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I, INSECT

OR

BATAILLE AND THE CRUSH FREAKS

Oh, my prismatic Nymphalidae, my cross-veined Psychidae, my Sesiidae with the delicious anal veins, how could cruelly unimaginative lepidopterists have pinned you to a common corkboard of classification, when after all the world is so shadily large? I'll not commit that crime! So fear repetition not; there remain many seas of blood and cream to be traversed. If this advertisement be not sufficient, I can only protrude my wormlike tendrils of apology, craving forbearance on the grounds that a writer must write about what he knows, and since I know nothing about any subject it scarcely matters where I dabble.

—William T. Vollman, *Butterfly Stories*

I. The Cutting Edge

The etymology of entomology: from Greek *entomon* (insect), *en-* + *temnein* (to cut).

AT THE TOP RIGHT-HAND CORNER of page 107 of my copy of Georges Bataille's book *Erotism*, in a chapter called "Sexual Plethora and Death," is a crusty smudge of filth. Adjacent to this dark spot, which occupies about the space of a big O in 12 point font, are a few words in my script, written years ago, identifying the spot: "dead insect," I inscribed, with an accompanying arrow pointing toward the stain. And beneath the insect's corpse, also in my hand, are the words "sensuality set in motion." This latter phrase refers to the sentence of Bataille's text that caps page 107: "Inevitably linked with the moment of climax," Bataille writes, "there is a minor rupture suggestive of death; and

conversely the idea of death may play a part in setting sensuality in motion.”¹ While I cannot recall precisely why I felt compelled to specify the entomoid origins of the little carnage I had committed, once upon a time, by smashing this bug between the pages of my book, it is clear enough that the insect’s death—crushing, explosive—is an apt physical metaphor for the “minor rupture” of which Bataille speaks. The ictal dimensions of the squashed bug make it the perfect embodiment of a “little death,” as Bataille was fond of calling the orgasm. Indeed, Bataille’s book is dedicated to elaborating the relations obtaining between “death and sensuality.” He examines the linking of sex and death in the inner experience of physical eroticism as well as that of mysticism, which, he explains, is erotically impelled. Comparing the dynamics of physical and mystical eroticism to the ritual killings of sacrifice, Bataille claims that “all eroticism has a sacramental character.”² That is, all eroticism resembles sacrifice insofar as it elicits a rupture in one’s sense of closed individuality; eroticism, like sacrifice, participates in a violence, a violation—an experience of a little death that “jerks us out of a tenacious obsession with the lastingness of our...separate individuality” and plunges us into an experience of sacred communication.³ But it was only recently that I discovered what I now take to be the meaning behind my marginal insect sacrifice—as a way of approaching one of the most troubling phenomena of sexual fetishism—and it is to an exploration of this behavior that I want to dedicate the following pages.

Among the many obscure and bizarre sects of fetishism, few remain so perplexing or so underexamined as that of the “crush freaks.” At the cutting edge of the edgy world of sexual fetishistic practices, the crush freaks are notorious for their enthusiasm for witnessing the crushing death of insects and other, usually invertebrate, animals, such as arachnids, crustaceans, and worms.⁴ More specifically, crush freaks are sexually aroused by the sight of an insect exploded beneath the pressure of a human foot—usually, but not necessarily, a relatively large and beautiful female foot. Sometimes the insects meet their demise under the force exerted by a naked big toe. Other times, it is the impaling heel of a stiletto or the raised outsole of a platform shoe that accomplishes the extermination. The crush freak typically fantasizes identification with the insect as he or she masturbates and savors the sense of sudden, explosive mutilation attendant upon the sight of the pedal extrusions. Jeff “The Bug” Vilencia, the foremost spokesperson for crush enthusiasts, describes his ecstasy thus: “At the

¹ Georges Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, trans. Mary Dalwood (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1962),107.

² Bataille, *Erotism*,15.

³ Bataille, *Erotism* ,16.

