



The pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression: Bataille, sovereignty, desire

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Abstract

Through concepts such as the act of transgression, the idea of the pursuit of luxury can be radically transformed by reconsidering the work of the French philosopher Georges Bataille on sovereignty and desire within contemporary culture. This article on the relations between transgression, luxury, sovereignty, and desire constitutes a reworking of Bataille's thought. Offering an exploration and development of the key notions which run through current work on luxury, from sumptuous living to human lives in search of lavishness, the article places these important concepts in their intellectual and historical contexts and goes on to trace their considerable possibilities for contemporary French thought. In this manner, the article not only makes the idea of the pursuit of luxury accessible, but also invites readers to make their own critical judgements of such a pursuit. The article concludes with an account of the pursuit of luxury and acts of transgression as a moral vision, and with the perpetual problems of luxury and necessity. The notion of the pursuit of luxury is now impossible to disregard for anybody who is serious-minded about contemporary acts of transgression, and this article affords the ideal companion to the wide-ranging diversity of Bataille's critical texts on sovereignty and desire.

Keywords

Luxury, transgression, Georges Bataille, sovereignty, desire

Introduction

Transgression is a central concept in the French philosopher Georges Bataille's (2012a) historical and contemporary studies of the human infringement of rules, responsibilities, and the surpassing of appropriate bounds, both as an innovator in the investigation of individual human contraventions of various laws and guide to the acts of transgressive people such as criminals. This article offers readers an original encounter with Bataille's crucial writings through an important contemporary

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theoretical discussion of the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression, including the pursuit of sumptuous living and associated actions focused on the difficulties of human lives in search of lavishness throughout history. In exploring the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression I argue that, against the idea that the pursuit of luxury is unnecessary, such a pursuit is, actually, the appearance of the will to transgress; a will, furthermore, that is not only impracticable ever to accomplish, but also one that calls into question numerous assumptions contained within everyday life because the pursuit of luxury, whilst providing pleasure, is also the pursuit of an infraction. Considering the use value of comprehending the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression, I suggest shifting the interpretation of the pursuit of luxury away from subjects related to comfortable surroundings and towards the concept and acts of transgression. This is significant because acts of transgression point not only to an alternative explanation of human lives looking for luxuriousness throughout history but also to what Bataille (1992) calls human acts of ‘sovereignty’, to human lives pursuing luxuriousness as a means of achieving independence and autonomy. The pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression is a moral vision that is less concerned with problems of luxury and necessity and more concerned with problems of sovereignty, moral principles, and the interior relation of people to the subjects and objects of their desire. The article begins with Bataille’s conception of transgression before moving to the idea that the pursuit of luxury can be understood as an act of transgression prior to reflecting on the use value of this notion regarding human acts of sovereignty in advance of the Conclusion.

Transgression

Transgression is a crucial but multi-accented concept with a complex and still unfolding history, which in itself articulates the difficulty of general human history. Transgression is employed on the one hand, as in its formal usage, to denote a violation, as of a law, or to the exceeding of due bounds or limits and so by extension to individual human breaches of a law (as in a description of a transgressive person as a criminal). On the other hand, transgression is used to allude to intellectual and artistic works and/or creative practices that, in their very forms and meanings, describe human society as socially created by, amongst other things, instances of transgression rather than by instances of natural goodness. Occasionally this second meaning is generalized to create accounts of the transgressive mood or troublesome disposition of a social group or the flouting of the laws and directives of a society, era, or nation that has perhaps descended into evil. Transgression is consequently used to imply individual acts of ‘going across’ or the character of the defilement of a law, to a state of tainted or disgraced artistic or intellectual development, to the specific unruly life and traditions of an amoral social group lacking in values and rules, to a social-historical moment of evildoing or a broad era of wrongful behaviour. People comment on activities that transgress moral or civil laws, on transgressive acts that are vicious or vile, on transgressive actions that arouse disgust or abhorrence, on the transgressive treatment of people that are considered an abomination, on contemporary malevolence and immorality, iniquity, or morally objectionable behaviour, or on transgressions that are villainous, illegal, or spiteful and cruel acts.

One way of examining transgression is along the lines of Georges Bataille’s (2012a) explanation of transgression’s European usage over the last two centuries of modernity and the ongoing negation of conventional morality in thought, word, and deed initially advanced by melancholy poets and thinkers concerned with transgressive urges and transgressive bodies such as Charles Baudelaire (Sartre, 1946) and Nietzsche (1886, 1887). Bataille proposes that in its most extensive use transgression has referred during the rise and formation of modernity in the 19th and 20th centuries to the domain of needs and to challenges to established authority inherent in both modernity

and in the arts of modernism (decadent literature, atonal music, Cubist painting, Futurist sculpture, Dadaist theatre, Surrealist film). Transgression has nonetheless been comprehended and appreciated by Bataille in diverse ways. In Bataille's 'excessive' viewpoint (Armitage, 2001: 1–2) transgression is seen as exemplified in a list of practices (e.g. transgression as eroticism) and valued above conventional or unadventurous creative forms (e.g. vanilla sex, to which Bataille essentially denied any genuine transgressive status).

Of significance to Bataille's view is his approach taken towards the transgressive act, which can take transgressors to places where obedience to the niceties of manners is surplus to the requirements of contemporary advanced collective social life. Debates about transgression in Bataille's (1988a) sense have supplemented and been encouraged by transgression as an 'inner experience' in which people exceed the bounds of rational, everyday behaviour, which is constrained by the consideration of profit, productivity, or self-preservation. The experience of transgression is consequently defined concerning its indissolubility from the consciousness of the constraint or prohibition it violates, once more in terms that see that it is precisely by and through its transgression that the force of a prohibition becomes realized (Suleiman, 1990: 75). Bataille's subsequent defense of transgression as equivalent or necessary to a limitless inner realm sets the construction, structure, and coherence of that limitless realm – predominantly the completion that follows and accompanies transgression – against the pre-modern and God-driven order of preindustrial society.

