

Bataille and Contagion, or Towards a Space of Sound and Art

Combining ethnology and anthropology with ancient sun worship, Bataille tries to explain human activity with the idea of the 'solar anus,' a metonymical association of the sun and anus in the flow of energy that circulates and nourishes the activities of all living beings. For Bataille, the source of heat from the sun to the earth is an inexhaustible energy, supplying living beings with the energy for procreative activity. After all this, it is still always abundant, ending up as an excremental excess, which is for the earth, the activity of a volcano; for humans, perhaps it is the activity of excremental excretion. In the manifestation of excessive energy, sun and anus are associated.

In this image of the flow of energy from the sun to the earth, volcano and to the anus, Bataille imagines that humans eventually develop an eye on the top of the skull to contemplate the dazzling sun, which he calls the 'pineal eye'. Humans do have a pea-sized endocrine gland called the 'pineal gland' that produces melatonin, and is considered a vestigial photoreceptive organ, namely a 'parietal,' or 'third' eye. Bataille imagines that this undeveloped eye originated in the anus. When the ape started to walk upright, the anus fell in and hid between two legs, cutting off any direct connection with the sun, which endows humans with autonomy. As a result of the now hidden anus, solar energy thus accumulates inside the body, and in seeking an outlet, finally ascends to the top of the body in order to recover the direct connection with the sun. For Bataille, the 'pineal eye' represents some final point of the flow of energy: solar energy comes down from the sun to meet the hominid body at the now-hidden anus, and instead, now greets the orifice on top of head. As a result of this 'organic repression' of bipedalism, the human body becomes a site for accumulating the excess, which perpetually seeks for its way out.

But why is it the eye? Why not the pineal ear? Why did Bataille come up with the image of an eye for an orifice of the excessive energy that overflows from human activities? Of course this questioning can be endlessly unfolded; why not the pineal nose? Pineal mouth? Pineal finger? Pineal penis? Pineal vagina? Pineal, any part of the body? Bataille's idea of pineal eye is susceptible to various interpretations, particularly due to its allegorical opaqueness. Deleuze's idea of 'body without organs' could be regarded as one of the most radical questionings that explores the metaphorical expression of the pineal eye with an image of the body itself as a potentially ubiquitous gland. But here, I would like to single out a particular case study of what I will call the 'pineal ear.' I am tempted to read Bataille's concept of the pineal eye and his obsession with eyeballs, prominent throughout his works - as a critical challenge to visually-oriented perception in the Christian tradition, continued in the society of spectacle in capitalist societies.

I will explore the possibility of reading Bataille's pineal eye as a critical challenge, gesturing towards a non-hierarchical mode of perception; as well as employing it in the stream of discussion on art, particularly focusing on the auditory experience. I discuss the pineal eye in reference to Bataille's idea of contagion as the communication and transmission of solar excess, which, I assume, underpins his project in *The Accursed Share*. This exploration is nurtured by the case study of two figures, who firstly explored the understanding of sound with regard to the human body and perception in the age of industrial overload, either in the realm of warfare or everyday life: the futurist painter and composer Luigi Russolo (1885-1947) and a German Jewish voice trainer, Alfred Wolfsohn (1896-1962). They experienced the First World War as an unprecedented scale of industrial warfare in human history, and in their works and practices, they drew attention to the tremendous capacity of human perception to open up under the extremity of physical/psychological overload in violent circumstances. They witnessed excessive energy in the horrendous experience of warfare, particularly through auditory experiences and tried to employ it in their creative practices. I assume here that their works demonstrate the possibility of a limitless malleability of human

perception, a possibility that embodies Bataille's idea of an excess that is fundamentally contagious and transmittable between different entities and phenomena.

Bataille's idea of the solar anus and pineal eye are the primal images that fostered his thinking on human activities, starting with a very simple questioning; how and where does the overflow of energy that nurtures and overwhelms all the living beings on earth manifest itself in the various phases of human activities? Bataille thinks that this flow of energy is fundamentally in the state of excess, constantly carving out its way of excretion for its own sake. The idea of excess and excretion as a fundamental state of entities expressed in the metaphor of solar anus is later developed into his theory of expenditure: the non-productive consumption of properties and fortunes. What he calls the 'general economy' in *The Accursed Share* initially refers to his attempt of locating the way out of the excess in human societies. Rather than suppressing the excess, humans have always come to terms with the excess in the form of communal activities that goes well beyond the individual being. Its systematic organisation can be found in the primitive rituals of a gift-giving feast practiced by indigenous peoples such as in potlatch or the act of sacrifice, (the aim of which is to intervene the accumulation of energy and properties in a certain place and disperse them among other parts of the community). Bataille further describes the places of the expenditure in various societies; in religious practices of elaborate ritual ornamentation in medieval Europe; in warfare, particularly in Islam; in meditation in Tibetan Buddhism, or in the modern capitalist system that paradoxically reorganises the non-productive consumption of excess around the expansion of production capacity itself, endlessly enhancing the productivity and the utilitarian use of consumption for the sake of further accumulation of excess.