⁴ Some crush freaks extend their enjoyment to the death of vertebrates, such as “pinkies” (baby mice), goldfish, frogs, and larger animals. Thankfully, these instances of crush freakism appear to be relatively rare.

point of orgasm, in my mind all of my guts are being squished out. My eyeballs are popping out, my brain comes shooting out the top of my head, all my blood squirts everywhere... What a release, that imagery really get me off! Seeing that foot coming down on me, coming into my stomach and pressing all that weight on to me till I burst! Wow!"⁵ "In this perturbing reconfiguration of ritual animal sacrifice, the final murderous stomp usually brings on [the crush freak's] orgasm—the 'little death' achieved by the actual death of his living proxy."⁶

What meager attention this macabre practice has received in the way of analysis leaves much to be desired. Indeed, the bizarre habits of the crush freaks are generally not so much discussed as referenced and not so much analyzed as glibly described. And even self-proclaimed deviants consider such gruesome itineraries "too disturbing and scary for words," "truly beyond the pale."⁷ Of the few attempts to treat this strange byway of cultural entomology, very few go beyond a statement of highly ambivalent fascination coupled with brief illustrations of the fetish. For example, in a short article on the subject, G.A. Pearson, an entomologist at North Carolina State University, offers a few anecdotal accounts of the fetish's manifestations before summing up with this disappointing conclusion: "Clearly, I just don't get the whole crush predilection. However, there seems to be very few crush freaks, so I don't think the invertebrate world is in great danger. Crush fetishists represent a fascinating example of the human ability to eroticize just about any activity: in this case, one of interest to entomologists."⁸ Katharine Gates, author of *Deviant Desires*, a compendium of "incredibly strange sex," does somewhat better than Pearson. She contextualizes crush freakism as a subset of both foot fetishism and as an "arcane elaboration of the giantess theme"⁹ dear to macrophiles, who fantasize about being trampled to death by Godzilla-like women. Unfortunately, her essay is dedicated almost exclusively to describing her encounter with Jeff "The Bug" Vilencia. While supplying raw "ethnographic" data, which I will draw upon presently, the essay provides scant analysis, and comes across as little more than an oversimplified etiological account of Vilencia's fetish. The harrowing descriptions of insects, crayfish, and their ilk being smeared by feminine toes, and the comical descriptions of the bug-man himself, raise questions that they in no way begin to answer. Both the entomologist and the sexual ethnographer

⁵ Vilencia quoted in Katharine Gates, *Deviant Desires: Incredibly Strange Sex* (New York: RE/Search Publications, 2000), 133. Bataille might have delighted in Vilencia's imagery, if not his expression of it, which resonates with his own. See, for example, "The Pineal Eye," *Visions of Excess*, ed. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 79-90.

⁶ Gates, *Deviant Desires*, 133.

⁷ Gates here cites the reaction of "another deviant" to Jeff Vilencia's practices.

⁸ G.A. Pearson, "Insect Fetish Objects," *Cultural Entomology Digest* no. 4 (November 1991). <http://www.insects.org/ced4/crush_freaks.html>

⁹ Gates, *Deviant Desires*, 133.

appear to lack the interpretive equipment for approaching a phenomenon of this sort.

In order to understand a sect of fetishism as sinister and scandalous as the crush freaks, I would suggest that “we need to employ a comparable hermeneutical tool.”¹⁰ I want to propose that the insights of the French thinker Bataille provide a helpful starting point for analyzing the crush freaks. The author of highly disturbing pornographic novels and equally disturbing theoretical work, Bataille was once called by André Breton the “excrement philosopher.” But this scathing sobriquet points to precisely what makes Bataille so useful in understanding human sexuality in all its polymorphous perversity. In fact, Bataille’s writings on ritual sacrifice and mystical experience help provide a fuller understanding of the bizarre rituals of the crush freaks.

Both the writings and life of Bataille evidence an obsession with religion. In his teens, Bataille converted to Catholicism and contemplated entering the priesthood before renouncing his faith in order to fashion himself as an erotic mystic of decadence. Bataille’s writings on religion are as heterodox and filthy as he was. But if it is the case, as Wendy Doniger suggests, that we need to employ a variety of methodological tools to interpret various sorts of religious phenomena,¹¹ I would suggest it is also the case that we need many tools to interpret the vicissitudes of erotic experience. In particular, I want to employ Bataille’s notion of wounding, in the registers of sacrificial eroticism and mysticism, in order to advance my own rather bizarre hypothesis: that crush freakism is best understood not, or not only, as a subset of foot fetishism or macrophilia,¹² but rather as an ambivalent manifestation of technophilia, sexual arousal associated with machinery. Crush freakism, I submit, devolves in part on a violent literalization of the analogies between insects and machines.¹³ Moreover, this literalization emerges through a certain dialectic of typicality and anomaly, normativity and perversion, part and parcel of machine culture. I will

¹⁰ Hugh Urban makes this suggestion in relation to the Kapalikas, a heterodox Hindu sect of medieval India. See “The Remnants of Desire: Sacrificial Violence and Sexual Transgression in the Cult of the Kapalikas and in the Writings of Georges Bataille,” *Religion* (1995), 25, 67-90.