So described, as in the works of Bataille and Foucault (1977), the latter of whom wrote a powerful introduction to Bataille's concept of transgression, transgression is rallied to explain 'an action which involves the limit, that narrow zone of a line where it displays the flash of its passage, but perhaps also its entire trajectory, even its origin' (Foucault, 1977: 33–34). Foucault's (1977: 33–34) claim 'that transgression has its entire space in the line it crosses' has also informed the 'play of limits' such as the regulation and obstinacy associated with the incessant crossing and recrossing of 'a line which closes up behind it in a wave of extremely short duration and thus it is made to return once more right to the horizon of the uncrossable'. In Bataille and Foucault, the valued transgression is that of an absolute contingency between a limit and a transgression or that they are unthinkable, futile, and meaningless in isolation, although both authors and their individual works are as dissimilar as their shared interest in sense making, and the moment at which both limit and transgression find meaning. In Foucault's (1977: 35) assessment, the transgression of the limit 'takes the form of a spiral which no simple infraction can exhaust'. This includes a radical, contemporary change of definition of transgression and of the terms of evaluation because the relationship between transgression and limit is simple, 'like a flash of lightning' (Foucault, 1977: 35), and complex, like the spiral which relates the two. However, both Bataille's and Foucault's interpretations share the supposition that transgression has an active, determining effect upon ideas of evil, approaches to madness, and the experience of depravity and danger in everyday lives riven with lawlessness and negation. They contrast with the standpoint that sees transgression as oppositional, disruptive, or transformational in society and culture, which are thought to be more fundamentally violent, determinedly divisive, and unethical than the act of transgression itself. This latter assessment might be associated with a victory over limits or a dialectical or revolutionary approach to the act of transgression but in Bataille and Foucault's more sophisticated versions the emphasis is on drawing on a model of transgression that announces limitation and its obverse, which Bataille and Foucault feel it essential to address.

However complex, then, Bataille's definition of transgression is imperative to his conception of eroticism as an object of study, to his methods and aims concerning various academic and non-academic themes (including death and violence). Transgression's usage and meanings in these settings may be inconsistent, shocking, comparatively descriptive, playful, or appraising of eroticism as a principle of disorder, which is precisely Bataille's thesis. Conversely, Bataille's investigation of

transgression is never free of assumptions of taboo or involvement in meaningful, taboo-making activity on the part of his research or the primitive constitution of taboo or the simultaneous urge to transgress being studied. Perhaps Bataille's most powerful conception of transgression in his academic and literary works, such as *Story of the Eye* (1982), particularly in the arts, the humanities, and cultural studies, has been his own originating definition of transgression as the coupling of taboo and transgression as a whole range of surface structural rituals that have emerged concerning sexual practice.

Bataille's work on transgression as a force that destabilizes the taboo but in so doing ensures its effectiveness developed from neither Baudelaire nor the Nietzschean tradition but from a critical encounter with each (Bataille, 2004, 2012b). Writing in 1957, Bataille (2012a: 63; original italics) sees a convergence of the idea of transgression as something which '*does not deny the taboo but transcends it and completes it*'; indeed, transgression's association with taboo is a dynamic component in the process of socio-cultural reproduction that enables change while at the same time ensuring stability. What connects the essential relation between transgression and taboo, Bataille says, is the idea that such a relation makes sensible the contingency of, on the one hand, the stasis and determinacy of socio-cultural structures and, on the other hand, the innovation and agency inherent in the practice of socio-cultural action. Bataille's thinking helped inspire his conception of transgression as confirming and showing a consciousness of limits, not their absence and stimulated new directions in Bataille's socio-cultural studies of the act of transgression and the realm of the norm (Izard, 1982: 243).

However, it would be untrue to imply that, for example, Bataille's (2012a: 63–64; original italics) claims that there 'exists no prohibition that cannot be transgressed' or that taboo (as terror) and transgression (as awed fascination) are two contradictory urges amount to a consensual definition of either taboo or transgression in the contemporary period; even that the idea of transgression as something which '*does not deny the taboo but transcends it and completes it*' is generally accepted. In an initial response to Bataille, the leader of the Surrealist movement, the French artist Breton (1972: 53), excommunicated Bataille from the Surrealist movement because Breton considered Bataille 'pathological', whilst the French existential philosopher Sartre (2010: 219–293) did not so much propose alternative definitions of transgression, taboo, or their transcendence as dismiss Bataille's whole enterprise as a mystical 'adventure that lies beyond philosophy, on the borders of knowledge and non-knowledge'. In a subsequent stage, the influence of contemporary postmodern theory has led some, such as the late French sociologist Baudrillard (2016: 154–158), to repeat Bataille's critique of earlier ideas of transgression in terms now of their effects, in human life, of the fading of the discursive real. Additionally, some may raise doubts concerning Bataille's 'violent' and 'cruel' conception of the transgression of taboos and it is easy to imagine that feminists might decry such a standpoint, or the desire for this, in the field of transgression as in other subjects. The variant meanings of transgression are now more readily comprehended as the necessary manifestation of diverse acts and practices across different, sometimes violent, and erotic discourses. We are brought then to a pluralized and dialogic idea of transgression as an interior and unconscious symbolic form, a sometimes opaque and undisclosed desire that people discover is mysteriously encroached into and possibly even shared and to the sporadically alarming debates this in turn produces.

The pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression

Similar to transgression, the pursuit of luxury – the pursuit of comfortable surroundings – is an indispensable but multifaceted conception of acts concerned with the complexities of human lives seeking opulence throughout history. However, I argue that the pursuit of luxury is an act

of transgression that, contrary to the idea that the pursuit of luxury is something that is unnecessary, is, in fact, a manifestation of what I shall call 'the will to transgress'; a will, moreover, that is not only impossible ever to complete, but also one that challenges many assumptions contained within everyday life. This is not to deny that the attempt to obtain luxury is something that provides comfort but, rather, to insist that, such an attempt to obtain luxury is also a violation. For instance, people at weekends often feel 'entitled', after working hard during the week, to break the laws of necessity. Consequently, drinking this bottle of wine or eating that box of chocolates or both on a Saturday night allows them to indulge in 'life's little luxuries' (Mansvert et al., 2016: 88–107). Yet the pursuit of luxury is not just the purchase and consumption of something or service that is desirable but additionally the manifestation of the desire for abundance, of the desire to surpass due confines and limits through the pursuit of a surplus. Such individual human infringements of the law of necessity through the desire for, acquisition, or even the theft of, expensive objects, are the contraventions of people who may be ordinary luxury consumers, or even lawbreakers, or both. The appeal of the pursuit of luxurious objects, which are frequently hard to obtain, is, at least in part, the intellectual and aesthetic appeal of the pursuit of transgression, of expending energy and money on works and/or creative practices that, in their very shapes and implications, ward off threats to individual autonomy. Delineating the pursuit of luxury like this allows the consideration of its place in human society as something that is socially generated, constantly worked upon, and continually updated. But such definitions additionally permit thought about the pursuit of luxury as something that is increasingly transgressive in an era wherein the decline of natural goodness and the death of God imply that there is no limit, that there is nothing exterior to being, and that consequently people are forced to a perpetual recognition of the interiority of their being, to what Bataille (1992) calls sovereignty – the reign, the power, the accountability, and the mono-causality of the self. Accordingly, it is not that, for example, the provision of a Rolls Royce luxury car is a 'good' or a 'bad' thing, but, rather, that the transgressive tenor or disruptive spirit of those individuals driving it or those social groups riding in it are bidding for human sovereignty to be assured through acts of luxury consumption that create no use value (Armitage, 2020: 15–30). The desire to break the laws and commands of society, of the period, or even the nation, can therefore be located in individual acts of luxury consumption as well as in the creation and consumption of a lust for excess, of the luxurious generation of waste and loss. This last is less about the pursuit of luxury as wickedness and more about the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression where individual acts of human sovereignty reject the economics of necessity (work as mere subsistence; food as mere survival; sex as mere procreation; investment as mere continued production) and, instead, embrace the economics of individual acts of luxury consumption that are ends in themselves. Desecrating the laws of consumption as survival and production, the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression is thus a state of creatively and intellectually influenced economic development. Choosing luxurious acts such as non-procreative sex or conspicuous acquisition as routes to the expression of a lawless life, sovereign individuals institute new traditions of luxury consumption in seemingly unprincipled social groups that perhaps reintroduce pre-capitalist acts of consumption or primordial acts of sovereignty. For this reason, whilst luxurious objects are desirable, they crucially lack the principle of utility. It is not that luxurious objects are unnecessary that are at issue but the fact that they offer something more than survival to humankind that is beset with fundamental problems. Indeed, luxurious objects present social-historical 'singular instants' (Armitage, 2022: 41–58) of excess, of the possibility of participating in luxurious conduct and creative acts. When people talk about activities such as riding in a Rolls Royce limousine, the real luxury is not the ride per se but the sensation of transgressing extant morality that life beyond utility offers. Breaking the laws of a life lived inside the realm of utility is a transgressive act that is not necessarily spiteful or dreadful but is almost certainly where sovereignty can be sought and might even be

found. An extravagant wedding that includes caviar and other culinary embellishments is a transgressive act because, by partaking in it, people know that they are flying in the face of the instrumental rationalism that is foundational to contemporary society, personal identity, and the conventional morality that is the basis of present-day conduct.

Studying the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression from a Bataillian perspective is novel and important because such a view offers insights into postmodern acts of indulgence and into how the continuing denial of traditional morality is connected to the sovereignty of individuals, to their actions that are non-servile, unconstrained, and which emerge less as the divisive principle of individualized melancholy and more as the unifying principle of collectivized enjoyment. Bataillian poesis and thought regarding rich living, of transgressive impulses, and acts involving sumptuous lifestyles, are, resembling Baudelaire's and Nietzsche's descriptions of transgressive bodies, a search for sovereignty – for acts of pleasure that are also a glorious expenditure. Adopting yet crucially adapting the work of Bataille, I argue that the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression alludes in the present period less to the realm of needs and necessity and more to the realm of possibilities wherein the sacred and the profane combine, in which the old authority of the restricted economies of utility is transgressed and replaced by the new authority of the unrestricted economies of excess. Nevertheless, unlike the pre-modern literature of Sade (2016), for instance, with its eventually untenable absolute relativism and its unwavering dedication to solipsism that needs to feed on the domain of the other yet repudiates the other's being, a contemporary Bataillian concern with sovereignty, whether examining literature or any of the other arts, is hypothesized on the very necessity of the other and of the social and sociality, as when, for instance, Bataille (1988b: 67) discusses the independent art of the 'potlatch' (a gift-giving feast) of the Indians of the American Northwest as 'of prime importance in social life'. The pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression can thus be understood as something pleasant and valued by Bataillian sovereignty as the pursuit of recognition and independence. In a Bataillian excessive perspective, the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression relates to, indicates, or supplies luxury in the form of the promise of a sovereign life, a life not of homogeneity, accumulation, or one enmeshed in objects but one of heterogeneity, expenditure, and subjectivity. The pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression is a doctrine, a principle, and a practice: the practice of sovereignty. Consider the typical luxury cruise on an ocean liner, with the liner's homogeneous passengers vacationing, embarking on round-trip voyages to various ports-of-call, where they may disembark on tours known as shore excursions to accumulate objects from tourist shops. Now consider the atypical 'Desire' luxury cruise, based on an ocean liner dedicated solely to transgressive sensuality, eroticism, and pleasure, with the liner's heterogeneous passengers holidaying, immersed in the 'Desire Experience', entering a realm of sexual gratification, where clothing is optional, to fulfil their various sexual fantasies, where they might go on to awaken their senses (which is their prime objective) and lose themselves in amorousness whilst expending their subjectivity in a hedonism without limits.¹ The value, purpose, and significance which the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression carries is as a replacement for and corruption of orthodox rationality. The pursuit of sovereign luxury as an act of transgression is a daring creative act of extreme erotic human dynamism, thought, and outrageous action, which enables people to think outside of that calculating rationality which has forged the contemporary luxury cruise on an ocean liner for homogeneous passengers. The pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression begins with sovereignty, with a self-centred responsibility to 'know', for example, the art of sex, not de-personalized universal qualities such as vanilla sex or formalized religion, to which many people adhere. Any Bataillian conception of the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression is hence a conception of the pursuit of luxury as sovereignty.

