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Spectacular Sacrifice: Death in Images

by

Timothy Swiffen

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
Through Sociology, Anthropology and Criminology
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Master of Arts at the
University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

2010

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Spectacular Sacrifice: Death in Images

by

Timothy Swiffen

APPROVED BY:

Dr. Michael Darroch
Department of Communication, Media and Film

Dr. Randy Lippert
Department of Sociology, Anthropology and Criminology

Dr. Karen Engle, Advisor
Department of Sociology, Anthropology and Criminology

Dr. Gerald Cradock, Chair of Defense
Department of Sociology, Anthropology and Criminology

September 20, 2010

DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

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ABSTRACT

The filmed beheading deaths that have proliferated on the Internet present an unusual set of phenomena in the west. The aim of my project is to analyze these videos in terms of their connections to the larger visual discourses of represented violence and death in western culture. It is my contention that a theoretical understanding of the significance of these videos can be achieved by examining the traditions of ritualized violence through an updating of the insights made by Guy Debord, René Girard and Georges Bataille. By examining the relationship between these digitally encoded deaths and the theories of *spectacle*, ritual violence and eroticism I am seeking to contextualize the complex relationship these videos have to western culture.

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INTRODUCTION

"Reconciling Morbid Fascination and Utter Revulsion"

In 2004, while the most recent Iraq war was still in its infancy, the video of the beheading death of Nicholas Berg, a Jewish American businessman, was released onto the Internet. This was my first encounter with the infamous beheading videos. The Nicholas Berg video was not the first to gain notoriety in the west, the recorded murder of Daniel Pearl, a Jewish American journalist kidnapped and murdered in Pakistan, predates it by more than two years. Before that in Russia, the recorded murder of the soldier YevgenyRodionov by Chechen rebels gained notoriety in 1996. So the Nicholas Berg video is not unique because it was the first of its kind. However, it was the first to come directly from Iraq and it was the first of what became a series of videos released in 2004. Following the release of the Berg video in May 2004, six more videos from Iraq entered into public discourse before the end of the year. In chronological order, these were the seven murders filmed and recorded: Kim Sun-il (June), GeorgiLazov (July), Eugene Armstrong (September), Jack Hensley (September), Kenneth Bigley (October) and ShoseiKoda (November3). Along with these, there is also the filmed decapitation of Paul Marshall Johnson, Jr. (released from Saudi Arabia in June, 2004) and PiotrStańczak (released from Pakistan in February, 2009).

These are not the only beheading videos circulating, but they are most infamous in the west and they have proved to be the easiest to locate and contextualize. In my research, these were the videos that could most easily be attached to a specific victim and to place temporarily. One of the English based "shock sites" (websites specializing in galleries of grotesque imagery) that I encountered had a video compilation of what appeared to be 23

separate beheading deaths. Included in these were the infamous ones listed above as well as several I was unable to locate specific information on. This fact on its own indicates that there is a complicated relationship between these videos and the various audiences in which they circulate. But, as I said earlier, my own encounter with the beheading videos began with Nicholas Berg.

I learned of the existence of the Berg video in the same fashion that the majority of westerners did, through the coverage it received in western media. The coverage itself was fascinating and usually included clips from the video itself carefully re-edited to not directly show the more horrific details. These clips were always prefaced by the familiar warning of “graphic content” and the advice that more sensitive viewers should look away, but these are only meant as a promise that “what cannot be shown” is sublimely horrible. The careful construction of the edited clips, designed to show just enough (but not too much) of the obscene object achieved the intended effect, I was compelled to seek one it out. I desired to see the graphic and spectacular murder that is too terrible to be openly shown.

It took me two days after first hearing of the existence of the Nicholas Berg beheading video to summon up the determination to seek it out. Finally overcome by morbid fascination, I logged onto the Internet and began my search. I was immediately struck by how easy it was to find. All it took was the keywords “Nicholas Berg video” into any search engine and I was immediately brought to a webpage streaming the video. The only thing striking about the website I first encountered this video on was its complete bareness. The video was labeled in English but there was no extra information or

supplementary links, just the video. This is where I first encountered the death of Nicholas Berg.

The violence displayed in this video followed a pattern that has been repeated in most of the subsequent beheading videos. The video opens with a close up shot of Nicholas Berg himself. In this scene he gives his own name, the names of his family and the city where he grew up. Following this there is a cut to a scene of Berg with his arms bound behind his back sitting on the floor, behind him standing in a row are five armed and masked men. At this point the masked man standing in the middle reads a statement. The reading makes up the majority of the video, lasting approximately four minutes. There are no demands made in the statement, it is mostly a call to arms against the United States in defense of Islam and Muslims. At the end of the statement, the captors claim to have contacted the American administration and offered to release their hostage in exchange for the release of some prisoners in Abu Ghraib, an offer which was refused. The statement ends with the promise that there will be many more murders carried out in the same fashion. The five men then converge on Berg, he is pinned face down while one of the men grabs his hair and begins to slit his throat. Initially you can hear the murmured cries of Berg as the attack begins but soon after he is totally silent. His attacker continues to saw at Berg's neck until his head is severed from his body, a process that takes nearly a minute and is captured full frame and in its entirety by the video. His head is then held up by the hair and displayed directly for the camera. The final shot of the video is of Berg's body still lying with his stomach to the ground but with his decapitated head placed on his back facing the camera.

I was inspired to seek out this video because of my own morbid fascination, in part induced by the coverage it received in western media. Of course, morbid fascination is not the only reaction one could expect from the western media coverage, nor is it the sole intended effect from the intentionally lurid construction of the clips. After all, those who indeed perceive themselves as “too sensitive” for the terrible promise of the videos can easily find even the knowledge of their existence filling them with a deep and horrible revulsion. But it is precisely this oppositional set of responses to the beheading videos that fascinates me. It is my contention that these subjectively dissimilar reactions are not nearly as contradictory as they may first appear. One only needs to look to the work of the Marquis de Sade or of Georges Bataille to see that there is an inherent unity in the feelings of compulsion and repulsion in the presence of obscenity. The possible meanings behind the feelings of disgust and desire that mark the reception of the beheading videos in the west are made even more compelling when we consider the actual content of the videos. These are digital records of actual deaths and these videos exist as endlessly re-playable deaths captured in spectacular images. The obscene object that inspires such seemingly contradictory emotions is the ghostly presence of an actual death lingering in the dematerialized stream of digital code.

This is why these videos deserve closer analysis. By piecing together the significance of these videos in terms of their relationship to modern western subjectivities, knowledge about the place images of death have in the contemporary west can be produced. There is also the potential to shed light on the complex relations between western subjectivities and the diffuse world of images circulating through the Internet. These digitally recorded

deaths stand as particularly piercing moments where the role of death and the status of images can be implicated in the contemporary configuration of subjectivities.

But why choose such extreme images of violence and death as a point of entry? It is true that as examples of images ingested by a western audience through the medium of the Internet, the beheading videos are atypical in terms of their extreme nature. However, while the extremity of these videos may seem unique, their existence is not anomalous. The uniqueness of these videos lies directly in their apparent *extremeness* as ingested images. This extremeness is a result of the unflinching view they offer of the violent annihilation of another. However, I feel that it is the very extremeness of such digital representations that allows us to better understand the mechanisms of desire and fascination that underscore the relationship between western subjectivities and spectacular representation. These videos of beheading deaths are not extreme because of their fundamental dissimilarity to the more mundane images proliferating through the Internet. Instead, I would suggest that these digital representations of actual violence and death are extreme in that they indicate the same set of desires that elicits the consumption of the more “ordinary” images and representations floating through the cyber ether but in a markedly distilled form. But before this can be articulated, something must be said about the beheading videos themselves.

"Contextualizing Digital Death and Western Consumption"

As a starting point, I want to make clear the theoretical level on which I intend to engage with these digitized images. To reflect on these representations we must adopt a semiotic sensibility and distinguish the signifier from the signified. These beheading videos are best seen as existing in two distinct realities. The first reality refers to the actual moment

of the murder that these digital images are a record of; this is the signified moment. The second reality of these images refers to their existence solely as signifiers; as pieces of consumable media that float through the Internet. To place too much emphasis on the signified moment when considering these images runs the risk of an analysis getting bogged down with issues concerning the relationship of so-called “Muslim extremists” to the governments of western powers and can lead us to examining the geo-political relations between different nation-states. Although these clearly are important issues to consider, they fall well outside the scope of my investigation. As well, I would argue that any conclusions we could draw from a focus on the signified moment has no effect on the power of these images as consumable signifiers. However, this is not meant to imply that the dual realities of these images as both signified and signifier exist completely separately from each other. On the contrary, part of the power of these images as signifiers comes from their very concrete connection to an actual moment of violence and death.

But drawing this distinction between the actual signified moment and the video itself as a floating signifier is not as simple as I would have hoped. The power of these videos is not confined to their reception in western discourse. After all, the citizens of western governments are not the sole audience of the beheading videos. The first issue that must be addressed is the actual structure of these videos. Some of the beheading videos are actually follow ups to an initial “demand video.” This is what occurred with the cases of Eugene Armstrong, Jack Hensly and Kenneth Bigley. After their initial kidnapping, a video recording was made of the hostages while still alive and included a set of demands. The presence of these demands implies that these videos – both the demand videos and

the beheading videos – were crafted to be consumed by more than one audience. These videos have been described as attempts at “terrorist recruitment.” In other words, these videos are circulated through Islamic communities as a way of showing defiance towards western military incursions in the Middle East. They are meant to encourage people to take up an active role in the fight against western dominance. This accounts for the presence of these videos on so-called “Jihadist” websites. These websites, usually posted in Arabic or Farsi, are generally minimally designed but can be filled with messages and slogans promoting solidarity among Islamic people in the struggle against western powers and some may call for unity in a global jihad. However, this is not true for all of these types of sites.

As tempting as it may be in the west to attribute the circulation of these videos among Islamic people as an indication of the extreme and total nature of a call to Jihad, this is not exactly accurate. In many of these videos the demands made are sweeping and general, usually something like an immediate and total withdrawal of all foreign troops from a country – usually Iraq but sometimes Saudi Arabia – and can contain a direct call to arms in a total “war against infidels.” However, not all do and this does not necessarily reflect the general aims of those who created such videos. Along with the overt call to arms and grand demands made in the more infamous videos, many kidnapers ask exclusively for money. According to the CBC’s online article “Foreign Hostages in Iraq,” published on July 22, 2006, between 2004 and 2006 there have been more than 200 foreign civilians kidnapped in Iraq, the majority have been released by their captors (Foreign Hostages in Iraq, 2006). Some of these hostage releasings have reportedly come at a cost of millions of dollars. This was is the case of the kidnapping

of Italian aid workers SimonaPari and SimonaTorretta who were abducted on August 20th 2004 and which according to an article on the BBC news website, may have cost the Italian government upwards of one million dollars (US) (Peroni, 2004). Such reports are unconfirmed and have been openly denied by the Italian government. However, the majority of these kidnappings do not involve videos – at least none that have been made into a public spectacle and pushed into popular discourse. Nonetheless, these kidnappings are still relevant when considering the more infamous beheading videos. The fact that so many kidnappings, and subsequent beheadings, have occurred but only in the context of a monetary demand for ransom suggests that many of the hostage takings were not carried out with the express purpose of delivering a message to a specific audience. However, the demand videos that preface the well-known beheading videos generally contain the demand for the withdrawal of all foreign troops from Iraq. The case of Issa T. Salomi, an American civilian contactor abducted on January 23rd 2010, is a notable exception. A demand video was released by his abductors in February calling for the withdrawal of all foreign troops from Iraq, compensation to Iraqi families and the prosecution Blackwater security contractors. His release was negotiated in exchange for the release of four Iraqi prisoners and he was freed on March 25th. The demand video gained media attention in the west, but despite the general sweeping demands, a negotiated settlement was reached. This suggests again that although the video did have a more general message in part intended to reach a wide audience, this was not necessarily the sole motivation for those who produced it. Thus, these videos cannot be said to have a single purpose nor a single meaning. The reception these videos receive is of course dependent on the audience consuming them.

And these videos by their very nature as free visual signifiers reach a wide audience indeed. My analysis here is not meant to provide a definitive account of what these videos “mean.” Rather, I am interested in how these videos become incorporated into the spectacular culture of images that has manifested itself in advanced western capitalism. I am concerned with how these videos can be placed into visual discourses of the west.

It is also not simply the case that these videos have been transplanted into western visual discourse; they do not enter western culture as wholly alien objects. This is demonstrated by the significant presence these videos have in English based “shock sites.” The purpose of a shock site is exactly what one would assume by the label; it is a website specializing in the showcasing of particularly shocking or graphic imagery. This implies that beheading videos, as striking representations of actual deaths, have a much more complicated relationship to larger visual discourses in the west.

When considering the type of presence these video have in the west, it is essential to understand that their reception is greatly dependent on how they fit into the larger culture of images in advanced capitalism. Of the most telling examples of this are the videos of Eugene Armstrong, Jack Hensly and Kenneth Bigley. These videos are particularly interesting to me first, because of the demands made by their kidnappers, and second, because of the relatively small presence they had in media discussions in the west – at least in North America. Eugene Armstrong, a construction contractor, was kidnapped on September 16, 2004 along with fellow American contractor Jack Hensley and the British civil engineer Kenneth Bigley. Following the kidnapping of these civilians, a video was released showing all three still alive and demanding that all women prisoners be released from Iraqi jails. This demand is even more compelling when we consider that it was

made after the photos of torture and abuse by American soldiers at Abu Ghraib had been leaked to the public early in 2004.

Their demand was that prisoners be released from prisons where it had become public knowledge that widespread torture and abuse were occurring. This demand was, of course, not even considered and on September 20th 2004, the decapitation of Eugene Armstrong was digitally recorded and released on the web. Jack Hensley was killed on film in the same fashion the following day and Kenneth Bigley would remain alive until sometime around October 7th when a video was released of his decapitation.¹This seeming coincidence in violent imagery circulating on the Internet indicates that much can be gained from considering them in relation to the overarching presence that images of violence and death have in western visual discourse. It is my contention that a theoretical understanding of the significance of these videos can be achieved by examining the traditions of ritualized violence by updating the insights made by Guy Debord, René Girard and Georges Bataille. I am not suggesting that these videos have only one interpretation nor am I suggesting that my interpretations are somehow not context specific. On the contrary, it is my aim to analyze these videos in such a way that allows them to reveal something about the specific context from which I see them.

¹ Another interesting feature of these beheading deaths is that, in a sense, even the specific dates that these murders were carried out on have become virtualized. The specific dates usually are generally not known and it is the date that the videos were released that is given as the date which the victims perished.

"Structure of the Analysis"

My project is divided into three chapters, each devoted to a different phase of the analysis. The first chapter offers an investigation into what constitutes the visual culture of advanced capitalism. I begin by discussing the limitations of the traditional Marxist critique of the *Culture Industry* forwarded by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002). There are nuances to the current formulation of capitalism and how it has structured the relationship between subjectivity and images that is not adequately captured by Adorno & Horkheimer's theory. And the limitations of their theory are made even more apparent considering how the Internet has magnified the presence and importance of images in contemporary discourse. In its place I suggest a revisiting of Guy Debord's concept of *spectacle* and the *spectacle society* (Debord, 1994; 1998) as a means for interpreting the role images have come to play in contemporary culture. Moving from there I attempt to reconcile Debord's ideas with the seemingly contradictory ideas of Foucault concerning the status of observation, surveillance and spectacle. It is my aim to demonstrate that the conditions of spectacle have become embedded into the visual structure of the web cam video in order to analyze how this has manifested itself in contemporary western visual discourse. This is meant as a point of entry for considering the visuality of the beheading videos.

The second chapter introduces Girard's ideas concerning the relationship between social life and the ritual practices of communal murder found in sacrifice. Although I point out some of the limitations of Girard's theory – most importantly, its reliance on a concept of a *pure origin* – the theoretical role he ascribes to violence is extremely useful. By combining Girard's concepts with the psychoanalytic process of *virtualization* described

by Slavoj Žižek (Žižek, 2002), I will argue that, in terms of their relationship to a spectacular culture of images, the beheading videos take on the mutated role of the sacrifice. I outline some of the features of this *virtualized sacrifice* and discuss how this has been reflected in the contemporary discourses of death – namely the contemporary taboo on death – as well as what this demonstrates about the place of violence in contemporary western culture.

