

Luxus:

A Thanatology of Luxury from Nero to Bataille

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I

Luxury and Empire

In this paper I propose to develop an *aneconomic* theory of luxury that locates the meaning of the state and experience of the luxurious beyond *restricted economics* in the space of the sacred. In this respect, I will seek to propose a theological understanding of luxury, with the qualification that what we might call the theology of the luxurious is essentially *atheological* by virtue of its lack of a Godhead. Against classic interpretations of the history of luxury, such as those of Berry (1994) and Howard Adams (2012), my objective in this paper is, therefore, to try to separate the notion of luxury and the luxurious from its dependence on ideas of need and necessity, which tends to confine luxury to an abstract space of excessive quantity, and instead develop an understanding of the human or more precisely non-human quality of the luxurious. However, in order to reach this state, and suggest a theory of the *quality* of luxury, my discussion will pass through the work of Berry (1994) and others who have shown how luxury resides on the other side of necessity. While my paper seeks to move beyond Berry's work, his discussion has influenced my analysis, primarily because his theory of the demoralisation of luxury informed my position that luxury may function as a critical device able to transgress neoliberal, capitalist, realism and the kind of utilitarian calculus which has come to dominate contemporary society (Fisher, 2009). Under these conditions need, necessity, and

utility is everything and the world is organised around a form of instrumental rationality which cannot accept waste and useless expenditure.

However, there is a sense in which the discussion and analysis of luxury, and in particular a discussion and analysis of luxury in contemporary global capitalism, unlocks a critical perspective capable of moving beyond this utilitarian position. That is to say that an exploration of the idea of luxury enables a shift in perspective which takes in both Weber's (2010) vision of capitalism, where instrumental rationality necessarily results in an austere approach to life and the world, *and* Sombart's (1967) alternative view, which explains how capitalism revolves around enjoyment, excess, and centrally sexual desire. Given these two spirits of capitalism, which revolve around austerity and luxury, I would suggest that it would be a mistake to imagine that neoliberal global capitalism is simply an iron cage, where instrumental rationality is everything, an instead show how it is possible to locate a space, and world, beyond this miserly condition, in the state of the luxurious. In order to develop this position, I want to extend Sombart's claim that capitalism is founded in sexual desire into a Freudian (2001) theory of desire and, beyond desire, drive, where the psychoanalytic economy of lack and the satisfaction of lack collapses towards a paradoxical space of absolute plenitude and infinite poverty. The essential point of my paper is that this moment, the moment of drive, which is accessible through the state and experience of the luxurious, may open out onto the possibility of a world beyond what Fisher (2009) talks about in terms of contemporary global capitalist realism. In what follows, then, I seek to construct a psycho-political theory of the *quality* of luxury and the *quality* of the luxurious through a consideration of Roman luxury, which I explore through reference to the relationship between Seneca and

Nero (Romm, 2015); Freud's central statement of the psychology of luxury, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (2001); and finally Bataille's dark theology of the luxurious, which we find in his three volume work, *The Accursed Share* (1991, 1993).

The title of my paper is *luxus*, the Latin word for dislocation, excess, over-abundance, extravagance, exuberance, and moving beyond, and I employ this male noun over the female variant *luxuria*, which has the same English significance, because I want to explain the concepts of luxury and luxuriousness in terms of decline, decay, and eventually the death of phallic austerity. In this respect my use of the male term *luxus* relates to the Oedipal, or rather Anti-Oedipal, story I want to develop, where the luxurious opens a space for the transformation of male phallic power from an austere form that represses waste into a new form that embraces excess in the name of moving beyond an obsession with *restricted economy* and productivity. Thus I employ the male noun *luxus*, rather than the female *luxuria*, because I want to show how phallic power implies its own collapse, and contains the seeds of its own destruction. By contrast, the female term *luxuria* suggests that opposition to phallic power emerges from somewhere else, the feminine, and that male austerity, rationality, and reason are somehow self-identical. It is this position which I seek to undermine through first, my exploration of 1st century Roman history, and specifically the struggle between the Stoic philosopher Seneca and the Emperor Nero who may be seen to symbolise the twin infinitives of ancient austerity and luxury (Romm, 2015); second, Freud (2001), who identified Oedipal trauma and desire with the luxuriousness of death; and finally Bataille (1991, 1993), who is clear that there is nothing austere about phallic sovereignty, which is on the contrary defined by over-abundance and destruction of all forms of vertical authority. The take

