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## Material excess and aesthetic transmutation<sup>1</sup>

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### \*1. Introduction

"Nothing in Excess," reads the maxim on the walls of Apollo's temple at Delphi. Dionysus, on the contrary, is related to every kind of excess: mystic in the religious, orgiastic in the sexual, ecstatic in its ritual dances, euphoric and inebriated in the Bacchanals. Dionysus was hence patron of wine and of highly impassioned arts like song, drama and poetry.<sup>2</sup> His symbolic presence summons a sense of freedom, fertility, generosity and ease.

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche claimed that the combination of Dionysian vs. Apollonian forces beget art and enable harmony in life. Apollonian properties in art, such as unity, harmony, symmetry, regularity and order, have been emphasized by traditional aesthetics, while the excessive, Dionysiac side has remained relatively overlooked.<sup>3</sup> Excess, however, is unsurpassed in the intricate labor of Chartres stained glass windows, in Arcimboldo's imagination, in the plethora of forms at the Alhambra, in the intensity of feelings in a sonata or a sonnet, in the profuseness of images in Hiëronymus Bosch's paintings among others. What is impressive in Pharaonic, Gothic, Islamic, Baroque, Rococo, Romantic and Expressionist art is partly due to their excess in scale, in aggregation, in vigor, in depth or in fervor.

The connection between excess and the aesthetic is deep-rooted and can be viewed from two standpoints: the aesthetics of excess through artistic, natural and quotidian objects, and the aesthetic itself as an excess, which will be the main focus of this paper. My interest here is to explore not only this aesthetics of excess but its counterpart, the excess of the

aesthetic, by examining the social processes whereby the aesthetic is regarded as a fundamental manifestation of excess through a variety of concretizations among radically dissimilar cultures.

There are various ways of coping with material excess: accumulation, destruction, dissipation and distribution.<sup>4</sup> The most reasonable, ethical manner of dealing with excedents in a context of social inequality is obviously distribution. Anthropologists, however, have hardly found significant samples of distribution societies in western or non-western cultures, whereas cases of the other three forms of dealing with excess are prevalent.<sup>5</sup> The primary questions with which this paper is concerned are: why is the phenomenon of the dissipation of excess, rather than its distribution, so generalized even among quite distinct cultures? Why does the aesthetic dimension often appear so closely related to these processes of dissipation? For the purpose of elucidating such participation, we will explore the relation between the aesthetic and excess through a dual itinerary: tracing the aesthetic in rituals and customs related to the expenditure of excess in non-western cultures and tracing excess in what is considered aesthetic through both instances, artistic and quotidian, in western cultures. By comparing both perspectives, we will find related beliefs, such as the Maori idea of *hau* and the Western sense of *aura* (as conceived by Walter Benjamin), as well as opposing usage of and attitudes toward each of them. The definition of excess and of what is socially acceptable in relation to property and accumulation of excedents varies significantly from one culture to another, yet the role of the aesthetic in regards to material excess seems to be universal. This role, I will contend, is related to a process of symbolic transmutation that underlies the dissipation of excess.

## 2. Terminological considerations

### 2.1 On material excess

Three authors have explicitly deal with the idea of material excess: Thorstein Veblen, Marcel Mauss and Georges Bataille. They all mention the aesthetic but none of them,

unfortunately, deals with it in particular. It was Bataille, in *The Accursed Share*, who worked more extensively on the idea of excess to the degree of proposing a Copernican revolution of economy based on it. Counter to the dominant paradigms in economics, Bataille maintained that both nature and society obey a pattern of excess rather than scantiness and limited resources. He stated that a living organism receives much more energy than it needs, and that this excess of energy is not only inevitable but has to be dispersed else it becomes destructive turning against the organism.<sup>6</sup> The excess of sperm for a single ovum (120 to 600 million), the excess of ova deposited by many species, the excess of female *jouissance* that Lacan had difficulty understanding,<sup>7</sup> all illustrate this tendency to dissipation and exuberance. Leave a garden untended and it will soon overflow and fill every gap. For Bataille, this century's World Wars were the catastrophic consequence of industrial excess that was not voluntarily spent when required. I will not attempt a thorough analysis of this very controversial thesis proposed by Bataille, also incomplete in its argumentation and theoretical development. I will only examine his heretic view on the economy of excess in relation to the aesthetic within the perspective of Mauss' study of preliterate societies which, in fact, influenced Bataille's own conceptions.