The final phase of my analysis involves an accounting of what could be called the *religious* character of the virtualized sacrifice. I do not mean religious in the sense of its connection with a specific religious doctrine or creed. Instead I employ the term in same broad fashion that Émile Durkheim meant when he described the *religious life* of humans (Durkheim, 1965). In order to properly define the beheading videos as a type of sacrifice, it is necessary to link them with this type of religious life and, even more importantly, to connect them with the *religious* or *mystical experience* itself.

This chapter addresses Georges Bataille's work on the role of eroticism in the religious life of humans. Extending his ideas about the three categories of eroticism (physical, emotional and – most importantly – religious) (Bataille, 1986) I offer the argument that the beheading videos represent an example of a new form of the erotic specific to the conditions of advanced spectacle and virtualization. Again I will turn to the psychoanalytic insights of Žižek to describe the features of virtualized sacrifice. By considering the shifts in the dialectic relationship between continuity and discontinuity I will demonstrate how spectacular sacrifice inverts the functioning of the traditional sacrifice.

By interpreting the beheading videos through these frames, I am attempting to update these theoretical insights by demonstrating the relationship modern western subjectivities have to images and representations of violence and death. The aim of my project is to go beyond the gut-reflex feelings that immediately spring to mind and to use these videos to provide new ways of thinking about ritualized violence, spectacle society and eroticism.

CHAPTER ONE

"The Contemporary Problem of the Culture Industry"

The so-called “culture industry” of advanced capitalism (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997) falls short when trying to come to grips with society in the age of the Internet. The problem of “culture” in a state of advanced capitalism described by Horkheimer and Adorno stems from the perception of an ever increasing homogenization of the material output of the industries of “culture” in the modernized world (film, television, popular writing, etc.). To argue this they adopt a classically Marxist notion of a structural tendency within capitalism towards the concentration of the means of production into the hands of an ever shrinking group of elite bourgeois with an accompanying necessity to homogenize and standardize industrial output. Their contribution is to suggest that this capitalistic tendency should not be limited to the operations of the “standard” category of industry in the form of a factory producing a material object, but can be expanded to encompass more contemporary types of industry. This is what they describe as the “culture industry.” Through their analysis of this novel form of industry they suggest the experience of “individuality” – an experience that appears to innately resist homogenization – has itself become the site of ever increasing standardization. The threat implied in this vision of the operation of advanced capitalism is that the space for artistic expression, and by extension the possibility of a meaningful life (or “authentic” individuality), is being squeezed out of existence. In its place we are left with an experience of identity based solely on the consumption of various commodities. Identity itself becomes a commodity with the threat that capitalism has now achieved the capacity to alienate ourselves from the subjective experience of our own existence.

But the Internet presents us with a phenomenon in the operations of the current epoch of capitalist society that is not adequately explained by this theory. Although Horkheimer and Adorno's articulation of "culture" is descriptive of the interaction of the individual with the structures of advanced capitalism, the monolithic power of the so-called "industries of culture" has reached a limit. This limit is best exemplified by two "threats" with which the culture industry is now faced. First, the homogenizing tendency is seemingly challenged by the proliferation and ease of access to the "cultural products" that these industries produce; for instance the apparent "problem" of pirated films and television shows, which allows the public access to the material without directly profiting the industries that produced them. Secondly, along with this proliferation there has been an accompanying explosion in the consumption of a seemingly more "individuated" cultural product. The diet of visual based stimulation that contemporary capitalist society has been so connected to is no longer finding its nourishment solely in the cultural product churned out by the industries of culture. Alongside these heavily industrialized visual products, the Internet has carved out the space for a different form of visual cultural product. This is easily exemplified by the expanding role of the so-called "viral" video in two senses. First, as a site of direct engagement with advanced capitalist "culture" – in the sense that going to a cinema can be read as a site of direct engagement with the culture produced by the culture industry forwarded by Horkheimer and Adorno. Second, as specific cultural reference points for the society of advanced capitalism – in the sense that a quotation from a movie, television show or a commercial can become a part of the lexicon of western culture – serving as a marker of shared experience.

The prevalence and “cultural capital” of so-called “user generated content” exemplified by the Youtube video signifies the emergence of a significant new *form* of visual cultural product. The role such digital visual material plays in our interactions with “pop-culture” is now starting to rival that of viewing an industrially produced film or television show. The potential viewership and notoriety of a viral video clearly speaks to this. As I said above, I describe this new form of visual product as more “individuated.” I use the term individuated to convey a particular meaning but I also use it with some hesitation since it can lead to a mistaken conclusion about the nature of subjectivities structured by this new form of visibility. When we more closely consider this visual product both my meaning and the potential for an unproductive reading of these new visual phenomena will be clarified.

This new form of digital visual cultural material can be understood as increasingly individuated first, because of the method by which these materials are chiefly produced; and second, because of what is represented in and by these visual materials. The more individuated nature of this new form of popular digital visual material in terms of its actual production is easy enough to explain. A website such as Youtube allows an individual to create consumable visual material that has the potential to reach an audience of millions completely outside the industrial means of production of the culture industry. An opportunity such as this for the isolated individual simply does not exist in the medium of television or film. But this fact should not be taken to suggest the Internet as a network and user-generated digital media as a visual commodity are by their nature immune to the perceived threat the culture industry poses to the subject; that through this proliferation of digital media the subject can be saved from the amputations and

manipulations that the industries of culture sought to inflict upon it. However, this view is found in a wide range of academic literature and at times is taken for granted. For instance, in her discussion of racial identity in the Internet age, Lisa Nakamura (2001) draws attention to how the disembodied character of the virtual cyber-spaces on the Internet allow for participants to step freely in and out of racially specific identities which both reproduces and subverts racial stereotypes. In another example, a psychological study by Katelyn McKenna and John Bargh (1998) describes what they refer to as the “demarginalization” potential of the anonymous “virtual group” on the Internet. For McKenna and Bargh, the anonymous nature of virtual groups provides those with a “concealable stigmatized identity” a place to belong. What stands out in both these articulations of the Internet’s influence on identity is how the dematerialized or disembodied character of being online is articulated in terms of its potential for subversiveness or demarginalization. For Nakamura especially, the main political question when considering race becomes how actual *access* to the technologies of the Internet for all individuals is limited in terms of both race and class. What is highlighted in both these examples is that the mediation of communication through the Internet reduces identity performance to a subjective choice and this is assumed by its very nature to offer potential resistance to hegemonic power structures. These lines of reasoning take the apparent “individualizing” movement in the visual forms of consumable visual culture as carving out a new space and new method of interacting with western “culture” for the subject. A safe place for the subject to protect and express itself and this place is understood as a site of potential resistance to the homogenizing power of the culture industry. Such a view rightly sees the new interactions between images and subjects

precipitated by these shifts in technology as reordering the subject's relationship to consumable images. Although the subject now has the potential to function simultaneously as producer and consumer of such imagery, it is misguided to view this scenario as a kind of liberation; a freeing of the authentic subject from its cage. The reason for this becomes apparent when we begin to consider what I described as the second characteristic of this increasingly individuated visual material.

The actual content of websites such as Youtube, Facebook, and Myspace is of fundamental importance in understanding that their digital visual content is somehow more individuated than the types of consumable visual material that preceded it.

Websites like these call for people to invest aspects of their own identity by posting digital moments of their own life. This creates a rather unique sort of relationship between the spectator and the image itself. As a spectator and consumer of this material, we ingest aspects of the lives of other spectators. It is this fundamental consumer relation that is exemplified in the mode of visibility constructed by the webcam. This is important because it is essential to consider the type of satisfaction that is derived from ingesting this sort of visual material. What is the pleasurable kernel hidden in these images? The answer to this question lies not in the actual content of these images, but rather in precisely what is not seen. This then leads to a new question, if an understanding of this pleasurable kernel can only be grasped by starting to consider what is outside the image, I now have to consider what attribute can be identified outside the frame of these images. However, for this line of reasoning to yield any useful conclusions it must avoid getting bogged down in an examination of the relative merit of one example of "user-generated" content versus some other. Such a tactic could only descend into a moralistic

calculation with the aim of sorting the “good” examples of user generated content from the “bad.” To proceed along these lines ultimately would be fruitless, serving only to mask the actual changes that have occurred both in subjects and in their relationship to this new form of image. It would serve only to fall back on a predetermined moral register, confronting these new phenomena as if they were nothing more than a reiteration of the relationship with images that we have been grappling with since the dawn of “modern” capitalist culture.

Avoiding this sort of moralization opens the space to consider what all these forms of webcam inspired “user generated” images share. It is possible then to make clear the pleasurable kernel that the satisfaction of consuming these images is derived from.

Roland Barthes (1981) tells us that a photograph has two essential elements. First, there is the *studium*, a term Barthes uses to refer to the literal moment that the photograph is meant to be a record of – the actual person, place or thing that is captured in the frame. The *studium*, then is a reference to the signified moment of the photograph. As I outlined in my introduction, any conclusions we could draw from a focus on the signified moment has no effect on the power of these images as consumable signifiers. The second element of a photograph is what Barthes refers to as the *punctum*; the ephemeral details of a particular photograph that penetrates a viewer, the fleeting and often inconsequential minutiae that fascinates a viewer. It is in these piercing details that a viewer comes to find a particular image compelling, to distinguish it from the visual *white noise* of imagery that we are constantly bombarded with in so-called popular culture. I do not dispute the subjective nature of the connection that a viewer has with any particular *punctive* detail in any particular image. However, I intend to argue that in the case of

the consumption of these individuated cultural commodities through the medium of the Internet, the subjective aspect of being drawn to one particular *punctive* detail as opposed to any other does not suggest a fundamental dissimilarity between the *fascinations* that draw some to a particular example of this cultural product and others to a different one. Although a particular punctive detail is a subjective quality – a detail that I find particularly fascinating and compelling can easily go unnoticed by any other viewer – I argue that all manifestations of particular punctive details are unified in the sense that they share a similar referent.

This of course leads to the obvious question, what exactly is this referent? To answer this I must consider the relationship between the actual producers of this material and the location of the gaze within these images. Because a site like Youtube calls for individuals to record moments from their own private lives or events that they have personally witnessed, there is an essential difference in terms of what is actually represented as opposed to the visual output of the culture industry. The “characters” in this type of viral video are not the archetypical characters of the silver screen, acting out a staged narrative that is dependent on a sort of agreed upon set of norms. Rather, the “character” is a living person; a person somehow abstracted from the real world but fundamentally as full of flesh and bone as the viewer who watches. If we consider the phenomenon of the webcam-based website, this shift in the location of the gaze becomes apparent. In his discussion of websites such as *Jennicam* and *Anacam*, websites that a consenting adult opens to allow people to voyeuristically spy on them through the lens of the webcam for a subscription fee, Nicholas Mirzoeff notes that “webcam users make the bedroom interior the scene of the action.” In what he sees as a unique mode of

visually mediated by the webcam wherein the Foucauldian panoptic gaze is turned inwards on itself, this sort of visibility creates the scenario where “the viewer sees the ostensibly private space of the photographer” (Mirzeoff, 2002: 13). This inverted photographic gaze speaks to an important shift in the relationship between revealing and concealing in terms of desire and identity. The concealed location of the traditional photographer is revealed to the camera, the photographer in the particularity of their day to day life becomes the visual object. According to Mirzeoff, as visual consumers, we are essentially permitted to lurk in the closet of the photographer and spy on one of the most conceptually intimate spaces for the individual; we spy on the photographer’s bedroom. The metaphor of the closet here holds a particular fascination for Mirzeoff. As he points out, the closet has been theorized by Queer culture as a space where the queer subject hides their identity from the disciplinary gaze and by extension to stay in the closet would amount to the destruction of the self through guilt and deception (Mirzeoff, 2003). But with the gaze that emanates from the closet, “webcam users do come out of closet but make their closet visible to anyone with Internet access...viewers are guaranteed constant access, the place of the panoptic jailer” (Mirzeoff, 2002: 13). It is this sort of relationship to the gaze (as this revealing camera/closet) that Mirzeoff describes as a device to validate the desire and therefore the very existence of western visual subjects (Mirzeoff, 2002). The “closet” is no longer the symbolic place of concealment that must be exited in order to liberate the subject, rather the gaze of this now digital other is being internalized.

However, to conceptualize this recasting of visual subjectivity as a simple redeployment of the Foucauldian disciplinary panoptic gaze only succeeds in obscuring the importance

of the unique relationship fostered between the inverted gaze of the webcam and its visual consumers. The visual landscape created by the webcam cannot adequately be called panoptic because it lacks a disciplinary quality. Can a gaze that is still fundamentally under the control of the “photographer,” even when inverted to reveal the photographer to an audience, truly be called disciplinary? The viewers who are allowed this “constant access” cannot be seen simply as “panoptic jailers.” First and most apparent, the constant access offered by the webcam is not absolutely constant; it is still contingent on the “photographer.” The guarantee of access is limited to when the photographer allows it.² Secondly, the “occupant” of the closet is shifting and unstable and in this sense is not so much a jailer but more of an amorphous mass that does not really exert any direct power over the object of its gaze. Rather, the visibility of the webcam is better seen as a manifestation of what Žižek would call the impotent aspects of the gaze. Although the gaze represents power and mastery, at the same time it suggests impotence as its obscene supplement. For Žižek “the gaze denotes at the same time power (it enables us to exert control over a situation, to occupy the position of the master) and impotence (as bearers of a gaze we are reduced to the role of passive witness to the adversary’s action)” (Žižek, 1991: 72). Does this not perfectly apply to the

² This notion is somewhat complicated by the fact that the webcam “photographer” may be compelled to reap the benefits of this kind of commodification (i.e. monetary gains). As well, the photographer, as is the consumer, is governed by a legal contract stemming from the subscription. However, this fact on its own does not negate the problems of interpreting the relationship as panoptic. The structure of the gaze in the webcam subverts this panoptic reading despite the varying degrees of commodification that can accompany such webcam arrangements.

visuality of webcams? Far from a disciplinary master, the gaze of the webcam is pure impotence.

For these reasons, the webcam as panoptic guard tower is ultimately unsatisfying.

However, this does not mean that Mirzeoff is misguided in seeing something significant in the visuality of the webcam. Although he attributes it to a shift in the subject's relationship to a panoptic gaze, he rightly points to what he calls the "digitizing of desire." This new digitized desire fundamentally reshapes the subject since, according to Mirzeoff, "digital desire dissolves the self – the eye/I so often evoked in theoretical discourse – at the heart of the subject and replaces it with an endlessly manipulable digital screen." (Mirzeoff, 2002: 14). Under this form of visuality employed by the webcam, the position of the eye/I that was once occupied by the photographer is thoroughly destabilized. In its place stands the subject with its eye turned inwards and in turn this inverted photographic subject allows visual consumers to peer at them through this inverted eye/I. This is the new photography of the webcam.

But how is desire digitized if the webcam is not simply the digitalization of panopticism?