off point for my discussion is, therefore, the relationship between Seneca's Stoic philosophy and Nero's reign of luxury, which I connect to Freud (2001) through the idea of Thanatos, or the death drive to nothingness, and his metaphorical connection between Rome and the unconscious, where the ruins of the ancient city become symbolic of repressed unconscious content that psychoanalysis seeks to liberate in the name of self-understanding.

On the basis of this connection, my claim is that there is an unconscious state and experience of luxury and luxuriousness that is *transhistorical* and links the experience of the Romans to the present. My turn to Freud thus pitches Seneca and Nero into the present where I turn to the works of perhaps *the* modern theorist of luxury, Georges Bataille, and his concepts of the accursed share, consumption, eroticism, sovereignty, and atheological mysticism. Working through Bataille I conclude through an exploration of an *aneconomic* understanding of luxury which has previously been understood economically on the borderline of need. This is where my reference to the Freudian (2001) notion of thanatology, or the *word of death*, comes into view, because I want to suggest that the principal significance of the state and experience of luxury resides in an attempt to escape the passage of time through *either* the simulation of death or, in the real experience of the luxurious, the flatline itself. In my view luxury and the luxurious are, therefore, about escape from the thingness, and the temporality of life. Thus I conclude with the claim that luxury, and this is the case for the experience of luxury in contemporary capitalism, should be understood in terms of the sacred, and cannot be thought through in profane, instrumental terms, even though today, in the global, capitalist, secular world, the luxurious is hidden inside the profane economy of things. In this way, my

final point is that contemporary luxury represents the sacred unconscious of the profane world and, as a consequence, a kind of religiosity without religion, which has the potential to tip over into what Eugene Thacker (2011) calls Bataille's *divine darkness*, a kind of transcendental materialism, where things suddenly lose their value and the empire of economy collapses towards a new sustainable future where humans live in intimacy and sympathy with their environment.

However, before I turn to this thesis, and my line through Seneca, Nero, Freud, and Bataille, I want to contextualise my discussion and explain the relationship between luxury and contemporary social and political thought. In his classic work on the idea Chris Berry (1994) points out that luxury resides on the borderline of need and necessity. Here, luxury is understood in the context of the shift from ancients to moderns, and the related move from a closed to open conception of the universe. In the modern, open, world the dynamism of desire becomes a positive attribute, and the endlessness of luxury predicated on shifts in understandings of need, is recognised as essential to growth. Although Berry's story takes in *the demoralisation of luxury*, so that the Socratic-Platonic, Stoic vision of the evil of the passions no longer holds in the modern world, I would suggest that the moral critique of luxury remained a force in Marxism, Neo-Marxism, and psychoanalysis, where Freud and Lacan explained the necessity of Oedipus and repression. In the case of psychoanalysis, the tendency to the demoralisation of luxury really took effect in the late 1960s when Lacan came into conflict with Deleuze and Guattari over the fate of Oedipus. Against the classic Freudian figure of necessary repression, Deleuze and Guattari (1983) celebrated Anti-Oedipus and the *useless* figure of the schizophrenic, whose principal characteristic was transgression. Following the same approach,

Foucault (1990) would later reposition Seneca and the Stoics, so that the Roman guides to living with lack became champions of transgression and self-transformation. In this context luxury is never simply about economic growth, which, Berry points out, we find in Mandeville and Smith, but also the transgression of the self, and the over-coming of the repressive, austere, system set up by Freud's Oedipus. Of course, in recent years, and centrally since 2008, the moral critique has returned centre stage, and the revolutionary power of the transgressive critiques of Deleuze and Guattari and Foucault has faded slightly, simply because the new spirit of capitalism has made luxury its core principle. In the wake of Weber (2010), who imagined an austere, purely instrumental form of capitalism, Sombart's (1967) economy of luxury and desire is now centre stage. Although it would be a mistake to imagine that the Weberian model is no longer relevant, because the majority of people still labour under conditions of austerity, post-modern capitalism lives off luxury, which ensures growth, and essentially supports its very existence. As Adorno and Horkheimer (1997) saw in the mid-20th century, consumer capitalism survives on the basis of its utopian function / fiction – the promise of luxury and the escape from the pain of production is sold to everybody through the culture industry.

