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Cold Sun • Hot Planet:

Solarity's Aesthetic, Planetary Perspective

William Blake asked the tiger: 'In what distant deeps or skies burned the fire of thine eyes?' What struck him this way was the cruel pressure, at the limits of possibility, the tiger's immense power of consumption of life. In the general effervescence of life, the tiger is a point of extreme incandescence. And this incandescence did in fact burn first in the remote depths of the sky, in the sun's consumption . . .

—Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy. Volume 1 Consumption* (1991)

This quote from Georges Bataille summarizes a nexus of thinking about the general economy of the sun; how its energies compel planetary life with a need to consume, accumulate, and expend surplus energy in ways that ensure its movement from one being to another and through consciousness itself. But, for Bataille, this energy, and our consciousness of it, is rife with ambivalent reversals that trouble ontological distinctions. For the sun's energies chain human beings to our mortality, animality, and importantly for this article, *planetaryity*. The sun's reversals—its nourishment of beings and its violent expenditure of them in what Bataille calls its “depredations of depredators”—cannot be understood through the physics of energy exchange, nor even its politics

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per se (Bataille 1991: 34). Rather, its ambivalent movement perturbs these systems of knowledge altogether.

Bataille's account of solarly from his early essays in the nineteen-twenties and thirties to his three-volume speculative theory of economy in *The Accursed Share* (1946–49) ventures through figurations of the pain of accumulation, the sadism of expenditure, and the catastrophic expulsions of the earth as these are all envisioned from the sun's perspective in the depths of the sky. In short, solarly is a lens by which to see the movement of the sun through planetary beings in processes of growth, consumption, death, and decay. In the epigraph with which I open, solarly is mirrored as a hunger that burns in the tiger's eyes and a cruel pressure that invests the tiger with the energy to consume. In this vein, solarly is a potential energy that passes through planetary life: it compels the tiger to hunt its prey, but it will also push through the tiger's body, driving it towards its own death, to rot into the earth and return to the raging heat of competition for the sun's nourishment once again.

The tiger is but one of many allegories by which Bataille articulates human solarly as a fundamental desire to consume and its capacity for destructive energy expenditure. Solarly, it seems, is the same no matter what being it occupies: it drives all beings to expand to the point of their own death, a passage and absorption into other beings or material states. In this sense, solarly is a fantasy of the death of capitalism and an end to its myth of self-expansion. Solar energy produces a self-expending drive that condemns the bourgeois capitalist economy to disburse itself into base matter. Most importantly, Bataille pursues this fantasy by situating capitalist subjects and relations in painful struggle with their planetarity, the elemental forces of cold and heat, ice and fire, blinding light and nocturnal depths that disfigure the human body.

In what follows, I address Bataille's conjoining of solarly and planetarity with an attentiveness to the plenitude of his writing and its painful effects. Thinking solarly's potentials alongside mass extinction—the end of lives and the possible end of life itself—is dreadful. It calls forth violently contradictory reactions at the limit and possibility of the human, as well as the limit and possibility of the social, the collective, the Other more broadly, and others in particular. While it is tempting to think solarly as the energetic condition for a redistribution of being, subjectivity, and collectivity, this cannot take place without a struggle with the frightening potential of contemporary capitalism and its resourcing of life as energy *as the very form solarly might take*. I recuperate Bataille's solarly, then, in order to articulate the risk

that solarly might mutate with the petrocultural regimes from which it emerges and become a new capitalist energy regime that accelerates or otherwise exacerbates our current course toward planetary destruction. The question I would invite us to consider in this reconsideration of Bataille's planetary aesthetics is, can we expend the sadism implicit in capitalism's anticipation of the future to take hold of solarly otherwise?