#### \*2.2 On necessity

Two senses of the term "necessity" must be outlined: the logical sense as opposed to contingency, and the functional sense as opposed to superfluity. Although both senses meet at the end, this distinction is worth maintaining at the outset. Adam Smith defined the latter in the social sense as what the community considers indecent for its members to lack. Bataille goes from the logical to the functional sense when he illustrates the economy of excess as the non-contingent process whereby the sun necessarily produces a surplus of energy far beyond the functional needs of the planetary system. Superfluity is a relative value according, for instance, to an anthropocentric view that measures its usefulness for a specific purpose. We will attempt to describe how the aesthetic mediates this shift from logical to

functional necessity by being both non-contingent, as attested by its occurrence in all cultures, and functional, as a social practice intimately involved with the dissipation of excedents.

### \*2.3 On the aesthetic

Mainstream aestheticians have primarily centered their analyses around specific objects (artworks) and qualified them as worthy of aesthetic appreciation according to particular standards, thus relatively disregarding the aesthetic as a contextualized, multifarious social practice. Anthropologists, on the other hand, have introduced us to social practices in other cultures but, on this particular issue, they have borrowed from traditional aestheticians the concept of the aesthetic referred particularly to specific objects (quilts, ceramics, masks). Instead of reducing the aesthetic to a quality of certain objects, a wider conception is needed to comprehend its social meaning and connection to material and symbolic production. The concept of the aesthetic applied here encompasses events, spaces, interactions or objects that specifically appeal to the senses, generate disinterested appreciation, are sensitively arousing and open to judgments based on taste.<sup>8</sup>

### \*3. The beauty of exuberance; aesthetics of excess

*Exuberance is beauty*

William Blake<sup>9</sup>

The idea of excess precisely as aesthetic appears to contradict what most art theory has alleged, as it goes against the sense of economy of means and indulges in superfluity, immoderation, profusion and redundancy. What is undeniable, however, is that there is an aesthetic of excess. No one can remain aesthetically indifferent towards various manifestations of excess, whether natural or manufactured: lush vegetation, the abundance of stalactites and stalagmites at Mammoth and Postojna caves, the colossal scale of the Hypostyle Hall of the Karnak temple, the overwhelming power of water at Niagara Falls, the

monumental extension of the Great Wall of China or the glare and opulence of the Mirror Hall at the Palace of Versailles. The utmost prototype of excess, taken to sublime proportions, is the Hall of Justice at the Palace of the Nasrids in the Alhambra, utterly excessive in ornamentation.

That excess is aesthetic does not mean that the contrary--frugality, decorum or simplicity--cannot be aesthetic. Historically, art appears to be a pendulum that oscillates between excess and restraint. On whatever side it happens to be, this pendulum is always moving in reference to excess, whether towards or against it. Gothic art, Baroque and Rococo, Mannerism and Romanticism are undeniably excessive in some way or another: in form, in emotion, in scale, in proportion or in decoration. Art has developed dialectically from the disembodied images of Medieval painting to the exuberantly embodied characters depicted during the Renaissance, particularly by Leonardo, Raphael and Michelangelo and later by the sensualism of Rubens. The perfect proportions of the human body and the sense of balance were further exaggerated in the Mannerist expression of Parmigianino, Fiorentino, Goujon, El Greco and Goltzius. The formal severity and contained emotions of Jean Louis David's paintings were opened into Romanticist passion by Delacroix and Guericault.

Formal excesses that flourished in Art Nouveau were completely eliminated by Bauhaus and Functionalism through an almost puritanical restraint which, in turn, has been reversed to the intentional anachronisms, chromatics, ornamentation and humorous allusions of Postmodernism. Minimalism, Geometrism, Concretism, Suprematism and Neoplasticism display formal control towards minimal, compact patterns (Malevich's *White Square on White Background* could hardly go further in formal and chromatic austerity). Yet, on the other side of the pendulum, we simultaneously have the excess of color and emotions of Expressionism, the intense cromatism of Fauvism, the oneiric hyperboles of Surrealism and the lucid irrationalism of Dada.

In contemporary art, illustrations of excess are equally eloquent. We have the exaggerated scale in Christo's earthworks, Pop art's overstatements on mass culture (Lichtenstein's enlargements, Oldenburg's huge inflatable artifacts, Warhol's alliterations and excessive color, Jeff Koons' gigantic photos), as well as the enthrallment with excess in the viscerality of Punk, Body and Performance art.<sup>10</sup>

