providing freedom of innovation and even transgression, thus allowing some individuals to (again, paradoxically) use their freedom of choice to reject their own individualism and seek a return to a more connected way of thought and life.

Chapter Six explores the idea of duality and its transcendence, from the points of view of Tibetan Buddhism and of Bataille. In the dichotomies of *samsara* and *nirvana*, self and other, male and female, mind and body, sacred and profane, one finds the idea of duality at the centre of the issues being considered here. The techniques employed by Tibetan Buddhism, by the Surrealists, and by Georges Bataille were all focused on overcoming duality in the interest of achieving unity. A focus on the presence of duality within all other issues considered in this dissertation highlights the underlying unity of concerns that is camouflaged by the eclecticism of cultural, religious, and aesthetic diversity.

A balance must be maintained between an awareness of the substantial gap that exists between cultures, the vacuum of which is often filled with exoticist fantasy, and a sound connection with the ‘reality’ in which we live, even if that reality is, in some ultimate sense, an illusion. The dichotomy, as well as the need to simultaneously recognize it and avoid being dominated by it, becomes more critical when discussing the history of interactions between East and West. The reader must remain aware of the subjective nature of ethnographic knowledge, and remember that ‘Paris invent[ed] a

\(^{58}\) Bataille, *The Absence of Myth* p. 84.

\(^{59}\) Surya, *Georges Bataille*, p. 23.
Far East of phantasms in the middle of the eighteenth century which seems completely detached from history, as if two “Asias” coexisted, without meeting.\textsuperscript{60}

This observation supports the views of Mircea Eliade: ‘When one approaches an exotic spirituality, one understands principally what one is predestined to understand by one’s own vocation, by one’s own cultural orientation and that of the historical moment to which one belongs.’\textsuperscript{61} This caveat applies to Masson, Artaud, Bataille and Surrealism in general, as it does to all who come into contact with a foreign culture: they were simultaneously refugees from, condemners of, and products of the society in which they lived. Their particular form of Orientalism allowed them a certain creative breathing room in which to consider alternatives, a breadth of thought and being that allowed them the freedom of liberatory exploration. Whether that exploration led to the discovery of a land beyond the self, or merely left them abandoned on an island of their own creation, is a question that is far more open to interpretation.

\textbf{PART ONE}

\textbf{FROM PARIS TO LHASA AND BACK AGAIN}

\textsuperscript{60} ‘Paris s’invente un Extrême-Asie de fantasmes au milieu du XVIIIe siècle et qui semble totalement détaché des récits du temps, comme si deux « Asies » coexistaient, sans se rencontrer.’ Blanchard and Deroo, \textit{Le Paris Asie}, p. 11.

We hear on all sides that East and West are meeting but it is an understatement. They are being flung at one another, hurled with the force of atoms, the speed of jets, the restlessness of minds impatient to learn of ways that differ from their own.

- Huston Smith

CHAPTER ONE
EUROPEAN ENCOUNTERS WITH TIBET

From the buttresses of Tibet to the rich valleys of the coloured rivers, from the plains of elephants and the alligator marshes to the Himalayas of Coromandel, from Amou Daria to Sakkaline, deep souls sense it coming like a storm upon the ocean: the Western epidemic.

- Robert Desnos

The only Europeans who are known to have reached Tibet prior to the eighteenth century were Christian missionaries. The few who managed to reach Lhasa and return to Europe brought back tales of a strange city somewhere in the Himalayas,

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full of mysterious people with supernatural powers. In the absence of television, mass travel, and other forms of technology that would allow the easy verification of facts, these tales were based as much on legend as on reality. It was not until the mid-nineteenth century that Europe first began to develop an awareness of Tibet that was based on something more than imagination, though it was still something less than reality. Attracted by the exoticism of their largely unenthusiastic hosts, adventurous Europeans, driven by curiosity, desire for fame and adventure, and Christian zeal, began risking their lives and reputations in efforts to reach Tibet and Lhasa.

One of the central factors of Tibetan culture, and of the mystery that Europeans found irresistible, was its intriguing form of religion. Similar in form to the Roman Catholicism with which all Europeans were familiar, it was radically different, and even heretical to many, in content: Tibetan Buddhism lacked not only a monotheistic God but a soul as well; in fact it appeared to be based on nothing outside the illusions of the mind. This idea, unnerving in itself, became that much more disturbing when clothed in the robes, incense, and ceremony of what appeared to Europeans to be Catholicism. This introduced an element of what Freud would call the ‘unheimlich’, or ‘uncanny’, defined by Schelling as ‘everything that ought to have remained…secret and hidden but has come to light.’ The strange was conjoined with the familiar, making it all the more strange. Tantric Buddhism, so at odds with the expansionism and positivism of Europe, fascinated and repelled Europeans with its radical implications. Even today, some abhor the idea that reality resides ultimately within the mind, dismissing it as a mentalist form of retreatism, while others maintain that a philosophy that places all responsibility for an individual’s situation within that individual is actually the height of empowerment.

In Tibet, Indian Buddhism was influenced and transformed by a combination of Tibet’s indigenous Bön religion, centuries of extreme isolation, and a very demanding climate (the last of which did away with such luxuries as vegetarianism). Vajrayana Buddhism eventually developed into what is probably the most ornate, convoluted, and baroque school of the wide-ranging Buddhist tradition, one that in many ways views the Buddha as a God rather than as a historical human being.

The divergence of the many variant forms of ‘Buddhism’ highlights the constructed nature of the entire field. Each doctrine tends to valorize itself as ‘original’

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and, whether subtly or aggressively, to attempt to marginalize not only other religions but other forms of its own religion as well. It should be remembered that nearly all schools of Buddhism, no matter how divergent they are from one another, make claims of originality, and seek to adopt ‘the original words of the Buddha’ as their own. The result is a plethora of belief systems, each of which sees all others as constructions while remaining unaware of its own constructed nature.

‘THE GREAT GAME’ c. 1800-1907

Tibet had always been more involved in the politics and power struggles of the rest of Asia than an idealized Western history generally acknowledges. Conquered by Genghis Khan in 1207, it maintained a convoluted series of cho-yon or ‘patron-priest’ relationships with the Mongols for centuries, in addition to its more recent and well-known history with China. Many people from varying parts of Asia, for reasons ranging from economics to religion, made their way to Tibet, as Lopez makes clear:

> We often hear…that Tibetan society was hermetic, sealed off from outside influence. Yet the reports of travelers from the early eighteenth century note that Tartars, Chinese, Muscovites, Armenians, Kashmiris, and Nepalese were established in Lhasa as merchants. The monasteries in Lhasa drew monks from as far west as the Kalmyk region of western Russia;…from as far east as Sichuan Province in China; from as far north as the Buryiat region near Lake Baikal in Siberia; and from as far south as the Sherpa regions of Nepal.

Despite this ongoing contact with its Asian neighbours, the practices and philosophies of Tibet existed in relative isolation from the West, allowing Tantric philosophy to develop and grow there over several centuries with virtually no Occidental influence. Tibet first entered widespread Western consciousness in the nineteenth century when its geographic location assumed increased strategic importance for China, Russia, and British India. Invaded by Jammu in 1841, Nepal in 1854, Britain in 1888 and 1903-04, and China in 1906 and 1949, Tibet was clearly

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66 Lopez, Prisoners of Shangri-La, p. 187.
67 See McMahan, Empty Vision: Metaphor and Visionary Imagery in Mahāyāna Buddhism, p. 100.
68 ‘This expression made its first appearance in print in Kaye’s History of the War in Afghanistan (1843). It seems, however, to have been coined by Captain Arthur Conolly, a daring but in the end an unlucky player of the Great Game, who was beheaded after torture at Bokhara in 1842.’ Peter Fleming, Bayonets to Lhasa (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1961), p. 30. Fleming references H.W.C. Davis, The Great Game in Asia, 1800-1844 (Raleigh Lecture on History, 1926).
69 ‘Tibet was never as isolated as was once imagined.’ Frank J. Korom, Constructing Tibetan Culture (St-Hyacinthe, Quebec: World Heritage Press, 1997), p. 1; for more on the political relations between Tibet and its eastern neighbours, see Tadeusz Skoruposki, ‘The Religions of Tibet,’ The World’s Religions, Stewart Sutherland et. al., eds. (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 786.
70 Lopez, Prisoners of Shangri-La, p. 8.
being forced out of its isolation and into ‘the maelstrom of history’\textsuperscript{71}, where it would be essentially coerced into assuming its place in the world of modern political gamesmanship.

The aggressive curiosity of Western explorers, combined with the political ambitions and paranoia of Russia and British India, made the breaching of Tibetan sovereignty more or less inevitable. Its strategic location at the crux of Russia, China, and India meant that, as populations, technology, and mobility all increased, Tibet’s isolation would become progressively more undermined by a wide range of political players who were determined to use its geography for their own ends. This began in earnest with the onset of what became known as ‘The Great Game’ in the early nineteenth century.

Tibet, in its distant and forbidden status, guarded by impassable mountains and an unwelcoming political situation, was the perfect vehicle for endless craving, a condition of which Western explorers were, and continue to be, the most visible avatars. The land holding this guarded philosophy that claimed to provide freedom from craving and dissatisfaction found itself to be the object of that very craving. Explorers sought Lhasa as a prize, yet almost all of them missed the true treasure of this distant city: its lesson was that it was not needed at all, that what these explorers sought could only be found within themselves.

Prior to the age of aviation, Tibet’s remote location in the heart of the Himalayas made it one of the most difficult countries in the world for foreigners to reach. Paradoxically however, Tibet’s lack of hospitality contributed to its accession by the West, its towering remoteness only fuelling the determination of Western explorers and travelers to reach it, and to make of its snowy mountain peaks a perfect \textit{tabula rasa} for their disaffected fantasies.\textsuperscript{72} This image of inaccessibility was intensified by European comparisons of Tibet with China, which was prominent in the awareness of the British public at the time due to the Opium Wars of the mid nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{73} This conflict emphasized the point that, like almost every other country in the world in the nineteenth century, neither China nor Tibet was entirely unaffected by Britain’s dominance in areas of politics, trade, and travel.

\textsuperscript{71} Lopez, \textit{Curators of the Buddha}, p. 284.
\textsuperscript{72} Lopez, \textit{Prisoners of Shangri-La}, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{73} ibid., p. 5.
Because of this dominance, any historical overview of the era must of necessity address the role of Britain as well as that of France.\textsuperscript{74} While the primary focus of this dissertation concerns the influence of Buddhism on French writers and artists, the role of Britain in the Western encounter with Tibet and the surrounding region is too great to overlook. Particularly during the late nineteenth century, Britain played a dominant role in the area, motivated largely by its colonization of India and resultant concern with Indian borders and security. One must keep in mind that France, while itself an imperial power in various parts of the world, did not play that role in Central Asia, and thus was spared the concerns of Britain, for whom ‘the room available for imaginative play was structured by the realities of administration, territorial defence, and executive power.’\textsuperscript{75} The political maneuvering between Britain and Russia, two of the most powerful nations in the world at that time, had an inevitable influence not only on Tibet, but also on the experience of others who sought to go there. In addition, Britain’s imperial ambitions had a profound and largely negative impact on the Tibetan attitude towards foreigners who sought to enter their territory. Tibet had been officially closed to foreigners for most of the nineteenth century, amply demonstrating its willingness and ability to live without the intervention of the West.

Tibetan fears of a foreign threat to the purity of their Buddhist beliefs, aroused by British and Russian strategizing, were only strengthened by the string of aggressive Christian missionaries appearing on their horizons. The desire of the Tibetan government to exclude foreigners was motivated largely by ‘the fear of the extinction of Buddhism by the foreigners – a feeling which prevails in the minds of the dominant class, the clergy.’\textsuperscript{76} The Victorian explorers who went to Tibet seemed little concerned that they were not particularly welcomed there. Stories abound of travelers disguised as traders, pilgrims, and monks, using trickery, force, and everything in between to make their way to Lhasa. Given the harsh treatment that Tibetan authorities regularly meted out to rule breakers within Tibet, their relative tolerance towards Western interlopers is remarkable. Ironically, Westerners were sometimes the cause of the severe punishments to which they were themselves usually immune:

\textsuperscript{74} The possibly inadvertent imperial collaboration of these two nations is noted by Said when he writes: ‘to speak of Orientalism therefore is to speak mainly, although not exclusively, of a British and French cultural enterprise…’. Said, \textit{Orientalism}, p. 4.
\textsuperscript{75} Bishop, \textit{Sacred Myth of Shangri-La}, p. 6.
The Tibetans were...determined to keep [foreigners] out. The dreadful retribution meted out to a Tibetan official who had unwittingly given assistance to one such intruder is grim proof of this. He was arrested, imprisoned, flogged, then flung – still living and with his hands tied behind his back – into the Tsangpo [River]. The hands and feet of his servants had been cut off, their eyes gouged out, and they were then left to die in agony...77

Tibetan law codes included many other practices that appear to stray widely from Buddhist claims of universal compassion. French writes that these punishments included ‘kidam (khyi dam), stamping the word meaning “dog” on the forehead with a hot iron; kotum (ko btums), sealing a criminal in a fresh animal skin and leaving it to dry, then throwing the body in the river; and gyansar kurwa (gyang sar bskyur ba), throwing a criminal off a high precipice.’78 (The author states further that ‘few Tibetans I talked with reported having seen [these punishments] carried out’. The point being made here is not that Tibet was a sadistic society, but rather that the realities of any society rarely conform to the idealizations of those who are unfamiliar with it.)

The ‘Great Game’ made the names and reputations of many remarkable explorers, Orientalists, and colonial administrators. Amongst the principal players in the Tibetan aspect of this struggle for power were the Thirteenth Dalai Lama [Plate 3], a Mongolian associate of the Dalai-Lama, Aharamba-Agyan-Dorjieff, who was instrumental in Tibetan relations with Russia [Plate 4],79 Lord Curzon, the Viceroy of India who was largely responsible for the 1904 British invasion of Tibet [Plate 5],80 and Colonel Francis Younghusband, the seemingly indestructible British explorer who led the 1904 invasion [Plate 6].

Unlike many Western interlopers into Tibet, Younghusband made no attempt to disguise himself. With more than 10,000 soldiers and porters at his back, there would have been little point. Representing the British Empire, he marched over the Himalayas, through the Tibetan landscape, and all the way to Lhasa in a show of force designed, amongst other things, to counteract the perceived Russian influence in Lhasa. Ultimately, as would be the case in many subsequent political gambits up to the present day, virtually no evidence of the predicted ‘Russian threat’ was found.

79 ‘...it is scarcely possible to exaggerate his importance...as a formative influence on British policy towards Tibet.’ Fleming, Bayonets to Lhasa, p. 40.
80 ibid., p. 13.
Younghusband was, in addition to being an invader of Tibet, a great admirer of its culture and religion, and in his later years wrote a large number of books which were heavily influenced by Buddhist philosophy and spiritual concerns. He was joined in his literary pursuits by two other influential Europeans: Charles Bell, a British agent stationed at Gyantse in Tibet who was also a close friend of the Dalai Lama, and Alexandra David-Néel [Plate 7], the French explorer and writer.

Positive feelings towards the Tibetan people amongst the population of Britain were sufficient to make the 1904 British invasion of Tibet a major subject of debate, with St. John Brodrick, then British Secretary of State, capturing the feelings of many when he wrote, in a letter to the Viceroy of India Lord Curzon, that ‘the slaughter…barbed the contentions of those who urged that the Tibetans were an inoffensive people who only wanted to be left alone’. The scandal shrunk into relative insignificance when the Great War began to loom on the horizon, and with its outbreak in 1914 the ‘Great Game’ was brought to a bloody and largely inconclusive end.

POPPES AND LAMAS – CATHOLICISM AND BUDDHISM

Although accounts differ, many believe that the first European to reach Tibet was an Italian Franciscan named Jean de Plano Carpini. He arrived there in 1246 under the auspices of Pope Innocent IV, and subsequently wrote a book about his travels entitled Historia Mongolorum. He was followed by Guillaume de Rubrouck, a French Franciscan sent by the King in 1252, Odoric of Pordenone in the early fourteenth century, and the Jesuit missionaries Johannes Grüber and Albert D’Orville in 1661. Michel Jan and J. W. de Jong maintain that Antonio de Andrade was in fact the first European to reach Tibet, in 1624 or 1625.

Ippolito Desideri and Manuel
Freyre followed in 1715-16. De Jong writes that Desideri lived in Lhasa from 1715 until 1721, and Francesco Orazio della Penna (1680-1745) from 1716 until 1732. Desideri’s attitude was typical of this era of Europeans’ confidence in their own righteousness. ‘Although Desideri mastered the Tibetan language and studied the culture, he did so not as the subject of academic exploration but in order to “arm myself to launch a war”, as he put it. He was impelled by a desire to refute Tibetan religious ideas and beliefs, and thus to propagate Christianity.’ Desideri’s attitude, while largely acceptable in his own time, reads as paternalistic in our own: ‘Tibetans are naturally accommodating and docile, but uncultivated and rude.’

Although not particularly surprising, given that they were missionaries, this aggressive drive towards conversion, which Tsering Shakya calls ‘the dominant feature of study of Tibet by missionaries’, was a major contributor to the Tibetan government’s eventual expulsion of all Christian missionaries in 1745.

The previously discussed similarities between the ‘strange’ religion of Tibet and their own Catholicism was not lost on most of these travelers. The observations of de Rubrouck are typical:

All have their heads shaved, and beards as well...They are celibate and can be found in groups of one or two hundred, living in the same monastery...They carry with them, wherever they go, cords of one or two hundred threaded beads, the same as our rosaries...

Due to their many striking liturgical and sartorial similarities, the presence of charismatic central leaders, and their common submission to regimes of celibacy, cloistering, and obedience, Tibetan Buddhism and Roman Catholicism have often been
equated by Western writers. The similarities between the two faiths were noted as early as 1330, when Odoric of Pordenone (c. 1286-1331) remarked that ‘in this state resides the Great Abbot, or the Pope in our language.’ (‘in iste civitate moratur Lo Abassi, id est, Papa in lingua sua’). This fascination with what appeared to be a form of central Asian Catholicism continued into the nineteenth century, when Jourdain Catalani de Séverac wrote that ‘in that empire, there are temples of idols and monasteries of men and women, as there are at home, with choirs and the saying of prayers, exactly like us, the great pontiffs of the idols wearing red robes and red hats, like our own cardinals.’ In 1891, Augustin Chaboseau echoed Schopenhauer (‘one of the first [Europeans] to seriously investigate Buddhism as a coherent philosophical system’) in his claim that ‘Catholic institutions “were borrowed directly from Buddhism”; Origen, the Manicheans, the Albigensians, the Knights Templar were all “perfect Buddhists”.’ There were many other Catholics who were dismayed by this similarity, more so than if they had encountered a truly foreign faith. According to Lopez, Catholic missionaries tended to explain the existence of Tibetan Buddhism using one of two theories. The first was a form of genealogy or diffusionism, in which the similarity was credited to the presence of a Catholic influence in Tibet’s distant past. The second, more arcane theory was one of ‘demonic plagiarism’, in which

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91 Peut-être a-t-il [Odoric] pénétré dans Lassa, dont il nous dit que c’est la cité « où demeure le grand Abbé, qui est comme leur pape, étant le chef de tous les idolâtres et donnant les benefices du pays à sa guise ».’ Itinerarium, ch. XLV, p. 249-50, cited in Henri de Lubac, La Rencontre du Bouddhisme et de l’Occident (Paris: Aubier, 1952), p. 44.


93 Oldmeadow, Journeys East, p. 23.

94 ‘En 1891, Augustin Chaboseau reprend à sa manière la these de Schopenhauer; à ses yeux, toutes les institutions catholiques « ont été empruntées directement au bouddhisme »; Origène, les Manicheens, les Albigeois, les Templiers étaient des « bouddhistes parfaits ».’ op. cit., p. 234.

95 The Catholic missionaries Evariste-Regis Huc (1813-60) and Joseph Gabet (1808-53) believed that Tsong kha pa (1357-1419), the founder of the Geluk sect, had been mentored by a Caucasian Catholic from the West. Lopez, Prisoners of Shangri-La, p. 26.
any similarity between ritual elements of the Church and those of rival cults is attributed to the work of the devil.\footnote{ibid., p. 27.} Another explanation for the similarities between Buddhism and Catholicism, one that incorporates the hierarchical view of cultural progression that was the dominant paradigm of British colonialism, is Sir James Frazer’s ‘comparative method’. This theory, which Frazer explored at great length in \textit{The Golden Bough}, makes the claim that all societies develop according to a similar pattern, and each is distinguished by the stage it occupies in the continuum of development and the rate at which it progresses along it. The comparative method was so named because of its claim that societies at the same stage of development, regardless of their location in time and place, share the same characteristics, allowing knowledge of one to inform analysis of another. Such a theory cast primitive societies as contemporary reminders of the archaic stages through which Western civilization had passed, and from which the ‘savages’ themselves, with the encouragement and support of the West, would eventually emerge.\footnote{James Frazer, \textit{The Golden Bough} (London, The MacMillan Press, 1974; first published in 1890).} The obvious colonialist implications of this theory substantially reduced its popularity beginning in the mid twentieth century. Nevertheless, when applied to Tibetan Buddhism and its similarity to Catholicism, it served the philosophical and religious needs of the Church of England quite well, in that it not only presented Buddhism and Catholicism as comparable, but both of them as more ‘primitive’ than Protestantism. Lopez comments on the connections between the three forms of religion within the context of English politics:

\begin{quote}
It is against the background of original Buddhism and anti-Papism that the Protestant discourse on Lamaism must be placed: Lamaism, with its devious and corrupt priests and vapid sacerdotalism, would be condemned as the most degenerate form of Buddhism (if it was a form of Buddhism at all) in the decades just after Roman Catholicism was being scourged in England.\footnote{Lopez, \textit{Prisoners of Shangri-La}, p. 32.}
\end{quote}

Whatever the actual ‘truth’ may be, whether an objective truth or one created by those who investigated it, it is difficult to deny the striking similarities between these two faiths, which had little or no historical contact prior to the era of Odoric of Pordenone.
Although Britain’s activities in Tibet throughout most of the nineteenth and into the twentieth centuries were motivated almost entirely by its concern over trade privileges and the security of India, European interest in the region for several centuries prior to this had been primarily religious.

Virtually all of the Westerners to reach Tibet prior to the nineteenth century were there for reasons of religion. This religious basis for exploration in Tibet mirrored a similar foundation of intellectual pursuits in France, according to Obadia: ‘Jesuit missionaries initiated the study of Asian civilizations and inspired the first research on the religions and languages of India.’

As will be seen in following chapters, the role of religion, and of Catholicism in particular, was more than incidental in the relationship between Buddhism and Surrealism. Structurally, philosophically, and socially, the characteristics of these three seemingly disparate modes of thought are interwoven in complex and revealing ways. As implied above, there is a substantial literature noting the similarities between Buddhism and Catholicism. A smaller literature also exists exploring the relationship between Catholicism and Surrealism; in an echo of James Frazer referring to Lhasa as ‘the Rome of Tibet’, many commentators have saddled André Breton with the epithet ‘the Pope of Surrealism’. Thus, for the purposes of this study, the Catholic Church will be drafted into service as a connective trope between the Tibetan monastery and the Parisian café.

FROM RELIGION TO PHILOLOGY

Following the expulsion of all Catholic laity and missionaries in 1745, Western religion did not permanently disappear from Tibet, due to the eventual arrival of numerous nineteenth century religious travelers. This new breed, although they were

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99 This was certainly the case for the Catholic monastics and missionaries sent there by the Pope: ‘The first contacts of the Western world with Buddhism in Asia took place in the thirteenth century when Pope Innocent IV sent Franciscan and Dominican friars…to the Mongol Khan.’ De Jong, A Brief History of Buddhist Studies in Europe and America, p. 8. ‘L’histoire des rapports entre la France et le bouddhisme commence par…des missions, franciscaine et dominicaine, lancées par le pape Innocent IV au concile de Lyon en 1245.’ Corinne Butigieg, Le Lotus et la Roue: l’emergence du bouddhisme français (Rodez, FR: Éditions du Rouergue, 2003), p. 183.


102 One of the more prominent uses of this insult was in Jacques Prévert’s text ‘Mort d’un Monsieur’, in the anti-Breton pamphlet ‘Un Cadavre’ published in 1930: ‘Un jour, il criait contre les prêtres, le lendemain il se croyait évêque ou Pape en Avignon’. ‘One day he cried out against the priests, the next he took himself for a bishop or the Pope in Avignon.’ English translation: Maurice Nadeau, The History of Surrealism (London: Plantin Publishers, 1987), p. 275; see also Surya, Georges Bataille, p. 231.
Protestants rather than Catholics (not that this made a difference to the Tibetans), were equally convinced that ‘[no] force less than the Gospel of Christ’ could give the Tibetans ‘life and progress in the true sense’. Amongst those to attempt to reach Lhasa were Annie Taylor, ‘whose dream it had become to preach Christ’s gospel inside the heathen capital’, the Reverend Henry Lansdell, who attempted, unsuccessfully, to charm his way into Tibet bearing a letter of introduction from the Archbishop of Canterbury, and Petrus and Susie Rijnhart, along with their infant son Charles. Susie Rijnhart was the only one of the last party to survive the venture.

Similarities between Tibetan Buddhism and Catholicism preoccupied these Protestant believers as it had their Catholic predecessors, but in a very different way. While Catholics saw the rites of the Tibetans as an idolatrous corruption of sacred Catholic ceremony, Protestants saw them as a confirmation that the Catholics themselves were idolatrous and corrupt. If it is true, as Patrick French has written, that ‘the outward trappings of Tibetan Buddhism have always disturbed Protestants’, and that ‘Roman Catholics are said to find the images and the incense a little easier to tolerate,’ this, combined with the historical antipathy between Catholics and Protestants, could help to explain why many Protestants were so wary of Buddhism.

The difference in focus between the men of the cloth, both Catholic and Protestant, who initiated and propagated the Western entry into Tibet, and the scientifically minded Victorians who dominated its exploration in the nineteenth century is striking. Corinne Butigieg refers to the Western study of Buddhism taking ‘a more scientific turn in the nineteenth century,’ citing ‘numerous studies, translations of texts, dictionaries, grammars, and essays’ beginning with the publication of Recherches sur Buddo ou Bouddou by Michel-Jean-François Ozeray in 1817.

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104 Hopkirk, Trespassers on the Roof of the World, p. 92.
105 Hopkirk is apparently more astute than Lansdell was when he points out that the Tibetans ‘could hardly have been expected to know who the Archbishop of Canterbury was’. ibid., p. 77.
106 ibid., p. 137.
107 Lopez, Prisoners of Shangri-La, p. 29.
The transition of European interest from a religious context to a more or less philological one is related to the aforementioned expulsion of missionaries in 1745, an act that helped to end the momentum of Christian zeal that had been slowly building.  

Beginning in the eighteenth century, long before any of the Surrealists were born, the increasing rate at which Sanskrit, Tibetan, and Pali works were being translated into German, French, Russian, and English was seen as an indication of the rising tide of European interest in the East, prompting Henri de Lubac to comment that, by the middle of the eighteenth century, Buddhism was becoming ‘the order of the day’. It was Lubac’s opinion that it was the philosophy and religion of Buddhism, as opposed to other aspects of these ‘exotic’ cultures in which it existed, that was capturing the attention of Europeans, a situation markedly different from the ancient origins of contact between East and West, which, according to Lionel Obadia, were largely secular.

Many Western explorers, such as Alexander Csoma de Körös and Alexandra David-Néel, were motivated by a genuine desire to learn more about Tibetan Buddhism. Others were involved with scientific, nationalistic, or military interests (Eugene Burnouf, George Bogle, and Francis Younghusband, for example). None of these people, whatever their personal motivations, could escape the fact that religious belief played a major role in all cultural exchanges between Tibet and the West. The matrix within which these exchanges occurred was essentially created by religion. When the Vajrayana Buddhism that dominated every aspect of the lives of Tibetans came face to face with the Christianity that had controlled Europe for centuries, the meeting left little neutral ground in which a scientist or an unbeliever could operate unaffected by these philosophies. Thus any inquiry into the influence of Eastern

110 This had happened before as well, in 1635. De Jong, A Brief History of Buddhist Studies, p. 11. For more on Tibetan distaste for Christian missionaries, see Hopkirk, Trespassers on the Roof of the World, p. 92-3, and Obadia, Bouddhisme et Occident, p. 20.
111 ‘Vers le milieu du siècle, le bouddhisme est donc à l’ordre du jour. En France, en Angleterre, en Allemagne, en Russie, les travaux vont se multiplier.’ Lubac, La Rencontre du Bouddhisme et de l’Occident, p. 145. For an extensive list of authors and works to support this statement, see ibid., p. 145-8, and Obadia, Bouddhisme et Occident, p. 33.
112 ‘[Le Bouddhisme] s’impose à l’attention de tous, et sous son signe l’Orient et l’Occident commencent de s’affronter comme ils ne l’avaient jamais fait encore.’ Lubac, Rencontre du Bouddhisme, p. 151.
113 Obadia is referring to pre-Buddhist contacts, and appears to agree that, as Buddhism and Christianity became driving forces in their respective societies, they also became dominant in the interactions between the two: ‘Les premiers contacts entre l’Asie et l’Occident sont pratiquement dépourvus de tout contenu religieux. Ce n’est qu’à partir de l’ère chrétienne que la civilisation occidentale se caractérise, jusqu’à une époque récente, par la présence et la prédinance d’un ethos défini par une institution socio-religieuse dominante et exclusive, ce qui transforma radicalement la nature des rapports et entre l’Orient et l’Occident, et rendit problématique la question de la rencontre entre des religions à vocation universaliste.’ Obadia, Bouddhisme et Occident, p. 9.
thought on European artists, even if focusing on matters social, scientific, political, or artistic, must of necessity also address religious practice, as all of these fields were affected by the dominance of Buddhism in Tibet and of Christianity in Europe.

That being said, it must be recognized that the nineteenth century was witness to a move away from an explicit, involved, and sometimes mystical focus on religion, and towards a more detached and scientific approach to its study. This move was dominated by the work of the French Orientalist Eugene Burnouf (1801-1852).114

The contributions of Burnouf and other nineteenth century scholars of Buddhism such as Burnouf’s predecessor Brian Houghton Hodgson (1800-1894), Alexander Csoma de Körös (1784-1842), and Sir John Woodroffe (1865-1936) (writing as Arthur Avalon), were instrumental in the development of European attitudes and beliefs about Buddhism and Tantra. Much of the later aversion to Tantra amongst Europeans could be traced in large part to the work of Burnouf, who had little sympathy for it, and ‘saw little in it beyond tedious systems of magic for utilitarian ends, devoted to a cult of “bizarre and terrible gods and goddesses”’.115 Hodgson, due to the early date of his research, its voluminous nature, and his donation of massive amounts of material to public institutions in Calcutta, Paris, and London, was also a formative influence.116 Donald Lopez writes that ‘the sustained study of Buddhist texts did not really begin in Europe until the delivery of Brian Hodgson’s package of Sanskrit manuscripts into the hands of Eugène Burnouf in 1837’.117 The most significant contributions of Csoma de Körös included the discovery of a huge number

114 ‘On attribue à Eugène Burnouf (1801-1852) le statut de fondateur des etudes bouddhiques, en tant que discipline située aux confluentes de plusieurs autres. Il s’efforça de préciser et de diversifier leur contenu. Il succéda à Antoine-Léonard de Chezy à la chaire de Sanskrit au Collège de France et publia une célèbre Introduction à l’histoire du bouddhisme indien (1844).’ ibid., p. 32; ‘Burnouf, more than anyone else perhaps, can be regarded as the founder of modern Buddhist studies.’ Wedemeyer, ‘Tropes, Typologies, and Turnarounds,’ p. 240.


116 ‘Au cours de vingt-cinq années de recherches dans les monastères du pays, [Hodgson] réussit à se procurer tous les livres canoniques du bouddhisme népalais, conservés, par une exception unique, en sanscrit…il devait réunir en 1841 et publier à Serampour sous le titre de Éclaircissements sur la literature et la religion des bouddhistes, il communiqué libéralement des copies de ses manuscrits aux Sociétés asiatiques de Calcutta, de Londres et de Paris. Enfin, en 1837, il donne ou procure à la Société de Paris un lot de Quatre-vingt-huit ouvrages.’ Lubac, _La Rencontre du Bouddhisme et de l’Occident_, p. 139; ‘His lifelong labours brought to European scholarship the discovery of an entirely new literature – the Sanskrit mahāyāna buddhist texts of the _prajñāpāramitā_ school as well as the Sanskrit and Tibetan scriptures of the _vajrayāna_.’ ‘…he donated hundreds of manuscripts to the libraries of Great Britain, India, and France during the first half of the nineteenth century, which formed the basis for the study of Buddhism in European universities and in India for the second half.’ Taylor, _Sir John Woodroffe, Tantra, and Bengal_, p. 120. See also W.W. Hunter, _A Life of Brian Houghton Hodgson_ (London, 1896); Lopez, _Curators of the Buddha_, p. 3.

117 Lopez, _Curators of the Buddha_, p. 2.
of significant Tibetan texts and the creation of a Tibetan-English grammar and dictionary. According to Kathleen Taylor, Csoma de Körös, perhaps unwittingly, can also be credited with the beginnings of an enduring Western legend: ‘It was from de Körös’ work on the kālacakra tantra that there penetrated into Europe the idea of the mythical land of Shambala, and its hidden wisdom which became the ‘Shangri-La’ of a popular book of the 1930s.’

Sir John Woodroffe, a British judge in India, published many translations, articles, and books about Hindu Tantra. Woodroffe challenged the conventionally negative view of Tantra amongst the English, and was almost certainly a Tantric initiate himself. Taylor makes a convincing case that his pen name, ‘Arthur Avalon’, was not a personal pseudonym but rather a name used in collaborative publications between Woodroffe and the Indian scholar Atal Behari Ghose, who, probably because of the dim view of Tantra taken by his fellow Indians as well as the British, did not want his name made public. While Woodroffe’s expertise lay more in India and Hinduism than Tibet and Buddhism, his acceptance of Tantric beliefs and philosophy eased the way for later Western scholars who would increasingly turn their attention towards Tibet. Some idea of Avalon’s contribution to Western awareness and understanding of Tantrism can be gained from Masson Oursel’s statement: ‘A chapter of Burnouf, some remarks of A. Barth, various researches of Louis de la Vallee Poussin, constituted before 1913 all that was written on the Tantras, whose encyclopedic character, ritualistic nature and bizarre mysticism repelled the analysts…’

The academic study of Eastern religions was also aided by Max Mueller’s translation of the Rig Veda and his book Comparative Mythology. Mueller’s research on Eastern religions, Hinduism in particular, included material that was previously

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118 ‘Csoma de Körös visited Tibet where he studied the language in the monasteries. He…brought many texts to the Asiatic Society in Calcutta. Many of these Tibetan texts…were translations of Sanskrit originals which Hodgson had acquired in Nepal. But whereas Hodgson had only found fragments of the literature, de Körös discovered the whole canon.’ Taylor, Sir John Woodroffe, Tantra, and Bengal, p. 121.


120 Reference is to James Hilton’s Lost Horizon, op. cit., p. 121.

121 ‘ “Arthur Avalon” [was] an imaginary character, combining the talents of both men but especially the public image of Woodroffe with the textual knowledge of Ghose.’ Taylor, Sir John Woodroffe, p. 3.

122 1869-1938. De Jong esteems La Vallée Poussin as a major scholar of Buddhism, calling his translation of the Bodhicaryāvatāra ‘by far the most learned of all the existing translations’. De Jong, A Brief History of Buddhist Studies, p. 43; for a criticism of contemporary interpretations of La Vallée Poussin’s work, see Wedemeyer, ‘Tropes, Typologies, And Turnarounds,’ p. 242.

unknown and caused unprecedented interest in the artistic and intellectual communities of France, England, Germany, and America.\textsuperscript{124}

Hodgson, Burnouf, Csoma de Kőrös, ‘Avalon’, and Mueller were some of the more prominent individuals within a large group of Europeans and Westerners who had been fostering an interest in Eastern thought for many years.\textsuperscript{125} These scholars represent the philological, as opposed to participatory, nature of Western interest in Buddhism in this period. Lopez, referring to Hodgson’s delivery of a large number of Sanskrit and Pali texts to Europe, writes that ‘from that point on, Buddhism could be regarded as a vast but ultimately exhaustible world of texts’.\textsuperscript{126} It is this textual, as opposed to devotional, understanding of Buddhism that rendered it acceptable to a late nineteenth century, primarily British (and inescapably imperialist) investigating culture.

Abe writes that ‘scholarship is thus posited as privileged ground for understanding between cultures, a universalist ideal that is firmly grounded in the liberal tradition of the West’.\textsuperscript{127} The East is accepted as worthy of study, but only within the boundaries of Western understanding, which is dominated by the intellect. The acceptability of this approach amongst the European public was widespread: Obadia writes that publications on Buddhism, besides increasing in number, were becoming less and less confined to religious contexts.\textsuperscript{128} He adds that ‘Buddhism remained a purely intellectual object... [It] was not adopted as a faith in France before the first third of the twentieth century.’\textsuperscript{129}

It is interesting to note that this intellectual, textually based approach, carried out by scholars who were indifferent or even hostile to the subject of their studies, ultimately provided the basis for a more faith based spread of Buddhism in the West, to the point that there are now thousands of Western converts to Buddhism who, while

\textsuperscript{126} Lopez, \textit{Curators of the Buddha} p. 5.
\textsuperscript{128} ‘Outre qu’elles se multiplièrent, les publications sur l’Asie furent de moins en moins réservées à un public de religieux.’ Obadia, \textit{Bouddhisme et Occident}, p. 25.
\textsuperscript{129} Obadia, ‘Tibetan Buddhism in France,’ p. 102.
remaining believers and active participants, often know very little about the philological pursuits of their immediate (Western) forebears.\textsuperscript{130}

Despite Western awareness of an underlying reality based in impermanence, and a history of scholarship and exploration, and perhaps because of the less than ideal interaction between the Victorian mindset of nineteenth century British explorers and the transgressive image of Tantra, contemporary knowledge of Tantra is still largely limited to degraded images of sexual athletics. Many works purporting to reveal the truth about Tantra engage in ‘reductionism so extreme that a true initiate would barely recognize the Tantric heritage in these writings’.\textsuperscript{131} As late as 1987 De Jong wrote that ‘Tantrism is still the most neglected branch of Buddhist studies’. He simultaneously proves and exacerbates this situation in his \textit{Brief History of Buddhist Studies in Europe and America} by devoting only six lines out of 129 pages to scholars of Tantra, curiously omitting the critical works of Arthur Avalon altogether:


In contemporary Europe and North America, alongside the inevitable ignorance of large swaths of history, the basic tenets of Buddhism are becoming ever more familiar to the general public. Even prior to the opening of Tibet, however, awareness of the roots of craving and dissatisfaction was not limited to Tibetan mystics. Western literature has long had an equal, if perhaps less systematized, knowledge of the phenomenon, as can be seen in passages ranging from Thackeray’s ‘\textit{Vanitas Vanitatum! Which of us is happy in this world? Which of us has his desire? Or, having it, is satisfied?’}\textsuperscript{133} to Hegel’s ‘Inherent in the strange and remote is a powerful interest…the attractiveness of which is in inverse proportion to its familiarity.’\textsuperscript{134}

The books, stories, press coverage, and speaking tours of early explorers and scholars who had returned to Europe formed the roots of what was to become, towards the end of the nineteenth century, a veritable obsession with Tibet and specifically with

\textsuperscript{130} Other scholars of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who devoted themselves to the study of Tibetan religion included W.W. Rockhill (1854-1914), Georg Huth (1867-1906), Palmyr Cordier (1871-1914), Berthold Laufer (1874-1935), and Andrej Vostrikov (1904-1937).
\textsuperscript{131} Feuerstein, \textit{ Tantra: The Path of Ecstasy}, p. xiii.
\textsuperscript{132} De Jong, \textit{A Brief History of Buddhist Studies}, p. 74.
the city of Lhasa. Ironically, and in keeping with the philosophy of the unsatisfactory nature of illusion that was taught there, Lhasa often failed to live up to its idealized image. A common theme begins to emerge from the many accounts of Western visitors. It begins with the traveller’s rhapsody at the first glimpse of Lhasa: ‘…we suddenly caught a glimpse of our goal – Lhasa, far off, under a range of dark mountains – sparkling in the sunset; and the Potala, standing out above the city, its golden roofs beckoning like a far-off beacon.’

This is followed by the triumphant entry into the city and interaction with the exotic residents. Soon reality sets in, and disappointment and incomprehension are expressed when the traveler is confronted with a scene described by Fleming: ‘It was surrounded by a nauseous squalor…In the pitted streets pools of rainwater and piles of refuse disrupted the march…The houses were mean and filthy, the stench pervasive. Pigs and ravens competed for nameless delicacies in open sewers.’ The description is supported by Charles Bell, who wrote that ‘there are no sanitary arrangements of any kind. In the houses a hole in the floor; outside, just dark corners by the streets, and the surrounding fields.’ The disenchanted traveler must face the fact that life, even in Lhasa, is not like the imagination; it is not only mundane and difficult but frequently filthy as well.

Lhasa’s overwhelming attractiveness lay not in any qualities which it actually possessed, but solely in the fact of its distance, its mystery, its forbidden nature, and its inaccessibility. The mystery existed solely in the minds of those who longed for it. Thus, while the physical city often failed to fulfill expectations, this very failure vindicated the deeper philosophy of which Lhasa was a symbol, namely the idea that suffering is caused by desire, and that the longed-for ‘fulfillment’ of desires, whatever they are aimed at, always fails to satisfy.

Disillusionment amongst Western explorers often extended beyond dubious urban planning to the individuals with whom they came into contact. Had Georges Bataille’s ephemeral plans to visit Tibet actually come to fruition, his later aversion to monks may have been even more extreme, if the opinions of some of the men in Younghusband’s 1904 mission are to be believed: ‘many officers, deriving their only preconceptions about Tibetan lamas from [Rudyard Kipling’s novel] Kim, were shocked to find that in real life most of these sages personified a loutish depravity.’

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137 Bell, Portrait of the Dalai Lama, p. 229.
138 Bishop, Sacred Myth of Shangri-La, p. 172-73.
139 Fleming, Bayonets to Lhasa, p. 121.
Unlike today’s Western image of the Buddhist monk as benevolent, peaceful, and wise, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries monks were viewed by many Westerners as dirty, ignorant, parasitical, and oppressive to the populations of their countries. Not surprisingly, these attitudes were most common amongst the missionaries who were attempting to convert them. Susie Rijnhart wrote that she found the lamas to be ‘ignorant, superstitious, and intellectually atrophied.’ The Japanese explorer Ekai Kawaguchi, a Buddhist monk himself, saw the lamas as ‘an incarnation of all vices and corruptions.’ In addition, Tibetan Buddhism as a belief system was widely viewed as ‘a dangerous form of nihilism’. In a historical period dominated by the Protestant ethic and the idea of hard work, progress, and self-improvement, a life which consisted of contemplation and living off of the charity of others was generally seen by Westerners as less than admirable. Bishop writes that ‘explorers represented the extreme vanguard of an extroverted, aggressive, expansionist culture which valued, above all else, involvement in the world, individuality, earnestness and will. To this cultural ideal of manliness, the extreme introversion and world denial of hermits, recluses, siddhas and lamas was seen as a form of madness.’ These condemnatory opinions reached their apex in the suspicious attitudes towards the strange and apparently morally corrosive practices of Tantra, described by André Guibaut as ‘the monstrosity of Lamaism.’ Perhaps Guibaut had been reading Johann Herder, who wrote that the religion of Tibet ‘deserves the epithets of monstrous and inconsistent.’

The widespread nature of these complaints compels one to believe that there was at least some truth to them, leading to the unsurprising conclusion that some Tibetan monks were corrupt, lazy, and ‘impure’. While this pejorative construction is in direct contrast to the present idealization of Buddhism amongst contemporary

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140 ‘While travelers [had] mixed feelings about individual lamas…opinions about the system of power they exercised over the populace were uniformly negative.’ Bishop, Sacred Myth of Shangri-La, p. 128. See also Bishop, Dreams of Power, p. 36.

141 Rijnhart, With the Tibetans in Tent and Temple, p. 125.


143 Kon, Review of Le Culte du Nant, p. 311; see also Roger-Pol Droit, Le Culte du Nant, Les Philosophes et Le Bouddha (Éditions du Seuil, 1997). The majority of contemporary readings on this phenomenon focus on the opinions of Western visitors, rather than on the facts on which they were based. Hale offers an interesting exception to this, in a chapter that discusses the political, financial, social, and legal realities of Tibet in the late 1930s. Hale shows that there may have been a sound basis for these condemnatory opinions. See Christopher Hale, Himmler’s Crusade (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, 2003), p. 255-83; for a discussion of social and economic inequality in Tibet, see Fokke Sierksma, Tibet’s Terrifying Deities (The Hague: Mouton and Co., 1966), p. 102-10.

144 Peter Bishop, Dreams of Power (New Delhi: Adarsh Enterprises, 2001), p. 36.


Western Tibetophiles, both are equally inaccurate examples of Orientalist objectification, or a ‘logique de l’altérité’ in which the reality of the Other is subsumed beneath a projection of the self.

With the increase of communications and transportation that arrived with the twentieth century, the intercultural dynamics between Tibet and the West began both to accelerate and to move in both directions. As the religious interest of missionaries in Tibet segued into the philological studies of scholars, Tibetan religion began its own migration into the minds and societies of those who had been studying it.

VAJRAYANA HEADS WEST

The effect of Western incursions into Tibet on the spread of Vajrayana Buddhism was profound. Even before the current Dalai Lama’s escape to India in 1959, ongoing political upheavals were raising not only Western awareness of Tibet’s political status but also curiosity about its exotic religious practices. As early as 1904, such unfortunate events as the Younghusband expedition had the unintended effect of a greatly increased European awareness of Tibetan issues. Public opinion ‘ranged from outright disapproval…to a vague and slightly apprehensive curiosity,’ fuelled by a lively debate in the press over the appropriateness of British activity there. Opposition to the British role in the deaths of Tibetans was inflamed by press denunciations of ‘an expedition which has never been popular, if only because we are obviously crushing half-armed and very brave men with the irresistible weapons of science.’ The possession of vastly superior firepower made the conflict a foregone conclusion, and being forced to participate in this rout of largely defenseless Tibetans offended many British officers’ Victorian sense of honour. Although several thousand Tibetans lost their lives as a result of the unfortunate venture, the long-term political effects of the Younghusband Expedition were minimal.

In contrast, the long-term effects of the Chinese occupation of Tibet have been profound, including the establishment of a Tibetan government-in-exile in Dharamsala, India, and the diffusion of Tibetan ideas throughout the world, often accompanied by

147 ‘During the 1960s and 1970s…young scholars came to exalt Tibet as a pristine preserve of authentic Buddhist doctrine and practice…Scorned by Waddell at the end of the last century as “contemptible mummmery,” [Tibetan Buddhist] literature was now hailed by Orientalists of a new age…as a repository of ancient wisdom…’ Lopez, Prisoners of Shangri-La, p. 42.


149 Fleming, Bayonets to Lhasa, p. 137.

150 The Spectator (9 July, 1904), quoted in ibid., p. 154.
resident Tibetan monks. The Dalai Lama, in the span of one incarnation, has been transformed from a semi-mythical and rarely glimpsed man-god to the author of many best-selling books, darling of the media, and friend of celebrities such as Richard Gere.

The relationship between Tibet and the West, and by implication between Buddhism and Europe, was forever changed with the advent of World War One. The carnage and upheaval of the war turned Europe’s attention temporarily away from Tibet, disrupted the balance of power between Russia and England, and accelerated the disillusion with Western rationalism that many alternatively minded Europeans were beginning to feel. In a grotesque parody of its early triumphalism, twentieth century Europe quickly tore itself apart, and in so doing planted the seeds of a new world, one in which an ever growing Western interest in the East would result in a global cross-pollinization that would forever change them both.

CHAPTER TWO
EASTERN INFLUENCES IN 20TH CENTURY FRANCE

Crippled in the chaos of the Occident, without a connecting thread, I can only wish to play the necrologist-poet to an inimical culture. The Orient is still alive…But the Occidental free-arbitrary-dualist-individualist, the sad capitalist-colonialist-imperialist, fettered with the etiquette of his order – he is finished.

- René Daumal 151

The closing years of the nineteenth century saw many Europeans beginning to search for alternatives to a culture that they saw as hidebound, moribund, and mired in its own past. As the new century approached, ‘doubts arose as to the reigning philosophy of the upper middle class – the self-satisfied cult of material progress which, in a vulgarized sense, could also be termed “positivism”.’ 152 Particularly in the realms of art and literature, values and standards that had been widely accepted for centuries were being questioned in a search for creative outlets that would better reflect what was seen as a new world. Later, in the early twentieth century, the Italian Futurists could be seen as the cutting edge of this trend, with their worship of speed, cars, and war, and their cries to destroy the museums and the past along with them. 153 Not all critics of the past were as extreme as this, of course, but lurking around the fringes of European society there was a general feeling of impending and desired

change. In their search, many gravitated to the East and to the philosophies that were found there, as part of ‘a mood of discontent with the comforts and promises of western civilization, and…a search for more satisfying and meaningful alternatives."

At the time of the founding of Surrealism in 1924, the Oriental Renaissance had been in existence in name as well as in fact for well over a century, the term having been coined by Schlegel in 1803. Schlegel was one of the early conduits bringing Eastern thought into Europe, and was unequivocal in his admiration: ‘The primary source of all intellectual development – in a word the whole human culture – is unquestionably to be found in the traditions of the East.’

Theories concerning the reasons for the flourishing of interest in Eastern thought are varied, but generally involve the malaise of a privileged but alienated Western population who were seeking to return to something more ‘real’, as well as augmented contact with foreign cultures through improved transportation and communications. Increased interest in Buddhism was part of a broader societal trend focusing on the occult, magic, and the irrational.

By the time of René Daumal’s lament for (or celebration of?) the obsolescence of Western Man, any French citizen with an interest in Eastern alternatives had access to a substantial accumulation of Buddhist writings, manuscripts, and artifacts, as well as numerous organizations dedicated to Buddhist practice and intercultural education. The exotic interests of nineteenth century Europeans such as Théophile Gautier, whom Harris credits as being ‘the first true modern to appreciate the literary and artistic potential of [Asian Buddhist art],’ helped to popularize the artwork, artifacts, and books that had been brought back to France by scholars and ethnographers such as

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156 Batchelor, The Awakening of the West, p. 252.
157 Friedrich Schlegel, quoted in Clarke, Oriental Enlightenment, p. 65.
159 ‘Beginning with the Pre-Raphaelites and Ruskin, who had tried to make the English believe that art was a form of divine worship, the neo-religious wave of mysticism had crossed the Channel and swept through France. Suddenly occultism, esotericism, and mysticism were everywhere. Books on magic, sorcery, astrology, divination, and every known ancient superstition filled the bookshops. In addition to [Blavatsky’s] Isis Unveiled and The Secret Doctrine, there were Traité méthodique de science occulte, Au seuil du mystère, Le Serpent de la Genèse, Les Mages et le secret magique, and so on. Spiritualism now became an overnight fashion, with a monthly publication, L’Initiation, and a bimonthly journal, Annales des sciences psychiques spreading the esoteric doctrines of spiritualist belief.’ Robsjohn-Gibbings, Mona Lisa’s Mustache, p. 59; see also p. 68, 84.
Hodgson, Burnouf, and Paul Pelliot. According to Harris, Gautier, along with others in his circle such as Hugo, Flaubert, Mallarmé, and Baudelaire, was interested in Oriental motifs ‘for their novel, transgressive, and diversionary value’. This interest in the social and aesthetic aspects of Eastern artifacts was a common theme in this era; in time, the interest would deepen to include a more profound commitment amongst many Westerners to the belief systems that had inspired the imagery.

Mircea Eliade, after discussing the modernist influence of Mallarmé, notes both the prevalence of the attraction of the East and its involvement in the rebellion against accepted Western norms:

The writers and artists of the twentieth-century avant-garde went even further [than Mallarmé]: they sought new sources of inspiration in the plastic arts of the Far East and in African and Oceanic masks and statues. André Breton’s surrealism proclaimed the death of the entire Western aesthetic tradition...René Daumal taught himself Sanskrit and rediscovered Indian aesthetics...from Baudelaire to André Breton, involvement with the occult represented for the French literary and artistic avant-garde one of the most efficient criticisms and rejections of the religious and cultural values of the West.

An extensive history of exploration, writing, and exchange between East and West existed by the twentieth century. The fact that the East, and particularly Tibet, continued to be seen as exotic and unknown was as much an act of will on the part of Europeans as a reflection of reality. Particularly in the wake of the horrors of World War One, there was a need in Europe to believe in an ‘imaginal landscape’; an unspoiled land that was not affected by Europe’s rapid modernizing and resulting upheaval. Fuelled by the striking, erotic, and often macabre nature of Tibetan art and objects, the exoticist trope of ‘mysterious Tibet’ operated, in the words of Edward Said, ‘as representations usually do, for a purpose, according to a tendency, in a specific historical, intellectual, and even economic setting’. The construction of Tibet as the land of Lhasa, the Dalai Lama, yak herders, and flying monks appeared, or more

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162 op. cit., p. 367.
164 Bishop coins this useful term when he writes of ‘the sustained creation of Tibet as an important imaginal landscape for Western cultures’. Bishop, Sacred Myth of Shangri-La, p. 25.
accurately was created, within the European imaginal landscape at a time when it was most useful, and fulfilled the aspirations of a European population in search of wider horizons for their dreams.

**BUDDHISM IN FRENCH POPULAR ART AND CULTURE**

Interest in Buddhist and Eastern themes was in no way limited to artists, writers, Surrealists, or dissidents during this era. Popular culture responded as well, providing the public with endless entertainments extolling the mysteries, dangers, and surprises of the East. In addition to the availability in European languages of previously obscure Buddhist works such as the *Dhammapada*, the *Tripitaka*, and Tantras such as the *Vijñāna Bhairava* (which Jean Bruno equates with certain aspects of Bataille’s meditational techniques),

Europe also began to create its own *oeuvre* of works that were dedicated to or influenced by Buddhism and Asian culture in general. Inspired by the interest in all things Eastern that was prevalent in France at the time, explorers and writers published everything from theoretical analyses of Eastern religion to action based adventure stories designed for a mass audience. Scholarly works by Hodgson, Burnouf, and Avalon were joined by accounts of Himalayan exploration by Francis Younghusband, Sven Hedin, W.W. Evans-Wentz, Giuseppe Tucci, Jacques Bacot, Alexandra David-Néel, Richard Burton, Heinrich Harrer, and many others. The presence of these explorers and writers in France was only one factor in a network of Eastern influences, including organizations, teachers, books, and periodicals.

Obadia writes:

In France, Orientalist mediums constituted a particularly favourable ground for Buddhist propaganda...During the first half of the twentieth century, Tibetology developed in Europe through the work of W.W. Evans-Wentz (1875-1965), Orientalist and folklorist, who translated for the first time the now-famous *Bardo-Thödol*, or *Tibetan Book of the Dead* (1927), and that of Giuseppe Tucci (1894-1984) who visited Tibet several times between 1927 and 1949...In France, Jacques Bacot translated and published the biographies of two of the most important personages in the religious history of Tibet: Marpa (1925) and Milarepa (1927). It was left to Alexandra David-Néel, however, to be the first true apologist of Tibetan Buddhism in France.

