

To the Mad Bitch, She is Dead

Deciphering the Ecstatic Body with Reference to Bernini's Ecstasy of St Teresa and Jouissance.

The Ecstatic as Death

'I saw in his hand a long spear of gold, and at the iron's point there seemed to be a little fire. He appeared to me to be thrusting it at times into my heart, and to pierce my very entrails; when he drew it out, he seemed to draw them out also, and to leave me all on fire with a great love of God. The pain was so great, that it made me moan; and yet so surpassing was the sweetness of this excessive pain, that I could not wish to be rid of it. The soul is satisfied now with nothing less than God. The pain is not bodily, but spiritual; though the body has its share in it, even a large one.'¹

Lacan is unequivocal when he states that St Teresa, as depicted in Bernini's sculpture *The Ecstasy of St Teresa* (1652), is coming but knows nothing about it (Lacan. 1975, p.76). Clearly sexual, for Teresa, this moment of jouissance is violent, ecstatic and out of this world;² taken a step further and with reference to Bataille, her ecstasy has necessitated a type of death in order that her sensual delight (and agony) may be fulfilled. In this moment of divine suspension, her personality is dead, 'Just as if some mad bitch has usurped the personality of the dignified hostess a little while back.' (Bataille 1957, p.106). Equating the moment 'minor rupture' of climax with the moment of death, Bataille identifies sexual violence as being akin to death in that, although temporary, it overturns the 'structure of life' (1957, p.106). This is strongly suggestive of there being a masochistic element in relation to jouissance, as the subject has to endure danger, violence and anxiety to attain

¹ St Teresa of Avila. (1562) *Book of My Life, Autobiography*, Chapter XXIV, Part 17

² I refer to Lacan's later concept of the supplementary jouissance which is feminine in nature, beyond the phallus and akin to a mystical experience, see Evans, D. From Kantian Ethics to Mystical Experience: An Exploration of Jouissance. In: D. Nobus. 1998 *Key Concepts of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*. London: Rebus Press. p.10

erotic exhilaration. But masochism, by its very nature, implies enjoyment and welcoming of this danger; pain is a means to pleasure, 'pleasure is taken in the very act of suffering itself, so that it becomes difficult to distinguish pleasure from pain' (Evans D., 1998, p.6) and in contrast, Lacan supposes that in *jouissance*, pleasure and pain remain distinct (1998, p.6). The paradox is that the pleasure comes at the price of suffering.

The Ecstatic as Abject

If *jouissance* constitutes a type of death, a moment of suspension where the subject is consumed or subsumed by the 'mad bitch', it therefore empathizes with Kristeva's explanation of the abject as a human reaction, be it convulsion, spasm or nausea, 'to a threatened breakdown in meaning caused by the loss of the distinction between subject and object or between self and other' (1980, p.1). And yet within this revulsion and in relation to *jouissance*, the abject remains seductive, alluring; we are drawn to the horror. Teresa's body is horrified and convulsed by her consummation with God (in the form of the angel) as her self is sacrificed but is nonetheless consumed with ecstasy by the event.

'It follows that *jouissance* alone causes the abject to exist as such. One does not know it, one does not desire it, one joys in it (*on en jouit*). Violently and Painfully. A passion. Hence a *jouissance* in which the subject is swallowed up but in which the Other, in return, keeps the subject from foundering by making it repugnant. One thus understands why so many victims of the abject are its fascinated victims - if not its submissive and willing ones.' (1980, p.9)

We may be its compulsive victims, in thrall to *jouissance* and the abject, but we do not necessarily desire it; there may be pleasure within the experience of the abject, a degree of release or purgation, but in contrast to Lacan, for whom desiring is an essential component of *jouissance*, Kristeva argues that though we may be drawn to it, we are not desirous of it.