Regardless of the categories involved (beauty, ugliness, magnificence or the grotesque) excess is linked to the aesthetic in that it captures attention, engages our sensibility and seizes our imagination not only through art but in everyday life. Excessively long fingernails, extremely narrow waists, voluminous breasts and amazingly high heels are exhibited as aesthetic attributes of femininity. An excess of food, as when a whole turkey is laid on Americans' Thanksgiving or Christmas dinner table, is appreciated as an aesthetic expression of bountifulness. Excess of speed at roller-coasters and car races, of sound and volume at discotheques, of sun, sand and sea at the beach are enjoyed by many as aesthetically pleasing. Thousands of crashed cars, of buildings on fire and endless explosions repeatedly represented in the movies and on television are relished by the public as a spectacular exhibition and destruction of excess. The excess of space in vast lobbies and halls, the excessive physical effort displayed by athletes, the exaggerated apparels presented in fashion shows, drag queen contests and carnivals are all appraised in terms of their aesthetic effects. Certain objects such as porcelain figures, plush animals, souvenirs and posters are not only displayed for an ornamental purpose but to exhibit some degree of excess even among economically deprived urban classes, as are artworks among more affluent classes. Gifts are typical symbols of excess: jewels are gleaming, perfumes are pleasant, liquor is luscious, bouquets are lovely, chocolates delicious and bonsai cute; none are necessary, all are excessive and each is aesthetic.<sup>11</sup> We may react with pleasure or displeasure to the excessive, but we can never remain indifferent to it. Excess is never aesthetically neutral.

#### \*4. Phylogenetic roots of the aesthetic

We examined above the aesthetics of excess through art, nature and everyday life in western societies. We will now consider the other side of this relation, the aesthetic itself as an excess. Bataille explores how excedents are consumed in various kinds of societies such as the Aztec sacrificial theocracy, Moslem militarist and Lamaist monastic organizations. His work on this subject was inspired, as he acknowledges, by Mauss' investigation on the Tlingit and Häida communities, particularly their *potlatch* ceremony which is a competitive dissipation of excedents for generating prestige and stabilizing the community. Based upon Malinowski's discoveries on the inhabitants of the Trobriand islands and the ritual of the *kula* that regulated the circulation of gifts,<sup>12</sup> Mauss found a variety of gift exchange customs among groups in different parts of the world that were of equal compulsory reciprocity.<sup>13</sup> He states that the *potlatch*, sometimes accompanying special occasions such as a wedding, a circumcision, birth, sickness, or a daughter's arrival at puberty, involves not only giving away precious objects but the dilapidation of goods by throwing copper artifacts to the sea, burning lard, demolishing canoes and setting fire to the chief's house or to an entire village.

The aim of these ceremonies is to overwhelm and impress the rival group for the sake of achieving honor and, in the Maori case, generating the force of *mana*, the magical, religious or spiritual force in Maori religion. This ceremony was named by the Chinook term *potlatch* meaning "to feed" or "to consume."<sup>14</sup> As Mauss insisted, these exchange ceremonies are never voluntary, but compulsory in nature: there is an obligation to reciprocate with gifts of equal or greater value. *Potlatches* are events that may become almost legendary in the memory of the community, an achievement celebrated by all participants and subsequently related to the prestige of the host.<sup>15</sup>

What is interesting to note from our perspective is the aesthetic quality of these rituals. Accompanied by song, dance, food, speeches and performances, *potlatches* appeal to the senses and require a careful attention to form and protocol that captivate the members' imagination, sensuous delight and admiration. They are not mere squandering or destruction

of goods, as in the case of dumping, because they are always publicly exhibited, and thus become communicative or symbolic acts that must comply to a particular form emphasizing the message for its own sake, precisely what characterizes the poetic or aesthetic function of language for Roman Jakobson.<sup>16</sup> As the form displayed through artworks is a necessary condition to deem them artistic, the form or manner in which goods are presented, shared and dissipated in the *potlatch* is what conveys meaning and effectiveness to the act and deems it aesthetic.

The conscious aim intended by a *potlatch* is expressing gratitude to human or divine beings, conveying pleasure, inspiring respect and establishing a position within the community. Let us imagine two contending tribes, each trying to surpass the other, each offering greater quantities of goods, of better quality or more exceptional, brought from remoter places or made with greater talent and skill. The *potlatch*, then, is an aesthetic event in its appeal to the senses, in sensitively affecting the participants, in its being source for disinterested appreciation and open to judgments based on taste.

Mauss and Malinowski believed they found the origins of economy and of law, of religion and morality in the *kula* and *potlatch* patterns of circulation. I suggest that we might also seek therein the roots of the aesthetic. In preliterate societies, if one must give away most of what one possesses for the sake of balancing and preserving the community, this must at least be done with style and character, displayed before everyone, in a memorable event and dramatically surrounded by ritual. This public display marks the difference between mere destruction and aesthetic dissipation. As cave art of the Paleolithic period integrated magic, communication, technology, economy and the aesthetic, these ceremonies, although ephemeral, similarly combine various purposes: economic, legal, religious, aesthetic, social and political. The *potlatch*, moreover, accomplishes various communicative functions defined by Jakobson: expressive of status, conative in compulsory reciprocity, referential of material proficiency, phatic in maintaining balance and contact within the community, and aesthetic in complying to a particular form of realization that generates



sensitive appreciation. The circulation and expenditure of excedents, therefore, imply confidence in material exuberance and its foremost manner of display is, and has been, aesthetic.