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167 ‘…les milieux orientalistes ont constitué, en France, un terrain particulièrement favorable pour la propagande bouddhiste ou, du moins, pour la vulgarisation des themes de cette religion. Durant la première moitié du XXème siècle, la tibétologie se développa, en Europe, à travers l’oeuvre de Evans-Wentz (1875-1965), orientaliste et folkloriste, qui traduisit, pour la première fois, le désormais célèbre Bardo-Thödol ou ‘livre tibétain des morts ’ (1927), ou celle de Tucci (1894-1984) qui séjourna plusieurs fois au Tibet entre 1927 et 1949...En France, on doit à Jacques Bacot d’avoir traduit et publié les biographies de deux des plus importants personages de l’histoire religieuse du Tibet, qui sont Marpa
David-Néel was the author of many books on Tibet and Buddhism, as well as a close friend of Valentine Penrose (né Boué), the poet, collagist, and wife of Surrealist painter Roland Penrose. The presence of her books in the reading lists of many of the individuals in this study, including Michel Leiris, André Breton, and Georges Bataille, indicates the familiarity of many within the Surrealist group with her work.

The widespread enthusiasm for Tibet and the East that was augmented by writers such as David-Néel was also tempered by detractors such as Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, who wrote that ‘it is au fait to be a Buddhist, at least we hear of a Chela served up for lunches, as if he were the last new poet or a hummingbird on a half-walnut shell. A live Theosophist is a godsend in a dead drawing room.’ T.H. Robsjohn-Gibbings shared in Phelps’ cynicism: ‘In the lecture halls of Berlin and Paris the Eastern hierarchy of the occult revealed its magic doctrines to a new generation. In darkened rooms throughout Europe they held their séances. The fakirs came to Paris in swarms, stuck knives in their cheeks and throats, were buried alive, and lay on beds of sharp nails.’ This cynicism reached the pages of La Nouvelle Revue Française in the form of Pierre Drieu La Rochelle’s withering attack on the Surrealists for their neo-Orientalism:

With the incredible gullibility of poets who suddenly leave their distraction and catch in flight any word trailing in the endless babble of the newspapers, you casually latch onto this old cliché of the revolution rolling from east to west, and on top of this aggressive nonsense, you are terribly mistaken if you think that we will forget your incessant whining.

Drieu La Rochelle’s nationalist sympathies had been offended by the Surrealists’ open letter to Paul Claudel of 1925, in which they combined Orientalism, anti-nationalism, and a personal vendetta against Claudel (who had referred to them as ‘pederasts’): ‘We hope with all our strength that revolutions, wars and colonial
insurrections come to annihilate this Western civilization whose vermin you defend even in the Orient...”

This combativeness and mud slinging (which, along with the posturing and charlatanry at which it is often justifiably aimed, always exists at the fringes of new ideas) could not obscure the fact that there was a significant increase of ‘serious interest in the more profound philosophical aspects of Eastern religion, and its approach to the inner world of spirit.’

Outside of specialist subcultures, one of the main sources of knowledge of the East was the popular novel. McNab writes that ‘the mainstream of French life was inhabited by shoals of authors selling the charms of outré-mère to the capital, the metro-pole. A thriving cultural import-export industry existed and a literature coloniale was supplied by authors specialising in particular colonies.’

Books which utilized themes of Eastern mystery or Buddhist exoticism included adventure novels such as F.E. Penny’s The Swami’s Curse (1922), Elizabeth Sharpe’s Secrets of the Kaula Circle (1936), and James Hilton’s Lost Horizon (1933). All of these books were following in the steps of Eastern-themed books that are now seen as classic literature, including Rudyard Kipling’s Kim (1901), and quasi-historical accounts making good use of the vogue for the exotic, such as Sir Richard Burton’s Vikram and the Vampire (1870) and Philip Meadows Taylor’s much earlier Confessions of a Thug (1839). Taylor’s book was an early example of a sub-genre characterized by the civilized European’s horrified account of the excesses and superstitions of India. Arthur Miles’s The Land of the Lingam is another example, the French translation of which was borrowed from the Bibliothèque Nationale by Georges Bataille in February of 1936, the same year that he founded Acéphale. It may or may not be coincidental that Chapter Two of this book contains accounts of human sacrifices amongst blood cults in India.

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174 McNab, Ghost Ships, p. 19.

175 The level of Miles’ objectivity can be intuited on the first page, which refers to ‘Hinduism, the most hopeless conglomerate of superstitions since the world began’. Even more remarkably: ‘India is a land which has no history’ (p. 49). The book was banned in India. Arthur Miles, The Land of the Lingam (London: Paternoster, 1933); French translation: Le Culte de Çiva: superstitions, perversions, et horreurs de l’Hindouisme (Paris: Payot, 1935); ‘Emprunts de Georges Bataille à la Bibliothèque Nationale (1922-1950),’ Oeuvres Complètes Vol. XII, p. 603.
Later influential books included *The Message of Tibetans* by Arnaud Desjardin (1969) and *The Third Eye* by T. Lobsang Rampa (1957). The public appetite for things Tibetan can be gauged by the fact that the latter book was an enormous best seller, despite the fact that ‘Rampa’ was actually one Cyril Henry Hoskin, a plumber’s son from Devonshire. His book’s unequivocal rejection as a fraud by many experts on Tibet appears not to have affected its sales.

Buddhist themes were presented in varying degrees of seriousness, ranging from the sombre to the comic, as in Flaubert’s novel *Bouvard et Pécuchet*:

The scandal increased when Pécuchet said that he liked Buddhism. The priest burst out laughing: ‘Ah! ah! ah! Buddhism!’ Mrs. de Noares raised her arms: ‘Buddhism!’ ‘What…Buddhism!’ The count repeated. ‘Do you know it?’ said Pécuchet to Mr. Jeufroy, who looked confused. ‘Know it! Better than Christianity, and before that, it recognizes nothing of terrestrial things. Its practices are austere, its faithful more numerous than the Christians, and as for incarnations, Vishnu has not one, but nine of them! You be the judge!’

Edwin Arnold’s epic poem *Light of Asia* went through 50 editions in London and 100 in the United States, and, in an instructive example of a reflexive relationship between East and West, was read and admired by Ananda Coomaraswamy and by Gandhi in India. Charles Allen goes so far as to call Arnold’s poem ‘the chief instrument by which Buddhism was brought into the Western mainstream’, and to claim that it ‘helped to Westernise Buddhism’.

The French fascination with Asia, fuelled by both immigration and native exoticism, manifested itself not only in books but in society at large. Organizations concerned with Asia that were active in France before World War Two included the Asiatic Society of Bengal, (established in 1784), the Pāli Text Society (1881), the

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179 First published in London by Trubner in 1879.
182 ‘…fondée à Calcutta…par un petit groupe d’Occidentaux intéressés, pour des raisons d’ordre mercantile et politique, par l’étude des langues…asiatiques.’ Obadia, *Bouddhisme et Occident*, p. 37.
société des amis du Bouddhisme (1929),\textsuperscript{184} the Association Francaise des Amis de l'Orient (1921),\textsuperscript{185} and the École française d'Extrême Orient (EFEO) (1901).\textsuperscript{186}

These organizations concerned themselves with Buddhism to varying degrees. This more overtly religious aspect of Eastern culture was largely confined to the immigrant community until the 1960s, when Westerners began to convert in larger numbers to a belief involving faith as well as intellectual curiosity.\textsuperscript{187} This was the true beginning of a Western Buddhism, which is different in many ways from the Asian traditions, most notably in its approach to asceticism, monasticism and the role of the guru. Zürcher writes that ‘unlike Christianity, Buddhism’s spread resulted from a relatively unorganized and “spontaneous” dissemination, described as a “branching” of religious communities that were established within, and, to a certain extent, acculturated to, the local grassroots community.’\textsuperscript{188}

This modification of Buddhism into forms more compatible with Europe was simply another phase in a long history wherein Buddhism, more than most religions, has taken on aspects of the cultures with which it comes into contact. In the words of Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh, ‘the forms of Buddhism must change so that the essence of Buddhism remains unchanged. This essence consists of living principles that cannot bear any specific formulation.’\textsuperscript{189} Thus Buddhism has assumed markedly different forms in India, where it originally emerged from Hinduism,\textsuperscript{190} China, where it met with Daoism and ancestor worship, central Asia (including Nepal, Tibet, and Bhutan), where it was influenced by Bön and indigenous shamanist traditions), and Southeast Asia, where Theravada Buddhism has remained dominant and largely unaffected by the Mahayana of China, Japan, and central Asia. Lopez uses Heinz Bechert’s term ‘Buddhist modernism’ to describe the form of Buddhism that is characterized by rationalism, universality, and a fixed doctrine:

Because it is “atheistic” in the sense that it denies the existence of a creator deity and because it places a strong emphasis on rational

\textsuperscript{183} By Theodor W. Rhys-Davids. ibid., p. 37.
\textsuperscript{184} By American born Grace Lounsbery. Obadia, ‘Tibetan Buddhism in France,’ p. 103.
\textsuperscript{185} By Masson Oursel and Sylvain Levy, at the time of Rabindranath Tagore’s second visit to Europe. Taylor, Sir John Woodroffe, Tantra, and Bengal, p. 140.
\textsuperscript{187} Obadia, Bouddhisme et Occident, p. 107-18.
\textsuperscript{188} Erich Zürcher, Bouddhisme, christianisme et société chinoise (Paris: Juillard, 1990), quoted in Obadia, ‘Tibetan Buddhism in France’, p. 94.
\textsuperscript{189} Quoted in Baas, Smile of the Buddha, p. 1.
\textsuperscript{190} Clearly this is a simplification of the origins of Buddhism, but a necessary one due to the complexity of a full historical description.
analysis, it is, more than any other religion, compatible with modern science...the essential practice of [this type of] Buddhism is 
meditation, with the rituals of consecration, purification, expiation, and 
exorcism so common throughout Asia largely dismissed as popular superstition. This version of Buddhism was unknown in 
Tibet. 191

Upon its arrival in the secular, progress oriented cultures of twentieth century Europe, Buddhism began to absorb these qualities in the same way that it absorbed mysticism in Tibet 13 centuries earlier, resulting in a Western Buddhism that exhibits a very Theravadan emphasis on objective observation. Most Western Buddhism de-emphasizes not only religious belief but also hierarchy, monasticism, and faith-based adoration of gurus and saints. In keeping with the more practical, science-based, and individualist cultures of Europe and North America, Western Buddhism is seen by many as closer to psychology than to religion. Butigieg warns of the risk of trivialization inherent in this process of secularization: ‘The search for techniques of concentration, meditation, and yoga is often undertaken by occasional lay practitioners for use as therapy or in their professional or daily lives.’ 192 Alternatively, this process can be seen as a liberation from tradition-bound superstitions in the interest of maintaining a vital and effective philosophy. Jacqueline Baas writes:

[Buddhism’s] manifestations...range from the austerity of Zen Buddhism to the visual and aural complexity of Tibetan Buddhism. Similarly, in the United States, where Buddhism has spread both through immigration and through texts and teachings, its various forms have been adapted and integrated with local cultural and spiritual phenomena ranging from pragmatism to Judaism and Christianity to psychology. 193

Whatever the uses to which these belief systems were put, the increasing presence of Asian art, books, and teachers of Buddhism in France was instrumental in the Europeanization of ancient techniques.

Many early adherents of Buddhism appear to have been Theosophists, and the philosophy also attracted many artists, including Kandinsky, Mondrian, and Klee. ‘The very first self-proclaimed French Buddhists were individuals sharing more or less

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191 Lopez, Prisoners of Shangri-La, p. 185.
192 ‘L’approche du tantrisme par les Français reste très « occidentalisée ». La recherché de techniques du concentration, de méditation et de yoga est souvent une demande des pratiquants laïcs occasionnels pour en tirer des fruits dans leur vie professionnelle ou psychologique quotidienne. Elle n’a, de ce fait, que très peu de choses à voir avec l’engagement profond que représente la pratique réelle et monastique du tantrisme en Asie. La vigilance exercée par les associations de défense des individus décourage aussi la pratique du tantrisme dans sa version intégrale originelle.’ Butigieg, La Lotus et le Rouge, p. 118.
theosophical ideas: Maurice Magre, whose book Pourquoi je suis bouddhiste (“Why I Am a Buddhist,” 1928) is the first confession of a self-converted Buddhist in France, and the famous Alexandra David-Néel, who had contacts with the Theosophical Society before traveling through Tibet.\footnote{Obadia, ‘Tibetan Buddhism in France’, p. 103.} The relative familiarity of Theosophy to many Europeans of the time made acceptance of Buddhism far more likely, particularly in an environment in which ‘spiritualism and mediums of every variety had suddenly reappeared.’\footnote{Robsjohn-Gibbings, Mona Lisa’s Mustache, p. 177.}

**BUDDHISM AND MODERNISM**

In 1920, Richard Huelsenbeck wrote that ‘Dada is the American side of Buddhism, it raves because it knows how to be silent, it acts because it is in a state of rest.’\footnote{Richard Huelsenbeck, quoted in Stephen Foster and Rudolf Kuenzli, eds, Dada Spectrum: The Dialectics of Revolt (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1979), p. 98.} How did the Zen irrationalism of Japan that Huelsenbeck here intimates, the Daoist detachment of China that influenced Henri Michaux, or the Tibetan transcendence that Artaud longed for, become a part of the world of artists and writers in France, seemingly so far removed from the world of Asia, socially, philosophically, and geographically? The answer to this question will help to create a broad historical context within which the influence of Buddhism on Surrealism can be more fully understood. While it would be difficult to determine in a specific manner what writings, works of art, or ideas influenced which artists at what time, it is possible to reconstruct a historical account of what manifestations of Buddhism were present in early twentieth century France that may have had an influence, directly or otherwise, on the artists who lived and worked there. In some cases there is direct evidence, in the form of journals, eyewitness accounts, libraries, or archives, of the influence of Buddhism and Eastern philosophy on French artists and writers. From these one can interpolate the nature of the environment that existed at the time, and create a likely scenario for the prevalence and significance of Eastern influences.

This Eastward shift within Europe, fuelled by a potent combination of Orientalist idealization, spiritualist schools of thought such as Theosophy, and disgust at the carnage of the Great War (a war seen by some, such as the Dadaists, as symptomatic of the bankruptcy of European culture),\footnote{‘…a reaction against all the rules and standards and methods and practices associated with the hated world that had spawned the World War, a reaction against all the literary and artistic attitudes of the past…’ John G. Frey, ‘From Dada to Surrealism,’ Parnassus Vol. 8, No. 7 (December 1936), p. 12.} exerted a subtle yet notable
influence on European society. Writing in 1947, Robsjohn-Gibbings unsympathetically summarized the trend:

…in reaction to the Victorian scientific world, a revival of Eastern occultism swept over Europe. Under the impetus of this wave of supernatural Oriental thought, modern art added to its primitive magic systems the obscurantism of Asian occult lore. It also developed a predilection for secret cults and the belief that the modern Western artist was the equivalent of the Eastern seers and mahatmas.\textsuperscript{198}

Much of this occultism and escapism was the result of a widespread social revulsion at the devastating effects of World War One. As in any major social upheaval, there were unforeseen impacts, not all of them detrimental. In addition to alienating (and killing) many artists, the Great War facilitated their exposure to Asian culture by importing many troops from French colonial holdings such as Vietnam and Cambodia: ‘with the beginning of hostilities, the immigrant situation changes drastically in the capital…the voyage “towards Paris” will be undertaken by nearly 250,000 “yellows” in less than three years’ [Plate 8].\textsuperscript{199} These soldiers, many of whom remained in France after the war, naturally brought their Buddhist beliefs with them, helping to diversify what had been until then a largely Catholic nation. Butigieg confirms the importance of the War in this process: ‘Diplomatic openings to bring France closer to Tibet were undertaken from 1907, but it was the First World War which finally concretized the establishment of Asian populations in France.’\textsuperscript{200}

The relatively benign \textit{Japonisme} of the nineteenth century began to cede to a more contentious and polarized worldview of a spiritually bankrupt West and an untainted East, this view manifesting itself most forcefully amongst the writers, painters, and poets who were associated with politicized art movements such as Dada and Surrealism. Bishop recognizes the common ground, within the minds of the European seekers of this time, of Western occultism and Eastern religion: ‘the...

\textsuperscript{198} ‘Max Beckmann, Oskar Kokoschka, Fernand Léger, Georges Braque, Otto Dix, George Grosz and many others, all belonged to a generation for whom this slaughter was an overwhelming trial in their lives, shattering their confidence in the moral and rational assumptions of Western culture and throwing into question the entire nature of human existence.’ Martin Ries, ‘André Masson: Surrealism and His Discontents,’ \textit{Art Journal} Vol. 61, no. 4 (winter 2002), p. 74. Although Robsjohn-Gibbings makes no mention of Bataille in his book, the reference to ‘secret cults’ is reminiscent of \textit{Acéphale}. T.H. Robsjohn-Gibbings, \textit{Mona Lisa’s Mustache} (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1947), p. 14.


\textsuperscript{200} ‘Des ouvertures diplomatiques sont entreprises dès 1907 pour rapprocher la France du Tibet mais c’est la première guerre mondiale qui va réellement concrétiser l’implantation en France de populations asiatiques.’ Butigieg, \textit{Le Lotus et la Roue}, p. 184.
popularity of psychoanalysis, psychic research, occultism, and surrealism, each of which celebrated a timeless, dematerialized world, ensured that...Tibetan sacred knowledge found a well-prepared and receptive home.\(^{201}\) The somewhat shallow vogue for the exotic was serving not only to threaten traditionalists and elate dissidents, it was also ushering in, and camouflaging to a certain extent, a deeper and more profoundly foreign manner of looking at the world. The fact that the motivations of many enthusiasts were based primarily on rebellion did not substantially alter the fact that the philosophies that they were dabbling in had an ancient and quite valid history. Alexandra David-Néel wrote that ‘men compelled to abandon cherished ideals...are eager to transplant them to a more favourable fairyland...they build gardens in heaven...but how much more readily will they seize upon the opportunity of lodging them in an earthly country. Tibet offers that opportunity.'\(^{202}\)

Not everyone was in agreement with this trend. In 1925, close on the heels of the birth of Surrealism, Les Cahiers Du Mois published a special issue entitled Les Appels de l’Orient, in which a survey on the subject of East-West relations solicited the views of prominent French intellectuals, including Sylvain Lévi, Émile Senart, André Gide, Paul Valéry, Edmond Jaloux, and many others.\(^{203}\) Said writes that

the questions dealt with relations between Orient and Occident in a timely, not to say brazenly provocative, way, and this already indicates something about the cultural ambience of the period...One question asks whether Orient and Occident are mutually impenetrable (the idea was Maeterlinck’s) or not; another asks whether or not Oriental influence represented “un peril grave” – Henri Massis’s words – to French thought; a third asks about those values in Occidental culture to which its superiority over the Orient can be ascribed.\(^{204}\)

The leading nature of the last question, as well as the presence of Massis, a member of the right wing group Action Française and author of Défence of the West who was ‘preoccupied with defending the West against foreign contaminants,’\(^{205}\) give some idea of the perspective of this publication. Whatever its political stance, Cahiers du Mois did, to its credit, find room in its pages to publish the decidedly pro-Eastern views of writers such as Phillipe Soupault, René Crevel, René Guénon, Henri Barbusse, and André Breton.


\(^{202}\) David-Néel, Magic and Mystery in Tibet, p. 260.


\(^{204}\) Said, Orientalism, p. 250.

\(^{205}\) op. cit., p. 117.
Notions of Orientalism that were much later clarified and systematized by Said are seen in abundance in *Les Appels de l’Orient*, in passages such as Paul Valéry’s statement that ‘our role is therefore to maintain this power of choice, of universal comprehension, of the transformation of everything into our own substance, powers which have made us what we are.’

Twenty-first century interpretations of this era, looking back at it from a perspective in which the interpenetration of East and West is an established fact, tend to emphasise the historical trends that supported the development of this state of affairs. This issue of *Cahiers du Mois* is significant in its largely unsympathetic view of the influx of Eastern ideas, and in the presence in its pages of many quite influential names, indicating that this lack of support was not merely the attitude of a marginal few.

Despite the prejudices of the majority, the spiritual premise of Buddhist philosophy held a strong appeal for many people in Europe, just as it does today. In the case of disaffected artists, writers, and philosophers such as the Surrealists, the somewhat transgressive and seedy image of a practice such as Tantra only increased its appeal. The apparent compatibility of many Buddhist beliefs with various aspects of spiritualism such as Theosophy and ‘free thought’ also aided its entry into progressive thought and culture in Europe.

**EASTERN INFLUENCES IN TWENTIETH CENTURY ART**

Turning to an examination of Buddhist influence on the artists and writers who form the core of this study, the words of Ian Harris serve as a cautionary note against the drawing of easy conclusions:

> It is notoriously difficult to trace influences in art without falling into the trap of simplistic and mechanistic theorizing…how can we distinguish [shallow] work…from that produced by someone deeply concerned with giving creative form to cherished ideals, symbols, or motifs? When we turn specifically to the work of modern Western artists for whom Buddhism has had special meaning, the problem is further compounded. What aspects of Buddhism has the artist found inspiring? Has the inspiration been philosophical or cultural, or has the artist been attracted to the tradition’s emphasis on the cultivation of specific mental states?

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Harris proposes that the reception of Asian Buddhist influence into Western art can be divided into three phases: the first, found in nineteenth century France, is characterized by a shallow ‘faddish fascination’ with the exotic nature of Asian society. Included in this phase would be japonaiserie, in which Asian elements and artifacts were decoratively included as elements in otherwise Western art [Plate 9], and the more involved but still aesthetically based japonisme, which utilized Asian pictorial techniques, particularly the woodblock prints known as Ukiyo-e [Plates 10-11].

Many Asian elements can be found in the works of Edouard Manet (1832-1883), James Whistler (1834-1903), Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890), Paul Gauguin (1848-1903), Odilon Redon (1840-1916), and other French and British artists who were searching for exotic alternatives to what they saw as a moribund domestic art tradition.

The second phase of Asian artistic influence, centered in the first half of the twentieth century, sees ‘a more significant movement away from Western aesthetic norms, with some artists taking the first steps to understand Buddhism in its Asian contexts.’ The third phase, which began its momentum in the late 1960s, continues this trend into ‘a greater involvement of Westerners in almost all aspects of traditional Buddhist activity.’ Here we are concerned only with the first two of these phases, primarily the second, in which artists’ involvement in Eastern ways began to make its first transition from a purely aesthetic interest to a concern for the philosophy and way of life that inspired the art.

Two artists who had a profound influence on the Surrealists and other artists in early twentieth century France were Vincent van Gogh [Plate 12] and Odilon Redon. Van Gogh, an appreciator of Asian iconography and composition, was an inspiration to disaffected artists for his life as much as for his art. His difficulties and torment only seemed to add to his appeal for Artaud, who was inspired to write ‘Van Gogh, The Man Suicided by Society’ and for Bataille, who published ‘Sacrificial Mutilation and the Severed Ear of Vincent van Gogh’ in the journal Documents.

While Artaud’s writing excoriates society for its treatment of van Gogh, Bataille focuses on van Gogh’s place in the history of bodily transgression. Published

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209 ibid., p. 367.
210 ibid., p. 365.
in 1930, Bataille’s essay was probably read by Artaud and may have influenced his own essay, published nearly twenty years later in 1947.

Odilon Redon, who was greatly admired by the Surrealists, was not averse to synthesis when it came to his art or his spiritual beliefs. Harris writes that Redon was ‘the first modern artist to depict the Buddha in a manner close to traditional iconographic norms’, but also notes that Redon’s work Sacred Heart or Buddha [Plate 13] is ‘a definite fusion of Buddhist and Christian imagery – not surprising, given Redon’s earlier involvement in occult and theosophical circles.’ Barbara Larson also notes Redon’s eclecticism in his ‘growing taste for Eastern religious philosophies and reincarnation, along with pantheism’ and ‘his interest in unifying the spiritual and the occult with science. By the last decade of the century Redon was gathering books on Buddhism, Hinduism, and esoteric religions.’

As we move into the twentieth century we find prominent artists with a more substantial and long lasting interest in Buddhist philosophy. Rawson writes:

Many modern Western artworks show an obvious resemblance to yogic and contemplative art, not only superficially, but in the intentions of the artist. Brancusi, Kandinsky, and Klee were familiar with Eastern philosophies - although in an indirect way, through the interpretations of the theosophists - as well as the Western mystical tradition, and they had a more than superficial and passing experience with meditation. Brancusi had read translations of the Tibetan Buddhist texts published by Evans-Wentz…

Further examples of the influence of Buddhist iconography and thought can be found scattered throughout the history of Modernism. Brancusi owned a copy of The Tibetan Poet Milarepa, and ‘strongly identified with this Tibetan sorcerer-poet turned saint, detecting in his life parallels with his own’. On several occasions Man Ray used Buddhist icons in his portraiture [Plates 14-15]. Michel Leiris analyzed the work

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of Joan Miró in relation to Tibetan meditations on emptiness, and wrote about the ‘mystical practices of Tibetan ascetics’ that he had learned about from ‘an article of Mrs. Alexandra David-Néel that I had read, on the advice of my friend Marcel Jouhandeau’. David-Néel’s writings were also present in the library of the Surrealist painter Remedios Varo, along with books by Paramahansa Yogananda, Zen Buddhist teacher D. T. Suzuki, and others. Artists and writers as diverse as Claude Cahun, Kandinsky, André Breton, Henri Michaux, and Marcel Duchamp, in addition to those addressed in this study, were more or less conversant with the tenets of Buddhism.

Hedwig Fechheimer stated in Documents that ‘Buddhist imagery…does not seem foreign to European imagery of the same era.’ Although these influences remained for the most part abstract and generalized, there are some examples of what appear to be direct influences, for example in the work of Victor Brauner [Plates 16-19]. In portrayals of beings such as hermaphrodites and multi-armed deities, one can see the iconographic influence of Eastern art, as well as a more general influence in the subject matter being portrayed.

Prior to 1950, however, there seems to have been little formal application of the ethics and tenets of Buddhism as actually practiced in Buddhist cultures. In other words, there is little or no evidence that any of these individuals took vows in any order, practiced meditation or Buddhist ritual on a regular basis, or otherwise behaved as, or defined themselves as, formally Buddhist. Many artists, particularly Duchamp and Brancusi, lived their lives in keeping with an ethic of detachment and impermanence, but the idea that they did this in obedience to a formal Buddhist practice appears to be, frankly, the wishful thinking of art historians. This situation began to change for artists, as it did for the surrounding society, beginning around 1950, with the more explicit interest in Buddhism of artists such as Isamu Noguchi.


‘Vers la fin de l’entretien que je mentionne ici, Willie Seabrook, après que je lui eus parlé d’un certain nombre de pratiques mystiques des ascètes thibétains (souvenirs d’un article de Mme Alexandra David-Néel que j’avais lu, sur le conseil de mon ami Marcel Jouhandeau, dans la Revue de Paris du 10 avril 1930), Willie Seabrook me rapporta l’histoire suivante, qu’on lui avait racontée à lui-même, lors de son voyage en Arabie…’ Michel Leiris, ‘Le “Caput Mortuum” ou la femme de l’alchimiste,’ Documents No. 8 (1930); reprinted in Documents 1929-1930, p. 462.


L’image bouddhiste…ne semble pas étrangère à la peinture européenne de la même époque.’ Hedwig Fechheimer, ‘Exposition Chinoise À Berlin,’ Documents No. 1 (1929); reprinted in Documents 1929-1930, p. 60.

For example, Tosi Lee has written an article exploring Tantric influences in the work of Marcel Duchamp. While insightful in many ways, it makes numerous farfetched claims in an effort to prove its thesis. Tosi Lee, ‘Fire down below and watering, that's life: a Buddhist reader's response to Marcel Duchamp,’ Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art (Berkeley: U. of California Press, 2004), p. 113-122.
(1904-1988), John Cage (1912-1992), and Jasper Johns (b. 1930). A good example of this is Johns’s three paintings entitled *Tantric Detail* I, II, and III (1981) [Plate 20], which display the clear iconographic influence of Tibetan art.225

Barbara Rose writes that ‘the images in the *Tantric Detail* paintings have been identified as being based on a well-known book on Tantric art.’226 In the middle of a grid of abstract grey lines, one finds a cartoon-like image of a pair of testicles that appears to have been transferred directly from a Tibetan painting of the protector deity Samvara in union with his female shakti [Plate 21]. Below this is the image of a skull, suggesting, as in Tantric art, the identity of sex and death. In the Tibetan painting of Samvara, the generative power of the union of opposites is centred in Samvara’s testicles, the only part of the image to be transferred to Johns’s painting.

The interest in Tibetan interpretations of mortality by artists such as Johns indicates not that mortality is a Tibetan phenomenon but that cultures and traditions such as Tibetan Buddhism were offering something that was lacking in the West: a comprehensive, honest, and useful interpretation of death, the most universal human phenomenon. The Christian explanations of the process of death offered by the consumption based, anti-mystical culture of 1950s America (the more simplistic of which reduced it to a simple process of ‘going to heaven’) were not sufficient for the many seekers who, a few short years later, would begin journeying to India and beyond in search of answers, as well as creating art with a decidedly Eastern influence.

The writer and artist Henri Michaux was engaged with the themes of Buddhism in both an implicit and an explicit sense. He was knowledgeable about Eastern thought, particularly Daoism, at an intellectual level, and also pursued that path in a more visceral and personal way.227 He shared Bataille’s interest in formlessness, a state of mind that was aided by his extensive experimentation with mescaline. Michaux’s writings and drawings, mystical apprehensions that combined the constant change of

Buddhism with the eerie atmosphere of much Surrealist art, inhabited a *demimonde* of paranoia, shifting definition, and the possibility of exaltation.

As with the work of so many of his contemporaries, Michaux’s work is peppered with references and observations that indicate a familiarity with Buddhism and Eastern thought, while remaining independent of any formal adherence. His work *A Barbarian in Asia*, an account of his travels in India and Japan, includes as part of his descriptions much information on Buddhist customs, ending with a quote from the Buddha: ‘In the future, be your own light, your own refuge. Seek not another refuge. Go not to seek refuge other than in Yourselves.’

We can assume that Michaux had some influence on André Breton, based on the number of Michaux’s books that were in Breton’s library, and on Breton’s inclusion of Michaux in a list of poets who interested him.

One gets the impression that Breton, despite his organizational genius, capacious memory, and tenacious dedication to the cause of Surrealism, was less willing than someone like Michaux to dive entirely into the unknown, being in possession of a stronger sense of self-preservation than were many of his fellow Surrealists. His pleas for an escape from rationality, while sincere, rarely led him into truly dangerous situations, either physical or mental. In his novel *Nadja*, when he is challenged by Nadja to cover his eyes while driving a car, he writes that it is ‘unnecessary to add that I did not yield to this desire’. This caution, while certainly understandable, also indicates a desire for preservation of the separate self that is somewhat at odds with both the Surrealist project of cooperative creation and the Buddhist goal of overcoming the ego.

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229 ‘Vous m’exposez beaucoup en m’invitant à choisir parmi les poètes vivants mais qu’à cela ne tienne, disons Saint-John Perse, Reverdy, Jouve, Péret, Michaux, Char, Gracq, Georges Bataille, Césaire, Schéhadé, Pieyre de Mandiargues, Malcolm de Chazal, force m’est de m’en tenir à ceux qui se sont manifestés depuis le plus long temps ou dont l’œuvre est déjà très étendue.’ Interview with Pierre de Boisdefrê. See www.atelierandrebreton.com.

As was the case with Artaud, the Orient remained for Breton largely an idealized counterpoint to the West. He frequently invoked its use as a weapon in invectives against what he saw as the ignorance and depravity of Europe:

It is a question of fighting…the odious fanaticism of Mr. Massis and some others. I am not waiting for “the East” to enrich us or renew us in anything, I am waiting for it to conquer us.

Breton’s interest in the East was influential, given his position within Surrealism and his extensive social and intellectual contacts, and certainly played a part in the prevalence of Eastern themes in several issues of La Révolution Surréaliste.

Claude Cahun, a close associate of Michaux, Breton, and Bataille, was also very interested in Eastern thought. Aliaga writes that ‘Cahun devoured texts about oriental philosophies: Buddhism, Zen, gnosis, symbolism and Schopenhauer…’

Cahun’s compatibility with a philosophy of detachment such as Buddhism can be intuited when one reads her lament that she has ‘spent 33 years of my life desiring passionately, blindly, that things be different from how they are.’ Cahun ‘cites as influences figures as diverse as Socrates, Buddha, [Leonardo] da Vinci, Kropotkin, and Havelock Ellis, and claims to have taken her method of thought from Heraclitus, Hegel, and Marx’.

Jonathan Meades, in a critical assessment of the Surrealist map of the world (in which exotic locales are emphasized at the expense of Europe) strongly challenges Surrealist claims to exoticism with an uncompromising analysis of the motives behind the creation of this map, calling it a cartographic homage to the cultures that they believed to be their sources and their inspiration, that they believed they owed a debt to. They’d merely plundered them; that’s the European way: colonization through appropriation…This map is wrong. It denies Surrealism’s Eurocentricity…Europe tried to absolve itself of slavery and colonialism by appropriating the idioms of alien cultures.

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231 Bonnet claims that Artaud knew hardly anything about the literature of the Far East: ‘Quant aux littératures de l’Extrême-Orient, Artaud n’en connaît guère que les textes traduits dans les années 1920-1921 sur lesquels il donne à diverses revues des notes critiques; il s’y intéresse, certes, mais surtout pour souhaiter des traductions plus abondantes.’ Bonnet, ‘L’Orient dans le Surréalisme,’ p. 416.

232 ‘Ce qu’il s’agit de combattre, quelque peu d’importance qu’on y attache, c’est l’odieux fanatisme de M. Massis et de quelques autres. Je n’attends pas que « l’Est » nous enrichisse ou nous renouvelle en quoi que ce soit, mais bien qu’il nous conquière.’ André Breton, in Les Appels de l’Orient, p. 251.


235 ibid., p. 142.

236 Published in Variétés, 1929.

An interesting and quite literal example of the appropriation that Meades condemns was the arrest of André Malraux in 1923 for the theft of artifacts from the Bantéay Srei temple, near Angkor Wat in Cambodia. Although convicted and sentenced to three years in a Cambodian prison, he served no time at all, largely thanks to political pressure and a petition from a group of French intellectuals. While one could hardly fault these men for coming to the aid of an associate, the contrast between their defense of his thievery and their condemnation of the West’s exploitation of the East is telling.

William Anderson writes that

the Malraux incident can be seen as the point where appropriation of heritage was refined through an intellectual framework that advocated the benefits of ‘world heritage’ and the dissemination of cultural items outside of their geographical milieu. This position was advanced by Malraux in his concept of the ‘museum without walls’, where objects could be re-appraised...when separated from their initial setting.

Malraux was expressing his ‘appreciation’ of Eastern art in a traditionally Western way, by engaging in what Bishop calls ‘the Western habit of selectively removing and adopting organized symbolic practices from traditional cultures’. This interest in, or even dependence upon, an Other is symptomatic of the duality that Eastern practices sought to overcome. The omnipresence of a dichotomized world was a torment to many Western artists who were seeking a holistic vision; it drove them into the arms of the exotic in their search for an escape into completion. For the Surrealists, and even more for Bataille, Leiris, and the group centered around the journal Documents, ‘the other (whether accessible in dreams, fetishes, or Lévy-Bruhl’s mentalité primitive) was a crucial object of modern research’. In a direct reaction to the cultural paternalism and contempt towards foreign and ‘lesser’ cultures that characterized the immediate past of their world, Surrealists and like-minded

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238 Polizzotti, Revolution of the Mind: The Life of André Breton, p. 213.
240 Bishop, Dreams of Power, p. 122.
241 Clifford, ‘On Ethnographic Surrealism,’ The Predicament of Culture, p. 120.
dissidents valorized and pursued all that was foreign and strange. They were seeking to maximize what Malinowski called ‘the coefficient of weirdness’ in their own lives.

In his influential essay ‘On Ethnographic Surrealism,’ James Clifford writes:

Unlike the exoticism of the nineteenth century, which departed from a more-or-less confident cultural order in search of a temporary frisson, a circumscribed experience of the bizarre, modern surrealism and ethnography began with a reality deeply in question. Others appeared now as serious human alternatives; modern cultural relativism became possible.

The relevant question here is not whether such Others actually were ‘primitive,’ but whether or not they were perceived as such by the artists in question. In a political or ethnographic study, the relative levels of development (or decay) of interacting cultures would of course be important, but when examining the attitudes and mental landscape of a particular group, the salient question is what was occurring within their own minds.

The idealization of Tibet by French Modernists, as epitomized by Artaud’s letter to the Dalai-Lama, was in fact nothing new; Blanchard and Deroo write that ‘the French have, since Marco Polo, had an idealized image of the East.’ As Said demonstrates in his book Orientalism, distorted views of the Orient were and are not limited to those who are actively hostile to it; these distortions extend in both directions, towards an aversion to and even hatred of what is seen as foreign and exotic, and equally in the direction of an idealization and unrealistic valorization of this same unfamiliar quality, usually at the expense of the more familiar West.

There is an argument to be made that the ‘miraculous’ events and abilities attributed to Tibet and other Asian locales were only aspects of the natural world which those who are uninitiated into its secrets do not understand. Breton stated that ‘what is wonderful about the fantastic is that there is no fantastic – there is only reality.’ Alexandra David-Néel, probably more familiar with the real Tibet than any other French person of this era, wrote that ‘the Tibetans do not believe in miracles, that is to say, in supernatural happenings. They consider the extraordinary facts which astonish

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243 op. cit., p. 120.
244 Modernists were not alone in this: ‘Les Français ont depuis Marco Polo une image idéalisée de l’Extrême-Orient.’ Blanchard and Deroo, Le Paris Asie, p. 10.
245 ‘Ce qu’il y a d’admirable dans le fantastique, c’est qu’il n’y a plus de fantastique: il n’y a que le reel.’ André Breton, Manifestes du surréalisme (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), p. 25.
us to be the work of natural energies which come into action in exceptional circumstances, or through the skill of someone who knows how to release them…"246

It is the gap between this ‘knowing’, which is borne of an intimate familiarity with and participation in a particular culture, and the exoticist longing for the unknown, characterized in the twentieth century primarily by disaffected Westerners, that is the measure of the West’s alienation, both from itself and from the cultures that it idealizes. This is nowhere clearer than in early twentieth century France, where Buddhist practice, which was originally founded, according to most traditions, as a rational undertaking espousing neither a soul, a ‘higher being’, nor a faith unconfirmed by experience, was frequently associated with such non-rational and faith-based systems as spiritualism and Theosophy.247

Stephen Batchelor addresses the occult aspects of Buddhism, as opposed to the rational aspects, in his theory that periods of Western interest in Eastern philosophy, culture, and religion have corresponded with periods of ‘irrationalism’ in the West, citing the 1870s, 1920s, and 1960s as examples.248 These historical eras, which involved Spiritualism, Surrealism, and the hippy counterculture, respectively, each utilized ‘the mysterious East’ as a resource within a societal milieu that required it, after which it was more or less disregarded until the need for it rose again, always assuming a slightly different character. While Western intellectual and artistic dissidents attempted to ally themselves with the East, their common characterization of the East as ‘irrational’ was in fact influenced by a Western conceptual tradition. Cultural training and indoctrination are ubiquitous; even a rebellion against their strictures is in a sense merely a further extension of their hegemony. This is the paradox confronted by aspirants towards a different culture than their own; their very reality is created by that which they desire to escape, and they possess no language outside of it.

ASIA AND THE SURREALISTS

Much of the knowledge that the Surrealists used in their battle against their own culture was acquired during journeys to foreign lands, particularly Mexico and the Caribbean. However, with the exception of the odyssey of Gala and Paul Eluard and

246 David-Néel, Magic and Mystery in Tibet, p. 7.
247 ‘Ce qu’on constate, c’est que, dans l’imaginaire occidental, les notions bouddhistes, d’abord rationalisées dans les circles savants, prirent, en se vulgarisant, une coloration irrationnelle’. Obadia, Bouddhisme et Occident, p. 41.
Max Ernst to Indochina (a journey that had a lasting impact on Ernst’s painting),\(^{249}\) [Plates 24-25] none of the ‘card carrying’ Surrealists ever saw Asia firsthand.\(^{250}\) Jean Jamin writes that ‘the surrealists’ interest in exoticism was played out more by thought than by action. Contrary to what many people think, they traveled very little.’\(^{251}\)

Was this lack of travel to Asia on the part of the Surrealists an intentional omission? Certainly, prior to 1950 the journey would have been far more arduous and time-consuming than it is today. However, given the numerous journeys undertaken by various Surrealists throughout Europe and to North Africa, North and South America, and the Caribbean (despite Jamin’s contention, they did make their way to numerous foreign ports), it seems that Asia would have been accessible. This fact is borne out by the journey of Ernst and the Eluards. Weinberger comments on the lack of direct experience of Asia amongst the Surrealists and its relationship to idealization: ‘ André Breton never went to Asia, but he read haiku and Suzuki, compared automatic writing to meditation, found Zen inferior to Surrealism, and thought the word Orient corresponded to the “anguish of these times, to its secret hope”.’\(^{252}\) For Breton and many other Surrealists, notably Artaud, Asia functioned as the West’s ‘secret hope’ rather than as its own self-determining culture. In the same way that women were appreciated within the role of the muse, Asia was valorized, but only as an indication of the West’s failure, or as a beacon for its hopes. The words of Edward Said are applicable to the Surrealists when he writes that the ‘unimaginable antiquity, inhuman beauty, [and] boundless distance’ of the Orient ‘could be put to use more innocently, as it were, if they were thought and written about, not directly experienced.’\(^{253}\) The omission of geographic Asia (the one on the map, as opposed to the one in the Western mind) from the Surrealist travel itinerary appears thus to have been at least partially intentional, based on a (possibly subconscious) desire to maintain the purity of a mental image, unsullied by troublesome ambiguities of real geography and complex cultures.

In the words of Michel Leiris:

…our first political position was an anticolonialist position, opposed to the Guerre du Rif. Basically, we were concerned about the situation of colonized peoples well before we were concerned about the situation of the proletariat. It seems quite likely – this is the aesthetic dimension –


\(^{250}\) Michel Leiris, who was active in the Surrealist group from 1924 until 1919, visited China and Japan, but these visits did not occur until 1955 and 1964, respectively. See Aliette Armel, Michel Leiris (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1997), p. 552-5, 608-12.


\(^{253}\) Said, Orientalism, p. 167.
that exoticism played a role. We were much more inclined to be solidary with “exotic” oppressed people than with oppressed people living here.  

Gonsalves writes that ‘for the Surrealists, the Orient was an extravagantly abstract myth that provided an oppositional stance against everything they despised in Western civilization.’ Bonnet makes the same point: ‘What exactly does the term ‘Orient’ mean for the Surrealists? [It is] that which is not Europe or her child, North America, referred to by Crevel as “the Far West”. The Orient is that which escaped from Greco-Latin civilization and its heritage, Christian civilization’. In the midst of their rebellion against the paternalism and self-referencing of the West, the Surrealists were inadvertently perpetrating the same mistake, making the East dependent upon the West by defining the East as anything that was different from what they knew.

This is the point made by Roger Caillois in his essay ‘Illusions à rebours,’ a point with which Denis Hollier took issue in his speech of June 2006. Caillouis chastised Western ethnographers for propagating a biased anti-Western viewpoint in response to what they saw as an anti-Eastern one. He advocated in place of this bias an objective viewpoint that gave advantage to neither East nor West. Hollier claims that Caillouis’s inclusion of Surrealism in his accusations is unwarranted, and that there was never such a thing as ‘surrealist ethnography’.

Hollier paraphrases Caillouis’ condemnation of Surrealist idealizations:

The anti-Western conclusions ethnologists seem entitled to draw from fieldwork are in fact falsely experimental, falsely \textit{a posteriori}, since the field trip they so proudly invoke teaches them nothing in reality; rather, it confirms their expectations and prejudices. They leave the West committed to condemning it, to demonstrating the superiority of the Other, and nothing they encounter will change their minds: ‘Rejection came prior to study; and inspired it’.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{254} Price and Jamin, ‘A Conversation with Michel Leiris,’ p. 159.
\item \textsuperscript{255} Joshua D. Gonsalves, ‘The Case of Antonin Artaud and the Possibility of Comparative (Religion) Literature,’ \textit{MLN} 119.5 (2004), p. 1036.
\item \textsuperscript{256} ‘Que désigne exactement pour les surréalistes le terme Orient? A cela on peut répondre: tout et rien, c’est-à-dire essentiellement ce qui n’est pas l’Europe ou sa fille, l’Americque du Nord, désignée par Crevel comme un Extrême-Occident. L’Orient, c’est ce qui échappe à la civilisation gréco-latine et à son héritière, la civilisation chrétienne.’ Bonnet, ‘L’Orient dans le Surréalisme: mythe et reel,’ p. 415.
\item \textsuperscript{257} Roger Caillouis, ‘Illusions à rebours,’ \textit{La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue Française} vol. 5 (1955), p. 67.
\item \textsuperscript{258} Hollier, ‘Surrealism and Its Discontents,’ \textit{Undercover Surrealism}, Hayward Gallery, 23-4 June, 2006.
\item \textsuperscript{259} ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{260} ibid; quote: ‘Le refus a précédé l’étude; et il l’a inspirée.’ Roger Caillouis, ‘Illusions à rebours,’ \textit{La Nouvelle Revue Française} vol. 5 (1955), p. 67.
\end{itemize}
Hollier attempts to distance Surrealism from Caillois’ challenge by writing that ‘if Leiris was both [a Surrealist and an ethnographer], it was not at the same time. It was only upon his return from the Dakar-Djibouti Mission, four years after having broken away from the Surrealist movement, that he became an ethnographer.’

In this interesting exchange between Jean Jamin and Michel Leiris, Hollier’s claim is partially contradicted in the case of Leiris but tacitly supported in the case of other Surrealists:

Jj: …you have said relatively little about the intellectual itinerary that led you into anthropology.
ML: In terms of my own experience, I can say quite frankly that it was surrealism…which represented for me the rebellion against the so-called rationalism of Western society and therefore an intellectual curiosity about peoples who represented more or less what Lévy-Bruhl called at the time the mentalité primitive. It’s quite simple.
Jj: ‘Did you talk much about anthropology, as such, in the company of surrealists?
ML: Hardly. No, we talked rather about the Orient in the Rimbalidan sense: Orient with a capital O, meaning all that is not part of the Occident. Artaud, and the rest of us after him, vomited up the Pope and developed a kind of cult of the Dalai Lama. It was a bit convoluted.
Jj: In the end, you were replacing one cult, that of Reason, with another.
ML: Exactly, but we didn’t realize that at the time. We stood firmly against the West. And this was evident in a fairly blatant way in the surrealist statements and manifestos. What was going on was a rebellion against Western civilization, plain and simple.

Artaud’s letters to the Pope and the Dalai Lama are extreme examples of what Caillois condemns, the first an uncompromising attack and the second a self-effacing plea that transforms the Dalai Lama into a supernatural saviour of the utterly depraved West, one who holds the power of survival in his hands. This inflation of the powers of Eastern ways of life is symptomatic of a disaffected culture that has lost faith in its own surroundings.

The exploration and direct experience that helps to alleviate abstraction and idealization, somewhat rare among the Surrealists, appear to have been somewhat more common amongst those who might be called Surrealism’s ‘fellow-travellers’. René Daumal journeyed to India to study Sanskrit, while André Malraux traveled to Cambodia in an unsuccessful bid to steal temple sculptures. Henri Michaux and Blaise Cendrars both wandered extensively in Asia, and Victor Segalen, an influential

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261 ibid.
precursor of the Surrealists who died in 1919, traveled in and wrote about China.\textsuperscript{263} Julia Kelly locates Segalen within a pantheon of travelers who were adopted by the Surrealists as wandering mentors: ‘Rimbaud, seen in the 1920s through the lens of Victor Segalen’s retracing of his journey to Djibouti, was joined by a series of other seminal writer- and artist-travelers in the avant-garde imagination…: Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, Pierre Loti, Joseph Conrad\textsuperscript{264} and Paul Gauguin.’\textsuperscript{265}

The Surrealists were the inheritors and propagators of the generalization and idealization of ‘Asia’, due both to their interest in the mysticism and transcendent possibilities of Eastern thought, and to their attempts to utilize Eastern images and philosophies to their own ends, as ‘a catalyst in the Surrealist revolt against Western civilization.’\textsuperscript{266} There is no doubt that their interest in Eastern philosophies was genuine, and that their search for some form of personal awakening was sincere. Given the politicized and polarized environment in which they lived, however, it was inevitable that this sincerity was blended with a certain level of opportunism \textit{vis-a-vis} the desired fomentation of Surrealist rebellion against the West.

Surrealist writers such as Breton and Artaud frequently invoked the ways of the East as a solution to the depravity and meaninglessness with which they felt they were surrounded. Although at times embarrassingly idealized, some of these writings were based on a certain amount of familiarity with the subject. While Breton did write of his desire ‘that the East of dreams could pass more and more into the West of daylight [and] banish the gloomy politics typical of these terminal days of our decadence,’\textsuperscript{267} he also exhibited a more genuine familiarity with Tibetan traditions, as in this passage from an essay on Max Ernst: ‘he swoops down towards the mountains of Tibet where we see him reappear as a gold-spangled god between the six arms of his \textit{shakti}. There, so travelers report, transparent men, endowed with the wings of asceticism, cover

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Louise Tythacott writes that Segalen ‘made epic journeys through China and is acknowledged as one of the principal founders of the French school of Chinese archaeology.’ Louise Tythacott, \textit{Surrealism and the Exotic} (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 232, n. 3.
\item According to the record of his borrowings from the Bibliothèque Nationale, Georges Bataille was familiar with Conrad as early as 1925, and borrowed seven of his books between that year and 1939. See ‘Emprunts de Georges Bataille à la Bibliothèque Nationale (1922-1950),’ \textit{Oeuvres Complètes} Vol. XII, p. 562, 577, 597, 604, 605, 615.
\item ‘L'Orient sert de catalyseur à la révolte surréaliste contre la civilisation occidentale.’ Bonnet, ‘L'Orient dans le Surréalisme,’ p. 417.
\item ‘Que l'Orient du rêve, du rêve de chaque nuit, passé de plus en plus dans l'Occident du jour. Il dissipera cette politique sombre des derniers temps de notre decadence.’ André Breton, in \textit{Les Appels de l'Orient}, p. 251.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
impossible distances along the precipitous footpaths.” The last reference is to what is known as a lama lung-gom-pa, an adept who is capable of traveling rapidly over long distances in a trance state, about whom Alexandra David-Néel wrote in her book Mystiques et Magiciens du Tibet. Given his encyclopedic knowledge on a vast range of subjects, and David-Néel’s prominence in French society, it is quite probable that Breton had read this book.

Breton’s interest in Tibet is further attested to by his possession of a number of Tibetan artifacts: a ceremonial headdress [Plate 26], a damaru (a drum made of conjoined human skulls) [Plate 27], and several bronze statues of fearsome Tibetan deities, including Yamantaka and a yab-yum pair [Plates 28-30]. Breton also owned at least two Tibetan tangkas [Plates 31-32]. Breton’s possession of the yab-yum statue, a common artifact in Tibet that portrays Shiva and Shakti in sexual union, is representative of his interest in the transcendent possibilities of sex.

Breton held the idea of the ‘elect union’, a relationship between a man and a woman, often meeting in an unexpected or chance encounter, resulting in a discovery of the ‘marvellous’ through a psychological and erotic fusion. This idea is very similar to Tantric ideas, which are expressed in statues of Shiva and Shakti (male and female principles) in ecstatic sexual intercourse, symbolizing the perfect balance of opposites and spiritual harmony. This was the subject of an article, accompanied by photographs, which appeared in Minotaure (No. 11, 1938) [Plate 33]. It was a familiar concept to the surrealists. This symbolism also appears in western alchemy. An illustration from the Rosarium Philosophorum (1550) entitled Mysterium Conjunctionis depicts a sexual union symbolic of the union of opposites [Plate 34].

The above-mentioned Minotaure article, by Maurice Heine, is prefaced by a description of yab-yum, the symbolically significant sexual coupling of Tibetan deities:

The position in which one finds the divinities with their Shakti is usually called Yab-Yum in Tibetan, i.e. literally Father-Mother. In the eyes of a believer, it represents only procreation, and it should be said that no Buddhist sees obscenity or even lustfulness in it. According to the sacred books, it is on the contrary the supreme emblem of the union of matter (feminine energy) with spirit (male energy), one fertilizing the other in order to create life (vital energy of a new being).
The influence of Tibetan art on Surrealism is more one of philosophy and underlying implication than of composition and form. In terms of form, the strict, geometric structures of Tibetan mandalas and yantras bear no resemblance to the evanescent forms of Dali and Tanguy, the meandering lines of Masson, or the atmospheric blobs of Miró. However, the juxtaposition of seemingly incompatible elements that is so common in Tibetan art bears a clear resemblance to the concerns of Surrealism. Lumír Jisl was speaking of the art of Tantric Buddhism, but could as easily have been speaking of Surrealism, when he wrote of ‘the great contrasts, in which two contradictions are clasped together and forced to live side by side in constant tension’. Similarly, Marylin Rhie refers to ‘two seemingly opposite states becom[ing] simultaneously coexistent…It is this coexistence of two worlds and the spirit of energized life that infuse the best of Tibetan art.’

Both of the above authors, writing from the perspective of Buddhist art, appear to be in agreement with Cardinal when he writes specifically about Surrealism:

The juxtaposition of alien entities, in a context foreign to them, is always likely to appeal to the surrealist taste for treacherous paradox and the jarring ironies of humour noir. Surrealist beauty must be understood above all as a precarious balance between opposites: stationary/dynamic, immobile/mobile, inanimate/animate, controlled/chaotic, Classical/Romantic, and so on.

The theme of the juxtaposition of opposites, so prevalent in both Tibetan and Surrealist art, is closely related to the concept of duality and more specifically to its transcendence. The bringing together of seeming opposites is intended, not to emphasise their incompatibility, but rather to expose the illusory nature of the thought process that conceives of them as incompatible. The only way to fully comprehend this is to force the mind out of its customary dualistic manner of thinking. In this sense, both Tibetan Buddhist and Surrealist art can be seen as transcendent.

Surrealism, in its advocacy of both creativity and transcendence of the self, was in a sense the servant of two masters, a different situation than Buddhism, in which any art that is created is quite explicitly in the service of spiritual advancement and not personal expression. In the words of Rabinovitch, the Surrealists ‘pursued a new

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274 Marylin Rhie, ‘Tibetan Buddhist Art: Aesthetics, Chronology, Styles,’ *Wisdom and Compassion*, p. 44.
awareness without the discipline of meditation followed by Tibetan, Ch’an, or Zen Buddhism that removes attachments to self; theirs was an artistic discipline based on the excitation of the imagination.\textsuperscript{276}

Hollier presents an interesting analysis of the Surrealists’ map of the world as an expression of a world-view dominated by an East-West dichotomy, with a curving equator that ‘is clearly in search of a direction and has no truly structuring force’.\textsuperscript{277} Gazing East with such fervour, the Surrealists often remained unaware that it was the West from which they were gazing, and the West that formed the parameters of their assumptions. As Hollier points out, there was equally a lack of awareness of the importance of a North/South dichotomy.

The objects, writings, and ideas that were introduced to modern France from abroad served as ethnological signifiers of ‘difference’, but to a certain extent all that was different was the same: the world was divided into two largely monolithic, mutually exclusive categories: ‘us’ and ‘not us’. Objects from abroad served as vehicles for what Europeans preemptively desired to see in them.