What is of import to any Bataillian interpretation of the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression is the attitude taken towards transgressive acts of excess. Such acts of excess transport

transgressors to locations where compliance with the subtleties of etiquette is superfluous to the obligations of contemporary advanced shared social existence through acts of absolute sovereign revolt. Pursuing luxury as an act of transgression from a Bataillian standpoint consequently entails acts of extravagance that signify people's refusal of the reduction of themselves to utility. The pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression is an inner experience, a wholly human quality wherein people outstrip the borders of the rational through their refusal of '*the given*', through their daily conduct, 'whatever this may be, provided it is *the given*' (Bataille, 1992: 343; original emphases). Pursuing luxury through an act of transgression, therefore, involves a human inner experience that is similar to entering a spiritual or mystical dimension: it signifies the rejection of rational and discursive knowledge of the given and the acceptance that accesses to the reality of the sacred, to expressive, moving, and ecstatic experiences, are the absolute other with regard to the profane reality of the human given. Unimpeded by thoughts of profit, efficiency, or self-protection, the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression is the sumptuousness of refusal, of life without rules, and unnecessary prohibitions, restrictions, and limits. The experience of the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression is therefore delineated regarding its indissolubility from the awareness of restraint. It is a prohibition-free indulgence in the pleasures afforded by luxurious material objects and services. Nevertheless, arguing for a Bataillian conception of the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression is not to be misunderstood as a simple case for living a life of luxury. Rather, it is to assert that, given the boundless inner domain that people inhabit, it is unsurprising that they seek to create, structure, and cohere a seemingly intelligible or logical boundless inner domain of sovereignty, an inner domain wherein the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression is the aspiration to transcend contemporary forms of Godless disorder and post-industrial society with a view to achieving their ultimate essence.

With the aid of Bataille (and Foucault) the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression can be thought of as an act of self-indulgence which is a truly human sovereign action that includes an unspoken limit and an element of desire, that line where new acts of a struggle for recognition show their movement, but also their whole path, even their spatial foundation. The pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression is a discursive space of sovereignty where desire traverses the line into lust, into something unbounded or imperative that is not enlightened by the enactment of limits but by the power and influence of conscious and unconscious drives. Whatever pertains to or is involved with the pursuit of luxury remains free because transgressive sovereignty is an act that criss-crosses a line which is not wedded to power (except perhaps in Foucault), but which is bound to the pursuit of luxury, to bringing luxurious subjects and objects into being before the line closes after them and they are forced to go back to the horizon of the impassable. To accept a Bataillian standpoint on the value of the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression is to accede that there is a total contingency between the limit that is a necessity and the act of transgression that is the pursuit of luxury's commitment to freedom, that necessity and the pursuit of luxury are unimaginable, useless, and insignificant separately. The pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression is thus the singular instant at which the limit that is a necessity and the act of transgression which is the pursuit of luxury's pledge to self and to its sovereignty acquire value. In this evaluation, the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression of the limit of necessity takes the shape of Foucault's spiral that no breach of necessity can expend. This comprises a radically new, contemporary transformation of the meaning of the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression and of the conditions of appraisal. This last is important because the association between the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression and the limit of necessity is straightforward, akin to a thunderbolt of individual sovereignty, and multifaceted, not unlike the disappearance of the limit condition of necessity into the spiral that connects them. Hence, a Bataille-inspired view assumes that the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression has a dynamic, causal, influence upon thoughts of sensual pleasure,

attitudes to the post-God realization that there is no exteriority to being, and the experience of 'eadness' or happiness derived from the pursuit of luxury in ordinary lives torn apart by a lack of any existential guarantees. A Bataillian position is not that the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression is antagonistic to luxury, troublesome like licentiousness, or transfigurative like amorousness in society and culture, which are often understood to be associated with the demise of the sacred (Pefanis, 1991: 45). Rather, Bataillian thinking is that the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression leads in contemporary thought to strategies and methods of going to the limits of subjects and objects that are an indulgence, to thoughts of necessity, notions of gratification, beliefs about desire, the morality of subjects and objects with luxurious qualities, and then to transgressing those limits to delimit their operation by, for example, the possession of objects that are excessively expensive. This Bataillian view I associate with a conquest over the limits of necessity and the pursuit of a luxurious approach to the act of transgression. Nonetheless, in this Bataillian account, the stress is on an exemplar of the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression that proclaims the drawback of necessity and its opposite, lavishness.