Solar Phantasms: Writing Capitalism at the Boiling Point

In *The Accursed Share*, Bataille considers the willful destruction of property in the Northwest Coastal First Nations' practice of the potlatch and of Aztec human sacrifice to the sun as complex forms of energy expenditure and key instances of solarly in operation (1991). In his analysis of this text, Jean Baudrillard makes the important point that Bataille figures Aztec solarly as a generous economy that derives from the knowledge that the sun *gives nothing*: "The unilateral gift does not exist . . . it is necessary to nourish it continually with human blood in order that it shine" (Baudrillard 1998: 193). Solarly is not a pure form of generosity, then, but rather the economic extension of the sun's insatiable demand for life. This is why Bataille teases out a bi-directional relation from the concept of consumption: it is at once the excess energy that must be expended and the excessive desire to consume in order to generate that excess energy. The incandescence of the sun gives generously but equally burns within living organisms as a demand to be fulfilled, like the predatory hunger in the tiger's eyes.

In this way, Bataille's account of solarly mirrors the logic of capitalism with its implicit demand for sacrifice. His apparent celebration of "solar societies" must therefore be carefully read in terms of how his language enacts the double meaning of consumption: it both posits the restrictions of capitalism and drives against them. Thus, for Baudrillard, the sun's expenditure of energy is not implicitly generous; it is not the site of solarly. Rather solarly shines through Bataille's writing as it positions a "*subject of knowledge always at the boiling point*" (194, emphasis mine). His dazzling visions evoke mythic forces and figures that he sets against disciplinary formulations of objective knowledge, such as Marxism, anthropology, political economy, and scientific method. It is not the sun, but Bataille's mythologization of it in the face of restricted economies of knowledge that is the fulcrum of expenditure.

Bataille recuperates the generosity of solarly through his mythic assertions and their capacity to draw out unthought subject positions. His invented archaic language is directed to the outpouring of dynamic elements

into words that disfigure the subject and knowledge itself, through their narrative and graphic unfolding as violent interception and continuous overflow. Bataille's deployment of solarità as a mythic agent is therefore better understood as an operation of deconstruction, not just of words or concepts, but of entire systems of knowledge. This operation is what philosopher Rodolphe Gasché calls Bataille's phantasmology: his writing and positioning of myth in such a way as to set it against the repressive scaffolding of science and philosophy (2012). Phantasmology is an anti-science: it raises mythic phantasms such as vital elements, sense-effects, archaic forces, and unintelligible narrative excesses that have been suppressed and expelled in order to achieve the transparency of scientific logic. Bataille's writing sets phantasms against the logic of science and philosophy to "shatter their peace" and outstrip their intelligibility (111).

By unleashing phantasms as ontological forces in his writing, Bataille anticipates the planetary thinking of political ecology. For example, his phantasmology informs Gayatri Spivak's formulation of planetarity as the Urform of alterity; a primary figuration of the disfiguring force of the other (Spivak 2003: 71). Planetarity, she suggests, makes an uncanny appearance that is disjoined from identifications with globalization. To think ourselves as planetary, rather than as global or worldly is to radicalize alterity itself (one's own and others') in ways that are not derived from a global imaginary still entrenched in a colonizing framework. Despite the command of globalization to schematize the imagination, Spivak argues, humans tend toward an alterity, a transcendental figure whether nature, mother, or god, that is attributed with an original animating force. Yet this original force always risks being reabsorbed by the logic of globalization. Planetarity is therefore a continuously receding domain, never bound to the strictures of the figure. It is both a radical figure of alterity in contrast to "nature", but also an insistent operation of disfiguration by which the planet and planet-thought preserves its zone of irreducibility within the dominance of globalization. Planetarity acts at once as a force, an embodied position, and a philosophical disposition toward alterity.

In a similar vein, Bruno Latour, Isabel Stengers and Donna Haraway all introduce a panoply of mythological, classical, or fictional figures into their philosophies of planetary modes of existence as remedy to the epistemes of the modern and to channel the uncanny quality that inflects the intrusive appearance of a planetary reality (Latour 2004; Stengers 2015; Haraway 2016). Each invokes the name Gaia to nominate a mythic being that governs these planetary intrusions. This approach is not to designate a truth (with sci-

entific authority) but is rather a theoretical praxis: a mode and language that is sensitized to planetary forces, and which confers upon us humans the power to experience and think the planet in consonance with its indifference to us. Solarity puts us at the boiling point of planetary thinking. As it threatens to overflow our economy and its correlated knowledge systems, solarity calls us to remember the planet's indifference to us, to that global economy and its forms of knowledge. Its indifference is precisely its generosity.