\*5. Beyond materiality; the *hau* and the *aura* of things

Mauss began an inquiry on economy and ended with an inquiry on morality. He was concerned with understanding the code behind this obligatory reciprocity: "What rule of legality and self-interest, in societies of a backward or archaic type, compels the gift that has been received to be obligatorily reciprocated? What power resides in the object given that causes its recipient to pay it back?"<sup>17</sup> Remarkably, Mauss implies in the second question ("what power resides...") a partial answer to the first: It is the belief that there is a power within objects that acts upon people and forces them to reciprocate gifts. This power is the *hau* or spirit of objects, which retain part of the soul of their maker and can be destructive if not properly recognized and dealt with. The Maori people call *hau* this spirit that clings to an object when ownership changes: one must relate to this concrete presence in objects when one introduces them into one's home. Mauss explains that the *hau* also exists in personal property and in nature and it influences people's actions.<sup>18</sup>

From a contemporary point of view, the idea of the *hau* seems like mere childish superstition of primitive, uncivilized people. Yet, in our culture it is implicitly forbidden to give away to someone else a present we received, something like betraying the spirit of the person who has provided the gift. If the object were merely an object, this interdiction wouldn't stand. Moreover, we do not invest in an artwork unless we are sure it is genuine, even if we can't tell the difference between the original and a perfect replica or when the latter has greater aesthetic quality. Apparently, we also believe in something similar to a *hau* in things or "soul of their maker", at least in artworks.

It is not too farfetched to associate the Maori sense of *hau* with what Walter Benjamin called the "*aura*" in the work of art.<sup>19</sup> His assertion of the loss of *aura* in the age of

mechanical reproducibility may also explain the contemporary sense of loss of *hau* separating objects from subjects and becoming, as Marx argued, fetishes that turn against their producers in industrial production.<sup>20</sup> Industrially produced objects lack *hau*, which impedes the producers from recognizing themselves in their products and hinders consumers from perceiving a concrete human trace in them. Traditional hand made objects, on the other hand, are highly appreciated precisely because we believe they still possess and display *hau*. This belief in the *hau* or *aura* and its appeal has been detected and deliberately applied by the advertising industry that literally attempts to manufacture a personality for commodities of mass production and artificially inject publicized brands with a Western sense of *hau*.<sup>21</sup>

An additional dimension of Marcel Duchamp's conceptual work, particularly his *Fountain*, becomes significant from this perspective: it is an act of choosing an industrial, anonymous object, totally *aura*-less, and conferring upon it a kind of spirit or *hau* by signing it and declaring it a work of art. In this sense, the urinal chosen by Duchamp becomes unique and different from the thousands of identical others of the same series because only this one possesses the particular *hau* conferred upon it by the artist. For Duchamp, authorship became a matter of declaration rather than fabrication; a non-verbal performative speech act of nomination or conferral of the status of art upon an object.

Another case of contemporary Western *hau* production is the so-called "car art." Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, Robert Rauschenberg, and David Hockney, among others, have each decorated a BMW car, converting an already expensive piece of machinery into an even more expensive work of art. These vehicles must now be carefully packed and transported before ending up motionless on display in art exhibits worldwide. Between the car and the artwork, the difference is the *hau* of the artist who painted it. This spirit is what, in archaic societies, demands reciprocation, and in modern societies justifies a price unrelated to the amount of labor invested in or any benefit derived from the object. The amazingly high prices people were willing to pay for Marilyn Monroe's dress in a recent

auction, for example, is another illustration of Western attachment to the *hau* of objects.<sup>22</sup> By increasing their symbolic import, the *hau* or spirit of things adds to their aesthetic value.

\*6. The limits of excess and the law of cyclical dynamics

Mauss found among the communities of the American Northwest what he termed "total social phenomena" meaning:

[A]ll kinds of institutions are given expression at one and the same time—religious, juridical, and moral, which relate to both politics and the family; likewise economic ones, which suppose special forms of production and consumption, or rather of performing total services and of distribution. This is not to take into account the aesthetic phenomena to which these facts lead, and the contours of the phenomena that these institutions manifest.<sup>23</sup>

Up to here we have most of what Mauss can tell us concerning the aesthetic: hardly an allusion. Other anthropologists relevant to our point (Veblen, Sahlins and Bataille) prove no more enlightening. What does Mauss mean by saying that these facts lead to aesthetic phenomena? I will venture an answer.