The Ecstatic as Fold

The Baroque aesthetic, in which Teresa is firmly planted, both attracts and repels. A pathological rejection of the rigidity and formalism of the Renaissance, referred to, by Gregg Lambert, as the 'visible decomposition and decay of the classical style that preceded it' (2004, p.18), it reeks of sexuality and excess. An aesthetic that the Roman Church deployed and enjoyed both visibly and insidiously as a tool to bolster the Counter Reformation, it may be accused of vulgarity, but as a means of appealing to the masses, the Church knew what modern advertisers know so well, namely; sex sells:

'It is for this reason (because of its sensuality, its attraction to movement and its emotionalism) that its appeal is supposedly directed toward a larger more common public than either the Renaissance, before it, or Classicism that followed.' (2004, p. 17)

The Baroque obsession with death and intensity, a heightened sense of transience, the infatuation with rapturous movement and sensations of apprehension anxiety and even nausea (2004, p.18) are all features that are relevant, if not critical, to *jouissance* and within this aesthetic and within *jouissance* the fold is palpable. Referring to Baroque traits in painting and sculpture, specifically those of movement and ornamentation, Lambert says they produce a 'dizziness in the spectator, as well as a sense of unity, through the cumulative unfolding of surfaces..... producing both tension and release in the spectator or reader' (2004, p.17). Ensclosed and embedded in the folds of her robe, St Teresa's ecstasy mirrors the pleats and undulations both implicit and explicit therein (Maccormack 2008, p.66). The minor rupture of her *jouissance* is tangible in the waves and fluctuations in the fabric. 'The folds and pleats of Teresa's robe materially resonate with and as the folds and pleats of her ecstasy' (2008, p.66). As her *jouissance* is boundless, so are the folds: as the spectator, we cannot accept that either are finite.

'The Baroque does not refer to an essence, but rather to an operative function, to a characteristic. It endlessly creates folds. It does not invent the thing:.....But it twists

and turns the folds, takes them to infinity, fold upon fold, fold after fold. The characteristic of the Baroque is the fold that goes on to infinity.' (Deleuze 1991 ,p. 227)

The Ecstatic as Animal

Teresa's head is flung back, mouth agape, eyes barely visible as they roll back in her head, 'revealing no pupils, rolled within to see without' (Maccormack 2011).³ Rarely, if ever, is the ecstatic seen with their mouth closed. Bataille equates the physiognomy of the scream with that of the animal and though Teresa may not be screaming, there are obvious similarities; when screaming, the individual throws the head back thereby allowing the mouth to become a continuation of the spinal column '*in other words, in the position it normally occupies in the constitution of animals*' (Bataille 1930, p.59). In Francis Bacon's screaming bodies we do not necessarily see the horror so often ascribed to him, but a spasm, a 'violence of sensation' (Deleuze 1981 p.xv), an attack on the nervous system; Deleuze talks of 'invisible forces' that affect Bacon's bodies, these forces can equate to the affect *jouissance* has on the body. Though specifically referencing Bacon, it could just as easily be Teresa that Deleuze is referring to:

'This is the relationship not of form or matter, but of materials and forces - making these forces visible through their effects on the flesh. There is, before anything else, a force of inertia that is of the flesh itself:..... Already we have here the role of the spasm, or of the scream: the entire body trying to escape, to flow out of itself.' (1981 pp.xii xiii)

In *jouissance*, in order to separate ourselves from the animal, the other, the object, we must become animal. Again the paradox; we are inexorably drawn to or by *jouissance* as a means of catharsis and yet to achieve it, we must experience that which we fear most.

³ Maccormack, P. 2011 *Artwork 9* http://headgallery.org/spinal_spinal.html

The ecstatic body, or as Maccormack (2011) asserts, 'ecstatic being', and specifically Teresa, both infect and affect. A contradictory, enigmatic struggle to confirm one's self that requires a loss of self and a loss of external awareness, this body is suspended, mesmerised, hypnotised and paralyzed, experiencing but unaware, dying a minor death and yet profoundly rooted in its corporeality.

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