



Review of Kent Brintnall, *Ecce Homo: The Male-Body-In-Pain as Redemptive Figure* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011) 220 pp.

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Kent Brintnall's *Ecce Homo: The Male-Body-In-Pain as Redemptive Figure* is a profoundly responsible reconciliation of art, religion, feminism, and queer studies. The work is seductive, beautiful, and at times forces the reader to pause in awe at the momentary loss of self invoked by the text. And, this is the point. Through exhaustively analyzing action films, Robert Mapplethorpe's photography, and Francis Bacon's paintings through a Batailleian lens or what could also be called Barthesian *punctum*, Brintnall manages to maintain the reader's attention, lacerating the reader's very subjectivity.

The work is divided into four major sections, preceded by a prelude and followed by a postlude. Both the prelude and postlude challenge dominant thoughts on George Bataille's work, and the *meat* of the work is a performative negotiation through an examination of several mediums—thoroughly Batailleian in intention and affect. Unlike some other secondary sources on Bataille, Brintnall *consciously recognizes the paradox inherent* in any attempt to essentialize Bataille's works. With this in mind, and in using Bataille's own texts as well as the aforementioned works of others, Brintnall posits what might be considered insurrectionary notions of gender semiotics.

The prelude of *Ecce Homo* entails a discussion of an image depicting the brutal "death by 1000 cuts," an actual photo series that was near and dear to Bataille. Specifically, Brintnall is attempting to rectify errors of perception that other scholars have run with in their own attempts at minimizing/problematizing both Bataille's content, and style. To Brintnall, the point of Bataille's work is to force subjects to meditate, become vulnerable, and only at this point can communication (and perhaps glimpses of immanence) materialize. The theme of the male-body-in-pain (such as Jesus' as we are reminded throughout the book) is such a point of rupture, often (intentionally? unconsciously?) overlooked. Regarding the divine-male-body, the crucifixion image as no longer valid for the purpose of subjective rupture is a Batailleian theme that Brintnall elaborates upon in a digestible manner.

The first chapter on action films titled "Suffering|Triumph" explores various action films, positing several observations. One such observation is the idea that "homoeroticism demands a sadomasochistic story" (p. 33), meaning that the blatantly homoerotic depictions and performances of protagonists in action films is attractive to the viewers due not to the hypermasculine, nearly nude actors, but to the violence and carnage that he both takes and inflicts (at least this is what the viewer must tell himself). This chapter goes on to discuss notions of verisimilitude and Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ*, raising questions about feminist theology through the plot of the film. Again, Brintnall calls for questioning of

theological and subjective convictions in the focus he calls to the (divine) male-body-in-pain. The chapter ends by suggesting that acknowledging our own fragility will be imperative to a new (political) future. Though sound on its own, this chapter seamlessly plants the seeds for the psychoanalytic investigation of masculinity and masochism that follows.

The second chapter, titled “Masochism|Masculinity” provides an overview of psychoanalytic discourse relevant primarily to Freudian notions of masculine subjectivity. Brintnall introduces Lacan, and more contemporary thinkers (Hollywood, Silverman, Mulvey, among others) to chime in on the issue, gracefully positing his own thoughts on the subject. Again true to Bataillean fashion, Brintnall, in a manner that exhibits his own thorough consideration and research on the topic, stands much of psychoanalysis on its head. About Freud’s notions of normative masculinity, Brintnall observes (through a rigorous preceding discussion) that “masculinity and homosexuality are, ultimately, both founded on the penis’s desirability” (p. 91). This is perhaps one of the easier to digest postulates that Brintnall puts forth in this heady section. This chapter initially seems unnecessarily intense, an intuition that a careful reader would need to see past. The dense, yet readily accessible information conveyed in this chapter is imperative to later sections, especially the postlude. Again, Brintnall closes this chapter by pointing out the necessity of vulnerability (the “lessons of death”) in order for “the foundation of a new way of expressing self and seeing the other” (p. 99) to actualize. In pointing towards different events and mediums that can perform this novel means of existing, Brintnall moves on to discuss the works of Robert Mapplethorpe in the third chapter.