¹¹ See Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes and Other Mythical Beasts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 5-7.

¹² The prominence of the big toe for the crush freaks would also lend itself to Bataillean analysis. See Bataille’s essay “The Big Toe,” *Visions of Excess*, 20-23. Macrophilia, too, might be fruitfully analyzed through Bataille’s writings on mysticism and sacrifice, in which the individual is extinguished beneath the sacred “immensity” and returned to impersonal “continuity.”

¹³ This formulation is itself an analogy of Seltzer’s construal of the relations between machines and human bodies in serial killing. See *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America’s Wound Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 33, where he states the thesis that has inspired some of my reflections in this paper: “Serial killing...devolves in part on a violent *literalization* of the analogies between bodies and technologies, persons and landscapes, one identity and another, one body and another, one death an another.”

argue that the crush freaks are the vanguard of a new kind of sexuality, one that bridges the realms of the technological and the theological, machines and mysticism.

Though I hope to go some way beyond former analyses of the crush freaks, I obviously cannot contend here with the numerous ethical questions that would have to accompany a fuller study of the subject. Moreover, I can only hope that my discussion is taken to be "less ideologically complicit with these tendencies than critically expository of them."¹⁴ Concerns revolving around gender, animal rights, pornography, and the problems of witnessing and representation are just a few ethical issues that demand attention. The present study can provide only provisional adumbrations for working out the "messy moral conundrums"¹⁵ raised by the practices of the crush freaks. Thus what I offer here is but a prolegomenon to any future elaboration of the lurid socioentomology of crush culture.¹⁶

II. Atrocity Exhibitions: Sacrificial Eroticism and Mysticism in Vilencia and Bataille

"There is no better way to know death than to link it with some
licentious image."

—The Marquis de Sade, cited in Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*

Historically, the advent of the crush freak phenomenon can be traced to the 1960s, with the emerging availability of home recording equipment. It was then that short crush films and videos first appeared, in 8mm format.¹⁷ The coincidence of technology and crushophilia is patent in the career of Jeff Vilencia, as well. Vilencia, a resident of California, "makes his living in film and video, and he used to work part-time as a film specialist helping to restore 1950s

¹⁴ Hal Foster claims this on behalf of Max Ernst and Hans Bellmer in regard to their engagement with fascism. See "Armor Fou," *October* 56 (Spring 1991), 97.

¹⁵ As Gates aptly puts it. She discusses her own ambivalence about including Vilencia in her book.

"All of the other deviants are fairly harmless—they're not hurting anybody or anything but themselves. Their desires may be weird, but at least they're consensual." But she decides to include him, though with this caveat: "Jeff is a complex and intelligent person whose stories and opinions are worth hearing. He's definitely no saint, but his sins are interesting ones that force us to look long and hard at our own sometimes inconsistent ethical universe." *Deviant Desires*, 134.

¹⁶ Here I am referencing Mark Seltzer, who speaks of the "lurid sociobiology" of serial killing. My discussion of the specifically technophilic aspect of crush freakism owes much to his analysis of the phenomenon of serial killing in relation to the machine age in *Serial Killers*.

¹⁷ Gates, *Deviant Desires*, 136.

[television] shows.”¹⁸ He creates his own crush films in a garage studio which doubles as a screening room. It was here that he recorded the vermicular ablations comprised in his infamous 16mm experimental short, evocatively entitled *Smush*.¹⁹ The film opens “portentously with a dedication to Richard von Krafft-Ebing, author of the classic tome *Psychopathia Sexualis*.” Filmed in grainy black-and-white and thickly scored with “surreally echoing sound effects,” Vilencia proclaims his minuscule masterpiece a “stylistic paean to Jean-Luc Goddard.”²⁰ Until 1999, when the House passed a bill outlawing the sale of videotapes depicting animal torture and killing,²¹ Vilencia was creating, reproducing, and distributing ten to fourteen crush videos a year through his film company, Squish Productions. In addition, Vilencia is the founder and editor of *The American Journal of the Crush-Freaks*, a photocopied publication offering pseudo-scientific articles on the psychiatric profession, “detailed profiles of individual readers as ‘specimens’ for scientific study,” and most comically, a book review section, featuring primarily gardening books by women, in which “Vilencia systematically reproduces every sentence in the book where the...author suggests ‘stomping,’ ‘crushing,’ or ‘squishing’ bugs.”²²

But Vilencia’s passion for collecting, recording, reproducing, and disseminating extends beyond the domain of his crushophilia strictly speaking—and in a manner suggesting that behind his patent freakism is a more reticent fetishism, a technophilia oriented toward machines in general, and technologies of reproduction in particular. Katharine Gates’s account of her meeting with Vilencia provides crucial facts for my analysis. And while I do not yet have sufficient data to know if Vilencia can be held up as an exemplar of crush freakism, I hope that making salient some of the details of his case will provide the groundwork not only for the present discussion, but for future investigation, as well. So, let us consider Gates’s account of her visit to Vilencia’s studio.