But the problem of contemporary, global, capitalism is that the space of luxury, the space of transgression and luxurious expansion, the space for going beyond, the space for more, no longer really exists. In this situation the modern, open, world has started to close down, towards a post-modern, or globalised, world characterised by a lack of space, possibility, and hope. Work is everywhere. Under conditions of closure, where there is no more space, luxury shifts to time, and we seek escape from need and necessity in moments of bliss, but even these moments are now rare.

When time is also exhausted, and there are no more moments for luxurious expansion, we are essentially caught in what Paul Virilio (Armitage and Roberts, 2002) calls the grey zone, a nonspace of fullness, finitude, and pollution. The problem of luxury today is, therefore, not simply one of environmental resource, which is that the biosphere simply cannot cope with the expansion of the global consumer society in China and India, but also one of planetary dimension, where space and time have become completely full of past luxuries, which are present necessities, and there is effectively nowhere else to go. Here, the very idea of luxury itself, or at least the limit form of luxury and luxuriousness we find in things, has tipped over into absurdity, and there is no more space for material expansion. Thus we approach the idea of the decadence of the super-rich or, in the language of Occupy, the 1% who consume the majority of the world's resources, and live in a state of luxury which lapses into absurdity, precisely because it is simultaneously inside and outside the profane world of things. The luxuriousness of this class, which is represented in Martin Scorsese's *The Wolf of Wall Street* by the figure of Jordan Belfort who lives on the borderline of excess and suicide, is also symbolic of the decadence of what Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000) call *Empire* and link to the globalisation of American capitalism. For Hardt and Negri the problem of Empire resides in its endless transgression and the condition of over-reach. That is to say that when it reaches its highest level of development Empire starts to over-produce and sow the seeds of its own destruction because it can no longer recycle its own surpluses. In this respect, Hardt and Negri suggest that over-production and super-abundance, the luxury of Empire, will eventually empower the multitude that will have no need for the control system of capitalism, which survives on the basis of their productivity.

While Hardt and Negri's thesis updates Marx for the 21st century, it also relies on the history of Rome, and the struggle between the forces of Empire and the Republic, to support its vision of the inevitable collapse of the luxurious imperial model. Of course, this connection is not simply coincidental, because the leading nation of Empire, America, was founded upon the Roman Republican ideal, and has always remained fearful of the fall into imperial decadence, a concern made explicit in Cullen Murphy's (2008) popular book, *Are We Rome?* The story of the decline of Rome is, of course, well known, and explored by numerous writers. For example, in his massive *The City in History* (1968) Lewis Mumford explains that Republican Rome existed in a contained, managed, bound, Platonic state organised around virtue, or *virtus*, which we can link to phallic, paternal, authority. Drawing on Plato's original urban-psycho-political theory of the necessity of the just, austere, division of labour from *The Republic* (1991), Mumford's history moves on to show that military victory, territorial expansion, and economic growth eventually led Rome to become a monstrous *psychopathopolis* characterised by excess. In other words, Mumford's claim is that when Rome lost its connection to necessity and the city was no longer about need, it fell into what he calls *purposeless materialism*, with the subsequent collapse into an orgy of sex, violence, and luxury. Although the particular period Mumford identifies with Rome's psychopathy, the 1st century, was under imperial rule, the problem is that this particular version of the rule of the father was never likely to impose Freudian discipline upon the people, primarily because the famous leaders of this period, Caligula and Nero, were essentially out of control teens, who had never been subject to Oedipal discipline themselves, and therefore could never possess masculine *virtus* or virtue. As a result of a lack of proper order, Mumford explains how 1st century Rome collapsed into excess and luxury to the extent that

there was no restriction on desire and the city became a space of Thanatos, or the death drive which heads over to the other side of material things.