The webcam is definitely a digitized gaze, but why does the mere presence of a digital gaze necessitate "digitized desire" and a destabilization of the eye/I of the subject? It is not because of the gaze of the digital panoptic "guards" that the subject is made so unstable. Rather, this destabilization resides in the structural position that the webcam gaze occupies. Lacan argues that although the gaze seems to reside in the position of the subject, it actually belongs to its object (Lacan, 1977). He offers an elaboration in a personal story of when as young intellectual he was compelled by the desire to "see something different" and he threw himself into physical work. While on a small boat

with a family of fisherman, one of them pointed out a sardine can floating in the water to the young Lacan. This fisherman, named Petit-Jean, then asked Lacan “You see that can? Do you see it? Well, it doesn’t see you!” (Lacan, 1977: 95). Petit-Jean found his comment highly amusing but Lacan was struck by why he found it less humorous than the fisherman. In contemplating this Lacan suggests that if Petit-Jean’s comment had any meaning at all it was because, in sense, the can is actually looking at him. Petit-Jean’s question and his amusement at it are drawn from the actual difference in subjective positions between the fisherman and the young Lacan. In this moment, Lacan occupies the position of the one who does not belong. In the eyes of the other fisherman Lacan is an outsider, and it is from this position of non-belonging in the moment that the sardine can gazes at him and situates him, and it is for this reason that Petit-Jean finds humour in his comment (Lacan, 1977). The gaze that the sardine can possesses is the impossible gaze of the object; the gaze that situates the subject but resides outside of it. It is here that the power of fascination exerted by the webcam can be explained. By gazing at the photographer through this inverted camera, the audience can imagine itself as the sardine can that stared at Lacan. The gaze of the webcam situates the photographer but in doing so allows its audience to imagine that they are in fact situating the photographer through a kind of pure gaze-of-the-object. The webcam creates the experience that the audience has access to the impossible gaze – a gaze that appears to situate the photographer in their actual particularity. It is here that significance of the webcam as closet becomes clear. It is not in giving the audience the position of “panoptic jailers” that the consumers of this sort of webcam visuality draw their satisfaction, it is in the illusion of a pure objective

gaze. This is what I would call the fantasy of the webcam, that through it access is granted to the pure object gaze.

Along with the creation of this webcam fantasy, the visual structure of the webcam as visual cultural product points to what can be called an increased *individuation*. As Foucault demonstrated in his genealogy of the western subject, the experience of modern subjectivity is intimately connected to the concept of truth and the activity of confession. Through what he calls a “technique of the self,” it is seen as a kind of moral obligation for subjects to know the “truth” of themselves through the act of confession (Foucault, 1997: 177). It is in this sense that I argue that this new visual cultural product, in a theoretical sense, is much more individuated than the visual output of the culture industry. Rather than representing a homogenized subject, a representation that encourages the creation of the closet as a space in which the Queer subject hides their identity, in this more individuatedvisuality the closet is not something that we emerge from to reveal the truth of our identity but a place from which the subject both wills to be gazed at and wishes to occupy. This shift in the visual is a reformulation of the subject’s relationship to the gaze. For thisrecasting of subjectivity to be adequately articulated, it is necessary to contextualize the experience of this subjectivity in the collective experience of western culture under the conditions of advanced capitalism. If the theories of Horkheimer and Adorno can no longer be applied to the production of culture, what can be used as a theoretical base?

"The Society of the Spectacle and the Internet"

To answer this question, I want to consider what is at stake in this new form of visuality. Although the webcam can allow us as watchers to peer through what appears to be the

pure gaze of the object, this gaze is mediated. We gaze at a computer screen that provides us with the window to peer at the photographer through their own camera. But through this mediated gaze, what we see on the screen is a representation. To be sure, there is a real person whose closet we are given the opportunity to occupy. But in the transformation into a digital image the real person that we gaze at is transformed into something undoubtedly different yet somehow hauntingly the same. There is an uncanny character about this “living body” at which we had desired to gaze. In its digitized transformation this body mutates into something not quite alive. The actual body of the living being that I gaze at is transformed into code, but as the body is rendered as code, something still lingers. This lingering presence, this residual energy constructs the “living body” that occupies my gaze as something between real and unreal, between life and simulation, between being and non-being. What is this residue, this strange substance that somehow bridges the gap between being and non-being? When I considered this question I was immediately drawn to the opening thesis of Guy Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle*:

The whole life of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*. All that was once directly lived has become mere representation (Debord, 1994: 12).

This notion of life as “accumulating spectacles” and all that was once lived rendered as representation allows a point of entry into this new field of visibility. But to understand the implications of this idea first its meaning must be more precisely articulated. These opening lines from Debord’s work are written as a direct allusion to Marx’s infamous opening from *Capital*:

The wealth of those societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails, presents itself as “an immense accumulation of commodities,” its unit being a single commodity (Marx, 2000: 1).

It is in considering these ideas that my emphasis on the *form* of these digitized representations can be clarified. Debord introduced the concept of *spectacle* as a Marxist critique of the mass media in advanced capitalist society. Spectacle, however, is a nuanced term and cannot be simply defined as the mass media itself. Debord describes the mass media as spectacle’s “most stultifying superficial manifestation” (Debord, 1994: 19). Spectacle is better understood as the new entity which is created when the technologies of mass media are combined with advanced capitalism and the systems of governance in advanced capitalist nations. This new entity presents a type of “culture” that appears to have a kind of independence similar to the independence of the economy invented by the advent of political theory. This spectacle for Debord becomes the means for us as members of the *spectacle society* to identify ourselves, others and life itself. To offer Debord’s notion of spectacle in favour of Horkheimer and Adorno’s conception of the culture industry at this point could be read as an almost lateral step. The question that should immediately be addressed is how exactly does Debord’s soundly Marxist critique differ from the soundly Marxist critique offered by Horkheimer and Adorno? The answer to this is found when the actual pleasure that a subject derives from consuming this new form of visuality is considered. What distinguishes Debord’s spectacle from the monolithic culture industry is that it allows the space to conceptualize pleasure. If western “culture” is conceptualized as the homogenizing tendency of the culture industry, why for some does an interaction with its commodities manifest itself as pleasurable? To understand the visual products of western culture solely in terms of the

hegemonic encroachment of the culture industry effectively leaves no space to conceptualize pleasure and satisfaction. Spectacle on the other hand carries with it the notion of visual pleasure. While watching a spectacle a viewer is not simply a passive agent, but is drawn into a relationship with the spectacle itself. The power of spectacle is directly tied to its connection to visual pleasure; its power of fascination resides in its ability to evoke pleasure in those that visually ingest it. It is for this reason that Debord's conception provides a more useful and revealing point of entry. So, with this connection to pleasure in mind, the status of images as commodities in the functioning of spectacle can be considered.

The point for Debord is that the conditions of advanced capitalism coupled with the birth of mass media, create a situation where images take on the characteristics of a commodity as outlined by Marx. For Debord, the residual "magic" that lies behind a commodity, its fetishistic character, also lurks outside the frame of any visual representation. For Marx, a commodity as a *thing* is a very unusual object. In the section of *Capital* dealing with what he calls "commodity fetishism," Marx identified the "mystical quality" of commodities that simultaneously makes them appear trivial yet endows them with a certain energy that seems self-contained, as if this energy was an inherent and essential characteristic of the object made commodity. For Marx, this residual *energy* or *mystical quality* of the commodity is created by the mechanisms of capitalism. Capitalism renders invisible the actual social relations that make any specific commodity possible. Rather than appearing as nothing more than a congealed mass of social relations and human labour, capitalism lifts commodities into a realm made up of nothing more than commodity relations. Commodities are removed from the world of

human relations and woven into a web of relations with other commodities in terms of worth or value, what Marx calls “exchange values.” A commodity then represents the abstraction of actual social relations and in its place a system is created where commodities interact with each other in a realm outside of human consciousness and social relations, they become mystified (Marx, 2000). For Debord, this “mystical” quality of commodities has infected the realm of the image. Just as a commodity stands in the place of actual social relations, our “immense accumulation of *spectacles*” stands in the place of the actual lived life of the subject. Actual life rendered as consumable visual representations is what lies at the heart of the ghostly power of this mode of vision. The mutated photographer we gaze at from their own camera occupies the illusive space between represented life and actual life. It is this non-distinct “life” that fascinates us and in the condition of our advanced spectacle it is this form of (un)real visually consumable life that comes to stand in the place of life itself.

For Debord, the spectacle is not merely a collection of images “but a social relation among people mediated by images” (Debord, 1994: 12). It is my intention to argue that the accumulation of images on the Internet that exist as representations of life have come to stand in place of life itself. And this in turn represents a new kind of social relation among the people that inhabit the cyber communities of the Internet. Of central importance to Debord’s understanding of spectacular society are the notions of alienation and separation as the result of the functioning of capitalism and capitalist production. In fact, *spectacle* for Debord is the “perfection of separation *within* human beings” (italics in original) (Debord, 1994: 18). Although spectacle is fundamentally about separation, it functions as a kind of unifying force but what it unifies in us is the fundamental

separation which it creates. It is this condition of social relations mediated by images that unifies the members of the “society” through separation that I will argue we are now faced with. I want to examine the meaning of our use of the Internet as a site of communication, representation and consumption through the lens of the spectacular society in part as a method of critiquing the notion of the Internet that I demonstrated at play in the work of scholars like Nakamura, Mckenna and Bargh which assumes the Internet as an inherently free and democratic entity at its best or at its worst as a politically neutral tool. I intend to argue that the Internet and our consumptive use of it restructures the subject and its relationship to the image. It is this restructured subjectivity that lies at the centre of an intensified spectacle. In this light, the Internet is more accurately seen as intrinsically tied to the functioning of a contemporary society of the spectacle and therefore works to sustain and entrench a system of alienation and separation.

"Spectacle and Foucault: Observer vs. Spectator"

Debord's ideas concerning spectacle and the role of the spectator have fallen out of fashion in the decades since the publication of *Society of the Spectacle*. A reason for this can be traced back to the writings of Foucault on the birth of so-called *disciplinary power* in his famous and hugely influential genealogical analysis of modern prisons, *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison* (1995). Foucault associated the spectacle with the enactment of classical sovereignty and instead viewed modern subjectivity as more intimately bound to the phenomenon of *observation* (Foucault, 1995). As a starting point, Foucault's conception of power and knowledge is one that is both complex and innovative. For Foucault, knowledge and power are intimately linked to the point where

one cannot be enacted without a simultaneous enactment of the other (Foucault, 1995). Knowledge creates objects that are subject to power and power creates objects that are subjects of knowledge. These two concepts are forever linked to the point where they cannot adequately be analyzed in isolation and instead have to be understood as what he refers to as “power-knowledge relations” (Foucault, 1995: 27). According to Foucault, the most relevant feature of subjectivity in modernity was the movement to render individuals as both “docile and useful” through the implementation of techniques of surveillance. These techniques of surveillance were responsible for not only bringing with them “new procedures of individualization” (Foucault, 1995: 305), they simultaneously cast the subject into new fields of knowledge. By rendering the individual subject as a site for the production of knowledge, Foucault argues that disciplinary power has conditioned the modern experience of individuality and that this new experience involves an implementation of techniques of power-knowledge that are quite distinct from the techniques of spectacle.

One of Foucault’s most critical ideas concerning spectacle, and one that is often used in describing Debord’s concepts as out-dated or limited is when he writes: “Our society is not one of spectacle but of surveillance... we are neither in the amphitheatre nor on the stage but in the Panoptic machine” (Foucault, 1995: 217). But, as argued by Jonathan Crary, we should not separate Foucault’s conclusions about the spectacle from the actual context of his writings in *Discipline and Punish*. Debord and his work are tightly bound to the Situationist International and the infamous wildcat general strike in May 1968 that nearly toppled the French government headed by Charles de Gaulle. Foucault was writing in France in the early 1970’s, a time and place where the massive academic and

popular effects of Debord's work and the ensuing uprisings were most immediate and acutely felt. His use of the word spectacle is very intentional and employed as a direct allusion to the analyses of capitalism forwarded by Debord (Crary, 1992). As Crary rightly points out, Foucault, whose writings allowed a new way of conceptualizing power, knowledge, the subject and the machinations of modernity as a whole, was attempting to oppose what he viewed as an overly simplistic use of spectacle. The notion that subjects as actual "spectators" of the "spectacle" are simply "controlled" or "duped" by media images is one that Foucault would have resisted (Crary, 1992: 18). It is also a notion that I would resist. Such an understanding of spectacle is far too easy and privileges the place of the subject far too much. It assumes the existence of an authentic subject that can have substance outside of relations of knowledge and power; that a subject who is truly "not duped" in the sense of being capable of transcending or moving beyond the system of power/knowledge is a real possibility. As Žižek demonstrated through his reading of Hitchcock, the condition of being one "who sees," or of being one "who is not duped" is a status that can only lead to the same "errs" that the subject "who does not see" is guilty of (Žižek, 1992). The subject "who sees" is still caught in the web of power relations.

But Foucault's dichotomy is itself guilty of an oversimplification. As Crary points out, "Foucault's opposition of surveillance and spectacle seems to overlook how the effects of these two regimes of power can coincide" (Crary, 1992: 18). Instead of opposing these two forms of vision – that of observer vs. spectator – by rethinking contemporary forms of vision it is possible to view vision itself as becoming a "kind of discipline or mode of work." For Crary the development in technologies related to visibility, just like

Foucault's panoptic machine, involve "arrangements of bodies in spaces, regulations of activity, and the deployment of individual bodies, *which codified and normalized the observer within rigidly defined systems of visual consumption* (italics added)" (Crary, 1992: 18). The significance of this point as it relates to spectacle should not be overlooked. Spectacle is not responsible for deceiving us about or distracting us from the truth of subjectivity; it does not simply act as a screen that obscures our vision. Spectacle itself is a *mode of vision*, or in another sense, spectacle is imbedded in a system of specific *techniques of vision*. This notion leads Crary to conclude that mass culture is equally implicated in the transformations that were outlined by Foucault (Crary, 1992). It is important to note however, that spectacle as outlined by Debord did not simply appear the moment the panoptic model of institutions was adopted. Rather, these panoptic institutions signify one of the multiple starting points for the structuring of a new form of vision. They represent an important shift in the *techniques of vision* that both inform and are structured by advances in technologies of visual representation. Seen in this light, the structuring of vision itself is as central to the modern subject as Foucault's networks of disciplinary power/knowledge.

"Spectacle, The Posthuman and The Cyborg"

The significance of using spectacle as means of engaging with the subject forming visuality demonstrated in the webcam is magnified if we consider it alongside some of the insights offered by cyber theory. For N. Katherine Hayles, advancements in cybernetics and instant communication have led ultimately to the collapse or destabilization of the so-called "liberal humanist subject." Of central importance to understanding the arguments advanced by Hayles is acknowledging the position that the

physical body occupies in the increasingly mediated social interactions of advanced capitalism. In an extension of the dichotomous hierarchal relationship between the mind and the body often attributed to liberal humanism, the paradigm shift in conceptualizing the subject that Hayles identifies is rooted in a view of the mind (or the actual seat of the subject) as a stream of information (Hayles, 1999). For the subject of liberal humanism, the body exists as something distinct from the self and as something that is to be mastered. It is the task of this subject to take “possession” of their body and to control it. In the case of the posthuman, the fundamental disconnect between mind and body is still in place and for Hayles it is from this disconnect that the “posthuman” subject is born (Hayles, 1999: 5). But in the case of the posthuman, the body is no longer something that the self “possesses” but instead something that the self “transcends.” For Hayles, the operation of posthumanist assumptions can be clearly seen both in the writings of prominent cyberneticists and examples of science fiction narratives. Hayles opens her argument by referencing the musings of a prominent “roboticist” named Hans Moravec. In his work *Mind Children: the Future of Robot and Human Intelligence*, Moravec argues that technology will soon reach the point where human consciousness can be downloaded onto a computer (Moravec, 1988 cited in Hayles, 1999). In the scenario envisioned here the self is viewed as a stream of information that can be extracted from the tissue of the brain and in a process that would destroy the actual body, this information can be placed into a new medium (like a computer chip) and the actual self is somehow capable of surviving this transformation unaltered. As Hayles writes: “the posthuman view thinks of the body as the original prosthesis we all learn to manipulate, so that extending or replacing the body with other prostheses becomes a continuation of a process that began

before we were born” (Hayles, 1999: 3). The body is no longer something to which the subject is inevitably tied to but must seek to master; it is rather a consequence of history, an accident of evolution. It is nothing more than the medium which contains the coded information of the self. The relevance of this idea will be clarified later.