A Paradoxical Elemental Intimacy with the *Jesuve*

By reading Bataille's solarity next to contemporary theorizations of planetarity (the mythic earth as primary alterity), it becomes possible to discover in solarity the disorganizing force that perturbs the limits of economy and science, and unseat them from their authority over the ebullience of life. But this cannot occur without a radical disfiguration of the subject itself, one that effects a becoming-planetary as its energies deflagrate the subject of knowledge. Here is where solarity is channeled through the aesthetic effects of the phantasm. Solarity becomes an encompassing term for the many earthly and cosmic elements that prey on Bataille's subjects, pressuring them and then pulling them apart in the paradoxical movement between the accumulation of energy and its total expenditure unto infinity.

It is remarkable that Bataille embraces the sun by figuring it as an agent of bodily torment. (This should alert us that solarity is a deeply ambivalent subject matter, meant to be handled with care and not abstracted and theorized as energy culture, or worse, appropriated towards a total and destructive capitalist command of subjectivity). Bataille's early formulation of solarity in the late nineteen-twenties, "The Solar Anus," is a painful exercise in writing his own phallocratic body into desire and death, across the loneliness of ontological solitude (1985: 5–9). The essay moves between his own intimacy with a lover (an eighteen year old white bourgeois girl), and the violent elemental dynamics between the sun and the earth. He and his lover, sun and earth, are bound together in a paradoxical elemental intimacy. They become interpenetrated but also propelled apart into endless isolation and eventually complete annihilation through a form of planetary coitus that cycles across life and death in perpetuity. In other words, the resituating of sexual communion through solarity destines his body and his lover's into a staging of the cosmic rancor between the shadowy depths and energies of the earth (which he figures as specifically anal) and the unyielding exposure of the sun (which he figures as phallic).

Bataille rewrites the dynamics of heteronormative penetrative sex alongside earthly dynamics, like the movement of the tides, sea lapping against the sand, the rotations of the earth and the moon. He shows how these terrestrial rhythms begin to accumulate the energies of planetary elements and overflow under the influence of the sun; how the bodies begin to generate excesses that drive the lovers into deeper depths of the night, specifically, a deathlike sleep from which he awakens as a corpse-like figure. His reawakening is accompanied by an increasingly violent need to violate bodily and topographic boundaries. From the night, and the lovers' sleep of ontological solitude, the sun awakens him to a different, unthinkable intimacy: a drive to sadistically and with accelerating repetition penetrate his lover's anus to the point of mutual annihilation (7–8). The sun is the dynamic force that drives his body into desire and expenditure—as blood-filled erection and ejaculation—and activates a repetition compulsion. The sun does not, will not, and cannot stop: it drives his body's re-emergence as a corpse that continues to desire and expend. The lovers' bodies have intermingled and been transposed into a solarized planet, figured as the fluidity of the earth's rot, soil, and lava spewed from volcanoes. The earth's cracked topography thus becomes the sun's anus: the site of its violent ejection of contents. The sun's generosity is therefore not pure abstract light or heat, but is rather countermanded by the earth's profane and hidden decay. Bataille refuses to think phallic solarly without its carnal opposite, the anal night, which serves to produce a totality of cancelation: the “solar annulus” by which his lover's anus, the earth's anality, and the drive to annihilation are bound up in his writing of the sun.

