
Documents from Head to Toe: Bodies of Knowledge in the Works of Paul Otlet and Georges Bataille

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ABSTRACT

This article contrasts Paul Otlet's epistemology of documents with that of Georges Bataille's in the late 1920s and early 1930s in regard to the body parts that they assign as sites and analogues for documents. A double meaning to the notion of documents emerges, defensive and offensive of and to twentieth-century European scientific epistemology, morality, and aesthetics: documents as the full and truthful representation of reality, and documents as the material inscription of social, cultural, and physical affordances leading to the reality of irrational drives. The brain as the site of the mind is said to be the physical location given to the former, and "the body" is the physical site given to the latter, reinforcing a traditional Western anatomical psychology determined by ideational and materialist ontologies and corresponding traditional bodily tropes for "reason" and "the senses."

We believe that we think with our brain. But I think with my feet. It's only there that I meet with something hard. I have seen enough electro-encephalograms to know that there is no shadow of a thought.

—Jacques Lacan, speaking at MIT (cited in Apollon and Feldstein 1996)

INTRODUCTION

The only research that I know of that addresses the works of the early to mid-twentieth century French librarian, philosopher, and social critic Georges Bataille (1897–1962) in regard to what we often refer to as European Documentation is that of an article by Isabelle Rieusset-Lemarié

(1997).¹ In her article, she contrasts Georges Bataille's "acephalous" or headless politics with Paul Otlet's (1868–1944) contemporaneous tendency toward monumentality (architectural and bibliographic) and the corresponding hierarchical and elitist politics suggested in his works.

Surely, Bataille's works are absent from the information science canon not only because of the pornographic literary genesis of some of his works but also due to his anthropological influences, which promoted a materialism of experience over an idealism of pure knowledge via "information" (or in his day, the term was largely "documentation"). But beyond this, Bataille's Nietzschean criticism of positive science led to a tension with both "information" and "information science" in the early modern form of the document, understood as a container for such information. For Bataille, documents are not containers for information; instead, they indicate social, cultural, and physical powers or affordances. They inscribe and index reality rather than represent it. They are extensions and powers of sense, rather than of reason. And for this reason, Bataille's works engage literary works and ritual, even in their more philosophical performances, rather than taking themselves as scientific.

But for this as well, in their reification of "sense," particularly through anatomical body parts furthest removed from the brain (as the physical site of the mind, and therefore of reason, according to the anatomical psychology of the Western cultural tradition), Bataille's works border on a reversal of classical metaphysics, which remains, however, metaphysical. This, however, is a metaphysics of sense rather than a metaphysics of reason (just as Martin Heidegger [1979] argued Nietzsche had done).²

It is not only Bataille's acephalous vision of politics developed in his journal *Acéphale* (1936–1939) that is important to note in contrast with Otlet's elite liberalism, but, as Giorgio Agamben (2004) noted, Bataille's fascination with the headless and the animalistic began earlier with his articles in, and as the editor of, the Parisian journal *Documents* in 1929–1930. If Vincent Debaene (2014) is correct in asserting that the notion of the document was contested in the beginning of the twentieth century as much as the concept of information was at the end of that century, then Bataille's conception of the document (influenced by the rise of French ethnology) is worth examining in contrast to the notion of documents held by Paul Otlet. Interesting and telling sites of this contestation are the body parts that each of these writers assign as physiological indexes for documentary evidence.

In this paper, I will focus upon Bataille's articles in *Documents*, especially his article, "The Big Toe." For Bataille, the human body, and so the mind, is what it is because standing depends on the big toe, and so it is the big toe that most creates the possibility for a specifically human mode of consciousness and action in the manner of being an erect animal. In contrast to Paul Otlet's epistemology, where the brain is the anatomic equivalent

to the document and the mind in the brain is equivalent (as content) to the information in documents (and so, conversely, the document or generalized book is posited as an external storage space for the mind [Otlet 1934; Rayward 1999]), for Bataille the analogous body part for documents is the foot, and particularly the big toe, which is the basis for human erection and so for much that follows as human being. For Bataille, human culture literally stands on the big toe, as information “stands on” the materiality of documents. Far from being a purely playful trope of surrealist disruption, Bataille’s celebration of the big toe is a vehicle for arguing for a materialist, rather than an idealist, foundation for documents, which carries with it various contrasts, such as movement versus stasis, culture as standing on excess and debris rather than ideal symmetry, “primitivism” rather than “the West” as the basis of civilization, documents as performative exchange versus transmission (Buckland 2014), and the realist privilege given to photographs over line drawings. (The very sites and material forms of documentation in the library to which each man devoted his career at that time also suggest different roots for their epistemologies and ontologies of documentation: Bataille worked in the medallion and coin collection in the Bibliothèque Nationale, and Otlet worked primarily with books and other paper documents in his Mundaneum.)