In the case of the so-called “cyborg identity” advanced by Donna Haraway, although employed to construct what she refers to as an “ironic political myth” (Haraway, 1991: 149), we can see the same sort of argument forwarded as that of N. Katherine Hayles. For Haraway, our use of technology as necessary extensions of the body that allow us to participate in contemporary culture has also led to a problematization of the binary categories that entrench the liberal humanist subject. According to Haraway, the demarcating line between human and machine has become so blurred as to destabilize these categories altogether (Haraway, 1999). These theoretical perspectives on the state of modern subjectivity share a great deal in common but for me what is most interesting is how both view this state of subjectivity as a possible ground for the development of a kind of positive politics of the self. What Haraway and Hayles point to are perceived crises of modernity, the collapsing of once stable categories spurred on by our interactions with new technologies. And it is in these perceived crises that both view the opportunity to battle the exclusions of modernity. This is why Haraway proclaims that her “ironic political myth” is one that is “faithful to feminism, socialism and materialism” even when her faithfulness is meant as “faithful blasphemy” (Haraway, 1999: 149). For Haraway, the very technologies that modernism has birthed have led to the collapse of the very categories their development relied upon. In the same vein, Hayles perceives the subject as information, transcended from its body, as presenting a unique opportunity to

liberate the subject from the binary hierarchy that humanism is based on. Although she readily admits that the perception of the body in the conditions of posthumanism is directly related to and expands on the split between mind and body of humanism, Hayles feels the emergence of the posthuman and its accompanying deconstruction of the liberal humanist subject is “an opportunity to put back into the picture the flesh that continues to be erased in contemporary discussions about cybernetic subjects” (Hayles, 1999: 5). As if the flesh we once strove to master can be reintroduced and repacked around this posthuman self, this self that distanced itself from the body to such a degree it is conceptualized as a stream of disembodied and coded information. Both the cyborg and posthuman subject is built on the foundations of liberal humanism, the privileges and exclusions of this paradigm were the necessary conditions for the cyborg and the posthuman to emerge.

Using these ideas as touchstones, the possibility opens up to piece together the significance of the visuality imbedded in the webcam. Although I do not deny the fundamental shifts in subjectivity outlined by Hayles and Haraway, I am more cautious about embracing this new form of self. Though it is not quite the case that either author wholly “embraces” the emergence of the subjectivities they describe, they do associate their emergence as a potential opportunity. Both view these apparent crises of modernity as the basis for a kind Kuhnian paradigm shift in the conceptualization of subjectivity. The once stable categories of modernism are being wholly subverted by the very processes they set in motion and in the wake of their collapse the entire discourse around the subject is now an open page, a whole new field of knowledge where the now antiquated categories no longer make sense nor even count as legitimate forms of

being. Despite the fact that the novel reconfigurations of the subject offered by both Hayles and Haraway are built on the destabilization and inversion of the categories of modernity and are in response to this apparent Kuhnian style shift in subjectivity, it does not follow these emergent posthuman and cyborg subjectivities can be deployed as sites to rewrite the discursive field of being. It is on this point that my view diverges from those of Hayles and Haraway. For both, the emergence of these subjectivities is one of the first few tentative steps toward a wholly new paradigm of being. This I do not dispute. However, for me these novel configurations of the subject represent the ultimate culmination and complete internalization of an increasingly nuanced spectacle society. Their emergence from the turmoil caused by these shifts in subjectivity does not liberate them from the machinations of modern western capitalism. Rather, the cyborg and the posthuman are more constructively seen as the logical outcome of a mode of visuality that seeks “the perfection of separation *within* human beings” (Debord, 1994: 18). Rather than articulating the theoretical destruction of the flesh and bone of the body as an opportunity to re-embodiment the subject by lamenting its lack of flesh in discourse, I see these emergent subjectivities as the ideal agents in the society of the spectacle. I read these new manifestations of the subject as the ideal self of the spectacle, ideal in the sense that both the cyborg and posthuman subjectivity blend seamlessly into the mode of visual consumption and representation demonstrated in the phenomenon of the webcam. Both are identities that have fully internalized spectacle as both a method of visual consumption and a means of constructing visual subjectivity. If spectacle is a movement toward the perfection of separation within human beings, the status of both the cyborg and posthuman subject need to be reconsidered. The breakdown of the status of “human”

for the cyborg's and the posthuman's transcendence from its body are not sites of possible refuge for a potentially less mutilated subject, they are instead specific responses to an intensifying society of spectacle. For lack of a better term, I will refer to this ideal self as the *spectacularsubject*. Spectacle has now reached a level of intensity where the perfection of separation it fosters can now truly be seated "within" human beings. The discursive manifestations of the cyborg and the posthuman are reconfigured spectacular subjectivities that embody the internalization of a spectacle mode of visibility and the ideal of separation truly coming from within. The important point of connection for me here is that the potential pleasure and satisfaction derived from the consumption of webcam visibility reaches its maximum if the audience adopts the subjective position of a posthuman or cyborg. The apparent horror of the beheading video vanishes if it is consumed by cyborgs and posthumans. These videos take the pleasurable kernel demonstrated in the more mundane versions of webcam visibility to its ultimate conclusion. The web beheading videos are what Lacan or Žižek would call examples of surplus enjoyment (*plus-du-jour*). Žižek explains that this notion of *plus-du-jour* is modelled after the Marxist notion of surplus value since "surplus enjoyment has the same paradoxical power to convert things (pleasure objects) into their opposite, to render disgusting what usually considered a most pleasant "normal" sexual experience, to render inexplicably attractive what is usually considered a loathsome act" (Žižek, 1991: 12). This aspect of the beheading videos as examples of *plus-du-jour* is an idea that will be expanded on in the chapters that follow.

"Life as Representation: Beheadings, Sacrifice and Spectacle"

If contemporary culture has emerged as an unprecedented intensification and internalization of the spectacle, then Debord's assertion "that all that was once directly lived has become mere representation" (Debord, 1994: 12) should take on a new kind of meaning. If spectacle at the time of Debord's writing can be seen creating the experience of life as nothing but an accumulation of images, a wild sea frothing with visual representation, what is the significance when we are no longer considering the lived lives of *humans* but of those of cyborgs and posthumans? It is in considering this point that I believe something new, and potentially disturbing, can be revealed by considering the visually represented "sacrifices" of the Islamic beheading viral videos in terms of the visuality of the webcam. If, as Debord asserts, the spectacle operates as a "social relation among people mediated by images" (Debord, 1994: 12), it is my aim to articulate what the contours of the "social" are when the spectacle is mediating relations between cyborgs rather than people. In this emergent social body conditioned by the contemporary spectacle and populated by cyborgs and posthumans, it becomes a pressing necessity to evaluate how it interacts with its subjects and how it informs and structures the experience of life.

In the following chapter, I will take up this line of questioning in greater depth. If spectacle and the emergent subjectivities that compose it do indeed represent a fundamental reconfiguration of the social and therefore of lived life, the importance of considering these beheading videos will become more clear. In the conditions of this intensified spectacle, the graphic representations of violent death found in the beheading videos can be read as moments of *spectacular violence*, and their existence on and

consumption through the Internet can in turn be understood as forms of *spectacular sacrifice*. In other words, I suggest that a kind of sublimation is at work. In a society where social relations are mediated through images and representations, the experience of the purifying and community structuring sacramental rite can be found via our interaction with images and representations of violence and death. By examining our consumption of these represented sacrifices, something is revealed about both the social body and the subjects that inhabit it. It is this revelation that I would like to outline next.

CHAPTER TWO

"Sacrifice, the Ritual and the Sacred"

Something about the custom of ritualistic sacrifice seems to represent the antithesis of modern western civilization. As if the custom is associated with a primordial ignorance, shrouded in irrationality and attributable to what Freud would call primitive humanity's "omnipotence of thought." There is however something undeniably compelling about this ritual. The sheer frequency of its appearance across time and place among groups of people demonstrates that there is something hidden in the ritual of sacrifice. It is this hidden kernel that excites those who study it. Because of the regularity of its occurrence among societies so distant both spatially and temporally, studying the ritual of sacrifice and contemplating this hidden kernel holds the promise of revealing something fundamental about the nature of humanity and society. But the quest to uncover origins is one to always be wary of. The quest for the origin is always one to uncover the *ultimate truth* and is one that can never be satisfied. Nonetheless, ritualistic sacrifice holds a certain potential.

As Donna Haraway points out, the various distinctions that demarcate the divide between human and animal have been continually eroded. Confronted as they are with the need to concretely define the essential difference between human and animal, both the human and natural sciences have proposed many such dividing lines – humans as the sole bearers of language, culture, tool use or emotion – and all have proved themselves to be either unsatisfactory or outright inaccurate (Haraway, 1991). Despite this, the act of ritualistic sacrifice still appears as something distinctly human, however distant we may fancy the practice is from the so-called "civilized" sensibility of the modern westerner.

Rather than attributing sacrifice to a kind of idealized “primitive ignorance,” studying the ritual makes it possible to understand an aspect of what gives humans their unquestionably unique character. It is my first intent to demonstrate that the act of sacrifice is not as far removed from our everyday lives as some may assume. Ritual sacrifice deals with an intense interplay of violence and death, and both, however transfigured they may appear today, are still central to human life. It is my argument that the position that the beheading viral videos hold in western discourse coupled with the new visual mechanics of the webcam can be read as a modern transfiguration of sacrifice. Like the “primitive” ritual, the fascination that compels the consumption of the “represented life” demonstrated in the viral video – of which the beheading video appears as a more distilled form – is also intimately linked with death and violence. This suggests that both still have a centrality in our lives and cannot accurately be regarded as a “primitive” characteristic of human civilization. But before the affinity between these “spectacular sacrifices” and the classical ritual sacrifice can be made clear, it is important to first piece together the importance of ritualistic sacrifice.

Among the earliest scholars of ritualistic sacrifice there was an overwhelming tendency to attribute the emergence of the practice to myth. Myth was presented as the origin of the ritual. This location of myth before ritual in the discourses of religion led scholars to place their investigative emphasis on mythic beliefs. As Burton Mack suggests: “the question that exercised scholars was how to account for the origin and plausibility of mythic beliefs and notions, and rituals were regarded mainly as ‘responses’ to these ‘myths’”(Mack, 1987: 1). This notion of sacrifice allows for the narrative that sacrifice is practiced as a literal “offering” to the gods. But this accounting of sacrifice ultimately

reveals little about the importance of the act. To view the sacrificial ritual as pure offering is to attribute its emergence to a kind of universally shared and consciously practiced reciprocal relationship with the gods. The problem with this is that it assumes that ritual sacrifice appears as one of the most universally shared human customs because in the shrouded past all people undertook the same rational calculation in contemplation of how best to appease the gods – whom they would have already mysteriously created – and of how to ensure that the realm of myth would answer a hope or demand. As well, the emergence of new ideas regarding the relationship between myth and ritual in the late 19th and early 20th centuries generated skepticism about the “myth before ritual” hypothesis and ultimately led to it being abandoned by most scholars.

One of the most influential reinterpretations of the relationship between myth and ritual was advanced by the founder of modern sociology, Émile Durkheim in his *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1965), originally published in 1915. The ideas he presents are an example of a movement away from the traditional view of myth and ritual. Specifically in the arguments he advances about *totemism* (the apparent earliest form of “primitive” religion) and the division between the realm of the sacred and that of the profane. Durkheim outlines his theory that religion is in fact the worshiping of the force that the social group creates simply by being a group. Religion then is society’s worship of itself. His argument is based on an extremely broad definition of religion. For Durkheim, religion does not suggest a fundamental belief in a specific religion, nor does it necessarily suggest a theistic belief system. In his view of religion, the National Socialist Nuremberg rally of 1936 and the Catholic ritual of communion would both be manifestations of the “religious life” of humans. The religious element of each is located

in their relationship to systems of symbols and rituals that are held in relation or in response to the *sacred*.

According to Durkheim, the essential function of religion and the religious life is to divide the world between the realm of the *profane* and the realm of the *sacred*. The realm of the profane refers to the mundane world, or what Bataille would call the *world of work* (1957). The profaneworld of work is comprised of the behaviours, actions and interactions that humans perform in their everyday lives. These are things that people do that elicit no special consideration or admiration in their minds. Whether the actions and behaviours of the profane are practiced directly to ensure survival (tilling the field, eating a meal) or inconsequentially (having a conversation, going for a walk) is of no real consequence. The important point for Durkheim is that the majority of human action occurs in the world of the profane and causes no special feeling of excess.

The profane world of the mundane finds its counterpart in the world of the *sacred*.

Sacredness for Durkheim refers to something that exceeds the mundane boundaries of the everyday. It is the presence of this excessive force in certain symbols, objects and people that causes the feeling of awe. A sacred object has an energy that seems to overflow it, an aura that endows it with a quality that transcends the *ordinary* world of profane objects.

This distinction is easy enough to conceptualize; however, no object, person or idea is sacred in and of itself. It is not as if each particular sacred element is a vessel for a kind of *essential sacredness* of which they are but manifestations. Nor is it the case that a sacred object derives its power from its own characteristics or properties. A sacred object is not *magical* in the sense that power overflows it by its own nature, but sacred objects do possess a magical character nonetheless. Any specific symbol of the crucifix has this

effect among its worshippers. A cross on its own is not magical by its own properties – the material used to construct it is certainly not sacred – but as a part of the system of symbols that is Christianity it is endowed with a great power for those who believe (Durkheim, 1965).

So what is this *magic* power if it is not an essential feature of the sacred object itself? For Durkheim (1965), the answer to this question resides in the mysterious power of the social. Religion, in the general sense of an interaction with the realm of the sacred, is quite simply a society's worship of its own social force. The energy of the social is evident in the power that a mob can have in overwhelming individual inhibitions. The state of frenzy that manifests itself in the mob creates an energy that overfills the individual, leaving them open to act in ways unconscionable in the day-to-day world of the profane. Although this overwhelming influx of energy is a product of the *internal* dynamics of the group itself, its undeniable vigour and unquestionable ability to produce a state of being distinct from the world of the profane causes it to be experienced as an *external* force. For a believer, the surplus of energy produced by the group in a religious rite can create the feeling of transcendence; and it is this that distinguishes it as a sacred moment. In the moment of religious ecstasy, believers find themselves lifted from the drudgery of the profane into a realm that is altogether distinct; they are lifted to the world of the sacred. To demonstrate how the interior energy created by the group becomes externalized, Durkheim considers the *totemic* religious practices of so-called "primitive" people.

The *totem* operates as a dual symbol. First, it is the emblem of the clan and therefore a symbol of the group itself. Second, it is a representation of the god or religious beliefs

(the totem animal or object) of the clan members. The fact that the totem can operate simultaneously as a symbol of both the physical group and the transcendental manifestation of the sacred realm led Durkheim to argue that the social life and the religious life of people are intimately connected; the religious life of humans operates as the essential condition that allows the profane world to exist as such. The drudgery of the profane is the counterpoint of the self-annihilating ecstasy of communion with the sacred. In the totemic practices of the “primitive” clan Durkheim also discovered what he saw as the origin of the externalization of the sacred force produced by the internal dynamics of the social body. When the totem clan engages in a totemic rite and individuals lose themselves in sacred ecstasy, they experience the transcendent force of the sacred. But what has changed? In the eyes of the believer, the only observable aspect of their communion with the sacred that distinguishes it from the profane world is the presence of the totemic emblem. In this moment, the energy produced internally by the group itself is attributed to the character of the sacred object or animal and its representations (Durkheim, 1965). Because Durkheim envisioned the realm of the sacred as the necessary byproduct of the formation of the group, his work stands as a step removed from the notion of myth before ritual. On the contrary, the world of myth - which can be understood as a collection of narratives describing the sacred – is a response to the surplus energy that the group itself can produce just by its coming together.

The work of Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss in the area of sacrifice is also an important re-formulation of the notion of myth as the origin of ritual assumption. Published in 1899, their work *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Functions*, had a huge influence in the field and much of the research done on the phenomenon of sacrifice has had to respond to this

work in one way or another. For Hubert and Mauss, emphasis is placed on ritual as the origin of myth. The repetition of the ritual of sacrifice engenders both the gods and the mythic realm:

The repetition of these ceremonies in which, either by custom or for any other reason, an identical victim reappears at regular intervals, ends up creating a sort of personality. The accumulation of past sacrifices thus culminates in the creation of a god (Hubert and Mauss, 1964: 81).