In this early essay, Bataille initially figures solarly as phallic, sadistic, and predatory. But he cannot write solarly without its opposite: the earth, the (female) anus, the fluidity (blood) with which the earth is replete and which it expels as lava from its volcanic topography. In “The Solar Anus,” the sun's energy essentially de-phallicizes the male lover as it “analizes” the female lover. Both bodies are violently stripped of their procreative coding and are recast in the sun's violent exchange with the earth. Ultimately, Bataille gives a name to this excessively phallic but paradoxically de-phallicized (annulled) male figure, which he elaborates in subsequent essays: the *Jesuve*. The neologism combines the words “Je suis,” “Jésus,” and “Vésuve” (Vesuvius), to articulate the terms by which solarly intervenes on male subjectivity and its sacred underpinnings in Christian theology. Bataille pollutes the image of the singular, bleeding Jesus on the cross (God as man), who is sacrificed and whose blood is expended to cleanse the world's sin. The

Jesuve is the obscene and godless synthesis of the sun and the earth, a profane Jesus, at once phallic and anal. It is a subject replete with blood that it seeks to expend violently, whose face is hideously red, obscene, and volcanic, and whose words are excrement. Bataille writes, “I am not afraid to affirm that my face is a scandal and that my passions are expressed only by the JESUVE . . . the filthy parody of the torrid and blinding sun” (8–9).

As a parodic image of the sun, the Jesuve derives its power from its own operations of self-expenditure/self-cancellation/self-sacrifice. Solarity is its disfiguring force, a dynamic energy that mutates the human body and its meaning. The sun offers the capacity for heterological readings of the intertwining of the human body, consciousness, and earthly form. In so doing, it becomes possible to position the Jesuve as a transitive energy by which to write solarly and revolutionary energy together as co-extant planetary forces that well up in the human body and living things more broadly conceived. Thus, Bataille recuperates the sun as a dazzling force that rises up *from below*, blazing through the body and bursting through the top of the skull. The sun possesses the body and absorbs it into an anal/annulling, blind/blinding pineal eye. Now, blindness and vision appear together as the sun’s maddening and cancelling effect. Blind sight becomes the operative force and condition of visuality itself at the origin of planetary consciousness.

Cold Sun, Blind Sight

Bataille’s writing discovers in solarly a mythological vision that stands as the antithesis of Enlightenment philosophy. In this regard, Bataille casts science and philosophy in the same cold light of the sun in a method he calls heterology, or “the science of the heterogeneous,” (1985: 97). He imagines a solar light that would counter the presumed objectivity of the Enlightenment tradition. In order to do so, Bataille drew from Friedrich Schelling’s concept of the *katabole* in his *Philosophy of Mythology* (2012). As Rodolphe Gasché explains, the *katabole* is a tripartite concept that means: (1) to cast down, to throw down, to push down; (2) to originate, to ground, to begin; (3) to throw away, to cast away from oneself (60). It is at once an action, an actant that is cast out from the subject, and a founding concept. Taken together, the *katabole* encompasses both the act of expulsion and the excess that is expelled.

Bataille had a special interest in the *katabole*, seeing in it the potential for a reversal of scientific transparency and a recuperation of solarly as a light from below. Under the influence of this concept, he deploys the mythological images of the solar anus, the Jesuve, the pineal eye, and others, not to cele-

brate solar light, but rather to cast solarity itself into a carnal planetary morass from which it could recover and discover anew its own disavowed mythology. For Bataille, science had cast away not just the mythological but also the philosophical. It had ruthlessly divided consciousness in order to pursue a pure transparency. He thus wages his critique in the form of a mythological representation whose operation would present to science what it had violently expelled (94). Solarity appears as the antithesis of the illumination of consciousness, a reversal of the katabolic movement of the expulsion of myth through the application of the sun's destructuring effects on the subject and on consciousness itself. Thus, when solarity is figured in and by the mythological image, it returns to scientific discourse as a profane stranger that goes unrecognized by the consciousness that cast it out and disfigured it by expelling it in the first place. Upon its return to consciousness, the mythological image katabolizes the concept from which it was violently separated. It awakens phantasms within the very language of the concept.