Overall, Bataille in his writings enacted the Nietzschean critique of Western cultural idealism and Nietzsche’s metaphysical inversion of rationalism by bodily sense. This type of critique was not uncommon after the collapse of Western European cultural and moral values following the First World War. And in the light of the Second World War, the nuclear age, and many other sites of both traditional and new forms of civic horror, it continued in performative art, body art, and many other “body”-centered epistemologies, as well as in celebrations of “irrationality,” insanity, some forms of feminism, and many other forms of “antirationalism,” at least through the later parts of the twentieth century in the avant-garde arts and in cultural critiques more largely, which continues to this day.

Bataille’s works in *Documents* were influenced by the use of photography in documentary works, as well as by emerging French ethnology (Debaene 2014; Métraux 1963), where visual anthropology (e.g., “documentaries”) played a key role in evidence production. Those photographs by virtue of their subject matter, their banality, and their depictions of representations of excess and frenzy, were taken as antiaesthetic. In contrast, in Otlet’s works, though photography is an important metaphor for not only perception but also cognition, photographs are almost never used, but instead, documentary and cognitive functions are illustrated in line drawings, illustrating speculative psychological and sociological theories of documentary evidence and theories of mind. In Otlet’s works, the cognitive and epistemological ideal of photographs as exact reproductions of reality are depicted in a manner that no photograph can perform. And the represen-

tations in the illustrations give ideal and harmonious depictions of various activities in the world and supposed states of mind. In Bataille's works, documentary photography serves to indicate that which exceeds beautiful representation, whereas in Otlet's works, illustrations serve to depict an underlying or possible utopian reason to the world. In Bataille's works, documents can only be indexical, since what is depicted refers to the text surrounding the photograph and the empirical world and the experiences of the reader. In contrast, Otlet's use of illustrative documents is toward depicting a beautiful harmony of reason as existing in the formal quality of rhetorical closure in documents and through organizations of knowledge in practices of documentation. The two contrasting sides of the Kantian aesthetic are here displayed: photography as suggestive of the excessive or sublime, and illustrations as the depiction of the harmony of psychological faculties in documents and documentary practices.

PAUL OTLET AND DOCUMENTATION

Paul Otlet is a well-known theorist of European documentation who needs little introduction in the field of information science. He is considered one of the founders of modern documentation and of information science, particularly if we understand the term *information* to mean the ideational "contents" of documents (Balnaves and Willson 2011; Day 2014).

For Otlet, documents are containers for not only information but also knowledge. This collapsing of information and knowledge is possible because for Otlet documents contain "facts." Facts are, in turn, complex and simple, corresponding to larger and smaller atomic chunks of documents and their information content.

Otlet's works on documentation are amalgamations of practical principles of document management and various philosophical perspectives held together by naïve empiricism and a type of logical positivism that is epistemically grounded in bibliographic classification systems. Documents, for Otlet, representationally contain simple and complex facts, which are reflected in bibliographic abstracts, classification systems, and other "knowledge organizations" (Day 2016).

For Otlet, facts are "contained" in minds. They are reflections of simple and complex states of the empirical world. In his *Traité de documentation: le livre sur le livre, théorie et pratique* (1934), Otlet discusses documents as an external mind, and he discusses language along the lines of Saussure's earlier "circuit de la parole"—an intersubjective circuitry of transmitted mental "messages" or ideas (Day 2001). We can succinctly see Otlet's theory of knowledge and the role of documents in the following diagram from the *Traité* (fig. 1).