Gates reports that on the day of her interview with Vilencia, she became “completely lost” in trying to find the studio. She was “looking for [a] ranch-style house, but it was just one of hundreds of absolutely identical ranch-style houses in identical streets and neighborhoods in the seemingly endless suburban sprawls south of Los Angeles.” At the conclusion of her lost wanderings through

¹⁸ Gates, *Deviant Desires*, 134.

¹⁹ Though not insects, worms might be thought in the same conceptual register as insects. Moreover, it is worth noting in the context of the present essay that “worms” have recently gained prominence in the world of computer technology, where they designate a particularly pernicious and insidious form of internet sabotage.

²⁰ Gates, *Deviant Desires*, 135. My description of the video, as well as the biographical information about Vilencia himself, is drawn from her account.

²¹ Allowances are made for videos with “serious religious, political, scientific, educational, journalistic, historical, or artistic value.” See Gates, *Deviant Desires*, 145.

²² Gates, *Deviant Desires*, 137.

the “desolate SoCal landscape,” Gates finally arrives at Vilencia’s door. Here she is greeted by the Bug himself, who, she reports with surprise, is an average-enough looking guy, a regular California “type.” The first thing she notes about the studio environs are the “racks upon racks of shelves filled with thousands of old vinyl records”—a collection of over 20,000 LPs (all classical music).

In the course of the subsequent interview, Vilencia describes his rather questionable means for procuring the elusive conditions of his gratification. Sometimes he calls the authors of the gardening books to discuss their preferred bug-crushing techniques. On other occasions he will solicit fantasies from random women over the phone, asking those who consent to participate, “What would you do if a bug crawled into your room?” Little do the women know that they are providing telephonic stimulation for their onanistic interlocutor.²³ Vilencia will also occasionally release cockroaches onto public grounds, pointing them out to female pedestrians, and recording the subsequent smash parade with a video camera.

The eagerly forthcoming Vilencia relates the following childhood dream scenario: “In the dream, a friend of mine and I went to a woman’s house. I didn’t know who the woman was, but she invited us in and she put us in one of the old washing machines with two giant wringers. She put us through these wringers and she flattened us out and...walked all over us.” He then comments upon his delight in being impounded within Temple Grandin’s therapeutic “squeeze machine,” designed for autistic people. “I was in it!” he proclaims. “You get in and you pull this lever and there are these two big pieces of padded wood...and you can control the pressure. That’s what’s interesting, that you can control the pressure.”²⁴

A bit further on, Vilencia meditates on the role of television in shaping his perversion. Blaming or crediting pop culture for his peculiar tastes—he is ambivalent on this point—Vilencia notes that the ‘pulsating electronic image’ of TV exerts a hypnotic fascination over its viewers: “Television has always been getting bad raps,” Vilencia pontificates, “and here’s another one you can add to the list. I’ve talked to thirty guys who got off watching a TV commercial. [T]his TV commercial set the stage for their life-long fetishistic behavior. Now that’s radical. What else can television cause?” Yet Vilencia appreciatively recalls²⁵ a decisive, if minor, television trauma from his own childhood: an encounter, via a commercial, with a gigantic B.F. Goodrich go-go model which instilled in him a

²³ Gates, *Deviant Desires*, 141.

²⁴ Vilencia quoted in Gates, *Deviant Desires*, 140.

²⁵ Appreciatively insofar as he registers no regret in having seen the commercial, and desires to keep the resulting sexual fetish intact.

delight in feeling small, overwhelmed. Indeed, the discotheque rhythms of the enormous go-go girl and the pulsing of the hypnotic TV mimic each other in a coalescence of message and medium; each fascinates, each seduces, and each overwhelms.

This coincidence of seduction and reduction takes on religious overtones for Vilencia. Again recalling his childhood, Vilencia speaks of the “voice of God” narration of sex ed films and their intimidating but provocative aura of erotic mystery.²⁶ Moreover, like his macrophilic cousins, Vilencia adopts a worshipful attitude vis-à-vis his gigantic sex goddesses.²⁷ “If she steps down hard enough,” Vilencia gushes, “sometimes parts of my body will stick to her foot, and she will have to wipe her sexy foot off... Then my entrails exude as I am flattened out of existence by my Goddess.”²⁸ Beneath the enormity of the sacred, the exoskeleton bursts with a pleasurable and ablative emission.