The phantasm relates to the absolute concept as an elemental phenomenon. As Gasché (2012: 157) points out, Bataille's phantasms are *cold* and even have an icy effect on the topography of the mind. We might consider this passage from his essay "The Pineal Eye": "For if the affective violence of human intelligence is projected like a specter across the deserted night of the absolute or of science, it does not follow that this specter has nothing in common with the night in which its brilliance becomes glacial," (Bataille 1985: 81). It is for this reason Gasché (2012: 157) characterizes the violence of Bataille's mythological images and their heterogeneous effects as "glaçant," a quality that suggests at once the frozen environment of origin from which the phantasm emerges, an icy ghost that arises from the shadow cast by the absolutism of science, but also an image that mirrors (like *glace* or ice) the process of philosophical illumination as a sharply cold analytical mode.

In order to expose, mirror, and reverse the implicit violence of science and philosophy, Bataille mimics the method and disposition of objective authority. "The Pineal Eye" reenacts Hegel's primal scene at the origin of abstraction, when the Absolute Idea illuminates and claims images that fly up from the nocturnal pit of consciousness. In Hegel's (1983: 87) *Philosophy of Mind*, the nocturnal pit is an infinite world of images stored in the treasury of the Spirit, in the night of the human being. The nocturnal pit is a kind of automated and arbitrary geyser of sorts, shooting out images from its store in an archaic, nonsensical form. The Absolute Idea slumbers here, but begins to emerge through a "recollection" of the image, a procedure of illu-

mination, appropriation, and refinement of the image that it claims from its archaic origin in the night. The Absolute Idea imagines itself into being through its claiming of the image. It appears out of its own sign-making fantasy, in which the illumination of the image in the night of being is the fundamental operation of abstraction.

Bataille reads Hegel's origin of consciousness as fundamentally *appropriative*, which he counters with a reverse operation: philosophy as expenditure. His heterology entails the individual subject of consciousness, expelling its contents *as its form of gratification and expansion*. Moreover, those unassimilable elements—the excreted phantasms—would be constituent actants of the very sociality with which Bataille counteracts the abstractions of science and philosophy. In this way, Bataille reverses Hegel's procedure of abstraction by casting an incandescent illumination into the nocturnal pit of the imagination, leaning further into the depths of consciousness to draw out and unleash its phantasms. Again, Bataille situates illumination as coming from the depths. This is a paradoxical light that returns from the nocturnal pit to cast itself on absolute concepts and reveal the phantasms that cling to them like cold residues. Solarity is this very excessive illumination: an elemental condition by which the phantasm freezes and sticks to the absolute concept and refuses to free itself. Gasché (2012: 157) explains: “Bataille does not oppose the warmth of affect and violence to the coldness of the abstract and the Absolute. On the contrary, what irrupts within it is a frost even icier than the coldness of understanding and reason. The frost of this affective violence congeals the coldness of reason.”

Bataille releases elemental disfigurements to intensify analytic rigor. The play of planetary forces on concepts restages disciplinarity itself as a sadistic force that shatters foundational concepts. The sun appears as a disfigurement of the faculty of judgment writ large. It is unimaginably cold, not only in the sense that it demands a particular sacrifice (and does not care who that particular is), but because its exposure of the planet is totalizing. It exposes universally but demands a splitting into infinite singularities. Further, it demands its sacrifice as the cyclical and perpetual donation of singularities. Its coldness is the predatory impulse of consciousness: it hunts from the depths, and possesses us to do its hunting for it. The torment of Bataille's heterology lies in this contradiction: that it imagines the coldness of the sun as a form of blindness to the pain of ontological solitude (the sacrifice, the accursed share), and positions this blindness as the pretense of economic exchange.

Hot Planet: Extreme Incandescence In the Light of Cold Facts

In an especially difficult section of “The Pineal Eye” subtitled “The Sacrifice of the Gibbon,” Bataille orchestrates another version of the violent exchange between the sun and the earth, this time with a dreamlike sequence featuring a group of nude men who torture a female gibbon and sacrifice her to the sun seemingly at the bidding of a perversely sexually aroused (white, bourgeois) Englishwoman. The group ties the gibbon to a stake—“trussed up like a chicken”—bury her alive in a hole in the earth leaving only her anus exposed (Bataille 1985: 85). Then they burn the skin of her protruding anus. She screams and her body convulses, seemingly for the gratification of the Englishwoman who trembles in synchrony with the gibbon’s agony. The words are painful to read. Taken together, the entire assemblage, a sacrificed primate, the profane ecstasy of the Englishwoman, and the somnambulistic men who carry out the sacrifice, constitutes for Bataille a vision of economy under the cold light of the sun as the “tender pact between belly and nature” (85). He even sets the stage for this passage with reference to the “solar significance” of the feeling of pride and triumph of “the man perceiving his own dejecta under the open sky” (85).