A Bataillian characterization of the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression is, like Bataille's notion of eroticism, an object of study regarding concepts and practices associated with the pursuit of luxury: it is a method for a moral project and an objective concerning diverse academic and non-academic subjects and philosophical investigations. However, unlike Bataille, my own objective pertaining to such subjects and philosophical investigations has less to do with death and violence and more to do with the pursuit of luxury as a quality possessed by a subject or object that is high-priced and how such subjects and objects become perceivable as an act of transgression. This is not to propose that the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression or its practice and connotations in these contexts might not be conflicting or alarming when people discuss wealth or demonstrate their pursuit of luxurious living. More readily, it is to argue that any explanatory account of licentiousness, however good-natured, must, as part of that evaluation, consider the sexual nature of sovereignty, the erotic characteristics of inner experience, and the tenets of a condition Bataille (1988a: 3) labels 'non-knowledge'. A Bataillian study of the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression should recognize that, for some people at least, the pursuit of luxury is a way of engaging with taboo; it is an engagement in expressive, and significant, taboo-making activity by those seeking sovereignty. For them, the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression is an investigation into splendour no matter whether the structure of the taboo is primitive, anthropological, historical, or philosophical. What matters is that the longing to pursue luxury as an act of transgression is satisfied, often through states of being wealthy, but always through non-logical ways to display themselves as figures of sovereignty. A Bataillian idea of the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression is thus academic labour directed at the arts, the humanities, and cultural studies that seeks to create a characterization of the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression as the combining of the taboo of having a plentiful supply of material goods and money and acts of transgression defined by rites and by the principle that 'nothing sovereign', such as sexual habits, 'must ever submit to the useful' (Bataille, 1992: 226).

My research on the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression, unlike Bataille's research on transgression, sees riches as forces that undermine the taboo of the sovereign individual, which is 'the useful', and, thus, guarantee that 'the useful' is unsuccessful in frustrating attempts at extravagant sovereignty as an existential disposition. In this respect, what is called for is a critical engagement with Bataille but also with what Nietzsche called the 'sovereign spirit' and 'the mysteries within it': watching 'curiously through the golden bars that surround its domain – fascinated and interested', Nietzsche writes, the purveyors of 'the useful' cannot but notice 'the hints of unknown perfumes ...' 'drifting mockingly' across their faces, and 'disclosing something of the secret gardens and delights' of sovereignty (Nietzsche quoted in Bataille, 2004: 10). A Bataillian

approach to the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression is an approach that does not refuse 'the useful' but exceeds it and accomplishes it through affluence. The pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression is linked with 'the useful' as a forceful constituent in the process of a specific aspect of socio-cultural reproduction that allows alterations in conceptions of wealth and poverty, whilst simultaneously assuring the constancy of the extremes of profligacy and deprivation. Consequently, the fundamental relationship between the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression and 'the useful' is the notion that such a relationship makes sensible the eventuality of, on the one hand, the stability and determinacy of 'useful' socio-cultural arrangements and, on the other hand, the originality and agency integral to those indulgent and 'nonessential' pursuits and socio-cultural acts devoted towards the sacred and the marvellous. Such Bataillian reasoning aids in forging an idea of the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression, of corroborating and presenting an awareness of the limits of 'the useful', not their absence, and is the incentive needed for new directions in Bataillian socio-cultural examinations of the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression and the sphere of 'the useful'.

Nonetheless, this is not to suggest that a Bataillian perspective on the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression or on 'the useful' is the only viewpoint. It is to suggest that the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression is a kind of reverential captivation by extravagance, of the subversion of temporality and 'useful' knowledge, of the contravention of 'unnecessary' expenditure and of the basic, if incongruous, compulsion wherein 'the useful' is cast aside for the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression, characterized, finally, as delight in the search for sovereignty. In the contemporary era, the notion of the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression is something that does not disallow 'the useful' but, increasingly, surpasses it and achieves it through the pursuit of pleasure wherein enjoyment becomes a site of contestation. In the next and final substantial section of this article, I will offer a Bataillian stance on the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression that is seeking sovereignty. I will do so not as a Bataillian surrealist artist or 'pathological' existential philosopher but, rather, as someone open to unconventional explanations of the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression that is looking for sovereignty and to questions concerning 'the useful'. The aim is to demonstrate how people try to transcend the contradictions of sovereignty in their socio-cultural relationships. Certainly, such a Bataillian initiative is something of a mystical quest that is positioned beyond orthodox philosophy and ideas of knowledge and non-knowledge, but it is also a genuine search for sovereignty as the fulfilment of the human condition. In contemporary critical theory, the following Bataillian account of the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression that is in search of sovereignty is focused on its impact on inner experience: on human existence and its sovereignty, on the decline of the discursive real, and on the rise of the discursive art of play beyond the terms of 'the useful', work, and servility. This Bataillian model of the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression that is in quest of sovereignty is a theoretical position that meditates on acts of transgression as acts that are in the hunt for sovereignty. It emphasizes that the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression on the lookout for sovereignty is merely one of a diversity of meanings that is a part of human inner experience. But how are people to understand the pursuit of luxury as a necessary expression of varied acts of transgression that are searching for sovereignty? How is human inner experience connected to sensual discourses of gratification and the pursuit of sovereignty? For the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression that is seeking sovereignty is principally an internal and unconscious symbolic form. Yet, following Bataille (1992: 245), it is, I argue, possible to learn how some of the mysteries of this internal and unconscious symbolic form. In the next section, I consider the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression through the prism of sovereignty, through the erogenous experience of luxuriousness as an interruption, and as the subverting of the limits of the self-caused by an irruption that abruptly

exposes the limit of the discourse of 'the useful' and a beyond that dispenses with the 'necessities' of absolute knowledge.