The crushed insect or worm is an important metaphor for Bataille, whose writings illuminate certain aspects of the crush freaks’ odd behavior. In his minuscule but influential essay “Formless,” Bataille claims, in language that might merit reproduction in one of Vilencia’s reviews, that “formless” is not only an adjective but an operation “that serves to bring things down in the world... What it designates has no rights in any sense and gets itself squashed everywhere, like a spider or an earthworm.” In this regard, the formless crushed bug or freak, parody of the Kantian sublime, is that in comparison with which everything is large. But Bataille goes on to claim that the sacred immensity of the universe itself is formless, and is therefore “something like a [crushed] spider or spittle.”²⁹

The bursting of bodies mirrors the transgression of social boundaries in the writings of Bataille. According to him, social restrictions are part of the profane realm of labor and production. However, human beings possess an ineradicable urge to exceed these boundaries, to expend and deplete themselves and thereby enter into mystical communication with the formless immensity of the sacred. For Bataille, ritual sacrifice and erotic excess are the foremost means by which to accomplish such exorbitant expenditure. Breaking prohibitions on sex and death thus provide the most powerful experiences of liberating transgression. Such transgressions “violate the utilitarian values of society through non-productive

²⁶ Mystery—or just confusion? In any case, Vilencia cites these films as a crucial component in his erotic development. See Gates, *Deviant Desires*, 144.

²⁷ Vilencia developed a sexual attraction to an obese neighbor. Necessity being the mother of invention, he concocted a fantasy in which he became a bug that was stepped on by the woman across the street. See Gates, *Deviant Desires*, 141.

²⁸ Vilencia quoted in Gates, *Deviant Desires*, 37.

²⁹ Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, 31.

excess, violence or pleasure"; "both break down the normal social rules which divide human beings from one another."³⁰ Non-utilitarian sacrifice and non-reproductive pleasure engender an expenditure of the self, a sense of being crushed by the immensity of the sacred in a manner at once agonizing and ecstatic. "Love expresses a need for sacrifice," Bataille claims, "each unity must lose itself in some other which exceeds it... [I]n erotic frenzy...the being is led to tear itself apart and lose itself."³¹

Like ritual sacrifice, both eroticism and mysticism provoke an experience of wounding, an opening of the body or the psyche in a death of the finite individual ego, and in communication with an other person—or with the wholly Other, the sacred. "Excess, laceration, and loss of substance" are the expressions of what Bataille calls a "will to loss," the desire to burst boundaries. "There is no communication more profound," he claims. "[T]wo beings are lost in a convulsion that binds them together. But they only communicate when losing a part of themselves. Communication ties them together with wounds, where their unity and integrity dissipate in fever."³² But the sacrifice that might elicit such a rupture of personal homogeneity operates according to a logic of identification that assumes a sacrificer and a victim. Elaborating his theory, Bataille claims that in looking directly at the victim of sacrifice, the sacrificer masochistically identifies with the victim; witnessing the animal's literal death, he experiences a little death—a minor rupture that lacerates his closed, socially determined, individuality.

I do not want to suggest, on the one hand, that the ritualized immolation of insects by the crush freaks can be simplistically reduced to Bataille's theories of sexuality and transgression. Nor would I wish, on the other hand, to insist that such "sacrifices" be considered sacred in more than an analogical manner. But I do think that Bataille's notion of sacrificial wounding helps us to understand Valencia and the crush freaks' identification with their victims, their consecration of lethal sex as the act of supreme sacrifice, and the ecstatic burst that accompanies an expulsive loss of substance and sudden "detumescence" of the over-socialized ego.³³ Moreover, with its depiction of an overwhelming sacred excess, it goes some way in explaining the pseudo-mystical dimensions of Vilencia's exuberance.

³⁰ Urban, "The Remnants of Desire," 75.

³¹ Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, 250.

³² Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, 250.

³³ In a discussion of Roger Caillois's work on "legendary psychasthenia" in the insect world, Denis Hollier speaks of the "subjective detumescence" exhibited by insects as they blend into their floral milieu. See "Mimesis and Castration 1937," in *October*, no. 31 (Winter 1984), 3-15.

III. Inside Out

"As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods; They kill us for their sport."