Like the preceding chapters, the third chapter begins by employing Bataille’s works in order to transition into the specific topic of investigation. In this chapter titled “Content|Form,” the mission is to “consider the startling—and, [Brintnall] will argue, politically productive—juxtapositions in Robert Mapplethorpe’s photographs” (p. 103). Brintnall, like Bataille, acknowledges the possibility of artwork (due to being outside the realm of discursivity) to rupture the personhood of the viewer. In particular, Brintnall finds this utility in Mapplethorpe’s photographs. Brintnall gives a thorough examination of Mapplethorpe’s work, providing accounts from various critics and thinkers. Brintnall expresses that “these images offer a critical apparatus for seeing cultural representations of masculine subjectivity and homoerotic desire differently” (p. 115). Brintnall acknowledges the well-founded critiques that Mapplethorpe’s depictions of black men propagate racist ideology. However, he calls for a closer examination of the impact of such works putting forth that this promulgation is not necessarily the result. It is precisely this sort of close (re)examination of art (and culture, religion, gender, psychoanalysis) that Brintnall sees to be imperative. In calling attention to deeper issues, Brintnall escapes the glaringly obvious critiques that much historical criticism cannot seem to move past. For Brintnall, seeing Mapplethorpe’s work as (only) racist, Bataille’s work as (only) pornographic, and the works of various psychoanalysts as (only) propagating gender binaries (amongst other problematic ideologies) is to miss the opportunity for profound self-evaluation (implicit the notion that self-evaluation has broader, social impacts). This chapter closes with the affirmation of willing degradation, as was the case with Jesus. This active inclusion of masculinity (in evoking notions of the *male*

body willingly suffering) serves as a smooth transition to the discussion of Francis Bacon's paintings that follows in chapter four.

Again, Brintnall opens the chapter by discussing Bataille's works and then flawlessly transitions into examinations of Bacon's paintings. The discussion, of course, focuses on the male-body-in-pain that Bacon so relentlessly expresses in much of his work. It is in this section that Brintnall most clearly expresses the connection between the crucifixion of Jesus and art: "Just as certain Christian discourses command the believer to identify with the crucified body on the cross, the formal devices of Bacon's paintings compel the viewer to identify with the mutilated body on the canvas" (p. 165). Brintnall meditates in this chapter on the vulnerability of the male body that is depicted over and over again in various paintings by Bacon. In doing so, as he does throughout the book, he pushes against dominant conceptions of male superiority and invulnerability (without ever denying the existing hegemonic gender implications). Brintnall warns against the theological penchant of assigning meaning to the crucifixion, in that doing so brings the adherent further away from meaning. Such paradox, fluently woven throughout this text, is deeply Batailleian. The chapter closes in what seems to be the suggestion that the call for active and conscious vulnerability in men is actualized in Bacon's paintings, which force vulnerability on the disrupted viewer.

The postlude elegantly ties the book's themes together. It assumes and takes seriously the postulates put forth in the previous sections in order to discuss what Brintnall perceives to be problematic analyses of Bataille's work. His generative interpretation, through examples and other scholarship (primarily Hollywood), is convincing and laudable. Brintnall notes the heterological doubling that takes place in Bataille's works concerning gender and other issues. In doing so, he is able to put forth very strong arguments against the ways in which other scholars have approached Bataille's works. What Brintnall offers is a feminist, queer, and ultimately *Batailleian* understanding of Bataille that maneuvers deeper through the symbolism and semantics than previous scholarship has been able to do. He closes the postlude (and the book) with the following sentences: "Bataille imagines a space of anguished ecstasy that propels the desiring subject and desired object beyond subjectivity, beyond objectivity, beyond gender, beyond identity. Propelled, through rupture, into fragmentation, we find ourselves-by losing ourselves-anew" (p. 197).

Overall, this book is compelling and laudable. However, certain caution to the reader is warranted. Brintnall employs a set of stars/asterisks periodically throughout the book that seem to demarcate a new/different line of thought. This is both invaluable and confusing at times. The reader will have to pay close attention in order to not confuse lines of thought (though the book *can* be digested intelligibly without attention to such demarcation). Likewise, bodies of italicized text throughout the book serve as an authorial locator, which perhaps has danger in distracting the reader. The exhaustive investigations of action movies, psychoanalytic theory, and the works of Mapplethorpe and Bacon at times seem unnecessarily thorough in the moment, dangerously bordering on losing the reader's attention. Personally, it was precisely that such detailed account held *my* attention that I was moved by the text. This is perhaps one mechanism through which the work is performative. I would encourage the reader to stick with the detailed analyses, and trust in the payoff.

This book has immense utility in various stratum of academia. Taken in its entirety, it has set the bar for scholars seeking generative appropriation of Bataille in their own projects. Previous attempts by other scholars fall short in comparison; however, they are necessary building blocks in the culmination of this book. To scholars and students of feminism, queer studies, masculinity studies, and gender studies this book provides an invaluable *different* approach to traditional issues explored in these fields. Employing action films in discussing masculinity and vulnerability *through* the hermeneutic of informed thought (gender studies, etc) has academic capital in its innovation and practicality. Regarding scholars and students of art (film, painting, photography) particular sections on specific works, terminology and approaches have pedagogical value. The book provides overviews of discourse on certain works/mediums/interpretations, and the works cited section is a valuable map for scholars and students of the art referenced. Lastly, in the field of literature and literary criticism, this book will earn its esteem. The book itself is performative: Brintnall negotiates this Bataillean affect on the reader in a fluid manner, making the text as a whole worthy of literary investigation and appreciation.

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