Here we have an illustration of books as ideational registrants of the facts of the external world and the transmission of those ideas from one mind to another via reading, speech, exhibits, and photography. Photog-

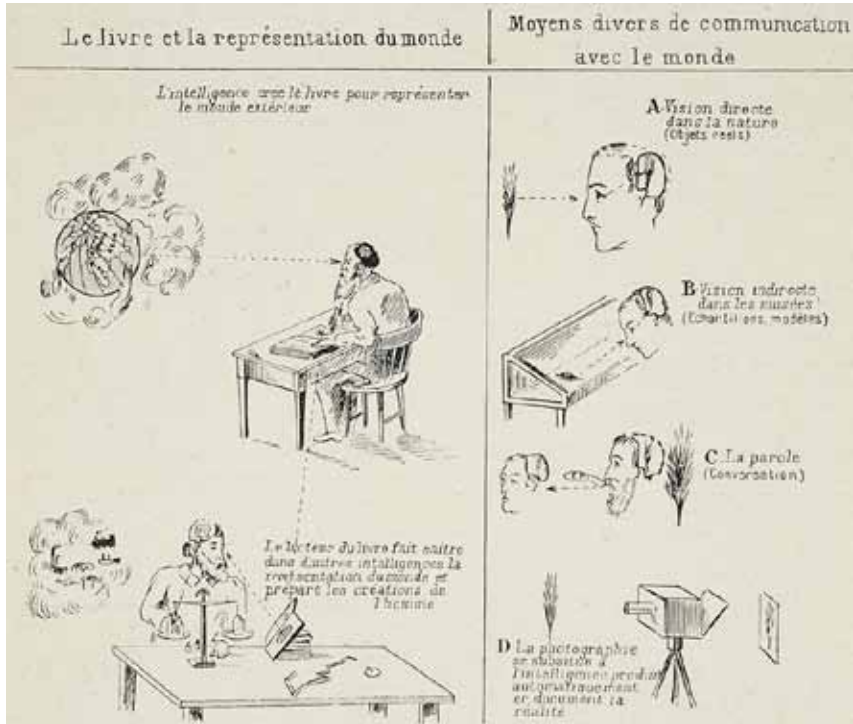


Figure 1. Documentation epistemology (Otlet 1934).

raphy is given an exemplary role here, supplementing the mind as a documentary device for representing reality.

It is curious that in Otlet's works there are no photographs, but rather only drawings. Perhaps there was a technical reason in printing and publication for this, but, epistemically, illustrations play the appropriate role of showing the idealistic and grand scale of Otlet's visions, whereas photographs could lack both these qualities and would require a more concrete and limited version of his visions. Otlet's drawings were numerous, and they represent a significant contribution to his work.

We should note, as well, the role of the depiction of the stalk of wheat in the above illustration. It is shown as a particular object under the gaze and as a sample of a type within an exhibit under the gaze. The illustration suggests that the camera, as a substitute for perception and cognition, does both at once. Particulars and their essential, universal properties within documentary systems and institutions, as well as recording and knowledge, are constantly confused in Otlet's works. The systems of documentation, like the camera apparatus itself, are constantly erased from the event of an entity's representation.

The cognitive privilege given to the head is obvious from this illustration as well: knowledge is a property of the mind, which is located in a brain, and as such is surrounded by the sensory organs of the eyes, ears, and the communicative means of the mouth. For Otlet, a document is a material container for an idea, just as the brain is the container for the mind.

That the head is the site of the mind (which is conscious and rational) and the body is the site of the senses, is also very clear in the curious little cutouts below (fig. 2), which come from Otlet's archives in Mons, Belgium. In them, space and time are understood, as in Kant's works, as *a priori* conditions of consciousness, organizing the senses of the body below the head:



Figure 2. Otlet's human cutouts. ©Collection Mundaneum–Mons; image: PO objets divers02.

It is not simply the psychological location of the mind in the head that is important here, of course. It is the cultural location of the mind in the head that is important as well, namely, as the brain is seen as the seat of reason and science. In this psychological-epistemic topology, reason and science do not “belong” to those body parts of the mobile senses, but rather to the supposedly immobile organ that is elevated transcendently to the senses below and outside of it and organize the later as cognition. Only as such can reason literally and figuratively stand above the “bodily” senses.

Correspondingly, in Otlet's works the essence of empirical entities is represented in books, as books (and other documentary devices that take after the book) are the "transcendental" organizers and containers of the senses via representations; they are made up of reason and logos. In Otlet's documentary epistemology, such essences are ordered by the aboutness categories and the logics of classification systems, which themselves abstract their contents from books. The library was envisioned by Otlet as the place of the representation of the world in its essential properties and relations.