In their examination of the sacrificial rite, Hubert and Mauss offer an accounting that goes beyond the notion of a pure *offering* to the gods. Rather than the victim being merely a gift for the divine realm of the sacred, the rite itself has a dramatic effect on the ones who perform the rite. Although it is the sacrificed object that becomes *consecrated* in the ceremony, the one who offers the victim also undergoes a profound transformation (Hubert and Mauss, 1964). This transformation gives a *religious character* to the one who offered the victim. The sacrificial rite in this framework is about the *purification* that it induces, and it is this purification that allows for contact with the sacred realm.

The rite operates as point of connection between the realm of the sacred and the profane, while the radical nature of the act sustains their mutual existence as separate worlds. The sacrifice is essentially a movement towards the sacred to the point of contact and then a return to the world of the profane. The residual energy that resides in the ones who make this movement (the sacrificers) gives them their religious character when they return to the realm of the profane. The gods are formed through the ritual itself. The ritual becomes a part of the myth, a process that gives rise to the narrative of “sacrifice as offering.” The ritual is a communion with the sacred realm that gives the gods their *personality*.

Although Durkheim, Hubert and Mauss offer an accounting for the sacred and its relation to ritual that inverts the classical assumption of ritual as a response to myth, they are still indebted to the traditional view of the nature of the sacred realm. Burton Mack explains that the notion of the inherently radical nature of the sacred in Hubert and Mauss's work causes them to assume that in sacrifice "killing was required because the gods were totally 'other' and dangerous, and because contact with them required a transformation as radical as that between life and death" (Mack, 1987: 2). The function of the sacrifice is to create a point of contact between the sacred and profane, to bring the practitioners into contact with the gods. The problem with this conception though is that it offers no explanation of the ritual itself. Instead, sacrifice is thought to exist because of the radical otherness of the sacred realm.

For René Girard, this schema for interpreting sacrifice is ultimately insufficient. The ideas put forward by Hubert and Mauss place sacrifice as the main act that engenders religion. For Girard this is problematic because it locates one unusual phenomenon, sacrifice, as the source of another unusual phenomenon, religion, without actually explaining this apparent source (Girard, 1972: 89). Furthermore, if we are to attribute the character of the gods to the accumulation of sacrifices themselves, what can be said of the earliest sacrifices? Why were the first sacrifices performed before the personality of the gods had been formed in the minds of the sacrificers? Is killing really the necessary feature solely because of its inherent radicalness? Girard's analysis focuses on the centrality of violence in sacrifice and this inclusion of violence allows for a method of connecting the examples of digitally recorded beheading deaths to the larger mechanisms of sacrifice. Although his ideas have their own limitations, they also allow for important

connections to be made between sacrificial rites, violence, transgression and social order. In the following section I will outline some of Girard's key ideas as well as their limitations.

"René Girard: Violence, the Sacrificial Crisis and the Law"

Like Hubert and Mauss, Girard places emphasis on the primacy of ritual over religious myth. But in his analysis, Girard attempts to account for the origin as well as the function of the sacrificial ritual. In his estimation, Hubert and Mauss's notion that sacrifice is practiced to bring us into contact with the gods does not explain the function of the ritual and gives no motivation to explain why the first sacrifice would be committed. Girard attempts to deal with these questions in his exhaustive analysis of "primitive" sacrificial rituals and classical tragedy, *Violence and the Sacred*, originally published in 1972. In it he attempts to account for the practice of sacrifice, both human and non-human, in terms of violence and the need for the community to protect itself from the threat of *reciprocal violence*. For Girard, an act of violence in the context of the so-called primitive community threatens to spread throughout the social body, ultimately destroying the society. One act of violence leads to a reprisal act of violence; this reprisal in turn will lead to another reprisal act of violence. This chain of reprisals triggers the development of blood feuds and these blood feuds can engulf the entire community by breaking down of the distinction between impure and purifying violence, causing a "sacrificial crisis" (Girard, 1977). Girard believes that the sacramental rite is practiced as a ritual to prevent this chain of destructive reciprocal violence from forming, and he re-establishes the distinction between these types of violence.

According to Girard, the ritual of sacrifice acts as means for the community to channel its violence on to the body of a “surrogate victim” (Girard, 1977: 79). However, it is not that the community decides to unleash its pent up violence on the body of chosen victim *in lieu* of directing it at their own differing desired outlets. Rather, the surrogate victim comes to embody the root of all the impure violence that threatens the community and only through a communal act of purifying violence – made pure through the ritual itself – can the threat to the society be expelled and social order re-established. According to Girard, the community is transformed through the constitution of the *surrogate victim*, and “where only shortly before a thousand individual conflicts had raged unchecked between a thousand enemy brothers, there now reappears a true community, united in its hatred for one alone of its number... the *surrogate victim*” (Girard, 1977: 79).

At the moment of the sacrificial ritual, at the instant that the communal violence is unleashed on the body of the *surrogate victim*, the community appears in its most distilled and unified form. However, the cycle of order (functioning society) – disorder (sacrificial crisis) – order re-established (ritual violence channeled through the *surrogate victim*) is a feature of “primitive” societies governed by the mythologies of “primitive” religion. For Girard, the establishment of the law as an institution in modern society intercedes between individuals, and provides a break in the chain of violence. The authority of the law prevents an act of violence leading to reprisals and acts of vengeance, and thus neutralizes the destructive effect of violence spreading throughout the social body (Girard, 1977: 15). For me, the distinction that Girard draws between “primitive” religion and modern law is problematic. But before I outline the problems in this

assumption, there are some other limitations in Girard's theory that need further fleshing out.

Girard presents his framework as an explanation of the absolute *origin* of the ritual sacrifice and this in itself can be a problem. In his critique of the search for a single origin, Foucault suggests that such an endeavour is always problematic "because it is an attempt to capture the exact essence of things, their purest possibilities, and their carefully protected identities, because this search assumes the existence of immobile forms that precede the external world of accident and succession" (Foucault, 1977: 142). To look for the origin of a phenomenon implies that there is an essential truth at the base of a phenomenon; that the origin can reveal a truth in its purest form. As Foucault goes on to say "the lofty origin is no more than 'a metaphysical extension which arises from the belief that things are most pure at the moment of birth.'³ We tend to think that this the moment of their greatest perfection, when they emerge dazzling from the hands of a creator or in the shadowless light of a first morning" (Foucault, 1984: 79). For Girard, sacrifice represents the first and most distilled social bond; it is the point where all social structure begins. The sacrifice is the seed allowing society to develop, and ritual clarifies the *fundamental nature* of the social. Girard certainly falls prey to the obsessive desire for origins that Foucault critiques. Despite this limitation, certain Girardian ideas remain useful. What Girard's work does offer is a way of conceptualizing the operations of violence as a social bond itself.

³ Here Foucault is referencing Nietzsche's *The Wanderer and His Shadow*, pg.3

For Girard, the *sacrificial mechanism* has a *generative function*: it generates all social structure. Rather than seeing sacrifice as necessarily generative, the ritual is more usefully understood as *productive*. The sacrificial ritual reconfigures violence into something that can be signified in the symbolic order. In other words, it transforms violence into socially productive forms. It is not that the first sacrifice is necessarily the origin of all things social. Instead, sacrifice allows us to observe the conversion of violence from a random and destructive elemental force into an object of social discourse. By making violence adopt the form of the ritual, the violence becomes manageable. It is here that Girard's ideas hold great value and can allow for an understanding of the operations of violence as a social bond in the culture of advanced western capitalism. With this in mind, I will outline how Girard formulates his theory.

Although he deals with a topic that has long been the focus of anthropological traditions, Girard employs a method that is altogether non-anthropological. Girard comes to his definition through a careful and thorough reinterpretation of myth and its relation to classical tragedy. He uses his concept of the surrogate victim along with the myth of Oedipus and Sophocles' tragic play *Oedipus the King* to explore the relationship between myth, violence and sacrifice. Girard introduces the concepts of reciprocal and mimetic violence in order to make his case. Mimetic violence – the repetition of imitative acts of violence – infects the social body, and renders all involved as “enemy brothers.” The threat implied by this is the loss of all social distinction. In the violent chaos, social structure disintegrates and all members of the community descend to the state of targets for reciprocal violence. This is why the mythic crimes of Oedipus are the heinous sins of parricide and incest. Oedipus' parricide – which is also the simultaneous crime of

regicide – casts him as the literal slayer of distinctions (Girard, 1972: 74). In terms of both the polis and the family, regicide and parricide can be understood as symmetrical crimes. In both, the apparent source of order is destroyed. The parricide destroys the law-of-the-father while the regicide annihilates the Law proper. The father is brought to the level of enemy brother. The same destructive element is present in the mythic crime of incest as well. For Girard, along with the destruction of the father’s distinct status in parricide, incest “destroys another crucial family distinction, that between the mother and her children. Between parricide and incest, the violent abolition of all family differences is achieved” (Girard, 1972: 74). In this destruction of distinction, the figure of the *monstrous double* is formed.

As he appears in Sophocles’ tragedy, Oedipus is the embodiment of this monstrous doubling. Girard points to the symmetrical characteristics of what he refers to as the *tragic debate* that Oedipus enters into with Tiresias, the blind prophet. They are depicted as doubles, each accusing the other of guilt in a symmetrical argument, and the crimes of incest and parricide are presented as “an exchange of mutual incriminations” (Girard, 1972: 72). It is the myth itself that intervenes and breaks the deadlock; without this intervention Oedipus’ guilt is no more evident than any of the others. The debate itself is not an act of discovering the *truth* of the crimes, but is a *tragic encounter* wherein one of the doubles must be annihilated. In the play, “Oedipus’ tragic fall has nothing to do with any heinous sin, it should be regarded as the outcome of a tragic encounter in which he has met defeat” (Girard, 1972: 73). Interpreting *tragedy* along these lines allows it to be reconciled to the contradictory features in the study of myth. According to Girard, tragedy emerges as a kind of subversion of myth. Or, more accurately, tragedy is born

when the mythic structure is already being subverted. In his framework, the actual ritual of sacrifice and the mechanism of the surrogate victim were beginning to lose their power and therefore their ability to properly resolve the sacrificial crisis. Tragedy, then, is an attempt to rearticulate the resolution of the sacrificial crisis via a redeployment of the surrogate mechanism. This is why in Sophocles' play Oedipus' guilt is the outcome of the tragic encounter with Tiresias and the ensuing tragic debate and not his actual guilt as determined by the myth. Tragedy takes the place of the ritual sacrifice: it remains a deployment of the surrogate mechanism wherein a chosen victim is made the vessel of the ills (mimetic violence) that infect the social body. Through the expulsion of this vessel, the community is purified and order restored.

This is why in Sophocles' play, Oedipus's *actual* physical guilt remains solely in the realm of myth. What ruins him is losing the tragic debate. Even though Oedipus is not literally sacrificed to the gods, he is still a sacrifice and adopts the mantle of surrogate victim. Oedipus becomes the source of the plague that hangs over Thebes, and only through his physical expulsion from the group can it be cured. Like a sponge, Oedipus absorbs the illness that has infected all of Thebes and with his exile the plague is cured and social order returns to the polis. At the centre of the tragedy, Girard identifies the operation of the surrogate victim mechanism as the redemptive force in a sacrificial crisis. For Girard, tragedy appears at the moment when the sacrificial ritual begins to lose its power. This raises two questions: first, if Girard criticizes Hubert and Mauss for not providing an account of the origin of the sacrificial rite, to what does he attribute its emergence? Second, what can be made of his idea that tragedy owes its lineage directly to the sacrificial ritual?

In the case of the origin of sacrifice, Girard builds off of Freud's analysis of the origin of taboos in his *Totem and Taboo* (1950). For both, the defining moment has to be traced back to an original and communally preformed murder. In Freud's work, this original murder occurs when humans are living in a condition he refers to as the *primal horde* and the victim of the murder is the *primal father* (Freud, 1950). The primal father existed in Freud's framework as an animalistic leader of the group whose rule is based on strength. The father is defined by his exclusive sexual access to all the women in the horde (akin to an animal pack). In their jealousy, the other men form what Freud refers to as the *band of brothers* to take from the primal father his exclusive access. The forming of this band is necessary since none of the *brothers* individually have the ability to usurp the primal father. Moreover, if one member did have this ability, the result of a single member murdering the primal father would only be the establishment of a new primal father in the horde. Nothing would change and the primal horde would persist. The band of brothers commits the act, with no single member solely responsible or guilty. According to Freud, it is in the aftermath of this act that our most basic taboos, specifically the taboos on incest, are formed. Faced with the horrible truth of the crime and the vacuum created by the absent primal father, the band of brothers is faced with a potentially dangerous situation. If any one of them assumes the privileges of the primal father, he is now all too aware of the murderous potential of his brothers. In a way, the now absent primal father reasserts himself. The taboo on incest is a means of guaranteeing that no one can be established as a primal father with exclusive access to all the women; the taboo ensures that not all women are available to any one man. Rather, the men now have to exchange women among each other. The absence of the primal father in the flesh creates the incest

taboo as the law-of-the-father ruled by his ghost, a law-in-the-name-of-the-father. The creation of the law-in-the-name-of-the-father was not only a pivotal moment in creating human consciousness as it exists now, but it is also the source of all taboo (Freud, 1950). Girard states unequivocally that he is not endorsing Freud's overall project in *Totem and Taboo*, but in terms of the theory of a collective murder as the origin of structure, Girard finds a point of agreement. Girard contends that the persistence of the sacrificial crisis and the similarity between different ritualistic practices can only be explained as an attempt to repeat an actual original murder: "I maintain that the original act of violence is the matrix of *all* ritual and mythological significations. Strictly speaking, this is only true of an act whose violence is absolute, so to speak: perfect, completely spontaneous, extreme" (Girard, 1972: 113). This original act of violence occurred as a response to a formative sacrificial crisis. People would have been caught in the extreme turmoil of mimetic violence and at some point, in a spontaneous and absolute act of violence, the original surrogate victim becomes the sponge that absorbs all of the violent desires of the group, the source of all trouble. In this moment, a mob mentality overrides the group and it communally murders the surrogate victim.

At this point I can now address the second question and it is here that I must distance myself from Girard's ideas. His ability to attribute the sacrificial mechanism to an actual *first murder* and then plot a direct line to the emergence of tragedy is due entirely to his quest for a pure origin. Girard believes that both the sacrificial ritual and classical tragedy involve violence as a social bond. Where Girard sees an evolutionary movement in the supposed *transition* from sacrificial ritual to tragedy, I am more inclined to see two instances where this violence is made into a productive force. In each case, violence is

transformed from something random and destructive into something that strengthens the presence of the social. Even though both involve the management of violence, it cannot be said that this is evidence that the pure origin of social structure has been found.

Despite this, the reasoning Girard employs to stake his claims of origin are still useful and can be used to reveal something about the operations of modern violence. The reason Girard sees an actual communally preformed murder as the origin of “all mythical and ritual signification” is because the paradoxical characteristics of the endlessly repeated ritualized victim and the surrogate victim in tragedy.

This paradoxical nature of these surrogate victims lies in their dual existence. At one time, the surrogate victim is manifested as the source of all evils, the carrier of the infectious seed of mimetic violence. But the surrogate victim also has unquestionable productive capacity. It is through the expulsion of the surrogate victim that order is restored and the sacrificial crisis resolved. Girard goes on to say:

This notion is affirmed, though in a veiled and transfigured manner, by the many etiological myths that deal with the murder of one mythological character by other mythological characters. That event is conceived as the origin of the cultural order; the dead divinity becomes the source not only of sacred rites but also of matrimonial regulations and proscriptions of every kind; in short, of all those cultural forms that give man his unique character (Girard, 1972: 93).

Girard finds the origin of ritual, and by extension all of social order, in the generative and constructive outcomes of the surrogate victim mechanism. The original sacrifice becomes ritualized as a preventive measure for the social group. Ritual killing is performed to prevent the formation of a sacrificial crisis. Despite the specious reasoning rooted in the desire for origins, his argument does recognize the productivity of violence. The value of Girard’s theory resides in its outline of how violence can be incorporated into social discourse.