Bataille, sovereignty, desire

What is the use value of understanding the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression? I argue that shifting the appreciation of the pursuit of luxury away from issues of affluent environs and towards the concept and acts of transgression point not just to human lives seeking wealth throughout history but also to the pursuit of sovereignty as an act associated with a moral vision, with the spurning of any moral values related to utility. Hence, understanding the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression is not concerned with questions of the necessary and the unnecessary but with questions of sovereignty and with moral principles. Thus, any appearance of the will to transgress is the appearance of the will to sovereignty which relates to the inner relation of people to the subjects and objects they desire. Yet, the will to transgress is impracticable ever to achieve because the morality of sovereignty spurns any values linked to utility. Appreciating the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression accordingly contests countless suppositions contained within ordinary life since any pursuit of luxurious enjoyment that is not warranted by the utility is viewed as a violation and therefore sovereign. For example, as indicated previously, the sovereign life of people at weekends starts once their necessities through toiling hard throughout the week are guaranteed, and the pursuit and prospect of life as luxury opens without the hindrance of the laws of necessity. Setting aside functionalist ideas of the luxurious life (e.g. drinking bottles of expensive wine, eating boxes of expensive chocolates), I argue that understanding the desire for abundance and the surpassing of due restrictions and limits through the pursuit of superfluity are important because they are as indispensable to people as gratifying their needs. Individual human defiance of the law of necessity is certainly concerned with the subjective desire for lavish objects but the infringements of people such as everyday luxury consumers must, at a profounder level, be understood as the attempt to construct a life beyond utility, a life that perhaps also resides in the realm of criminality but certainly resides in the realm of sovereignty. The subjective charm and pursuit of luxurious objects are accordingly to be understood as the intellectual and aesthetic attractiveness and pursuit of transgressive acts that lead to sovereignty, to burning up energy and wealth on works and/or creative practices that, in their very characteristics and worth, defend against the ultimate danger to individual independence, which is the consciousness of the cataclysm of death (Bataille, 1988b: 34; Featherstone, 2016: 66–82). Explaining the pursuit of luxury this way has a use value because it permits the reassessment of its status in human society as something that is socially reconstructed, singular instant by singular instant, continually revised, repeatedly renewed, and remediated as a philosophy of the sovereign subject. However, such explanations also license deliberation concerning the pursuit of luxury as something that is not only a transgressive act but also, as a sovereign act, intimately connected to a notion of death. For in an age in which there are no limits, the sovereign individual is the one who has the power to bear the knowledge that there is nothing external to their being, who understands the need to continually acknowledge the individual interiority of their being, and the torment and continuous work of death. Consequently, for Bataille (1992: 429), the sovereign individual 'measures up to that measureless catastrophe' under the menace of which each self has to live, which is the menace of forever living as if that individual were Nietzsche's (1883) 'last man' – the man who is tired of life, takes no risks, and seeks only comfort and security. Subsequently, to fully understand the previous discussion of the provision of a Rolls Royce luxury automobile in terms of transgressive sovereignty, it is important to note that the unruly spirit of those individuals steering it or those social groups traveling in it is a striving for human sovereignty that consists in freeing itself from determinate existence. Indeed, this act of luxury consumption not only produces no use value but is also unencumbered by the banalities of

everyday lives that conform to the laws and directives of society. The desire that is found in individual acts of luxury consumption along with the formation, consumption, and consummation of a craving for overabundance is, therefore, to be understood as the desire of people to elevate themselves beyond life, to participate in the lavish production of excess and loss as a way of examining, bearing, and upholding the work of death. This latter point is less concerned with the pursuit of luxury as meaning and more about the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression where individual acts of human sovereignty become independent through the gesture of putting lives at risk: refusing the economics of necessity, the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression is attached to nothing and preserves nothing. But, unlike the economics of necessity, such acts of transgressive sovereignty do not want to uphold themselves through meagre work, food, sex, investment, or accumulate the proceeds from their own risk. In its place, the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression accepts the economics of negativity, inclusive of individual acts of luxury consumption, that are not ends in themselves but, instead, the luxurious singular instant when people are finally relieved of their expectations. Violating the laws of consumption as subsistence and production, the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression is consequently a condition of imaginatively and intellectually inspired economic development wherein people's usual 'euphoria in unhappiness' (Armitage and Roberts, 2014: 113–132) associated with seemingly endlessly deferred luxury consumption, with the expectation of that future purchase that enslaves them, that subordinates the luxurious singular instant to some projected result in the act of, for instance, purchasing a Patek Philippe luxury watch, is propelled into the presence of the luxurious singular instant that is irradiated by the light of the sovereignty of a life delivered from its servitude (Bataille, 1992: 207). Choosing luxurious acts such as non-generative sex or the buying of a luxury watch as paths to the manifestation of an unruly life must, therefore, be understood as a rejection of the economy of restriction: sovereign individuals establish new customs of luxury consumption through new visions of thought about luxury itself. Indeed, such apparently amoral sovereign individuals often reinstate pre-capitalist acts of luxury consumption or ancient acts of sovereignty that are at odds with capitalism's governing discourse of pleasure. In the French novelist Annie Ernaux's memoir *The Years* (2018), for instance, she is not only disbelieving of capitalism's standing as the terminus of all human activities but also sure that, as Blackhurst (2021: 234; original emphasis) puts it, the 'true luxury of an existence under late capitalism ... is a liberating detachment from the imperative to accumulate more objects, which, subsequently, affords more time to being-in-common' with others. Such elemental acts of sovereignty as Ernaux choosing to separate herself from the pursuit of ever more luxury objects in the name of community are today not so much dismissed as subordinated to that principle of utility which is useful and valuable knowledge. A Bataillian outlook has a use value here because this subordination actually represents a 'horror of the blind spot' where luxurious objects and subjective desire meet (Bataille, 1988a: 113). Yet luxurious objects do not and cannot 'complete' the luxury consumer. Nor is it the case that luxurious objects are 'unnecessary' that accounts for the 'incomplete' consumer who works so tirelessly to be that complete consumer through their knowledge of luxury. Rather, it is the reality that luxurious objects present something in excess of work as mere survival and knowledge to humankind that requires transgression to endure and to manage its basic difficulties. Luxurious objects thus present people with social-historical singular instants of surplus that do not 'work', with the option of partaking in luxuriously transgressive behaviour and creativeness that are inherently incomplete for luxury consumers and who are therefore always left dissatisfied. So it is understandable that, when people travel in a Rolls Royce saloon, the luxury of the journey and the feeling of transgressing existing morality are somehow 'incomplete', despite the fact that such people are now living a life beyond utility. This 'incomplete' feeling on the part of people such as luxury consumers arises even when they are convinced