In this stream of thought in *The Accursed Share*, Bataille writes of contagion as a significant concept for thinking about how the excess is excreted not only in collective manifestations of primitive rituals or religious practices, but also in the everyday context of human behavior. In a section titled 'Life in communication, not isolation' written in *The Limit of Utility*, the unpublished fragments of *The Accursed Share*, Bataille writes of contagion as the basis of communication that functions to excrete the excess. Life is 'made of contagions of energy, movement or heat', and 'rapidly passing from one point to another, or from multiple points to other equally numerous ones, in the same way as in a network of electrical forces'. The excess is by nature contagious, sliding from one place, one creature, one person to another, perpetually distributing the accumulation of energy, properties and wealth into somewhere other than itself. Because of this contagious nature of the excess that runs throughout entities, existences are fundamentally mediated and communicated. Bataille locates the places of contagion not only in primitive rituals, but also in our everyday activities such as language, motion, music, signs, laughter, gesture and attitude. Certain phases of human activities function as a contagious mediation for carrying out the expenditure of the excess.

In these limitless movements of contagion, I, as an isolated being, am nothing but a stopping point, a swirl favourable to a new gushing, 'constantly colliding with other swirls that resemble it and modify its movement as it itself modifies the movement of others'. In *Inner Experience*, he writes almost the same in the section titled 'communication', where he declares that his whole research project aims to demonstrate contagion as a fundamental principle of existence that necessarily puts things in the state of communication.

In a sense, Bataille's project of *The Accursed Share* is to investigate the contagious nature of the excess that is communicated between beings, manifested in a range of phenomena from the transcendental urge in ritual and religious practices to the empirical world of everyday life. I claim that the contagious nature of the excess assures us of the transmutability of the human configuration. Taking art as one of the places of contagion that belongs to both transcendental and empirical phenomena, I will now investigate the contagious nature and transformative force of Bataille's theory of excess, particularly with regard to the expenditure of solar excess, exercised in the artistic representation of our

perceptual experiences. In other words, in the following part of the essay, I arbitrarily shift Bataille's idea of the pineal eye to a new conceptual 'pineal ear,' trying to draw critical attention to the discourse of an art that is driven by visual dominance, by instead introducing and incorporating auditory art.

With the advent of machinery in modernity, following moral and physical individualisation in the course of the Reformation and the industrial revolution, the human body becomes utilised as a unit for labour in a perpetual state of enhancement in order to maximise its productive capacity. This condition of modern power manipulating people's lives is most prominently theorised in the idea of biopolitics, where the tolerances of human life are stretched out, either physically or psychically, by the meticulous disciplinary interventions of discourses and technologies. For that power, life manifests itself as an inexhaustible source of energy for political manipulation, and for the creation of human intelligence, either for constructive or destructive purposing, regardless of its ethical implications. In a sense, biopolitics can be regarded as a contemporary mode of humanity's dealings with the excess through disciplinary power, and it is where I see the great influence of Bataille's idea of excess and expenditure on Foucault.

In avant-garde movements, when ideas of biopolitics started to flourish hand in hand with those technological developments that allowed for the unprecedented scale of industrial warfare in First World War, various artists started to pay attention to the tremendous capacity of human perception and tolerance opened up in the extremities of physical/psychical overload in such violent circumstances. Those artists who experienced the war were horrified and traumatised in losing their confidence and consistency as upright human subjects. At the same time, they were irresistibly fascinated, haunted and darkly illuminated by the inhuman dimension of war, and of the human perception of warfare and potential to tolerate the extreme situations.

Among them was a German Jewish voice trainer Alfred Wolfsohn, a lover of the painter Charlotte Salomon, and a pioneer in the realms of voice research and training, the practice of which was later formulated as the Roy Hart Theatre approach. Wolfsohn explored the possibilities of the human voice, not only as an instrument of theatrical expression, but also of psychic development and therapy. He served in the First World War as a doctor in the front-line trenches and was subjected to the various range of sounds of warfare, including gun-fire and bombing, and became particularly obsessed with the horrifying voices of dying soldiers. Returning from the war, Wolfsohn was haunted by the 'voice in extremis', the tremendous range of the impossibly vocalised screams and groans squeezed out of people in extreme bodily states; sounds that go far beyond the normal understanding of the sound a human can make. Drawing on his experiences during the war, as well as the voices of Hitler broadcast elsewhere in Berlin, he envisioned the nature and possibilities of the voice as an embodiment of a non-linguistic, inhuman dimension to the human, one being able to reach the unconscious and transform the human psyche.