As I mentioned earlier, Girard argues that the appearance of modern formalized law as an institution marks the abolition of the surrogate victim mechanism, this is problematic. Girard's primitivism prevents him from imagining that earlier societies practiced their own forms of law and it also idealizes the modern west. Walter Benjamin's *The Critique of Violence* (1999), provides a more compelling reading of the modern institution of law. In Benjamin's dialectical reading of the relation between the Law and violence, the Law maintains legitimacy by referring back to the fundamental *mythic violence* that gives birth to any legal order. Law is only legitimate in its ability to refer back to own violent roots. In this light, every instance of the law exercised represents a moment of violence itself. Added to this, Giorgio Agamben has advanced the notion of the *homo sacer* as the necessary legal subject to whom the law does not apply – legal subjects who are made “sacrificable” by the very structure of law (1998). In light of Benjamin and Agamben's contributions, we cannot conclude that modern law by its very nature is the antithesis of mimetic violence. Rather than the threat of violence being erased by the unquestionable authority of the law, it is my position that violence itself has undergone a meaningful transformation. Violence and its management now exist in the realm of spectacle. This means that not only is the Law implicated in its own founding mythic violence, it is also implicated in the realm of spectacular violence. The following section will deal with understanding modern spectacular violence and what this can reveal about the visual consumption of beheading videos.

"De-materialized Violence and the Taboo on Death"

The threats posed by violence have not dissipated in the west. It still has the potential to spill over and erupt and the law can become de-legitimated. Violence itself exists as an

object of not only fear but of voyeuristic fascination, as Foucault describes in his account of the public execution of Damiens(1977). However, he argues that this public spectacular violence has become less visible and its equivalent is now found in the techniques of disciplinary power built into the structure of modern institutions. It is my position that the appearance of modern disciplinary power did not wholly suppress the public love of violence. Although spectacular violence in the west no longer manifests itself in a demonstration of absolute sovereign power, the public's thirst for violence remained alongside the apparent "privatization" of violence. As the culture of advanced capitalism has evolved, the experience of both violence and death has undergone an important reconfiguration. In the previous chapter I argued that Debord's concept of spectacle can help us to understand the modes of visibility proliferating on the Internet. One of the essential features of a society of the spectacle is the transition from actual life to the state where "all that was once directly lived has become mere representation" (Debord, 1994: 12).

As I outlined in the first chapter, the increasingly porous nature of the body central to Haraway's argument and the transcendence of informational code over the body articulated by Hayles both point to an essential de-materialization of the experience of subjectivity. This de-materialization is not limited to discourses of the body; some scholars point to it as a central feature of advancing capitalism. For Žižek, dematerialization is described as a process of *virtualization*. According to him, the experience of *reality* for a western audience is increasingly influenced by its relationship to *Virtual Reality*:

On today's market, we find a whole series of products deprived of their malignant properties: coffee without caffeine, cream without fat, beer without alcohol...

And the list goes on: what about virtual sex as sex without sex, the Colin Powell doctrine of warfare with no causalities (on our side, of course) as warfare without warfare, the contemporary redefinition of politics as the art of expert administration, that is, as politics without politics, up to today's tolerant liberal multiculturalism as an experience of the Other deprived of its Otherness (the idealized Other who dances fascinating dances and has an ecologically sound holistic approach to reality, while practices like wife beating remain out of sight...)? Virtual Reality simply generalizes the procedure of offering a product deprived of its substance, of the hard resistant kernel of the Real – just as decaffeinated coffee smells and tastes like real coffee, Virtual Reality is experienced as reality without being so. What happens at the end of this process of virtualization, however, is that we begin to experience 'real reality' as a virtual entity (Žižek, 2002: 10-11).

To experience 'real reality' as a virtual entity is the complement to Debord's notion of life reduced to its own representation. For Debord, spectacle reduces 'real reality' to its representation in images. For Žižek, the process of virtualization transforms reality into something altogether unreal.

In the previous chapter I outlined how the viral consumption of digital recordings of beheading deaths can be understood in terms of their relationship to the mode of visibility constructed by the operation of the webcam. An essential feature of this mode of visibility is the destabilization of the subjective positions of the both the photographer and the spectator. This is a facet of the process of virtualization. But there is a much more sinister aspect to this process than might at first appear. As an audience, our experience with Virtual Reality does not simply obscure the 'real reality' of everyday life. Part of the thrill of an engagement with the semblances of reality in a virtualized reality comes from a longing for an encounter with the "hard kernel of the Real," the very thing that is suppressed in the process of virtualization. Žižek explains it thus:

The authentic twentieth century passion for penetrating the Real Thing (ultimately, the destructive Void) through the cobweb of semblances which constitutes our reality thus culminates in the thrill of the Real as the ultimate

‘effect’ sought after from digitalized special effects, through reality TV and amateur pornography, up to snuff movies. Snuff movies which deliver the ‘real thing’ are perhaps the ultimate truth of Virtual Reality (Žižek, 2002: 12).

In the vivid example of a snuff movie (a filmed death), Žižek finds the paradoxical truth of the processes of virtualization and de-materialization. This process by its very function produces a consumable reality deprived of its “hard kernel.” But in doing so, it creates a desire to consume the “virtualized reality” by promising a kind of encounter with the Real – the very thing that must be suppressed to become virtual and non-material. This idea is strengthened when we consider the “urban legend” status of snuff films. Although almost certainly these videos have actually been made at some point by someone, the fact that their existence in public discourse is in the realm of myth, mystery and morbid fascination only demonstrates the extent to which they hold a promise, the promise of an encounter with the “real thing.” This is why Žižek sees the snuff movie as an “ultimate truth.” The thrill that one could feel in the consumption of a snuff movie is in its potential to produce an encounter with the Real. By offering violence in a de-materialized form (at least, for the consumers – to be sure for the victim in the actual moment the video commemorates, the violence is all too material) these digitized deaths simultaneously suppress the hard kernel of the Real in violence while creating a “thrill of the Real” in its consumption.

Added to this virtualization of violence, I am arguing, is a de-materialization of death itself. Writers like Geoffrey Gorer and Philip Ariès have described a trend in the conception of death in western culture. Both argue that death has become the “great taboo” of western society. However, Gorer’s argument in *The Pornography of Death* (1959) is based on a popular assumption of Victorian attitudes towards sexuality. This

popular assumption understands the Victorian era as practicing an intense suppression of sexuality. But in the *History of Sexuality: Volume 1* (1978), Foucault famously refutes this “repressive hypothesis,” identifying instead an increasing diffusion of the discourses of sexuality, and the means for its regulation. Although Gorer partly bases his argument on this problematic view of the past as “more sexually repressed,” his ideas concerning the position that death occupies in the modern western psyche are still useful. What Gorer points to is the suppression of actual death in western discourses, and an accompanying explosion in the “pornographic” representations of death in popular media. Gorer considers the deaths portrayed in media as “pornographic” because, as with sex-based pornography, the representations of death are not accompanied with an attempt to signify the emotions that the actual experience would induce. Both pornographic sex and pornographic death represent a fantasy where “the emotions which are typically concomitant of the acts – love or grief – are paid little or no attention, while the sensations are enhanced as much as a customary poverty of language permits” (Gorer, 1959: 50-51).

This notion of representations of death increasingly enhancing its *sensational* aspects finds a more contemporary parallel in John Tercier’s work *The Contemporary Deathbed: The Ultimate Rush* (2005). Gorer argues that the exposure to death by “natural causes” is on the decline in the west and is being replaced by the “violent” or “sudden” death. He makes the claim that although at one time it was inevitable to be exposed to the drawn out “natural” death of another, many people no longer experience this nearness to death. Death now happens suddenly and unexpectedly. For Tercier, the status of the contemporary sudden and violent deaths is demonstrated in its representations.

He identifies a marked shift in the popular representation of death from the so-called quiet “death with dignity” that takes place in a dark room surrounded by loved ones, to the fast paced and spectacular “high-tech” death that takes place in the frenzy of a rushing ambulance or the dizzying whirl of the Emergency Room (Tercier, 2005). Death in popular discourse manifests itself solely as sensationalism.

Philippe Ariès makes a similar argument in *Western Attitudes toward Death* (1974).

According to Ariès, death has become increasingly subject to secrecy and suppression in public discourses. For both Ariès and Gorer, death is conceptualized as a very real threat to all societies. Death by nature is a disruptive force; it undermines and interrupts the functioning of society. According to Ariès, European society has historically practiced a number of techniques for “taming” death (Ariès, 1974). With the decline of the spiritual life of the modern west, these techniques of taming death have vanished. Now modern western society, faced with the same threat imposed by death but lacking the ability to “tame” it, seeks to expel the threat of death through its suppression and denial. The decline of the rituals surrounding death, such as the saying of the last rites or the deathbed scene as a kind of space for public gathering, has resulted in its banishment from public discourse and even causes the act of mourning to become an object of shame. This connection between mourning and shame is demonstrated in the American government’s refusal to allow the media to film coffins returning from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. This decision was motivated by the desire to control how the death of soldiers is represented, to distance the war effort from the shameful scenes of crying families and mourning loved ones. This banishment and avoidance of the “real reality”

of death is what constitutes its taboo nature. Death is now cloaked and mysterious. The ultimate goal is to avoid death at all possible costs.

It is such overt attempts to avoid and suppress death that lead Gorer to argue that the images of death in popular discourse have a pornographic character. Although I do not dispute that there is a pornographic element to the way death is represented, I am hesitant in labeling the position that the beheading videos hold in western discourse as another example of death rendered and consumed as pornography. Although the consumption of these videos does dwell in the realm of sensationalistic death and as Gorer argues, the pornographic element of contemporary represented death lies in the realm of sensationalism, there is something more complex at play in them. Deciphering this complexity will be part of the focus of the next chapter. Despite my hesitancy at interpreting these videos solely in their pornographic character, the sensationalistic aspects are still important. The ideas of Tercier again prove useful in understanding the contemporary connection between sensationalism and death. In his discussions of the modern “high-tech” death, Tercier is able to highlight the increasingly sensational aspects of death that dominate not just representations of death but also the actual experience of death. It is not only in images that the contemporary death takes place in a high-tech fury. In the age of advanced medicine, death increasingly occurs in the back of a speeding ambulance under the brutal crunch of CPR and the electrical violence of defibrillators. The intense and exciting scenes that make up the filmed action of a contemporary television drama set in a hospital often reappear as the last frenzied moments of an actual life.

This rendering of death into a sensationalistic frenzy illustrates both Debord's assertion that life itself has been reduced to its own spectacular representation in images, and Žižek's arguments about virtualization. The taboo on death is another example of the overall process of virtualization and de-materialization, an extraction of the "hard kernel of the Real." Pornographic death can then be explained as the necessary "passion to penetrate the Real thing" of death that is created by the suppression of its "hard kernel." Violence and death in the conditions of spectacle exist in discourse as de-materialized entities that only return to the material world in their horrible eruption in individual lives. But the materiality of violence and death in these moments only exist for the one who bears the brunt of its force. However, the claim that these videos exist as a form of *spectacular sacrifices* is not proven by their existence as *virtualized violence* on its own. For them to be adequately seen as sacrifices we have to distinguish them from other forms of spectacular violence. What is it about these specific graphic digital deaths that allow them to operate as the sacrifices of spectacle?

For me, the answer to this question is fourfold. First, these graphic representations of an actual death stand as overt violations of the western taboo on death and this bestows these videos a strangely *sacred* character. The knowledge of the existence of these videos alone charges them with energy, a residual force, even before they are viewed by a western audience. It is this strange overflow of energy, this sacred power, that explains their simultaneous existence as objects of revulsion and fascination. Second, these videos can be understood as a crystallization of the process of virtualization. Just as the ritual sacrifice is a moment where violence appears in a clear and distilled form, it is also the moment where the community appears in its most unified form. As examples of

crystallized virtualization, these videos are moments when spectacle itself can be deciphered in its most pure and “unified” form.⁴ Third, just as Girard argued that classical sacrifice had a productive function in terms of how it enables violence to become a manageable force, these digitized repetitions of actual deaths can also be seen as having a productive function in relation to spectacle and contemporary western society. Because of their extreme and visceral status as visual objects which contain an actual death, through visual ingestion they hold the potential to bring one the closest to experiencing the “thrill of the Real” of death. Opposed to the slew of ordinary – and necessarily hollow – spectacular images that make up western visual culture, these videos hold a special place. They transgress western death taboos, and they perpetuate the whole process of virtualization and de-materialization that in part maintains the taboo and therefore maintains and further strengthens spectacle. Fourth, the status of these videos in a spectacular culture of images is not limited to the realm of immaterial violence. These videos have a very real impact on actual material violence as well.

The extremeness of these videos is in part due to their supposed “barbarity,” which is only “barbaric” since it seen as a violation of the western death taboo, a taboo that is easily ignored when it comes to deaths of Iraqi or Afghan citizens. But why are those deaths easy to ignore? What is significant about the majority of the images that the west

⁴ To refer to spectacle appearing in its most “unified” form is an almost ironic statement. According to Debord, spectacle creates an inverted unity in separation. So, to refer to the title of Debord’s opening chapter, spectacle in its most unified form is actually “separation perfected.”

sees of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan? Or in other words, what is significant about the spectacular representations and images shown of these ‘real’ wars in popular media? For the majority of the images of these wars shown in the media, the significant feature is a lack of violence and death. Western news media provides us the anti-septic images of war in what amounts to a visual ode to the Collin Powell Doctrine of zero-casualty (at least for us) warfare. Absent are the blown-out buildings and mutilated corpses that accompany the actual war and instead we are given an image of what appears to be an orderly stable place intermittently marred by the eruptive violence of the insurgents. But for the western audience the beheading videos are nothing but violence and death; they are images of the “Real Thing.” When their status as representations of “pure” violence and death is combined with the fact that they are produced by the supposed enemies of western civilization, the very real effect of transforming the immaterial violence in spectacle into justifiable actual material violence unleashed on the Other is produced. The fact that such videos are not directly produced by the machinations of advanced capitalism or by citizens of western nations does not negate their very real significance and impact in spectacular culture. These digitized deaths are the ultimate truth of spectacle. Their ingestion through the Internet makes these represented and endlessly repeated digital deaths operate as spectacular sacrifices.

The graphic representations of violent death found in the beheading videos can be interpreted as moments of *spectacular violence*, and their existence on and consumption through the Internet can in turn be understood as a form of *spectacular sacrifice*. But this spectacular sacrifice operates in an inverted form from Girard’s conception of maintaining social order through unification. Rather than rendering violence manageable

through the communal ritual and the strengthening of social bonds, spectacular sacrifice works to strengthen spectacle as a means of experiencing society. Rather than “unifying” the social body, the spectacular sacrifice offers what I call an illusory *spectacular unity*. It is a unity based on the separation and alienation that underlies spectacle. It is this separation that allows for life to descend to its own representation and it is also why Debord titled the opening chapter of his book “Separation Perfected.” Spectacle seeks the perfection of separation, and these spectacular sacrifices offer an inverted unity (the unity of a shared spectacular culture). These sacrifices cement spectacle as the west’s primary means of experiencing the world and the lived life of its citizens.

But these are not the only features of the beheading videos that link them to the operation of a spectacular sacrifice. In the following chapter I will outline how these videos elicit what Bataille would call a sense of *religious eroticism* (1957). Even though these digital deaths can be linked to a process that seeks to incorporate violence and death into public discourse, this on its own is not enough to attribute them a sacrificial character. To be truly sacrificial there has to be an almost transcendental quality to them, a quality approximating the experience of ecstasy. It is the ecstatic character of these videos that must be further explored for these videos to be understood.

CHAPTER THREE

"From Violence to Ecstasy"

In the first chapter, I argued that the visual structure of the webcam creates the illusion of a kind pure object gaze and linked this to the functioning of spectacle described by Debord. Building off of this updated reading of Debord, the second chapter attempted to combine Girard's notions of ritual violence with the mechanisms of spectacle. However, there is a certain inadequacy that must be addressed in linking Girard's theories to Debord's ideas. In placing violence at the heart of ritualistic and religious practices, Girard's account of sacrifice offers an extremely fruitful paradigm. However, there is something lacking in this theory. As a system of managing violence, there is a definite logic to Girard's conception, but it falls short when trying to account for the very real feeling of the religious experience. How can the functional management of violence lead to religious ecstasy among believers? The answer to this question is found in the realm of excess and residual energies; or in other words, in a certain type of *magic*. The beauty and poetics of Girard's prose suggests that he too is aware that a satisfying explanation of such phenomena must delve into the realm of magic. His work deals with the ritual's unusual powers of transformation, its uncanny ability to alter dangerous and infectious violence into social cohesion and unity. So the "thousand individual conflicts [that] had raged unchecked between a thousand enemy brothers" (Girard, 1977: 79) undergoes a metamorphosis. The mimetic violence that had threatened the community is turned into its opposite, a violence that makes the community possible. But it is in these moments in Girard's text that his ideas seem to be lacking something essential.