These "total services of an agonistic type" are performed for the sake of producing *mana* or honor and prestige for the host. It is not clear, however, why or how destroying things of value--that have a soul or *hau*--can generate prestige or *mana*. If there is a power in things that compels reciprocity through gift exchange among archaic societies, why wouldn't this same power impel their preservation rather than their destruction? For instance, the power of time, of human labor, of information that force us to preserve historical documents seems to be contradicted by the practice of the *potlatch*. There must be another reason, in addition to *hau* or "spirit of things" or "soul of their maker" that can

explain the process of reciprocity and help us to understand how the destruction of useful objects produces prestige.

According to Mauss, certain ceremonies have to be performed because "to make a gift of something to someone is to make a present of some part of oneself ... To retain that thing would be dangerous and mortal..."<sup>24</sup> The reason for compulsory reciprocity lies, therefore, less in the *hau* or spirit of the thing retained, than in the act of retaining it. At issue here is the attitude towards retaining or giving and differentiates Western retentive societies from expulsive communities like the Häida and Tlingit. This difference, I contend, is a question of "pulse" understood as centripetal or centrifugal disposition in regards to things and the environment.<sup>25</sup>

There are, on one hand, societies that display centrifugal "pulse" and pride themselves in their power of giving away, like those communities that practice *potlatch* or *mayordomía*. These customs commit the host or *mayordomo* to pay for the dancers, musicians, candles, incense, pyrotechnic exhibition and feast, keep the Saint surrounded by flowers a whole year and celebrate the Saint's day by feeding the whole community and giving each guest an extra pack of food to take home that will satisfy his or her family for several more days.<sup>26</sup>

Western capitalist economies, on the other hand, exhibit a centripetal tendency and value their power to accumulate to the degree that prestige and honor are a result of hoarding wealth rather than sharing it. Monumental houses are built, sometimes a series of them, to keep a collection of lavish items to be displayed in front of guests for obtaining admiration. Certain commodities, such as art and cars, have the special convenience of making money more patently visible and ostensible. Bank accounts are personal and private, but the ostentation of excess by means of art and car collections is presumed to remain within the realm of good taste due to an aesthetic alibi.

In cases in which excess is ostentatiously squandered, as in the opulence of wedding and birthday celebrations or in political campaigns, it is a well calculated investment, a

declaration of status or power and an opportunity to directly exhibit pecuniary property or political ascendancy. For these Western centripetal cultures, sumptuary consumption, as Veblen has explained, is indicative not of how much the hosts are capable of giving away but of how much they still own so that they can afford to spend those amounts.

Since hoarding can be unlimited for Western capitalistic cultures, excess is literally impossible, for there is always room for more. We may accumulate almost everything without restraint: artworks, real estate, information, money and property. There is one instance, however, where excess and accumulation are strictly forbidden by contemporary Western standards: body fat. Excess of weight is taken as the utter antithesis of the aesthetic. Fashion is designed to expose and emphasize the ideal body weight and shape. Movie stars and sex idols exhibit their perfect control over extra fat, sometimes even explicitly specified in their professional contracts. While there exists a real terror of putting on excessive weight, mainly for aesthetic reasons, a notion of excess in pecuniary property, which can likewise attain degrees of monstrous obesity, is utterly lacking.

This bizarre logic of prestige and aesthetics does not operate in more traditional, so called archaic communities. Whatever anyone's weight happens to be is of no concern to others except as a status symbol. Accumulation of weight is either irrelevant or a symbol of well being, whereas accumulation of goods is as despised in *potlatch* communities as accumulation of fat in the Jet Set society. I find this interdiction of hoarding wealth much more reasonable than the taboo of hoarding weight, since the former is eminently social in character.

From this point of view, what differentiates Western ideas and values from so-called archaic communities is not as much the latter's fetishism or animistic superstitions regarding the *hau*, but the borders between the essential and the excessive and the contrasting sense of pulse and of value from which the individual attains prestige. The non-western version of Smith's definition could then be phrased as follows: the excessive is whatever the community considers indecent to hoard.