Finally, in contrast to Bataille, for whom violence was intrinsic for both the sense and the consciousness of humankind in civilizations, for Otlet violence and war literally take men and bend them out of their perfect and harmonious shapes, as we can see in the following ephemeral item (fig. 3), also from Otlet's archives, which depict war's distorting effects upon the natural individual and social bodies of "man."

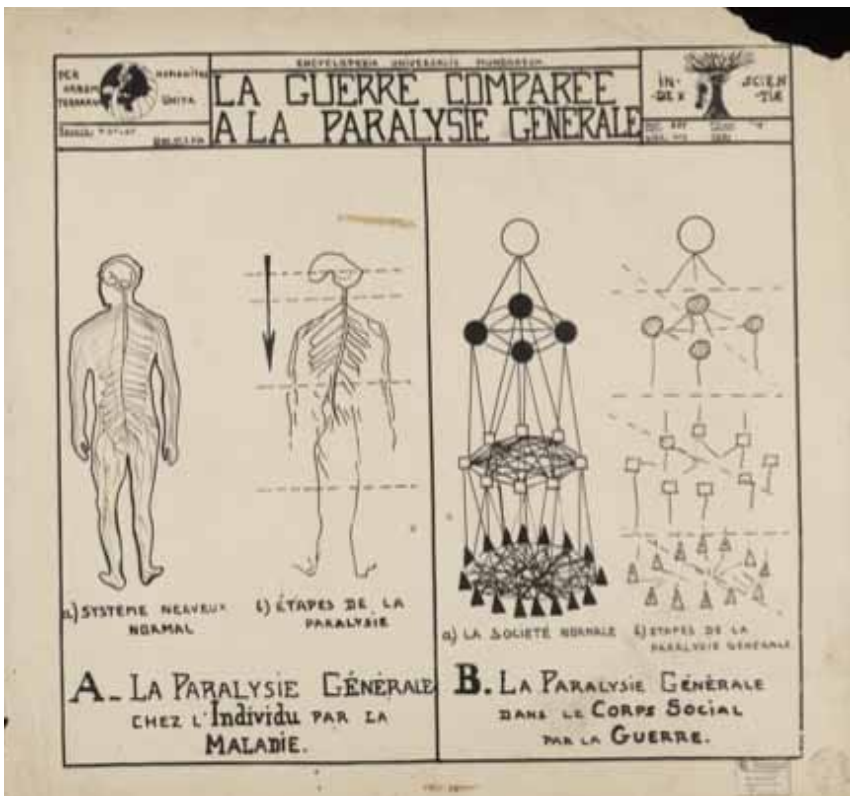


Figure 3. Otlet: Social Coordination in Peace. ©Collection Mundaneum-Mons; image: MUND-00010582_2008_0001_MA.jpg.

GEORGES BATAILLE AND DOCUMENTS

In contrast to Otlet's documentary epistemology, we now turn to the work of the French novelist and philosopher Georges Bataille, who also was a professional librarian at the French Bibliothèque Nationale, first as the head of the Department of Medallions and later in the Printed Books Department. Bataille was at the Bibliothèque Nationale for nearly twenty years, and then he became a librarian in Orléans. At the very end of his life, increasingly ill, he was reappointed to the Bibliothèque Nationale, an appointment that was never fulfilled due to his death.

Other than in Vincent Debaene's (2014) more broad work on French ethnology, the importance of the term *document* in Bataille's works appears to have been neglected. Perhaps we can account for this, in part, by the lack of explicit reference to documentation and librarianship in Bataille's own works. We do know, however, that Bataille was known by at least his European documentalist and Bibliothèque Nationale colleague Suzanne Briet, who mentions Bataille in her autobiography (Briet, 1976)).

In Briet's oeuvre, her work as a librarian and documentalist stands in complete silence in regard to her other work as a literary critique specializing on the nineteenth-century poet Arthur Rimbaud. Generally, there is an equal silence in Bataille's works between his professional and literary/philosophical activities. However, we might infer from Bataille's writings in the journal *Documents* and in his oeuvre more generally a rejection of the notion of documents as essentialist representations of the world. In examining their works, we find that Otlet and Bataille's notions of documents as evidence rest on very different epistemological commitments.