that they are flouting the laws of an existence inhabited within the sphere of utility. And it arises not because transgressive acts are valueless but because any theorization of the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression must consider the fact that sovereignty is inherently troublesome: for transgressive acts remove the sovereign luxurious singular instant from any vision of meaning and knowledge. The pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression thus wrenches would-be sovereign individuals out of the instrumental rationalism that is the basis of contemporary society and individual identity, morality, and behaviour.

The pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression has a use value as a form of investigation because it exceeds instrumental rationalism: from a Bataillian stance, such a pursuit is a postmodern act of immoderation but only on the condition of the rejection of the meaning of conventional morality. The pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression is linked to the sovereignty of individuals through their willingness to undertake non-servile risk and unimpeded negativity: the pursuit of luxury is the sensation of the almost nothing that is collectivized pleasure and into which the meaning of conventional morality disappears. Moreover, the non-logic of Bataillian sovereignty, transgressive cravings, and magnificent expenditures compel a different association with temporality. This is because, for Bataille, and for any conception of the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression, the deployment of the present-day for the sake of future needs and necessities (i.e. in view of the consequences of the restricted economies of utility) is irreversibly profane since it is servile. Sacred and sovereign is the luxurious singular instant when nothing counts but the singular instant of luxury itself. The pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression cannot be computed just as the unrestricted economies of excess cannot be predicted. What is sovereign is not, for example, the pre-modern literature of the Marquis de Sade, but the sociality of enjoyment, of the luxurious singular instant with others but without having anything else in view but this luxurious singular instant. The pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression is a useful way of understanding luxury because, aside from indicating acts that are transgressive yet agreeable, it emphasizes that the value of such acts from a Bataillian standpoint is to be derived from the feeling of sovereignty. Yet, in their pursuit of acknowledgement and self-determination, people can only experience sovereignty as a consciousness of the luxurious singular instant. However, it is vital that the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression is not understood as a consciousness of the luxurious singular instant that leads to a 'knowledge' of luxury. The assurance of a sovereign existence is contained within the experience of the luxurious singular instant. Heterogeneity, expenditure, and subjectivity are temporal modes, acts, and practices that are aligned with the sovereign action: the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression is an act that, like the 'Desire' luxury cruise noted earlier, is effusively carnal, erotically stimulating, gratifying, and bordering on a miraculous experience. The sovereign luxurious singular instants of the 'Desire' luxury cruise are those amazing feelings of having the possibility of acts of sexual fulfilment, of nudity, and of a debauchery without limits at one's disposal. To take advantage of the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression and of that pursuit's worth, rationale, magnitude, and resources involves participating in the miraculous overcoming of established rationality. Beyond need, the object of a 'Desire' luxury cruise is the human marvel that is sovereign life, a luxurious life of transgression beyond the necessity that calculating rationality defines not as radical erogenous human vitality but as 'moderate' 'clean-living' human homogeneity. The pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression commences with an incredible luxurious singular instant of sovereignty. But how does such a remarkable luxurious singular instant of sovereignty reveal itself other than through non-knowledge or art or sex? It can, for instance, appear among people in the form of informalized religious practices (e.g. 'Louisiana Voodoo', which arose through a syncretism of the traditional ecstatic religions of West Africa, the Roman Catholic form of Christianity, and Haitian Vodou): a Bataillian conception of the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression, as an act of sovereignty, in this example, thus merges informalized Haitian Vodou practices with formalized Roman Catholic practices.

Of consequence to any Bataillian elucidation and use of the idea of the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression is the understanding that the object of transgressive acts which are excessive is to repress thought. Luxurious transgressors seek to remove all knowledge of obedience to calculating rationality from themselves. Sovereign revolt lies in this nearness where processes of thought concerning, for instance, 'correct manners', within contemporary advanced communal social life or calculations regarding notions of possession or utility are deferred. The pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression manifests as the sovereign luxurious singular instant which, from a Bataillian (1992: 203) point of view, is simultaneously a singular instant of extravagant 'unknowing'. Only by refusing each act of calculated knowledge within themselves are people in the luxurious singular instant. The pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression is possible in the grip of fervent emotions that shut off the bounds of the rational or override the flow of everyday thought and behaviour associated with *'the given'*. The pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression is the splendour of the repudiation of calculated knowledge, of the disavowal of a life lived within the constraints and limits of instrumentalism that subordinates every experience to *'the useful'*. Nor can the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression be defined as a science since indissolubility from the consciousness of constraint, proscription-free pleasure in the happiness provided by luxurious physical objects and services are not conditional on the primacy of the future over the singular instant: indeed, any Bataillian understanding of the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression cannot be understood merely as a discourse of luxury because the limitless inner realm of transgressive sovereignty that people occupy does not develop in time but transcends it. Attempting to attain their definitive essence beyond the limits of calculated knowledge, people struggle to break the domination of 'work' in the name of indulgence; for 'work', unlike luxury, is always a servile, rather than a transgressive, action, forever limited and recommenced, forever bereft of sovereignty in action, and forever replicated. Calculated knowledge of being is never infinite and thus never sovereign: to be sovereign calculated knowledge would have to transpire in a luxurious singular instant. But the experience of pleasure that is the singular instant persists beyond the ordinary as a luxury, or beyond all calculated knowledge as the limitless, Godless, transgressive self of post-industrial society.