The *hau* in non-western societies imposes reciprocation and demands circulation, whereas the *aura* in western societies is purchasable, collectible and increases exchange value. In sum, the logic underlying obligatory reciprocity would appear to depend less upon the *hau* of things observed by Mauss, than upon a dynamic and communal sense of life, of the world, of work and of its products. As I mentioned above, it is a matter of pulse or an attitude towards retention rather than toward what is retained. Compulsory reciprocity comes from a worldview that considers as mere common sense that we must give back what we receive, obvious in natural biological processes as breathing and eating, birth and death, sowing and reaping. The circulation of matter and energy, the movement of all things, the moon, the stars and light, the rivers and the sea, the changing of the seasons, all evince a pattern of giving and taking and of abundance and dynamism, not of penury and immobility.

The order that Mauss called "total social phenomena" goes beyond the social, encompassing the cosmic as well. That is also why, as Mauss realized, destruction of wealth is only apparent because it is understood as returning to the spirits and the gods part of their due.<sup>27</sup> To give away almost everything one possesses in a ceremony of *potlatch* or *mayordomía* is only possible if one understands economy as Bataille described it, an economy of excess. From this perspective, there is an underlying faith that whatever is lost will be recuperated in one way or another, a faith in the generosity of life.

This holistic awareness explains the practice of reciprocity among the societies studied, seemingly not as much because of the belief that things have a spirit that can take revenge, but because everything must be kept in motion. To retain or to hoard is, in this context, a *contra-natura* attitude, equivalent to imprisoning or holding hostage something destined to be in motion.

\*7. The excess of the aesthetic; a shift from material to symbolic functionality

*It is difficult to believe that prehistoric man wouldn't have a certain awareness that, in introducing certain excedent formal elements he was exceeding the practical utilitarian limits beyond which a new space would be opened: precisely what we call the aesthetic. Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez<sup>28</sup>*

Kant's understanding of aesthetic appreciation as "pure disinterested delight" implies that it does not produce any kind of benefits, does not generate concepts, and is an end in itself: pure gratuitousness. This sense of gratuitousness seems to be Bataille's indirect debt to Kant when he argues that Aztec human sacrifice pretended to set humankind beyond the utilitarian, liberating sacrificial victims from servility. Although Bataille was wrong in attributing to the Aztecs the belief that sacrifice was gratuitous (because Aztecs regarded sacrifice not only as useful but indispensable for the survival of the sun-god Huitzilopochtli and of the entire community) he nonetheless was accurate concerning the human need to transcend the utilitarian. Had Aztec human sacrifice indeed been, as Bataille argued, non-utilitarian, it would have been even more monstrous, hardly discernible from killing for the sake of killing. Available evidence shows that sacrifice was almost a technological device for preserving the world according to Aztec myths and beliefs. In their world view, it was simply logical that the sun-god, like humans, had to be fed. Human sacrifice for the Aztecs was both logically and socially necessary, not excessive. How Aztecs transcended the utilitarian was not in sacrificing victims to the sun-god but in the lavishness of their temples and palaces, in the spectacularity of their rituals and festivities and in the luxurious lifestyle of their Tlatoani or leader which, jointly, constituted their theocratic aesthetics. In this case, we remain within the realm of the aesthetics of excess.

Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez, following Kant, has also noted that the aesthetic occurs as an excess that goes beyond strict instrumentality and generates a function that opens up, in Sánchez Vázquez's words, "a new space" into the aesthetic. Sanchez Vázquez, however, diverts from Kant's conception as he does not say that the aesthetic is non-utilitarian but that

it is meta-utilitarian. In other words, we have here a function that is still practical not as a physical utensil but as a symbolic function. Decorated flint tools, for example, display gratuitousness by exceeding their strictly instrumental form, which in turn produces a shift from the original function involved. Functionality is not annulled as these tools are still useful in a different sense: "The product of labor, by putting to work the capacity to transform matter, continues being an instrument, albeit a symbolic one, that enables it--thanks to its form--to act upon the real."<sup>29</sup> How does this shift from instrumental to symbolic functionality occur? Sánchez Vázquez unknowingly agrees with Jakobson's concept of the aesthetic in regards to its functionality specifically defined by an emphasis over form itself when he states that "a product fulfills this symbolic function when it acquires a "good form" (or "excedent form") as a result of "good work".<sup>30</sup> He adds:

All the creative power of painter-hunters of the Upper Paleolithic period, culminating what was accomplished during thousands and thousands of years of work--and among its highest achievements was the capacity to endow the material with an "excedent" form--was symbolically, magically put to the service of the practical end of hunting wild animals.

To link these views, while Kant conceives the aesthetic as opposed, almost by definition, to the functional, that is, as a kind of excess beyond the utilitarian, Sánchez Vázquez defines the aesthetic also as an excess, except that it does not cancel the functional but incorporates and transcends it through symbolic functionality. This shift from material to symbolic functionality explains the aesthetization of excess and provides a clue to Bataille's assumption of their necessary dissipation.