—William Shakespeare, *King Lear*

While Bataille's writings provide an approach to the fetish in question, I think we need to expand Bataille's wound to encompass the technophilic aspect of the crush freaks in general and Vilencia in particular. Cultural critic Mark Seltzer provides an apt framework for considering this aspect, and it is here that I want to take a more serious tone. Drawing on sources in popular culture and psychoanalysis, as well as the writings of Bataille and other theorists, Seltzer articulates an account of America's "wound culture." "The convening of the public around scenes of violence," Seltzer explains, "has come to make up a *wound culture*: the public fascination with torn and open bodies and torn and opened persons, a collective gathering around shock, trauma, and the wound."³⁴ Literally and figuratively, the wound is the breach that marks the crossing of the public/private boundary. It is "the icon, or stigma, of the everyday openness of every body" which defines "a culture of the atrocity exhibition, in which people wear their damage like badges of identity."³⁵

In particular, Seltzer is concerned with the modern phenomenon of serial violence, which he claims is the "form of public violence proper to [our contemporary] machine culture"³⁶ with its technologies of mass replication and simulation. Information and people mimic each other, giving way to an intimacy of machines and bodies, technology and personality. Analogies between the body and technology—as in the metaphor of incorporation, for example—and between persons and landscapes, one body and another, one death and another, designate the conditions of serial violence.³⁷ Citing historical cases (such as that of Ted Bundy) as well as fictional accounts (such as J.G. Ballard's *Crash* and Dennis Cooper's character "Mr. Xerox"), Seltzer claims that such acts reveal "an erotics at the crossing point of private fantasy and public space. These 'atrocity exhibitions' disclose, in the form of a spectacular corporeal/machinal violence, a drive to make mass technology and public space a vehicle of private desire and, collaterally, to...realize...private desire in public spectacle: the spectacles of

³⁴ Seltzer, *Serial Killers*, 1.

³⁵ Seltzer, *Serial Killers*, 2.

³⁶ Seltzer, *Serial Killers*, 17.

³⁷ Seltzer, *Serial Killers*, 33.

public sex and public violence.”³⁸

Jeff Vilencia’s disturbing acts of serial violence, and the landscape in which they are executed, exhibit just such a crossing of public and private; indeed, Vilencia startlingly exemplifies the serial killer profile. Living near the recursive loops of highways, in one of ‘hundreds of absolutely identical houses in identical streets in the endless suburban sprawls south of Los Angeles,’ Vilencia exhibits a “hyperidentification with place” that is “typical in cases of serial violence.” This identification is attributable, Seltzer argues, to “the subject’s feeling of a radical determination from the outside in,” a determination that Vilencia attests to numerous times in the course of his interview—determination by television, by popular culture, by childhood trauma. This results in a failure of distinction between subject and scene—a “deep absorption in typicality itself.”³⁹ Indeed, as Gates reports, Vilencia is a California “type,” not readily distinguishable from his neighbors. He works, moreover, among a collection of 20,000 LPs, and amidst recording equipment (video cameras) and reproductive technologies (photocopiers)—testaments to a penchant for collection, organization, and mechanical reproduction typical of those suffering the radical erosion of boundaries between self and other, private and public, machine and body.

This collapse of “distinction between living and machinal processes”⁴⁰ is evident in the literalization of the analogies of insects and machines. That insects *as* machines have invaded the popular imagination is patent. Beginning in the 1920s, the surrealists reacted to encroaching machinery by ambivalently embracing the insect and the mannequin, each possessing numerous articulations and machinic motions, each displaying an uncanny amalgam of the organic and mechanical—a fluctuation between life and death. But such combinations of industrial/mechanical processes and insect life are found virtually everywhere: in hackneyed similes (such as “busy as a bee” or “industrious as an ant”); in technological metaphors (bugs or worms in the system); in television (the hive mind of *Star Trek*’s Borg); in movies (the entomorphic machines in “The Matrix” or in more examples of Cronenberg’s work than can be mentioned); and in fiction (Burroughs’s disturbing miscegenations of insects and writing machines),⁴¹ to cite but a very few examples.

It is not difficult to see why insects make such apt metaphors for technology.

³⁸ Seltzer, *Serial Killers*, 31.

³⁹ See Seltzer, *Serial Killers*, 48-52.

⁴⁰ Seltzer, *Serial Killers*, 40.

⁴¹ The relations in the writings of William S. Burroughs between insects and technology, words and bugs, vermin and viruses would make the subject of another study.