Sacrificial rituals, like other religious rituals, are unquestionably powerful experiences, both great and terrible. Although I would not dispute that in the sacrifice, the death of the victim transforms “baneful violence into beneficial violence, into harmony and abundance” (Girard, 1977: 95), I cannot wholly accept Girard’s conclusion that “the sole purpose of religion is to prevent the recurrence of reciprocal violence” (Girard, 1977: 55). Perhaps in terms of pure *functions*, this is true. But this is not the *sole purpose* of religion. How can a conception of religion as nothing but a kind of rational method for dealing with violence account for the experience of ecstasy? Why is the management of violence that occurs in the ritual accompanied by the transcendental force that typifies the *religious experience*? There is a twofold problem if this relationship between the ritual and religious ecstasy/transcendence is accepted. First, such a position would suffer from the same problem that Girard criticizes in Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss’s notion that the realm of myth is constructed in the accumulation of sacrifices. Just as Hubert and Mauss offer no explanation for why the first sacrifice occurs before the “personality of gods” had been formed, Girard’s account offers no explanation for the experience of ecstasy. Second and more significantly, this conception evacuates the transcendental power of religious/mystical ecstasy of any significance of its own. It is reduced to a benign by-product of the transformational powers of a religious rite that begins and ends with the ritual itself.

Before I proceed any further I want to address the reasons why a discussion of these digital deaths needs to broach the subject of ecstasy. First, the realm of ecstasy is tightly connected to both ritual and the “religious experience” in general. For the beheading videos to be called sacrifices it is essential to connect them to the excessive world of the

erotic. The second answer is slightly more nuanced but still an integral aspect of the existence of these videos as endlessly consumable streams of digital code. I would like to propose that somewhere in the peculiar simultaneous fascination and revulsion that these videos elicit among westerners exists a particular type of *spectacular ecstasy*. This spectacular ecstasy accounts for the uncanny experience that can accompany the actual viewing of these digitized deaths. Just as the ritual of sacrifice involves an interplay of violence and death, these videos dwell in the realm of virtual and de-materialized violence. Since the classical religious/mystical experience can be induced by the ritual, it follows that if these videos are to be interpreted as spectacular sacrifices it must be possible to connect them to ecstasy. This is true despite the fact that for some the immediate reaction upon even hearing of the existence of these videos is one of disgust and revulsion. This fact on its own is not enough to refute the suggestion that westerners experience a type of ecstasy in the voyeuristic ingestion of digitized death. Disgust and revulsion are not antithetical sensations to the feeling of ecstasy. Rather, the possibility of horror and destruction is as central to religious ecstasies as the possibility of transcendental joy. Horror and disgust can be just as self-annihilating as the feeling of mystical ecstasy. To articulate this connection between terror and ecstasy, I will be turning to the work of Georges Bataille. Not only do his writings allow this necessary link to be understood; they also allow for an understanding of the so-called religious experience that is not possible in Girard's account. For Bataille, the ecstasy of religious experience is endowed with a significant meaning and is central to understanding the nature of humans and the world that they have constructed. In the following section, I

will outline Bataille's conception of religious ecstasy and its vital link to the world of eroticism.

"Religious Eroticism and Death"

What does the term erotic refer to? What is the erotic feeling? For Bataille, eroticism does not refer to all sexual activity. But all human sexuality – as opposed to “animal sexuality” – has the potential to be erotic. As he writes: “eroticism is the sexual activity of man to the extent that it differs from the sexual activity of animals. Human sexual activity is not necessarily erotic but erotic it is whenever it is not rudimentary and purely animal” (Bataille, 1986: 29). He also contends that eroticism today exists in three different forms: emotional, physical and religious. The first two categories are more or less straightforward: emotional eroticism refers to the dizzying sensations that can be induced by mutual affection; physical eroticism refers to the unsignifiable feelings of physical, bodily desire. However, defining what constitutes the plane of religious eroticism is much more difficult.

In part, this difficulty is due to the tendency to understand eroticism in terms of an opposition to pornographic sexuality in images, as if eroticism can be understood as “tastefully” made or presented pornography. However, this simple opposition is misleading and only obscures the actual relationship between images labeled as pornographic and those labeled as erotic. It is not accurate to argue that pornography is “more obscene” than eroticism. So-called obscenity is no stranger to eroticism. As well, the category of “obscene” is anything but objective and stable and the objects and actions that come to be labeled as obscene by a social group changes over time and varies from individual to individual. More tellingly, the feeling of obscenity is seldom stable even on

the individual level. The objects, gestures and actions that are in some moments unbearably obscene can be experienced altogether differently when interacted with in different contexts. Since Bataille tells us that “obscenity is our name for the uneasiness which upsets the physical state associated with self-possession, with the possession of a recognized and stable individuality” (Bataille 1986: 29) it is counterproductive to oppose eroticism from pornography in terms of their relative “degree of obscenity.” Both are invested in obscenity and to oppose them in this way would be nothing more than to confess personal preferences for certain types of obscenity over others.

However, this does not mean that pornography and eroticism are synonymous terms or refer to the same things. This is because eroticism implies a certain type of subjective feeling or experience while pornography refers to a specific filmic genre and is therefore attached to a particular set of filmic conventions. One feels the world of the erotic while one consumes images that are visually structured as pornographic.

This idea is also echoed by Žižek when he writes: “As it is ordinarily understood, *pornography* is the genre supposed to ‘reveal all there is to reveal,’ to hide nothing, to register ‘all’ and offer it to our view. It is nevertheless precisely in pornography as a filmic genre that the ‘substance of enjoyment’ perceived by the view from aside is *radically lost*” (italics in original) (Žižek, 1997: 109).⁵ This loss of the substance of

⁵ When Žižek refers to being “perceived by the view from aside,” he is referencing to the *awry* perspective that he argues is necessary for psychoanalytic interpretation and specifically for understanding Lacan’s contributions to the field of psychoanalysis. For further insight on the *awry* perspective and psychoanalytic interpretation see Žižek (1997).

enjoyment for Žižek is a result of its inherent perversity. The perversity of pornography is not found in the usual sense of the word; it is not perverse because it “shows what should not be shown” (Žižek, 1997: 109). Rather, he sees the perversity of pornography in how it formally structures the gaze between its spectators and its *obscene object*. Instead of the gaze being seated in the subject who watches the obscene object of pornographic film, Žižek suggests that the opposite occurs. He argues that the antinomic relationship between the gaze and the view articulated by Lacan that puts the view (the eye viewing an object) on the side of the subject and the gaze on the side of the viewed object is inverted in pornographic cinema. As he argues:

This antinomy of gaze and view is lost in pornography – why? Because pornography is inherently *perverse*; its perverse character lies not in the obvious fact that it “goes all the way and shows us all the dirty details;” its perversity is rather, to be conceived in a strictly formal way. In pornography, the spectator is forced a priori to occupy a perverse position. Instead of being on the side of the viewed object, the gaze falls into ourselves, the spectators, which is why the image on screen contains no spot, no sublime-mysterious point from which it gazes at us. It is only we who gaze stupidly at the image that “reveals all.” Contrary to the commonplace according to which, in pornography, the other (the person on the screen) is degraded to an object of our voyeuristic pleasure, we must stress that it is the spectator himself who effectively occupies the position of the object (Žižek, 1997: 110).

It is precisely because of this structured gaze that I do not fully follow the ideas of Gorer and attribute the west’s simultaneous fascination and revulsion towards these digitally coded deaths as another example of the proliferation of “pornographic death.” This is because when Gorer refers to pornographic death, he is using the term pornography in the same sense that Žižek critiques. For Gorer, the contemporary pornography of death supposedly reduces death to an object of our voyeuristic pleasure. But just as Žižek argues that in actuality it is the one who views pornography who is objectified, the same can be said of the beheading videos. The logic of this however is only revealed if

we consider the erotic aspects of digitized deaths. To say that there is an erotic quality to these videos is indeed a contentious stance, but it is also one which reveals the most about their relationship to the culture of advanced capitalism and the ways that violence operates as a contemporary social bond. To demonstrate this I will first offer a more concrete definition of eroticism.

As a starting point, Bataille views *eroticism* as the key feature of the religious/mystical experience. For this to make sense however, it is important to first outline and understand how Bataille conceptualizes the world of the erotic. Bataille offers a formula for understanding eroticism in the introduction of *Erotism: Death and Sensuality* (1986) that he argues is capable of revealing its meaning. It is here where he gives the seemingly paradoxical sentence: “Eroticism, it may be said, is assenting to life up to the point of death” (Bataille, 1986: 11). Bataille readily admits that this formula on its own does not amount to a definition. However it does provide a possible point of entry into understanding the meaning of the erotic realm. But if we are to make sense of Bataille’s paradoxical formula, we must begin by understanding the relationships he views between taboo, transgression, life, death and the world of work. It is in these interrelated phenomena that the meaning of eroticism can be found. This will answer the necessary questions of how one can “ascend to life” and how death can be the point where life ascends to its highest level.

The answer to these lies in the tensions between continuity and discontinuity that Bataille sees as central to not just human life but all life. According to Bataille, humans, like all creatures, are discontinuous beings and this discontinuity is the necessary result of reproduction:

Beings which reproduce themselves are distinct from one another, and those reproduced are likewise distinct from each other, just as they are distinct from their parents. Each being is distinct from all others. His birth, his death, the events of his life may have an interest for others, but he alone is directly concerned in them. He is born alone. He dies alone. Between one being and another, there is a gulf, a discontinuity” (Bataille, 1986: 11).

Human life is marked by an unavoidable discontinuity. Between two individuals there always exists a gap. According to some psychoanalysts, it is this inevitable gap that constitutes the requirement for signification, symbolic thought, language and consciousness. For Bataille this gap between discontinuous beings also implies death and it is central to understanding what he calls the *continuity of being* or *primal continuity*. In his framework, all life involves movements from continuity to discontinuity and this is reflected, at least philosophically in the most basic forms of reproduction. Even asexual reproduction, the method employed by the most basic forms of life, involves this movement. Before splitting, the single cell life is a discontinuous being with an experience inside itself all of its own. In order to reproduce, this single celled being must annihilate its own discontinuous existence in order to divide into two new and distinct discontinuous beings. But in the moment before this split, before the first being is destroyed to birth two more, there is an essential continuity. Before the two new beings become fully distinct, before they tear their progenitor apart, their inner experiences co-mingle within their parent. There is a continuity between these two beings before being thrown into their discontinuous existences. For Bataille, sexual reproduction also involves movements from discontinuity to continuity but in a reverse order from the transitions of asexual reproduction. In sexual reproduction the sperm and the egg, two discontinuous cells, merge to form a new life and in doing so they annihilate

their own discontinuous existences. Continuity is created in this merger and from this continuity the discontinuous existence of a new being is created.

It may seem like an absurd philosophical exercise to consider the life patterns of an amoeba and the discontinuous existence of sperm and ova. Bataille suggests that these objective and neutral facts about reproduction may seem insignificant, but this insignificance is deceptive. Although there is an unquestionable difference between the life patterns of single celled creatures and the complex self-awareness of humans, Bataille warns against “the habit of seeing these creatures from the outside only, of seeing them as things which do not exist inside themselves” (Bataille, 1986: 14). For Bataille, an “existence inside itself” is not the result an increase in the complexity of life but rather a fundamental feature of all life no matter how relatively simple. Just as all life, regardless of complexity, suggests an existence inside of itself, so too does reproduction imply the existence of discontinuous beings, formed through violent and annihilating slippages from states of discontinuity to continuity and back again. Bataille concedes that this exercise in considering the objective facts of sexual and asexual reproduction is done as a *reductio ad absurdum*, but it is done to illustrate that such transitions are at the very foundations of life. Although humans (as all beings that reproduce) are discontinuous, Bataille suggests that a type of nostalgia for a lost primal continuity persists, and it is in this tension between states of discontinuity and continuity that he finds meaning in his three categories of eroticism. In this light, eroticism is a feeling of continuity even if only for the briefest and most fleeting of moments. Erotic activity, then, is an attempt to dissolve the discontinuous existences of its participants.

Because of this drive towards continuity, erotic activity is drastically different, and in a way violently opposed to all other forms of individual and social human behaviour. This opposition only becomes clear after we consider what Bataille sees as one of the essential qualities that separates the world of humans from the world of animals. The development of work stands as the definitive moment when humans ascended from their animality (Bataille, 1986; 1989). Although he admits that work is not necessarily the exclusive domain of humans, human work nonetheless stands as something distinct from its other forms for two reasons. First, the earliest examples of human work and advanced tool making represent the beginnings of *reason* itself. As he describes:

Work is obviously no less ancient than man himself, and though work is not necessarily foreign to animal work, human work as distinct from animal work is never foreign to reason. It supposes that a fundamental identity is accepted between it and its wrought object, and it supposes the difference, resulting from the work, between its substance and the developed tool. Similarly it implies an awareness of the use of the tool, of the chain of cause and effect in which it is about to become involved. The laws which govern the acquired skills which give rise to tools or which are served by them are laws of reason from the outset (Bataille, 1986: 44).

The second distinguishing feature of human work is its emergence alongside the appearance of taboos related to death. According to prehistoric evidence, the appearance of Neanderthals not only marks the beginning of advanced tool making by humans but it also marks the earliest evidence of rituals surrounding death. The evidence for this can be found in the Neanderthal grave sites that indicate the practice of fairly elaborate ceremonial burial rituals. These facts lead Bataille to argue that the development of work distanced humanity from animals; the human discovery of how to manipulate materials to achieve a particular end not only changes the materials it utilizes but also fundamentally changes humans themselves (Bataille, 1989: 41). The development of work not only

coincides with the rise of humans as bearers of reason, it also marks the beginning of the religious life of humans.

According to Bataille, the emergence of rituals surrounding the treatment of dead bodies necessarily suggests the creation of taboos surrounding death. This is also the pivotal moment that makes the erotic lives of humans possible. For Bataille, these early forms of work coincide with the emergence of taboos because to function, the world of work must set itself against the immediate urge to satisfy violent desires. Just as work must constrain the satisfaction of immediate desire in lieu of a later reward (the outcome of work) so too do taboos. Taboos proscribe certain behaviours as improper or revolting, and therefore requiring their suppression (Bataille, 1986: 41). The creation of taboos must be considered an aspect of the suppression of actual desires since, as Bataille points out just as Freud did before him in *Totem and Taboo* (1950), taboos would be meaningless and redundant if the sanctioned behaviours and actions were not in some fundamental way desirable. It is in the tension between the worlds of work and taboo (discontinuity) on the one side and the feelings of nostalgia for a lost primal continuity on the other, that the religious life of humans is formed. And it is in the netherworld between the two that humanity discovers their capacity to experience the erotic.

What does this erotic experience of continuity entail? How can one be induced into a state of continuity? Émile Durkheim wrote about the transcendental force of the social as the core of religion. For Bataille however, the transcendence induced by a religious fervour has a fundamental connection to the unusual feeling of excess that can be produced by the most depraved actions. Eroticism is essentially about excess, it is about exceeding the borders of a discontinuous existence. It is the dizzying loss of self-control

that can be induced by the overflow of energy found equally in both the passionate embrace of lovers and the frenzy of a religious ritual. Eroticism is also about transgression. It is through transgression that one can approach the erotic world and this is explains why religious rituals often involve the suspension of taboos. The act of ritual sacrifice is itself a transgression of the taboo against killing. For Bataille it is the erotic realm that gives form and substance to the religious life of humans and simultaneously sustains the regulated patterns of social life in the world of work.