The final use value of a Bataillian approach to the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression is not merely that it points to acts of hedonism and tacit limits, desire, strivings for acknowledgement, and their movement across social space but to human sovereign acts as extraordinary states of unknowingness, available only in singular instants. The pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression is the pursuit of something luxurious that even people acting transgressively know nothing about; the singular instant of luxury is a discursive space of sovereignty but one that people, as where desire crosses the line into covetousness, know nothing about except that what finally concerns them is not only something limitless or authoritative but also *'supremely important'* to them (Bataille, 1992: 202–203; original emphases). Limitless thoughts, aware and unaware urges thus auto-evaporate into the nothingness of the pursuit of luxury and become transgressive sovereignty at the singular instant they stop being subjective thoughts. Overjoyed outpourings traverse that line, which is attached to the pursuit of luxury, disturbing the sequences of thought of luxurious subjects concerning the intoxication that is the luxurious object. Yet, before that line closes after them, such luxurious subjects experience that privileged singular instant that permits them to live in the now. Compelled to return to the horizon of the inaccessible, luxurious subjects enacting transgression thus yield, for example, the power of the limit that is a necessity, knowledge of liberty, and the pursuit of the calculated self. The consciousness of the singular instant is not sovereign and does not attain value apart from when the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression takes the form of Foucault's spiral – the spiral of unknowing. Only by counteracting their knowledge of the limit of necessity within themselves are luxurious subjects in the singular instant of luxury and not escaping its profoundly transformative capacity to enact forms of transgression. This is

conceivable in the grip of the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression that switches off the limit of necessity and disrupts or overturns the movement of servile thought (Bataille, 1992: 203). A Bataillan view of the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression acknowledges that the object of, for example, sensual pleasure, represses thought that takes all knowledge, of religion, of being, away from those pursuing luxury. Sensual pleasure erupts in the void of socio-cultural thought produced by their object in the thoughts of those pursuing luxury as an act of transgression. Nonetheless, these singular instants, of going to the limits of subjects and objects that are an immoderation, have the ability to capture ideas of satisfaction and eternally recapture the singular instant of desire that matters, the singular instant of the break with conventional morality, and of the fracture of limits. Hence, the possession of objects that are extremely costly is a way of attempting to halt the singular instant of luxury, to immobilize it within people's continually repeated efforts to overcome the limits of necessity. The initial possession of objects that are extremely costly, in particular, is an astounding singular instant when the pursuit of a luxurious method to the act of transgression reveals itself as a form of expectancy that simultaneously disdains necessity and dissolves luxuriousness into nothingness, disconnecting people from 'the useful' and from 'useful' activity.

Conclusion

In closing, it is evident that Bataille's innovative conception of transgression and the acts of transgressive people can be adopted and adapted to advance a novel and significant contemporary theoretical analysis of the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression. Certainly, the argument presented is that far from the pursuit of luxury being an unnecessary pursuit, the pursuit of luxury is a necessary pursuit because it is the manifestation of the will to transgress, a will that can never be fulfilled within the rules of daily life. Moreover, in deliberating the use value of understanding the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression, I have proposed that it is unnecessary to restrict readings of the pursuit of luxury to subjects concerned with affluent objects and environments. For, importantly, the concept and acts of transgression offer a different account of the pursuit of luxury, an account that is focused on subjects engaged with their own sovereignty. The pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression is a way of attaining a form of self-determination that can sometimes involve reaching self-dissolution or self-disintegration but at all times necessitates dislocation; it is a moral vision and one that is intertwined with the inner experience of people concerning the subjects and objects of their desire. Accordingly, a Bataillan description of the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression can be an object of study and a methodology for additional philosophical studies into those qualities possessed by subjects or objects that are expensive and how they become apprehensible as an act of transgression, whether through the erotic features of inner sovereign experience, non-knowledge, taboo, or the repudiation to surrender to 'the useful'. Research on the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression thus understands lavishness and opulence as forces that challenge the ultimate taboo for the sovereign individual: 'the useful'. Extravagant sovereignty is an existential disposition and a critical engagement with the secret mysteries and delights of the human spirit. Surpassing 'the useful' through acts devoted towards the sacred and the marvellous, the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression is not a limit but the unlimited basis for new directions in analyses of luxury and transgression. The proposition is that the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression is the seditious violation of 'the useful' for the sake of sovereignty that exceeds it. Undeniably, this is an atypical interpretation of the pursuit of luxury and of acts of transgression. However, the point has been to reveal how people attempt to rise above the paradoxes and ambiguities of sovereignty in their socio-cultural relationships and in their mission to achieve their human potential. Any contemporary critical theory of the pursuit of luxury is consequently immersed in the association between sovereignty and inner

experience, with the search for whatever is beyond ‘the useful’, with work, and with the nature of servility. This is no easy task given that luxury, transgression, and sovereignty are often interior experiential and oblivious representative configurations that are only disclosed within. Here, we have only alluded to the mysteries of people’s inner interaction with themselves and with others together with their manifestation as an external presence. Further research on the pursuit of luxury as an act of transgression must recognize that it is a demand for sovereignty, an interrogation of the limits of the self, and a critique of the ‘necessities’ of ‘useful’ knowledge.

Note

1. Desire Experience Cruise: <https://www.desireexperience.com/>

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