**BUDDHIST OBJECTS IN PARIS**

The growing public interest in the exotic led to an increase in institutional support. French institutions such as the Bibliothèque Nationale, the Louvre, the French Museum of Natural History, the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro, the Musée Guimet, and the Musée Cernuschi had become rich sources of exotic objects and ethnographic material long before the Surrealists began haunting the streets of Paris. As the public increased its consumption of exotic artifacts and artists increased their production of art that was influenced by exoticism, museums and galleries responded with ever-greater involvement:

In France, museums of ethnology sprang up to house the artifacts imported from the colonies, at first collected not for their formal or aesthetic qualities, but as curiosités, bizarreries...Artists such as Gauguin, van Gogh, Moreau, and Picasso visited the Trocadéro to study the art of non-Western cultures and in this way brought it to the attention of art historians and the public in the early twentieth century.\textsuperscript{278}

In addition to artists, ethnologists, many under the tutelage of Marcel Mauss and other anthropologists who set the stage in the nineteenth century, made great

\textsuperscript{276} Rabinovitch, *Surrealism and the Sacred*, p. 52.
\textsuperscript{278} Rabinovitch, *Surrealism and the Sacred*, p. 66-7.
strides not only in bringing new ethnographic knowledge to Europe but in synthesizing it with artistic and aesthetic concerns as well. Bataille’s colleagues and friends such as Michel Leiris, Pierre Klossowski, Maurice Blanchot, Paul Rivet, Georges-Henri Rivière, and Jacques Bacot were all highly influential in the Parisian world of ethnography and museology in this era.

Bacot (1877-1965) was a central figure in the introduction of Tibetan art and culture to twentieth century France. His ongoing influence is reflected in the presence of works that he brought to France from Tibet at the Guimet and the Cernuschi, in his involvement in groups such as the École pratique des hautes études and the Société asiatique, and in his influential books and articles on Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism.

While institutions such as the Trocadéro stressed an ethnographic agenda, many of the artists who were viewing and being influenced by these objects applied their own meanings to them, usually at the expense of any significance they may have formerly possessed. Louise Tythacott writes that the Surrealists ‘enveloped [non-Western objects] in a plethora of Surreal attributes. Instead of aestheticizing the primitive, they Surrealized it’. This frank adoption of the creations of another culture, with its tacit acceptance of the impossibility of actually identifying with the intentions of the original artist, while it could be seen as an affront, is also perhaps a more honest approach than some forms of anthropology that presumed to understand, or to attempt to understand. In the transformation of the meaning of the art object as it crosses borders, one can detect the presence of both Bataillean notions of non-knowing and Duchamp’s ideas regarding the application of meaning to the object by the viewer rather than the artist.

Leiris is quite adamant in his characterization of Picasso (a major influence on many Surrealists) as being uninterested in original intent: ‘Picasso never bothered with ethnography! Certainly, he had an appreciation for certain African objects, but it was a purely aesthetic appreciation. He paid absolutely no attention to any meaning these objects might have had.’ Georges Bataille and Documents could be located

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279 See D’Ardenne de Tizac, 4e Exposition des Arts de l’Asie, item #s 312, 608, 636, 660, 666, 667.
281 Tythacott, Surrealism and the Exotic, p. 60.
somewhere between the camps of aesthetics and ethnography, attempting to erase the boundaries that separated them.\footnote{Denis Hollier, ‘La Valeur d’Usage de l’Impossible,’ in Georges Bataille and Georges-Henri Rivière, Documents 1929-1930 (Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 1991), p. VIII-IX.}

As part of their enthusiastic pursuit of the exotic, many Surrealists and other artists could and did frequent the museums and galleries of Paris, as Tosi Lee speculates regarding Marcel Duchamp:

Duchamp’s contact with Asian culture could have begun as early as 1908-11. During these early years...he could have seen the collections of Buddhist art in Paris’s Musée Guimet and attended lectures there by the French Buddhologist Alfred Foucher.\footnote{Tosi Lee, ‘Fire Down Below and Watering, That’s Life,’ Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art, Jacquelynn Baas and Mary Jane Jacob, eds. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), p. 127.}

The speculative nature of this comment, while it weakens Lee’s claim, is understandable given the lack of available records. In a search of Parisian museums and archives undertaken for this study, it was determined that, with the exception of a guest book at the Musée Guimet dating from the 1880s, no definitive visitor records from this era were in the possession of any of these institutions.\footnote{This research was undertaken in January 2008 and included the Musée Guimet, Musée Quai Branly, National Archives, and other sites.}

The growing interest in the Asian collections of the museums of Paris was reflective of the city’s transition from a largely French and Catholic community into the multicultural amalgam that it is today. Richard Sonn writes that “the cultural significance of Buddhism in France at this time should be noted. Although surely a great exaggeration, contemporary sources have claimed that there were “300,000 practicing French Buddhists in the early 1890’s”.\footnote{Richard D. Sonn, Anarchism and Cultural Politics in Fin de Siécle France ( Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), p. 277. Quote from Emile Cère, “Le Bréviaire du Bouddhiste,” Les Entretiens Politiques et Littéraires 7 (10 August 1893), p. 113.}

Despite the increasing contact between East and West and the substantial Asian immigration into Paris since the mid-nineteenth century,\footnote{Blanchard and Deroo, Le Paris Asie, p. 9.} this influx of Buddhists, along with the Buddhist imagery and objects that accompanied them, was still encountering a relatively homogenous and largely Christian culture. The fact that nearly all practicing Buddhists at the time were Asian increased the perceived exoticism of Buddhist imagery.

Interest in Buddhist philosophy amongst artists stemmed from the remarkable objects that were inspired by it. Questions of ‘over-refinement’ aside, the Tibetan paintings, bronzes, sculptures, artifacts, and devotional images that were appearing in Europe, many depicting scenes and practices of a distinctly macabre nature, and some...
actually created from human bones, were the ideal vehicles to counteract the moribund nature of European culture that the Surrealists lamented. Although many Tibetan works lacked the primitivism of Oceanic and North American objects that so appealed to the Surrealists, their expression of grotesque themes and their apparent independence from the rational made them objects of intense interest.

A fine example of this genre is the thangka depicting Palden Lhamo that was donated to the Musée Guimet by Jacques Bacot.\textsuperscript{288} André Breton’s interest in Palden Lhamo is attested to by an image of this thangka in his book \textit{l’Art magique} [Plate 35]. The presence of the image, attributed in the book to the Musée Guimet, strengthens the assumption that Breton was familiar with the collections that were held there. The horrific iconography found here is typical of the genre. Riding a horse through a sea of boiling blood that is filled with corpses, Palden Lhamo, her skin dark blue, her hair in flames, adorned with a crown of skulls and a necklace of heads, brandishes a club as she chews on a corpse that hangs from her mouth. Above her, in the sky, bodhisattvas look down approvingly, in the knowledge that Palden Lhamo’s fearsome appearance belies a far more complex interior.

For varying reasons, artists and writers from both the Bretonian and the Bataillean camps would have been attracted to this kind of Buddhist iconography. In keeping with its doctrine of ‘skillful means’, Buddhism provided imagery to suit varying tastes. Emerging from a culture that had been religiously dominated by the imagery of a suffering Christ, Christian apostates could gravitate either towards the fearsome intensity of wrathful deities, or the meditative calm of Buddhas and bodhisattvas. Both of these Eastern themes offered what was seen as a healthy alternative to the guilt-ridden repression of Christianity.

One of the more impressive Buddhist works that was accessible in Paris at the time was the seven foot bronze Buddha Amitâbha, for which a special room was constructed at the Musée Cernuschi [Plate 36].\textsuperscript{289} This statue, acquired by Henri

\textsuperscript{288} ‘La déesse dPal-l丹 lha-mo, gardienne de la doctrine (dharma-pāla), sous son aspect Kāmadhātiṣṭhīवरि Pārvatī / Tibet Première moitié du XVIIe siècle / Détrempe sur toile / DON JACQUES BACOT 1912 / MG 21238’ display label, Musée Guimet.

\textsuperscript{289} ‘Le buddha Amitābha (Amida Nyorai) / Bronze, Japon, Tokyo, quartier de Meguro, Banryūji / XVIIIe s. Époque d’Edo (1605-1867) / M.C. 2078 Legs HENRI CERNUSCHI 1896 / “La grande sale de la demeure d’Henri Cernuschi a été construite pour accueillir cette statue colossale, l’une des oeuvres emblématiques du musée.”’ Exhibition label, Musée Cernuschi, Paris.
Cernuschi during his travels in Asia, has been on display at the museum since it opened in 1898, and was almost certainly seen by some of the Surrealists.

In addition to the Buddha Amitābha, Surrealist visitors to the Cernuschi could also have been exposed to many other works of art related to Buddhism, including a large collection of ancient Buddha statues and a Chinese bodhisattva figure donated by Pauline Tarn in 1909. The cumulative effect of the Cernuschi, the Guimet, and the Trocadéro was to offer a genuine aesthetic, and possibly philosophical, alternative to the disenchanted artists of the Parisian avant-garde.

Gilles Beguin singles out the Musée Cernuschi as having been particularly influential in the introduction of Asian art to Paris:

The conservator engaged in an active policy of expositions. Thus fourteen exhibitions followed one another at Avenue Vélasquez despite a six year gap due to the First World War. Most important was perhaps the exhibition devoted to Buddhist Art, which occurred in 1913 and included 695 items.

Of these items, 85 were of Tibetan origin, including masks, bronzes, paintings, and artifacts, giving the curious of Paris ample opportunity to expose themselves to ‘the rich colours and expressive lines’ of Tibetan art.

Giuseppi Leti gives an idea of the importance that Henri Cernuschi’s museum had in the awakening of France to Asian art:

After the death of Cernuschi, the museum he created continued its intensive development, thanks to its conservator, Henri d’Ardenne de Tizac, who until 1932 continued to enrich it with new acquisitions. The knowledge of Chinese art, limited until then to the Ming and Ts’ing eras, expanded considerably thanks to the missions of Chavannes, Pelliot, Henri Maspéro, and Lartigue, and the discovery of the antique style. D’Ardenne de Tizac…acquired…Buddhist sculptures, in particular the admirable Bodhisattva of Yun Kang,

290 Musée Cernuschi, ‘Musée Cernuschi, Musée des Arts de l’Asie de Paris’, visitor brochure, n.d.
296 ibid., p. xiv.
dating from the fifth century CE and given to the museum by Mr. Wannieck in memory of Cernuschi.\textsuperscript{297}

In addition to the Trocadero and the Cernuschi, the Musée Guimet was central to the increasing awareness of Asian artifacts and philosophy amongst the public of Paris. Opened in Lyons in 1879, then relocated to Paris in 1889, the Guimet is far larger than the Cernuschi, currently holding 45,000 works of Asian art.\textsuperscript{298} According to Milloué, the Guimet had, in addition to its extensive art collection, a library of 24,000 books by the year 1900.\textsuperscript{299} French awareness of Tibetan traditions was aided by the Musée Guimet’s holdings of Tibetan manuscripts and objects, an example being the engraved stones and horns bearing the characters of the ubiquitous mantra \textit{Om Mani Padme Hum} [Plate 95].\textsuperscript{300} Amongst the more significant objects for the student of Tantric art are a series of paintings and mandalas, including images of the protector deities Vaiśravana\textsuperscript{301} and the previously discussed image of Palden Lhamo.

The collections of Tibetan items at the Musée Guimet ranged from paintings and sculptures to ceremonial objects such as scarves, cymbals, robes, and masks. The latter were used in a Tibetan Buddhist ceremony that was held at the museum on June 27, 1898.\textsuperscript{302} In addition to these objects the Guimet possessed a collection of statues in bronze, wood, and copper, depicting Buddhas, bodhisattvas, deities, and \textit{yi-dam}, or fearsome protectors.\textsuperscript{303} An idea of the breadth of the Guimet collection is gained from the catalogue of the Loo collection, completed by Raymonde Linossier in 1929, in which there are 59 paintings listed, including portrayals of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, Feminine Deities, Terrifying Deities, and Saints.\textsuperscript{304}


\textsuperscript{298} Musée Guimet, ‘Parcours de collections’, visitor brochure, n.d.


\textsuperscript{300} ‘Feuilles d’un manuscrit tibétain écrit en or sur papier noir. Inscriptions, sur pierres et sur cornes, de la prière sacrée: \textit{Om mani padmé houm.}’ ibid., p. 128.

\textsuperscript{301} ‘mandala du dieu protecteur Vaiśravana / Tibet XIXe siècle / Détrempe sur toile / DON JACQUES BACOT 1912 / MG21236’ display label, Musée Guimet.

\textsuperscript{302} ‘...coussins et écharpes (khatas) ayant servi à la cérémonie lamaique célébrée au Musée Guimet le 27 Juin 1898.’ op. cit., p. 128.

\textsuperscript{303} ibid., p. 127-49.

\textsuperscript{304} Grousset et al., \textit{Études d’Orientalisme}, p. 5-96.
The presence of images of the wrathful deity Yamantaka at the Musée Guimet is documented in a museum guide as early as 1900, as well as in the pages of the Surrealist art review Minotaure over 30 years later. In the former, the sculpture is described in art historical terms:

JIGS-BYEDED YAB-YOUM TCHHOUD-PA: Yāmantaka, “vanquisher of death”, upright, crushing prostrate beings underfoot. He has 10 heads (of which one is a bull) adorned in crowns, 34 arms and 16 legs, and holds in his arms a goddess with three eyes wearing a crown of skulls. Jigs-byed is the Tibetan form of Shiva, Mahākāla or Bhairava. Copper statuette.305

In 1933, Maurice Heine, a close associate of Bataille and noted authority on the Marquis de Sade, describes Yamantaka in far more exalted style:

But also, the fury of the love of savage divinities! Under his Tibetan name, gChin-r I-gChed or the more usual Yamantaka, who would not recognize the Minotaur? Sixteen legs to crush, thirty four arms to massacre and seven heads to devour – of which the most appalling is the head of the bull...[T]he head of the bodhisattva Manjushri – as the thought dominates the act – dominates the seven heads with the triple eye, orders the thirty-four hands charged with weapons or bloody trophies and directs each group of eight feet which crush his dozen enemies with the steps of a tireless walk. So many horrors are still not enough for the holy anger of this Buddha. Thus Yamantaka, who emanates from them, avenges, as did the Minotaur, the angry gods.306

For those who may not have visited the Guimet, Heine’s article was accompanied by evocative photographs taken by the Surrealist photographer Raoul Ubac [Plates 37-38].307

The presence of images such as these in Parisian museums was no doubt compelling to the Surrealists and others who were interested in transgressive imagery. The Musée Cernuschi possessed numerous images of this kind, including two bronzes and an embroidery depicting Yamantaka, and two paintings and a copper sculpture of

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306 ‘Mais aussi, fureur de l’amour des divinités farouches! Sous son nom tibétain de gChin-r Je-gChed ou celui, plus usual, de Yamântaka, qui ne reconnaîtrait le Minotaure? Seize jambes pour écraser, trente-quatre bras pour massacrer et sept têtes pour dévorer — dont la plus effroyable est sa tête de taureau...[L]a tête du bodhisattva Mañjuṣrī — comme la pensée préside à l’acte — domine les sept chefs à l’œil triple, commande les trente quatre mains chargées d’armes ou de trophées sanglants et dirige chaque groupe de huit pieds qui écrase sa douzaine d’ennemis à tout pas d’une marche infatigable. C’est à peine si tant d’horreurs suffisent à la sainte colère du boudha désigné. Ainsi Yamântaka qui en émane, venge, comme fit Minotaure, les dieux courroucés.’ Maurice Heine, ‘Eritis Sicut Dii,’ Minotaure No. 11 (May 1938), p. 31-2; reprint (Paris: Skira, 1981). For full English translation, see Appendix B.

307 ibid., p. 30-33.
Mahakala. In her catalogue of the Loo collection at the Musée Guimet, Raymonde Linossier describes nine ‘Dieux terribles et locaux’ that were in the collection, including Yamantaka, Mahakala, and Dgra-lha.

The presence of wrathful deities within the context of devotional art has often been commented on. Other religious traditions have also employed horrifying imagery; indeed the Crucifixion, the true horror of which most Westerners have been inured to through repeated exposure, is the central and animating image of Christianity. However, the abject image of Christ crucified, intended to elicit pity, guilt, and repentance in the observer, is worlds away from the almost joyful dynamic horror that leaps from Tibetan images of wrathful deities. The most significant aspect of this art is the utilization of fright and ugliness to portray, not evil, but compassion and transcendence in its horrifying form. Protector deities appear in this manner in order to vanquish ignorance and suffering; their interiors, as is often portrayed in the multi-headed deities by the central presence of a Buddha head [Plate 39], remain placid, compassionate, and fully in control. Pratapaditya Pal writes:

It must be emphasized that although these terrifying deities of Buddhism may appear demonic, they are not “demons” in the Western sense. Nor are they personifications of evil or demonic forces. Rather, their fierce forms symbolize the violence that is a fundamental reality of the cosmos and the cosmic process in the universe in general, and of the human mind in particular.

The fact that the horrifying appearance of many Tibetan deities was frightening and disturbing to many early Western explorers (causing some of them to accuse the Tibetans of devil worship), and then, more recently, interpreted as having only peaceful motives, indicates the subjective nature of both of these interpretations. Linrothe offers a nuanced view of the appearance and purpose of these icons:

The shock of seeing figures whose only familiar referents in Judaeo-Christian-Islamic art are demons led many Westerners to assume that Buddhists in the Himalayan regions were devil worshipers…Later, a psycho-anthropological interpretation was applied to these images…Recently, the same deities have been ambitiously interpreted in a much more positive light, [described as embodying] full enlightenment adamant in confrontation with the most profound

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310 ‘Catholicism carries out its most sacred ritual, the mass, under the grotesque and shameful representation of a nearly nude and gruesomely mutilated man hanging from an execution device reserved for the lowest orders of society.’ Allan Stoekl, ‘Recognition in Madame Edwarda,’ Bataille: Writing the Sacred, Carolyn Bailey Gill, ed. (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 79.
311 Pratapaditya Pal, quoted in Lopez, Prisoners of Shangri-La, p. 141.
demons of the individual and collective unconscious...It is fascinating to track the evolution of Westerners’ reactions to the same images. There may be a grain of truth in all three of the ones represented here, along with others. Still, they probably shed more light on the interpreters than on the Himalayan cultures that stimulated them.\textsuperscript{312}

According to Bishop, one of the primary motivations underlying the frightening appearance of wrathful deities may have been to make the teachings they represented more memorable. In the same way that painful initiation ceremonies are often intended as mnemonic enhancers, the psychic violence done to the observer of horrifying phenomena strengthens memory of the event:

Essential to the recollection process was distortion, or the use of bizarre images. It was the capacity of the bizarre, or the grotesque, to reach particular depths of memory which rendered them absolutely necessary for the purpose of exploring and organizing the imaginative field. We remember and are most \textit{moved} by the extraordinary or bizarre...Not only does the wrathful image complement the peaceful in the essential ambivalence of the deity, but it also encourages and allows the exploration of imaginative regions which would otherwise be extraordinarily difficult to reach. As the Buddha recognized in his sermon on dukkha (suffering), we are drawn to the depths of insight through pathology.\textsuperscript{313}

This association of insight, memory, and pathology is a useful trope in the explanation of the human fascination with violence and the macabre; far from being merely an illness or a derangement, this fascination may serve a mnemonic purpose, and thus be related to all manner of psychic and social phenomena ranging from automutilation to survival mechanisms.

In addition to the plethora of painting, sculpture, and objects held by the museums, Europeans had the opportunity to read about Tibetan art and culture in numerous books, including \textit{The Gods of Northern Buddhism} by Alice Getty (1914), \textit{Tibetan Paintings} by George Roerich (1925), \textit{Two Lamaistic Pantheons} by Walter E. Clark (1937), \textit{Iconography of Tibetan Lamaism} by Antoinette Gordon (1939), and \textit{Tibetan Painted Scrolls} by Giuseppe Tucci (1949).\textsuperscript{314} Many museums in Paris were involved in publishing as well, producing exhibition catalogues that included Tibetan art.\textsuperscript{315}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{313} Bishop, \textit{Dreams of Power}, p. 111.
\textsuperscript{314} Lopez, \textit{Prisoners of Shangri-La}, p. 137.
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material, such as the Cernuschi’s 4e Exposition des Arts de l’Asie: Art Bouddhique (1913) and the Guimet’s Études d’Orientalisme (1932).\(^{315}\)

Amongst the crowds who passed by these exotic objects were various Surrealists, whose connection to the museums of Paris is acknowledged by Rabinovitch: ‘The surrealists were undeniably drawn to the idea of fetishism…and they were aware of its possibilities through exposure to protective amulets or power objects in the ethnological collections of the Musée du Trocadéro.’\(^{316}\)

The collections in the museums of Paris thus served as one element in the Surrealists’ ongoing process of artistic and philosophical migration from a monolithic Western culture and religion to a more cosmopolitan and hybrid viewpoint.

BUDDHISM, CATHOLICISM, AND SURREALISM

Many artists, always interested in the demi-monde and eager for alternatives to the mainstream, exhibited not only an interest in the East but also a savage aversion to Catholicism. The Surrealists, in particular, were infamous for their acidic views on organized religion. Far from attempting to hide this hatred, many Surrealists put substantial effort into flaunting it. Man Ray created a book cover that integrated an inverted crucifix with a female derriere [Plate 40], while Francis Picabia settled for a simple ink blot, which he entitled La Sainte-Vierge (The Sacred Virgin) [Plate 41].

Robert Belton writes:

Surrealist desecration cannot be a matter of dispute: Dalí, for example, drew at least one picture of a woman sexually stimulating a crucified figure (1931); elsewhere, he painted a Profanation de l’Hostie (profanation of the Host, 1929). His second collaboration with Buñuel, L’Age d’or (1930), caused riots in Paris because clerical figures were implicated in scenes of debauchery. Ernst and Masson made similarly anti-clerical works, though perhaps with less vehemence. The most blatant examples are surely the paintings of Clovis Trouille, a banal illustrator of transvestite priests and nymphomaniacal nuns.\(^{317}\)

Rabinovitch notes that ‘Surrealism reversed the psychology of its predominantly patriarchal Judaeo-Christian context by inverting the Catholicism that dominated France over the centuries. This deliberately shocking reversal of accepted tradition is strikingly apparent in Max Ernst’s 1926 painting The Virgin Mary Spanking

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\(^{316}\) Rabinovitch, Surrealism and the Sacred, p. 113.

the Infant Jesus\textsuperscript{318} [Plate 42]. This painting was denounced as blasphemous by the Catholic Church, who, in an inverted precursor of the ‘Degenerate Art’ show of the Nazis (in which Ernst also appeared), shut down the exhibition.\textsuperscript{319}

Philippe Soupault, one of the founding members of the Surrealist group, encapsulated not only the longing for the East, but also the feeling of cultural exhaustion and disillusionment with Western ways that was common at the time:

One need not be astonished that the past few years of humiliation (which have taught us the weakness and the poverty of our Western civilization) are also those where certain Westerners have leaned towards the East. Like a large sick body, Europe has tossed and turned on its bloody couch and called for help, and its weakened, demoralized spirit seeks a light.\textsuperscript{320}

Soupault’s disenchanted view of his own culture may have been negative, but his words pale next to the outburst of his fellow Surrealist Jean Koppen:

…all that is living vomits back into their rotted faces their “Jesus”, their God, their Heaven. Each time in the street you meet a servant of the Bearded Whore of Nazareth, you must insult him in a tone which leaves him in no doubt about the quality of your disgust. Moreover, if your mouth does not overflow with insults at the sight of a cassock, you are worthy to wear one.\textsuperscript{321}

Koppen’s hate-filled polemic is an extreme example of a sub-current of disaffection with Western rationalism in general and Christianity in particular, a ‘reverse-Orientalism…omnipresent in Surrealist publications’\textsuperscript{322} that was making itself felt in Europe in the early twentieth century.

The reactionary writer Henri Massis played the foil to these apostatic indulgences by insisting that Catholicism held the power to protect Europe not only from Asian invasion, but from German Orientalism and Bolshevism as well.\textsuperscript{323} The radical divergence between detractors and supporters of religion made it clear that the

\textsuperscript{318} op. cit., p. 224-5.
\textsuperscript{319} Nadia Choucha, Surrealism and the Occult, p. 84.
\textsuperscript{320} ‘Il ne faut donc pas s’étonner que les dernières années qui furent celles de l’humiliation et qui nous apprirent la faiblesse et la pauvreté de notre civilisation occidentale soient aussi celles où certains occidentaux se penchèrent vers l’Orient. Comme un grand corps malade, l’Europe s’est tournée et retournée sur sa couche sanglante et elle appelle au secours, elle réclame pour son esprit affaibli, démoralisé, une lumière.’ P. Soupault, ‘Vanité de l’Europe,’ Appels de l’Orient, p. 66.
\textsuperscript{321} ‘…tout ce qui est vivant vomit à leur face pourrie leur « Jésus », leur Dieu, leur Ciel. Chaque fois que dans la rue vous rencontrez un serviteur du Poutain à Barbe de Nazareth, vous devez l’insulter sur ce ton qui ne lui laisse aucun doute sur la qualité de votre dégoût. D’ailleurs, si votre bouche ne déborde pas d’insultes à la vue d’une soutane, vous êtes digne d’en porter une.’ Jean Koppen, ‘Comment Accommoder le Prêtre,’ La Révolution Surréaliste No. 12 (1929), p. 31.
\textsuperscript{322} Hollier, ‘Surrealism and Its Discontents,’ Undercover Surrealism, Hayward Gallery, 23-4 June, 2006.
\textsuperscript{323} Bate, Photography and Surrealism: Sexuality, Colonialism and Social Dissent, p. 131.
hybridity so reviled by writers such as Massis, far from being avoidable, was already present within Europeans themselves.

Given the oft-noted similarities between Tibetan Buddhism and Catholicism, the interest of the Surrealists in Buddhism appears problematic, but this is only the case when Buddhism is viewed as occupying the same cognitive category as Catholicism. In the case of the Surrealists, it was more a case of seeing Catholicism as the status quo and Buddhism as the alternative, rather than viewing both as ‘religions’, and thus equivalent. Their relative lack of doctrinal sophistication caused the Surrealists to create what could be called an ‘ecumenical Buddhism’ in their minds, with little concern for the vast differences between the different schools. Pierre Dhainaut writes that ‘Surrealism…in all creative spontaneity…chose certain fundamental aspects from the innumerable demonstrations of what one could call late Buddhism: Tantrism (erotic), Mahayana (logic), Zen (practice).’ By picking and choosing amongst various traditions for what was most amenable to their own purposes, the Surrealists contributed to the development of a phenomenon that was labeled ‘Buddhism’, but that was primarily created within a Western context, and used to fulfill the needs of contemporary Europeans. The main concern was to locate and utilize an exotic weapon that could be wielded against the status quo. The finer points of Eastern dogma were of little importance in this context.

Hollier claims that, despite Artaud’s valorization of the Dalai Lama, the Surrealists’ hatred of Christianity did not inspire them to replace it with Buddhism. Rabinovitch, somewhat contradicting Hollier, writes that ‘the Surrealists adopted non-European religions, especially Buddhism…as alternatives to the restrictive formalized religion and morality of the bourgeoisie.’ Hollier’s claim is the more accurate in a strictly factual sense, in that none of the Surrealists, and indeed none of the major European artists of that era, ‘adopted’ Buddhism in any formal way. Rabinovitch’s claim is not without merit, however, in that many of these artists, as has been repeatedly shown in this paper, were deeply influenced by the teachings of Buddhism, and even more by the modes and themes of thought that underlie this tradition.

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324 ‘It would…seem very strange indeed that the Surrealists would be interested in religious or quasi-religious states, for they were decidedly anticlerical.’ Belton, *The Beribboned Bomb*, p. 164.
327 Rabinovitch, *Surrealism and the Sacred*, p. 10.
primarily the ideas surrounding impermanence, selflessness, and the ultimate futility of a life limited to the visible and tangible world.

Most of the Surrealists, born in the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries, were raised in a largely Catholic milieu [Plate 43]. This fact, when combined with the active challenging of the Church in which they later engaged, makes the role of Catholicism potentially important when investigating the connections between Buddhism and Surrealism. A faith that is foreign and yet strangely familiar presents in some ways an opportunity for transgression without risk. Some aspects of Tibetan Buddhism would have appealed to the Surrealists, not for the stated reasons of their exotic difference from the European culture that they viewed as corrupt, but because of their similarity. A fascination with an exotic religion that, despite its foreignness, offered partially familiar structures, rites, and visual stimuli, perhaps offered the opportunity to indulge in a rebellion while remaining within familiar territory, albeit with a different name.

Matthews refers to Catholicism as ‘the only form of Christianity with which surrealists in France concern themselves,’ this ‘concern’ taking the form of intense distaste and radical opposition, in which they ‘continued a long French tradition of revolt against Catholicism that combined medieval mystical anarchism and revolution’ [Plate 44]. Anti-church sentiments were genuine and in many ways justified, but did not fully acknowledge the Surrealists’ own participation in and identification with a religious history. Attempting self-presentation as something foreign, the Surrealists could be disingenuous in their views of their own place in the history of Catholic France. Criticizing the Surrealists’ reworked map of the world, Meades remarks that an accurate map of Surrealism…is…a map of Catholic Europe, which is apt. Surrealism flourished in Catholic countries, where Christian mythology is sustained by a gamut of rituals which render the fantastical inseparable from the everyday…Whilst Surrealism may have been fervently anti-clerical, it knew its enemy; it purloined clerical garb and ecclesiastical practices. Surrealism was borne of the religious impulse; the desire for mysteries, but not the old threadbare mysteries. They certainly adhered to the conviction that there is more to it all than the objective world. [Surrealism] was concerned to build new mythologies.

No matter how strong the urge to escape the past may have been, this concern for mythology would have made the pageantry and mystery of both Catholicism and

329 Matthews, Surrealism, Insanity, and Poetry, p. 41.
330 Rabinovitch, Surrealism and the Sacred, p. 59.
Tibetan Buddhism nearly irresistible on an iconographic and aesthetic, if not ideological, level.

In the case of Georges Bataille, the converted and de-converted Catholic whose writings deal with themes of sin, violence, transgression, and sex, all of which are present in various forms in both Catholicism and Tibetan Buddhism, the investigation into Catholicism’s relationship to Buddhism assumes greater importance. Bataille was not only familiar with both Buddhism and Catholicism, but was quite cognizant of the similarities between the two, as is evident when he writes that Tibetan Buddhism has ‘no strict counterpart other than the papacy’.332

While Surrealist attempts at disruption of oppressive societal structures can, depending on one’s perspective, be viewed with a certain admiration, it must be remembered that they were functioning within the strictures of their time and place (strictures which are almost always invisible to those who are living within them). A subculture such as Surrealism, violently rejecting its religious past, was nevertheless produced by that past and subject to the mental, emotional, and social templates of its society. The transgression of the Surrealists was thus not as comprehensive as they might have hoped or believed. Tythacott addresses this when she writes that ‘the Surrealists could not entirely escape the culture which fostered their rebelliousness, and any idea of relating more directly and easily to exotic rather than French perceptions of the world is naïve romanticism.’333 Tythacott writes in reference to André Breton’s belief in the similarities between Surrealism and North American Indian culture, but the passage is equally applicable to the views of Artaud and others on the cultural and psychological accessibility of Tibetan Buddhism to twentieth century Europeans.

The Western dedication to the fulfillment of craving, rather than to its extinction, is one of the major fault lines where philosophies of East and West part ways.334 In this respect, Surrealism, with its dedication to the liberation and fulfillment of all desire, casts its lot very much within the tradition and belief systems of the West, despite its fascination with foreign and exotic cultures, and its professed rejection of European morals and ambitions. William Plank addresses the depth of the Western roots of Surrealism in his book Sartre and Surrealism:

333 Tythacott, Surrealism and the Exotic, p. 158.
334 I am referring here, of course, to the traditional philosophies that are identified as ‘Eastern’ and ‘Western’ rather than to the social or economic realities of contemporary Asia and Europe, both of which, it appears, are now fully committed to nurturing craving rather than detachment.
...the Surrealist, in spite of his lip service and even real concern for the idea of noncontradiction, is still an Occidental, infected beyond cure with the utilitarian attitude towards the external world – an attitude deeply ingrained in him from the platonic, Christian, Cartesian duality that set the external world apart from the self as a thing foreign, therefore threatening, therefore to be controlled, and manipulated by technology. The menacing aspect of surrealist poetry and painting is the measure of its failure to find the point of noncontradiction.  

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Nothing could be more foreign to the passion-obsessed Surrealist than the idea of observing objectively as a craving arises in the mind, and sitting disinterestedly until it passes away. This nurturing of objectivity, a central tenet of all forms of Buddhism, was largely incompatible with Surrealism, and helps to explain why the Surrealists, when they did express explicit interest in Buddhism, were nearly always referring either to the paradoxical aspects of Zen or to the overheated drama of Tibet. Breton wrote of ‘a desire to deepen the foundations of the real, to bring about an even clearer and at the same time ever more passionate consciousness of the world perceived by the senses’, as well as of his wish ‘to avoid considering a system of thought as a refuge,’ an unintentionally direct contradiction to the Buddhist tradition of ‘taking refuge’.  

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The Surrealists reveal themselves in this respect to be the inheritors of the French Romantic tradition of Rimbaud and Lautréamont, with its casting away of prudence in the name of passion and experience. In the enigmatic pluralism that is France, however, they were also influenced by the piety of the Catholic Church, the blasé dispassion of writers such as Baudelaire and Huysmans, and of course the mélange of foreign cultures that were increasingly a part of the European world.  

From an exploration of the manifestations of Eastern religion in France we turn to an explanation of the motivations and beliefs that animated Buddhism and Surrealism. The Asian creations that so fascinated the Surrealists as aesthetic expressions and bearers of exoticism were more than mere objects; they were also messengers from a culture that exhibited both striking similarities and striking differences to the world of twentieth century Paris. By studying the thoughts and beliefs of the people on both sides of this exchange: the Asians, mainly Buddhists, who created the objects, and the Europeans who studied and collected them, we gain greater

335 Plank, Sartre and Surrealism, p. 67.
337 Traditionally, when a person becomes a Buddhist, ‘refuge vows’ are taken in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, or the enlightened ones, the truth, and the community of seekers. See Donath, Buddhism for the West, p. 32-3; Conze, Buddhism: Its Essence and Development, p. 86.
insight into the nature of the objects themselves, their significance, the varying roles that they played and continue to play in varying contexts, and their significance in the philosophies and religions of the very diverse individuals who made, used, worshiped, preserved, and collected them.

CHAPTER THREE
BUDDHISM AND SURREALISM

[I am] amazed by how many problems from the history of religions and oriental studies I find in the writings, concepts, and nostalgias of André Breton. In Les Vases communicants he proclaims that the poet knows how...“to mingle action with dream…to intermingle the internal and the external…, to retain eternity in the instant…, to dissolve the general in the particular”. This is precisely what the yogins, tantrics, and many other Eastern “mystics” propose to do...The surrealists see in their movement not a new literary school but a means of gaining knowledge about “unexplored continents” (the dream, the subconscious); such an ambition can be well understood only by someone who knows oriental techniques of meditation...In a manifesto, Breton even speaks about the possibility of fusing...“two states which are contradictory only in appearance, attaining absolute reality, surreality”. I don’t know another Western text (recent) that expresses more truly the ancient nostalgia of the Indian spirit, which the yogic and tantric techniques strive to achieve.

- Mircea Eliade

When undertaking an analysis of any kind, whether it be philosophical, ethnographic, or aesthetic, one is faced with the often substantial gap between abstract dogma and its manifestation in the real world. As Sierksma has written, ‘every culture [shows] an actual pattern of behaviour which does not tally with the ideal pattern also present in the society…The question is only, how great the tension is between the two patterns.’

The answer to this question, in the case of both Buddhism and Surrealism, is that it can at times be very great indeed. The conflicts between a pure and rarified Buddhist ethic and the actual lives that its adherents live has manifested itself in many ways, including transgression of dietary and sexual restrictions, armed monks and Buddhist military forces, and a general and often necessary willingness to compromise.

339 Sierksma, Tibet’s Terrifying Deities, p. 21.
dogma in the interest of existing in the world. In addition to these compromises, there is the vast and ever-growing diversity of beliefs that exists in any tradition as ancient as Buddhism, a diversity that is always more extensive and specific than the dogmas which overlie it. In other words, doctrinal distinctions such as Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana are in the end only general categories which encompass a multitude of behaviours, traditions, and beliefs.

Surrealism is clearly less vast and diverse than Buddhism, but even in this relatively recent and delineated tradition, its title is a simplification that by necessity does not do justice to its constituent parts. Artists, writers, and groups as diverse as George Bataille, Frida Kahlo, René Daumal, and Le Grand Jeu have all been affiliated with Surrealism to one extent or another, largely through a process of historical expediency. A few individuals, such as Marcel Duchamp and Henri Michaux, ‘inhabit[ed] the realm the Surrealists merely long for,’ 340 confident enough in their journeys to be more or less indifferent to the groups that followed them. Even within the boundaries of what was, unlike many art movements, a clearly defined and essentially ‘card carrying’ organization, the pure Surrealist line of André Breton was constantly being transgressed by ‘an unruly and obstreperous assemblage of individuals radically unwilling to submit to discipline for very long’. 341

Some idea of the lack of unanimity amongst the Surrealists can be gained from an examination of the game they called ‘Scoreboard’ or ‘Scholarly Notation’, in which participants would give a score between +20 (‘unreserved approval’) and –20 (‘total abomination’) to a variety of concepts. With the exception of ‘Family’ and ‘Clergy’, which earn unanimous –20 ratings, the responses are surprisingly mixed in a group that by some accounts was so cohesive in its opinions. Even a subject as basic to the Surrealists as ‘Desire’ attracted a range of responses, including one –20 from Theodor Fraenkel (who was perhaps merely being provocative). 342 It is hardly surprising that many of these disorderly artists did not share Breton’s strict views regarding everything from sexual propriety 343 to the evils of writing novels. 344

342 Alastair Brotchie, A Book of Surrealist Games (Boston: Shambala Redstone, 1995), p. 86. The editor notes that this game took place in the early 1920s, and that the lack of unanimity may have been a sign of the impending split between Dada and Surrealism.
343 Breton’s remarkably rigid views on what was and was not acceptable are evident in the series of group interviews on sexuality that the Surrealists conducted between 1928 and 1932. Transcripts contain such curious comments as: ‘André Breton: Under no circumstances would I enter the presence of
However much abstract philosophies and belief systems may be compromised in everyday life, an examination of their philosophical underpinnings remains instructive. We can learn not only from the philosophies themselves, but also from the gaps between what they say and the varied ways in which they are applied, transgressed, struggled with, and ignored in the day-to-day world. Thus there is no implication here that all of the adherents of a particular philosophy or belief system are in keeping with all of its dictates. A more productive viewpoint is that the guiding principles of schools of thought such as Tibetan Buddhism and Surrealism were followed to some extent by different individuals at different times in history.

Edward Conze has written that the only three currents of European philosophy that can be significantly compared with Buddhism are the Greek Skeptics, the wisdom-seeking mystics, and the monists and dialecticians. If we examine these currents in relation to Surrealism (leaving aside dialectics, given Surrealism’s commitment to ‘insurrection contre la logique’), we find that elements of skepticism, wisdom-seeking, mysticism, and monism can all be found within the Surrealist agenda: skepticism fuelling its rebellion against church and state, monism informing its fascination with the idea of transcendence of duality and mundane reality, and wisdom-seeking and mysticism influencing its forays into the occult, foreign cultures, and Eastern thought. Bretonian concepts such as the juxtaposition of opposites and the point suprême can be seen as compatible with, and to some extent emerging from, these traits as well. The idea of the transcendence of duality and the reconciliation of opposites did not originate with Surrealism, of course; it is a central factor in many if not most ancient wisdom traditions, including Tantra, as Skorupski makes clear:

The Tantras assert that a mystical experience of the non-duality [of samsāra and nirvāna] leads to the realization of the supreme Buddhahood. The duality of concepts and appearances is seen as remaining at the root of all imperfections and through its elimination one achieves the highest spiritual perfection.

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349 Skorupski, ‘The Religions of Tibet,’ p. 797.
This, of course, is not to imply that the Surrealists were ‘Buddhists’ in any meaningful sense. Any observer with even a passing familiarity with Buddhism and Surrealism will note the glaring differences between the two; it is as difficult to imagine Louis Aragon or André Masson living in a monastery as it is to imagine a Buddha insulting a priest or issuing fiery manifestoes deriding his enemies. Nevertheless, at the deeper level of convergence (of nirvāṇa and samsāra in Buddhism, of dream and ‘reality’ in Surrealism), which is to say in their ultimate goals, the two disciplines share much common ground.

In previous chapters the constructed nature of the Surrealist view of Buddhism has been emphasized. Buddhism itself, in most of its forms, teaches that all views of the world are essentially constructed, insofar as an individual’s experience of the world is ultimately the experience of his or her own mind. Thus the construction of a Western image of ‘Buddhism’ by Surrealists and others is in itself a validation of one of the teachings of Buddhism, reflexively applied to the teaching itself. In this chapter, more emphasis is placed on the objective similarities between Buddhist traditions and Surrealist beliefs. A position that fails to consider the effects of culture and environment on human themes such as desire and suffering is incomplete and misleading. A purely postmodern position that valorizes slippage and relativism without recognizing those themes that appear in all human cultures is similarly lacking. The intention here is to create a cognitive space in which both the existence of eternal themes, and their modification by the varying cultures in which they appear, are acknowledged as valid interpretations of a complex intercultural exchange.

Due to its utilization rather than rejection of passion and desire, Tantric Buddhism could be seen as a precursor of Surrealist thought within an Eastern context. The attainment of enlightenment through the acceptance and skillful application of desire can be read as a more developed form of Surrealism’s liberation of all desire. Utilizing a more formalized and intellectual methodology, and built upon a far older tradition, Tibetan Buddhism recognized, as did Surrealism, the transformative power of desire and its ability to liberate the spirit, not only from the circumstances of a reduced existence, but also from the very self in which it was entombed. In addition, Tantric initiates were taught, unlike the Surrealists, that this pursuit was in a very real way ‘playing with fire’; the same desire that could potentially liberate also held the power to enslave and indeed to destroy, if it was allowed to gain control and augment craving rather than abolishing it. The dynamic interaction between the compassionate disinterestedness of Buddhism and the fervent obsessions of Surrealism, each
approaching desire from a different angle yet set upon a similar goal, functions as a
dynamic prism; each time that they are turned, their relationship diffracts in a slightly
different way.

Desire, death, and the innate human longing for a different world are central
issues for both Vajrayana Buddhism and the Surrealist project. The common thread
running through these issues is the separate self, the existence of which can be seen as a
vehicle of freedom from the mass, or as a prison that separates one from union with
creation. The urge to escape the self is an ongoing theme in the literature of both
Buddhism and Surrealism, from the Udānavarga’s ‘Those who, by always keeping
vows, become subdued and conquer self, their triumph is supreme,’ to Paul Eluard’s
‘We must efface the personality’s reflection so that inspiration may leap forever out of
the mirror.’ The theme of selflessness is echoed in other Eastern traditions such as
Daoism, as in this typically paradoxical passage from the Dao De Jing: ‘Is it not
because he is without thought of self that he is able to accomplish his private ends?’

In realms both spiritual and mundane, Buddhism and Surrealism attempt, in
their different ways, to overturn the order of things. Many of the individuals in this
study viewed the self as a prison that needed to be destroyed, or at the very least broken
open, in order for transcendent goals to be reached. In addition, they were not averse to
making waves in the outer world. Dhainaut writes that ‘neither Surrealism nor
Buddhism are closed systems: taken with their sources, they appear as protests against
the intellectual and social establishment.’ In its origins, Buddhism was a reform
movement within Hinduism, undertaken in reaction to its rigidity, lack of connection
with the needs of real people, and cruel practices such as animal sacrifice. Nasr writes that, although Buddhism shares with Hinduism a respect for the value of
knowledge, it ‘belongs to a very different perspective than Hinduism and, in fact, began
as a rebellion against many Brahmanical doctrines and practices.’ This could be
seen as an early parallel of the dynamic between Christianity and Buddhism explored in

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350 Gareth Sparham, The Tibetan Dhammapada: Sayings of the Buddha: A translation of the
353 ‘Envisagés d’un point de vue general, ni le surréalisme ni le bouddhisme ne sont des systèmes
clos : pris à leurs sources, ils apparaissent comme autant de protestations contre ce qui est
intellectuellement, socialement établi.’ Dhainaut, ‘L’éclair noir, la lumière blanche’, p. 3.
354 Suda, Religions in India, p. 146-50.
Chapter One, with Hinduism as Catholicism, Buddhism playing the part of Protestantism, Sanskrit replacing Latin, and Shakyamuni Buddha as Martin Luther.356

In the twentieth century, Surrealism enacted its chaotic protest against what it saw as the blind nationalism, oppressive Christianity, and poetry-starved mundanity of modern Europe. Today, with the word ‘surreal’ commonly used as a harmless adjective, it is easy to forget that the movement began ‘in order to lay waste to the ideas of family, country, religion.’357 Clearly the Surrealists were not shy about their position, and one can easily detect both their combative approach and their search for ultimate solutions in writings such as this: ‘The world is a criss-cross of conflicts which…and exceed the limits of a simple political or social debate. Our time is singularly lacking in seers. But anyone with any clarity at all must be tempted to calculate the human consequences of a state of affairs that is COMPLETELY BEWILDERING.’358

The contexts and content of the two movements were clearly different, but in their respective relationships to their surrounding societies one can find many parallels. In the words of William Plank, ‘the Surrealist description of unification as the ideal in the Second manifeste is in essence the same ideal as that of several Oriental religions and philosophies’.359 Nirvāṇa, the ultimate goal of a Buddhist monk, is characterized by limitless peace and a relationship to the world that is entirely free of striving and discord, while the Surrealist glories in confrontation, scandal, and infamy. Buddhism counsels detachment from desire, while Surrealism devotes all of its energy to pursuing it. Yet, beyond the seeking, the common goal of both is an existence that is free from the torment of unsatisfied desire.

WHAT IS DESIRE?

Tibetan Buddhism teaches that desire, like all emotions and mental states, exists solely within the individual mind. An enlightened being, one who has fully realized the

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356 This equation of Buddhism with Protestantism was present in mid-nineteenth century analyses. See Beinorius, ‘Buddhism in the Early European Imagination,’ p. 16.
357 ‘…pour ruiner les idées de famille, de patrie, de religion.’ Breton, Manifestes de Surréalisme, p. 82.
358 ‘Le monde est un entre-croisement de conflits qui, aux yeux de tout homme un peu averti, dépassent le cadre d’un simple débat politique ou social. Notre époque manque singulièrement de voyants. Mais il est impossible à qui n’est pas dépourvu de toute perspicacité de n’être pas tenté de supputer les conséquences humaines d’un état de choses ABSOLUMENT BOULEVERSANT’. The implications of the last word are lost in the English translation. ‘Bouleversant’ translates as ‘bewildering’ or ‘upsetting’, while ‘bouleversement’ can be translated as ‘upheaval’ or ‘overthrow’. Thus the author is simultaneously expressing an unacceptable state of affairs and hinting at its solution. Anonymous, ‘La Révolution d’abord et toujours!’, La Révolution Surréaliste No. 5 (1925), p. 31.
359 Plank, Sartre and Surrealism, p. 35.
illusory nature of the individual, is no longer subject to desire because, upon dissolution into the greater whole, the individual ceases to exist in any meaningful sense and thus becomes incapable of desiring something which is withheld. The belief that all of reality is but a projection of one’s mind is strongly expressed in the Bardo Thödol, commonly known in the West as The Tibetan Book of the Dead. This book, designed to be read to the dying in order to assist them in their journey to the next life, had a wide influence in certain circles of early twentieth century Europeans.

Satisfaction can be seen as the opposite, the resolution, or the absence of desire. Like the sacred and the profane, satisfaction and desire are incapable of coexistence. Surrealism and non-Tantric Buddhism both strive for the state of satisfaction in which dissatisfaction is banished, the first through the liberation of desire and the second through its ascetic denial. Tantric philosophy also seeks a resolution to the issue of desire, through its skillful use and fulfillment. These three fields of thought share the view that the resolution of desire is a major step in the direction of a greater perfection.

The word ‘desire’ is the most common English translation of the Tibetan dod chags or the Sanskrit rāga. Given the broad implications of ‘desire’ in English, the term ‘craving’ might be a more appropriate translation of these words. The main problem with the term ‘desire’ in the context of Buddhist meditation is the paradoxical situation of ‘desiring not to desire’. Dhainaut addresses this paradox when he states that forms and words are needed in order to access that which is formless and nameless. In the same way, even in Theravadin Buddhism and other disciplines that, unlike Tantra or Surrealism, do not recognize any value in desire, the strength and motivation that are energized by desire are necessary in order to escape desire.

The goal of this path is to remove desire, but only the type of desire that unbalances the mind. This is why the term ‘craving’ is more accurate, because it refers specifically to a state of mind that is full of clinging or aversion, unbalanced and not peaceful. One can desire and still be at peace, given that the desire is observed

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360 As with many of the more arcane points of Buddhist belief, the question of whether an individual actually ‘ceases to exist’ upon reaching enlightenment is a complicated one, the many perspectives of which are beyond the scope of this paper. ‘… in refuting the inherently existent we are not driving it out of existence, because it has never existed; rather we are simply gaining conviction that something that appears to exist does not exist at all’. Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, Clear Light of Bliss (London: Tharpa Publications, 1992), p. 178.


363 ‘Or ce sont précisément ces formes et ces mots qui nous restent, ce sont eux dont nous nous servons pour gagner cela qui est informe et innomé.’ Dhainaut, ‘L’éclair noir, la lumière blanche,’ p. 3.
objectively and does not upset the balance of the mind, and that the motivation arises from a balanced appraisal of a need. This is a very different situation than a mind which is running after something in desperation, and it is critical to remember that spiritual progress can as easily be the object of this kind of craving as alcohol, sex, fame, or any of the other foci of craving with which our world is filled. The type of desire that is being addressed here, and that the Buddha spoke of when referring to that which meditation was designed to eradicate, is the loss of detachment, the loss of mental balance, the desperation that comes with placing too much emphasis on the separate self and its needs. This is the desire, the Buddha would say, that keeps us chained to this world, the desire that, like a curtain of ephemeral distractions, hangs between us and the larger reality of unconditioned things, in which the false nature of the self and its cravings is revealed.

Whether they be possessions, people, situations, thoughts, or fantasies, objects of desire are all, according to Buddhist teaching, created by the mind. We are drawn into the illusion that the attractiveness of these things is inherent in the things themselves, when in fact it is a quality of the mind of the observer [Plate 45].

In Buddhism, desire is located within the individual, and the exterior stimuli of that desire are seen as largely irrelevant. While Hegel distinguished between, for example, the human and the non-human, the desire for dominance and the desire for recognition, the Buddha taught that desire is an internal process for which anything external is not only contingent but illusory as well. According to Buddhism, desire is the internal reaction of an illusory self to stimuli interpreted as positive and negative, and the line between self and Other is a further illusion maintained by the presence of craving and aversion.

Fosco Maraini, an Italian writer and explorer who traveled widely in Tibet and other parts of Asia, wrote that ‘the western world is a world of explanation, while the eastern world is that of implication.’ Nowhere is this more true than in the history of Western attempts to explore the concept of desire.

Western philosophical speculations on the subject of desire tend to be more abstract and convoluted than Buddhist techniques, and to focus on explanation rather than experience. Many European thinkers, including Sade, Hegel, Nietzsche, Freud, Kojève, and Sartre, considered the concept of desire at length, but unlike the Buddha were not approaching the matter from a strictly therapeutic point of view, and thus did

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not share the Buddha’s reticence in the face of lengthy and complex arguments, nor his preference for practical solutions. The Surrealists and Bataille were heirs to this complex analysis of desire, and rather than jettison it in favour of meditation, made their own contributions to this ever growing field of philosophical literature.

The modern tradition of European thought on the subject of desire can be said to have begun with G.W.F. Hegel (1770-1831). Hegel, himself indebted to earlier thinkers ranging from the ancient Greeks to Spinoza, Fichte, and Kant, presented his thoughts regarding desire and the self in his book *Einleitung zur Phänomenologie des Geistes* (*The Phenomenology of Mind*). First published in 1807, this book played an important role in efforts to understand the nature of desire amongst the modernists of France over 100 years later.

It is of course impossible to adequately explore the breadth of Hegel’s thinking within the present study. Variously referred to as ‘difficult to understand,’ ‘obscure,’ and ‘absolutely impenetrable,’ Hegel’s writing has tested the patience of generations of students and philosophers with its convoluted syntax and obscure intellectual progressions. The importance of his work is attested to by the fact that, despite this notoriety, he remains one of the most influential philosophers in the Western canon. Here we will engage only with the aspects of Hegel’s work that applied directly to the positions of Bataille and the Surrealists on the subject of desire, and these aspects were mediated primarily through the work of Alexandre Kojève (1902-1968).

Prior to 1930, according to Alexandre Koyré, ‘Hegel studies in France were practically nonexistent.’ Over the next several decades, however, Hegel’s ideas experienced a significant revival, due in part to the changing political and philosophical climate of Europe, and also to the series of lectures given by Kojève at the École des Hautes Études from 1933 to 1939. These lectures were collected and edited by Raymond Queneau and published in the book *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, of

367 This statement sounds less extravagant next to Merleau-Ponty’s claim that ‘all the great philosophical ideas of the past century…had their beginning in Hegel.’ Quoted in Butler, *Subjects of Desire*, p. 61.
368 ibid., p. ix.
372 ibid., p. 61-2.
which Bataille wrote, ‘no one today can claim to be educated without having assimilated its contents.’

Kojève, originally from Russia, was a philosopher, economist, and student of Koyré who had an enormous influence not only on Bataille but on French interpretations of Hegel throughout the twentieth century. His lectures, attended by such luminaries of French culture as Raymond Aron, André Breton, Gaston Fessard, Jacques Lacan, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Eric Weil, as well as Bataille, helped to revive a widespread interest in Hegelian concepts such as desire, the master-slave dialectic, and the need for recognition.

As can be seen by the calibre of attendees at his lectures, Kojève was by no means the only intellectual to be interested in Hegel at the time. His interpretation, however, was original and relevant enough to put him at the forefront of Hegel studies. Kojève used Hegel’s master-slave dialectic as a tool for interpreting human history on a wide scale, and defined the desire for recognition as basic to the human enterprise. This desire expresses itself initially as a struggle between two individuals, each desiring acknowledgement without offering acknowledgement in return. Eventually, one of the individuals involved in the struggle, the one who is less willing to risk death, concedes, and thereafter becomes the slave. In time, however, the slave, due to the fact that he is free to work, and that his master is dependent on his recognition, ends up prevailing in the struggle. There are echoes of both Buddhism and Christianity in this aspect of Hegel’s thought, the former in the inherent paradox of the ‘mastery of the slave’, and the latter in the idea of the weak and downtrodden achieving mastery in the end. Hegel’s ‘autonomous Self-Consciousness’ is compatible not only with the Buddhist idea of the primacy of interiority, but also with Bataille’s ‘sovereign individual’. Kojève’s role in moving Hegelian thought towards a more interior reality is addressed by Allan Bloom, who writes that ‘what distinguishes Kojève’s treatment of Hegel is the recognition that for Hegel the primary concern is not

374 ‘…anyone who wishes to understand the sense of that mixture of Marxism and Existentialism which characterizes contemporary radicalism must turn to Kojève.’ Allan Bloom, Editor’s Introduction to Introduction to the Reading of Hegel by Alexandre Kojève (New York: Basic Books, 1969), p. viii.
376 ‘…the Slave transforms himself…and thus creates the new objective conditions that permit him to take up once more the liberating Fight for recognition that he refused in the beginning for fear of death.’ Kojève, Introduction to the Reading of Hegel, p. 29.
the knowledge of anything outside himself – be it of nature or history – but knowledge of himself.\textsuperscript{377}

Even with Kojève’s internalized perspective, Hegelian thought remains more socially based than Buddhist introspection. While Buddhist thought focuses almost exclusively on the internal phenomenon of desire, the Hegelian tradition stresses the individual’s interaction with the social structures and functions that result from desire. Butler writes that ‘in Kojève’s view, desire only becomes truly human, fully transformative, when it takes on a non-natural object, namely, another human consciousness.’\textsuperscript{378} Stated more generally, the Hegelian view locates desire in the interaction between self and other. It could be said that the borderline that delineates the Self from the Universe is itself desire, in that it is this borderline that defines the self (since the separate self cannot exist without this delineation). Butler writes that ‘the subject is created through the experience of desire and is, in this sense, a non-natural self…the subject is essentially defined through what it desires.’\textsuperscript{379} When Kojève writes that ‘the (conscious) Desire of a being is what constitutes that being as I,’\textsuperscript{380} he is also identifying the delineating line between self and Other as Desire itself.