Their highly organized labor, machine-like movements, and apparently imputrescible exoskeletons all liken them to machines. Moreover, the virtual indistinguishability to the human eye of, say, one ant from another in a colony perfectly describes the anxiety-provoking typicality associated with the increasing intimacy of humans and machines. This living metaphor has thus become a metaphor for vital declivity; the insect, a symbol of the machine, is also the machinic harbinger of death. The movement from organic to mechanical is literalized in the many recent occasions of technology mimicking insects, as in the mounting production of entomorphic robots. If the insect is a metaphor for machinery, it is now also its literal embodiment—both a model of technology, and a model for technology.

I would suggest that this inescapable association of insect and machine is at work in the dynamics of Vilencia's fetish and that the exorbitant pleasures of his crush executions mask an eroticized anxiety vis-à-vis technology. This fetish operates on the literalization of the bug-machine analogy, and allows the crush freak to master the anxieties produced by machine culture through an indulgence in the ecstasies of technology. As I hope to show, it purports an explosive depletion of the human subject even while elevating and thereby reclaiming the subject.

The relays between insects and technology can be associated with the relays between inner and outer, between public spaces or mass spectacle, and private spaces or inner experience. Indeed, the insect's outer skeleton has provided a metaphor for thinking about ego formation. In this vein, one might recall the protective carapace of the animalcule in Freud's famous exposé of trauma, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.⁴² But some critics suggest that in today's machine culture, the traumatically formed ego must be "understood as a social ego, a muscle-armor that is...painfully drilled into and fused onto the individual," machine-like. This form of ego "seems likely to be incapable of escaping the danger of immediate fragmentation on contact with living life, unless it is inserted into some larger social formation that guarantees and maintains its boundaries."⁴³ Formed violently from the outside in, this "social substitute skin" creates an insect-like exoskeleton. Mark Seltzer builds upon this notion, affirming that perpetrators of serial violence require "a kind of behavioral skeleton—much like an insect—to provide an architecture for their fantasies and a structure to the violence that informs their conscious existence." This is, then, "the formation of the killer with a machine-like or devivified periphery: the man whose interior has lost its meaning in its utter dependence on the mechanical drills binding him to external and social forms."⁴⁴ Serial violence, spectacularly

⁴² See Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 1920. Standard Edition.

⁴³ Klaus Theweleit cited in Seltzer, *Serial Killers*, 51.

⁴⁴ Seltzer, *Serial Killers*, 51.

executed and compulsively reproduced, not only reenacts the violent penetration of the body or psyche by external forces; at the same time it grants what it had first sought to suture up: open interiors, visible insides—thus an evacuation of innards that would otherwise remain vacuous, meaningless.

The image of Vilencia, atypically typical, ensconced in his machinery and enveloped in an undifferentiated landscape like an insect blending in with its surroundings, affirms what these theories suggest: that the Bug-man's subjectivity is formed like that of other serial killers—through a traumatic intrusion of socializing forces that do not render the subject armored and invulnerable, but externally dependent and easily crushed. The compulsive, serial recapitulation of the breaking of the outside in culminates, for Vilencia as for his homicidal counterparts, in an eroticized bursting of the insides out. Taking literally the notion of the socially-formed ego as a technologically-produced outer skin, Vilencia is able, through his identification with insect victims, simultaneously to reenact the traumatic formation of subjectivity even while ecstatically exploding his oversocialized exoskeleton.

Vilencia's ambivalent ritualized killing thus proceeds by way of a peculiar dialectic of typicality and aberration, normativity and perversion. For although Vilencia is statistically anonymous, he is also sexually anomalous. Typical in appearance and thoroughly integrated with his social surroundings, he is also a self-proclaimed freak. I would suggest, however, that the freakishness of Vilencia is not the cause but rather the desired outcome of his lethal rituals, which depend for their effectiveness on the very socio-sexual boundaries they seek to transgress. In my discussion of Bataille, I pointed out that sacrificial killing and perverse sexuality both elicit a bursting of the boundaries that define the self, and that in masochistically identifying with the victim or the other, the sacrificer/lover participates in a form of non-productive expenditure, an explosive depletion of the self. Following these same lines, Vilencia's perverse rites, combining sexual pleasure and death, at once assume and transgress normal, or normative, sexual behavior, predicated on reproduction. Indeed, it is in recording his insect sacrifices that Vilencia is able to reconfigure sexual reproduction as mechanical reproduction; thus "Squish Productions" treats copulation as commerce—a sterile productivity at once profitable and perverse.