In light of this, the logic of Bataille's paradoxical statement that eroticism is "assenting to life up to the point of death" becomes clearer (Bataille, 1986: 11). Eroticism is assenting to life because it is at the heart of the religious life of humans and contains the possibility of experiencing our lost primal continuity for a fleeting moment. It lifts us from our "random and ephemeral" discontinuity and delivers a sensation that exceeds the limits of an individual life. As Bataille writes: "when the Marquis de Sade in his novels defines murder as the pinnacle of erotic excitement, that only implies that the destructive element pushed to its logical conclusion does not necessarily take us out of the field of eroticism proper" (Bataille, 1986: 18). Violent death is the destructive potential of eroticism. For Bataille this is because "men as discontinuous beings try to maintain their separate existences, but death, or at least the contemplation of death brings them back to continuity" (Bataille, 1986: 83). Bataille also sees this as an explanation for the phenomenon of violent death in ritual sacrifice. Explaining the religious power of ritual sacrifice, Bataille suggests that:

The victim dies and the spectators share in what his death reveals. This is what religious historians call the sacramental element. This sacramental element is the revelation of continuity through the death of a discontinuous being to those who watch it as a solemn rite. A violent death disrupts the creature's discontinuity:

what remains, what the tense onlookers experience in the succeeding silence, is the continuity of all existence with which the victim is now one. Only a spectacular killing carried out as the solemn and collective nature of religion dictates has the power to reveal what normally escapes notice (Bataille, 1986: 22).

This is where the destructive potential of eroticism lies. Death implies continuity for discontinuous beings and this is why violent murder can be understood as the “destructive element pushed to its logical conclusion.” In the same vein, the digital deaths in the beheading video can be interpreted as the “logical conclusion” of the destructive element of spectacular eroticism. Just as Žižek argued that the snuff film contains the ultimate truth of virtualization, in the same way the beheading videos present the ultimate truth of spectacle by crystallizing its destructive element.

However, Bataille’s theory does not adequately articulate the eroticism of spectacle. Although Bataille’s notion of religious eroticism offers a way to begin conceptualizing the erotic quality of these videos, how their erotic aspects function is markedly different. In an important way, Bataille’s three categories of the erotic are identical. Emotional, physical and religious eroticism each represent a different method for encountering the erotic realm. Despite this difference in method, each supposedly brings you into contact with the same thing, with the nostalgic feeling of a primal continuity. It can perhaps be said that contact with this primal continuity reaches its most intense levels when encountered through the rites of religious eroticism, but this is not necessarily true in all cases. The throws of emotional and physical eroticism for some can be just as total as the transcendence reached through the mystical experience. In the virtualized conditions of spectacle however, the feeling of eroticism induced by spectacle functions in a distinctly different manner. Instead of the eroticism of spectacle merely representing a novel

method for encountering a primal continuity, it inverts the relationship between discontinuity and continuity at play in Bataille's original three categories.

"Suppressed Continuity and Alienated Death"

In the previous chapter I outlined how these digitally encoded deaths can be interpreted as a type of sacrificial mechanism operating in an inverted form. The inverted nature of these digital sacrifices is a result of the peculiar manifestation of their erotic quality.

Unlike physical, emotional, and religious eroticism that seeks a dissolution of discontinuity for a fleeting moment of continuity, the eroticism of spectacle inverts its connections to the worlds of continuity and discontinuity. This is because spectacular eroticism is implicated in the processes of virtualization and de-materialization.

Although it is as powerful as the other three, spectacular eroticism exists in the virtual realm. If we recall, Žižek describes virtualization as a process that deprives a product of its substance, what he calls the "hard kernel of the Real." This process necessarily results in the pursuit of "an encounter with the Real" through semblances and leads to "real reality" being experienced as a virtual entity (Žižek, 2002). Spectacular eroticism as an agent in the process of virtualization is also caught up in the dialectic of the suppression of the Real and the thrill of an encounter with its semblance.

Bataille's three erotic types represent different means or tactics for achieving a fleeting dissolution of the self, its hard resistant kernel of Real. On the other hand, the eroticism that works to sustain spectacle suppresses this dissolution and instead offers a ghostly encounter with it through semblances. Žižek argues that it is the "malignant properties" that are suppressed in the process of virtualization. The excessive and unsignifiable character of an encounter with a primal continuity is the destructive potential process.

When implicated in the mechanisms of virtualization, this destructive potential persists as the “malignant property,” that must necessarily be suppressed. Spectacular eroticism seeks the suppression of the nostalgic primal continuity (its malignant kernel of the Real) to induce what can best be described as an uncanny discontinuity.

The beheading videos as examples of spectacular sacrifice subvert the connection between viewing the death of another and the experience of primal continuity fostered by the sacrificial ritual. The most immediate reason for this is that watching the beheading videos is a much more individual experience than the publicly preformed sacrificial rite. These videos are sought out by individuals who then watch these recorded deaths on the monitors of their personal computers in the privacy of their own home. Unlike with the deaths of traditional sacrifice, we are generally alone when we watch these deaths. This isolation is magnified in the “succeeding silence” (Bataille, 1986: 22). According to Bataille, it is in the “silence” that follows the death in traditional sacrificial rituals where the revellers experience the throws of religious eroticism. But the isolated silence that follows the individualized encounter with this de-materialized death implies a quite distinct relationship between continuity and discontinuity.

Comparing the visual structure of these videos to the traditional sacrificial rites outlined by Girard clarifies the shifts in the experiences of discontinuity and continuity in spectacular eroticism. Unlike the communally preformed ritual that demanded a new victim for each repetition of the ritual, these videos are repeatable moments of a single death. Nicholas Berg’s death is forever captured as a digital stream of information that can be continually reviewed. So unlike the traditional rite that brings its spectators into contact with death in a more general sense, these videos bring the spectators into contact

with infinitely repeatable individual deaths. Each of these digitized deaths is monument to the end of single discontinuous existence. Alone in front of our computers we have the ability to replay an encounter a single death. In these videos it is not death that we encounter (the primal continuity of being) but rather a single isolated death. This is why these videos as sacrifices do not bring us into contact with “the continuity of all existence” and instead confront us with alienated death, removed from its intimate connection with primal continuity. The succession of new victims demanded by the traditional rite is part of the reason why its spectators are able to experience the “continuity of all existence” (Bataille, 1986: 22). The multiple victims that a particular sacrificial rite accumulates through its repeated practice are why the ritual implies death in more general sense, the inevitable death that all discontinuous beings must face equally. This effect is magnified by the essentially communal and public nature of sacrificial rites. The spectators en masse experience the continuity of existence through the repeated deaths of others and this is what induces the state of religious ecstasy. The ecstasy that is implied by these digital deaths is markedly different. The erotic aspect of death in the beheading videos does not contain the potential for encountering a primal continuity. Instead they contain the possibility of experiencing an ecstatic state of virtualized discontinuity and this in turn is a key aspect of spectacle.

However, to suggest that Bataille’s eroticism has undergone a Žižekian process of virtualization is problematic. The virtualization described by Žižek suggests a type of hollowing out; it is a process that deprives a thing of its “malignant properties” and offers back a necessarily empty copy (Žižek, 2002). But this is not what has happened with eroticism. Although I suggest that spectacular eroticism is implicated in the process of

virtualization and that it exists in part as a virtual entity, in a very visceral sense its “malignant properties” remain. What this means is that the destructive potential that can culminate in murder that Bataille identified in eroticism is still present in the eroticism of spectacle. Spectacle did not encounter classical eroticism and repackage it as a “virtual eroticism” with its destructive potential for violent death suppressed. Rather, what spectacular eroticism suppresses is the fleeting primal continuity that Bataille’s eroticism held as its wonderful and terrible promise.

The state of being that Bataille recognized as primal continuity emerges in a mutated form in the conditions of spectacle. The rise of Internet technology and instant communication has given the citizens of advanced capitalism a type of *virtual continuity*. However, by referring to Internet technology as a virtual community, I am not suggesting that individuals engaged in Internet mediated interactions are somehow less discontinuous (or alienated) than the subjects of more pre-Internet capitalism. N. Katherine Hayles pointed to the cellular and alienated experience of users in her research (Hayles, 1999). So it is not the case that the Internet forms a simple and unalienating community, its virtual character (in the Žižekian sense) makes it more complex than this. The “virtual” nature of this community does not merely refer to the cyber “spaces” in which interactions mediated through the Internet occur, it also refers to the necessarily suppressed character that Žižek argues is fundamental to any virtualized entity. Bataille’s erotic moment of primal continuity occurs in a state outside of the world of work and systems of knowledge; this is why Bataille conceptualizes it as a moment of non-knowledge or un-knowing (Bataille, 2001). But in the virtualized conditions of advanced

capitalism, it is this excessive and unsignifiable character of continuity (its hard kernel of the Real) which is suppressed.

This presents a peculiar shift in how discontinuity and continuity are experienced in capitalism. Unlike Bataille's notion of eroticism as the drive to experience a radical and potentially annihilating continuity in the face of a hard to bear ephemeral discontinuity, spectacle presents a different formulation of this tension. Unlike the succeeding silence following the deaths in sacrificial rites, the tense silence that follows these digitized deaths for those who visually ingest them does not imply "the continuity of all existence" in the same fashion. The fascinating horror that follows the close up shots of Nicholas Berg's or Eugene Armstrong's decapitated head hoisted in the air by their anonymous killers as they celebrate is quite distinct from the unifying terror that for Bataille accompanies the communally performed sacrificial rite. Rather than providing contact with a primal continuity for the spectators through a momentary dissolution of their discontinuous existences, these videos magnify the limits discontinuous existences through a suppression of continuity.

"Virtual Discontinuity and the Spectacle Society"

In the first chapter I offer an updated account of Guy Debord's theory of *spectacle society* by examining the visual structure imbedded in the gaze of the webcam. Building off of this, the second chapter combines this concept of spectacle with René Girard's analysis of ritual violence to argue that as spectacular sacrifices these videos have the effect of de-materializing violence. This is because of how horrifyingly close yet strangely distant these videos bring us to a seemingly authentic "thrill of the Real" via a virtual encounter. What this does is reify spectacle as the primary means for interacting

with society. Or in other words, it brings us into a radical and unstable state virtual discontinuity. Our fascination/revulsion with these transgressions of our death taboo (safely and reassuringly perpetrated by an alien Other) speaks to the power such transgression has in the increasingly virtualized conditions of modern spectacle. Unlike the eroticisms outlined by Bataille that allow death to contain the possibility of exceeding limits, this form of spectacular eroticism presents death as an absolute limit. The spectacular deaths in these videos do not represent the point at which the dizzying continuity can disrupt our seemingly stable lives. It becomes the absolute limit of a virtualized discontinuity. This is not meant as a suggestion that every viewer responds to these videos in the same fashion, instead this spectrum of reactions (somewhere between utter revulsion and uncanny fascination) only conforms to the larger workings of spectacle. The fact that a particular reaction can fall anywhere in this spectrum does not negate this.

This discontinuity is virtualized not only because it is partly formed in the virtualized swirl of Internet technology but also because it exists in dialectical relationship with the suppressed primal continuity (or in other words, virtual continuity) that underlies spectacular eroticism. It is a discontinuity that has been deprived of its “hard kernel of the Real.” This discontinuity no longer finds its counterpoint in the ecstatic erotic excesses outlined by Bataille but instead in the suppressed virtual continuity implied by the alienated deaths demonstrated in the beheading videos. It is true that Bataille locates eroticism’s potential for extreme excess in the unsignifiable world of primal continuity and this is where his notion of inner experience reaches its highest levels. However, the inner experience that Bataille argued is induced by eroticism is transformed under

spectacle into the uncanny sensation that can accompany any viewing of these digitized deaths. This uncanny feeling of spectacular inner experience, rather than dissolving discontinuity, presents western subjectivity with the terrible limits of its own discontinuity. If the western subject is indeed conditioned through the operations of spectacle, then these videos demonstrate an extreme interiority in western subjectivity as the counterpoint to the virtual continuity that is increasingly organizing social life. It is this extreme interiority that Debord argued is fostered by spectacle. Under spectacle, “all that was directly lived becomes mere representation” (Debord, 1994: 12) in a process that necessarily suppresses all that had once been directly lived. So instead of actual social relations, the citizens of spectacle now find themselves interacting with a social reality mediated by images. It is this scenario that creates the extreme interiority of western subjectivity and it is because of this interiority that spectacle can operate as the “perfection of separation *within* human beings” (italics in original) (Debord, 1994:18). Because of this, spectacular eroticism can be understood as a kind of virtualized religious eroticism. Spectacular eroticism suppresses the immediate and material violence implied in its excessive nature. By removing the immediacy of actual material violence, the repeatable virtual deaths become interwoven into the fabric of life rendered as “mere representation” (Debord, 1994: 12). The immaterial form of the violence in these videos still contains a lingering capacity for erotic excess, an excess manifested as a confrontation with radical discontinuity in the face of a virtual continuity organizing life in the age of modern technology.

This novel, spectacular form of eroticism can also be conceptualized in another way. If we return to Žižek’s ideas concerning the structuring of the gaze in pornography, the

argument can be made that the current conditions of spectacle have rendered religious eroticism as pornographic. In the first chapter, I outlined how the visual structure of the webcam creates the illusion that viewers can see with a kind of pure gaze – that we can be the sardine can that sees (Lacan, 1997). The same empty promise is offered by the beheading videos, that by watching them we can gaze at death from an impossible position. Just as in pornography where the filmic attempts to “reveal all” actually reduces the viewer to the position of the object, the same is true in beheading videos. The distinctive ways that spectacular eroticism virtualizes the categories of continuity and discontinuity through the visuality of the webcam can be understood as a unique form of pornography. It is not simply the “pornographic death” that Gorer understood as a process of rendering death into an object of voyeuristic pleasure but rather it is pornographic in the Žižekian sense. Western subjectivity is reduced to the level of the object through the inherently perverse structuring of the gaze in the beheading videos. This is vital for thinking about the conditions of modern spectacle. For Bataille, “organized transgressions together with the taboo make social life what is” (Bataille, 1986: 65). The beheading videos proliferating throughout the Internet comprise a special type of “organized transgression.” The erotic quality of these videos sustains an intensified particularity that is essential for spectacle to operate as a “perfection of separation *within* human beings” (italics in original, Debord, 1994: 18). The erotic realm of spectacle exists as a radical state of virtualized discontinuity in the virtualized space of the Internet. It is this inverted Eros at play in the virtualized realm that sustains the spectacular magnitude of social relations mediated through images.

Identifying the unique form of eroticism at play in these modern digital images of death also has the benefit of outlining the pleasurable aspects of capitalism that Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno (1997) failed to account for. The power of spectacle lies directly in its connection to the visually based spectacular eroticism that infuses it with its uncanny power of fascination/revulsion. As transgressions of the western death taboo, these videos sustain the taboo as a type of decentralized “organized transgression.” This in part accounts for the presence of these videos on English websites specializing in showcasing grotesque images and the fascination that compels their visual consumption. The thrill of consuming these images results from their transgressive nature because, as Bataille tells us, “the transgression does not deny the taboo but transcends it and completes it” (Bataille, 1986: 63). In a very direct way, the transgression of consuming these digital deaths operates as a necessary compliment to the contemporary death taboo. These videos provide a direct example of death reduced to its sensationalistic aspects as outlined by Geoffrey Gorer (1950) and John Tercier (2005), and are therefore equally implicated in the processes that render lived life as its own spectacular representation in images.

There is a final issue that must be addressed in closing. Upon successful defense of this project it became apparent that to place the beheading videos in the context of “visual commodities” is somewhat lacking. As a potential site of future research, rather than incorporating them in this framework, it is much more productive to place them in the psychoanalytic network of drive, desire and object. These videos are more akin to psychoanalytic “objects” rather than capitalist “commodities.”

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VITA AUCTORIS

Timothy Swiffen was born in 1983 in Edmonton, Alberta. He graduated from Archbishop Macdonald High School in 2001. From there he went on to the University of Alberta where he obtained a B.A. with a major in Sociology and a minor in Film and Media Studies in 2007. He is currently a candidate for the Master's degree in Arts at the University of Windsor.