The Buddhist project is ‘selfless’, in the sense that its aim is to dissolve the desiring self into the surrounding universe and thus to eradicate both the self and its desire. Within Hegelian metaphysics, ‘desire…is the incessant human effort to overcome external differences, a project to become a self-sufficient subject for whom all things apparently different finally merge as immanent features of the subject itself’.\textsuperscript{381} Superficially, there appears to be a dichotomy here between Buddhism’s surrender of the self to the world in the first instance, and the drawing of the world into the self of Hegelianism in the second. If either of these projects is successful, however, this dichotomy vanishes, along with the self, the world, and desire, in the triumph of unity over duality.

It is from within the tradition of European scholarship that the Surrealists began their investigations into the nature of desire, and from this vantage point that they discovered and were influenced by the very different yet parallel approach to desire of Eastern thought, including Buddhism.

\textsuperscript{377} Bloom, Editor’s Introduction to \textit{Introduction to the Reading of Hegel}, p. ix.
\textsuperscript{378} Butler, \textit{Subjects of Desire}, p. 68.
\textsuperscript{379} ibid., p. 67.
\textsuperscript{380} Alexandre Kojève, \textit{Introduction to the Reading of Hegel}, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{381} op. cit., p. 6.
Both Surrealism and Buddhism agree that desire is a motivating force, and that living a life of unsatisfied desire is, so to speak, undesirable. However, their prescriptions for avoiding this life could not be more different: Surrealism advocates a massive increase in the pursuit of desire, a tearing away of the restrictions and limitations that prevent one from devoting everything to the liberation and satisfaction of desire. Buddhism believes that this path is futile, that this will only lead to more and stronger desires, which will continue to be unsatisfied. The only ultimate solution in Buddhism is to learn to walk away from the desires themselves, to eradicate them at the root. Tantric Buddhism is the element that prevents this relationship from being a simple dichotomy, as it effectively introduces the seed of Surrealism into the realm of Buddhism. By advocating the utilization of desire rather than the ascetic path, yet doing so within the context of a Buddhist tradition, Tantra introduces the foreign praxis of liberated Surrealist desire into the realm of tradition and asceticism. Pursuing the same ultimate goals as more traditional forms of Buddhism, Tantra utilizes techniques that would have been recognized by any of the Surrealists: transgression, liberation of the individual from oppression, the juxtaposition of incongruous forms, and the violation of social and psychological norms.

This does not mean, of course, that Tantra and Surrealism should be seen as synonymous, or even as particularly compatible. While Surrealism rejected nearly all of its own cultural history, Tantric philosophy quite strongly emphasized the importance of the continuity of tradition, and the inappropriateness of individual innovation within rituals and practices that had been subtly developed over a period of centuries. The central importance of initiation and of the guru in Tantra\(^{382}\) is in direct opposition to the essential anarchism of Surrealism, which was far more individually motivated (despite its claims to collective action) than Tantra, and frequently more interested in ways to épatez les bourgeois than in serious pursuit of spiritual purity. True Tantric initiates, while certainly disturbing to the Indian or Tibetan equivalent of les bourgeois, were also subject to very strict rules concerning their behaviour, and part of an ancient tradition of self-discipline aimed at very specific goals.

We are left with four essential methodologies for confronting the dilemma of desire. One can attempt to walk away from it and free oneself through detachment (non-Tantric Buddhism); one can accept, liberate, and utilize desire in an attempt to overcome it (Tantric Buddhism) or to fulfill it (Surrealism), or, in an ontological ‘sleight of mind’ that opens the possibility of infinite regression, one can accept not

only desire but also the knowledge that it will never be fulfilled, and learn to indulge in the futility of indulgence (Bataille).

What these approaches all have in common is their recognition of the power existent in longing and dissatisfaction, and their commitment to harnessing, or at the very least to trying to understand, what Annie Le Brun called ‘the inexhaustible aura of non-completion inherent in desire.’ They recognized, both intellectually and instinctively, the power of desire, both its power to destroy, and its power to liberate when liberated itself.

**BUDDHISM: LIBERATION FROM DESIRE**

In keeping with his interest in the alleviation of suffering rather than the development of complex philosophies, the Buddha provided a very simple definition of what desire was, and tended to avoid complex debates, ‘high philosophy’, and religious overtones. This emphasis on practicality was maintained with the development of Tantra: ‘Tantra’s exclusive concern with practical techniques of self-enlightenment over theory and speculation has given sādhanā (spiritual discipline) a unique place of importance in the whole system.’ Conze, remaining true to the Buddha’s original intention, writes that ‘Buddhism…is essentially a doctrine of salvation, and…all its philosophical statements are subordinate to its soteriological purpose.’

The role of desire is the primary characteristic that distinguishes the Tantric school within the Buddhist tradition. All other forms of Buddhism, most notably Theravada, valorize the practice of asceticism and warn against the dangers of succumbing to desire. These schools are the heirs to the philosophy of the Dhammapada, which advises:

Pleasurable sensations arise in living beings.  
The feelings are heightened by craving,  
And these beings cling to these sensations.  
Not letting go,  
They are compelled to experience suffering  
Over and over again.

Tantra utilizes desire while The Dhammapada and Theravada Buddhism avoid it, but no school of Buddhism advocates indulgence. The utilization of desire by

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Tantric Buddhism is a divergent methodology which nevertheless pursues the same goal as other forms of Buddhism: total liberation from the suffering that arises from craving, and ultimately nirvāṇa and transcendence of the world of conditioned things.

Tantrism was introduced to Tibet by Padmasambhava (known in Tibetan as Guru Rinpoche, Lopon Rinpoche, or Pema Jungme) sometime between 750 and 800 CE, during the reign of the king Trisong Detsen. Following a period of power struggles and political confusion, the doctrine of Tantra was further established in Tibet, and integrated within the traditional code of monastic ethics, the Vinaya, by Atiśa (982-1054), a teacher from India. Skorupski writes that ‘it is under Atiśa’s inspiration that there developed the general pattern of Tibetan Buddhism that was practiced within the monastic context.’

The lineage of the Dalai Lamas, the aspect of Tibet which is perhaps most familiar to Westerners, was not established until the sixteenth century, beginning with Sonam Gyatso (1543-88). Sonam Gyatso was the third successor of Tsongkapa. He visited Mongolia in 1578 and conducted a series of teachings, gaining the sympathy of Altan Khan and receiving from him the title of Dalai Lama (Ocean of Wisdom). This title was applied retrospectively to his two predecessors and a reincarnation lineage was established.

The philosophy of Buddhism, while originally predicated on the relatively simple truths of impermanence, egolessness, and suffering, has over the centuries expanded and diversified into a vast array of traditions, beliefs, rites, superstitions, and cultural expressions. In the interest of clarity and necessity, the discussion presented here will limit itself to two central ideas: the Doctrine of Dependent Origination and the Four Noble Truths. These concepts are fundamental to the Buddhist world view, and are shared with minor variations by all forms of Buddhism; they will here be discussed primarily in the forms they take within Vajrayana Buddhism.

Ten-ching drelwar jungwa, also called tendrel (rten 'brel), is the Tibetan term for the Doctrine of Dependent Origination. Like so many of the concepts in Eastern thought, it is quite elemental at the surface level, and also very difficult to fully comprehend. Simply, it refers to the Buddha’s realization that all things have their causes, and all things are the cause of something else. This simplistic sounding concept

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388 ibid., p. 784-5.
389 ibid., p. 793.
390 In its unanglicized and more difficult version, this term is rendered rtén.cing, brel.bar, byung.ba. It is more commonly known in the West by its Sanskrit term, pratītya samutpada.
has tremendous implications, and is at the basis of philosophies of karma and reincarnation. Buddhist codes of ethics and behaviour are also based on this concept, and teach that, for example, cruelty and suffering are not random occurrences, but rather the result of impure thoughts.

The primary significance of this doctrine in relation to Surrealism is that it is in complete disagreement with the idea of chance. Like the sacred and the profane, and desire and satisfaction, the two form a mutually exclusive dichotomy: where one exists, the other cannot. By its nature, the doctrine of dependent origination is all-encompassing; everything in the universe is predetermined and the direct result of something that has come before. Either because of its incompatibility with chance and the randomness of dreams, or because they were simply unaware of it, the Surrealists did not focus on this aspect of Buddhism, and at times they explicitly renounced its underlying premise: ‘It is characteristic of all European science and philosophy that it remains rooted in the great human lie of “causality”.’

Chance is the driving force in a universe without cause and effect, a universe which could be termed synchronistic at best, or perhaps simply random and entirely without sense. The Surrealists believed that chance could be the royal road away from the self, in that a world without cause and effect was a world in which individuals exercised no influence, and were merely carried on the tides of time like driftwood. Dream, like chance, sidelines the individual will and appears to progress of its own volition, free from the need for intellectual decision. The Surrealists wielded Poetry and Revolution as primitive weapons against a mundane world, the products of desire against the necessity of reason.

Within this valorization of chance, causality can still be seen implicitly within many Surrealist concerns. In Freud’s theories, for example, the idea that adult neuroses are caused by childhood traumas can be seen as a simplified form of the Doctrine of Dependent Origination. The same could be said of dialectical materialism and other Marxist theories, although they position the direction of influence in the opposite direction, from social structures to psychology. In short, any theory that recognizes causation, which is to say any theory other than one based on chance or randomness, can be seen as compatible to some extent with the Doctrine of Dependent Origination.

The question of whether this doctrine is ‘true’ is perhaps not as relevant as the question of what role it played within the society that created it. By developing this

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doctrine as a religious, social, and psychological reference point, traditional Tibetan society created a framework within which issues of desire and social control could be addressed in a meaningful way. The idea that all phenomena are the result of previous actions, and the cause of future actions, functioned in Tibet in a similar manner to Christian beliefs about heaven and hell in the West. People are less likely to behave in socially destructive ways when they believe that they will be affected negatively by their actions, and thus the Doctrine of Dependent Origination, at the same time that it presented a form of cosmological significance and unity, functioned as a method of social control and cohesion. Thus desire, which, if left unchecked and unmediated, can be the cause of great disruption in society as well as in the individual, was channeled into a framework of Buddhist belief, where it was, ideally, transformed into a force to propel the believer towards enlightenment, rather than left as a misunderstood, disruptive, and potentially dangerous urge.

In addition to playing a central role in the Doctrine of Dependent Origination, desire is the core concept animating the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism. These truths were realized by the Buddha upon his enlightenment and became the centre of all of his teachings. Like the Doctrine of Dependent Origination, they can appear elementary to the point of being simplistic, but are in fact an extreme distillation of an all encompassing philosophy. The Four Noble Truths can be summarized as follows:

1. To live is to suffer.
2. Suffering is caused by desire.
3. In order to eliminate suffering, one must eliminate desire.
4. This can be accomplished through the Eightfold Path.

The eightfold path is a summation of means of living that will help an individual to lead a life free of karmic debt. The eight elements of this path are Right Thought, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration. Proper adherence to these precepts eventually purifies the mind of desire, allowing one to escape suffering and the wheel of rebirth.392

Few aspects of Buddhism have caused more misunderstanding in the West than the first noble truth. Its apparent negativity and defeatism, particularly in the face of the triumphalist Victorians who were the first Westerners to study Buddhism in depth, reinforced the view of many that Buddhism was a philosophy of nihilism and

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pessimism. This condemnatory view of a contemplative tradition is unsurprising in a culture that viewed actions and solutions as exterior and socially based, and could not reconcile itself to a religion or philosophy that appeared to close itself off from the world. In fact, as Tibetan Buddhists were quick to point out, the validity of this view depends on what one defines as ‘the world’. Within a tradition that viewed the mind as absolutely basic to all reality, both the view of existence as suffering and the tradition of meditation and non-action were not only acceptable but fundamental to a confrontation with ultimate truth. If Buddhism presented the idea of life as suffering without offering any solution or escape, accusations of pessimism would be justified. However, this is not the case; Buddhism, as mentioned above, is nothing other than a map of an escape route from suffering, with all stages clearly marked. Given the enormity of the goal, the incredible difficulty of the journey seems of little consequence to a true believer.

Buddhism presents a description of desire that is as comprehensive as its explanation of suffering and how to escape it. It is very clear in Buddhist philosophy that desire is synonymous with the gap between what one seeks and what actually exists. It is the rejection of one’s mind, one’s surroundings, and one’s reality in favour of an invented alternative that does not exist. These fantastical inventions are the products only of separate minds, thus Hegel was in perfect agreement with Buddhism when he wrote that ‘self-consciousness is Desire.’

Tantric and non-Tantric Buddhism are at odds with the ultimate goal of Surrealism, which views desire not as an opponent or as a dangerous ally, but as the raison d’être of their entire movement. For the Surrealists, desire stood at the end of the journey, rather than as an obstacle along the path.

**SURREALISM: LIBERATION OF DESIRE**

Desire is the fuel of the art and literature of Surrealism. It is omnipresent, in the background or in the foreground of every aspect of the movement. And yet strangely, in all of this, one rarely comes across an actual definition of what desire is. Clearly, in the minds of the Surrealists, it is related to romantic love, to revolution, to poetry, to freedom, and to a certain form of exalted suffering. Yet writers such as Breton, Eluard, and Desnos seemed to live and write within the realm of desire without seeking to

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393 ‘…les œuvres de Hegel et de Schopenhauer ont contribué à associer le bouddhisme aux philosophies nihiliste et pessimiste.’ Obadia, *Bouddhisme et Occident*, p. 43.

elucidate its boundaries or attempting to define it from an intellectual standpoint. This lack of intellectual definition, although troublesome for historians, is actually quite in keeping with the stated Surrealist intention of living poetically rather than intellectually. In the words of Jean-Louis Bédouin, ‘the experience of poetic reality, which is none other than that of the marvellous, is communicable, but cannot be rationalized. For it to be received, the spirit must meet certain essential conditions, which fortunately escape from the statistical surveys and defy the psychological tests’. There are clear parallels between this supralinguistic analysis of poetry and the linguistically inexpressible nature of much Eastern mysticism.

Spiritual teachers such as the Buddha seek escape from the self in order to eliminate suffering, while schizophrenics such as Antonin Artaud are involuntarily torn away from themselves by an overpowering mental disability. In contrast, André Breton desired to overcome the self in the interest of immediate group access to the marvelous. He realized that Surrealism would not prosper unless its interests were put before those of each individual, though ironically he repeatedly weakened the Surrealist movement by banishing those who would not conform to his views of acceptable behaviour.

Breton focused on the transformative and transcendent aspects of the marvelous, rather than on the nihilistic concept of death, for similar reasons. In the presence of death, it is very difficult to convince oneself or others of the driving importance of a social movement. Referencing the work of Hal Foster, Johanna Malt writes that ‘the lurking presence of the death drive in every surrealist intimation of the uncanny must be disavowed by Breton in order to sustain the basis from which he chooses to justify the movement’s political involvement.’

Breton’s ‘central project...was to try and make poetic revelation a force to change human existence,’ indicating a world-view based on transcendence, rather than acceptance, of current conditions. Referring to suicide, Breton wrote that to him it seemed ‘legitimate in only one instance. If I have nothing left but my desire with which to challenge the world, and if death is the greatest challenge, then I might well reach the position of directing my desire towards death.’ This comment says much about Breton’s attitude towards both desire and death. He views desire as a tool to be

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used for something else, in this case to express his opposition to the world, thus setting himself apart from Bataille’s linking of desire with dépense and non-productive expenditure. He also views death as a weapon with which to oppose the world, an interesting viewpoint and one that may coincide with a view of the destruction of the self as a victory.

Because Surrealism declines to interrupt its escape from the constricting bonds of reason in order to provide a simple, intellectually based definition of desire, historians who seek to understand the dynamics of what was occurring in this movement face a choice between diversifying a purely cerebral point of view and missing the point altogether. The approaches of Buddhism and Surrealism to desire are complicated and multifaceted, but they are more or less unanimous in their lack of enthusiasm for purely intellectual solutions to any of life’s problems.

For the Surrealists, desire is a pure and liberatory force with no negatives save its repression. Far from being a stumbling block, it is seen as a stepping-stone from the mundane world to a poetic paradise of infinite freedom and possibility.

IMPERMANENCE AND THE INFORME

The Buddhist concept of impermanence bears marked similarities to Georges Bataille’s concept of the informe. While the two ideas are not synonymous, they both engage with issues of time and inevitable decay, and thus, indirectly, with death and desire as well.

The concept of impermanence is central to all schools of Buddhism. The Tibetan mi rtag pa, the Pali anicca, and the Sanskrit anitya all refer to the idea that nothing is lasting, that everything inevitably passes away. Given that humans are subject to this law along with everything else, impermanence is central to our experience of the world in that it is the force underlying our own deaths. Awareness of this fact was not confined to Buddhism or to the East, as any survey of Western philosophy will attest.399

In the Critical Dictionary, Bataille defined (or perhaps ‘un-defined’) the term informe as ‘not merely an adjective with such and such a meaning but a term for lowering status with its implied requirement that everything have a form. Whatever it

(formless) designates lacks entitlement in every sense and is crushed on the spot, like a spider or an earthworm. Bataille reiterates this conception of formlessness, an ongoing theme in his work, in *Inner Experience*: ‘Life is never situated at a particular point: it passes rapidly from one point to another (or from multiple points to other points), like a current or like a sort of streaming of electricity. Thus, there where you would like to grasp your timeless substance, you encounter only a slipping, only the poorly coordinated play of your perishable elements.’

In the first instance, Bataille situates the absence of certainty within space, while in the second it is based in time. The formless in space refers to an absence of defined form (which he represents, idiosyncratically, with images of spit, a worm, and a crushed spider). When conceptualized in time it is closer to the Buddhist idea of impermanence, which focuses more on the idea of constant change than on a complete absence of form.

The lack of form, certainty, and permanence underlies the power of desire, as desire underlies existence itself. Desire’s relationship to death and to our helplessness in the face of passing time is dramatized by Schopenhauer: ‘we begin in the madness of carnal desire and the transport of voluptuousness, we end in the dissolution of all our parts and the musty stench of corpses.’ Butler writes that desire is ‘the tacit knowledge of anticipation. The anticipation of fulfillment gives rise to the concrete experience of futurity. Desire thus reveals the essential temporality of human beings.’

Impermanence is the engine of desire, and impermanence is synonymous with time. If we accept the Buddhist claim that our existence is created by our desire, which is what keeps us within the world of *samsāra*, we begin to see that desire, time, and impermanence form a mutually dependent triumvirate, and indeed can be seen to be different aspects of a single, monolithic formation within which we live. The Buddha, having recognized and accepted his own powerlessness in the face of time and of impermanence, found the key to escape from *samsāra* in overcoming desire, the only one of the three elements of this triumvirate over which we have some control.

Using the above definitions, one can see the parallels between Bataille’s *informe* and many streams of Eastern thought, including both Buddhism and Daoism.

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401 Bataille, *Inner Experience*, p. 94. Here we see the beginnings of the idea of ‘slippage’, one of the main ideas to be transmitted from Bataille to younger French intellectuals such as Jacques Derrida. See Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).
Eastern mystical conceptions that advocate ‘flowing like water’, avoidance of planning, and non-resistance are speaking of a similar, though not identical, underlying concept as was Bataille, without the overtones of perversion and ruin which were an element of Bataille’s idea of the ‘formless’. To have a ‘form’ is to have a preconception about the future and thus to be less than fully receptive to the present moment and to a total personal surrender to the exigencies of chance. Thus the existence of form can in a sense be seen as an aspect of the separation from the universe which Bataille addressed.

The idea of constant change, while possibly more central to and formalized by Buddhism than any other tradition, is very common in the historical literature of both East and West. Henri Bergson, a predecessor of Bataille’s who was very influential in the French philosophical community, wrote that ‘form is only an instant taken from a transition,’ indicating his awareness of this universal theme. Along with sex and death, change is a theme that requires no historical precedent, as its presence is endemic to the human experience, and is constantly being rediscovered and re-elaborated through personal experience. Change is, ironically, a permanent condition, one that maintains an ongoing interaction with historical tradition, including, as it were, previous change.

A distinction should be made between the role of form in constant change and in the informe. The first implies a constantly changing form, while the second implies a complete absence of form, an idea that can lead to very different, and more nihilistic, conclusions. While constant change implies an ever-shifting kaleidoscope that is dependent on temporality, formlessness implies an absence of change and, in a sense, an absence of time itself. As was discussed above, the self is dependent on desire, which is dependent on time. Thus formlessness, in its eradication of time, may ultimately achieve a similar goal to traditional techniques of Buddhism: the eventual eradication of the self.

Bataille displays his understanding of the nature of desire, and his agreement with Buddhism (whether intentional or coincidental) when he writes that ‘nothing is more desirable than what will soon disappear’. Nowhere is this more true than in the case of the physical body, particularly one’s own, the disappearance of which is more or less synonymous with death and personal extinction. Rabinovitch reflects on the complex connections between the informe, the body, desire, and death:

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Georges Bataille’s notion of the informe – the unformed – connects the subconscious source of creativity with images of the body in continual transformation. Surrealist photography especially illustrates a visual range in depictions of the body from regeneration to decay, from emergent fetal forms to dismemberment. Eroticism in surrealist art splits between imaginative vitality and total consumption by the unconscious. The potential of the “unformed” allows these images to oscillate ambivalently on the threshold between life and death.

This ‘oscillation’ betrays the presence of the constant change that animates the universe, the difference between its antipodes maintained only by the myth of duality in the mind of the observer. The paradox that Bataille loved is the signifier of the transcendence of this duality, the point at which birth and death are simultaneously present and absent, the point at which duality is both mandatory and extinguished.

**RELIGIOUS AND OCCULT ELEMENTS IN SURREALISM**

André Breton’s interest in the occult is not only implied by his famous call for ‘the true and absolute occultation of surrealism,’ but by the presence in his library of books such as *Anthologie de l’Occultisme*, *La Table Ronde: Aspects de l’Occultisme*, *L’Occultisme a Paris* by Pierre Geyraud, and *Fables et Symboles* by Eliphas Lévi. Lévi in particular would have appealed to Breton, if Choucha’s description of an eerily similar mentality is to be believed:

Lévi was not a practicing magician but a theorist, and his importance lay in amassing much obscure occult material and interpreting it in a straightforward, materialist way, often using scientific analogy to explain occult phenomena...There is a moralistic tone to much of Lévi’s writing, although it is an unconventional one...Lévi was an acquaintance of the poet Charles Baudelaire, and also an influence.

The presence of the horrifying and the ugly is certainly more of a Bataillean than a Bretonian theme. Given this proviso, the coincidence of themes between Bataille, Surrealism, Tantra, and the occult, regarding both the identity of opposites and the value of transgression, is evident. Kenneth Grant, writing about the occult in his book on Aleister Crowley, could as easily be referring to Tantra when he writes that ‘the magical ecstasy liberated by union with grotesque or hideous images usually

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408 See www.atelierandrebreton.com.
associated with aversion, revulsion, or horror, is super abundant compared with that released by the union of (usually accepted) opposites.\(^{410}\)

Choucha acknowledges this connection between Tantra and the occult, going farther to suggest an erotic element to nearly all spiritual disciplines:

Crowley’s system of Magick included the use of the power of sexuality and love as a means for the aspiring magus to gain willpower and occult knowledge. He had based much of his rituals on information gained from the German Ordo Templi Orientis, which in turn was based upon Hindu Tantra. Francis King points out in *Tantra for Westerners* that there are Tantric undercurrents in most of the world’s religions and occult systems (particularly alchemy in the west)…It aims to transform consciousness through hedonism, using the senses to transcend the senses.\(^{411}\)

The final sentence is a fairly accurate description of Bataille’s philosophic project as well, with the proviso that ‘hedonism’ be understood within the context of a rending of the individual and an all-encompassing quest for the sacred, as opposed to straightforward indulgence.

In their different ways, both Bataille and Breton are discussing themes that are similar to the Buddhist idea of the identity of *samsāra* and *nirvāna*. The concept of dualism is at the centre of all of these philosophies; from dualism comes the individual, separation, and alienation. Transcendence of dualism leads to a reconnection with the divine. This reconnection, whether accessed through prayer, meditation, ritual, devotion, or self-denial, is a central theme of all religions.

According to Rabinovitch, Surrealism is ‘an exalted moment within mundane experience…exist[ing] on the threshold between art and religion.’\(^{412}\) Such a characterization highlights the role of Surrealism as a bridge between worlds, in this case between the plastic expression of personal feeling and the devotional movement towards loss of self. Surrealism incorporates both of these within its *raison d’être*, utilizing the plastic and literary productions of individual minds for what could only be called an ultimately religious purpose: the transcendence of the separate self in the search for an all-encompassing ‘surreality’. While certainly more Modernist than Buddhist, Surrealism’s striving towards a reconnected reality was ultimately a manifestation of the same drive that animated Buddhism: the drive to escape the self.

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\(^{411}\) op. cit., p. 82.

\(^{412}\) Rabinovitch, *Surrealism and the Sacred*, p. 6.
PART TWO

WESTERN BODIES IN CRISIS
Communication, for Bataille is first and foremost a bodily affair. Hence the interrogation of the limits of the subject starts from an interrogation of what we could call the “gates,” or openings of the body: the mouth, the vagina, the anus and the eyes are for Bataille central places for philosophical investigation because at these gates, the integrity of the subject is questioned; its limits can be transgressed.\footnote{Lawtoo, ‘Bataille and the Suspension of Being,’ p. 5.}

Man has always preferred meat to the earth of bones.

- Artaud\footnote{Antonin Artaud, \textit{Watchfiends and Rack Screams} (Boston: Exact Change, 1995), p. 292.}

\section*{CHAPTER FOUR}
THE METAMORPHOSIS OF THE BODY: ANDRÉ MASSON AND ANTONIN ARTAUD

Why not write \textsc{Metamorphosis} in huge letters, as it is the central word of my life and of my art?

- André Masson\footnote{‘Comment ne pas écrire MÉTAMORPHOSE avec les grandes lettres alors qu’il est le mot-maître de ma vie et de mon art?’ André Masson, \textit{Mémoire du Monde} (Paris: Skira, 1974), p. 8.}

If there is one hellish, truly accursed thing in our time, it is our artistic dallying with forms, instead of being like victims burnt at the stake, signaling through the flames.

- Antonin Artaud\footnote{Antonin Artaud, \textit{Watchfiends and Rack Screams} (Boston: Exact Change, 1995), p. 292.}
The body and its metamorphosis are frequent themes in the work of André Masson and Antonin Artaud. Utilized as a vehicle for the expression of subjects such as suffering, transgression, imprisonment and escape, the physical body is portrayed as vulnerable, powerful, and significant, both in the sense of having importance, and in the sense of representing, or signifying, deeper existential themes.

Masson, Bataille, and Artaud were all concerned with issues of desire and individual separation, and attempted in their art and writing to cope with these issues. One of the methods used was the metaphorical disassembly of the human body with the intention of using this destruction to determine the component reality of the individual. They were attempting in some way to access spirit through a destruction of the flesh, to transcend the limitations of individual life through the transgression of collective barriers. This preoccupation with death and dismemberment was not mere nihilism, although nihilism was often present in various forms. What can be seen beneath the surface of this sometimes frenzied destruction of the human body is a return to archaic ritual, a revivified use of ancient metaphorical systems of the body, recalibrated in order to utilize the body as a symbol for the alienated individual. One can find similar types of body-transgressive activities in many cultures throughout human history. In medieval Europe, religious penitents would wear hair shirts and flog themselves, their aversion to bodily indulgence inspired by Biblical verses that denied the worldly life: ‘For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live’. In Native American communities men would perform the Sun Dance, in which they pierced their chests with wooden stakes [Plate 46]. In Africa, many tribes would indicate status, membership, and passage through various life stages by leaving permanent marks on the body [Plates 47-48]. The ancient Aztecs (whose bloody rituals were an endless source of fascination for Bataille) tore out human hearts in frenzies of transgression that may have approached the limits of the possible [Plate 49]. In some Buddhist traditions, monks burn their flesh with...
incense in attempts to transcend the prison of the body. Diluted echoes of these ceremonies can still be seen (although their practitioners are more frequently motivated by fashion than by spiritual austerities) in the vogue for body piercing and tattooing [Plate 50].

The art and writing that was driven by awareness of the physical and symbolic presence of the body could be both celebratory and at times disturbingly nihilistic. In the work of many visual artists associated with Surrealism, including Masson, Hans Bellmer, Claude Cahun, and Victor Brauner, in the writing of Georges Bataille, and in both the art and writing of Antonin Artaud, this centrality not only of the body but of its vulnerability to manipulation, pain, and destruction is unavoidable.

Masson and Artaud were both involved with the loose affiliation of artists known as the Rue Blomet Group, so named because they tended to gather at Masson’s studio at 45 rue Blomet in Paris. This group also included Joan Miró, Michel Leiris, Georges Bataille, Georges Limbour, and others who were affiliated with Breton and the Surrealist group to varying degrees. As evidenced by their central role in the schisms and factionalism that occurred within Surrealism in 1929, this group was very far from being controlled by Breton’s preferences. Masson and Artaud, both of whom were excommunicated by Breton at least once, shared many similarities in their beliefs about the importance of metamorphosis, the vulnerability of the body, and the obligation of the individual to seek his own truth, no matter what the cost. Both men possessed knowledge of and interest in various forms of Buddhism, and were influenced by the teachings of the East. In this chapter, the art and personalities of Masson and Artaud will be explored within the context of this influence.

BUDDHIST INFLUENCES

In Chapters One and Two, we saw that the monolithic image of ‘Buddhism’ that was common amongst twentieth century modernists did not adequately reflect the immense diversity of beliefs that are encompassed by this rather broad term. The complexity of Buddhist eclecticism should be reiterated here in the context of its influence on Masson and Artaud.

According to the Dalai Lama, ‘impermanence, the misery of cyclic existence, the harm of afflictive emotions, and the training and improvement of the mind with ethics, stabilization and intelligence are teachings common to all schools of

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422 Surya, Georges Bataille, p. 74.
Nevertheless, one must distinguish between the traits of the various schools in order to make clear what one is addressing. Schools as diverse as Theravada, Zen, and Vajrayana Buddhism, emerging from Southeast Asia, Japan, and Tibet respectively, inevitably exhibit the doctrinal, philosophic, and cultural variations that are endemic to their cultures. Yet at the same time all share, in a general sense, a value system based on compassion, transcendence of the ego, and the possibility of liberation from the world of conditioned things.

In Buddhism the escape from the self is facilitated by detachment from sensory input and a consistent awareness of the self’s illusory nature. Different schools of Buddhism take varying stances on the question of the existence of the self, with some maintaining that the self does not exist and is a complete illusion, while others believe that there is some reality to the self that is extinguished upon attainment of nirvāna.

Geoffrey Samuel places this eclecticism of opinion on the question of the self within a historical context:

For non-Buddhist Indians in the period when Buddhism was an active part of Indian religious life (roughly to the thirteenth century A.D.), Buddhism was preeminently the doctrine that denied the self, though in practice…more positive phraseologies have also been of significance in Buddhist thought. The Buddhists themselves, while explicitly rejecting the idea of a permanent and eternal self, saw their position as a Middle Way between the ‘eternalist’ doctrines of Hindu theism, and the ‘nihilist’ doctrines of Indian materialists, such as the Cārvākas.

Whatever their views on the ultimate existence of the self, it can be claimed with relative certainty that all schools of Buddhism recognize the propensity of the mind to believe in, cling to, and excessively protect it, and that this clinging is one of the primary sources of the suffering that Buddhism sees as inherent in existence.

Beyond the recognition of craving as a root of suffering, and a concern for issues of compassion and impermanence, any claims regarding the beliefs or practices of ‘Buddhism’ must be tempered with an acknowledgement of its diversity and the fact that there are exceptions that can be made to every claim.

These seemingly arcane musings on the subject of the self bear a direct relevance to the creations of Masson and Artaud. Both artists maintained an interest in themes of death, the body, and the limitations of selfhood, and expressed these themes frequently in their art and writing.

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The prioritizing of simple existence in the present moment over future and past makes the intellectually and spiritually peripatetic existences of artists such as Masson, Artaud, or Bataille far more likely, in that it de-emphasizes, and even opposes, loyalty or faith to a preconceived doctrine. The result is a perpetual apostasy, a constant shedding of doctrinal skins as the spirit, eternally in the moment, evolves towards its own extinction.

**ICONOGRAPHIES OF BODILY DESTRUCTION**

A fascination with violence was no doubt a factor in the friendship and artistic collaboration between Masson and Georges Bataille. In terms of the similarity of their approaches to transgression, violence, and the sacred, it could in a sense be said that Masson was Georges Bataille in pictures. Dawn Ades writes that ‘Bataille’s presentation of the whole universe moved by desire and constantly coupling finds a visual parallel in Masson’s landscapes…Masson and Bataille were to collaborate intimately for nearly ten years, from *L’Histoire de l’Oeil* to *Acéphale*. The results of this close collaboration can be seen in Bataille’s books that were illustrated by Masson [Plate 51], and in Masson’s drawing that became the emblem for *Acéphale* [Plate 52].

Both men had an abiding fascination with the effect of violence on the human body. Masson’s experience with violence was certainly less abstract than was Bataille’s; he was seriously wounded in the chest and left for dead on a battlefield of the Great War, an experience that he recounts in his book *La Mémoire du Monde*. The physical body is the indispensable palimpsest on which human experiences of both pain and desire are inscribed. As such, it is at the center of concerns as varied as Buddhism, eroticism, masochism and sadism. Any profound desire to escape either physical pleasure or physical suffering is inevitably concerned with fundamental questions of existence in the world. The body, for all its complications and failings, is a necessary vehicle for consciousness as we know it. Butler writes that

the body is not merely the precondition for desire, but its essential medium as well; inasmuch as desire seeks to be beyond nature, it seeks to be beyond life as well.

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425 see Surya, Georges Bataille, p. 232.
In the erotic and sensual focus of Masson and Bataille, as in Tantra, one finds the alternative to the asceticism that would seek to be ‘beyond life’; in contrast, they all seek to be deeply ‘within life’, and to exist within the hidden place of connection between pain and desire.

The Tantric goddess Chinnamasta [Plate 53], who is portrayed as beheaded, holding her head in her hand, and drinking the blood that spurts from her own neck, is a good example of the type of utterly gruesome and transgressive art that appealed to many modernists, but whose interpretation in the twentieth century didn’t necessarily bear any resemblance to the original meaning borne within Indian or Tibetan culture. While the original significance of a deity such as Chinnamasta was as a representation of the distribution of life energy into the universe, modernists such as Masson, Artaud, and Bataille were more interested in the direct effect on the viewer of extreme physical transgression.

Elkins notes the importance of approaching such representations in an objective manner, allowing the viewer to see the underlying intentions of the artists more clearly:

> A large percentage of all images of the body remain unexplored because they seem too strong – too bloody, disturbing, violent, or painful – but those same images can also be compelling for reasons that remain hidden as long as their unfamiliarity continues to call forth what are unhelpfully called “visceral” reactions.

Purely in terms of the portrayal of one’s own suffering, few works were more ‘visceral’ than the self-portraits of Antonin Artaud [Plates 54-55]. Drawn while he was incarcerated in a series of mental institutions, these works express the vulnerability of the body through a direct assault on the paper that carries the images and through this on the senses of the viewer. Through multiple erasures, illegible scrawls, and tears and burns in the paper itself, Artaud transfers his suffering to the medium of its communication and attempts thereby to exorcize his condition, perhaps to shift its burden onto the viewer, a fitting occupation for the creator of the Theatre of Cruelty. Artaud was fully aware of the resonance of his art with various archaic concerns such as bodily mutilation and non-verbal communication. Kimmelman notes Artaud’s familiarity with various pre-modern sources that informed him about these themes:

> Like [the Surrealists, Artaud] was fascinated with non-Western and primitive cultures. It's one of the paradoxes of modernism that it often rejects what's modern in favor of what's archaic, and in this respect,

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among others, Artaud was a modernist. He steeped himself in the Hindu Upanishads and the Tibetan Book of the Dead.431

Artaud was keenly aware of the presence of death, and found that it, and perhaps even more importantly his foreknowledge of it, rendered all the painful illusions of life in a stark and unforgiving light. The presence of death provides, in the blunt words of William Burroughs, ‘that frozen moment when everyone sees what’s on the end of every fork’.432 Death is the barrier to a quotidian eternity; it blockades business as usual and ends the charade. In the face of the enormity and inevitability of death, humans generally react in one of three ways. The most common reaction is in fact an absence of reaction, a continuation of existence steeped in denial and a self-enforced belief that one’s life will continue forever, sheltering the ego from injury until death cuts in.433

In Georges Bataille’s typically uncompromising words,

the self-that-dies, if it has not arrived at the stage of ‘moral sovereignty’, in the very arms of death maintains with things a sort of harmony in ruins (in which idiocy and blindness coexist). It challenges the world no doubt, but weakly; it evades its own challenge, hides from itself what it was right to the end.434

Centuries of Buddhist voices were joined by many Surrealists in asking what purpose there is to this compulsive protection of an illusory ego, a tiny speck that is flung from the womb into the grave for no apparent reason. Better, they thought, to respond in a way that takes account of reality, and this response can occur in one of two ways. One of them, the ascetic path, was taken by many forms of non-Tantric Buddhism and, to some extent, by Artaud; the other, the Tantric path (again, in varying forms) by the Surrealists and by Georges Bataille.

Ascetic denial, the path advocated by non-Tantric Buddhism, is a rational response to an existence that will certainly end in death. Uncompromising rejection of a world of sensuality, a great leap for the golden ring that will spring one from the prison of samsāra, can be seen as a heroic undertaking. By not succumbing to the illusions of the quotidian world, the Buddhist learns to view desire as a trap, and trains the mind to react with equanimity to all stimuli. Far from being thrown here and there by the whims of fate, such a person becomes ever stronger as the mind develops,
eventually achieving total liberation from the hold of the world.\textsuperscript{435} This response is
grounded in a realistic awareness of the nature of the physical body and its abject
limitations. The body, commonly referred to in Buddhist literature as a ‘bag of fluids’,
‘a skeleton wrapped in skin’, and similar uncomplimentary phrases,\textsuperscript{436} is a delicate and
passing phenomenon.\textsuperscript{437} It would be impossible to describe Artaud as possessing a
placid mind, but he did express a view of the body that was compatible with this form
of Buddhism, and an equally strong urge to overcome its limitations.

In contrast to asceticism, the Tantric path utilizes the body as a means of
liberation, while remaining aware of its ultimately grotesque reality, an awareness that
is magnified by practices such as meditation in charnel grounds. The rejection of
asceticism that was practiced by Bataille and by most Surrealists was more compatible
with this form of Buddhism than the rejection of sensuality advocated by Artaud in his
later years. The paths of indulgence and asceticism can both be seen as reactions to the
power of desire. At the same time that desire entices, it inevitably enslaves, causing an
element of fear and helplessness that is always the corollary in a desiring reaction. This
underlying fear is the minor chord within a symphony of craving, and helps to explain
the motivation for the violence and aggression that are frequent companions to desire.

The Surrealists never developed as clear an awareness of the body’s diverse
connections with the mental and the spiritual as did Buddhism, seemingly too
preoccupied with their own desires, particularly in the case of the image of the feminine
body. Beneath their worship of bodily form, this violence and aggression fueled a
disturbing compulsion to deform and destroy the body. ‘Such photographers as
Boiffard, Bellmer, and Raoul Ubac [Plates 56-58] subjected the body to a series of
violent visual assaults reminiscent of \textit{Story of the Eye}, producing images “of bodies
dizzily yielding to the force of gravity; of bodies in the grip of a distorting perspective;
of bodies decapitated by the projection of shadow; of bodies eaten away by either heat
or light”\textsuperscript{,438} These artists were joined by others such as Pablo Picasso, Pierre Molinier,
Víctor Brauner, André Masson, and André Kertész [Plates 59-63] in the creation of

\textsuperscript{435} In Tibetan Buddhism, this process involves the desire to become a Bodhisattva through
\textsuperscript{436} ‘Look at the body adorned / A mass of wounds, a heap of bones / Impermanent, unstable / Though
most of us fail to recognize this. / The body wears out / A nest of disease, / Fragile, disintegrating, / Ending in
\textsuperscript{437} ‘The notion that the body is a bag of filth is as much at home with the ascetics of India as it is
with the Gnostics of the Mediterranean’. Georg Feuerstein, \textit{Tantra, the Path of Ecstasy}, p. 225.
189; quote: Rosalind Krauss, ‘Corpus Delicti,’ \textit{October} Vol. 33 (Summer 1985), p. 44.
entire oeuvres devoted to macabre distortions and reconstructions of the (usually female) human form.\footnote{For an equivalent dynamic within Buddhism, see Liz Wilson, Charming Cadavers (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).}

As is made abundantly obvious by the countless depictions of animal-headed deities, multi-limbed gods, and such impossibilities as animated skeletons in prehistoric, Egyptian, Hindu and Buddhist art [Plates 64-67], the modification of the human body in art is not merely a twentieth century phenomenon. For reasons ranging from exaltation to mockery, artists have taken advantage of their freedom and power of representation to subject the body to countless variations that would be impossible in the real world. Within the field of Surrealist iconography, recent art history has identified the more lyrical and idealized forms of body consciousness with André Breton, and the darker, more obsessive and sadistic form with Bataille and his circle. While this construction is somewhat simplified,\footnote{For example, as we saw in Chapter Two, Breton was interested enough in the more macabre aspects of Tibetan culture that he collected such things as a skull drum and statues of wrathful deities.} it does offer a useful template for study.

James Elkins writes that ‘pictured bodies are expressive in two largely opposite modes: some act principally on the beholder’s body, forcing thoughts about sensation, pain, and ultimately death; and others act more on the beholder’s mind, conjuring thoughts of painless projection, transformation, and ultimately metamorphosis.’\footnote{Elkins, Pictures of the Body, p. x.} This passage, while not written about Surrealism or Buddhism, well elucidates both the split between Bretonian idealism and Bataillean materialism within the Surrealist milieu, and the dichotomy of non-Tantric and Tantric Buddhism as well. Masson, Bataille and Tantra could be characterized as ‘downward’, focusing on concepts and imagery that are generally rejected as offensive, while Breton and non-Tantric Buddhism could be seen as ‘upward’, pursuing a more traditional union with the sacred through methods that valorize the transcendent. From a mundane point of view the two are opposites, yet within the realm of the sacred they merge and become complimentary, if not synonymous, their differences eradicated in the heat of their opposition to the world of duality. Artaud’s work can be seen to veer between these two extremes: his obsession with physical decay and excrement showing his sympathy with Bataillean themes, while his insistent urge to escape the body and the world and access something ‘higher’ resonates strongly with Breton and ascetic philosophy.

The appeal of a practice, such as Tantra, that utilizes the body as well as the mind, lies in the material reality of the body itself, in its inability to be other than what
it is. Whether experiencing intense pain, orgasm, or exaltation, the body is a purveyor of truth and, unlike the mind, does not mediate this truth with secondary thought processes of how it might be other than what it is. Rather than suppressing the body in favour of ‘pure’ spirit, anti-idealism would submit the mind to the unassailable fact of physical reality, thus abolishing duality through a process of the triumph of body over mind, rather than mind over body.

An aggressively utilitarian, objective, and anti-romantic view of the body is shared by many schools of Buddhism, as is clearly shown in this passage from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, a seminal text of Theravada Buddhism containing instructions on meditation given to bhikkus (monks) by the Buddha:

>a bhikku reflects on this very body encased by skin and full of impurities from the soles of the feet up and from the hair of the head down, thinking thus: “There are in this body hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, sinews, bones, marrow, kidney, heart, liver, pleura, spleen, lungs, intestines, mesentery, stomach and contents, faeces, bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, fat, tears, grease, saliva, nasal mucus, synovial fluid, and urine...” This awareness develops to the extent that there is mere observation and mere understanding; and he dwells detached and does not cling to anything in the world of mind and matter.\(^{442}\)

This objective categorization of the body is designed to separate it from what, for want of a better word, might be called the ‘spirit’, meaning whatever it is that survives when the body dies. Although some forms of Buddhism, particularly those that have remained more closely aligned with Hinduism, have evolved into an actively ‘anti-body’ philosophy, most forms encourage objectivity rather than hostility. An objective view of the body, held by a consciousness that is not clinging to the body that holds it, recognizes the ephemeral nature of the body and accepts it absolutely.

Ken Hollings, commenting on the interpretation of the body in Bataille’s writing, adopts a remarkably similar view to that of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta:

>putrefaction, in revealing the body to be unstable and base matter, deprives us of our sense of cohesive and inviolate identity. The artifice of propriety is torn apart: our flesh becomes dirt, and we actively embrace its foulness. In this excess the body’s limit is transgressed, and it is exposed as a liquefied flux of blood, urine, tears, sperm, sweat, and excrement.\(^{443}\)


\(^{443}\) Ken Hollings, ‘In the Slaughterhouse of Love,’ My Mother / Madame Edwarda / The Dead Man (London: Boyars, 1995), p. 204-5.
Conze adds that monks are encouraged to meditate on the emissions of the ‘nine apertures’,\textsuperscript{444} and to visit cemeteries to consider rotting corpses. His claim that these thoughts are ‘sure to have some disintegrating effect on any sexual passions there may be’ is not difficult to accept.\textsuperscript{445}

Just as there are sanitized strains of Surrealism that tend to excise the more troublesome and disturbing elements involving madness, necrophilia, and the like, so there are shallower forms of popular Buddhism that focus only on kindness and peace. In the words of James Hillman:

In the East the spirit is rooted in the thick yellow loam of richly pathologised imagery – demons, monsters, grotesque goddesses, tortures and obscenities...But once uprooted and imported to the West it arrives debrided of its imaginal ground, dirt-free and smelling of sandalwood!\textsuperscript{446}

The grimmer parts of the \textit{Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta}, focused as they are on the grotesque and ephemeral nature of the body, tend not to be emphasised in the sanitized imagery that Hillman critiques. The challenge of the \textit{Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta} to conventional thinking is stark and difficult, its honesty direct and disarming. Its message is unpleasant, particularly to contemporary Westerners who as a rule have been cushioned by technology and shielded from the reality of death for their entire lives. Our bodies, to which we are more attached than we are generally capable of imagining, will not last. If we seek an honest and holistic understanding of our situation, we must recognize the element of helpless incredulity in the laugh of the Buddhist monk. This doesn’t make the laugh any less genuine, or the end any less inevitable.

In terms of acceptance and mental placidity, the goals of Surrealism, described by Bataille as ‘a rage against life as it is,’\textsuperscript{447} could not be more divorced from Buddhism’s attempts at peacable detachment. The two disciplines do share a belief in the importance of a connection between mind and body, and a wariness about the dominance of discursive thought, as Hollier points out: ‘the more the body becomes the complex tool of expression and signification, the less expressive it is on its own.’\textsuperscript{448}

Lomas reinforces this viewpoint in commenting on Bataille’s experiential emphasis: ‘the terms of Bataille’s analysis are never philosophical abstractions but are anchored

\textsuperscript{444} A Buddhist term referring to the two eyes, two ears, two nostrils, mouth, genitals, and anus. Alternatively, it refers to the eye, ear, nostril, mouth, genitals, anus, navel, top of head, and crown of head. See Robert Beer, \textit{Handbook of Tibetan Buddhist Symbols} (Chicago: Serindia Pub., 2003), p. 240.
\textsuperscript{445} Conze, \textit{Buddhism: Its Essence and Development}, p. 98.
\textsuperscript{447} quoted in Michael Richardson, introduction to \textit{The Absence of Myth}, p. 24.
in the body and its desires’. In short, one of the driving forces behind both Buddhism and Surrealism can be said to be a recognition of the importance of non-intellectual, instinctual forces: their great potential for liberation when they are recognized and utilized, and their role in suffering when they are repressed and allowed to fester within an unexamined self. In the words of William Plank, ‘Surrealism, alchemy, and Oriental philosophies of unification involve a destruction or a reduction of the action of the ego or the consciousness conceived as the analytic intellect, and the affirmation of the validity of the darker, intuitive side of man.’

In Bataille’s journal Documents, ‘areas of the human body – a traditionally sacred realm – were ripped apart and analysed in terms of their horrible baseness’ [Plate 68]. While some of this ‘baseness’ was no doubt a reaction to Surrealism’s ‘idealism’ that so annoyed Bataille, there were also more profound attitudes towards the body being expressed. One way of asserting mastery over the inevitable disappearance of a thing is to destroy that thing oneself, before it can deteriorate. The savage and sadistic approach to the body that is so evident in Bataille’s writing could be an expression of this urge to mastery. Favazza notes this phenomenon in a clinical setting: ‘Feeling helpless and victimized by his untreatable medical condition, he mutilated himself in an attempt to establish control over part of his body. Instead of waiting passively to lose his finger, he actively destroyed it. “He could then feel that he was losing body parts because this was his wish” (Dubovsky 1978).’

When addressing the role of the body, we are faced with the simultaneous dichotomy and identity of Buddhist and Bataillean viewpoints. While both take a detached view of the body bordering on hostility, the objectivity of Buddhism is replaced in Bataille’s work with a frenzied intensity and, it must be said, an apparent desire to shock. One senses, beneath the words of the Buddha, a detachment based on a knowledge that goes deeper than the body; in Bataille, there is a passion emanating from a simultaneous fear of and fascination with death. The two mindsets are radically different and yet result in similar philosophies regarding the material and ephemeral nature of the body.

The most dramatic manifestation of bodily ephemerality within Tibetan Buddhism can be found in a meditation rite known as chöd. A Tantric ritual in which

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449 Lomas, The Haunted Self, p. 132.
450 Plank, Sartre and Surrealism, p. 61.
the initiate visualizes his body being torn and eaten by animals and demons, it was witnessed in Tibet and described by Alexandra David-Néel. The visualizations used in this meditation, intended as a simultaneous thanksgiving and karmic resolution by the celebrant for the gift of his body, bear a striking similarity to the concerns of both Bataille and Masson. David-Néel’s description was certainly read by Bataille, and probably by Masson as well, in her book *Magic and Mystery in Tibet*:

> The celebrant blows his bone trumpet, calling the hungry demons to the feast he intends to lay before them. He imagines that a feminine deity, which esoterically personifies his own will, springs from the top of his head and stands before him, sword in hand.

> With one stroke she cuts off the head of the *naljorpa*. Then, while troops of ghouls crowd round for the feast, the goddess severs his limbs, skins him and rips open his belly. The bowels fall out, the blood flows like a river, and the hideous guests bite here and there, masticate noisily, while the celebrant excites and urges them with liturgic words of surrender:

> “For ages, in the course of renewed births I have borrowed from countless living beings – at the cost of their welfare and life – food, clothing, all kinds of services to sustain my body, to keep it joyful in comfort and to defend it against death. Today, I pay my debt, offering for destruction this body which I have held so dear.

> “I give my flesh to the hungry, my blood to the thirsty, my skin to clothe those who are naked, my bones as fuel to those who suffer from cold. I give my happiness to the unhappy ones. I give my breath to bring back the dying to life.”

The inherent self-concern of an individual existence is here rejected to the ultimate degree, by renouncing not only one’s possessions and pleasures but one’s physical body, allowing its virtues and health giving properties to return to the greater world from which they were temporarily borrowed.

In the rite of *chod* is found one of the most evident influences of shamanism within Tibetan Buddhism. Eliade addresses similar practices of sacrificial visualization within shamanist traditions, writing of healing rituals in which spirits ‘cut him [the shaman] into small pieces, which are then distributed to the spirits of the various diseases’.

The intertwined ideas of humanity being connected and indebted to the surrounding environment, the human body as a borrowed source of energy that requires

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453 ‘To the sound of the drum made of human skulls and of the thighbone trumpet, the dance is begun and the spirits are invited to come and feast’. Robert Bleichsteiner, *L’Église jaune* (Paris: Payot, 1937), p. 194. The drum referred to by Bleichsteiner is known as a *damaru*, an example of which was owned by André Breton [see Plate 24].


compensation, and the shaman’s ability to mediate this situation, is an ancient one that predates the arrival of Buddhism in Tibet.\textsuperscript{456}

Themes of self-harm and the loss of boundaries between self and universe bear resemblances to contemporary diagnoses of insanity. This is no coincidence; there is a long history of correlation between shamanism and madness, as Ryan notes: ‘Through this vertiginous fall into madness, the inner resources of the mind lead [the shaman] to a center of sanity…It is this process that rescues him from madness and death and allows him to return a shaman.’\textsuperscript{457} As noted in the discussion of the mental challenges faced by Antonin Artaud, the line between spiritual awareness and mental instability is often a thin one, and this relationship is present within shamanism, Buddhism, and Tantra. The mental struggle to escape the bonds of a mundane or profane world can easily overrun the frameworks provided by religion, and descend into an uncontrollable loss of reason.

The images of torture, pain, and misuse of the human body present in the chöd ritual are understandably powerful and disturbing themes. These themes provoke a quite literally visceral reaction in most who experience them. In addition to physical pain, threats to the body are a potent reminder of the fragility and passing nature of the self. And yet, despite their disturbing nature, injury, pain, and torture exert a powerful attraction to the human mind, as can be seen in their perennial presence in many forms of art. Tantric Buddhism, the work of Masson and Artaud, and the writings of Bataille all take these themes to an extreme, continually confronting the viewer or reader with scenes of the most extreme suffering. It would be misleading to attribute this simply to sadism or ‘sickness’ (as many critics have done in all of the above cases); the enduring appeal of disturbing works of art and religious practices is due to more than simple

\textsuperscript{456} ‘…this type of meditation belongs to an archaic, pre-Buddhist stratum of spirituality, which was based, in one way or another, on the ideology of the hunting peoples…’ ibid., p. 435.
\textsuperscript{457} Ryan, \textit{The Strong Eye of Shamanism}, p. 90; Eliade also addresses the issue: ‘The thesis equating shamanism with mental disorder has also been maintained in respect to other forms of shamanism than the Arctic. As long as seventy-odd years ago, G.A. Wilken asserted that Indonesian shamanism had originally been a real sickness, and it was only later that the genuine trance had begun to be imitated dramatically. And investigators have not failed to note the striking relations that appear to exist between mental unbalance and the different forms of South Asian and Oceanian shamanism. According to Loeb, the Niue shaman is epileptic or extremely nervous and comes from particular families in which nervous instability is hereditary. On the basis of Czaplicka’s descriptions, J.W. Layard believed that there was a close resemblance between the Siberian shaman and the bwili of Malekula. The sikerei of Mentawai and the bomor of Kelantan are also neuropaths. In Samoa epileptics become diviners. The Batak of Sumatra and other Indonesian peoples prefer to choose sickly or weak subjects for the office of magician. Among the Subanun of Mindanao the perfect magician is usually neurasthenic or at least eccentric. The same thing is found elsewhere: in the Andaman Islands epileptics are considered great magicians; among the Lotuko of Uganda the infirm and neuropathic are commonly candidates for magic (but must, however, undergo a long initiation before being qualified for their profession). Eliade, \textit{Shamanism}, p. 25.
cruelty and prurient fascination. According to Tythacott, Bataille claims that ‘religious, physical, and emotional eroticism are extreme experiences whereby the boundaries of the individual self are broken down and communication, integration, and unity ensue.’ Imagery such as that found in the chöd meditation, approaching the issue through violence rather than eroticism (two fields that were closely related in Bataille’s thought) is a metaphorical representation of this breakdown, undertaken in the ultimate service of greater connection and reduced egocentrism.