Bataille conjures phantasmatic and phantasmological solar societies. These societies are phantasms that serve as their own analytical force; the afterburn of a drive to know the world by violently territorializing it and driving the planet to mass extinction. In Bataille’s time, the nuclear bomb was the threat to be defused, but today nuclear energy has been accompanied and overtaken by the regime of global petroculture. The sacrifice of the gibbon might be thought as a precursor to the mass extinction of animals and other forms of life due to climate change. The planet is as hot as ever, not just in the earthly sense of overflowing volcanoes as Bataille writes, but now as a pervasive ecological condition: warming waters, air, wildfires.

We might therefore consider solarify as a contemporary planetary phenomenon: a disfiguring force that preys on us in and through the heat of the planet. In these terms, it is both the cause and effect of the petrocultural regime. It could very well mutate further as we transition to other forms of energy unless we understand, as Bataille does, that solarify is generated at the axis of the sun and the earth. It may be petroculture, with its unrelenting drive to yield the earth as an energy, that appears as the culmination of solarify, and not solar energy cultures at all. How else to explain the appearance of the Jesuve-like President of the United States, Donald Trump, whose very platform was a return to coal energy as a way of taking the reins in a global

economy dominated by oil? Or how to explain the unrelenting aggression animating inter-ontological relations (between people across borders, against animals and other species)? Can it even be called an ontological relation if the boundary between beings is so devastatingly violated that the heteronormative white man's expenditure is the most dominant planetary force? The rise of climate change and the growing consciousness of the entanglement of global politics and planetary cataclysms is a realization of Bataille's perverse and paradoxical elemental intimacy. It is as though Bataille's phantasmology has been accepted as the normative operation of life itself, as the privileged form of biopower, as a force that disciplines life by sadistically exerting itself against, expelling itself into and out of living things not only to their death but to their very extinction. Nevertheless, it is this operation that has overtaken the (non)relationship between humans and other living species, hypostatized as racial and gender difference, and dramatized by political exchange between nation states. The exposure and consciousness of life and lives has never been colder, and the planet has never been hotter.

Yet it is here that we must reflect on Bataille's aesthetic maneuver: his disfigurements burn out the figure, and they reveal that the figure was always destined by the depths in which the sun burns. If we took hold of our solar-ity, as Bataille invites us to, and we were to look coldly at our economy, its epistemic underpinnings, and its implicit demands for sacrifice, what would we find? What would it mean for us to come to terms with the lens of our solar-ity today? Would the energetic underpinnings of the global economy seem more real or more fantastical? More torturous or more factual? Further, what would it mean to embrace the lens of solar-ity, rather than blindly let it (continue to) power our culture and our future? For inasmuch as Bataille forces us to dwell with the pain of sacrifice it is precisely because of his interest that such a figurative maneuver provokes deep reflexes—revulsion surely—but also, as Allen Stoekl suggests, the recoil of transgression is the unexpected site of ethics (Stoekl 2007: 252–282). The phantasms that animate Bataille's writing cannot but be seen as despicable, once they are seen. The Jesuve, the lovers, the Englishwoman, the priest, and all the figures that populate Bataille's essays derive their solar-ity from the sheer misery of degradation and torture they exert. Indeed, their pleasures are precisely the fulfillment of their own excremental mode. Bataille binds these phantasms to their imperial, bourgeois, white, and normative absolutes so that we locate their origin in the appropriative procedures of concept formation in the Enlightenment tradition. Might we, then, accept the challenge Bataille presents to us and take hold of solar-ity by expending it?

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