There is an important distinction between, on the one hand, Otlet's notion of the document as a container for the representation of the world and, on the other hand, Bataille's understanding of documents as evidence for discovering the world. Whereas the first tends toward the sign as the representation of the essence of what is, the second uses representations—such as photographs—as reference points for exploring the world and coming to understand it through experience. Whereas the first tends toward essentialism and positivism, the second embeds means of representation in materialist claims of experience. This is true even in Bataille's more philosophical or theoretical works.

Representation occurs in Bataille's works both through philosophical speculation or "theory" and through literary works, and, as in the case of his articles in *Documents*, through a mixed genre of both of these. In his literary writing and in his works in *Documents*, there are juxtapositions of empirical representations and literary devices, toward forcing a "surreal" depiction. This surrealist narrative describes a philosophical theme of desire and excess that Bataille claims operates beneath all human—and indeed, more generally, "animal"—reality. Likewise, though Bataille's lit-

erary works are sometimes seen as belonging to the work of the modern avant-garde, it is not so much because of the radicalness of their formal experimentation but, rather, because of their pornographic and “extreme” contents. They are representational narratives whose surrealist character is in part due to their obscene sexual content—the surreal lengths that an empirical or realist narrative is drawn out into a sexually grounded philosophy based on violence and excess.

Otlet’s and Bataille’s works are contrasts in notions of sense, as well. Whereas in Otlet’s works sense is organized in personal brains and the representational signs that compose minds in such, in Bataille’s works mind is a cultural form, enacted through cultural rituals and economies of energy investment and expenditure. While their common point of intersection is that of the documented body, the nature of that body is very distinct and is indexed to and analogized by different body parts that have traditionally been assigned the roles of reason (the brain) and sense (the furthest from the brain, the toes).

In as much as one can see Otlet’s project as a desire to recompose through documentation the wreck of nineteenth-century European culture and reason, which was laid to waste in the First World War, one can see Bataille’s project as that of unearthing what he thought to be universal qualities of violence, consumption, and squalor, which, in a highly accumulated and excessive form, financed (economically and symbolically) “European culture” and the Western “Enlightenment” through colonialism, racism, and war. In short, *document* signified for Otlet the theological book of the logos that contains reason, whereas for Bataille the term signifies evidence of the material processes and their economic drives that resulted in such logos. For example, the image outside of a slaughter house by Eli Lotar, which was commissioned by Bataille for his *Documents*’ “Critical Dictionary” section entitled “Abattoir” (Slaughter House) (Ades and Baker 2006), depicts cow legs neatly lined up outside a Parisian slaughter house. Here are depicted the literal basis for gastronomic good taste in Paris.

As was mentioned, Bataille’s literary avant-garde status is not due to his work’s contestation of formal innovation in the way, for example, that Russian constructivism was. Bataille’s literary works are relatively devoid of formal innovation, other than that of utilizing violent thematic contrasts (as Luis Buñuel did in the opening of his 1930 film, *L’Age d’or*). For surrealism, as an inheritor of Dada, narrative shock techniques functioned as critical levers upon cultural good taste, fine arts, and high literature and arts, rupturing cultural context and opening up the realist field to a “surrealist” foundation, where a deeper level of drives could supposedly be found. For Bataille, aesthetic judgments of harmonious and beautiful works, including the harmony of reason, were masks for a Nietzschean will to power. Formal or thematic violence in his literary writings suggested a

more “universal,” “unconscious,” and “irrational” field of reality. If, for Otlet, documents give evidence of clear and distinct truths, for Bataille they document truth as a product of shifting indexes of meaning.

In Bataille’s works, closure and accumulation is disrupted and expended, which is the reason for its accumulation in the first place. All being lies in becoming, and all beings are merely a becoming that never fully achieves a permanent mode of being. Accumulation attempts to overcome finitude, but it expends itself to such a degree that what is shown is that accumulation is not the goal, but rather, expenditure is—an expenditure that depletes the very being itself. This provokes for Bataille a literature that echoes Nietzsche’s “*gaya scienza*”—the philosophy of laughter in the face of ironic existence. Reason is founded on expenditure—of others and one’s self. For Bataille, Western “civilized man” is not the most rational, but rather the most hypocritical, because such a civilization denies in its sense of culture and civilization what is at its base, namely, “dirty,” irrational violence.