Vilencia himself makes clear that he sees his perverse but perfectible technological reproductions⁴⁵ as surrogates for normal but imperfect sexual

⁴⁵ On this point, Jonathan Z. Smith's theory of ritual as a "focusing lens" may prove illuminating. Smith argues that rituals such as sacrifice allow practitioners to express the precise and ideal conditions in which everyday activities might be carried out. "[R]itual activities are an exaggeration of everyday activities, but an exaggeration that reduces rather than enlarges, that

reproduction. "I don't know anybody whose first sexual experience was any good or worth repeating, maybe not even the first ten," he exclaims. Gates comments that Vilencia "has no desire to conform to the rest of the world by getting married and having children." She then quotes the Bug: "A lot of people say, 'I'd like to reproduce myself.' Well I say, 'Are you worth reproducing? I'm not!'"⁴⁶ But Vilencia's technologically reproduced sex scenes reveal the ambivalent logic operating behind his apparently straightforward sentiment. Vilencia delights in reproducing his symptom, indulging his mania for technological reproduction. In other words, he reproduces himself as an anomaly, a technophile, through the public display of his atrocity exhibitions.

The ambivalence goes further, of course, for if the literalization of the analogy of insect and technology holds, then we must acknowledge that Vilencia, like the insect with whom he identifies, is himself a collision of the organic and the mechanical. But nothing is more obvious than the fact that Vilencia, even if identifying with the insect, is also the orchestrator of the sacrifice. Bataille, who never forgets that it is the victim and not the sacrificer who is actually struck down, insists that there is an element of sadism in every occasion of masochism. I would insist, likewise, that while Vilencia may claim identification with the insect, he also merges, as orchestrator of the ritual, with the giantess committing the crime. He delights, one will recall, not only in being crushed by the squeeze machine, but in his ability to 'control the pressure' of the machine.

Indeed, the effectiveness of Vilencia's bizarre erotic rituals finally hinges on a dialectic of control and release and operates through a promiscuous commutability between the technological and the organic, the machinal and the human. In a bid to master the deadly, de-humanizing effects of machine culture, Vilencia at once identifies with the source of anxiety and destroys it, sanctifying and sacrificing it. On the one hand, he demonizes technology. Feeling himself crushed by the serial incursions of machine culture, he seeks to crush the insect that acts as a surrogate for the machine—thus a killing of the killing machine. On the other hand, he divinizes the very thing he fears. The machines that impound him, like the terrifying wringers that invade even his dreams, are erotically reconfigured as goddesses who paradoxically incarnate what Walter Benjamin calls the "sex appeal of the inorganic." The goddesses are fearful in their power, but they are capable of granting the boon of a pleasurable experience of emission.

clarifies by miniaturizing in order to achieve sharp focus. ... Ritual precises ambiguities." See "The Domestication of Sacrifice," in Walter Burkert, René Girard, and Jonathan Z. Smith, *Violent Origins: Ritual Killing and Cultural Formation*, ed. Robert G. Hareton-Kelly (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 194. See also Smith's "The Bare Facts of Ritual," *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 53-65.

⁴⁶ Gates, *Deviant Desires*, 145.

The crushing of the exoskeleton by the deity thus gives to sight what had been in doubt: an organic, and hence human, substance—the stuff of life. This, one might say, describes the technology of machine mysticism: merging with the machine, being taken over by it, as a means of obtaining a visceral, human, inner experience. At once producing and reducing anxiety, lethal and thrilling, these operations affirm a more general point about the human in today's machine culture, a point that might be summed up with a variation on Salvador Dali's famous formulation: The only difference between myself and a machine is that *I am not a machine*.

Thus the scandal—and the lesson—of the crush freak phenomenon is double. It dramatically displays both an anxious loss of the self in machine culture as well as the possibility for visceral experience achieved precisely by way of consumption, or depletion, within the technological milieu. As Hal Foster claims of trauma discourse, of which the present case is an instance, the subject is “evacuated and elevated at once,” its boundaries simultaneously transgressed and shored up.⁴⁷ The duplicitous anthropological vision that emerges from these observations affirms that our humanity may have to be lost in order to be regained, reconfigured in order to survive its own productions. What remains profoundly troubling, therefore, is that “humanity” thus construed is inseparable from the multiplication of wounds that kill it. Bataille would tell us that in some sense, this is nothing new; love and death, sex and violence, have never been very far apart. What is unique to our age, and what the crush freaks make disturbingly clear, is that technological reproduction may outpace, or replace, sexual reproduction, dissolving our species in rhythms of anxiety and ecstasy.

Death arrives like a machine. Eros comes in swarms.

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⁴⁷ Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press), 168. See also Seltzer, *Serial Killers*, 140, where the author claims that “it is precisely the boundaries between inside and outside that are violently breached and shored up, transgressed and reaffirmed” in the formation of the subjectivity of serial killers.