#### \*8. Dissipation, distribution and aesthetic transmutation of excess

The main question concerning excess at the start of this paper was: why is it dissipated rather than reasonably distributed? The answer seems to involve the antipode excess or the



realm of utmost precariousness: mortality. Material excess may seem limitless, but an individual's life is fatally limited. Consequently, whenever there is material excess, it is intended to be exchanged for vicarious temporal wealth. How can temporal wealth be attained? Only through a transition from the personal to social realm, that is, by the vicarious permanence in the memory of other members of the community. The aesthetization of material excess preserves the *hau* or spirit of things by the symbolic mediation of the aesthetic which recirculates it and converts material dissipation into symbolic accumulation of prestige or *mana* and in the memory of others. As a process of sublimation, western art is understood also as a permutation of personal libidinal energy, that is, corporeal, mental or emotional energy, into social, cultural and symbolic wealth. Material wealth is private or personal, whereas symbolic wealth (as language, prestige or power) is always social and depends on others for recognition or interpretation. Thus aesthetic dissipation of excess is both expected to fulfill an operation of exchange from material to symbolic capital and from personal to social wealth by accomplishing a relative distribution of excess, since the pleasure conveyed by it can be shared with the gods and by the community through *potlatch*, *mayordomía*, carnivals or other religious ceremonies. Moreover, there is an underlying belief in various cultures that the gods are aesthetically sensitive and thus aesthetic objects can better capture t

on of excedents, a significant part of the population is dedicated to aesthetic activities that are related to both power and religion. Material excess invested upon monumental architecture, i.e. pyramids and temples, does not mitigate material needs of the population, yet it becomes a patrimony of the whole community. This way, excess becomes perceptible to all. The more magnificent monuments are, the more confidence the community may have in its capacity for survival and the more it may feel protected from attack by intimidating rival groups. A community may take pride in the excesses it is able to afford and spend even vicariously in the person of the leader, until excess is withheld and accumulated rather than

symbolically shared, as in autocratic and despotic States, and ultimately destroyed by popular revolts.

It is not surprising that non-western and western cultures have a differing attitude towards the *hau* and the *aura* that compels circulation in the former while in the latter impels accumulation. The difference stems from a contrasting view on personal identity and on the relation between the individual and the community, culture and nature, in each society. What is remarkable is the point where such dissimilar cultures converge, that is, in the common belief and practice of the transmutation of material goods into symbolic capital via the aesthetic. This process of transformation of material into symbolic excess mediated by the aesthetic is apparently universal.

While Aristotle advised temperance, what we really enjoy is excess: It assures us that life is magnanimous and the world exuberant. Consequently, in a context that is bountiful, it is only natural to be generous. It has, in this sense, ethical repercussions. Strict calculation and control over people's time, desires, and energy, as occurs in totalitarian and bureaucratic regimes, stems from a sense of a precarious reality. It moreover leads, as Bataille insisted, to war and uncontrollable destruction. If excess is logically necessary in economy and nature, as Bataille argues, then along the same lines it must be acknowledged that the aesthetic, as its symbolic transformation and a relatively harmless and fully gratifying way of dissipating it, is functionally and socially necessary.<sup>31</sup>

We need to trust the possibility and actuality of the excessive itself, the feeling that excess is real, that we can lose without remorse, that there is a margin for vagary and play, that life gives more than we can take. This necessary confidence is nowhere better conveyed and expressed than by the concretization of the aesthetic. If excess is inevitable and its dissipation imperative, then the aesthetic is indispensable.

<sup>1</sup>Notes

A previous, more schematic version of this paper was presented at the XIVth International Congress of Aesthetics at Ljubljana, Slovenia, September 1998 (published in the proceedings). "The indispensable excess of the aesthetic" *Filozofski Vestnik*. Ales Erjavec, Lev Kreft and Marija Berjamo (Ed.) in Aesthetics as Philosophy. *Proceedings of the XVIth International Congress for Aesthetics*. Ljubljana: Filozofski Institut. pp. 173-180. Vol. 2. 1999.

<sup>2</sup>All expelled from Plato's Republic precisely for this reason.

<sup>3</sup>Allen S. Weiss' *The aesthetics of excess* (New York: SUNY, 1989) is an unusual attempt to explore precisely excesses (sexual, libidinal, emotional) in relation to madness, perversion and psychoanalysis by examining authors like Sade, Breton, Artaud, Bataille, Nietzsche, Klossowski.

<sup>4</sup>The difference between destruction and dissipation is that the former, exemplified by dumping, is mere waste or demolition of goods, whereas the latter is made perceptible and publicly displayed.