GEORGES BATAILLE’S “THE BIG TOE”

Above, we have discussed Lotar’s photograph of cow legs outside of a Parisian slaughterhouse. In his article, “Le gros orteil” (The big toe) from the first issue of *Documents* in 1930, Bataille argues for the primacy of the big toe in differentiating human beings from other animals, and as being the literal foundation of human being. The two photographs provided in the article (by J.-A. Boiffard, both captioned in translation, the “Big Toe [Male subject, 30 years old]”) as evidence of the importance of the big toe is not that of any famous big toe, but of a rather ordinary big toe.

Bataille’s article describes the (ig)nobility of the big toe as the literal base for human being and its reason:

The big toe is the most human part of the human body in the sense that no other element of the body is as differentiated from the corresponding element of the anthropoid ape (chimpanzee, gorilla, orangutan, or gibbon). This is due to the fact that the ape is tree dwelling, whereas man moves on the earth without clinging to branches, having himself become a tree, in other words raising himself straight up in the air like a tree, and all the more beautiful for the correctness of his erection. In addition, the function of the human foot consists in giving a firm foundation to the erection of which man is so proud (the big toe, ceasing to grasp branches is applied to the ground in the same plane as the other toes.)

But whatever the role played in the erection by the foot, man, who has a light head, in other words, a head raised to the heavens and heavenly things, sees it as spit, on the pretext that he has his foot in the mud. (Bataille 1985)

Characteristically, as with all important “infrastructure,” including that of one’s own body, the big toe and its importance are often ignored by its users until breakdown:

Man willingly imagines himself to be like the god Neptune, stilling his own waves, with majesty; nevertheless, the bellowing waves of the viscera, in more or less incessant inflation and upheaval, brusquely put an end to his dignity. Blind, but tranquil and strangely despising his obscure baseness, a given person, ready to call to mind the grandeurs of human history, as when his glance ascends a monument testifying to the grandeur of his nation, is topped in mid-flight by an atrocious pain in his big toe because, though the most noble of animals, he nevertheless has corns on his feet; in other words, he has feet, and these feet independently lead an ignoble life. (Bataille 1985)

Bataille ends "The Big Toe" by challenging the very epistemic claims for a "higher state" in André Breton's surrealism, suggesting that what the Bretonian surrealists saw via unconscious poetic states is in reality as clear as what is at their feet: the literal base for human being, that is, the big toe. Surrealism is "beyond" realism, but not by being "higher," not by being closer to reason in the head, but by being lower, at the feet. Whereas the Breton's group of Parisian surrealists sought a higher reality that reconciled contradictions in harmonious beauty, for Bataille, reality lie in aesthetic ugliness and the overturning of European good taste, toward the senses of "the body." No unconscious states and no drugs were necessary for a glimpse at reality, but rather, only an overturning of taste and a critique of the genealogy of Western morals. For Bataille, unconscious states are not necessary for seeing the importance of the big toe, but rather, one must only take the point of view of a base materialism:

The meaning of this article lies in its insistence on a direct and explicit questioning of seductiveness, without taking into account poetic concoctions that are, ultimately, nothing but a diversion (most human beings are naturally feeble and can only abandon themselves to their instincts when in a poetic haze). A return to reality does not imply any new acceptances, but means that one is seduced in a base manner, without transpositions and to the point of screaming, opening his eyes wide: opening them wide, then, before a big toe. (Bataille 1985)

CONCLUSION

If Paul Otlet is sometimes seen as the father of our modern notion of information as knowledge content, then Georges Bataille's works have to be seen as intervening in this notion by reinjecting the cultural, social, and physical conditions for something to be taken as evidence (i.e., as documentary "informing"). To this is attached, as well, an epistemology based in sense, so that what the document itself signifies is not what it contains, but what it references by its processes of situated experiential indexes and inscriptions. Documents "contain" information only through the cultural processes, physical entities, and social norms that they are indexed to. Since, for Bataille, such affordances are organized by economies of simultaneous accumulation and expenditure, "information" itself is a process of simultaneous construction and destruction. The result is a cognitive

model where rational states are at most idealistic constructs, the product of senses that are organized and disorganized by the constructive and destructive drives of eros.