MASSON: BETWEEN SURREALISM AND LE GRAND JEU

André Masson’s interest in Eastern themes spanned a time period of many years. From the time of his battlefield satori in 1917 through to his interview with Jean-Paul Clébert in 1967 and beyond, he frequently made reference, in his art, writing, and conversation, to impermanence, suffering, the loss of self, and other subjects related to the East, particularly Zen and Daoism. A major contributor to Masson’s knowledge of these things was his friend René Daumal (1908-44) [Plate 69].

As discussed in Chapter Two, Buddhist and Eastern influences were widespread in France in the early twentieth century, but nearly always as an element within an eclectic mix of influences. Daumal was one of the few artists who became truly immersed in Eastern thought and tradition. He wrote that ‘civilizations, in their natural process of degeneration, move from East to West. To return to the source of things, one has to travel in the opposite direction.’

In the summer of 1928, the first issue of Le Grand Jeu appeared. It was the work of a group that went by the same name, whose main members were Daumal, Roger Gilbert-Lecomte, Roger Vailland, and Josef Sima. As followers of René Guénon, the group was largely at odds with the Surrealist group, and included amongst its collaborators several ex-Surrealists, including Robert Desnos and Antonin Artaud. Le Grand Jeu expressed, in common with the Surrealists, a radical critique of Western values, but followed Guénon in his condemnation of the Surrealists for their

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inability to submit themselves to a transcendent law.\textsuperscript{464} In the eyes of Guénon, the Surrealists were ‘a little group of young men who amuse themselves with jokes of dubious taste’.\textsuperscript{465} Breton, while respecting Guénon’s intelligence and courage, also referred to him as a ‘social reactionary’ and a ‘deprecator of Freud’.\textsuperscript{466} These sorts of rifts within the artistic community imply how broad the interest in the East had become; various interests and groups, many of whom had little else in common, and were often hostile to one another, shared an interest in accessing the wisdom and knowledge that they perceived as coming from Asia.

Amongst the members of the Grand Jeu, ‘René Daumal was the one whose eyes were turned the most towards the East.’\textsuperscript{467} Daumal wrote essays on Indian and Tibetan Buddhism,\textsuperscript{468} as well as learning Sanskrit and undertaking numerous translations of Indian texts.\textsuperscript{469} His writings, the best known of which is probably the metaphorical novel \textit{Mount Analogue}, combine a message of Eastern-influenced wisdom with the narrative style and absurdist humour of post-Dada France. More than most of his contemporaries, Daumal was capable of synergistically combining these diverse influences into something that was greater than its component elements, thus breaking new ground in the ongoing conversation between East and West. He was able to learn from and incorporate Eastern thought in a very deep way, yet remained aloof from formal adherence.

Masson’s involvement with Daumal and \textit{Le Grand Jeu} increased his interest in Tibetan themes:

A photograph of [my] sculpture was reproduced in René Daumal’s review, \textit{Le Grand Jeu}, with a very beautiful text by Daumal which recognized its vaguely Tibetan character: it is rather horrible to look at. I liked Daumal very much and I collaborated in \textit{Le Grand Jeu} with my drawings. I didn’t really associate with anyone except Daumal. And with Artaud. Both were interested in Asia, like me. But Artaud was a Taoist, while I went for Zen. Daumal was passionate about the mysterious aspects of India and secret Tibet. It is with him that I spoke for the first time about Tantrism.\textsuperscript{470}

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\textsuperscript{464} op. cit., p. 109. \\
\textsuperscript{465} ibid., p. 109. \\
\textsuperscript{466} André Breton, ‘René Guénon, jugé par le Surréalisme,’ \textit{Nouvelle Revue Française} (July 1953), p.68. \\
\textsuperscript{467} ‘Au sein du Grand Jeu, René Daumal est celui dont le regard est le plus tourné vers l’Orient.’ Ottinger, ‘Le grand Jeu et le surréalisme français,’ , p. 56. \\
\textsuperscript{468} Rosenblatt, \textit{René Daumal}, p. 122. \\
\textsuperscript{469} ibid., p. 113-16. \\
\textsuperscript{470} ‘Cette sculpture a été reproduite en photo dans la revue de René Daumal, \textit{Le Grand Jeu}. Avec un très beau texte de Daumal qui y a vu le côté vaguement tibétain: c’est assez horrible à regarder. J’aimais beaucoup Daumal et j’ai collaboré au \textit{Grand Jeu} par des dessins. Je n’ai vraiment été lié qu’avec Daumal. Comme avec Artaud. Tous deux s’intéressaient comme moi à l’Asie. Mais alors
Masson found Tantrism to be a philosophy that was very much in keeping with the driving themes of death and eroticism in his own art. By all accounts he was an eclectic and widely read thinker who exhibited an interest in a broad range of subjects, all of which influenced his art to some extent. Surya notes the shared erudition that was a factor in the friendship of Masson and Bataille, and no doubt in that of Masson and Daumal as well:

The two men had in common a taste for Nietzsche and Dostoevsky (which distinguished them both from surrealism). They had a taste for Greece, for the tragic Greece of myths, a taste for the divinities, Dionysus, Mithras, Theseus, Orpheus and Ariadne, a taste for grave and transgressive eroticism, and a taste for Sade.\footnote{Surya, Georges Bataille, p. 232.}

Masson’s migration from a more orthodox, Breton-controlled Surrealism towards other groups, such as Le Grand Jeu, that were more spiritually based and accepting in their tastes and activities, reflects his commitment to an inner search for his own truth that could not coexist with external limitations to his freedom. Masson’s primary loyalty was always to his art and to what it represented, a journey that could be defined as a search for the sacred.

The energetic swirlings of Masson’s paintings are an expression of his deep belief in the unstable and eternally changing nature of existence. Repeatedly in his art and in his writing, he expresses his engagement with a universe in which everything is flux and flow, where nothing exhibits any independent existence.

While his paintings and drawings maintain a visceral connection to the vast metamorphosis of life, Masson’s writings more explicitly address Eastern philosophy, frequently exhibiting his familiarity with concepts of Zen, as in this passage on Chinese painting:

To “enter” such an art is useless if one does not understand first of all that the main point [l’\textit{essentiel}] for the Zen painter has nothing to do with what the Western painter understands by this term. For the Chinese, as for his Japanese follower…it’s about a manner of existing (in a deep sense) and not, as for us, a manner of doing. For them, it is a manner of being based in universal life, and for us a way of summarizing. For the Asian a vital decision, for the European an aesthetic attitude.\footnote{‘Inutile de vouloir « entrer » dans un tel art si l’on ne comprend pas tout d’abord que l’\textit{essentiel} pour le peintre \textit{Zen} n’est en rien semblable à ce que le peintre occidental entend par ce terme. Pour le Chinois, ou son émule japonais – pour Mou-ki comme pour Sesshū – il s’agit d’une manière d’exister – qu’Artaud était taoiste, j’étais pour le \textit{Zen}. Tandis que Daumal se passionnait pour les aspects mystérieux de l’Inde et du Tibet secret. C’est avec lui que j’ai parlé pour la première fois de \textit{tantrisme’}. André Masson, quoted in Clébert, Mythologie d’André Masson, p. 31. The photograph of Masson’s sculpture can be found in: Roger Gilbert-Lecomte et. al, Le Grand Jeu: Collection Complète (Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 1977), Issue II, facing p. 33; also see Lomas, \textit{The Haunted Self}, p. 47-9.}
Masson’s familiarity with Zen can be partially attributed to his friendship with a Japanese writer named Kuni Matsuo, who also taught him about Oriental art. Both Zen and Oriental art, particularly calligraphy, were to become important sources of inspiration in Masson’s art, as can be seen in the interview conducted with Jean-Paul Clébert in Aix-en-Provence in 1967.

...one wonders why an agitated man like me, who is only gratified by torment, would be interested in a sect which seeks the most total appeasement. This is a paradox, but perhaps a creative one...When I arrived at Aix, in October 1947, I had decided to give up my personal mythology and return to a simple contemplation of nature. I found myself surrounded by books on Zen, Suzuki, and others, along with notes which I had taken, and I ended up writing an essay which I called ‘L’Instant’, published in the Nouvelle Revue Française more than twenty years ago. Masson appears to have been mistaken about ‘L’Instant’; it does not appear in the Nouvelle Revue Française, although he does mention it in another article published in that journal.

The focus on direct experience rather than intellectual explanation that animates Zen was translated by Masson into a semi-abstract art that was more concerned with questions than with answers. Masson’s enigmatic forms are designed, not to comfort the viewer with a definitive subject, but to cast all previous preconceptions into doubt. As in Zen, his art is designed to uproot the mind from its constraining, if comfortable, milieu, in order to enable it to comprehend things at a deeper level, a level that cannot be accommodated within the bounds of reason and predictability.

In this passage about one of his first meetings with Georges Bataille, Masson equates various aspects of Western culture with ideas emerging from Zen:


'On peut se demander évidemment pourquoi un homme agité comme moi et qui ne se complait que dans le tourment a pu s’intéresser à une secte qui cherche l’apaisement le plus total. Il y a paradoxe. Mais ce paradoxe est peut-être créateur...Quand je suis arrivé à Aix, en octobre 1947, j’ai décidé de renoncer à ma mythologie personnelle et je me suis remis simplement à la contemplation de la nature. Il se trouvait que j’étais entouré de livres sur le Zen, Suzuki et d’autres, de notes que j’avais prises là-dessus et qui ont fini par faire un essai que j’ai appelé L’Instant, paru dans la Nouvelle Revue Française il y a plus de vingt ans.’ André Masson, quoted in Jean-Paul Clébert, Mythologie d’André Masson (Geneva: Pierre Cailler, 1971), p. 103-4.

“Dada? - not idiotic enough”; it is in these terms that Georges Bataille concluded our first conversation...Thus appeared this memorable answer, worthy of a Zen monk...So, Dada was not idiotic enough, and surrealism was much too “mental”...I must insist on this non-mental that George Bataille recommended...This non-mental, which is at the center of Zen doctrine.476

The appeal of Zen philosophy for Masson was clearly in its rejection of logic and reason, and in this it was associated in his mind, as it was for many of his fellow artists, with the revolt against reason of Dada and Surrealism. In addition to his knowledge of Zen, Masson was familiar to some extent with Tantric imagery, and was sympathetic to the aims of Tantra, as is shown in a quote from the same interview:

The little that I know [about Tantrism] has always attracted me, especially that which I believe to be the Tibetan version...I had practiced [the meditation on horror] already, without knowing that it was tantrism, when I was a soldier, in the most horrible places of the war of 1914-1918. I taught myself not to fail in front of the dreadful spectacles, to control myself and meditate, to keep a calm interior, even in the midst of battle.477

Like a chöd rite that had broken out of the realm of visualization and into reality, the Great War forced Masson into a confrontation with the vulnerabilities of the self. Masson had the strength of character, or perhaps the good karma, to ultimately benefit from the hell that he was forced to endure, in addition to bearing its scars.

The influence of Chinese calligraphy on some of Masson’s more abstract works is further evidence of his exposure to and interest in Eastern themes. In works such as Enchevêtrement478 [Plate 70], the presence of Chinese calligraphic styles such as that of Huai Su [Plate 71] is evident. The quality of the free-flowing characters is adopted by Masson and integrated into a Modernist idiom that speaks of chaos and transformation. The work can be seen in a sense as the graphic equivalent of Bataille’s use of Asian forms of meditation. In both cases, elements of influence are adopted and adapted


477 ‘Le tantrisme: je ne suis pas très erudite dans ce domaine, mais le peu que je sais m’a toujours attiré. Surtout ce que je crois être la version tibétaine du tantrisme. La sexualité tantriste, l’épreuve par la sexualité, c’est quand même une chose énorme. C’est évidemment la maîtrise de soi par la sexualité. D’autre part, il y a la méditation sur l’horreur. Je l’avais pratiqué, déjà, sans savoir que c’était du tantrisme, quand j’étais soldat, dans les endroits parmi les plus horribles de la guerre de 1914-1918. Je m’étais éduqué à ne pas faillir devant les spectacles affreux, à me maîtriser et à méditer, à garder un calme intérieur, et ceci même au sein des combats.’ in Clébert, Mythologie d’Andre Masson, p. 105.

without concern for contextual fidelity. In true Modernist style, the free juxtaposition of incompatible elements (writing and an undifferentiated spatial field in Masson’s case, yogic serenity and ecstatic excess in Bataille’s) is indulged in freely and idiosyncratically. The personal utilization of formerly discipline-based traditions is symptomatic of the particularly transgressive search for the sacred in which Masson, Artaud, and Bataille were all engaged.

Masson was clear about the influence of Chinese calligraphy on his work, and equated its character with Surrealist practices of automatism:

The origin of this aesthetic…came from the practice of automatic drawing. It is undoubtedly in the sand paintings of 1927 that its surrealist use is most outstanding. The muted colours…bring to mind Chinese paintings that are stripped of chromatic appeal. This similarity was obvious enough since Chinese calligraphy had attracted me very early, along with the “writings” of the Far East and the East.\textsuperscript{479}

In Masson’s use of automatism and calligraphy-based techniques, one can see the genesis of some of the concerns that were later to become central to the field of Abstract Expressionism. The connection between calligraphic form and the movement of the body that it requires are parallels to Masson’s concerns with the body. The forms of free calligraphy are symbolic of bodily liberation, something that Masson believed could only be found in the East:

I gained a peace and a happiness of being which seemed impossible to me in a West that was sunk in materialism…At the antipodes of the tradition of asceticism of the Western world, which has a crushing contempt for the body, the doctrines of Ch’an or Zen do not separate the spiritual from the bodily. To live with one’s body is also a pillar of Yoga…\textsuperscript{480}

Masson was forced by his war injuries to be aware of his own existence within a vulnerable physical body. This darker side of the physical manifested itself in much of his art, particularly in a fascination with the interpenetration of violence and the erotic. His disturbing series of drawings entitled Massacres, in which gangs of marauding men assault and stab groups of women [Plate 72] are an extreme example of this theme. In

\textsuperscript{479} ‘L’origine de cette esthétique, car c’en est une, dérive de la pratique du dessin automatique. C’est sans doute dans les tableaux de sable de 1927 que son emploi surréaliste est le plus marquant. Et, ici, cette monochromie (couleur ocrée du sable et sepia du trait) fait penser aux peintures chinoises les plus dépouillées de charme chromatique. Cette similitude était assez éveillée puisque la calligraphie chinoise m’avait très tôt attiré, et avec elle toutes les « écritures » extrêmes et orientales.’ ibid., p. 103.

\textsuperscript{480} ‘J’y gagnai une paix et un bonheur d’être qui me semblaient impossibles dans un Occident abîmé dans la matière…Aux antipodes des recettes d’ascétisme du monde occidental ayant pour notre corps un mépris écrasant, les doctrines Tch’an ou Zen ne séparent pas le spirituel du corporel. Vivre avec son corps est aussi un pilier du Yoga et n’oublions pas que c’est avec le voyage de Bodhidarma d’Inde en Chine que le bouddhisme zen atteignit l’Extrême-Orient et singulièrement le Japon au XIIIe siècle.’ Masson, Mémoire du Monde, p. 140, 142.
the words of David Lomas, this ‘bacchic frenzy of violence…foreground[s] the operations of an impersonal force that we might identify as the death drive, which through a play of repetition and difference builds complexity and generates the series in its entirety’. Lomas’ referencing of the Freudian death drive, or thanatos, is apt for Masson’s art, littered as it is with the tormented bodies and corpses of both victim and perpetrator. Similarly, the idea of repetition is related to insatiable desire: as driven beings eternally attempt to fulfill internal cravings through external action, they are compelled to repeat their futile actions indefinitely. When these two forces (thanatos and repetition) are conflated, the result is eternal violence, expressed in series such as Massacres. The expression of such violence is central to Masson’s oeuvre. Despite the omnipresence of the wandering line, he never strays far from the charnel ground.

Masson’s use of violent imagery in his art was both obsessive and cathartic. In this it bears a similarity to the esoteric Tantric art of India and to the representations of wrathful deities of Tibet. All of these forms of art are intended, in one way or another, to engage the horrible and to transform it into something else. Whether it is through a personal confrontation with one’s own mortality, as with Masson, or through an identification with something greater than oneself, as with the symbolism of Tantra and the meditative techniques of Tibet, the goal always involves an escape from the self. It is unlikely that these similarities were unknown to Masson.

His self-enforced stoicism in the face of horror may have been instrumental in Masson’s later fascination with the destruction of the physical form. In portrayals of surreal transformations [Plate 73] and straightforward aggression [Plate 74], a significant part of Masson’s oeuvre returns obsessively to themes of the body and its transgression, as though attempting to transform the trauma of his injuries into a more positive communication with the outer world.

Transgression of the kind found in Masson’s paintings, in addition to portraying pain, moves beyond the unacceptable and into the realm of sacred iconography. The sacred, particularly in contemporary times when much harrowing religious activity has been watered down into symbolic manifestation, is frequently misunderstood as referring merely to the revered or the respected. As we have seen in the discussions of Tibet’s wrathful deities, the sacred is implicated in far more wide-ranging, ambivalent, and disturbing realms than what is seen on the surface of a typical religious service today. As has been noted, Masson was made aware of this fact in the most difficult

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way imaginable during World War One, by having his body smashed by explosives and then laying through the night watching the battle rage around him. His experience was surely terrifying, but also, at times, ecstatic. In the midst of battle, surrounded by the dead bodies of his companions, Masson entered what can only be called a state of grace, as he wrote in Mémoire du Monde:

The intensity of the shooting was at its peak. At this point I was invaded by a feeling of unknown calm. There was nothing more: neither past nor future, only present, and this present was pure calm. This void was plenitude. As if I had just been born in a perfect universe. When, many years afterwards, I informed a Japanese friend of this inner experience, he told me it was what they call, in the Zen doctrine, a satori.482

What Masson was shown in a dramatically non-symbolic way was the profound identity of destruction and transcendence. He realized that ‘the intensity of the danger …can bring about the metamorphosis of the possible or probable victim: the anguish changes into exaltation.’483

The inseparable oneness of what we habitually dichotomize as ‘good’ and ‘evil’ became a dominant theme in Masson’s art, as has been noted by Rubin and Lanchner: ‘Masson’s eroticism…is haunted by aggression, guilt and mortality. A vagina becomes a flower – but also a saw-toothed trap. A penis is alternately a plant stem or knife.’484

Masson identified this type of ever changing metamorphosis as a central theme in both his art and his life, particularly within the relationship between sex and death, as Whitney Chadwick notes:

For Masson, the ceaseless play between fertile eroticism and death lay at the very foundations of all life, and during the 1930s he increasingly came to view erotic or sexual struggle and combat as inevitably tied to the mythical conflict between male and female principles.485

Masson came to recognize that the world around him, like the various forms of Buddhist philosophy that interested him, was an ever changing pastiche, and attempted to portray this in his painting, not only in the sense of changing form, but also that of a

482 ‘L’intensité du tir est à son comble. C’est alors que je fus envahi par un sentiment de calme inconnu. Il n’y avait plus rien : ni passé, ni avenir, seul le présent, et ce présent, c’était ce calme pur. Ce vide était plenitude. Comme si je venais de naître dans un univers parfait. Quand, bien des années après, je fis part à un ami japonais de cette expérience intérieure : c’était, me dit-il, ce que dans la doctrine Zen, on appelle un satori.’ Masson, Mémoire du Monde, p. 75.

483 ‘L’intensité du danger, par exemple un pilonnage d’artillerie sur la tranchée, peut opérer la métamorphose de la victime possible ou probable : l’angoisse se change en exaltation.’ Ibid.


deeper and incomprehensible change that encompassed the unity of joy and pain, good and evil.

Repeatedly we encounter this emphasis on the illusory nature of duality. Masson’s philosophy and artistic practice were dedicated to the exposure of this illusion, and were influenced by writers who held this view such as Nietzsche, Eliade, and Caillois. Dawn Ades writes:

The ambivalence of his own feelings: transport both courted and resisted, was an echo of that described by Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy* as part of the earliest Greek festivals “...the peculiar blending of emotions in the heart of the Dionysiac reveller – his ambiguity if you will – seems still to hark back (as the medicinal drug harks back to the deadly poison) to the days when the infliction of pain was experienced as a joy while a sense of supreme triumph elicited cries of anguish from the heart”486.

The idea that good can be synonymous with evil, or pain with pleasure, makes no sense within a rational framework. It is this very impossibility of total existence within the boundaries of reason that has caused the rejection of rational frameworks by seekers, mystics, and artists throughout the ages. As was made most evident by Dada, when ‘reason’ fails to suit one’s needs, and indeed ceases to make ‘sense’ itself, one is justified in seeking other means of existence, outside of reason’s constricting bonds.

Masson’s pursuit of the sacred was undertaken within this tradition of the rejection of reason. His perspective was based not on a hatred of reason, but rather on the recognition that reason was insufficient to the task. In order to access the place of the sacred and to paradoxically attain union with the wholly other, he sought to access a consciousness without limitation. It was a dangerous path that Masson was treading, a path that was not without victims. Those seeking to overcome the bonds of reason often found themselves in frightening places where all control was lost. Rather than liberation, they sometimes discovered madness.

**ARTAUD AND INSANITY**

The rejection of Western values in favour of the ‘mystical Orient’ is epitomized by the open letters to the Dalai Lama and to the Pope written by Antonin Artaud [Plate 75]. In the former of these letters, Artaud exhorts the legendary reincarnation of Chenrezig487 [Plate 76] to descend upon the West and ‘send us your illuminations in a

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487 ‘Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva Mahasattva … is known in Tibet as Chenresigs [or Chenrezig] and is revealed there in male form; whereas in China and Japan, a similar Bodhisattva in female form is known as Kuanyin and Kannon respectively. Avalokitesvara is the embodiment of the active principle of’
language that our contaminated European minds can understand’. Artaud’s tone throughout this text is beseeching, desperate, longing for an escape from what he sees as the worst of all possible worlds, and dominated by the exalted, poetic, and somewhat unhinged tone for which he was known:

Teach us, O Lama, the physical levitation of matter and how we may no longer be earthbound… With the inward eye I contemplate you, O Pope on the inward summit. It is inwardly that I am like you: I, dust, idea, lip, levitation, dream, cry, renunciation of idea, suspended amongst all the forms and hoping for nothing but the wind.

The antithesis of this idealization of the Dalai Lama can be found on the previous page of La Révolution Surréaliste, in Artaud’s ‘Adresse au Pape’ where the humble supplicant becomes the accuser: ‘we are thinking of another war, a war against you, Pope, dog.’

Artaud’s idealization of one authority figure (the Dalai Lama) at the expense of the previous (the Pope) is indicative of a somewhat desperate search for a saviour. Due to Tibet’s distant and largely unknown status, it remained an untested element and thus was free of the disappointment that Artaud felt in Catholicism’s inability to free him from his demons. Life for Artaud was, more than anything, an incarceration, which he spent searching for an escape. Morfee writes of Artaud’s belief that one’s true being is ‘held captive by the body’, and that ‘birth is nothing short of a life sentence in a demonic carnal prison.’

Artaud expresses this view through his idea of ‘the body without organs’:

For tie me down if you want to, but there is nothing more useless than an organ. When you have given him a body without organs, then you will have delivered him from all his automatisms and restored him to his true liberty.
What Artaud appears to be intuiting here is the concept of an astral form, a ‘self’ that has not been incarnated, and is thus not beholden to the limitations and eventual failings of physical organs. Artaud seeks an existence in which his individual psyche remains intact, but freed from the torments that he experienced in mortal life.

Given this view of existence, it is not difficult to understand the appeal of Buddhism to Artaud. In the form of a philosophy and practice in which the self is seen as a prison and its loss as a liberation, Buddhism offered him a structure within which the annihilation of the self was seen not merely as a positive event, but as the ultimate goal of existence. It is in marked contrast to the loss of self that occurs in madness and schizophrenia, states of mind that are unplanned, outside of the control of those experiencing them, and nearly always terrifying. And, not insignificantly, states of mind to which Artaud was subject. As in Favazza’s analysis of cases of self-mutilation mentioned above, it is possible that Artaud was aware of the imminent dissolution of his selfhood and, in a bid to take control of the inevitable, was drawn to a philosophy that sought the same end intentionally, with the possibility of enlightenment replacing the horror of mental illness as the end result.

Artaud devoted much of his energy as an artist and writer to an expression of a profound hatred of Christianity. The level of passion that Artaud exhibited was that of an apostate rather than an atheist. Morfee writes that

for Artaud God most certainly still exists, be it as transcendent Being or as inexpungible creation of the linguistic apparatus of the mind. It would therefore be misleading to talk of the late Artaud texts as atheist; he becomes, rather, an anti-theist concentrating all his energies on writing against God.493

This aversion to religion was very closely related to Artaud’s beliefs about the physical body, as Bauer notes: ‘Artaud envisions redemption through a post-religious art that withdraws itself from language and seeks to attain the immediacy of the body.’494 In much of his art, particularly his theatre, Artaud attempted to displace spoken language and sense with the visceral presence of the body. He believed that the essence of reality and truth lay, not in intellectual understanding or rational discourse, but in physical existence, which he found to be simultaneously indispensable and unbearable. Artaud rejected not only the Christianity of his enemies, but even,

eventually, the eroticism of his friends such as Masson and Bataille.\textsuperscript{495} Bauer notes that, for Artaud, ‘Christian spirituality and its rituals, on the one hand, and sexuality and eroticism, on the other, are not – as oftentimes assumed - contradictory opposites, since their common goal is the displacement of the reality of the human body.’\textsuperscript{496}

Although, until his death, Artaud never found an escape from his own profound physical suffering, his belief that the nature of life is suffering, and that the body is central to an experience of reality, is compatible with the teachings of Buddhism that offer an escape from this very suffering, and from this body.

Artaud, although he never went there, sought meaning and solace in the traditions of the East. In his essay entitled ‘Van Gogh, the Man Suicided by Society,’ (1947), Artaud includes obscure references to Tibet, based primarily on a poetic interpretation:

\begin{quote}
Perhaps it was dark like that in Chaldea, in Mongolia, or on the Mountains of Tibet, and no one has ever told me that they have been moved...but all the lamas in Tibet can shake, under their robes, the apocalypse they will have prepared...\textsuperscript{497}
\end{quote}

Passages such as this indicate Artaud’s awareness of a place called Tibet, a place he appears to associate with mystery and spiritual power, at the same time that they show his apparent lack of any real knowledge about its true nature. Denis Hollier states that ‘Aragon apostrophizes India as Artaud does Tibet, and Breton China, without giving thought, however slightly, to any direct connection with those geographical and cultural entities’.\textsuperscript{498}

In a passage that conflates the varying opinions of the Surrealist group on the subject, but is nevertheless insightful, Knapp summarizes Artaud’s interest in Buddhism:

Artaud and his fellow Surrealists believed in a modified form of Buddhism. They craved...a state of non-being or nirvāṇa, in which suffering no longer exists. Such a state of non-being could be reached through the wisdom of the East. Oriental philosophy, alluded to by Robert Desnos as “the citadel of all hopes”, might serve to alleviate the Occidental condition of alienation from true, inner reality. From the Surrealists’ point of view, through Buddhism it was possible to achieve a condition of no conflict or duality – no longing. Man could enjoy

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext{495}{‘Artaud holds himself to be the victim of occult cannibalism, proscribes all sexuality as inimical to God’s plan for the world, and regards the human body as prone to demonic ‘envoûtement’ [voodoo] due to its very nature and anatomy.’ Morée, \textit{Antonin Artaud’s Writing Bodies}, p. 85.}
\footnotetext{496}{Bauer, \textit{Antonin Artaud: Nature, the Apocalypse, and Van Gogh’s Art}, p. 9.}
\footnotetext{497}{Antonin Artaud, ‘Van Gogh, the Man Suicided by Society,’ \textit{Artaud Anthology}, p. 154.}
\end{footnotes}
perpetual communion with the core of life, with the spirit of the *all*, thereby experiencing total and absolute liberty and happiness.\(^{499}\)

Artaud believed that the main thing preventing the attainment of this state was the mental and societal obstruction of a person’s ‘nerves’, a term he used to indicate corporeal awareness. He wrote that you have to have been deprived of life, of the nervous irradiation of existence, of the conscious fulfilment of the nerve, to become aware of the extent to which the Sensibility and Science of every thought is hidden in the nervous vitality of the marrow, and to what degree those who bank solely on Intelligence or absolute Intellectuality are in error. Above all is the essence of the nerve. Fulfillment which contains all consciousness and all the occult paths of the mind in the flesh.\(^{500}\)

Here Artaud is invoking what is essentially a poetic-philosophic parallel to the theory of cellular memory, positing that consciousness itself exists not solely in the brain, but in the very fibre of the body. This idea bears a striking resemblance to various forms of Theravada Buddhism, in which techniques of conscious attention to the sensations of the body are used in order to release impurities and to increase an unfettered consciousness of present reality. Artaud believed that the insults and indignities imposed on the individual by society could be overcome by an unwavering attention to this interior reality, and that art (by which he meant an expression of inner reality rather than any particular plastic form) played a central role in this liberation.

Deborah Levitt comments on this belief of Artaud’s, situating it in a similar context to many other individuals in this study: that of the transcendence of duality and reconnection with a greater reality (surreality):

Here then we encounter Artaud's desire to re-appropriate what Derrida calls his “proper body” – and to re-appropriate the proper body of the theater. Artaud wants to annihilate the conflicts between abstract and concrete and, in fact, wants not only to dismantle a dualist metaphysics but also to annihilate all practical or performative differences between mind and matter and between representation and presentation...If this is an impossible gesture it is also potentially productive in that it allows Artaud to shift representation’s point of reference beyond Man.\(^{501}\)

If ‘Man’ is here used to indicate the corporeal being, the incarnated being that imprisons the spirit, then this passage may be read as being in agreement with philosophies, such as Buddhism, that advocate a transcendent reality that escapes the

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Desnos quote, ‘l’Asie, citadelle de tous les espoirs,’ from *La Révolution Surréaliste* No. 3 (1925), p. 8.

\(^{500}\) Antonin Artaud, *Artaud Anthology*, p. 58.

sufferings of the body; a reality that is seen by both Buddhism and Artaud as being not only preferable, but possible as well.

In his search for frameworks that would explain and perhaps control the state of his mind, Artaud was attempting to transform what Nietzsche referred to as a ‘madly thoughtless fragmentation and fraying of all foundations’ into an escape of sorts. If loss of the self was inevitable, the controlled progress towards enlightenment offered by Buddhist practice would have been an attractive alternative to madness.

It should be remembered that Artaud was himself interpreting the concept of madness based on the prejudices and cognitive limitations of his time. Foucault has written extensively on the relative nature of what is termed ‘madness’, particularly as it applies to its role in modern society, and its opposition to the repressive structures that are imposed on the individual in the name of reason. In *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault grants madness a role in the ability to resist the metaphysical restrictions of one’s own time, at the same time recognizing the sacrifice and horror that accompany any descent into its uncompromising maelstrom:

…this madness that links and divides time, that twists the world into the ring of a single night, this madness so foreign to the experience of its contemporaries, does it not transmit – to those able to receive it, to Nietzsche and to Artaud – those barely audible voices of classical unreason, in which it was always a question of nothingness and night, but amplifying them now to shrieks and frenzy? But giving them for the first time an expression, a droit de cité, and a hold on Western culture which makes possible all contestations, as well as total contestation? 503

In company with later radical psychiatric theorists such as R. D. Laing, Foucault rejects an interpretation of insanity as a simple ‘dysfunction’ on an individual level. Both Foucault and Laing see mental illness as a societal phenomenon, mediated and constructed by society as a whole, and imposed on the individual in order to displace responsibility for the suffering of madness from the larger culture. This granting of positive powers to a condition of insanity, while useful in its questioning of societal norms, also runs the risk of trivializing the suffering of the mad.

André Breton displayed a curious mixture of naïveté and egotism when he wrote of the insane that ‘they are people of scrupulous honesty, whose innocence is equal only to mine’. 504 Artaud, gaining his experience of madness from the inside,

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did not possess the luxury of such idealization.

David Lomas addresses the insensitivity inherent in idealizations of madness when he comments on the ‘degree of ignorance about what insanity actually entailed’. Lomas, The Haunted Self, p. 64. Sass makes a similar point: ‘most of these writers have had little or no experience with the realities of chronic insanity…and one suspects their glorification of madness may be fueled by motivations other than the purest desire for truth’. The reference is to ‘various writers in the romantic, Nietzschean, surrealist, and poststructuralist traditions’. Sass, p. 4.

In contrast, J. H. Matthews, citing Dr. Jean Broustra, draws attention to ‘the ambiguous use of the term “madness” by the surrealists. The word does not apply…to the kind of insanity that induces depression or leads to suicide, but to another form of madness altogether’. Matthews claims that a lack of clarity in the use of terms such as ‘dementia praecox’ and ‘schizophrenia’ has led to the impression that Breton and other Surrealists were glorifying and seeking to enter a world in which control of the mind was lost.

Due in part to their fascination with primitivism and the margins of thought, the sanity of Surrealists has at times been questioned by uncomprehending observers. Similarly, Buddhists have at various times in history been accused of losing touch with ‘reality’. The zen koans, reincarnation, and disembodied consciousness of Buddhism have often been viewed with the same dismissive contempt as Surrealism’s Dada heritage, public scandal, melting watches and nonsensical poetry and prose. At a more serious level than that of public reaction, the question of sanity is crucial to clarifying issues such as the relative nature of reality, the identity of the separate self, and the nature of thought. In the person of Antonin Artaud we find the coexistence of all the themes being addressed here: Surrealism, spiritual longing, desire, and madness.

Insanity, as opposed to its imitation, was relatively rare in Surrealist circles, although not unknown. Unica Zürn (1916-1969), a German artist and writer who was associated with the Surrealists and was a companion of Hans Bellmer for many years,

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505 Lomas, The Haunted Self, p. 64.
506 The reference is to ‘various writers in the romantic, Nietzschean, surrealist, and poststructuralist traditions’. Sass, p. 4.
508 ‘Could Breton really have remained or have been kept in ignorance of discoveries that had already superseded Kraepelin’s conclusions regarding dementia praecox? Or are we to conclude that he chose to ignore them? Whatever the answer, he was to follow gladly Kraepelin’s lead in reserving the term “dementia praecox” for what Bleuler had shown to be the hebephrenic types of schizophrenia. To follow Bleuler, instead, would have demanded acknowledgment of something plainly reflected in the etymology of schizophrenia: the debilitating feature of mental disturbance, which splits the personality, in conflict with the supreme surrealist ambition of unifying it.’ Matthews, Surrealism, Insanity, and Poetry, p. 17.
suffered a series of mental breakdowns and ended her life by jumping from a sixth story window.\textsuperscript{510} Leonora Carrington (b. 1917), a British painter who has spent most of her life in Mexico, immortalized her own brush with madness in \textit{En Bas} (Down Below).\textsuperscript{511} Separated from her companion Max Ernst when he was taken away to a concentration camp during World War Two, Carrington suffered a complete mental collapse, leading to an incarceration of several months in an asylum. It is interesting to note, within the context of this paper, that ‘Leonora herself, who has since studied Tibetan Buddhism, does not adhere to a classical Western notion of the fixed self and considers the person of \textit{Down Below} another member of her disparate inner population.’\textsuperscript{512} André Masson, following the trauma of World War One, suffered fits of rage and was briefly confined in a mental ward.\textsuperscript{513}

The experiences of Zürn, Carrington, and Masson, along with the possible mental disturbance involved in the suicide of René Crevel,\textsuperscript{514} were relatively uncommon occurrences amongst the Surrealists. Artaud was the most notable, and in a certain sense the only, exception to this norm. Possibly as a result of meningitis when he was a baby, he suffered from a lifelong series of mental and physical ailments, including severe headaches, nervous disorders, paranoia, hallucinations, and delusions of grandeur, all of these exacerbated by prolonged drug addiction.\textsuperscript{515}

André Breton, due to his service in an asylum during World War One, had first hand experience with the realities of mental derangement.\textsuperscript{516} Nevertheless, he and other Surrealists tended to gloss over the involuntary nature of madness in an attempt to put it into the service of an idea of total freedom. Plank critiques Breton’s insensitivity to the realities of mental illness:

Breton remarks that madmen showed a profound detachment for our criticism, that they got great comfort from their imagination, that they rather enjoyed their delirium: “les hallucinations, les illusions, etc., ne sont pas une source de jouissance négligeable.”…Sartre demonstrated that madness is more than just an eccentricity, a freedom of the imagination condemned by a shallow and insensitive bourgeoisie – it can be a disease that incapacitates and kills.\textsuperscript{517}

\textsuperscript{512} Marina Warner, intro. to Leonora Carrington, \textit{The House of Fear: Notes from Down Below}, p. 17.
\textsuperscript{513} Ries, ‘André Masson: Surrealism and His Discontents,’ p. 75.
\textsuperscript{517} Plank, \textit{Sartre and Surrealism}, p. 20.
As a result of his physical and mental difficulties, Artaud was very conversant with the experience of the dissolution of the self, yet experienced it as a terrifying affliction rather than as a liberation.\(^{518}\) In stark contrast to the optimistic idealization of madness that is characteristic of many Surrealist works, Artaud’s analysis from within makes difficult reading: ‘I have no idea what things really are, no idea of any human state; nothing of this world turns for me, nothing turns in me. Being alive, I suffer horribly.’\(^{519}\) The many asylums in which Artaud was confined over his lifetime served as his own involuntary monasteries, in which he painfully discovered the truth of the first noble truth of suffering:

There was an urgency in Artaud’s fascination for death: a frenzied and throbbing attraction, intimately connected with his disease...Unable to act to quell the “terrifying forms which advance” towards him, he lives without identity as “the roads to eternity open up” before him, and he becomes part of the cosmic flow – as an individual, he is dead.\(^{520}\)

In his passion for creation, his drive for an unvarnished confrontation with truth, and his mental afflictions, Artaud straddled the boundary between desire and necessity. It would be misleading to attempt to classify Artaud’s mental condition as a ‘technique’ of liberation from the self; like all psychotic breaks, Artaud’s periods in which he lost all sense of himself were not intentional,\(^{521}\) and far from being a source of enlightenment.

There was, according to Matthews, a ‘general disinclination amongst surrealists... to cross the boundary separating the sane from the insane.’\(^{522}\) In seeking a place of freedom for the individual in relationship to society, the Surrealists ostensibly rejected social conformity as restrictive and oppressive to the imagination, and observed that individuals who exhibited mental disorders were ‘liberated from the social obligation to respond coherently under interrogation.’\(^{523}\) However, particularly in the wake of Breton’s experience with Nadja, they also began to recognize that

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\(^{521}\) ‘To stress the role of hyperreflexivity in schizophrenic self-disturbances is not, as we know, to suggest that these developments are essentially volitional in nature, as if the fragmentation and dislocation in question were purely the result of some perverse strategy engaged in willfully.’ Sass, *Madness and Modernism*, p. 240.

\(^{522}\) Matthews, *Surrealism, Insanity, and Poetry*, p. xii.

\(^{523}\) ibid., p. 79.
madness presents its own form of slavery. \(^{524}\) A compromise was sought which, in the simulation of madness, presented the possibility of a middle way that escaped both the strictures of social imperatives and the loss of control inherent in true psychosis. The prerequisite for this activity was possession of a mind that was capable of choice, and this was sadly a prerogative that was denied to Antonin Artaud.

Artaud’s madness was a cruelly involuntary escape from the prison of the ego, but it does bear some relevance to more intentional and positive forms of the transcendence of self. In examining the negative and involuntary character of Artaud’s mental states, one can perhaps gain insight and perspective into other, more voluntary paths that lead to an exit from the self, such as Breton’s pursuit of the Marvelous, Buddhist meditations on emptiness, or Bataille’s obsession with expenditure and death.

The idealization of the East and of insanity were both techniques through which Surrealists and others attempted to expand, and ideally to destroy, the boundaries of the self. The fact that they sometimes, as in their idealization of the suffering of the insane, overstepped the boundaries of a positive ekstasis, does not render their efforts meaningless. In their continued drive to overcome what they saw as the constrictive and oppressive limitations of bourgeois modernity, their sometimes insensitive excesses were mere missteps on the road to a liberatory praxis.

Given the aspects of their interests and personalities that have been outlined here, Masson and Artaud’s sympathy for and interest in Tantric Buddhism are understandable and even inevitable. Their joint explorations of the darker regions of the human psyche, realms of violence and even madness that many of their fellow artists avoided, led to some of the most challenging images and writing to emerge from the French avant-garde of the early twentieth century. While their influences and interests were eclectic and wide-ranging, this chapter has shown that Tantric philosophy and Tibetan Buddhism played some part in the formation of their ideas, iconography, and beliefs. Their willingness to confront and engage with subject matter that was repulsive or frightening made both Masson and Artaud somewhat more receptive to Tibetan images such as wrathful deities with skull cups full of blood, trampling on the corpses of their enemies. The transgressive power of these images also appealed to another frequent visitor to the rue Blomet, Georges Bataille, to whom the final chapters are dedicated.

\(^{524}\) ibid., p. 35-36.
CHAPTER FIVE

‘A NECESSARY APOSTASY’: GEORGES BATAILLE

I live by tangible experience and not by logical explanation.

- Georges Bataille 525

In his introduction to Nietzsche’s Thus Spoke Zarathustra, Hollingdale writes:

Nietzsche is seeking to minimize the importance of ends, of purposes, and of actions and maximize the importance of states of being. If everything is eternally repeated, then there is no purpose or end in existence, and all who look for one are doomed to everlasting disappointment…It is as if one were on an unending sea journey. The destination is immaterial, since it is never reached; but whether one is seasick for much of the time is very material: it is really all that matters.526

In this concise metaphor, Hollingdale sweeps away much of the extensive and arcane commentary and obfuscation that lie atop the work of both Nietzsche and Bataille, and reaches the simple heart of what they were both, in different ways, expressing: have no concern for the illusions of past and future, just exist.

It is a concept that has been current in spiritual philosophy for centuries, from the time of the Upanishads, through Jesus Christ’s dictum to ‘take therefore no thought for the morrow,’527 through Ram Dass’ Be Here Now.528 Schwarz notes the presence

525 Bataille, Inner Experience, p. 33.
527 Matthew VI.34, The Holy Bible (London: George E. Eyre, 1856).
528 ‘…something of a hippie manual on techniques of meditation, breath control, yoga, and chanting’. Oldmeadow, Journeys East, p. 260; Ram Dass, Be Here Now (San Francisco: Lama Foundation, 1972).
of this philosophy in alchemy, as well as in Hinduism, the cradle of Tantra: ‘...absolute knowledge, which is the goal, the end and thus the Philosopher's stone, is called Jñāna, a term which indicates not a state of knowledge, but a state of being.’

Both Zen and Daoism share this focus on the present moment, as well as, not coincidentally, an ambivalent relationship to reason, and frequently make the point that their goals cannot be reached through its use. We can assume that this wariness and questioning attitude towards the dominance of the reason that they so hated attracted the Surrealists more than the stratification and sophistication of Asian cultures repelled them. Certainly the Dadaists, who ‘railed against rationalism and destruction, which they saw as inextricably linked within the European heritage,’ would have seen a reflection of their own beliefs in the Dao De Jing verse ‘the simplest chastity resembles the fickle, the greatest square has no corner, the largest vessel is never filled,’ or in any number of Zen koans whose sole purpose was to pull the rug of certainty from beneath the reader’s feet, thus liberating the mind from its rut of reason. William Plank reinforces this connection: ‘There is a parallel between Surrealism and its destruction of dualities and such Oriental concepts as the Tao, the ineffable Tao, of which we may attempt a definition in Western terms as the ‘conscious way’ wherein man becomes aware of his entire psyche, even to the level of biological continuity; or the satori, the sudden enlightenment of Zen...’ In his book Raja-Yoga (which Bataille owned and read), Vivekananda wrote that ‘the mind itself has a higher state of existence, beyond reason, a super conscious state, and when the mind gets to that higher state, then this knowledge, beyond reasoning, comes to man.’

A state of mind that confines itself to an awareness of the present instant displaces not only the dominance of reason but also two of life’s animating themes: desire and death. An acceptance of the current moment is synonymous with an acceptance of the world as it is, and this acceptance effectively disarms and eradicates not only questions of optimism and pessimism, but also all expressions of desire, which

530 Rabinovitch, Surrealism and the Sacred, p. 101.
531 Dwight Goddard and Henry Borel, Laotzu’s Tao and Wu Wei (New York: Brentano’s, 1919), Verse XLI, p. 32. This may have been read by Theo Van Doesburg, who wrote ‘But when we say nowadays that Dada is a bird with four legs, a square without corners, then this is the sheerest nonsense! This is Dada!’ Theo Van Doesburg, ‘Karakteristiek van het Dadaisme,’ (Utrecht: Mécano No. 4/5, 1923).
532 Plank, Sartre and Surrealism, p. 60.
533 Hussey, The Inner Scar, p. 89.
are dependent on the recognition and pursuit of alternatives, and on the passage of time (Eliade identifies time, along with the body and the cosmos, as one of the three fundamental elements of tantric sādhana). Awareness of one’s own death (which is by definition in the future) relies upon the recognition of time. Existence in the moment, to the exclusion of all else, short-circuits these concerns and renders them not only powerless but meaningless as well.

Amy Hollywood characterizes Bataille’s idiosyncratic use of the writings of Christian mystics such as Angela of Foligno and Teresa of Avila as a ‘necessary apostasy,’ part of a life and a corpus of work that were ‘in a constant state of movement, flux, or chaos’. This chapter will demonstrate that this relationship of movement and constant apostasy is equally applicable to Bataille’s appropriation of Tantric methodologies. Bataille’s relationship to the concepts of transgression and libertinism will be addressed within the context of Tantrism, the intention of this being to show that, in the same way that traditional Tantric ‘indulgence’ in sexual activity and other forbidden matters was characterized by observation of a strict protocol, Bataille’s ‘libertinism’, while still indulgent by some standards, was also subject to a framework of expectation and limitation. The primary limitation in Bataille’s case was his refusal to experience eroticism free of its ultimate connection to mortality and suffering. Like the Tantrics of history, and influenced by them, Bataille was exploring the nature, limitations, and possible spiritual outcomes of transgression.

Bataille may have received some of his ideas regarding Buddhism from Schopenhauer, ‘whose thought, partly under Indian influence, exhibits numerous, and almost miraculous, coincidences with the basic tenets of Buddhist philosophy.’ Bataille was also very influenced by Nietzsche (who was himself influenced by Schopenhauer), Marx, Hegel, Sade, Durkheim, Kojève, and Mauss, as well as by a wide variety of other writers and artists, and by his study of ethnology, including readings on Aztec society, the potlatch, and Buddhism.

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535 Eliade, Yoga, Immortality, and Freedom, p. 204.
537 ibid, p. 74.
539 For Bataille’s views on Aztecs and potlatch, see his The Accursed Share, Part Two: ‘Sacrifices and Wars of the Aztecs,’ p. 45-61, and ‘The Gift of Rivalry: “Potlatch”,’ p. 63-77. In the notes to these
Choucha notes the influence of the Marquis de Sade on Bataille’s thought and writing: ‘In keeping with his revolutionary message, de Sade disrupted traditional literary genres by mingling pornography with philosophy in his novels, attacking hierarchy by showing how the base and the elevated can be combined, and implying that their separation is mere artifice.’\textsuperscript{540} Yet again we are presented with the seemingly universal theme of duality and its effects.

The philosophies of Hegel and Nietzsche are largely incompatible, but ‘both German philosophers…advocate the necessity of a confrontation with death.’\textsuperscript{541} Bataille and Nietzsche are joined in this particular instance by Hegel, to reaffirm the necessity of the \textit{point abîme} for the project of eternally unfulfilled desire. In contrast to Breton’s \textit{point supreme}, located at the apex of idealism, this meeting can be found around a grave, the stone of which is planted at an ‘unlikely crossroad,’ located ‘at the intersection between these two opposing paths [Nietzsche and Hegel]’\textsuperscript{542}

Like Masson, Georges Bataille absorbed and utilized spiritual teachings from many different sources, without formally committing to any of them. Bataille’s need and desire for community and communion with others, attested to both by his writings and by the many groups with which he was involved, was in marked contrast to his largely unpopular goals. Bataille involved himself with various groups out of a need for companionship in transgression, and in an attempt to involve others in his search for states of being (not goals) that broke through the barrier that separates the profane from the sacred. It was a journey that he was unwilling and perhaps unable to compromise, and thus, despite his many acquaintances and associations, it was a path that he walked, for the most part, alone.

This intransigent nature, coupled with his ability to accept constant change (the latter influenced by his reading of Heraclitus and Nietzsche)\textsuperscript{543}, formed Bataille’s life into a series of leave-takings. His early conversion to Catholicism could be seen as a transgression of his largely secular youth, followed fairly quickly by a rejection of Catholicism itself. In the case of Buddhism, a leave-taking was unnecessary, as he never espoused a formal commitment to it.

\textsuperscript{540} Choucha, \textit{Surrealism and the Occult}, p. 56.
\textsuperscript{541} Nidesh Lawtoo, ‘Bataille and the Suspension of Being,’ \textit{Lingua Romana} Vol. 4-1 (Fall 2004), p. 2.
\textsuperscript{542} Lawtoo, ‘Bataille and the Suspension of Being,’ p. 2.
\textsuperscript{543} See \textit{Acéphale} 2 (21 Janvier 1937), p. 14-16
For Bataille, the journey of desire must be its own goal, and any perceived objective at the ‘end’ of this journey is illusory. He aligns himself with Nietzsche, and in opposition to traditional religion, when he references Nietzsche’s statement deriding ‘working ambitiously, keeping in mind some “goal”, or realizing some desire’ and asks ‘what could be more contrary to the propaganda of Christians and Buddhists?’ This insistence on the primacy of the present instant is heavily influenced not only by Tantra but also by Bataille’s reading of Nietzsche’s concept of the eternal return, two factors that Hussey notes were not unrelated in Bataille’s thought: ‘Bataille…draws upon the cosmology of Tantric literature and, in particular, borrows from Tantric meditative practice which aims at the annihilation of perceived chronological realities in a manner not unlike Nietzsche’s promulgation of the notion of the Eternal Return.’

Simon Elmer writes that for Bataille...the eternal return was, first and foremost, an ecstatic experience of losing oneself in the moment: when the subject, no longer entwined in the unfolding continuum – which is to say, in the movement of its becoming – is absorbed, without attachment to either the future or the past, in the instant.

Bataille accepted the emphasis placed by Eastern philosophy on the present moment, but was seeking a different goal within that moment. He made no secret of his disdain for the goals of ascetics, as Pierre Prévost notes: ‘George Bataille certainly did not pursue this research for the purpose of a spiritual realization similar to that of the Hindu yogi, nor did he hide his harsh criticisms of Hinduism’. Bataille sought to fill the instant, not with peace and acceptance, but with a passion and longing that would burn hotly enough to evaporate the self entirely: ‘a sudden impulse and an irrepressible need – these annihilate the heaviness of the world’.

While Bataille frequently questioned the value of a dualistic system of thought in which individuals are atomized and separated from their surroundings, he also saw the perpetual presence of unsatisfied desire as critical to the continued vitality of an individual’s identity and thought:

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545 Hussey, The Inner Scar, p. 93.
548 Bataille, On Nietzsche, p. 61.
It seems to me that the point at which the attention awakens here completely is that which merits this exasperating tension, which becomes irritated at any possibility of reduction. But would awakening be awakening if the one who was awakened were once to find himself satisfied with what he discovers? If he didn’t prolong further and without concern the interrogation which is awakening?  

Denis Hollier, addressing Bataille’s approach to dualism, equates it with Manichean Gnosticism, as well as relating it indirectly with concepts of the sacred and the profane through a focus on dualism’s two irreconcilable worlds. In addition, Hollier assigns dualism a role in Bataille’s apparent desire to maintain craving when he writes that

dualism itself, as a doctrine, never relinquishes the untenable position it imposes upon the one enticed by it, keeping him in a never resolved dissatisfaction. According to Bataille, this simply results from the fact that one must choose between a perfection which, satisfying the mind, definitely puts it to sleep, and the awakening which requires an ever unresolved dissatisfaction.  

In this case, Bataille’s equation of the pursuit of awakening with the maintenance of dissatisfaction rather than the transcendence of desire places him in direct opposition to Buddhist ideas. Buddhism is contrary to Bataille’s identification with the world of conditioned things, an identification it would view as attachment, while Christian theology would deride his idea that there is nothing better than this world, nothing to transcend to, as nihilism. However, one could as easily identify Bataille’s reification of dissatisfaction as a certain kind of ecstasy, a limitless yes to the reality of the world as it is, an alternative yet equally effective means of escaping the bonds of the self. A view of our current condition as ‘the best of all possible worlds’ can be seen either as optimism or as nihilism, depending on one’s perspective. The dichotomy evaporates when the present moment is seen as the only possibility, in which case the question of ‘best’ or ‘worst’ becomes irrelevant.

Judith Butler addresses Bataille’s view of desire, recognizing its debt to Hegel:

Only as dissatisfied desire is consciousness still alive and united with the being of life, a unity that is the infinite altercation of self and not-self that sets and sustains the organic world in motion...desire’s dissatisfaction is one that is discovered in the midst of life, as a

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549 ‘Il me semble aussi que le point sur lequel l’attention s’éveille ici tout entière est celui qui mérite cette tension excédante, qui s’irrite de toute possibilité de reduction. Mais l’éveil serait-il l’éveil si l’éveil se trouvait une fois satisfait de ce qu’il découvre? s’il ne prolongeait sans égard et plus loin l’interrogation qu’est l’éveil?’ Georges Bataille, Oeuvres Complètes vol. XI, p. 202.


consequence of movement rather than stasis, as a consequence of the impossible project to reconcile determinate identity and time.\textsuperscript{552}

This project is ‘impossible’, of course, because, in the face of death, determinate identity’s struggles against time are inevitably futile. As long as the separate self continues to exist, it undertakes actions to continue that existence, to deny its own inevitable demise, or both. These struggles do not alter the fact that the energy animating this self is, in a sense, “borrowed” from the surrounding universe, which will eventually take it back.

**OVERCOMING REASON**

Jonathan David York acknowledges the mutual interest in a trans-individual continuity of both Buddhism and Bataille, noting that the alienation of both from mainstream society is related to the fact that what is generally regarded as a healthy individual is in fact ‘the source of our alienation and inauthenticity.’\textsuperscript{553}

The transcendence of an individual is a contradiction in terms, as if and when transcendence actually occurs, the individual either ceases to exist, or is revealed to be an illusion, having never really existed. As many spiritual traditions have noted, this conception exists outside of the boundaries of rational thought, and cannot be fully comprehended by the rational mind. This antipathy to or expansion beyond the bounds of reason is a characteristic of mystical thought that invalidates it in the eyes of many rationally minded Westerners, but only made it more appealing to Bataille.

Jesse Goldhammer is one of many writers to note the difficulty of a comprehensive understanding of Bataille’s work, referring to its analysis as ‘an exceedingly confounding endeavor’.\textsuperscript{554} Nick Land goes so far as to deride the very idea of an understanding of Bataille as ‘wretched’, and claims that ‘a recovery of the sense of Bataille’s writing is the surest path to its radical impoverishment’.\textsuperscript{555}

Certainly Bataille, who was more concerned with a pursuit of extreme states of consciousness than with the organization of a comprehensive *oeuvre*, left behind him a difficult and self-contradictory, if inspiring, body of work. Roving over subject matter as diverse as sociology, ethnology, economics, pornography, fiction, and politics, Bataille’s corpus of writing is difficult if not impossible to itemize and label.

\textsuperscript{552} Butler, *Subjects of Desire*, p. 88.
\textsuperscript{553} York, ‘Flesh and Consciousness’, p. 45.
The chaotic nature of his work becomes clear upon even a casual perusal of his 12 volume *Oeuvres Complètes*, which, far from presenting the reader with a progression of distinct ‘works’, is rather a chaotic blend of interlocking, reversing, repetitive and fractured texts, their baroque structure accurately reflecting their own frenzied content. In the archives of the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, freed from the calming hand of the editor, the untamed nature of Bataille’s thought becomes still more evident. Handwritten manuscripts, many literally written on the backs of envelopes, overlap one another in a near-illegible scrawl. As the reader trolls through the boxes and envelopes, ideas surface and submerge again like wayward fish, their destinations frequently unknown. In the words of Jean-François Fourny, Bataille’s work ‘plays on all boards at once’. Given his predilection for the *informe*, this is perhaps as he would have preferred it.