<sup>5</sup>One exception to this rule is the kibbutz, whose main ideal is precisely an autonomous community of equal distribution.

<sup>6</sup>Georges Bataille, *La parte maldita*, (Barcelona: Icaria, 1987), Francisco Muñoz de Escalona (trans.) from *L'usage des richesses* (Paris: Minuit, 1949), 57.

<sup>7</sup>For a thorough examination and criticism of this aspect in Lacanian psychoanalysis, see Maxine Sheets-Johnstone *The Roots of Power; Animate Form and Gendered Bodies* (Illinois: Open Court, 1994), 311-317.

<sup>8</sup>For a definition of the aesthetic in a more comprehensive sense, see Katya Mandoki *Prosaica, introducción a la estética de lo cotidiano*. (México: Grijalbo, 1994) Part II.

<sup>9</sup> Cited by Georges Bataille, *La parte maldita*.

<sup>10</sup>Orlane's eccentric facial transformations, Ulay and Abramovic pain-inflicted body art, the ritual performances of Stewart Brisley (*Art for Today; Nothing* 1972) and Hermann Nitsch (1998). For his Aug. 24 1998 performance at the Prinzenbori castle, he used of 1000 lt. of animal blood, 13000 lt. of wine, 1000 kg. of grapes, 1000 kg. tomatoes, 2000 flowers, 10,000 kg. linen and so on. It may be questioned on its artistic value, but it is unequivocally excessive.

<sup>11</sup>The Trobriand tribes studied by Malinowski exchanged necklaces and bracelets, objects that, not strictly necessary as food and tools are, can be considered luxurious and symbols of wealth.

<sup>12</sup>Bronislaw Malinowski, [1922] *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (New York: Dutton, 1961).

<sup>13</sup>Including the American Northwest and the Rocky Mountains, Polynesia, Malaysia, Papua, South America and New Zealand.

<sup>14</sup> Marcel Mauss, *The Gift* (New York: Norton and Routledge, 1990), W.D. Halls (trans.) from "Essai sur le Don" in *Sociologie et Anthropologie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1950), 6.

<sup>15</sup> Marshall Sahlins observed that for nomadic people wealth is simply a burden and are happy to give objects away. Marshall Sahlins, "A Kind of Material Plenty" from *Stone Age Economics*, in Ino Rossi, John Buettner-Janusch and Dorian Coppenhaver (eds.) *Anthropology Full Circle* ( New York: Prager 1977).

<sup>16</sup> "La visée (*Einstellung*) du message en tant que tel, l'accent mis sur le message pour son propre compte, este ce qui caractérise la fonction poétique du langage." Roman Jakobson, *Essais de Linguistique Générale* (Paris: Minuit, 1963), 218.

<sup>17</sup>Mauss, *The Gift*, 3.

<sup>18</sup>Mauss, *The Gift*, 11.

<sup>19</sup>Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illumination* (New York: Hartcourt 1968): 217- 251.

<sup>20</sup>Karl Marx, "The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret thereof" in *Capital; a Critique of Political Economy* (New York: The Modern Library, 1906), 81-96.

<sup>21</sup>Pepsi and the younger generation, Nike and the athletically fit, Oreal and the beautiful, young and successful. These not so occult means of persuasion were studied by Vance Packard in his already classical *Hidden Persuaders*, among other authors.

<sup>22</sup>And probably also the private and clandestine auction of Princess Diana's fatal Mercedes Benz.

<sup>23</sup> Mauss, *The Gift*, 3.

<sup>24</sup>Mauss, *The Gift*, 12.

<sup>25</sup> See the specific sense of the term "pulse" in Mandoki, *Prosaica*, 163-166.

<sup>26</sup>A common tradition of prehispanic origin still practiced today in the *barrios* of Xochimilco and Ixtapalapa.

<sup>27</sup>Mauss, *The Gift*, 16.

<sup>28</sup>Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez, *Invitación a la Estética* (México: Grijalbo, 1992), 100. (translation from Spanish is mine).

<sup>29</sup> Sánchez Vázquez, *Invitación a la Estética*, 100-101.

<sup>30</sup>Roman Jakobson, *Essais de Linguistique Générale*, 218.

<sup>31</sup> Ellen Dyssanake argued for the necessity of the aesthetic based on Darwinian approach: her claim, centered on the artistic, is that the aesthetic is non-superfluous because it is necessary for survival. See her *Homo Aestheticus; Where Art comes From and Why*. (Washington: University of Washington Press, 1992). I, on the other hand, am claiming that it is necessary precisely because it is superfluous.