Whereas Otlet's texts and their images depict a rationally clean and harmonious utopia that is literally embedded in a documentary- or information-based society, Bataille sees modern culture as being deeply invested in the denial of its own material conditions, including illusions about the material conditions and forms for its social facts. Whereas for Otlet violence and the possibility for violence in misunderstanding are contrary to the beautiful harmony of essentialist and transcendental "facts," for Bataille, these "facts" rest on the historical facts of slaughter, consumption, and excess production, relegated to the borderlands of knowledge and to exotic lands that are other to Europe. For Otlet, culture, and particularly the culture of documentation, serves civilization as the highest embodiment of reason or order; for Bataille such an order is always based on an exclusion of the very basis of such order, namely, the violence of the exclusion of exclusion, the sacrifice of sacrifice for an ideal order, the denial of the base (big toes, laborers, slaves, the colonies) for the self-celebration of those who live off of them. For Bataille, no one can forever mask the dirty reality of the literal and metaphoric big toe.

Whereas Otlet saw bibliographic order and the knowledge of books as the cure for the chaos of the First World War and would see them as the answer to the encroaching Second World War, for Bataille European cultural and intellectual identity and feelings of cultural and moral superiority were based on the denial of the material facts of colonialism, class exploitation, and species greed, slaughter, and consumption, which were the basis of such wealth. This is so much so that a rather traditional orientalism arguably creeps back into Bataille's works; if Europe has reason and history, the Americas, Africa, and Asia have sensuality. It isn't that Bataille so much critiqued European civilization by an "other," but rather that he read it in terms of the other, though as being hypocritical and excessive even beyond "primitive" tastes by moral indignation and technologies of accumulation. If European Classicism had its origin and reason in "the glory" of Ancient Greece and Rome, and modernism was its triumph, then Bataille's orientalism has its anthropological primitivism outside of Europe, which however is then reread upon the even more extreme violence that results in "Europe" in the early twentieth century.

Otlet's works on documentation attempt to give evidence to documents by means of a writing that never ceases to end. Otlet can't stop telling us, in any one book or in all his books together, how simple everything is. He can't stop writing "the book on the book" (or the book on anything, for that matter). Everything is swept up in its textual and documentary accumulation, but one that cannot stop accumulating.

In Bataille's works, during a crucial shift in the meaning of science in

French anthropology, the philosophy of documents follows what seems to be its historical progression since the beginning of Western philosophy but, during modernity, interpreted in a dialectical and inverted form: from representing particulars by essential universals to representing essential universals in particulars. In Bataille's literary works, evidence of being is performed by particular representational characters in situations, and for this, it also belongs in a certain tradition of the literary and artistic modern avant-garde, which will culminate later in the twentieth century in terms of performance art. It is to literature that the particular as particular is indexed, though in its fictionality such performances mean that the representations paradoxically invite consideration as to their universality by acting as evidentiary—documentary—models (Roux and Courbières 2014).

In sum, we must recognize the very important significance that links the body of documentation to the documented body in twentieth-century modernity. The tension between the trope of "the body" as a sign of universal essences or as a sign of its own existential affordances that index it is reflected in two similar poles for the notion of documents earlier in that century. The philosophy of documentation, the philosophy of evidence, is stretched between these two poles, both earlier with the term *documentation* and more recently with the term *information*. Cartesian dualism, as well as an entire history of metaphysics reaching back to the beginnings of Western philosophy as a philosophy of evidence or documents is tightly bound up with a psychological and epistemic topologies based on anatomical tropes of the body.

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NOTES

1. However, a meditation on the meaning of documents in Bataille's articles and critical dictionary is performed in Maria Victoria Gaburro de Zorzi's master's dissertation, in Portuguese (2013).
2. Consequently, Bataille's anthropologically and literary-influenced notion of documents can be seen as a radically exterior modernist counter to the Otletian notion of information as ideational content, or, it can be seen as the dialectic counter within a metaphysics of a single idea of evidence, which I call *documentarity*. Whether one sees Bataille as "radical" (and "the body," too, as a radical counter to "the mind") depends on whether one is viewing the matter from within or outside of the modernist dialectic as it runs through philosophy, literature, and more generally "Western" culture.

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