Bataille’s hatred of reason provoked responses from many of his contemporaries, most notably André Breton and Jean-Paul Sartre. Both men took issue not so much with Bataille’s opposition to reason as with his use of language to express this opposition.

Breton famously stated that Bataille ‘reasons like someone who “has a fly on his nose,” which allies him more closely with the dead than with the living, but *he does reason*.’ In a reversal of the usual content of public feuds, Breton appears to be attempting to tar Bataille with the sin of *reasoning*, in order to claim *unreason* for his own camp, what we have earlier identified as ‘transcendent’ Surrealism. Referring to him as a ‘staid librarian’, Breton compares Bataille unfavourably to the Marquis de Sade, and condemns his interest in abjection, ugliness, and ‘that which is vilest, most discouraging, and most corrupted’. In a swipe against Bataille and the numerous Surrealists who had either left Surrealism or been expelled by Breton and gravitated towards Bataille’s camp, Breton states that ‘there is a good possibility that all they have in common is their dissatisfaction’, a curious statement from a man who promoted desire as of the greatest value. It is possible that Breton’s semantic parsing

For more on the dangers of writing ‘on’ Bataille, see Hollier, *Against Architecture*, p. 23.


‘Le malheur pour M. Bataille est qu’il raisonne : certes il raisonne comme quelqu’un qui a « une mouche sur le nez », ce qui le rapproche plutôt du mort que du vivant, mais *il raisonne.*’ André Breton, *Manifestes du surréalisme*, p. 146.


‘ce qu’il y a de plus vil, de plus décourageant et de plus corrompu’. *ibid.*, p. 144.

‘il est très probable qu’ils n’ont que leurs mécontentements à mettre en commun.’ *ibid.*, p. 145.
distinguished desire from dissatisfaction, but there is little doubt that Bataille may have been complimented, rather than offended, by such a statement.

Sartre’s essay ‘Un Nouveau Mystique’, published in 1947, presents a very similar criticism to Breton’s. It begins by identifying Bataille as both a Nietzschean and as a Surrealist, based on the anti-rational and personal nature of his writing: ‘For Mr. Bataille, feeling is the beginning and the end: “Conviction” he writes, “doesn’t come from reason, but only from the feelings that it defines”.’

Sartre adroitly deconstructs Bataille’s linguistic methodology, and reveals one of the reasons for the discomfort that many of Bataille’s readers feel: the inherent inconsistency of using language in an attempt to destroy reason. Sartre writes that ‘only poetry does not attempt to communicate a specified experience…Poetry limits itself to the sacrifice of words; Mr. Bataille wants to give us the reasons for the sacrifice. And it is with words that he must exhort us to sacrifice the words.’

For a writer, unless he chooses either to remain silent or to resort to the nonsense syllables found in Dada, this is an unavoidable paradox. In his essay, Sartre acknowledges that Bataille was ‘very aware of this circle’. While Bataille conceded the paradox, his other writings show that he was not particularly concerned with self-contradiction. For Bataille, who was dedicated to attempting to apprehend the world as it is, paradox was far less worrying than idealism.

Robbe-Grillet demonstrates an ongoing Bataillean influence in French literature when he writes that the world is ‘neither meaningful nor absurd, [it] quite simply is…all around us defying our pack of animistic or domesticating adjectives things are there…without false glamour, without transparency.’

One can almost hear Bataille in the background: ‘Definition betrays desire. Its aim is the inaccessible summit. But the summit eludes any attempt to think about it. It’s what is. Never what should be.’

Idealism, by definition, proposes a state of being that is at odds with what exists, and thus is an obstruction to an unfettered recognition of reality. Like Plato’s cave analogy, it applies a perfected façade, a preconception of ‘should’ over the face of what is, thereby alienating and separating the one who engages in it, and reinforcing dualism. Taking this thought one step beyond mere idealism, one could say that any

563 Seulement la poésie ne se propose pas de communiquer une expérience précise…La poésie se borne à sacrifier les mots; M. Bataille veut nous donner les raisons de ce sacrifice. Et c’est avec des mots qu’il doit nous exhorter à sacrifier les mots.’ Sartre, ‘Un Nouveau Mystique,’ p. 179.
564 ‘Notre auteur est très conscient de ce cercle.’ ibid., p. 179.
565 Alain Robbe-Grillet, quoted in Sass, Madness and Modernism, p. 33.
566 Bataille, On Nietzsche, p. 89.
theoretical position implies a preconceived certainty, necessitating a calcification of potential and loss of contact with a constantly changing and unclassifiable reality.

In the closing passage of *On Nietzsche*, Bataille meditates on the final escape from this idealism (which he sees as energized by an obsession with reason), into the arms of an unjudged and unjudging moment:

But just as the event being past, the community discovers itself beyond the calamity (cautiously, as tears dry up, as closed faces regain their light, as laughter cavorts again) – in the same way, the “tragedy of reason” changes to senseless variation.\(^{567}\)

**TANTRA AND GEORGES BATAILLE**

If one considers Tantric Buddhism to be an aspect of Buddhism, and Bataille to be, in some sense, an aspect of Surrealism, an argument can be made that they occupy similar positions *vis-à-vis* their respective contexts: a position of transgression against their own heritage. Taylor comments on the oppositional relationship that Tantrics had with traditional Buddhists: ‘From whatever sect they emerged – Saivite, Vaisnavite, or Buddhist – the tantrics held the same relation to the orthodox practice: they transgressed boundaries and infringed the rules whether ritual or ethical.’\(^{568}\)

Similarly, Surrealism’s beliefs concerning transcendence and spiritual states of union were turned on their head by Bataille in his writings about base materialism, formlessness, and the futility of dignity and progress. This position of Bataille and Tantra as ‘enemies from within’ highlights the role of transgression as opposed to opposition; in order to transgress, one must have a certain relationship, an identity, with what is being transgressed. Simple opposition to something with which one is not connected is an entirely different thing.

Bataille has been frequently, and somewhat erroneously, identified by historians as a Surrealist, or as Surrealism’s ‘old enemy from within’. This phrase was coined by Bataille himself, and has been quoted much more frequently than what appears several lines earlier in the essay ‘On the Subject of Slumbers’: ‘Whenever the occasion has arisen, I have opposed surrealism.’\(^{569}\)

For the purposes of the present essay, the primary distinction between Bataille and Surrealism can be seen in the contrast

\(^{567}\) ibid., p. 157.

\(^{568}\) Taylor, *Sir John Woodroffe, Tantra, and Bengal*, p. 159.

\(^{569}\) The paragraph reads: ‘I would appear a poor choice. Whenever the occasion has arisen, I have opposed surrealism. And I would now like to affirm it from within as the demand to which I have submitted and as the dissatisfaction I exemplify. But this much is clear: surrealism is defined by the possibility that I, its old enemy *from within*, can have of defining it conclusively.’ Georges Bataille, ‘On the Subject of Slumbers,’ *The Absence of Myth*, p. 49.
between Bretonian idealism, which could perhaps be labeled Transcendent Surrealism, and Bataille’s commitment to an anti-idealist, radically materialist position, which is often referred to as Base Materialism.\textsuperscript{570} Bernard-Henri Lévy questions ‘the way that handbooks of literature join the name of Bataille to that of André Breton as if they were two branches of the same family, and that the author of \textit{Story of the Eye} represented I do not know which undercurrent, or which tribe, of surrealism.’\textsuperscript{571}

Bataille’s identity as a Surrealist is as much the result of historical accident as it is a reflection of a substantive identity. Certainly, he associated with many people involved in the Surrealist movement, and concerned himself in his writing with concepts that were also important to the Surrealists, such as the questioning of dominant ethical values, sovereignty, and the coincidence of opposites.\textsuperscript{572} However, his role, like other individuals such as Marcel Duchamp and Frida Kahlo (who stated that ‘I never knew I was a Surrealist until André Breton came to Mexico and told me I was\textsuperscript{573}), appears today to be more that of an inadvertent adoptee to the movement, the only difference being that Duchamp and Kahlo were more or less drafted by Breton, while Bataille was attached to the movement by historians, despite his frequently contentious relationship with Breton, and despite his clearly stated discomfort with Breton’s movement:

‘I immediately thought that the dense world of surrealism would paralyse and suffocate me. I could not breathe in an atmosphere of ostentation…I had the feeling of being overwhelmed by a strange, deceitful, and hostile force which emanated from a world without secrets…’

Unlike Robert Desnos, Raymond Queneau, Jacques Prévert, Michel Leiris and other signatories of ‘Un Cadavre’ (a virulent anti-Breton manifesto published in 1930 that has become emblematic of the ‘dissident Surrealist’ group), Bataille was never a Surrealist to begin with.\textsuperscript{574}

The role of Tantra within Buddhism is somewhat more complex than that of Bataille within Surrealism. As explained in Chapter One, Tantric Buddhism, also

\textsuperscript{570} Although the ‘Breton-Bataille dichotomy’ has achieved a certain canonic status as a result of the stance of \textit{October} magazine and scholars such as Rosalind Krauss and Hal Foster, the reality of their interactions is quite complex. For a précis of this issue see Lomas, \textit{The Haunted Self}, p. 130.


\textsuperscript{574} Bataille, \textit{The Absence of Myth}, p. 36.
known as Lamaism, has been derided over the centuries not only by Westerners but by other Buddhists as well, due to its supposed impurity and degradation of the classical parameters of Buddhism. Despite its utilization of beliefs, deities, and ceremonies adopted from sources other than Buddhism, however, it would be difficult to deny that it is in fact a form of Buddhism, however far it may veer from more ‘orthodox’ forms. It is true that Tantric Buddhism, in contrast to other schools, welcomes expressions of desire into its practice. However, in the practice of impermanence, selflessness, and suffering, and the commitment to release the mind from cycles of suffering through self-purification, Tantric Buddhism retains the identifying themes of Buddhist practice.

As mentioned in the introduction, Bataille had more than a passing interest in Tantric practice and, according to Jean Bruno, had considered writing a book on the subject. Bruno was a friend of Bataille and a co-worker at the Bibliothèque Nationale, and was probably told this in conversation with Bataille. Beyond this statement in a footnote of Bruno’s article ‘Les techniques d’illumination chez Georges Bataille,’ there appears to be no record of this book, implying that, despite his interest, Bataille did not pursue the project at any length. It is difficult to assess the significance of this proposed project mentioned by Bruno, within the context of an oeuvre that was, by all accounts, riddled with unfinished projects and aborted plans.575

Earlier in his life, Bataille had shown an interest in visiting Tibet, an interest that, like his later book on Tantra, never became a reality. In 1922, when he was 25 years old, he wrote to his cousin: ‘The only thing that matters in our little lives is to keep moving; personally I will be happy when I’ve taken that movement a little farther. Tibet seems to me to be the most suitable place because of the difficulty, the cold, the altitude and the polyandry’.576 This comment says much about the working of Bataille’s mind, even at an early age, although admittedly what it says is ambiguous. One can see the beginnings of a transgressive streak that is attracted to the difficult and the exotic, as well as an interest in unusual and forbidden sexual practices. One can also see, perhaps, a mind that was influenced by the current fashion for the East and the exotic that was quite widespread at the time the letter was written. Certainly they are the words of a young man (though admittedly one who had already lived through a

world war); a man who had not yet experienced the exaltation or agonies that were to mark the older Bataille.

Bataille borrowed at least five books by Alexandra David-Néel from the Bibliothèque Nationale between 1932 and 1942, and his associate Michel Leiris was familiar with her writings on Tibetan spiritual exercises. Bataille’s article ‘Le Paradoxe du Tibet’, his most extensive work that deals specifically with Tibet, is a review of Charles Bell’s book Portrait of the Dalai-Lama.

Passages found in this review, published in 1947, imply that Bataille remained subject to a certain level of idealization regarding Tibet, as were many Europeans. When he writes that ‘Tibet is paradoxically an enclave of peaceful civilization, incapable of attacking others or defending itself’, Bataille overlooks the history later delineated by Donald Lopez, who points out the omission:

Nor was Tibet, in Georges Bataille’s phrase, ‘an unarmed society’. Tibet did not renounce armed conflict when it converted to Buddhism in the eighth century, or in the eleventh century, or under the fifth Dalai Lama...Tibetan armies fought against Ladakh in 1681, against the Dzungar Mongols in 1720, in numerous incursions into Bhutan during the eighteenth century, against invading Nepali forces from 1788 to 1792 and again in 1854, against Dogra forces invading Ladakh from Kashmir in 1842, and against the British in 1904.

Bataille and Artaud were only two of many Westerners who tended to think of Tibet as ‘an unarmed society’ (although Bataille did write that ‘an insurmountable inferiority in weaponry made a defeat of the invaders unlikely’, indicating his awareness that the apparent pacifism of the Tibetans may have been largely due to lack of resources).

Bataille never dedicated an entire work to Buddhism, Tantra, Tibet, or India, but all of these subjects appear recurrently in his work, as we have seen in various

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577 Voyage d’une parisiennne à Lhassa, Initiations lamaïques, and Mystiques et magiciens du Tibet were all borrowed on April 1, 1932. The first two were borrowed again, along with Grand Tibet: au pays de brigands gentilshommes, on February 1, 1937, and the last again on May 7, 1942. Le Modernisme bouddhiste et le Bouddhisme du Bouddha was borrowed on May 15, 1942. ‘Emprunts de Georges Bataille à la Bibliothèque Nationale (1922-1950),’ Oeuvres Complètes Vol. XII, p. 584, 608, 618.


581 Lopez, Prisoners of Shangri-La, p. 8-9.

references throughout the present study. Urban notes both the presence of this theme as well as the difficulty of utilizing it:

By no means a careful scholar, Bataille was an extremely eclectic and haphazard reader, who used his sources quite indiscriminately. Moreover, it is difficult to know how much Bataille himself knew about and was influenced by Indian thought. He had clearly read a good deal about Indian religions, including yoga, Tantrism, and the mythology of Kali; but strangely, his own writings on these traditions are neither extensive nor accurate.

Although he is known to have engaged in meditation that bore a certain resemblance to Tantric meditations found in Tibet, Bataille’s interest in Tantrism as a discipline remained largely intellectual, according to Bruno, who stated that Bataille ‘does not appear to have used it.’ Bataille himself noted that he had briefly, and apparently unsuccessfully, undertaken study of the Tibetan language.

This litany of ambivalence and failed starts might appear to be more of a discounting than an affirmation of Bataille’s involvement with Buddhist thought, and yet it is in keeping with his apostatic nature, and his engagement with formlessness and constant change. Bataille moved through the rituals and traditions of Christianity, Buddhism, Tantra, and other systems in the same way that he moved through the physical world, concerned not so much with form as with the content that form obscures: ‘Being is the absence that appearances conceal’. Bataille rejected fealty to any specific form in order to remain faithful to the quest that all spiritual forms represent, the search for a place beyond language, beyond reason, and beyond the very forms that promise to lead there.

There are many examples of Bataille being influenced yet not converted by esoteric knowledge. A passage from Vivekananda’s book leaves no doubt about at least one area in which Bataille was definitively at odds with traditional wisdom:

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583 See ‘Le Paradoxe du Tibet,’ Critique (May 1947), p. 427-38; Inner Experience, p. 17, 22; Guilty, p. 20; On Nietzsche, p. 32, 85; Eroticism, p. 156, 248; The Absence of Myth, p. 84.

584 Hugh B. Urban, ‘The Remnants of Desire: Sacrificial Violence and Sexual Transgression in the Cult of the Kāpālikas and in the Writings of George Bataille,’ Religion 25 (1995), p. 68-9. Urban does not explain why he calls Bataille’s writings ‘inaccurate’, but does add the following footnote (p. 85, n. 9): ‘Bataille was apparently very fond of Eliade’s Yoga; he also wrote one brief piece on the Goddess Kali for the journal Acéphale…and he briefly mentions other aspects of Hinduism, including Tantrism.’ Urban is himself inaccurate regarding the Kali piece: it was published in Documents No. 6 (1930); reprinted in Documents 1929-1930, p. 368.

585 ‘Quoique s’intéressant au tantrisme (dont il avait retrouvé certains principes et sur lequel il projetait récemment tout un travail), Bataille ne semble pas l’avoir utiliser.’ Bruno, ‘Les techniques d’illumination chez Georges Bataille,’ p. 718.

586 ‘Resolving to travel, begins study of Russian, Chinese, and even of Tibetan, which he quickly abandons’. Georges Bataille (written in third person), ‘Autobiographical Note,’ My Mother/Madame Edwarda/The Dead Man, p. 218.

There must be perfect chastity in thought, word, and deed; without it the practice of Raja-Yoga is dangerous, and may lead to insanity. If people practice Raja-Yoga and at the same time lead an impure life, how can they expect to become Yogis?  

Bataille was utterly uninterested in this sort of ‘purity’, and devoted his energy to what he saw as more pressing issues: sex and death. Bataille ‘was particularly drawn to astronomical theories that advanced a biocentric cosmogony; such theories bolstered his conception of Eros as a universal (pro-)creative force, and inspired him to imagine the origin of the cosmos in analogues of sexual reproduction.’  

This association of sexual intercourse with the birth of the universe is also a central tenet of Tantric philosophy:

The Hindus believed that through uniting spiritually and sexually with Shiva, Shakti gave form to his spirit and created the universe. Tantra, therefore, views the creation of the world as an erotic act of love. This, in Tantra, is the nature of the divine, the root of all that exists.

Bataille is unequivocal in his agreement with this placing of sex and eroticism at the centre of existence. As the origin of human life, it is also the origin of human death, and the basis of all human desire. Bataille saw the mental seizures and physical contortions that constitute the sex act, and the desire for it, as the basis for all his other concerns, and his writing is littered with passages such as this:

Eroticism around us is so violent, it intoxicates hearts with so much force – to conclude, its abyss is so deep within us – that there is no celestial opening which does not take its form and its fever from it.

Bataille expresses a disturbing and idiosyncratic version of this philosophy in his essay ‘The Solar Anus,’ where he combines the Tantric notion of the sexual generation of existence with a modernist machine metaphor:

The two primary motions are rotation and sexual movement, whose combination is expressed by the locomotive’s wheels and pistons. These two motions are reciprocally transformed, the one into the other. Thus one notes that the earth, by turning, makes animals and men have coitus, and...that animals and men make the earth turn by having coitus. It is the mechanical combination or transformation of these movements that the alchemists sought as the philosopher’s stone.

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588 Vivekananda, Complete Works, p. 170.
591 Bataille, Inner Experience, p. 120.
The reference to alchemy reveals Bataille’s eclectic interest in numerous traditions, all of which possess as a common element the desire to overcome duality and to enter (or re-enter) a state of oneness, a feat that can only be accomplished through an escape from the self. Despite all of this, however, Bataille stops short of identifying sex as a reliable path towards spiritual awareness. He refuses to acknowledge any ulterior uses for sexual frenzy, as to do so would negate his association of sex with expenditure. This contentious interaction was also present in Bataille’s relationship to Christianity. Amy Hollywood writes that ‘whereas the mystics’ path ends with the divine encounter, Bataille renounces all objects, aims, or end for his quest and his desire.’

For Bataille, the very power that sex wields is dependent on it being utterly without redeeming qualities, and even something to be feared. Erotic activities are deprived of their power as soon as they are seen as ‘useful’ or as a means to something else. Bataille asks whether fear ‘is not precisely what does underlie “sex”; and whether the connection between “mystic” and “sexual” has not something to do with the gulf’s of terrifying darkness that belong equally to both domains.’

Tantric initiates share Bataille’s awe of the erotic’s mysterium tremendum but, perhaps emboldened by their participation in a developed tradition, believe that with practice they can master this power and force it to serve their own ends. Bataille has no such faith, and whether through preference or resignation, sees the erotic power of sex as something that cannot, and must not, ever be controlled. In this passage, Bataille condemns Tantra for its avoidance of ejaculation, and for its failure to recognize sex as something that should exist without ulterior purpose:

Tantric yoga uses sexual pleasure, not in order to ruin oneself in it, but to detach oneself before the end from the object, from the woman, whom they make use of (they avoid the last moment of pleasure). In these practices…it is always a matter of entering into possession of interiority, of acquiring the mastery of inner movements, detached from the objects of our life…Not being easily offended by licentiousness, I find it contemptible to “abuse” a woman and pleasure for means other than those of their own. Contemptible above all to “exploit” experience, to make a stilted exercise out of it, even a competition.

The apparent lack of enthusiasm for Tantrism in passages such as this is counteracted by the uncanny resemblance of some of Bataille’s practices to Tantric

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594 Bataille, Eroticism, p. 222.
595 Bataille, Inner Experience, p. 183.
meditations, as well as by the testimony of acquaintances such as Jean Bruno and others, including Pierre Prévost, who wrote that ‘it seems likely, based on certain allusions made during the meetings of the College of Socratic Studies, that it is a tantric yoga he was practicing.’

Bataille’s relationship to Tantric practice appears to have been simultaneously one of relative ignorance, curiosity, rejection, and idiosyncratic involvement. Put briefly, and at the risk of oversimplification, Bataille was attempting to adopt the techniques of Tantric yoga in order to pursue a path that was frequently completely at odds with the stated goals of these practices. He would sometimes veer from endorsement to apparent rejection within the span of a single passage:

This mastery of our innermost movements, which in the long run we can acquire, is well known: it is yoga. But yoga is given in the form of coarse recipes, embellished with pedantism and with bizarre statements. And yoga, practiced for its own sake, advances no further than an aesthetics or a hygiene, whereas I have recourse to the same means (laid bare), in despair.

Even had he been able, Bataille would not have accepted the Tantric invitation to escape his desires through the engagement and ‘disarming’ of those very desires. He followed a philosophical path that viewed desire as an asset rather than as a liability. This desire was not to be used, as in Tantra, as a self-destroying power that would overcome itself; neither was it a symptom of something missing or ‘wrong’ with existence. While many viewed desire as representative of an essential lack, Bataille saw it as symptomatic of the inherent overflow of existence, an expression of the universe being, in a sense, too big for itself.

Jonathan David York comments on Bataille’s distance from a philosophy based on lack: ‘While most phenomenologists, like ancient Gnostics and contemporary psychoanalysts, describe desire as symptomatic of an essential lack, Bataille followed his Neoplatonic Renaissance precursors in upholding its life affirming and creative energies.’ This opposition to the rejection of worldly life was the basis of many of Bataille’s beliefs and activities, including his indulgence in what some saw as a surfeit of sex and alcohol (‘my true church is a whorehouse’), and his opposition to monks

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597 Bataille, Inner Experience, p. 15.


599 Bataille, Guilty, p. 12.
and the priesthood: ‘My principle against ascesis is that the extreme limit is accessible through excess, not through want.’

Bataille’s reservations regarding Eastern spiritual practices were the result of a mixture of idealization and an eclectic autodidacticism. Of the 836 books borrowed by Bataille from the Bibliothèque Nationale between 1922 and 1950, at least 50 are directly relevant to his interest in Asia, including historical, ethnological, and sociological works on China, Tibet, India, and Nepal, language textbooks in Sanskrit and Chinese, and studies in Oriental philosophy and comparative religion.

In ‘The Unarmed Society,’ Bataille’s review of Portrait of the Dalai Lama by Charles Bell, Bataille exhibits a familiarity with many aspects of Tibetan custom and philosophy, but appears to be more impressed with Bell than with his book:

The work is poorly done, but it is more lively and offers more than a formal study; it is a jumble, but no matter: We do not have a less systematic or more complete document on the civilization of Tibet. Charles Bell is the first white man to have had sustained relations, based on a kind of friendship, with a Dalai Lama. This very honorable diplomatic agent…felt a genuine concern not only for the interests of his own country but for those of Tibet, whose language he knew.

Later in this essay, Bataille relates what he sees as the non-productive lives of the monks to his own theory of dépense: ‘lamaic enlightenment morally realizes the essence of consumption, which is to open, to give, to lose, and which brushes calculations aside’. This is a surprisingly laudatory statement from a man whose disdain for systems of asceticism was well known.

Bataille’s compatibility with the concerns and techniques of Tantrism, as well as his distance from more conventional notions of Buddhism, are neatly summed up by Jean Bruno when he writes that ‘Bataille…sought to release in himself a conflagration or “solar burst”, not to attain harmony or peace’. Whereas a Tantric adept would

600 Bataille, Inner Experience, p. 21.
undertake disciplines of concentration, visualization, and focusing in order to reach enlightenment, Bataille engaged in them for more obscure, idiosyncratic, and, in a sense, ‘goal-less’ reasons. Devoting himself to living in the moment, he ‘loves revolution for the revolt, not for the utopia of its realization.’

More interested in experience than in explanation, Bataille sought what Jonathan David York calls ‘a dialectical consummation that owes more to a dithyrambic than a teleological resolution, more to the operations of desire than to those of history, more to libido than Cogito.’ Or, to put it more colloquially, Bataille would rather laugh than think:

As soon as the effort at rational comprehension ends in contradiction, the practice of intellectual scatology requires the excretion of unassimilable elements, which is another way of stating vulgarly that a burst of laughter is the only imaginable and definitively terminal result – and not the means – of philosophical speculation.

We are dealing with a serial apostate whose laughter (he hopes) will drown out the words of the philosophers, and whose study of religion is repeatedly interrupted by drunkenness, gambling, and a virtual residence in whorehouses. Having both discovered and rejected the Catholic Church by his early twenties, he was not likely to be held in check by a discipline such as Tantra, and it is little wonder that his interest in religions eventually took the form of a bizarre attempt to generate one of his own.

ACÉPHALE

In June of 1936, Bataille introduced the idea of the Acéphale with the words ‘man has escaped from his head as the condemned man has escaped from prison.’

Acéphale was formed by Bataille as an attempt to embody and extend his beliefs about sacred community. Surya writes that Bataille’s companion Laure (Colette Peignot), Georges Ambrosino, Pierre Klossowski, and Patrick Waldberg were all members of this shadowy group, with numerous others possibly being involved. Masson was involved with the development of the idea, particularly in his drawing of

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608 Surya, Georges Bataille, An Intellectual Biography, p. 146.  
the headless man, but was not involved in Acéphale’s activity as he was in Spain at the time. In its secrecy, its emphasis on experience as opposed to theory, and its ritualistic activity, Acéphale in some ways resembled the Tantric sects of ancient India more than the French political organizations of its own era. Acéphale eschewed the pursuit of political and worldly goals in favour of an internal, occultized reality. Far from publicizing its goals or attempting to win converts, the group quite literally hid itself in the woods and, through a confrontation with an inner reality, attempted to influence the world through communion with its darker and hidden aspects. Although certainly not explicitly ‘Tantric’, Acéphale shared aspects of initiation, secrecy, occult means, and transgression with this ancient philosophy.

For Bataille, reason is a prison, and the head is the symbol and the locale of reason. In search of a body-centred existence, which is to say an existence energized and defined by instinctive drives rather than by detached consideration, Bataille continually attempts to undermine the dominance of reason in his life and in his writing. This hatred of reason is the primary motivation of Bataille and Masson in their creation of the Acéphale, the headless man holding a bleeding heart and a dagger, with a death’s head for genitalia and a labyrinth of viscera at his centre. For Bataille, this image symbolized his goal: a being who has cast reason down from its throne and replaced it with an unexamined life of visceral existence. Even when allowing the head into his consideration, as in his theorizing on the pineal eye, Bataille transgresses its hegemony. The thousand petaled lotus at the crown of the head, the site of transcendence in Buddhist and Hindu cosmogony, is replaced with a blinded eye, staring futilely at an anal sun. The blinded eye: symbol of purpose turned against itself, of the ultimate futility of sight, project, and reason.

A group such as Acéphale, existing as it did at the very edge of social acceptability, was bound to attract a very small number of people and to exist for only a short time. Even if its existence had not been cut short by the intrusion of World War Two, it is difficult to imagine that Acéphale could have established itself as a permanent element of the French avant-garde.

In his introduction to Bataille’s book Visions of Excess, Allan Stoekl summarizes the mythical, as opposed to political, basis of the group:

Bataille for a long time had been interested in marginal groups: Gnostics, madmen, knights, sects of heterodox Christian mystics. The Acéphale group was also outside the mainstream of political life: subversive yet not intended to lead an organized mass movement, the

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611 ibid., p. 236-7.
activities of the group would help stimulate a rebirth of the kind of social values Bataille had espoused in the Critique Sociale essays: expenditure, risk, loss, sexuality, death...[Acéphale’s] main goals were the rebirth of myth and the touching off in society of an explosion of the primitive communal drives leading to sacrifice.\footnote{612}

Bataille’s interest in groups such as those mentioned above is attested to by many of the books he borrowed from the Bibliothèque Nationale, amongst which were Favre’s Les Sociétés secrètes en Chine, Miles’ Le Culte de Civa, Evans-Wentz’s Le Yoga tibétain et les doctrines secrètes, and La Doctrine du sacrifice dans les Brahmanas by Sylvain Lévi.\footnote{613}

The very idea of a ‘secret’ society is related to notions of the unconscious, the body, and the hidden. Intellectually based groups and activities seek to enlighten, to bring issues to conscious attention in order to understand them rationally. Secret societies such as those found in Tantra, alchemy, and other occult traditions tend to be more based on physical reality, faith, and a group consciousness that is not fully graspable by purely rational means. This was certainly the case in the beliefs of the Acéphale group, the symbol of which, Masson’s headless man, has foregrounded bodily concerns so completely that the head is entirely absent. The head, the symbol of idealism and utilitarian reason,\footnote{614} is seen as the enemy of bodily freedom and Dionysian excess. According to Bataille, it is ‘conscious authority or God,’ and ‘represents one of the servile functions that gives itself as, and takes itself to be, an end; consequently, it must be the object of the most inveterate aversion’.\footnote{615} Choucha writes that ‘the denial of the head is a denial of self-control, logic, reason, evoking infinite potential for expansion in a different dimension.’\footnote{616} In the case of Acéphale, this direction was away from isolated, individual existence, and towards a sacred collective characterized by participation in transgressive acts. In the words of Jonathan David York, ‘this “Gnostic” orientation informs Bataille’s assessment of the symbiosis of flesh and consciousness in terms of sacred experience, and determines his emphasis on

\footnote{612}{Allan Stoekl, introduction to Visions of Excess, p. xix.}


\footnote{614}{'Tout d’abord, pourquoi “acéphale”? Si l’on se souvient du “Bas matérialisme et la gnose” qui évoquait ce dieu-âne égyptien dont la tête avait été tranchée, on peut toujours avancer que la “tête” est le symbole de l’idéalisme et de la raison utilitaire.’ Jean-François Fourny, Introduction à la lecture de Georges Bataille, p. 88.}

\footnote{615}{Bataille, ‘Propositions,’ Visions of Excess, p. 199.}

\footnote{616}{Choucha, Surrealism and the Occult, p. 91.}
the material world in general, and the body specifically, as the loci in which this experience unfolds. The wound that Bataille sees as necessary for true communication between individuals is to be shared in such a group, expanding from a personal injury to exist as a collective, and bonding, laceration.

What differentiates Bataille categorically from a structure such as fascism, which also celebrated the submission of the individual to the group, is that he was seeking ‘a total annihilating surrender of the self, a complete ‘giving up’ of oneself,’ not to any race, individual, country, or identifiable political power structure, but to an unknowable totality which by definition was beyond the control of nations. While the ends that he sought through this sacrifice were unquestionably distinct from those of the fascists, the presence of such extreme and apparently anti-individualist views were seen as cause for alarm by many. Fortunately for his credibility and even for his safety, Bataille’s interest in human sacrifice was not widely known at the time.

The archaic and chthonian themes that dominated Acéphale are not difficult to recognize. The very notion of a secret society is more aligned with pre-Enlightenment structures such as alchemy or the Knights Templar than with the ostensibly liberal humanism of twentieth century Europe. The headless figure that was the icon of Acéphale, grasping a flaming heart and a dagger, is clearly more an expression of ancient themes of sacrifice and atonement than of contemporary notions of reason and enlightenment. Even the association of the intestines with a labyrinth, an apparently idiosyncratic creation of Bataille and Masson, turns out to be, according to Eliade, an ancient pairing, along with other associations such as the belly with a cave, or the backbone with the axis mundi. Little wonder, then, that the notion of a human sacrifice, perhaps the most ancient of transgressive sacralizing acts, should appear here within this bad seed of thanatos, nestled like a worm within the heart of a nation that was soon to descend into yet another orgy of death.

Bataille was aware that, in the words of Denis Hollier, ‘at the heart of social existence, assuring the group’s cohesion, rules a repulsive crime.’ The legend of Acéphale’s plans to undertake a human sacrifice as a means of deep group cohesion has done nothing to counteract speculations about Bataille’s political leanings. Historians repeat varying accounts of this story in the service of differing agendas, some even

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617 York, ‘Flesh and Consciousness: Georges Bataille and the Dionysian,’ p. 44.
620 Hollier, Against Architecture, p. 124.
questioning Bataille’s sanity. In the current state of liberal democracy and relative peace that exists in Europe and North America, tales of wool-suited French intellectuals pondering a human sacrifice sound difficult, if not impossible, to believe. In fact Bataille, while certainly extreme for his time, was part of a long tradition of interest in sacrifice: ‘the formations of violence that appeared during the [French] Revolution convinced a wide spectrum of French intellectuals that sacrifice – a public spectacle of ritual violence – was necessary for political beginnings.’

Many years later, Roger Caillois, who may or may not have been an actual member of Acéphale, reflected on the group motivations that lay behind such a lacerating concept:

In the heat of the moment, nothing less than a human sacrifice seemed capable of binding together our energies as profoundly as it was necessary to carry out some huge task – which, furthermore, did not have any clear goal. Just as the physicist of antiquity needed but one single fulcrum to lift up the world, for the new conspirators the act of solemnly putting to death one of their own members seemed a sufficient means of consecrating their cause and ensuring their eternal loyalty. By making their efforts invincible, this was supposed to deliver the world to them.

The group aspect of this intentional death is central to its power and meaning. By descending to the very root of human existence, not alone but with conspirators (conspiracy being, literally, a ‘breathing together’), one could annihilate the barriers that lay between individuals in the mundane world. Mutual participation in this dark orgy, so incomprehensible to those outside of the group, would forever bind participants, not only as sharers in a secret guilt, but, just as importantly, as societal outcasts, voluntary pariahs. This ritual of death would push away the profane world, neutralize its ‘profanity’, leaving at the centre of the resulting void a condemned family of impenetrable cohesion, a black pearl grown over a heart of murder.

Goldhammer’s description of the extensive historical role of human sacrifice is testament to its ongoing power in many aspects of Western history. Awareness of this bloody legacy creates a context in which Acéphale can be seen as less a contemporary aberration than an ancient tradition made manifest:

Like sacrificial practices in France and throughout the world, sacrifice in the West has an important politico-religious heritage. All three major Western religions were founded sacrificially: Judaism and Islam trace their roots to Abraham’s attempted filicide; Christianity began with

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Jesus’ crucifixion. Sacrifice - both real and symbolic - was also present at the dawn of Western politics....democratic Athens was founded after Theseus slew the Minotaur...and Republican Rome was born when Romulus killed his brother, Remus...Brutus committed filicide to overthrow the corrupt Tarquin monarchy, thus reestablishing the [Roman] republic. In each of these religious and political examples, a new community and authority were born when people congregated around sacrificial death.\footnote{Goldhammer, \textit{The Headless Republic}, p. 5.}

This gory legacy is not the exclusive province of the West, of course; a history of sacrifice haunts Eastern religion as well, one that equals or exceeds the litany of death outlined above, and one with which Bataille was quite familiar. Hussey notes that ‘Bataille demonstrates an academic expertise not only with Oriental themes but also the “\textit{cauchemar inoubliable}” of Hindu religious experience.’\footnote{\textit{cauchemar inoubliable}: unforgettable nightmare. Hussey, \textit{The Inner Scar}, p. 88-9.} He is referring to Bataille’s brief article on the goddess Kalī, published in the ‘Dictionnaire Critique’ in Bataille’s journal \textit{Documents} in 1930.\footnote{\textit{Documents} No. 6 (1930); reprinted in \textit{Documents 1929-1930}, p. 368.} Accompanied by a bloodthirsty image of Kalī [Plate 77], this article appears to be more concerned with the number of sacrifices made to the goddess than with ethnographic study. It is illustrative of Bataille’s primary motivations: a somewhat superficial employment of ethnographic information as a vehicle to access what he saw to be more primary and universal issues, such as human subjugation to the inevitabilities of violence, impermanence, and death.

Acéphale’s secret meetings took place at the foot of a lightning struck tree in the forest outside of Paris.\footnote{Pierre Klossowski: ‘Je me souviens de la méditation devant « l’arbre foudroyé » dans la forêt de Marly,’ Bernard-Henri Lévy, ‘ « Cette drôle de société secrète » (Conversation avec Pierre Klossowski),’ \textit{Les Aventures de la liberté}, p. 171. See also Surya, \textit{Georges Bataille: An Intellectual Biography}, p. 251.} The detail of the tree is notable in that it bears a certain resemblance to a tradition of the cults of Bhairava and Kālī of Kashmir, according to Sanderson: ‘These invocations took place precisely where the uninitiated were in greatest danger of possession: on mountains, in caves, by rivers, in forests, at the feet of isolated trees...’\footnote{Alexis Sanderson, ‘Purity and power amongst the Brahmans of Kashmir,’ \textit{The Category of the Person}, Michael Carrithers, et. al., eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 201.} As it was a secret society (and with a few relatively minor exceptions, none of the participants ever betrayed their vow of secrecy), details of the meetings and ceremonies of the Acéphale group have largely disappeared with the deaths of its participants. In his introduction to the reprinted collection of \textit{Acéphale}, Michel Camus writes:
We know only what is legible, all the rest is unreadable. Those who...took part with George Bataille in the development of the myth of acephality in the forest of Saint-Nom-la Bretèche...did not write in the review. Conversely, the conspirators who collaborated in the review did not necessarily form part of the group of initiates. Not everyone could, as did George Bataille, torture themselves in the writing to the point of feeling headless...629

Bataille was certainly aware of and in a general sense inspired by the occult and mystical aspects of Tantra but, given the level of secrecy that was operative in Acéphale, we have no way of knowing if the group was directly or consciously influenced by a Tantric legacy. By receding into the fog of history with its secrets intact, Acéphale preserves its esoteric nature, and remains true to its essentially antisocial raison d’être.

THE EYE

Much has been written on the changing role of the visual in the early twentieth century. Inspired by the stop-motion photography of Eadweard Muybridge, the dynamic imagery of Futurism, and the increasing pace of daily life, modern artists, the Cubists prominent amongst them, began dismantling the visual image into its constituent parts, undertaking an assault on form within art that has yet to end. Most analysis of this trend focuses on the fate of the depicted object (its disintegrating form, the aggression that appears to be directed towards it). If one views the artwork itself as an animating subject rather than as a passive object, it can be seen that the assault is in fact not only on depicted form, but on the eye of the viewer as well. In Surrealism, one finds this assault on the eye becoming ever more explicit. The visual sense being fundamental to the dominant Western view of the world, it was inevitable that the Surrealists would, so to speak, have it in their sights.

Walter Ong has summarized the cultural assumptions and priorities regarding vision against which both Buddhism and Surrealism were reacting:

Freudians have long made the point that for thought and civilization itself to advance, man must minimize the proximity senses of touch, taste, and smell and maximize the senses of hearing and sight...[which] keep the individual and the object of perception nicely distinct...Of the two, sight is the more abstract and thus the more ‘objective.’ The latter-

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day history of civilization has entailed a marked movement from the aural to the visual world sense.\footnote{Walter J. Ong, ‘World as View and World as Event,’ American Anthropologist Vol. 71, No. 4 (August 1969), p. 644.}

In Bataille’s case, and in that of many of his associates in Acéphale and the College of Sociology, their distrust of vision was related to some extent to their questioning of modernity and valorization of the primitive. Ong addresses the increased importance of vision in modern society, and its displacement of other, more ‘primitive’ senses that left the subject more connected with the surrounding environment:

…the “world sense” or “world presence” of virtually all premodern cultures tends in modern, technological societies to be replaced by an experience of the world as a kind of view…Vision…is the prototypical distance sense, embodying in every glance the separation of subject from object and allowing for a greater sense of control and of distance from emotional or instinctual response. Vision is also the most self-conscious sense, since it is most conducive to an awareness of one’s own position in relation to the perceptual field.\footnote{Sass, Madness and Modernism, p. 445-6, n. 84.}

A society that is dependent on the maintenance of separate individuals is a society dependent on vision. Separating existence into the observer and the observed, maintaining distance as a prerequisite of its own existence, vision is philosophically distant from any undertaking that advises the reabsorption of the individual into the greater whole. As long as the eye is open and seeing, it is connecting the seer to the outside world, yet simultaneously maintaining a separation. It is a paradoxical connection that is dependent on distance, as opposed to the loss of boundaries that is sought in some artistic, and most spiritual, practices.

According to Gerald Eager, closed eyes represent a willingness to ignore the outside world in favor of the inner one, and are also, not surprisingly, symbolic of sleep, dreams, and death.\footnote{Eager, ‘The Missing and Mutilated Eye in Contemporary Art,’ p. 55.} What these three states of being have in common is that they involve the loss of conscious control. Given the association of these states with so many of the prominent themes in Buddhism and Surrealism (dreams, death, the loss of individuality), it is little wonder that the iconographies of both of these fields are so rich in imagery that depicts closed eyes [Plates 78-82].

McMahan provides a summary of the many existing philosophical studies that address the role of vision in modern society:

The gist of most is that ocularcentrism in the Western Enlightenment tradition involves a distancing of the subject as seer from the object and a reductive objectification of the seen. Sight, its critics claim, is the sense
activity that perceives at a distance and tends to neglect temporality; therefore, it is prone to give rise to uninvolved, spectatorial modes of knowledge in which the separate subject views the world as a collection of static objects.\textsuperscript{633}

This ‘spectatorial mode’ is quite similar to the state of mind that both Buddhism and Surrealism were attempting to escape. It leads to a type of knowledge in which the individual is not only assumed to exist, but is also required to be autonomous and separated from the surrounding environment. This lack of involvement and identification with everything that is not ‘self’ simply reinforces the illusion that the ‘self’ exists in some definitive and lasting form. Philosophies that espouse an ever-changing reality that consists of eternal ‘slippage’ would counter that the ‘self’ is in fact a temporary energy form such as a wave or a swirl within a stream. While it may appear to have independent existence, it is in fact a phenomenon that consists entirely of the material of its surrounding environment. As mentioned above, the senses of touch, smell, and hearing are much more amenable to this sense of identification, and do not require the separation and individuation that is required of sight.

The opposition of the Surrealists to the dominance of vision did not result in the eye being shunned or ignored in their art. On the contrary, many Surrealist artists appear to have been obsessed with eyes: their appearance, their function, their vulnerability, and their transgression. Martin Jay writes that

the eye was, in fact, a central Surrealist image…Anticipated by Odilon Redon’s haunting images of single eyes as balloons, flowers, or Cyclops staring towards heaven [Plate 83], artists like de Chirico, Ernst, Dali, Man Ray and Magritte developed a rich ocular iconography. In most cases, the eyes (or often the single eye) were enucleated, blinded, mutilated or transfigured, as in Story of the Eye, into other shapes like eggs, whose liquid could easily be spilled. Ernst’s Two Ambiguous Figures (1919) [Plate 84]…Man Ray’s Object of Destruction (1923) [Plate 85]…Dali’s The Lugubrious Game (1929) [Plate 86]…Giacometti’s Suspended Ball (1930-31) [Plate 87]…all typify the violent denigration of the visual that culminated in Buñuel’s slashing razor.\textsuperscript{634}

The final reference is to the opening scene of Un Chien Andalou, the notorious film made by Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dali in 1929, in which a woman’s eye is cut open with a straight razor [Plate 88]. Opposition to ocular dominance has never been more straightforward than in this horrifying scene, and eighty years have not lessened the intensity of the image. The visual impact is made all the more intense in that it is

\textsuperscript{633} McMahan, Empty Vision: Metaphor and Visionary Imagery in Mahāyāna Buddhism, p. 183.
\textsuperscript{634} Martin Jay, ‘The Disenchantment of the Eye: Surrealism and the Crisis of Ocularcentrism,’ p. 192.
the eye that is watching the eye being destroyed, the immediacy of the experience thus being greater than the witnessing of the destruction of another body part.

This period of history saw the imposition of authoritarian social structures that imposed control on the visual and aesthetic experience of society. The promotion of Social Realism in the Soviet Union and Nazi condemnation of ‘degenerate’ art in Germany are two examples of this trend. These regimes believed that, by controlling what people saw, they could more effectively control what people think.

The Buddhist approach to vision is in marked contrast to these authoritarian attempts to dictate the visual experience of individuals. Various schools of Buddhism utilized authority in varying ways, ranging from the absolute authority of the abbot in a Zen monastery to the total freedom of Tibetan hermits, who would often live most of their lives in complete isolation. Whatever the external situation, the success of the meditation practice is dependent on the meditator having unfettered access to inner experience without the mediation of others in the practice itself. While the iconography of Tibetan Buddhist art was strictly controlled by tradition, the reason for this was not to suppress dissent, as was the case with Hitler and Stalin, but to maintain the purity of a meditational practice that had been refined over centuries. The motivation for this did not necessarily stem from a respect for the individuality of the monks; in fact, given the feudal social structure of Tibet, combined with the widely accepted belief that the self was an illusion, ideas of individual liberty, in the sense that they are used in the modern world, would have been quite foreign and even bizarre in ancient Tibet.

McMahan notes the different approach to vision that existed in this culture, and the resultant breach in approaches to the visual between a culture dominated by Tantric Buddhism and our own:

In Tantric meditation, this basic structure is carried over into deity visualizations in which the identity of the practitioner is exchanged for the identity of the deity in an acknowledgement of their interdependence and a celebration of their both being ultimately empty of inherent existence. This is far from the distancing and objectifying gaze of the disinterested mind in modern rationalism. It seems, then, that the refusal of most Buddhist schools in India to attempt to ground philosophical discourse in supposed ontological foundations may have averted some of the problems inherent in modern Western ocularcentrism.635

A near-universal element amongst meditational techniques is the attempt to disengage the visual sense. While not all techniques of meditation require closed eyes, even those in which the meditator remains able to see neutralize the vision through

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focus on unstimulating phenomena such as walls, a single candle flame, or open countryside with few features. The reason for this is that vision is one of the most powerful connectors of the individual to the outer world, and thus its neutralization is an effective method of internalizing the consciousness and the intellect. Buddhism shares Surrealism’s fascination with the eye, which ‘is undoubtedly the most symbolically charged part of the body in Buddhist thought and practice.’

In marked contrast to the base activities lurking in *Story of the Eye* and in other dark corners of Bataille’s *oeuvre* and imagination, Buddhism tends to valorize the eye, particularly the inner eye, which is representative of spiritual insight.

While reading Vivekananda’s *Raja-Yoga*, Bataille was exposed to the concept of the chakra system, in which various points along the spine assume specific levels of importance along the path of spiritual development:

The Yogi alone has the Sushumna open. When this Sushumna current opens, and begins to rise, we get beyond the senses, our minds become super-sensuous, super-conscious – we get beyond even the intellect, where reasoning cannot reach.

Buddhism’s emphasis on and belief in internal vision is manifest in any number of Buddha statues and paintings, on which can be found two features, the urna and the usnisa, which represent the power of the inner eye [Plate 89]. The urna, situated between the eyebrows, is symbolic of the third eye (the sixth chakra), and the usnisa, symbolized on a Buddha by a large bump at the crown of the head which is usually conflated with a topknot of hair, represents the thousand-petalled seventh chakra, the seat of total enlightenment. These are the two highest points in the chakra system, which is based on the belief that there is a current of energy (the ‘sushumna’ mentioned above) that moves within the spinal column. This system is central to many techniques of Hindu and Buddhist meditation. Many meditations are designed to awaken the *kundalini*, a psychic energy that is believed to be ‘sleeping’ at the base of the spine in unenlightened people. This energy then rises through the sushumna, energizing each of the chakras in turn. When it reaches the crown of the head (or the point between the eyebrows), the psychic energy is released from the framework of the body and enlightenment is attained. The spiritually inverted reflection of the usnisa, an abject

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construction that banishes the idea of enlightenment, can be found in Bataille’s idea of the pineal eye.

Located at the same spot as the usnisa, at the crown of the head, the pineal eye was anything but transcendent. Bataille identified it as the site of anguish and absurdity: ‘When I solicit gently, in the very heart of anguish, a strange absurdity, an eye opens itself at the summit, in the middle of my skull.’ While in Hinduism and Buddhism the crown of the head is the point at which human existence can access the divine through the release of the kundalini, in Bataille’s notion it is the site of a reptilian eye staring upwards in futility at an anal sun. In this world, even the ascendant is descending, everything falling downwards, all structure collapsing beneath the glare of imminent death.

While there is no evidence that the Buddha or any of his followers shared Bataille’s early belief in the existence of a ‘pineal eye’ (indeed, the idea that they might have done seems quite ludicrous), a less literal connection can definitely be made concerning the foregrounding, by both Bataille and Buddhist theory, of the physical and spiritual importance of the crown of the head. Bataille’s ‘mythoanatomical legend of the pineal eye’ part of what Krell calls a ‘mythological anthropology’ of ‘phylogenetic tragedy, precarious survival, anguished adaptation, freakish permutation and ignominious self-recognition’, may have been partially influenced by the idea of the chakra system. Based on the testimony of those who knew him and on written records at the Bibliothèque Nationale, we know that Bataille exhibited an ongoing interest in books on Buddhism and Asia, including Histoire de l’Asie, Les religions de l’Inde, Mystiques et magiciens du Thibet, and Les Civilisations de l’Orient. This familiarity with Buddhist and Tantric literature would have exposed Bataille to many ideas that were compatible with his own concerns, including the role of the body in spiritual pursuits, the importance of transgression in the realm of the sacred, Tantric ritual and ceremony, and the role of the chakras in Buddhist methods of enlightenment. In a curious and possibly significant parallel to the Tantric elements involved in Bataille’s practice, the psychoanalyst Rudolf Reitler, writing in 1913, associated the third eye with transgressive sexuality. Jeanne Siegel notes a striking similarity between

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643 For a comprehensive list of Bataille’s borrowing, see Georges Bataille, ‘Emprunts de Georges Bataille à la Bibliothèque Nationale (1922-1950)’, Oeuvres Complètes Vol. XII, p. 553-621.
a photograph in Reitler’s article and a work by Max Ernst, raising the possibility that Reitler’s work may have been known in Surrealist circles. 644

Having studied as a medievalist, Bataille was also widely read in Western philosophy (although he was not, as Sartre was quick to point out, a ‘real’ philosopher), and would have been familiar with the philosophers whom Krell identifies as having been interested in the role of the pineal gland:

The paradoxes of the pineal – even when the gland and eye remain unmentioned – extend far back in our history, from Hegel’s philosophy of nature as developed in the Encyclopedia and in the 1805-06 lectures at Jena on Realphilosophie, back through Kant’s Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View and Descartes’ Treatise on Man, to Thomas, Thomas’ Aristotle, Aristotle’s Plato, and Plato’s Timaeus. For it is the doctrine of Timaeus of Locri, the Pythagorean doctrine as recorded in Plato’s Timaeus, that we recall when Bataille designates “the summit of the head” as the “focal point of the new equilibrium”. 645

Although Bataille does not credit Descartes with his own interest in the pineal eye, 646 he does mention Descartes in his writings and was no doubt familiar with his treatises on the pineal gland [Plate 90]. 647

Krauss writes that Bataille’s idea was

the very opposite of Descartes’ belief that the pineal eye was the organ connecting the soul to the body…Bataille’s notion of the gland’s function is that it propels man upward, attracting him toward the empyrion – representative of all that is lofty – impelling him however to stare straight into the sun, becoming as a result, crazed and blind. 648

Taken literally or metaphorically, the idea of the pineal eye is compatible with philosophies advocating apostasy against the primacy of the intellect and a return to the dominance of instinct and non-rational thought. To use a physical metaphor, utilization of the pineal eye can be seen as stripping away the suffocating brain that surrounds it in order to free instinctive sight from the prison of analysis and preconception. The goal is the destruction of self-as-desire, leaving only self-as-pure-perception.

The pineal eye is the point at which diacritical oppositions are neutralized: rising becomes falling, excretion is just as easily assimilation, the low is higher than the high… “Every difference is a

647 René Descartes, Treatise of Man (Cambridge: Harvard U. Press, 1972), p. 86. See Appendix D.
surprise resemblance, the Other is a paradoxical state of the Same, let us put it more crudely, with the familiar words: the Other comes down to the Same."  

The pineal gland first appears in the brain of the human foetus at 49 days after conception. It is interesting to note that the Tibetan bardo (the time between death and the next rebirth) is also associated with this time frame. This similarity has led to much theorizing that attempts to create a straightforward identification of the appearance of the pineal gland with the end of the Tibetan bardo, or with the entry of the soul into the body. There are a number of factors that complicate this relationship, not the least of which is the absence of a soul in Tibetan philosophy. In addition, the bardo lasts for a maximum of 49 days, and there is little evidence that the death of the previous body occurs at the same time as the conception of the new one. This is an area that is worthy of study, but study that is informed with a healthy respect for the immense complexity of Tibetan philosophy, a philosophy requiring a far more nuanced approach than a simple equation between the pineal gland, the human soul, and the end of the bardo.

Bataille’s obsession with the concept of the pineal eye was largely contemporaneous with the anonymous publication of Story of the Eye in 1928. Bataille does not include his musings on the pineal eye in this book, but it is certainly equally exotic, to say the least, in terms of the situations in which eyes find themselves.

Its well-deserved pornographic reputation is curiously blended with the fascination it has exerted on intellectuals including Barthes, Foucault, and Sontag, all of whom have written on the book, examining it from angles as varied as linguistics, body morphology, semiotics, and psychology. The dominance of vision in Western culture, as well as the avant-garde’s ongoing opposition to this dominance, form central themes in the book. Martin Jay writes that ‘the enucleated eye was a parodic version of the separation of sight from the body characteristic of the Cartesian perspectivalist tradition.’ In other words, the destruction of the physical eye was Bataille’s way of opposing the philosophy that is based upon it.

Foucault recognized the role of language as a compelling theme in Bataille’s story, as well as noting the twisted similarity of the tortured Bataillean eye and the inward-turning eye of the spiritual seeker:

The enucleated or upturned eye marks the zone of Bataille’s philosophical language, the void into which it pours and loses itself…

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somewhat like the interior, diaphanous, and illuminated eye of mystics and spiritualists that marks the point at which the secret language of prayer is embedded and choked by a marvelous communication which silences it. Similarly, but in an inverted manner, the eye in Bataille delineates the zone shared by language and death, the place where language discovers its being in the crossing of its limits: the nondialectical form of philosophical language.651

Foucault positions his analysis of Bataille’s work at the meeting point of language, death, and eroticism, thus simultaneously interrogating Bataille’s message and acknowledging Bataille’s influence on his own philosophical practice.

Siegel, writing on Man Ray’s sculpture Object to be Destroyed, similarly remarks on the conflation of eye and vagina, but associates this conflation with Freudian theory:

The eye pinned to the pendulum elicits a basic Freudian principle in dream formation, that of displacement, where a body part which often moves upward is displaced by another. In this instance, the vagina, moving in synchronization with the phallus, is transposed to the eye.652

Thus both Bataille’s story and Man Ray’s object express the common Surrealist conflation of inner and outer, in this case the interiority of the vagina with the exterior focus of the physical eye.