Exploring the relationship between the human psyche and the expressive potentiality of the human voice, Wolfsohn worked on his self-curing experiment and discovered the range of tonal qualities of which his voice was capable, hearing himself make sounds both higher and lower than the extreme ends of the grand piano which he used as a measure. His traumatic experience of witnessing the 'voice in extremis' during WWI provided the psychic and somatic knowledge necessary to overcome the fear of this unknown region of human perception, which was manifested to him in his voice training:

1. Alfred Wolfsohn, 'Double & Multiple Stopping by the Voice: Female Voice (Multiple) / Female Voice (Double)' (0:48)

2. 'Duets (Voice & Instruments): Female Voice and Violin' (2:08) (from the album 'Vox Humana: Alfred Wolfsohn's Experiments in Extension of Human Vocal Range')

Wolfsohn concluded that the conventional divisions used to characterise the human voice are artificial rather than natural, and that the boundaries and categories introduced in the articulation of the voice, between male and female, human and animal, adult and child, should be challenged by investigating through intense emotion the unexplored sphere of the human psyche. The horrific experience of the sound of suffering in WWI found its place in his creative experimentation with a new dimension to the human voice that has not yet been moulded according to socialising categories. By recognising and practicing the extraordinary range of the human psyche and emotion which primordially encompass inhuman/animal states, one reaches, he surmised, the unknown realm of the voice that will eventually transform the understanding of the human self, both bodily and psychologically. Wolfsohn's practice demonstrates the possibility of expanding the human capacity of dealing with, consuming and transmitting afterwards, the overloaded state of being radically exposed to the excessive energy accrued in violent circumstances.

The futurist painter and composer Luigi Russolo is one of the earliest figures who drew attention to the auditory experience of noise that is particular to living in the age of machinery from the 19th century onward. In his well-known manifesto *The Art of Noise* published in 1913, he theorized the revolutionary force in the auditory experience of noise, denouncing any form of music that is tonally organised. His noise includes the sounds of nature such as wind, water and various animal sounds, the sounds of the modern industrial environment, or the human voice of talking or singing without signification. Without formal musical education, he envisioned categorising these fragmented auditory experiences from our surroundings, as never-ending stimuli from what we take through the ear. He also built instruments to represent these sounds, using various materials including waste and chemicals.

3. Luigi 'Russolo, Veglio Di Una Città', recorded in 1913 (from the album 'Futurism And Dada Reviewed 1912-1959')

Russolo's aim was to break down the hierarchical division between sound as everyday auditory experience and music as its purified formation. As is typical with avant-garde artists, with the idea of noise Russolo targeted *l'art pour l'art*, claiming to bring back art or music into the social/political context and everyday reality. Like many of the Italian Futurists, Russolo served in the First World War, and was severely wounded, an injury from which he never quite recovered. His revolutionary idea of sound is underpinned by his physical exposure to the industrial noises of modern warfare along with the increasing proliferation of machinery in the early modern everyday context. In this new phase of perceptual life, Russolo tried to reconstitute the auditory experience as 'the shrillest, strangest and most dissonant amalgams of sound', orchestrating the fragmented noises with artistic fantasy.

Likewise, a number of artists in this period found a creative source in the newly cultivated dimension of our auditory life. These experiments with fragmented noise as a transgressive device for breaking down the conventional boundaries between sound and music in the early twentieth century have evolved into various musical genres in the latter half of the twentieth century. Russolo's art of noise which was ultimately inclined to seek artistic synthesis in orchestrating various noises has carved out a way for *musique concrète* and experimental improvisational music. On the other hand, Wolfsohn's idea of pushing the limit of musical/auditory experience in order to expand human perceptual and psychological capacity, and tolerance, can be said to have cultivated different genres of noise music such as industrial music, power electronics, or harsh noise, in which deeply atonal noise is radically explored with electronic devices. One of the most prominent examples of this kind is Merzbow (1956 -), a Japanese electronic noise musician since the 1970's.

4. Merzbow, 'Frozen Guitars and Sunloop/7E 802' (from album, Dharma, 2001) (33:15-33:45)

Listening to this sort of noise music in the concert venue for an hour is, I reckon, the most radical realisation and embodiment of what those avant-garde artists envisioned in terms of challenging and expanding the limit of human perpetual capacity in the elongated state of extremity. On the other end, there are lines of people who challenge the liminal hearing of the ever-receding sound into silence. Among them, I take an example of a Spanish experimental musician and sound artist Francisco Lopez (1964-).

5. Francisco López, 'Untitled Sonic Microorganisms', (from album, Untitled Sonic Metaorganisms / Untitled Sonic Microorganisms, 2007) (23:45- 24:15)

In these works that explore the audibility or possibility of hearing in extremis, either in the form of excessive noise or the silent sound which is barely audible, the avant-garde's dream of cultivating a tolerance to the unknown realm of human perception is dialectically pursued in the form of sublime aurality. Here, I am tempted to interpret Bataille's idea of excess and its contagious nature as a moulding of the range of our receptivity, of our capacity to synthesise and absorb the audible intelligibility of the world. With the reception of the pineal ear, our psyche moulds itself, at the cost of plausibility, into what the world offers it, by receiving what it sees, hears, or knows, transgressing the limit of our perception formulated by the pragmatic idea of the human subject as an isolated, rational and individual being.

This preliminary sketch for thinking about sound art, a place where the perception of sound takes place in an experience of audio space as well as visual space, challenges the rational hierarchy built around the human senses. I believe that the auditory experience rearticulated, not exclusively as an issue of ear as against eye, or as a subcategory of body, but as one of numerous pineal glands, contagious conduits, perpetually absorbing and transmitting the excess, offers a critical artistic possibility in the age of a visually-oriented, or rather one-dimensionally preclusive, society of spectacle.