

Mike Barrett

21I .031

Professor Scribner

May 10, 2003

Surrealism in The Story of the Eye

Georges Bataille's The Story of the Eye tells the story of two lovers who explore the sensuality and limits of sex and violence. This Surrealist novel addresses issues of extreme sex and violence not usually examined by society, attacks the notion of the individual, and works outside of the normal sense of consciousness found in linear narratives.

On the surface The Story of the Eye is a pornographic novel with graphic descriptions of blasphemous, disgusting, and deviant sexual acts. However the misclassification of this work of surrealist erotica as pornography is misleading and dismissive; the story goes far beyond the sexual deviance of the main characters. As a medium, Bataille uses the sexual relationship between the main characters as a canvas on which he frames the story, using it to express the violence of life through their sexual experiences. Simone and the narrator routinely participate in socially unacceptable sexual practices such as frequently urinating on each other, public sex, and penetrating just about every orifice. Bataille spends a good portion of the novel describing these intimate encounters, which happen more and more as the story progresses. His language is often direct and frank, giving clear and vivid descriptions of the placement of bodies, where different fluids strike on the body, and the sexual acts themselves. However, the initial shock of the urination fetish and sexual abandon of the two quickly wears off.

Even within the scope of the novel, the reader become desensitized to those aspects of their relationship due to the frankness with which Bataille describes them, and the frequency of the acts within the narrative.

This allows Bataille to explore further Surrealist themes of violence and death. Surrealist artists were interested in these because the manifestations of violence in the world are reflections of unconscious desires and motivations. Bataille is not merely trying to shock the reader with graphic depictions of sex; he is interested in the effects of those acts on the world and the characters' surroundings. The narrator says that the dirty nature of sex is unimportant compared to the profanation of purity as the violence of the act spills outward. (Bataille 48, 49) The bloody almost-decapitation of a cyclist hit with a speeding car, a matador gored during a bullfight, multiple violent rapes, and the cold-blooded murder of a priest are other instances of extreme violence that captivate Simone and the narrator. The violence in the novel is linked with sexual ecstasy and is thus moved away from its horrible nature and elevated instead. The glorification of violence, manifested in sexual energy, death, and physical violence, is taboo in civil society. However, at least on a subconscious level, everyone thinks about and often participates in these things, and Surrealists were interested in exposing this fact.

Another Surrealist theme involves how the subconscious affects the conscious mind. Bataille explores this by creating dream-like passages where the characters' motivations become unclear, and their reactions to events do not follow logically or directly from reality. For example, during the first visit to Marcelle's asylum, the stormy weather and the sheet flapping in the wind unsettle Simone and the narrator to the point where they lose rational control over their actions. Later, when confronted with an

unknown naked woman, the narrator moves towards her with the intent to shoot, although he does not have any rational explanation for why he has a need to kill her. (Bataille 24-27) Bataille also mirrors the violence of their actions in nature and the elements. During the first rape of Marcelle, a squall roars in off the sea, challenged only by the writhing violence on the cliff-top, as the three bodies continue to ravage each other, in seeming defiance and indifference to the storm. (Bataille, 7-9) The writing glorifies the extreme acts of sex and violence, showing how the narrator revels in his deviance. For example, when Marcelle's screams after the teenage orgy begin to attract the neighbors, the narrator flings open the doors to the room, while Simone is stretched out lewdly amongst the blood, urine, and broken glass. (Bataille 16)

Surrealist art was also concerned with attacking individual personal identity, in order to effect a social change starting from the level of the individual. Throughout the novel, Bataille uses repeated images of eggs, eyes, blood, urine, and the sun. He uses the character's obsession with eggs and eyes to shift perspectives and blur the lines between the characters. The other symbols work to augment the ideas of vision and the image of the eye, as throughout the novel they are related to the characters and their actions. The images are found also in nature, such as the unreal Spanish sunlight that watches and sees every act of public lewdness as Simone and the narrator have intercourse on the streets of Seville. (Bataille 59, 67) At the bullfight, just as Simone slips the bull's eye-like testicle into her vagina, the matador's eye is gorged by a different bull; this links Simone and the bullfighter, along with all the violence of his death and the sexual charge of the bullfight itself. (Bataille 64) Simone and the narrator have almost identical desires and motivations, as seen when they both inexplicably remove their clothes at the asylum, and

the similarity with which they react to events, such as the urine-stained sheet in Marcelle's window. (Bataille 24, 26) Their dialogs about eggs and eyes, and the fetish with eggs in the toilet during Simone's illness link Simone and the narrator to each other and the various eye-like images throughout the novel. (Bataille 36- 38) After the murder of the priest, the blurring of characters is at its most intense as the priest's removed eye is used as a sexual object. The eye rolls over Simone's naked body, rolls onto the corpse of the priest, and is rolled between the naked bodies of the two main characters by Sir Edmond as they have sex, thus linking all of them in the violence of sex and death. However the culminating moment is when the eyeball is looking out from Simone's urine and cum covered vagina. The priest's eye becomes Marcelle's, looking out from Simone, as red sunlight streams in from the windows, shining on the utter abandon and wantonness of the scene. (Bataille 83, 84)

The Story of the Eye blurs personal identity, moves through dream-like states, and directly addresses issues of sex and violence in society. Bataille uses these themes to develop a Surrealist novel that challenges and addresses issues of the subconscious, hidden desires, and the latent violence that lies underneath every motivation.

Works Cited

Bataille, Georges. The Story of the Eye. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1987.

MIT OpenCourseWare
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

21G.031J / 4.608J Topics in the Avant-Garde in Literature and Cinema
Spring 2003

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.