The antagonistic relationship between exterior vision and inner knowledge can be used as an explanatory trope in the exploration of Georges Bataille’s apparently hostile feelings toward the physical eye. In many of his writings, Bataille consistently questions the dominance and even the value of the eye, and frequently portrays its abuse and destruction. In this Bataille was in keeping with, and possibly influenced by, many of his acquaintances in the Surrealist movement. Eager points out that ‘the roots of the imagery, and of the impact, of missing and mutilated eyes can be found in Surrealist Art. The human eye is a key symbol in Surrealism, and its use is often centered around the enigmatic absence of the eye, or around its sadistic destruction.’653

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A devalorization of external vision leaves Bataille more philosophically attuned not only with the ‘primitive’ cultures which he sought to emulate, but also, albeit in a different way, with Buddhist philosophies that privilege inner vision over the distractions of the outside world.

The most disturbing instance of Bataille’s challenge to vision is unquestionably the final scene in *Story of the Eye*, in which the eye of the murdered priest is removed from his head and placed into Simone’s vagina. This bizarre event actually has an iconographic precursor in Hindu legend, in the form of Indra’s curse. In this story, as a punishment for lusting after another’s wife, Indra’s body is covered with one thousand vaginas. Later, due to various reasons (the legends vary), all of the vaginas are transformed into eyes.654

Is this conflation of eye with vagina a perverse reversal of Bataille’s former obsession with the pineal eye at the top of the head? The male rising, the masculine erection, is neutralized, demolished, and brought down. The eye of the church is forced back into infancy, peering not only out from the feminine source of life but downwards. All hope of transcendence is annihilated, transported to a land of negation by the force of Simone’s, and the narrator’s, insatiable desires.

In the place of the closed, interior eye of self-awareness, or even the sun-obsessed pineal eye that strives for the impossible, the story ends with the displaced, unseeing eye of crime, Bataille’s terminal mockery of the hope for transcendence.

The inner world to which the pineal eye might lead us is externally mirrored, and reversed, by the Panopticon, the dystopia of which Foucault writes in *Discipline and Punish*, where individuality is eviscerated beneath the all-seeing eye of an ever-present authority. Whereas mastery of the inner eye leads to liberation, submission to the external eye results in the loss of all freedoms. At a literal level Foucault is writing of the prison designed by Jeremy Bentham in which the prisoner is constantly exposed to the view of authority. He is also clearly referring to a society in which surveillance and social control seek constantly to usurp individual freedoms and sovereignty. In his exploration of the origin and theory of prisons, Foucault describes the Panopticon as a construction that can be seen in many ways to be the antithesis of the pineal eye. Designed as both a perfection of external sight and an extension of hierarchical authority, the Panopticon oppresses from outside whereas the pineal eye seeks to illuminate from within. Even though, in Bataille’s construction, the pineal eye seeks

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the light of the sun from without, the initiative springs from within the individual and thus functions to expand sovereignty. How different the results of this are from Foucault’s vision, where ‘full lighting and the eye of a supervisor capture better than darkness, which ultimately protected. Visibility is a trap.’

The inner eye of wisdom and peace, through which the ego is dissolved in a reunion with the divine, is forever at odds with the outer eye, the panopticon of authority. In either construction, the eye is the Achilles’ heel of the individual, the place where separateness is threatened. The inner and the outer eye both moderate the inevitable death of the individual, but the resultant reality of these two seemingly similar fates could not be more different.

Exterior vision, whether emanating out from the physical eye, or imposed upon the individual by an external authority, binds the individual to a scientific, consensus reality. Reason assumes its oppressive throne in this construction, set upon the imagination and freedom of the sovereign individual, and twisting them to the needs of the mass. The response of the seeker is to turn to an inner vision, one that is impervious to the dictates of authority, in order to fashion a direct connection to a greater reality, a connection that, when utilized properly, functions as an escape route to the divine. Whether through Buddhist ascension up the ladder of the chakras to the detachment of a higher plane, or Bataillean surrender to the inevitable collapse of the pineal eye, that inner force, unencompassed by terms such as ‘self’ or ‘soul’, seeks its release. The end result of this individual and indestructible drive to break free from the bonds of reason is the eventual downfall of science and certainty. Krell writes:

If the superfluous pineal apparatus of Descartes’ Treatise of Man in fact makes the rational soul superfluous, the pineal eye threatens to reduce the species man to Aquinas’ superfluum. And yet during the past three hundred years Descartes’ fiction has become the remarkably tenacious physiological science of our schools of medicine and village surgeries. Should we not, then, ladies and gentlemen of the academy, ape the history of modernity? Should we not agree here and now to return three hundred years hence, in order perhaps to find the obsessions of Georges Bataille – obsessions that evoke in us nothing so much as a burst of derisive laughter – to find those obsessions thoroughly pervading what by then we will no longer have the temerity to call the sciences of man?

George Bataille’s search for a sovereign relationship to the world was an unremitting challenge to this temerity. With a hundred questions borne of every answer, he was eventually confronted with a reality that refused to be bound by the

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656 Krell, ‘Paradoxes of the Pineal: From Descartes to Georges Bataille,’ p. 228.
terms of ‘truth’ or ‘meaning’. ‘In the end, left with nothing, he would state quite simply: “C’est comme ça”.’

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CHAPTER SIX
S(LAUGHTER)HOUSE: THE RESOLUTION OF DUALITY

At the material level, we experience the body as separate from its environment. In the higher levels of existence, however, the boundaries between body and environment become increasingly blurred, and the primordial body is coextensive with the universe itself. In other words, at the highest level of corporeality, we literally are the world.

- Georg Feuerstein 658

The slaughterhouse is linked to religion insofar as the temples of by-gone eras (not to mention those of the Hindus in our own day) served two purposes: they were used both for prayer and for killing.

Laughing at the universe liberated my life. I escape its weight by laughing. I refuse any intellectual translations of this laughter, since my slavery would commence from that point on.

- Georges Bataille 659

The transcendence of duality is a central concern and motivating force behind Tantra, Surrealism, and Bataille. The Second Manifesto of Surrealism finds Breton sounding somewhat Buddhist when he writes that ‘everything leads us to believe that there is a certain point in the mind where life and death, the real and the imaginary, the past and the future, the communicable and the incommunicable, are no longer perceived in contradiction to one another. One would search Surrealist activity in vain for a motive other than the hope of determination of this point.’ 660

Interestingly, Bataille adopts these lines in the service of his own agenda: ‘I shall add: Good and Evil, pain and joy. This point is indicated both by violent literature and by the violence of a mystical experience: only the point matters.’ 661

Nadia Choucha notes that this ‘magical polarity between ugly and beautiful’ is found in alchemy, the Kabbalah, the writings of the Marquis de Sade, and Tantra, all of which had an influence on Surrealism. 662

659 ‘L’abattoir relève de la religion en ce sens que des temples des époques reculées, (sans parler de nos jours de ceux des hindous) étaient à double usage, servant en même temps aux implorations et aux tueries.’ Georges Bataille, ‘Abattoir,’ *Documents* #6 (1930); reprinted in *Documents 1929-1930*, p. 329; Bataille, *Guilty*, p. 16.
660 ‘Tout porte à croire qu’il existe un certain point de l’esprit d’où la vie et la mort, le reel et l’imaginaire, le passé et le futur, le communicable et l’incommunicable, le haut et le bas cessent d’être perçus contradictoirement. Or, c’est en vain qu’on chercherait à l’activité surréaliste un autre mobile que l’espoir de determination de ce point’. Breton, *Manifestes du Surréalisme*, p. 76-7.
One of the most difficult teachings of non-duality for our minds to grasp is the idea of the identity of good and evil. The idea seems viscerally anti-intuitive, and in contradiction to teachings of spiritual awareness and compassion. The difficulty arises in the fact that we and our minds exist within a dualistic reality, a reality dominated by reason that does not allow the existence of paradox or the identity of opposites. For this reason, many spiritual disciplines focus specifically on this mental inability, for to overcome it is to break the hold of reason within the mind, allowing a closer communion with a greater reality that is unconstrained by the limitations of rationality. The resulting mental state is not ‘irrational’, but rather greater than rationality, encompassing but not limited by it, a state that could be called ‘sur-rational’, or, in a very literal sense, ‘surreal’.

This state of mind that reason prevents us from reaching is the state of mind sought by Surrealism, by Tibetan Buddhism, and by Georges Bataille. The primary methods used to access it are techniques such as poetry, rebellion, automatism, and the juxtaposition of incompatible elements in the former case, and various methods of meditation in the latter two. In this chapter, the meditational techniques of Tibetan Buddhism and Bataille are examined within the context of the issue of duality.

TIBETAN MEANS OF ACCESS TO THE SACRED

Tantric belief emphasizes practice and technique over philosophy. Its intention is not intellectual understanding, except insofar as that understanding helps in the attainment of spiritual goals. The primary methodology for the attainment of these goals is meditation. John Powers offers a commentary on the process of meditation as it functions within Tibetan Buddhism:

Most meditative practices aim at some form of cognitive restructuring. Since suffering arises from wrong ideas, the solution to the problem of suffering lies in changing these ideas, and this is accomplished through meditation. Suffering arises from actions based on afflictive mental states such as desire, ignorance, hatred, etc., and many of the practices of Tibetan meditation are designed to serve as counteragents to affictions.1

This focus on practice does not preclude the existence of an arcane intellectual tradition. Linrothe cautions the unwary scholar of Tantra: ‘The secrecy which surrounds its core teachings, the use of a cryptic language for prayers, the centrality of

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1663 Powers, Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism, p. 71.
mystic experience and comprehensive many-layered symbols contribute to a system of belief and praxis which has proved almost impenetrable to discursive scholarship."

Most of the Tantric elements of what came to be known as Tibetan Buddhism began in India, within the Hindu religion. Tantra is a collection of techniques and ceremonies, rather than a distinct religion in and of itself, and as such was incorporated to varying degrees into the Buddhist and Jain religions as well. In the words of Nadia Choucha, ‘Tantra is not so much a system of belief, but a technique of action that is physical, mental, and spiritual.’ Vajrayāna Buddhism is the result of a synthesis between Tantra and traditional Tibetan beliefs, including shamanism and the indigenous Bön religion.

Shamanism is a major element of Tibetan Buddhism that distinguishes it from other forms of Buddhism. Richard Noll defines shamanism as ‘an ecstatic healing tradition which at its core is concerned with techniques for inducing, maintaining, and interpreting the experience of enhanced visual mental imagery.’ A definition such as this makes it clear how shamanist practices would be easily reconciled within a Tantric framework, in which the primary goal is the production of ecstatic states through meditation and visualization. Both traditions share an interest in ecstasy, transcendence of self, and reconnection. Robert E. Ryan identifies ecstasy as a transcendence of the self, and writes that ‘the shaman becomes the mediator between the individual human mind and the archetypal, transpersonal realm beyond it’. The presence and importance of shamanism in Tibet prior to the arrival of Buddhism in the eighth century would help to explain the subsequent centrality of sacerdotal practices within Tibetan Buddhism, in contrast to the more participatory and internal nature of other schools such as Zen and Theravada. At the risk of oversimplifying, one could say that the shamans of ancient Tibet were eventually transformed into the Lamas whose presence was so central to early modern Tibetan society.

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665 Feuerstein, Tantra: The Path of Ecstasy, p. 10-12.
666 Choucha, Surrealism and the Occult, p. 82.
667 ‘…the pre-Buddhist religion was referred to not only as bon, but also as gtsug (both words of uncertain etymology)… other priests were active besides the bon-po, especially a class of priests known as gshen, a word probably meaning “sacrificer” [Snellgrove/Richardson 1968, 52]. We have no way of knowing if this etymology was known to Georges Bataille, but it would certainly have interested him. See also Per Kværne, Tibet Bon Religion: A Death Ritual of the Tibetan Bonpos (Leiden, The Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1985), p. 3, and Thurman, “Tibet, Its Buddhism and Its Art,” Wisdom and Compassion, p. 21.
Eliade writes that ‘Lamaism has preserved the Bon shamanic tradition almost in its entirety’, and delineates the shamanic roots of such Tibetan Buddhist phenomena as the chöd rite, the Bardo Thödol, and various healing rituals.\(^670\) Eliade observes that Lamaist practices affected Siberian shamanism as well, reminding us that historical influences are frequently complex and reflexive, not unidirectional.\(^671\)

André Breton also discusses the relationship of shamanism to Buddhism in Tibet in his book *l’Art magique*, where he writes:

> The extreme dilution of the character of the shaman, at the same time neurotic, medicine-man and (sometimes) official sorcerer of his tribe, probably extended its shadow on pre-Hellenic oracles via Thrace, on Babylonia, and more certainly on Tibet. It achieved there the inextricable mixture of magic and Buddhism which now radiates from the “roof of the world” onto almost all the peoples of Northern Asia…Shiva, the cosmic dancer…celebrate[s] in direct terms Tantric magic…For the dance of Shiva, drunk from the many worlds which he destroys, only to regenerate them, is substituted the imposing, grimacing couple of the Yab-Yum, or “Father-Mother”.\(^672\)

The Surrealists’ fascination with city streets, flea markets, dreams, and foreign cultures was largely based on the unpredictable and mixed nature of these diverse phenomena; the impure and eclectic nature of Tantra and Tibetan Buddhism would have appealed to them as well. The conflation of Buddhism, magic, and shamanism, all of which are frequently referenced in the writing of Bataille, Breton, Seligmann, and many other Surrealists, produced a philosophy that exhibited many characteristics of Surrealism: an interest in super-rational phenomena, the juxtaposition of irreconcilable elements, and a deep inquiry into the interior workings of the mind.

Mircea Eliade wrote that ‘it is not easy to define Tantrism.’\(^673\) Spanning centuries and consisting of a multiplicity of schools, beliefs, and forms, many of which are in conflict with one another, Tantra is not only enormous in its scope within the East but very different from what it has become in the West. Thus, what is addressed in this study is not Tantra *per se* but rather early twentieth century Western perceptions of what Tantra is. Many of these beliefs were exaggerated or erroneous, and all were


\(^{671}\) ibid., p. 441.


incomplete to some extent. Nevertheless, these were the beliefs that motivated and informed the artists and writers who are examined here, and thus in a sense the misperception became a self fulfilling reality, a *de facto* school of thought which, while bearing some similarity to the original that inspired it, remains ultimately a Western phenomenon, an artifact of Occidental culture, inspired by the East.

Most histories state that Tantric Buddhism emerged from Hindu Tantra in India in around 800 C.E. This is a useful yet overly simplified historical truism. Alex Wayman gives some idea of the more complicated and intertwined history of these two schools:

> The Buddhist Tantra goes back in many of its leading ideas to the Brahmanism of the older Upanisads, and some of its ritual (e.g. the *homa*, or burnt offering) can be traced to old Vedic rites…The Buddhist Tantra is deeply indebted to certain later Upanisads such as the Yoga Upanisads, which were probably composed in the main form about the 1st century B.C. to the beginning of the Gupta period, and which are a primitive kind of Hinduism. But these mystical practices were so thoroughly integrated with Buddhist dogma, that it is a most difficult matter to separate out the various sources of the Buddhist Tantra.\(^{674}\)

Pratapaditya Pal concurs with Wayman in his evocation of the complexity of Tibetan religious traditions. Referring to it as ‘Lamaism’, the common term in the early twentieth century, Pal defines Tibetan Buddhism as

> not merely those forms of tantric or esoteric Buddhism that were transplanted from India between the seventh and the thirteenth centuries. Rather, it is the result of the continuous acculturation that took place on the Tibetan soil and is really an amalgam of the early, native shamanist beliefs, Bon ideology, and imported Buddhist concepts…Lamaism is specifically the *Tibetan* version of the Indian esoteric systems, and it developed a distinct liturgical and exegetical tradition of its own. Moreover, in addition to the imported concepts, the Lamaist pantheon evolved its own imagery of bewildering complexity.\(^{675}\)

Robert Thurman defines Buddhism as a ‘movement founded on the Buddha’s discovery of a happy way of living as a relational and flexible self, free of the exaggerated egocentrism derived from a habitually static and rigid self-image.’\(^{676}\) This is a sound basis for a definition of all forms of Buddhism, stressing as it does the separated, calcified sense of self as the root of mental impurity. Tibetan Buddhism exhibits marked differences from other schools of Buddhism, but shares with them the

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\(^{676}\) Thurman, *Wisdom and Compassion: The Sacred Art of Tibet*, p. 25.
belief that this ‘self’ of which we are so fond is not only an illusion, but a destructive one that causes endless suffering in the minds of those who are controlled by it.

Over the centuries, Buddhism has existed in three primary forms, of which Vajrayāna was the most recent to develop. The most ancient form of Buddhism has come to be known as Hinayana or Theravada, and focuses on individual enlightenment gained through many lifetimes of meditation and asceticism. Still practiced throughout much of the world, this style of Buddhism is mainly found in Southeast Asian countries such as Thailand, Malaysia, and Burma. In Theravada Buddhism, a person who has reached enlightenment is known as an arhat. Several centuries after the founding of Buddhism, a second school known as Mahayana developed. The primary difference between this school and its predecessor is the presence, in the place of the arhat, of the Bodhisattva, a spiritually advanced person who vows to save all sentient beings and declines to leave the world of suffering until this is accomplished. The Bodhisattva Vow is certainly one of the most ambitious in religious history, and would have impressed the Surrealists with its audacity. Over the centuries it has taken many forms, this being one of the more common:

All beings without number, I vow to liberate
Endless blind passions I vow to uproot.
Dharma gates beyond number, I vow to penetrate.
The Great Way of Buddha I vow to attain.677

Mahayana Buddhism and its many variants can be found primarily in Tibet, China, and Japan. Zen is probably the most familiar of the Mahayana schools in the West. The fact that both Zen and Tibetan Buddhism are considered to be Mahayana schools despite their radical differences in image and technique gives some idea of the breadth that the term Mahayana covers.

The third school of Buddhism, closely related to Mahayana, is Vajrayāna or Tantric Buddhism. It differs from Mahayana primarily in the speed with which it is intended to carry the adept to enlightenment. The similarities of this form of Buddhism to Surrealist dream theory and Bataillean notions such as ‘the impossible’ are difficult to miss:

The essence of the tantric technology is a shift from gross to subtle realities of the universe, a reality wherein evolutionary change can be immeasurably accelerated, wherein matter can be instantaneously reshaped by imagination. The progress achieved within the subtle

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reality is then “inconceivably” transferred into the gross reality in
order to deliver the benefits to other beings. To make this
“inconceivability” a tiny bit intelligible, we can consider the realm of
dreams and its relationship and effect on the waking world...tantric
technology operates in a similar way, by shifting levels of reality.678

Thurman defines Vajrayāna, which he calls ‘the Apocalyptic or Tantric
Vehicle’, as ‘the esoteric aspect of the second [Mahayana].’679 David Snellgrove
approaches the term Vajrayāna somewhat differently: ‘...many of the roots of the
Vajrayāna were already present in the Mahāyāna, just as those of the Mahāyāna were in
the Hinayāna, [but] the differences between the Vajrayāna and the earlier forms of
Buddhism are extreme. The main difference derives from the Vajrayāna use of
incantation and ritual as means towards the ultimate goal, whereas in the earlier phases
of Buddhism their use was largely peripheral.’680 This is but one example of the many
differences of interpretation and doctrine that exist within Buddhism, differences that
over time often lead to entirely separate and conflicting traditions.

The Guhyasamāja Tantra, one of the oldest known Tantras, sets the tone for
many later Tantras with its rejection of asceticism in favour of engagement with
temptation, desire, and bodily realities: ‘No one can succeed in obtaining perfection
through processes which are difficult and painful; but one can succeed easily through
the satisfaction of all desires’.681 While this philosophy is eerily similar to the
mainstream acceptance of indulgence and consumption in the contemporary West, it
was a radical aberration in the conservative society of ancient India where it originated.

There is general agreement that Vajrayāna is the third of the major schools of
Buddhism to have appeared, and that it is characterized by a greater focus on
ceremony, the role of the guru, and the idea of using ritual to greatly accelerate the
process of enlightenment. Vajrayāna Buddhism achieved its fullest expression in Tibet,
due largely to the synthesis of religious and political power in that country.

This variegation of an ancient philosophy into multiple forms, in this case
Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayāna, is something that occurs with any tradition of
thought that survives long enough to undergo varying interpretations. Fosco Maraini
reflects on the impact such variation had in Tibet:

The most striking thing about all this is the strange destiny of Gautama,
the Buddha, [who preached an] agnostic philosophy based on a grim

678 Thurman, Wisdom and Compassion, p. 25.
679 ibid., p. 24.
681 Benoytosh Bhattacharya, ed., Guhyasamāja Tantra or Tathāgataguhyaka (Baroda, India:
Oriental Institute, 1967), p. 27.
diagnosis of the innermost nature of man...Yet here we see him transformed into the emanation of an emanation of an emanation – a god in a fantastically elaborate and complicated system of other gods, a celestial actor in a stupendous, cosmic drama...

Maraini is presenting one interpretation of Buddhist history here, which believes that “pure” Theravada Buddhism was more or less corrupted by Mahayana doctrines, which mixed Buddhism with various other traditions and beliefs. Beinorius attributes the origins of this construction to Hodgson, who, he writes, ‘was the first to establish a clear distinction between the northern and southern branches of Buddhism, and it was his emphasis on the latter as the more ancient and ‘pure’ version of Buddha’s teaching that led to the pre-eminence in the European mind in the nineteenth century of the southern Theravada tradition, the northern Mahāyāṇa school remaining largely neglected until the following century.’

Another perspective bases the origin of the differences between Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana on what is known as ‘skill in means’ (Tibetan thabs la mkhas pa), a term used to describe the Buddha’s use of differing techniques for different students. The use of skillful means was intended to make Buddhism accessible to anyone, presenting it in terms that emphasized the intellectual and rational or the devotional and spiritual depending on the proclivities and of the student.

In the words of Giuseppe Tucci, ‘the two vehicles, the greater and the lesser one, are not opposed to each other but complete each other, forming a single vehicle…which reveals itself differently to created beings, according to their different spiritual capacity and maturity.

This flexibility and practical ability of Buddhism to adapt to varying cultures and to transform itself to suit varying needs helps to explain how it has assumed such radically varying forms over the centuries. A sharp focus on the importance of enlightenment, as opposed to strict adherence to unchanging form, has allowed Buddhism to incorporate influences as varied as shamanism, ancestor worship, Bön,
and Tantra. In his essay ‘The Religions of Tibet’, Tadeusz Skorupski acknowledges this practicality in his discussion of Tantric philosophy:

The Tantras are not preoccupied with speculation. Their chief goal is to induce and acquire a mystical experience. In a general way, one could say that the Tantras represent a ritualised and yogic application of the Mahāyāna philosophical concepts. Two of those concepts, samsāra and nirvāna, stand at the centre of tantric considerations.687

Samsāra and nirvāna are Sanskrit words referring respectively to the ‘wheel of suffering’ meaning the cycle of reincarnations, and to the escape from that wheel. Within the dualistic world they appear as opposites, although, as the above quote shows, this appearance of duality is the very characteristic that propagates the wheel of suffering. Not until the consciousness escapes from this illusion does the unity of samsāra and nirvāna become clear. According to Butigieg, ‘tantrism recognizes that transcendence (nirvāna) is already present in the cycle of rebirths (samsāra).’688

The roots of Tantra, according to Donald Lopez, lie in ‘a movement in Indian religion that made use of traditionally proscribed activities in the religious path (most notably sexual intercourse)…regarded by nineteenth century Orientalists as the most depraved of abominations.’689 Tucci refers to Tantra as a ‘subtle web of legend woven by a religion based on the experience of the masses and perpetually fluctuating between the two poles of sex and death.’690 With the exception of Sir John Woodroffe, most Western scholars of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries took a dim view of Tantra and made a very clear distinction between it and Theravada Buddhism. Thomas Rhys Davids wrote that Tibetan Buddhism, or ‘Lāmāism’, was ‘not only…different from, but actually antagonistic to, the primitive system of Buddhism’691, while Monier-Williams called it ‘so different from every other Buddhistic system that it ought to be treated of separately in a separate volume’.692

The negative views of the body that were integral to traditional Hinduism and Buddhism coincided compatibly with the Christian distrust of the flesh and repression of sexual urges that were common in Europe in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It was within this context of East-West agreement on the evils of the flesh that Europeans were presented with Tantra, a belief system that appeared to glorify the

687 Skorupski, ‘The Religions of Tibet,’ p. 797.
688 ‘Comme dans le Mahayana, le tantrisme reconnaît que la Délivrance (nirvāna) est déjà incluse dans le cycle des renaissances (samsāra).’ Butigieg, Le Lotus et la Roue, p. 115.
691 Thomas W. Rhys-Davids, quoted in Lopez, Prisoners of Shangri-La, p. 33.
692 Monier Monier-Williams, quoted in ibid.
body in all of its desire-filled imperfection. Many Europeans who found themselves able to accept and even admire strange and exotic disciplines which nevertheless shared many of their own repressions were far more challenged by Tantra, which in addition to being strange and exotic appeared threatening to a moral belief system based largely on the repression of sexual and bodily urges.

The transgressive nature of Tantric ritual that so disturbed many Western observers centred around what are commonly called ‘the five Ms’: mudra (grain), matsya (fish), mamsa (meat), madhya (wine), and maithuna (sexual intercourse).\(^{693}\)

Coming from a sexually repressed culture that was entirely accepting of meat, fish, alcohol, and grain, it is hardly surprising that nineteenth century Europeans were most disturbed by the practice of maithuna. Opinions differ as to whether the Tantric focus on sexual ceremony was intended to be interpreted literally or not. Reformers such as Arthur Avalon who sought to improve the image of Tantra amongst Westerners stressed that the sexual aspects of Tantric ceremony were limited to visualizations within the initiate’s mind. Historical evidence suggests that, within the plethora of approaches and belief systems that fall under the umbrella of Tantra, some used sex in a largely symbolic manner while others took the sexual instructions found in many Tantric writings quite literally.

Although the Hindu religion frequently promotes a view of the body as a tie to the world of suffering, and thus as a negative thing, India’s many erotic temples are monumental evidence that, unlike Europe, India also has a history of acceptance of sexuality as a part of life [Plate 91]. In contrast to the sexual negativity underlying Western disapproval, Tantra’s poor reputation in traditional Indian society stemmed not from its focus on sex, but primarily from its use of meat and its challenging of the caste system.\(^{694}\) Ironically, with the relaxing of sexual repression in the West, it is this same sexual element that has fuelled a contemporary revival of Western interest in Tantra, although the modern emphasis on ‘great sex’ retains only the slightest echo of the spiritual transcendence advocated by the ancients.\(^{695}\)

Suda clarifies the point that Hinduism, like Buddhism, does not condemn sex and sensuality *per se* but rather the craving that is almost inevitably aroused by them. His identification of the loss of control of the mind, rather than the passion itself, as the root of suffering, reveals the roots of Tantric thought within Hinduism:


A life devoted to the pursuit of sensuous pleasures and worldly success cannot be wholly and fully satisfying; the higher part of this nature remains unsatisfied…it should be our aim in life to rise above our animal nature and bring it under the control of the spiritual consciousness…It must be added that Hinduism does not recommend the suppression or extinction of sensuous desires and impulses to act…There is nothing wrong in satisfying the sex passion even. The error creeps in when the desire becomes a craving.696

Countless images, both Hindu and Buddhist, of deities creating the world through copulation [Plate 92] indicate a level of comfort with the idea that was lost in the West many centuries ago, to be replaced by the repression of bodily freedom and the death based imagery of the crucifixion [Plate 93].

The actual practice of Tantra, as stated above, is difficult to define. In addition to having a history of secrecy and obfuscation on the part of its devotees, it has developed within this secrecy into a highly eclectic range of practices. This list of desirable qualities of Tantric initiates can give some idea of what is involved, but should not be taken as definitive.

1. **Yama** – moral restraint: truthfulness, nonstealing, chastity, greedlessness.
2. **Niyama** – self-restraint: purity, contentment, austerity, study, devotion.
3. **Āsana** – posture, to guard against heat and cold, dry and moist.
4. **Prānāyāma** – “extension of the life energy” by means of breath control.
5. **Pratyāhāra** – sensory inhibition.
6. **Dhāranā** – concentration, usually on a mantra or representation of a deity.
7. **Dhyāna** – meditation: deepening of concentration.
8. **Samādhi** – lit. “putting together,” or ecstasy; complete merging with the object of meditation.697

During the archaic period of Tantric practice, prior to its absorption into and dilution by mainstream society, these admirable qualities were often expressed in a manner both socially and visually extreme. Sanderson’s description of a Tantric adept makes clear not only why they were not acceptable to Indian ‘polite society’, but also why their image would have appealed to many transgression-loving modernists of the twentieth century, including the Surrealists and Georges Bataille:

Smeared with the ashes of funeral pyres, wearing ornaments of human bone, the initiate would carry in one hand a cranial begging-bowl and in the other a *khāṭvāṅga*, a trident-topped staff on which was fixed beneath the prongs a human skull adorned with a banner of blood-stained cloth 698 [Plate 94].

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696 Suda, *Religions in India*, p. 52-3.
697 op. cit., p. 124-5. This source deals primarily with Hindu Tantra.
698 Alexis Sanderson, ‘Purity and power amongst the Brahmans of Kashmir,’ p. 201.
The motivations of a Tantric initiate in adopting such an extreme appearance were based primarily in a rejection of societal norms and a prioritizing of goals that, far from requiring societal acceptance, were more easily realized without it. By voluntarily adopting the role of a pariah, reinforced by an appearance that repelled others, the devotee divorced himself from societally motivated goals, and strengthened his ties with other initiates within the Tantric community. Similar, though generally less extreme, sartorial techniques can be seen in many other religious and social subcultures, including the black hats and payos of orthodox Jews, Rastafarian dreadlocks, and Buddhist monks’ robes and shaved heads. Even the spikes and leather of punks can be interpreted as a simultaneous rejection of dominant norms and sign of belonging to a separate community.

The sometimes eccentric appearance of traditional Tantric initiates, while serving to insulate them to some extent from the world, was of little consequence in comparison to the interior techniques that lay at the heart of the Tantric quest.

Tantric Buddhism stresses the inappropriateness of excessive imagination and the importance of conformity to traditions that reach back for centuries. Odette Monod-Bruhl addresses the restrictions that were placed on the artistic undertakings of the Tibetan monk:

> free inspiration is prohibited to him. He must submit to the sacred texts and to the iconographic traditions which determine the composition of the thankas, thoroughly describing the divinities, their attitudes, their gestures, their attributes, the color of their faces and their clothing.  

Although the ability to visualize is important, the Tantric initiate needs to avoid being carried away by his own internal imagery. On the subject of Tantric art, a fairly reliable reflection of Tantric beliefs, Whiles writes that it is ‘a system of signs within a very specific semantic code, the function of which is essentially religious and spiritual. It follows a strict iconographical canon which involves the fusion of the collective and individual consciousness.’

Tantra is a practical series of techniques designed to help the initiate to access a mental state that is freed from the illusion of separation. In this quest for connection to the universal sacred, techniques have been developed to involve all of the senses, thus

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creating a holistic bodily focus on the ultimate goal. Mookerjee summarizes this utilization of body, sight, voice, sound, and intellect:

Tantrikas have developed a systematic method whereby ‘cosmic cross-points’ are created in the relative plane, at which the individual encounters the universal noumena. These cosmic cross-points can be achieved either by working on one’s self through the human body (Kundalini-yoga), through performance of rites and rituals, or visually through such forms and figures as yantras, mandalas and deities (which comprise the mainstream of tantric art), or verbally by the repetition of seed syllables (mantras). Hence tantra’s diverse methods which invoke the involvement of all senses, at different levels – physical, mental, or psychic – in concert or singly.\(^{701}\)

Mookerjee is referring primarily to Indian and Hindu Tantrism, from which Tibetan Buddhism inherited many techniques of meditation. The involvement of multiple senses in the process of meditation is no doubt one of the similarities to Catholicism that was noted by early missionary visitors to Tibet. The Catholic Church’s techniques of worship through music, art, architecture, incense, and communion were clearly motivated by a similar desire to involve the whole person in devotion towards God, to the exclusion of all else.

Four of the primary Tibetan methods for enabling a holistic submersion in a meditative state are Mantra, Mudra, Yantra, and Asana, which utilize voice, hands, eyes, and bodily posture respectively. A description of each of these techniques is presented here, in order to give a sense of how they work together to absorb the consciousness into a single pointed focus on the object of meditation.

A Mantra is a word or phrase that is repeated as a means of focusing and calming the mind, allowing greater access to meditative absorption. This description, however, is only a description of the mantra’s most superficial aspects. Eliade writes on the depth and importance of mantras in Tantric philosophy:

The unlimited efficacy of mantras is owing to the fact that they are (or at least, if correctly recited, can become) the “objects” they represent. Each god, for example, and each degree of sanctity have a bija mantra, a “mystical sound,” which is their “seed,” their “support” – that is, their very being. By repeating this bija mantra in accordance with the rules, the practitioner appropriates its ontological essence, concretely and directly assimilates the god, the state of sanctity, etc.\(^{702}\)

The most commonly used Mantra in Tibet is Om Mani Padme Hum, which is written, carved, embroidered, and repeated endlessly throughout the nation [Plate 95]. It is generally translated as something resembling ‘Hail to the Jewel in the Lotus’, and

\(^{701}\) Mookerjee, The Tantric Way, p. 15.

is variously interpreted as a phrase celebrating the Buddha, Avalokiteshvara, or the Dalai Lama. Charles Bell notes that ‘Tibetans have written volumes to explain the meaning of this mystic sentence.’

Heinrich Julius von Klaproth wrote that ‘if the mantra were to be found in India, it would be amongst the followers of Śiva, where it would mean “Oh! The lingam is in the yoni, Amen.”

Lopez paraphrases Monier-Williams’ beliefs on the mantra’s meaning: Monier-Williams...translated the mantra as “Om! The Jewel in the Lotus! Hūm!” He wrote that “In all probability an occult meaning underlies the ‘Jewel-lotus’ formula and my own belief is that the majority of those who repeat it are ignorantly doing homage to the self-generative power supposed to inhere in the universe,” explaining in a note that “the name Mani is applied to the male organ, and the female is compared to a Lotus-blossom in the Kāma-Śāstras. I fully believe the formula to have a phallic meaning, because Tibetan Buddhism is undoubtedly connected with Śaivism.”

The Mudra can be seen as a bodily equivalent of the Mantra. Mudras are essentially hand gestures and formations designed to represent various spiritual states, and to aid in meditation [Plate 96]. Monks and laypeople use mudras in meditation in imitation of Shakyamuni Buddha, who is usually ‘depicted with his hands making symbolic gestures (mudras), the three most common being the gestures of manifesting enlightenment, giving teachings, and contemplation.’

Mudras have proven useful to historians of ancient Buddhism, in that they are literally preserved in stone, and unlike mantras survive in great numbers, in the form of statues and paintings, long after their creators have disappeared.

The Yantra, like the Mantra and the Mudra, is primarily a spiritual tool designed to aid in meditation and concentration. Unlike the other two it exists outside of the body proper, in the form of drawn diagrams that are pondered with the eye. It could be argued that the actual Yantra exists within the mind of the meditator, the external image being only a crude manifestation of the actual reality. The most well known Yantra is called the Sri Yantra [Plate 97].

Virginia Whiles writes that ‘Yantras’ are “power diagrams”, of an abstract, geometrical or figurative nature, which reveal the underlying structure of the universe. In order to interpret them, it is important to understand the philosophical context of the

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704 Lopez, Prisoners of Shangri-La, p. 119.
705 ibid., p. 122. This is one part of a full chapter exploring the phenomenon of this mantra, p. 114-34.
Opinions vary regarding the actual traditional use of the yantra, some characterizing it as an aid to meditation, while others insist that the yantra itself is viewed as a deity by devotees. Philip Rawson identifies the yantra as a visual equivalent of the mantra, and stresses their dual roles as symbols of elemental and creative forces:

The chanted seed sound, the mantra, and its visual equivalent the yantra (power diagram), share a "base sound". Each phase of consciousness attained by the meditator has its basic sound and its basic diagram. From these bases…arises the chant associated with the specific phase of consciousness expansion.

Asanas [Plate 98] are body postures designed to aid in meditation, and can be seen as the full-body equivalent of a mudra. More generally associated with yoga, asanas also exist in Tibetan Buddhism, most commonly in the practice of prostrations, which many monks engage in as an expression of humility and respect for Buddhist teachings.

All of these techniques, properly utilised in conjunction with one another, assist the meditator in moving toward ecstasy, or, more evocatively, ekstasis, the Greek term for ‘standing outside of oneself’. For a meditator, the point at which this is accomplished is synonymous with the realization of the illusory nature of the self.

According to Skorupski, ‘the Tantras assert that a mystical experience of nonduality leads to the realization of the supreme Buddhahood. The duality of concepts and appearances is seen as remaining at the root of all imperfections and through its elimination one achieves the highest spiritual perfection.’ Bataille’s concordance with this belief is clear when he writes that ‘what I suddenly saw...was the identity of these perfect contraries, divine ecstasy and its opposite, extreme horror.’ As we have seen above, he would not have supported Tantra’s emphasis on ‘realization’ and ‘achievement’, but he did agree with the identification of duality as a barrier to the realization of truth.
In the East the dualistic tradition is reflected in the Sanskrit terms sāt and āsāt, which can be roughly translated as ‘true or existing’ and ‘untrue or false’. These terms originated thousands of years ago in Indian literature such as the Upanishads. They are used in a phrase from the Aranyaka Upanishad:

Asato mā sat gamaya
tamaso mā jyotir gamaya
mṛtyor mā amṛtam gamaya

This verse is translated in Herold’s French version of the work as:

Fais-moi aller du non-être à l’être,
fais-moi aller de l’obscurité à la lumière,
fais-moi aller de la mort à ce qui ne meurt pas’.  

These terms are used by Visuvalingam in his comments on Bataille’s interest in the paradoxical dance of ecstasy and torment from the perspective of Hinduism. He writes of Bataille’s belief that ‘the organized sāt aspect of life is founded on the original but suppressed chaos āsāt which, as the ultimate truth of man’s humanity, must be given conscious but circumscribed expression within this very order itself.’

Visuvalingam is expressing, from the perspective and using the terminology of Hinduism, Bataille’s conviction that access to the sacred is dependent on the overstepping of profane limitations. In order for this overstepping to remain possible, the limitations must remain in place. This is the difference between a philosophy of access to the sacred and one of straightforward libertinism. The former respects taboo as something that is required in order to maintain its own transgression, while the latter seeks to do away with taboo altogether, leaving an undifferentiated field of indulgence.

**METHODS OF MEDITATION**

One source of Tantric knowledge that Bataille is known to have been in contact with was the Romanian historian of religion Mircea Eliade, with whom he associated in Paris in the 1940s. Eliade wrote that he and Bataille ‘talked about oriental religions”

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711 ‘Lead me from non-truth to truth; lead me from darkness to light; lead me from mortality to immortality’. Herold, A.-Ferdinand, L’Upanishad du Grand Aranyaka (Brihadâranyakopanishad) (Paris: Librairie de L’Art Indépendant, 1894), p. 19; See also Suda, Religions in India, p. 18, where the verse is transcribed as ‘Asato ma sad gamaya, / Tamaso ma jyotir gamaya, / Mṛityor ma amṛtam gamayeti,’ and translated as ‘From Unreality lead me to Reality, From Darkness lead me to Light; From Death lead me to Immortality.’

and yoga, because it was for this reason he wanted to meet me: to find out how one can become a yogin without having to live in Himalaya.\textsuperscript{713}

The two were not always in agreement, however, as Bataille shows in Guilty:

I don’t confuse my sexual licentiousness and my mystical life. The description of Tantrism in Eliade’s book left me hostile. I don’t like to mix my enthusiasms. In addition to being remote from the purposeful indifference of Tantrism, compromise attempts only succeeded in further alienating me from possibilities of this kind.\textsuperscript{714}

Bataille is almost certainly referring to Yoga: Essai sur l’origine de la mystique Indienne, which was based on Eliade’s doctoral thesis and published in 1933.\textsuperscript{715} Bataille’s opinion of Eliade’s book appears to have changed by 1948, according to Eliade: ‘In March I met Georges Bataille. He talked with me a long while in my room at Hôtel de Suède; he had read Yoga in 1936 and had been especially interested in the chapters on Tantrism. He invited me to contribute to Critique, and a few weeks later I sent him the first article.’\textsuperscript{716} Later, Bataille encouraged Eliade to write a book on Tantrism, a project that was never completed:\textsuperscript{717}

[Bataille] asks me to write a book on Tantrism, which he would publish immediately. In fact, the hour we spent together was largely “confiscated” by Tantrism. He told me that after a three-years’ search of the Bibliothèque Nationale where he was a functionary, he was surprised to discover that the most lucid exposition of Tantrism was in a book published in Bucharest (my Yoga of 1936).\textsuperscript{718}

Why would Bataille react with hostility to Eliade’s description of Tantra, then subsequently encourage him to complete a book on the subject? Numerous answers could be given to this question, none of them definitive. The hostility may have been a passing phase or a misunderstanding that was later resolved. As nine years had passed between the writing of Guilty and the conversation noted by Eliade, Bataille’s feelings about Tantra, Eliade, or both may have changed. Perhaps most importantly, Bataille’s state of mind would have been quite different, for obvious reasons, in 1948 than it had been in 1939. A more intriguing explanation may be that, following the war, Bataille’s interest in Tantra and meditative states appears to have continued in a largely

\textsuperscript{714}  Bataille, Guilty, p. 20.
\textsuperscript{715}  This book was later extensively revised and published as Le Yoga: Immortalité et Liberté by Librairie Payot in 1954.
\textsuperscript{717}  ‘I had [convinced] Georges Bataille that I had to postpone the writing of Le tantrisme.’ ibid., p. 154.
\textsuperscript{718}  Eliade, Journal I: 1945-1955, p. 79.
intellectual form. The exalted terrors of 1939, brought on by the death of Laure and the looming threat of the War, and exacerbated by intense meditations on death and horror, appear to have receded, leaving a more stable mental basis from which Bataille’s investigations could continue. Perhaps, in this quite different situation, Bataille was less invested in the outcome of his labours, and was able to approach Eliade out of a purely intellectual or even literary interest.

If this was the case, it was certainly a different state of mind for Bataille than what he had experienced in the late 1930s, a period that saw his most intense involvement with meditation and inner exploration.

In the years immediately preceding World War Two, Bataille formalized his interest in inner states by undertaking an idiosyncratic form of meditation. Little addressed in the growing literature on Bataille, this interest in meditative states was not as relevant to Bataille’s peers as contemporaneous and more popular issues involving politics, Communism, and questions of religion and the sacred. In a truly sovereign manner, Bataille pursued this interest out of personal necessity, and an insatiable need to discover the inner reality of his being.

In the question of how and why Bataille engaged in these meditative practices, we arrive at one of the central issues of this study. From both a Buddhist and a Surrealist viewpoint, all of the history, politics, and religion addressed here ultimately exist only in the minds of those who create them, and thus their nexus can be found within those minds. Knowledge of the social, political, and historical conditions that surrounded Bataille is critical to an understanding of his work, but one cannot gain a true appreciation of his message without an examination from a spiritual and psychological perspective, a delving into his ‘inner experience’. More than any other activity, meditation recognizes this primacy of mental states, and utilizes this knowledge in the quest for greater awareness of self and truth.

In an autobiographical note, Bataille wrote that he ‘had begun in 1938 to practice yoga, but really without close adherence to the precepts of the traditional discipline, in considerable chaos and in a state of mental turmoil pushed to the extreme.’

This note makes it clear that he was very aware of, and no doubt reveled in, his position of definitive exteriority in relation to traditional religion and techniques.

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of meditation. However, his identity as a ‘Gnostic heretic,’ an apostate from both atheism and Catholicism, and an outsider to Buddhism does not preclude the existence of striking similarities and resonances between his idiosyncratic techniques and those of traditional religions, including Christianity and Buddhism. It is not difficult to recognize those elements of both Tantric Buddhism and visionary Catholicism that would have been attractive to Bataille. From the bloody excesses of Tibetan deities to the sensual abandon of Teresa of Avila (one of Bataille’s favoured saints) [Plate 99], any technique or belief system that sought to abandon the mundane in favour of closer communion with eroticism and death would have been immensely attractive to Bataille.

This fascination with excess and hesitancy to commit oneself to a predetermined discipline was a trait amongst many artists of Bataille’s era, as Rabinovitch notes:

> In Ch’an and Zen Buddhism, this special state of mind arises through meditation and continued discipline, but in the culture of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, artists were drawn to Dionysian ecstasy over clarity and reason and circumvented the upward spiraling path of discipline or practice in favor of the path of excess.  

Bataille was notoriously amenable to participation in this path of excess through the common means of alcohol and sexual activity. However, he was rescued from the vacuous fate of the unfettered libertine by his recognition of the ultimately tragic nature of these activities, and by his pursuit of a deeper truth through other means as well. One of these means was meditation.

One of the primary techniques utilized by Bataille was what can only be called a meditation on horror. He frequently utilized a series of photographs, taken by Louis Carpeaux in Peking in 1905, of a man being subjected to a Chinese torture. One of these photographs was given to him by his psychologist, Adrien Borel, who was present when the torture took place. They depict a Chinese man, Fu Chou Li, who had been condemned for the murder of prince Ao Han Ouan, undergoing ‘Leng Tch’e’

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721 ‘If Nietzsche functions as Bataille’s philosophical father, St. Teresa of Avila serves as his theological mother – for the passions of the voluptuary and the saint are one.’ ibid., p. 54. See also Bataille, Eroticism, p. 224.
722 Rabinovitch, Surrealism and the Sacred, p. 52.
725 ‘Georges Dumas may have been and Adrien Borel certainly was present at this execution on 10 April 1905, and brought back photographs of it.’ Surya, Georges Bataille, p. 93.
or the ‘Torture of One Hundred Pieces’, in which the victim is cut up while still alive [Plate 100]. In these deeply disturbing images Bataille saw what he called ‘an infinite capacity for reversal’ and stated that the images ‘had a decisive role in my life’.

Bataille wrote:

I had recourse to upsetting images. In particular, I would gaze at the photographic image – or sometimes the memory which I have of it – of a Chinese man who must have been tortured in my lifetime. Of this torture, I had had in the past a series of successive representations. In the end, the patient writhed, his chest flayed, arms and legs cut off at the elbows and at the knees. His hair standing on end, hideous, haggard, striped with blood, beautiful as a wasp.

A large part of Bataille’s fascination with this image was caused by its utter absence of transcendent qualities. In contrast to images of the torture of Christ, this was ‘the trivial execution of a guilty man, devoid of all salvation’. Bataille sees the idea of salvation as stemming from a misguided idealism. Idealism recoils at savage imagery, and Bataille grants that ‘it is natural to rebel, to cry out (our hearts fail us): “That can no longer be!” and to weep…’ The fact remains that it is, despite our weeping. Thus, in a sense, idealism only adds to the horror, in its futile rage against that which is.

The mind struggles with the horror confronting it, but simultaneously rejoices that it is happening to someone else. Elisabeth Bronfen writes that ‘we experience death by proxy…there is death, but it is not my own’. The fact that Bataille was interacting with photographs makes the nature of his experience even more vicarious. Taylor writes that ‘Bataille must have taken pleasure in looking at the photographic reproduction of the event, not the event itself…Bataille did not confuse the original scene with its image…’

Susan Sontag addresses the implications of Bataille’s attraction to horror: Bataille is not saying that he takes pleasure at the sight of this excruciation. But he is saying that he can imagine extreme suffering as something more than just suffering, as a kind of transfiguration. It is a view of suffering, of the pain of others, that is rooted in religious

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726 ibid., p. 93.
thinking, which links pain to sacrifice, sacrifice to exaltation – a view that could not be more alien to a modern sensibility which regards suffering as something that is a mistake or an accident or a crime.733

Here Sontag appears to be endorsing the Buddhist view that pain and suffering are inherent in life, but also applying an overtone of transcendent use value that is not necessarily present in Bataille’s thought. As in the case of the victim of the Chinese torture, Bataille sought out incidents of suffering and transgression that did not have any redeeming qualities such as the potential for ‘transfiguration’. A subject is not truly abject unless its suffering is serving no purpose at all. James Elkins writes: ‘If abjection fits visual practice, then it is [in] the “perverse” contemporary sense that the disiecta membra of the body can have religious or sacred meaning. Heterology, the study of unrecuperable violations in bodily unity, has become one of the last remaining sites of the spiritual in recent images.’734 Whether this concurs with Bataille or not depends on whether one believes that in order to be sacred a thing must have some meaning or purpose beyond itself, or conversely whether this purpose or meaning would in itself eliminate something from the realm of the sacred.

Bataille’s purpose in subjecting himself to such horrifying subject matter appears to have been an attempt to overcome what he saw as a specious dichotomy between revulsion and ecstasy. Steeped in the philosophies of Durkheim, Mauss, and Eliade, Bataille was trying to move his experience of the sacred out of the realm of theory and into that of experience. In this, he was very much in keeping with Tantric practice, the entire purpose of which is to experientially unite the practitioner with the visualized deity, and thus by extension with the surrounding universe. All Tantric philosophy is seen as useful only insofar as it promotes this experiential goal. Indeed, philosophical engagement that is devoid of experiential content, insofar as it reinforces individual isolation rather than annihilating it, could be seen as not only irrelevant, but as actively harmful to spiritual goals.

The sacred, in the archaic sense used by the above philosophers, encompassed the grotesque and the ‘unavowable’ as completely as the exalted and the pristine. Anything that existed outside of the profane world, which to Bataille was the world of failed communication, was by definition sacred, and this included the victims of horrific torture, who embodied more thoroughly than anyone Bataille’s belief that true communication was synonymous with wounding. In his literally and increasingly disembodied state, in his proximity to death and his total identification with

734 Elkins, Pictures of the Body, p. 54.
transgression (as the murderer of a prince and then the victim of torture), Fu Chou Li represented for Bataille a complete escape from the controls of the profane. In a sense that appears perverse unless it is viewed from Bataille’s point of view, this obscene, violated, still living body was a representation of freedom.

Bataille’s methodology of interaction with these photographs of torture coincides closely with the techniques used in the Tibetan chöd rite, with which he was familiar from having read the work of Alexandra David-Néel. In both of these practices, the destruction of the body is seen as a means of escaping from the self and achieving communion with the Other. In Bataille’s case, Fu Chou Li ‘communicated his pain to me…and it was precisely that which I was seeking, not so as to take pleasure in it, but in order to ruin in me that which is opposed to ruin.’\textsuperscript{735} In the chöd rite, the initiate seeks to commune with the rest of creation, from which he has borrowed his body, by offering to return it for the betterment of all others, including demons and horrifying deities. One could argue that there is a very significant difference between Bataille’s meditation on photographs of torture and chöd visualizations, namely that the former represents a real torture and death, while the latter is a visualization. This is a valid dichotomy only at a surface level. It is significant that Bataille was not the one being tortured. His entire experience was gained through the medium of the photographs that he studied, thus in this sense it was, for him, solely a visualization. For both Bataille and the undertaker of the chöd rite, visualization remains within the confines of the mind, and its power and efficacy are determined solely by the focus and intensity of that mind.

In addition to his meditations on these photographs, Bataille utilized other methods that bore an even closer resemblance to the chöd ritual. He writes of these experiences at length in \textit{Guilty}, the book that he began at the onset of World War Two, a fact that no doubt influenced its content:

\begin{quote}
On the wall of appearance I threw images of explosion and of being lacerated – ripped to pieces. First I had to summon up the greatest possible silence, and I got so as to be able to do this pretty much at will. In this tedious silence, I evoked every possible way there was of my being ripped to pieces. Obscene, ridiculous, and deadly thoughts came rushing out one after the other. I thought of a volcano’s depths, war, and my own death. It wasn’t possible any more to doubt that ecstasy dispenses with any idea of God.\textsuperscript{736}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{735} Bataille, \textit{Inner Experience}, p. 120.
\textsuperscript{736} Bataille, \textit{Guilty}, p. 32-3.
In keeping with his anti-transcendent system, Bataille has no intention of his sacrifice ‘benefiting’ anything, either himself or other beings. This is the absence that forever separates him from a tradition that in many other ways his practice resembles so closely. Chöd intends for its lacerations and sufferings to foment a catharsis within the initiate and in the world at large, to transform suffering and separation into peace and connection. Bataille undertakes his meditations with no such goal in mind.

The resolution presents itself in the fact that, through his utter subjugation to the moment and his flight from hope, Bataille eventually finds himself backed in to the same place as the true believer. His existence is now confined within a single moment; all pasts, all futures, and all possible alternatives have been abolished. This state of purified mental stasis transcends, or completes, paradox, and the question of original intention is lost within the silence of arrival. Seemingly irreconcilable differences between the devotion of the Tibetan monk and the overheated practice of George Bataille are resolved at this eschatological destination, this point of inevitability.

This absence of differentiation amongst phenomena that have reached the end point of existence is what Buddhists call the void or emptiness (Tibetan stong pa nyid; Sanskrit sūnyatā). Bataille’s search for a place beyond individual identity often took the form of an engagement with this void and with ideas of absence and negation. The nuanced relationship between Bataille’s methodology and such Tantras as the Vijñāna Bhairava becomes evident in the juxtaposition of passages from the two fields.

The Vijñāna Bhairava advises that

One should cast one’s gaze on an open (stretch of) land devoid of trees, mountains, walls, etc. When the state of mind is fixed there, then the fluctuating thoughts dissolve (by themselves).\(^{737}\)

Bataille proposes a similar practice, with a divergent outcome:

Looking at the naked mountain slopes in front of me while I “meditate,” I imagine a horror emanating from them in cold and storms. Hostility of insects in combat – promise of death, not life!\(^{738}\)

The methodology is nearly identical, but the internal state is wildly divergent. While the Tantric’s thoughts are dissolving, Bataille’s are swirling up in a devastating maelstrom of combat and death.

Far from being a straightforward faith in meditative practice, Bataille’s interest in books such as the Vijñāna Bhairava was tempered by a constant questioning of

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tradition, and a contentious relationship with the disciplines from which he gained many of his ideas. While he made use of the techniques of yoga and meditation, he frequently criticized their goals and their asceticism. It was not always clear to Bataille that the ultimate intention of these practices, beyond the dichotomy between indulgence and renunciation, was quite similar to his own: ‘In the same way that Bataille, via Nietzsche, aims at subsuming thought in Dionysian experience (‘Le vertige Dionysiaque’), so the practice of Yoga aims at self-annihilation, revealing the illusion of personality which, like all else in the created world, is flux, the passage of events and not identity.’

According to Bruno, one of the features of Bataille’s meditations was the nurturing of a dynamic fluctuation between great tension and total relaxation.

In February of 1939, on the verge of completing a meditation of excessive tension, [Bataille] relaxed… and his state was suddenly transformed, became effusive and ascendant, as though he were caught up in an immense force… There are other cases of his in which relaxation (whether brought on intentionally or as a result of discouragement and surrender), following a strong emotive tension, accelerates the process of enlightenment.

It is unclear whether the similarity of Bataille’s technique to certain Tibetan and Tantric practices (chöd, meditations on horror, the alternation of tension and relaxation, contemplation of the void) was the result of Bataille’s eclectic reading in the field, or whether he had stumbled upon them independently and discovered, as did early Tantric initiates thousands of years before him, that such techniques were effective methods of spiritual realization. It seems likely, based on the somewhat arcane and unlikely nature of a ‘tension-relaxation dichotomy’ as the basis for a method of meditation, and its prominence in the Vijñâna Bhairava, the Bardo Thodol, and (according to Bruno) the techniques used by Bataille, that he learned of the technique through one or both of these books, or perhaps through someone who was familiar with them. Whatever its origin, the similarity between the above passage by Bruno and this description of the Bardo Thodol by Peter Bishop is undeniable:

740 ‘En février 1939, sur le point d’achever une méditation dans une tension excessive, [Bataille] se détendit alors et son état soudain se transforma, devint effusion, montée, comme s’il était happé dans une force immense… On connaît d’autres cas que le sien où la détente (peu importe qu’on l’ait provoquée ou qu’elle soit due à un sentiment de découragement et d’abandon), succédant à une forte tension emotive, accélérera les processus d’illumination.’ The author goes on to relate this technique to Zen practice as well. Bruno, ‘Les techniques d’illumination chez Georges Bataille,’ p. 711-12.
The process described in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* can be described alchemically as a ‘dissolutio’ followed by a ‘coagulatio’, as a fragmentation followed by a reunification. Time and again, Tibetan Buddhism takes consciousness to the outermost limits of psychic fragmentation only to then establish order once again. It seems to have the ability to evoke the wildest, most terrifying imaginative forms and then to restructure these into calm images of wholeness…This capacity to fragment and then unite is the source of Tibetan Buddhism’s power as a spiritual discipline.\(^742\)

This process could be interpreted as classically Tantric, in that it is utilizing a dualistic technique to overcome duality, just as it utilizes desire to overcome desire. The descent into chaos and dissolution, followed by a re-establishment of form, is a mirroring of the world of conditioned things and its dualistic nature: respiration, night and day, up and down, life and death. By mimicking these forms the initiate seeks to become one with them, and hence to master and subsequently to escape them.

Bruno provides a detailed description of this process as it functions within the *Vijñāna Bhairava*, and identifies this idea and this text as formative influences in Bataille’s practice:

Nowhere is this alternating process repeated with more insistence than in a remarkable tantra from Kashmir, the *Vijñāna Bhairava*, which varies untiringly the same fundamental exercise, where the feelings, having served the concentration, must in the end be eclipsed…At the limit, this can evolve towards a quasi-abstract contemplation of space, or towards a fixation on the sky such as the Buddhists practiced, which Bataille sometimes experimented with himself. Some of his texts, which perhaps at first evoke gratuitous images, actually correspond as much to a technique as to a state of being, as is evident in the first poems of *The Archangel*, where the consciousness is lost in vastness, as well as in the fragments of *Method of Meditation* published in 1946 under the title *Devant un ciel vide* [Before an empty sky] where he opposes to the anguish of being limited to oneself ‘a song like the modulation of light from cloud to cloud in the afternoon, in the unbearable immensity of the skies.’\(^743\)

\(^{742}\) Bishop, *Dreams of Power*, p. 72.

\(^{743}\) ‘Nulle part on n’a répété avec plus d’insistance ce processus alternant que dans un remarquable tantra du Cachemire, le *Vijñāna Bhairava*, qui varie inlassablement le même exercice fondamental, où les sensations ayant servi à la concentration doivent à la fin s’éclipser…À la limite, cela peut évoluer vers une contemplation quasi-abstraite de l’espace, ou vers la fixation du ciel, que les Bouddhistes ont pratiquée, et que Bataille vit quelquefois experimenter autour de lui. Plusieurs de ses texts, qui évoquaient peut-être au premier abord des images gratuites, correspondent en réalité aussi bien à une méthode qu’à des états, comme on le devine dans les premiers poèmes de *L’archangélque*, où la conscience se perd dans l’immensité, ainsi que dans les fragments de *Méthode de méditation* publiés en 1946 sous le titre : Devant un ciel vide – où il oppose à l’angoisse de l’être limité à soi « un chant semblable à la modulation de la lumière de nuage en nuage, l’après-midi, dans l’étendue insoutenable des cieux ».’ Ibid., p. 716.
The similarities that exist between Bataille, the \textit{Vijñāna Bhairava}, and the \textit{Bardo Thodol} extend outward to other disciplines as well. There are implications for and resonances to any number of dualistic structures and concepts: alchemical processes, Breton’s idea of the communicating vessels (in which the connection between, and identity of, waking and dream states is explored), the dynamic tension between male and female that is so central to both Tantra and Surrealism, and the ultimate duality, with which Bataille was obsessed, that encompasses life and death.

Bataille’s awareness of death, of the ephemerality of human existence and the inevitability of constant change, was reinforced in him by many factors in his life: the destruction of two world wars, the death of Laure at the age of 35, and not least his long association with André Masson, whose obsessions with change, violence, and death matched Bataille’s own.

One could present any number of sources for Bataille’s ideas about death, but one must suffice here: in August of 1939, less than a year after Laure’s death, in the month before the outbreak of World War II, and during the twilight of \textit{Acéphale}, Bataille borrowed a book by W. Y. Evans-Wentz from the Bibliothèque Nationale in which was written:

\begin{quote}
The ego, or soul, is equally ephemeral, being dependent for its relative existence upon an interminable series of sense impressions, instantaneously arising and passing away, a mere flux of perpetual transformations.\footnote{W. Y. Evans-Wentz, \textit{Tibetan Yoga and Secret Doctrines} (London: Oxford U. Press, 1935), p. 17.}
\end{quote}

In his text ‘The Practice of Joy Before Death,’\footnote{Georges Bataille, ‘The Practice of Joy Before Death,’ \textit{Visions of Excess}, p. 235; ‘La Pratique de la Joie Devant La Mort,’ \textit{Acéphale} 4 (June 1939), p. 11.} published in \textit{Acéphale} two months earlier, Bataille had delineated the self-obliterating core of his idiosyncratic meditation practice, what Surya refers to as his ‘black, deviant’ yoga.\footnote{‘Bataille took up a pretty unorthodox yoga; a black, deviant one.’ Surya, \textit{Georges Bataille: An Intellectual Biography}, p. 511, n. 10.} In this text he claims ‘no more than an affective resemblance between this practice and those of the religions of Asia or Europe’,\footnote{Bataille, ‘The Practice of Joy Before Death,’ p. 236.} thus maintaining a certain level of spiritual autonomy and dissociating himself from any obligation to religious tradition. In a sense, the very fact that Bataille denied the resemblance implies that the resemblance is there. Despite this disclaimer, the similarity of his text to certain Tibetan and Tantric works, particularly in its obsessive focus on the inevitability of death, is clear.
As the rumblings of war grew louder and louder around him, Bataille’s lugubrious consciousness could not tear itself away from the overwhelming presence of death, and he wrote about it incessantly:

Everything that exists destroying itself, consuming itself and dying, each instant producing itself only in the annihilation of the preceding one, and itself existing only as mortally wounded…
I imagine the frozen instant of my own death…
I can only perceive a succession of cruel splendors whose very movement requires that I die: this death is only the exploding consumption of all that was, the joy of existence of all that comes into the world; even my own life demands that everything that exists, everywhere, ceaselessly give itself and be annihilated.748

Bataille was probably unaware at the time of the uncanny resemblance of his lament to the words of the first Dalai Lama, written over 450 years earlier:

Meditate on how the Lord of Death comes to all living beings. No matter what the constitution of the body we have taken in this rebirth, it does not pass beyond the reach of death. No matter where we may live, it is not outside the territory of death. And no matter what the historical era, it is not a time free from death.749

As discussed above, this obsession with death on the part of Bataille was simply another aspect of his obsession with eroticism. Bataille recognized the inseparable nature of sex and death, to the extent that he viewed them as two aspects of the same phenomenon, believing that eroticism ‘draws its dark and wounding character of bedazzlement from death’.750

Freud’s idea of thanatos, or the death drive, claimed that in addition to the better known and more easily accepted desire to remain alive, each individual also possesses a desire to return to a state of calm, or even non-existence. The state of a Buddha, in which the boundaries defining the self have been overcome, could be seen as a form of ‘non-existence’, but a personality unfamiliar with this tradition or unable to bear the rigours which it requires sees death as the only doorway to the peace that thanatos seeks. While Freud focused on the phenomenon of the death drive within a Western context, he was also familiar with the terminology of Buddhism, as can be seen in this passage: ‘The consideration that the pleasure principle demands a

748 ibid., p. 238-9. ‘Tout ce-qui existe se détruisant, se consumant et mourant, chaque instant ne se produisant que dans l’anéantissement de celui qui précède et n’existant lui-même que blessé à mort…Je me représente l’instant glace de ma propre mort…je n’aperçois qu’une succession de splendeurs cruelles dont le mouvement même exige que je meure; cette mort n’est que consommation éclatante de tout ce qui était, joie d’exister de tout ce qui vient au monde; jusqu’à ma propre vie exige que tout ce qui est, en tous lieux, se donne et s’anéantisse sans cesse.’ Bataille, Acéphale 4 (June 1939), p. 16, 22-3.
reduction, at bottom the extinction perhaps, of the tensions of instinctual needs (that is, nirvāna) leads to the still unassessed relations between the pleasure principle and the two primal forces, Eros and the death instinct.\textsuperscript{751}

In order to understand what a person thinks about death, we must understand what that person thinks about the self, as death in the individual sense is only meaningful in the context of the self. Stoekl writes that ‘for Bataille, all entities are collections of other entities; there is no simply isolable ipse that would represent unitary being. What cells are to a human being, a human being is to that larger organism, the community.’\textsuperscript{752} Richardson interprets Bataille as saying that ‘in dying we consummate our life and enter, or re-enter, the continuity of existence, a continuity that had been interrupted by our birth.’\textsuperscript{753} While Bataille was painfully aware of himself as an isolated individual, he was also cognizant of the greater whole of which he was a part, and saw his own inevitable death as a return to that greater whole, simultaneously terrifying and fulfilling.

Many of these ideas came to Freud through his reading of Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, indicating a certain commonality of intellectual ancestry with Georges Bataille. If Freud had trouble comprehending the Surrealists, however,\textsuperscript{754} he would no doubt have been even more bewildered by Bataille. Freud delved into the underworld of human consciousness with the intention of curing its problems, while Bataille was more prone to glory in the very things that Freud viewed as neuroses.\textsuperscript{755}

The experience of World War II appears to have had a profound effect on the intensity of Bataille’s interest in techniques of inner experience. Although, as we saw earlier in his conversations with Mircea Eliade, Bataille maintained some level of interest in Tantric thought, he had, according to Prévost, more or less lost interest in his meditation practice by September of 1945:

\textsuperscript{752} Stoekl, introduction to \textit{Visions of Excess}, p. xxi.
\textsuperscript{754} In a letter to André Breton of 26 December 1932, Freud wrote, ‘I am not in a position to understand clearly what Surrealism is and what it wants. Perhaps I was not made to understand it, I who am so far away from art’. Original in German. Translated as ‘moi-même je ne suis pas en état de me rendre calir ce qu’est et ce que veut le surréalisme. Peut-être ne suis-je en rien fait pour le comprendre, moi qui suis si éloigné de l’art.’ in \textit{Le Surréalisme au service de la Révolution} No. 5 (May 1933), p. 11.
\textsuperscript{755} See Georges Bataille, \textit{My Mother / Madame Edwarda / The Dead Man} (London: Boyars, 1995).
He said to me that all that [his research into inner experience] was past. Admittedly, he would speak again about it in his books, but he no longer saw it as particularly important...\(^{756}\)

In the absence of a commitment to formal and ongoing techniques, and in the wake of the destruction of the war, Bataille’s permanent apostasy appears to have continued its inevitable progression. In later years, as he became somewhat less extreme in his views (and more generally acceptable in such roles as the founder and editor of the successful journal Critique), Bataille would look back on some of his ideas, such as his meditations on horror, his involvement with Acéphale, and the idea of the pineal eye, with a certain amount of detachment, if not regret, referring in 1959 to the idea of founding a religion as ‘comical’.\(^{757}\) Surya presents the possibility that, later in life, Bataille may have simply chosen to become more strategic, maintaining a socially acceptable front in order to continue his indiscretions undisturbed.\(^{758}\) Whatever its motivation, his later disavowal of these pursuits does not lessen the intensity of his engagement with them in the interwar years. The pineal eye, staring blindly and futilely out the top of a human skull, encompasses ideas of physical transgression, solar decay, Freudian displacement, the undermining of transcendence, and excremental psychology. It stands as a fitting symbol of these marginal and often disturbing obsessions of the young Bataille.

The pineal eye was only one incarnation of that versatile organ for Bataille; throughout his life the eye maintained a powerful, and often terrifying, hold over his beliefs and his imagination.

**THE SACRED AND THE PROFANE**

One of the most evocative manifestations of duality is the dichotomy between the sacred and the profane. According to Eliade, ‘the sacred and the profane are two modes of being in the world, two existential situations assumed by man in the course of his history...[they] depend upon the different positions that man has conquered in the cosmos; hence they are of concern both to the philosopher and to anyone seeking to discover the possible dimensions of human existence.’\(^{759}\) Eliade defines the profane as the everyday, something akin to ‘natural realities’, and the sacred as simply ‘the


opposite of the profane’, and indirectly relates them to conceptions of modernism by stating that ‘the completely profane world, the wholly desacralized cosmos, is a recent discovery in the history of the human spirit.’ Eliade’s rather broad definition gives some idea of the breadth of the terms, and of their centrality to questions with which Bataille was preoccupied, such as religion, death, and states of exaltation.

Unlike Eliade, whose concern was primarily with an ethnographic understanding of the sacred, Bataille focused his attention on the implications of the sacred to the individual, particularly as it related to death. On the subject of sacrifice, Bataille writes:

The victim dies, thus the witnesses participate in an element which his death reveals. This element is what it is possible for us, along with religious historians, to call the sacred. The sacred is precisely the continuity of being revealed to those who fix their attention, in a solemn rite, on the death of a discontinuous being.

For Bataille, ‘the death of a discontinuous being’ can be seen as synonymous with the return of that being to a greater continuity, the sacrality of which is defined by its oneness: the complete absence of duality, fracture, and distinction.

Unlike poetry, which could be characterized as the path from the known to the unknown, or Freud’s conception of the unheimlich, or the uncanny, which is the unknown hidden within the known, the sacred is that which is not only completely unknown, but must remain unknown, and completely separate, in order to maintain its identity. According to Hollier, the duality that results from this gulf is absolute: ‘instead of positing two principles in conflict with the world, it posits two worlds.’

Bataille wrote that ‘the sacred is only a privileged moment of communal unity, a moment of the convulsive communication of what is ordinarily stifled.’ He understood community to be not only an expression of the sacred, but a potential means of collective escape from the prison of quotidian existence. He was cognizant enough of these issues to open his book Theory of Religion with the words ‘the foundation of one’s thought is the thought of another’. Bataille’s numerous attempts to forge radical and productive alliances with those around him were more than anything expressions of his interest in the sacred, and were in keeping with his belief that any philosophy worth the name must be lived as much as thought, with thought itself being

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760 ibid., p. 10.
761 ibid., p. 13.
overcome as much as utilized: ‘I am not a philosopher but a saint, perhaps a madman.’

Bataille’s ideas concerning the sacred and the profane were heavily influenced by his reading of Mauss, Eliade, and Durkheim, as well as through his contemporaries such as Michel Leiris and Roger Caillois. Readings such as these influenced Bataille’s thinking regarding Buddhism, the sacred and the profane, and the relationship between the two. Obadia places Durkheim within the tradition of scholarship relating ideas of the sacred and the profane to Buddhism:

It is in particular following the reading of Oldenberg, but also of Burnouf, that in 1912 Emile Durkheim used Buddhism as a counter-example to challenge the theistic definitions of the religion defended by his predecessors (Spencer, Frazer and Tylor) and to establish the now famous distinction between the sacred and the profane.

The dualism that underlies the concepts of the sacred and the profane can be found in most philosophical traditions. In the West this tradition is rooted in the Greek dichotomy between Apollo and Dionysus, a construction used extensively by Nietzsche in his Birth of Tragedy.

It is well established that Bataille was an avid reader of Nietzsche, not least by the fact that he titled one of his books Sur Nietzsche. Some of his exposure to Buddhist ideas thus came no doubt through his reading of The Anti-Christ. In this book Nietzsche makes clear his feelings about both Buddhism and Christianity; admiration for the first, and contempt for the second. Statements such as ‘Buddhism is a hundred times more realistic than Christianity’ are in keeping with Bataille’s anti-idealistic philosophy.

The influence of Nietzsche on Bataille’s convoluted literary style is evident. While rooted in a simple binary structure, Nietzsche’s characterization of the interactions and oppositions between the Apollonian and the Dionysian within Hellenic culture is, like Bataille’s constant shifting between ecstasy and torment, sufficiently convoluted and subtle to make facile comparisons useless. As though demonstrating

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766 ‘Je ne suis pas un philosophe mais un saint, peut-être un fou.’ Bataille, Oeuvres Complètes V, p. 218.
767 Bataille borrowed Durkheim’s Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse three times, and Hubert and Mauss’ Mélanges d’histoire des religions four times. See ‘Emprunts de Georges Bataille à la Bibliothèque Nationale (1922-1950),’ Oeuvres Complètes Vol. XII, p. 573, 577, 579, 585, 588, 592, 611.
768 ‘C’est notamment à la suite de la lecture d’H. Oldenberg, mais aussi d’E. Burnouf, qu’Emile Durkheim utilisa, en 1912, le bouddhisme comme contre-exemple, pour récuser les définitions theistes de la religion défendues par ses prédécesseurs (H. Spencer, G. Frazer et E. Tylor) et établir la désormais célèbre distinction entre le sacré et le profane.’ Obadia, Bouddhisme et Occident, p. 36.
his belief that ‘in every exuberant joy there is heard an undertone of terror,’ Nietzsche maddens his reader by fashioning his writing in the image of the ‘contrariety at the centre of the universe’ and ‘the interpenetration of several worlds’. Both Nietzsche and Bataille appear to be striving for an expression of paradox, a written language that evokes duality while simultaneously undermining it.

In Bataille, the idea of duality is nowhere more forcibly expressed than in the unbridgeable gap between male and female. Echoing Tantric constructions, Bataille positions the feminine as a philosophical centrality and as a perilous meeting point of desire and destruction. These themes are brought together in Tantra in the image of the goddess Kali [Plate 101] (about whom Bataille wrote a brief article that appeared in Documents in 1930), and in Bataille’s writing, in figures such as Madame Edwarda. Choucha writes that ‘it is perhaps in this attempt to subvert language and thought and ‘transcend’ the male principle of the Logos, that Bataille’s influence from Tantra becomes apparent. He insists upon action and the direct experience, which is also a feature of Tantra...’

In reading Bataille, the central role of the feminine is impossible to ignore. Whether presented as a mother, lover, or whore (categories that in Bataille are anything but mutually exclusive), the role of Woman is almost always central to his thinking. Similarly, in Tantric Buddhism, in Surrealism, and in Catholicism, there is a strong feminine presence at the centre, from which everything else radiates. ‘The Surrealist conception of love (which includes eroticism as an integral part) presents a striking parallel with the occult tradition. It is similar to Tantra, for love and eroticism are seen as a means towards mental and spiritual expansion.’ The feminine is valorized, sometimes out of a need for control, sometimes out of a need for comfort or as an Other against whom to frame a self, but always as a central theme. Simultaneously valued for her beauty and feared for the power that beauty affords her, the female, whether real or imagined, is seen as something that exists on another plane from ordinary reality.

Bataille symbolizes the gap between male and female, while simultaneously challenging their duality, through the paradoxical expression of incompatible elements. This technique can be clearly seen in his story Madame Edwarda, which conflates what

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Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy, p. 64.
Georges Bataille, ‘Kali,’ Documents No. 6 (1930); reprinted in Documents 1929-1930, p. 368.
Choucha, Surrealism and the Occult, p. 91.
Choucha, Surrealism and the Occult, p. 62.
is generally considered profane with the values of the sacred, specifically by equating God with a prostitute:

(Let me explain myself. No use laying it all up to irony when I say of Madame Edwarda that she is GOD. But GOD figured as a public whore and gone crazy – that, viewed through the optic of ‘philosophy,’ makes no sense at all. I don’t mind having my sorrow derided if derided it has to be, he only will grasp me aright whose heart holds a wound that is an incurable wound, who never, for anything, in any way, would be cured of it…And what man, if so wounded, would ever be willing to ‘die’ of any other hurt?)"  

Bataille roots this passage in ambiguity and paradox. The sacred, which by definition must be separate from and ‘vertiginously dangerous’ to the profane, is nevertheless brought together with the profane in the most blunt and degraded way, in the body of a whore. In the words of Visuvalingam, who was writing on the practices of Hindu Tantrics, Bataille ‘charges even the crudest profanities with a transcendent significance’.

In the introduction to this story, Bataille repeatedly stresses the paradoxical nature of this joined attraction-repulsion: ‘mankind is the direct result of poignant, indeed violent impulses, alternately of revulsion and attraction; “…the insensate moment towards which we strive with all that is in our power and which at the same time we exert all our power to stave off…”; ‘….leaping headlong into the sickening emptiness, into the very nothingness which at all costs being has got to avoid…”.

In a manner similar to, if more violent than, a Zen koan, Bataille attempts to break open the limitations of reason and duality by presenting the mind with an irresolvable conflict which nevertheless must be resolved. This compulsive association of disparate elements is, along with historical convenience, one of the reasons that Bataille has been consistently associated with Surrealism. However, while Breton used this technique in an attempt to liberate the mind from constricting and habitual thought patterns, thus gracing a formerly enslaved consciousness with ‘la clé de champs’, Bataille was attempting to commit acts of literary terrorism, introducing matter to anti-matter and hoping for an explosion.

776 Georges Bataille, Theory of Religion, p. 36.  
779 Bataille, ibid., p. 141.  
780 Bataille, ibid., p. 143.
By presenting the concept of God in the form of an attractive but ‘fallen’ prostitute, Bataille simultaneously addresses and undermines not only Eliade’s concept of the utter separation of the sacred from the profane (‘the sacred always manifests itself as a reality of a wholly different order from “natural” realities’), but also the sacred’s irresistible nature, its mixture of attraction and terror, and its necessary transgression of the profane’s dominating logic. In the words of Roger Caillois, ‘the sacred involves right or wrong action and is imbued with the opposing qualities of pure and impure, holy and sacrilegious, that define within their own limits the very frontiers to which the religious order can be extended’. For Bataille, the malleability of these frontiers, the paradox of their simultaneous sacredness and transgression, was essential to their vibrant nature and to their devastating power within the mind of humanity. The taboo does not banish the transgression but, on the contrary, depends upon it, just as the transgression depends on the existence of the taboo: ‘The transgression does not deny the taboo but transcends it and completes it.’ In other words, there is a need for transgression within a greater order, rather than an overthrow of the system. The transgressor needs the transgressed, and the transgression requires limits. In Hegelian terms, ‘the human subject does not exhibit greater potency through an unobstructed expression of selfhood, but requires obstruction, as it were, in order to gain reflection of itself in its environment, recognition of itself by Others.’

This acknowledgement of the necessity for opposition and difficulty within human existence bears a resemblance to the Buddhist admission of the inevitability of suffering. It also sheds light on issues of sadism and masochism, specifically by calling into question the voluntary nature of these traits; if existence itself is based on longing, on difficulty, and on the unobtainability of the desired, it could be argued that masochism is nothing more than a recognition and acceptance of truth, and sadism a deferral to the inevitability of pain. The sacred, cloistered behind walls of taboo, maintains its distant existence, yet recognizes the reality of its own transgression within the profane. In the same way that suffering lies at the heart of Buddhism, the infliction and reception of pain is the hidden truth of the dichotomy between the sacred and the profane, and in the transcendence of this dichotomy through submission to it can be found its terrible beauty.

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781 Eliade, The Sacred and the Profane, p. 10.
CONCLUSION

When discussing the Western view of and approach to such ‘exotic’ fare as Buddhism, Tibet, and Eastern thought in general, it is critical to remember that what is being addressed is in fact this Western view, and not these cultures and nations themselves, which have, in the words of Edward Said, ‘a brute reality obviously greater than anything that could be said about them in the West’.

According to the Buddhist philosophy that is central to this paper, this is true of all phenomena: due to the fact that all manifestations of the conditioned world are ultimately created by the mind, we never actually experience an exterior reality, but only our interior impressions.

While acknowledging the existence of Western fantasy and projection and their role in the West’s imperial policies throughout much of the East, one should not go so

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far with this thought as to discount ‘the positive motivations and impulses behind many Western encounters with and representations of the Orient’. In his book *Journeys East*, Harry Oldmeadow attempts to redress the excessively anti-Western bias that he believes is reflected in Said’s book *Orientalism*:

Whilst [nineteenth century Orientalists’] work was no doubt often contaminated by mixed motives and their work sometimes turned to dubious ends, the scholarly enterprise in itself was a noble one and their heroic labors ought to elicit our admiration and gratitude rather than opprobrium. This is especially the case amongst those writers and researchers who, far from aiding and abetting colonial regimes or reinforcing racist and progressivist ideologies, were inspired by a sense that the East had philosophical, artistic and spiritual riches which could be shared by a Western world which had lost its religious bearings.

This absence of ‘religious bearings’, characterized by the lack of formal devotion and spiritual belonging that is so often found in the West, affirms the European culture and belief system in which Modernist artists lived, both through their lack of true adherence to a foreign belief system, and through the individualistic process of non-adherence itself. It is nevertheless clear that the underlying premises of Buddhism were evident in this era. In Breton’s writings on objective chance, Duchamp’s interest in art without an artist, and Bataille’s darker obsessions with the annihilation of the body and the separate self, the animating themes of Buddhism were an underlying presence within Dada, Surrealism, and other artistic associations of the era. Given that these themes, including death, impermanence, and craving, are universal human experiences, there is no surprise in the fact that they often appear independently of an explicitly Buddhist context. From Heraclitus to postmodernism, the theme of constant change and shifting realities has animated humanity’s search for meaning. All philosophies are not monolithic, of course; their differences are as great as their similarities. Exploring the ways that humans have attempted to come to grips with spiritual paths and underlying realities, one finds an endless array of paths involving prayer, sacrifice, communal dance, physical ordeals, meditation, isolation, music and singing, and restrictions on diet, speech, appearance, and sexual activity. The apparent expressions of human culture are infinite, but the deeper one delves into the motivations behind them, the more the similarities come to the fore. Huston Smith writes that ‘it is possible to climb life’s mountain from any side, but when the top is

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787 ibid., p. 13.
reached the pathways merge. This is not to imply that the expressions of a religion and its inner meanings are separate entities; Smith also writes that ‘it is one of the illusions of rationalism that the universal principles of religion are more important than the rites and rituals from which they grow. To say this is like saying that a tree is more important than the sun and soil from which it draws its life.’ In religion, the sun and soil are of infinite variety, but the tree that grows from them always involves the same fundamental elements: sex, death, the search for self, the escape from self, and the attempt to rejoin a lost archaic unity. In the words of Joseph Campbell,

there is a formative force spontaneously working, like a magnetic field, to precipitate and organize the ethnic structures from behind, or within, so that they cannot finally be interpreted economically, sociologically, politically, or historically. Psychology lurks beneath and within the entire historical composition, as an invisible controller.

The research presented in this study has sought to prove the presence of a broadly Buddhist influence within the avant-garde circles of early twentieth century Paris, while remaining cognizant of the fact that Western conceptions of ‘Buddhism’ are provisional, albeit useful, constructions. By focusing on the concept of desire and the reality of the human body, the dissertation has supported a central premise that, in classical Buddhist fashion, walks the middle way between the extremes of convention and speculation.

A recognition and iconographical analysis of the similarities between Tibetan art and the work of Bataille, Masson, Artaud, and other Surrealists can help to illuminate the idea of the Philosophia Perennis, a term used in the Catholic Church which is similar to the themes of underlying constancy explored by Campbell, as well as by James Frazer in The Golden Bough, Aldous Huxley in The Perennial Philosophy, and Nietzsche in his concept of the eternal return. All of these works address the idea that there are eternal themes and realities within human experience which reappear continually throughout all times and civilizations. This concept of repetition, also explored by scholars such as Ananda Coomaraswamy, René Guénon, and Frithjof Schuon, is one explanatory trope that can be used to better understand the presence of common themes such as transgression, the centrality of the feminine, and the abjection of the body found in both Tantric Buddhism and in Surrealism. In the words of Lopez,

788 Smith, Religions of Man, p. 76.
789 ibid., p. 4. Smith’s implication that the inner meaning of a religion is borne of its rites is questionable; the point being made here is that the two are interdependent.
‘the mandala is ultimately neither Tibetan nor even Buddhist, but a symbol of something ancient, universal, and timeless.’\(^791\) The same could be said of the unnerving juxtapositions and descent into the inexplicable of Surrealist art.

Supporters of this traditional view support the argument that human experience is more or less fixed in terms of its underlying motivations and experiences. Desire, suffering, and impermanence have existed, and will continue to exist, in all human societies. These scholars, and the established religions and world views that they represent, lean towards an interpretation of reality that supports tradition and discourages personal innovation. The lessons learned from history are valued as primary sources of social stability and personal fulfillment. In contrast to this view, a more contemporary interpretation that could be broadly labeled ‘postmodern’ sees experience as shifting, contingent, and dependent upon subjective experience. The latter view, developed by scholars such as Jacques Derrida and Julia Kristeva, views history as a construction that conceals rather than reveals the reality of experience.

This dissertation has offered a small step in the potential development of a common ground between these two positions, an arena in which the valid lessons of classical history can be animated by contemporary concerns without being pre-empted. Clearly, human experience is deeply affected by culture, geography, social class, intelligence, gender, race, and religion. Just as clearly, the experiences of desire, impermanence, and suffering that have formed the core of this study are universal. Contemporary theorists who cross the line from recognition of cultural influence to denial of historical fact are, in the view of this study, denying not only thousands of years of historical development, but also the daily, lived experience of the present.

The most significant difference between the doctrine of Tantric Buddhism and the beliefs of Bataille can be found in the end points of the paths that they take in response to this knowledge. Tantra, despite its transgressive character and utilization of abject and forbidden materials, posits as its end point the same goal as other schools of Buddhism: transcendence of illusion, escape from the bonds of the world, and enlightenment. Bataille, on the other hand, believed that ‘if salvation is the goal… every action makes you a fragmentary existence’, \(^792\) and that ‘an entire human being is simply a being in whom transcendence is abolished’. \(^793\)

Taken to their logical conclusions, where would these different schools of thought lead us? These are harrowing questions to ask of Tantra, a spiritual discipline

\(^791\) Lopez, *Prisoners of Shangri-La*, p. 147.
\(^793\) *ibid.*, p. xxvi.
that has been known to include graveyard meditations, disturbing sexual practices, and unappealing dietary choices amongst its activities. More troublesome still are the implications and undeniable truths of a mode of thought such as Bataille’s: ‘…death will interrupt us. I won’t always be required to continue the servile search for the true. Every question will remain finally unanswered.’\textsuperscript{794} Both the Buddha and Georges Bataille traveled through frightening places in their respective searches for truth. But at the end of their journeys, the Buddha looked within and found light, while Bataille found only night.

Due to the elusive nature of his writing, the divergent directions of thought contained in the increasing body of critical literature on Georges Bataille are as much a creation of his many commentators as they are his own. In the same way that Kojève appropriated Hegel and Bataille himself appropriated Nietzsche, numerous, variant, and frequently contradictory ‘Batailles’ have been and continue to be created within the critical literature on his work. Breton’s ‘excremental philosopher’, Sartre’s ‘new mystic’, Leiris’s ‘impossible man’ and Nick Land’s ‘virulent nihilist’\textsuperscript{795} all combine to create what Loyer calls the “plural” Bataille whom it is impossible to reduce to a single and falsely unifying name.\textsuperscript{796}

There are some characteristics that all of these personages have in common, the most relevant to the current argument being Bataille’s opposition to the dominance of reason in human life and belief, something that was a guiding theme in many of his works. Bataille sought a method whereby the instinctive and often violent totality of human existence could be liberated from the Enlightenment based rationalism that he saw as choking the creativity and capacity for ecstasy of the individual.

In February of 1948, in response to Aimé Patri’s consideration that Bataille was a Buddhist due to his interest in ‘the destruction of the myth of the personality’, Bataille stated quite clearly that ‘I don’t consider myself a Buddhist, because Buddhism recognizes transcendence’.\textsuperscript{797} While on the surface this statement appears quite unequivocal, such an ‘anti-transcendence’ position can also be seen to be transcendent, in the same way that to be an artist in inter-war France was often to be anti-art. Modernists of this period often adopted an ‘anti-art’ stance, not because they opposed what art represented, but because they sought that thing itself, rather than its

\textsuperscript{794} Bataille, \textit{On Nietzsche}, p. 47.
\textsuperscript{795} Fred Botting and Scott Wilson, \textit{Bataille} (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave, 2001), p. 3.
\textsuperscript{797} Bataille, \textit{The Absence of Myth}, p. 84.
representation. In the words of André Masson, ‘Art has never been – and is still not – the sacred’. Ide...
to an understanding of Tantra: ‘Vātsyāyana and the other authors who concerned
themselves with these customs...were in no sense pornographers...to regard the
Kāmasūtra as a work of pornography is to attribute to it a character which it does not
possess and to judge it by standards appropriate to our own day rather than to the time
when it was written.’

A similar point could be made about Bataille. The intensity of his experience
emanated from the enjoyment of pleasure coexisting with its own forbidden nature, as
well as an overwhelming awareness of its ephemerality, and the inevitable pain that
accompanies its disappearance. This pain, as Buddhism taught and as Bataille was
aware, is caused not by the pleasure itself but by our clinging to it.

In one sense, the Surrealists and Georges Bataille arrived at much the same
conclusion that the Buddha had reached 25 centuries earlier: that the intellect, the
handmaiden of reason, is useful but not sufficient. The intellect, used as a tool or as a
vehicle to reach a greater goal, is indispensable. But when seen as an end in itself it
becomes not only an end but a dead end, leading ultimately to a separation from, rather
than a union with, any greater reality or ultimate release from suffering. The intellect is
by definition contained within the individual, it exists in order to assist in the survival
of the individual. The spirit, that unified thing beyond language to which both
Buddhism and Surrealism pointed, is not contained by the individual but rather contains
the individual; it is greater and more comprehensive than an intellect and thus cannot
be fully comprehended, but only indicated as something that exists beyond it.

To call into question Surrealism’s relationship to reason, and to the exotic
cultures that inspired it, is certainly not to imply that the Surrealist rebellion was
without value. Any social upheaval, by its very nature, begins at a certain level of
unfamiliarity with its goals, and Surrealism was no exception. While it may be valid in
retrospect to point out that their views of the East were relatively unsophisticated, this
was of little importance at the time, when their intention was the overthrow of the
European way of thought and of being. Had the Surrealists succeeded in toppling the
power structures of Europe in the 1920s, it is frankly unlikely that their alternative
could have been worse than what in fact ensued. The rise of Fascism that engulfed
Europe was not only a trend worthy of opposition, but one which made the drawbacks
of Eastern idealization appear minor in comparison. The fact that the European history
so reviled by the Surrealists, fresh from World War One, led fairly quickly into the

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801 Giuseppe Tucci, Rati-Līlā: An Interpretation of the Tantric Imagery of the Temples of Nepal
further horrors of Nazism, the Holocaust, World War Two, and Stalinism, vindicated the Surrealists and other dissidents in their claims of the moral corruption of Europe, and made their idealization of an alternative, any alternative, far more understandable in retrospect.

Beneath Europe’s cultural and political shifts existed a more profound and long-lasting transformation of spiritual and religious assumptions. A culture that had developed within Christianity’s paradigm of a ‘world without end’ was being exposed to traditions that were based on the idea of constant change. Eastern religions joined new developments in literature, physics, and technology in promoting the idea that nothing is ‘without end’, not the individual, the state, or the world, and in corroding the colonialist certainty upon which Europe had been based for centuries. This grand cultural dismantling was the cumulative result of thousands of individual minds shifting their points of view, and of millions of ‘intimate destructions’ occurring.

An intimate destruction represents the dismantling of an illusion. It is the end of the world for that illusion, and the continuation of eternal reinvention for the infinity from which that illusion’s energies have been borrowed, and to which they are inevitably returned. What the limited self (the illusion) sees as an intimate destruction, is in fact an infinite (or eternal) return.

Buddhism is one manifestation of the ancient search for unity, one way in which people have attempted to reconcile themselves to the world around them. The question of whether the modern artists being discussed here thought of themselves as ‘Buddhists’ is less meaningful than the question of whether they were engaged in the same fundamental search as was Buddhism.

The point sought by Tantra, by Buddhism, by Surrealism, and by Georges Bataille is the point at which desire, paradox, and helplessness converge to create the moment freed from the illusions of past and future. Desire, dependent on the belief in a future moment, collapses into itself upon realization of the totality of the present, and one’s unchangeable place within it. The paradox of a desire simultaneously attained, surrendered to, and overcome, merges with the helplessness of singularity in the present moment. This is the state of ecstasy in which the separate self is dissolved in laughter, irrespective of its source.

In the words of Georges Bataille:

If I possessed within me musical resources to communicate my feelings, what would eventuate would be a (quite probably feeble) explosion – an explosion that, at one and the same time, would be both a languorous demented wave of sound and the expression of wild joy –
a joy so untamed, however, that listening to it there would be no way of knowing if it came from my laughing or dying.\footnote{Bataille, \textit{On Nietzsche}, p. 86.}

For Bataille, laughing and dying become indistinguishable, as the inevitability of both becomes clear. The victim of time realizes the certainty of extinction, and transcends what would be tragedy by perceiving its avoidance as an impossible illusion. When the absence of alternative is fully grasped, the sting of death collapses into an absurd parody of itself, and the idea of life is abdicated in favour of an all-encompassing existence within the present instant. The dependence of eternity on its own impossibility is revealed, and the single, present moment regains its primacy over illusions of past and future. This is the laughter in the slaughterhouse of life.

Laughter, a psycho-physical reaction to paradox, is dependent upon the body. Like death, it is a phenomenon of incarnated existence, and a reaction to the helplessness inherent in such an existence. The body is the worldly medium of both humour and suffering, the crucible where the two are joined. When suffering is viewed as opportunity, and laughter as the transcendence of tragedy, one is then on the road to a fusing of duality, and demolition of the chasm between laughter and slaughter. The body can be known as that which suffers, and that which laughs, the paradoxical alliance of these two functions brought fully into consciousness by moving outside of the profane realm and into the sacred, through ascetic practices such as meditation, or through the exalted excess advocated by Bataille. The pursuit of the sacred is the denial of profane absurdity, and thus the implicit confirmation of its existence. In an absurd universe, the necessary illusion of God is the only sensible alternative. A world in which religion made sense would be the only world in which it was not needed.

In many of the systems of thought that have been explored in this study, the body has been associated with the alienated ego, and thus simultaneously deified and demonized as the driving force of creativity and the barrier between the self and the divine. In the Tantric use of corpses, the frenzied self-erasure of Artaud, and the fascination with the ‘acéphale’ of Georges Bataille, one can see the tormented and paradoxical gropings of the human towards some level of resolution with the impossible fact of our separate physical existences.

This ‘resolution’ is the intimate destruction, intimate in a sense implying not only privacy and exclusivity, but also something infinitely small yet all-encompassing. It is not a damaging of self at the level of self, but an absolute annihilation at a level beyond the cellular, beyond the molecular, beyond the atomic; a destruction at the level
of memory and possibility, a destruction beyond mourning and illusion, turning full circle and coming to rest at the place of a greater creation.

Whether borne of lack or of excess, desire is fuelled by the courageous existence of joy in the face of death. Systems of thought such as Tantric Buddhism, Surrealism, and the *oeuvres* of Artaud, Masson, and Bataille are the children of this hazardous desire. In laughter, in joy, in the identity of torment and ecstasy, unity lies hidden like a numinous pearl between the dualistic hemispheres of reason’s brain: the opportunity to experience the impossible coexistence of sovereignty’s rebellion with the dissolution of absolute surrender.
‘Homo sapiens is a reformed hunter-killer of depraved appetites, which once helped him to survive. He was partly rehabilitated in an open prison called the first agricultural societies, and now finds himself on parole in the polite suburbs of the city state. The deviant impulses coded into his central nervous system have been switched off. He can no longer harm himself or anyone else. But nature sensibly endowed him with a taste for cruelty and an intense curiosity about pain and death. Without them, he’s trapped in the afternoon shopping malls of a limitless mediocrity. We need to revive him, give him back the killing eye and the dreams of death. Together they helped him to dominate the planet.’

‘So, psychopathy is freedom, psychopathy is fun?’

‘A natty slogan, Paul, but it does contain a certain fiery truth.’

- J. G. Ballard

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GLOSSARY

**Acéphale**

a secretive group founded by Georges Bataille, Laure (Colette Peignot), and others, to explore themes of myth, sacrifice, and the sacred. Active 1936 to 1939.

**Ajñā**

the sixth chakra, located between the eyebrows, corresponding to the third eye.

**Anāhata**

the fourth chakra, corresponding to the heart.

**Anattha**

(Tb. *bdag med pa*) selflessness.

**Anicca**

(Tb. *mi rtag pa*) impermanence.

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Asana a yoga posture.

Avalokitesvara (Tb. Chenrezig) Mahayana and Vajrayana deity of whom the Dalai Lama is considered to be an emanation.

Bardo Thödol The Tibetan Book of the Dead.

Bodhisattva (Tb. changch’ub sempa) a person who has irreversibly entered on the path to Buddhahood, OR certain highly-attained beings such as Avalokiteshvara or Manjushri who can be contacted in ritual for aid and who are, in effect, deities.

Bön an indigenous Tibetan religious tradition. A variant Buddhist order that developed from the tenth century onwards. Bön employs Tantric practices similar to other Tibetan traditions but worships different deities.

Buddha (Tb. sangvé) Awakened one; a person who has achieved enlightenment.

Chakra an energy centre located along the spinal column.

Ch’an a Chinese form of Buddhism, precursor to Japanese Zen.

Chinnamastā a Tantric goddess who beheaded herself, usually portrayed holding her own head and, with two disciples, drinking the blood that is spurting from her neck.

Chittakasha mental space, as opposed to Mahakasha.

Chöd a Tibetan meditational practice that involves visualizing one’s body being cut up, transformed and made into an offering for deities, demons, and other beings.

College Of Sociology A study group that presented a series of lectures dealing with the role of the sacred in society. Founded by Georges Bataille, Roger Cailllois, Michel Leiris, and others. Active from 1937 to 1939.

Dalai Lamas series of reincarnate lamas that began in the 15th century. The fifth Dalai Lama became ruler of much of Tibet, with his capital at Lhasa. The Dalai Lamas are seen as emanations of Avalokiteshvara.

Damaru a Tibetan ceremonial drum made of human skulls.

Documents a journal founded by Georges Bataille, focusing on art and ethnography. It published 15 issues in 1929 and 1930.

Dukkha (Tb. sdug bsngal) suffering.

Grand Jeu an art movement whose main members were René Daumal, Roger Gilbert-Lecomte, Josef Sima, and Roger
Vailland. It published a journal of the same name from 1928 to 1932.

‘Great Game’ the late nineteenth century struggle for dominance in central Asia between Russia and Britain. No relation to the Grand Jeu.

Guru Rinpoche see Padmasambhava.

Hinayana a term for Theravada meaning ‘lesser vehicle’, as opposed to the ‘greater vehicle’ of Mahayana. Considered somewhat pejorative.

Jñāna knowledge, pure awareness.

Kalī the destroying goddess, the consort of Shiva, portrayed with four arms and a necklace of severed heads.

Kundalini the energy lying dormant at the base of the spine, that yogis attempt to awaken and raise through the spinal column.

Lingam The male sexual organ or any representation thereof.

Lopon Rinpoche see Padmasambhava.

Mahakasha elemental space, phenomenal world, as opposed to Chittakasha.

Mahayana a form of Buddhism that developed later than Theravada, the main difference being the presence of the Bodhisattva and the desire to liberate all beings, not only oneself. Present mainly in Tibet and Central Asia.

Manipūraka the third chakra, corresponding to the solar plexus.

Mantra a word or sound that is repeated as an aid to meditation.

Mudra a hand gesture or position used in meditation.

Mūlādhārā the first chakra, corresponding to the pelvic plexus, and the site of unawakened Kundalini.

Nirvāṇa the state of release from samsāra, total liberation.

Om Mani Padme Hum mantra of Avalokiteshvara, translated as ‘The Jewel in the Lotus’.

Orientalism The Western study of the Orient, OR following Edward Said, the tendency of Western scholars to use the Orient as a ‘blank slate’ for inscribing their own preconceptions.

Padmasambhava (Tb. Pema Jungme, Guru Rinpoche) Indian tantric teacher who introduced Tantric Buddhism to Tibet in the late 8th century.

Pema Jungme see Padmasambhava.
Pineal Eye a residual eye found at the crown of the skull in reptiles, OR in the writings of Georges Bataille, the eye that breaks through the crown of the skull in humans, blinding itself by staring at the sun.

Pineal Gland a small, pinecone shaped gland located at the top of the third ventricle of the brain, surmised by some philosophers, including Descartes, to be the location of the human soul.

Sādhana spiritual practice, means of accomplishment

Sahasrāra the seventh chakra, corresponding to the crown of the skull, and possibly the pineal gland. Vivekananda calls it ‘the thousand petalled lotus of the brain’.

Samsāra the cycle of suffering, the existence of ordinary beings, characterized by constant rebirth in one or another of the six planes of rebirth (gods, asuras, human beings, animals, hungry ghosts, hell beings).

Shakti cosmic feminine energy, OR the female partner in Tantric ritual.

Shakyamuni the historical Buddha, who lived in the 6th century BCE in India.

Sushumna the passage through the centre of the spinal cord, through which the Kundalini travels upward when awakened.

Svādhisthāna the second chakra, corresponding to the genitals.

Tantra (Tb. gyüd) a ritual practice within Hindu, Jain, and Vajrayana Buddhist traditions, transmitted from guru to disciple, OR a text associated with one or another of these traditions. Important Buddhist Tantras include Guhyasamaja, Cakrasamvara, Hevajra, Yamantaka and Kalacakra.

Thangka A Tibetan portable scroll icon, usually of a Buddha, bodhisattva, or deity, painted with mineral colors on fine cotton or silk and sewn into a brocade frame stretched on two end sticks.

Theravada the oldest form of Buddhism, characterized by a focus on meditation and self-liberation. Present mainly in Southeast Asia.

Tibetan Book of the Dead the western summary of the Bardo Thödol, ‘Great Liberation Through Hearing in the Intermediate Stage’, a text of Tibetan Buddhism that is read to a dying person in order to help them to navigate their way through bardo, and ideally to avoid another rebirth in samsāra.
**Upaya-kaushalya** (Tb. *thabs la mkhas pa*) means, methods, or techniques, “skillful means,” referring to the Buddha’s ability to teach appropriately for any student.

**Urna** a bump or mark found between the eyebrows on many Buddha statues, symbolizing the presence of the third eye.

**Usnisa** a bump or mark at the top of the head on many Buddha statues, often portrayed as a topknot of hair, symbolizing the seventh chakra and spiritual realization.

**Vajrayana** Tantric Buddhism. Tradition that became widespread in the later Indian period (5th to 12th centuries CE) and was transmitted to Nepal, Southeast and East Asia, Tibet and Mongolia.

**Viśuddha** the fifth chakra, corresponding to the throat.

**Yab-Yum** literally, ‘father-mother’; the practice of maithuna or sexual union within Tantric ritual, OR any portrayal of this rite in Tibetan art.

**Yamantaka** a wrathful deity portrayed with a bull’s head. Written about by Maurice Heine in *Minotaure*.

**Yantra** a geometric design used in meditation.

**Yidam** a Tantric deity.

**Yoga** (Tb. *neljor*) general term for techniques of meditation and spiritual practice in Indian religions. In Tibet, it usually refers to Tantric practice.

**Yogi** (Tb. *naljorpa*) practitioner of yoga (female: *yogini, naljorma*). In Tibet, it generally refers to lay Tantric practitioners, though monks and nuns also perform Tantric yoga.

**Yoni** The vagina or any representation thereof. An object of veneration in many Tantric rituals.

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**APPENDIX B: ERITIS SICUT DII**


ERITIS SICUT DII… (you shall be as gods…)

By Maurice Heine
'The position in which one finds the divinities with their Shakti is usually called *Yab-Yum* in Tibetan, i.e. literally *Father-Mother*. In the eyes of a believer, it represents only procreation, and it should be said that no Buddhist sees obscenity or even lustfulness in it. According to the sacred books, it is on the contrary the supreme emblem of the union of matter (feminine energy) with spirit (male energy), one fertilizing the other in order to create life (vital energy of a new being).'


I

‘These guardian divinities are venerated by the people as well as by the lamas who choose them for protectors… The costumes and the attributes change according to the character of the divinity: the kind ones have the clothes of the bodhisattvas, with coiled hair, vajras, rosaries, and the lotus as attributes…'

J. DENIKER 804

Exalted and divinized, identified with purest ecstasy, the act of love has received from lama-artists in the temples of Tibet, the title of nobility which the persecutions of the Church prevented the Gnosis from conferring on it in the West.

*Eritis sicut dii...* Here is symbolized the promise of the wise Snake. The *Yi-Dam* 805 united with his *Shakti*, a double being that perfects its authentic unity with the peak of bliss, such is the Protector, necessarily benevolent, who places himself amongst the emanations of the Buddhas and the bodhisattvas. Divine loves of *Yab* and *Yum*... Unchanging knowing smiles… Glances filtering through slanted half-closed eyelids… Invaluable gestures of the multi-armed hands holding magic emblems… Softness of the love of the soft divinities!

II

‘One could say that the imagination of the Tibetans became exhausted in the representation of this figure, in order to depict its horror and ferocity.’

J. DENIKER 806

But also, the fury of the love of savage divinities!

Under his Tibetan name, *gChin-r I-gChed* or the more usual *Yamantaka*, who would not recognize the Minotaur?

Sixteen legs to crush, thirty four arms to massacre and seven heads to devour – of which the most appalling is the head of the bull – is this to grant too many means to the Minotaur?

Not at all, because the head of the bodhisattva Manjushri – as the thought dominates the act – dominates the seven heads with the triple eye, orders the thirty-four hands charges with weapons or bloody trophies and directs each group of eight feet which crush his dozen enemies with the steps of a tireless walk. So many horrors are still not enough for the holy anger of *this* Buddha. Thus Yamantaka, who emanates from them, avenge, as did the Minotaur, the angry gods.

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805 Tibetan name of protector gods.
A belt of snakes balancing the severed heads, an elephant skin thrown over the shoulders, these create the costume of the Savage, along with, for each of his heads, a pearl-encrusted crown of skulls. Here, before a glory of red flames, the black god embracing the blue goddess: in this union, wreathed in smoke, the spirit incorporates itself with its Shakti, Minotaure incarnates himself.

Nevertheless, Yab does not suspend any of his activities. He continues his course from left to right, and while his first pair of arms are closed again on Yum to whom he attends, the work of their hands never stops: the left firmly holds the thod-khrag, the top of the skull filled with smoking blood, while the right comes to chop the internal organs of his victims with the gri-gug. The goddess meanwhile throws her hands to the shoulders of the god, but the left raises an empty thod-khrag, the right holds up an impatient gri-gug, because insatiable Shakti claims her share of bloody delights. Each partner contributes to raise to its supreme expression the incomparable sadism of the couple.

The Minotaur reveals his entire secret - or just a glimpse of it - only in the depths of his den, where, from time to time, he shelters the motionless objects of his love. Never, except at the rare moments of this terrible pause, does the lascivious expression of his irritated face reach similar intensity. It seems that all the fury of his available energies is concentrated in the bullish head, which appears ready to devour Yum…

And who knows if eternal Shakti, Matter reappearing endlessly within matter, is not, in a delirious communion, devoured herself by the Spirit? Why the Minotaur, resuscitated in Tibet, wouldn’t have more in common with his man-eating ancestor in Crete?

APPENDIX C: CERNUSCHI EXHIBITIONS, 1911-1952

May-June 1911 - First exhibition of the Arts of Asia: Chinese carpets.

November 1911 - January 1912 – Second exhibition of the Arts of Asia: Japanese weapons from the collection of Dr. Mène.

April-June 1912 – Third exhibition of the Arts of Asia: Ancient Chinese paintings, antique jade, Peking glassware.

April-June 1913 – Fourth exhibition of the Arts of Asia: Buddhist Art (India, Japan, Tibet).
1913-1914 – Fifth exhibition of the Arts of Asia: the Victor Goloubew Collection.

January-May 1921 – Sixth exhibition of the Arts of Asia: New Chinese exhibitions from the Musée Cernuschi.

May-June 1922 – Seventh exhibition of the Arts of Asia: Animals in Chinese art.

1923 – Eighth exposition of the Arts of Asia.

1925 – Siamese and Cambodian sculpture.

1927 – Semi-precious stones.

1929 – Flowers and birds in Chinese art.


1946 – Korean art.

June 1946 – Contemporary Chinese paintings.

December 1946 – Contemporary Turkish painting.

1947 – Paintings of India.

1948 – Iran: works from the Tehran museum, the Louvre, and private collections.

1950 – Contemporary Japanese ceramics.

1951 – Tibet: banners and miniatures.


APPENDIX D: NOTE ON DESCARTES’ CONCEPTION OF THE PINEAL GLAND

‘This is the first passage locating psychic activity in the pineal gland. When we study the climate of ideas within which Descartes developed this notion, it seems less gratuitous than it otherwise might. There were, in general, two theories about the use of this gland: first, that it controls...the flow of spirits between the third brain ventricle and the fourth (for Galen on this, see Siegel, Galen’s system, 119); and second, that it supports and keeps separate the vessels that enter the brain to form the choroid plexus. Galen said that “as often as nature subdivides a raised up vessel, she interposes a gland to fill the interval” (UP, bk. 6, chap. 4, K3, 424).

Descartes’s idea that animal spirits move from blood to gland to ventricle is a fairly natural development of the Galenic view re-expressed by Paré who said that the pineal’s “utility is to reinforce the separateness [division] of the vessels brought there
by a flap of the pia matter for generation of animal spirits and to give life and nourishment to the brain” (Oeuvres, 1575, 127). If there is to be a separate soul, what more plausible locus of intermediation between it and the body than the gland whose associated blood vessels form the chief source of animal spirits?

In pre-Cartesian Renaissance thought, circa 1542 to 1632, the functions of the pineal body were variously represented. For Columbus, “the use of this gland is for separating the veins even though the matter appears otherwise to certain anatomists to whom it seems evident that it was made to shut in the spirits of the fourth ventricle, but this idea impresses me as entirely improbable” (Anatomica, 192). Piccolhomini supposed that the “pineal is provided to keep open the interventricular foramen lest the brain’s diastole prevent a proper backflow of spirits from the fourth ventricle to the third” (Praelectiones, 255). According to du Laurens, the third ventricle produces two channels, one communicating with the pituitary gland, the other with the fourth ventricle. In the latter channel appears a pointed glandule shaped like a pine cone, “deemed to serve, as other glands do, for steadying the veins and arteries which are distributed to the brain so that the animal spirits have a free and open way to go from the third ventricle to the fourth” (Oeuvres, 1621, 306).

A warning was sounded by Bauhin, who admonished that being external rather than internal to the brain, the pineal could not act as a sort of guard controlling the flow of spirits from the third to the fourth ventricle (Theatrum, 1605, 598-599). But Crooke allowed the gland both functions, that is, to “confirme the divisions” of the vessels that give rise to most of the blood plexuses of the brain, and “to keep the passage of the third ventricle open – so that the animal spirit [be not] hindered from descending into the fourth ventricle” (Mikrokosmographia, 1631, 467-468).

As between these variously interpreted and often synthesized ideas of the purpose of the pineal gland, Descartes was primarily influenced by its alleged function of sustaining the subdivisions of the vessels entering the brain. The supposition that it played this role made it a proper place for the separation of spirits from the blood and for a patterned transmission of these spirits to, and through, the ventricles. These uses of the gland made it…a proper organ for intermediating between the body and the soul.

For Descartes elsewhere on the pineal gland as siege de l’âme or siege du sense commun, see the Passions (AT 11:351-362) and the Dioptrics (AT 6:129); also his letters to Meysonnier (AT 3:18-21) and Mersenne (AT 3:123, 263-265, and 362-363).


IMAGE SOURCES

Plate 1 - Georges Bataille in 1961
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This book is for Bony Joe Damascus