II

Roman Luxury and Indifferent Things

Mumford (1968) takes Nero, Emperor of Rome from 54 to 68, as symbolic of the luxury, or what he calls the purposeless materialism, of Empire, but what he does not show, primarily because his objective is to trace the evolution of the urban form rather than explore the history of Roman politics, is that Nero's tendency to luxury and excess found its counter-point in the philosophy of the Stoics and in particular Seneca, who became Nero's teacher and advisor. While Nero, who became Emperor in his teens, may be seen to embody the trajectory of *luxus*, where the phallic father figure falls into excess, pushes his consumption beyond the profane world of things, and eventually reaches the true sacred space of luxury found in annihilation, sacrifice, suicide, Seneca extended Socratic-Platonic philosophy and wrote about the emptiness of consumption and luxury, *but*, most importantly, was similarly set on escape from the profanity of the material world into sacred space, which he would identify with the universe, where *all things are in all things*, in his late work, *Natural Questions* (Wilson, 2014). Following Socrates, who famously seeks to escape the confines of the miserable human body in Plato's (2002) *Apology*, Seneca was critical of material existence, and thought that the body is a slave to desire, which threatens to run amok unless it is carefully controlled by the powers of reason. Building upon Plato's equation of political psychology, where reason must control the passions, and architecture, where the city of men must reflect the beauty of reason, order, and justice, Seneca opposed the luxury of Rome, which under Caligula and Nero was always about *more* and pushing back the limits of consumption, with his

own empire of the self (Wilson, 2014). For Seneca, the self was the *first* empire and it required reason, moderation, and austerity in order to escape the turbulence and desire and the passions. Thus, what I want to suggest in this, the second section the article is that the story of Roman *luxus* is the story of these two empires – the social, political, economic, and cultural Empire of Nero, who lost himself and his city in the luxurious world of things which eventually led to mass suicide and apocalyptic destruction, and the Stoic, or *Greatest Empire* of Seneca, who sought to leave the world of things behind for a life and death characterised by voluntary simplicity (Romm, 2015). As a result, my argument will be that Nero and Seneca, the Roman exemplars of luxury and austerity, can be seen to symbolise two very different versions of the concept of *luxus*, which ultimately lead towards the same conclusion – that is, transgression of the profane world of things and occupation of the ultimate space of luxury, death, where the quality of the luxurious is defined by dark, empty, nothingness.

Following Berry's (1994) work we can make the case that Nero's Rome was characterised by three forms of ancient luxury – self-indulgence, greed, and ambition. The monstrosity of the Emperor is well known to the extent that he has become a kind of mythological symbol of excess. Consider his most famous *transgressions*. According to key sources, such as Tacitus (2003), he slept with his mother, Agrippina, before later having her killed. He raped and then murdered his half-brother, Britannicus, who could have become his rival for the role of princeps, or first among equals. He kicked his second wife to death, and then castrated and married a slave who resembled her. Beyond his family problems, the Emperor compelled his rivals to 'open their veins' on a regular basis and in 64 is rumoured to

have more or less burnt the city to the ground. After starting the fire, he famously looked out on the city and 'fiddled', or played music and sang about the destruction of Troy. In the wake of mass destruction, he set about the reconstruction of the city, which was nearly bankrupted by the construction of his *Domus Aurea* or Golden House. But in spite of these crimes, Champlin (2005) suggests that Nero's *luxus*, his transgressive behaviour, was reflective of his essential cynicism, which was concerned with the destruction of political rivals and the aristocratic class and his personal alignment with the masses who he thought could prop up his rule. In this way Champlin suggests that Nero sought to turn Rome upside down in order to preserve his own position. What we may mistake for Nero's madness was in reality a result of his cynicism and political realism. In other words, the young Emperor was the classic Machiavellian prince 1500 years before the classic cynic wrote his infamous guide to the exercise of political power. In this view what Nero gave to Rome – the spectacle of the circus, gladiatorial contests, theatrical performance, and pornographic excess – was a riot of luxury that elevated the people out of the miserable world of necessity and gave them a glimpse of some other space where limits no longer apply. Luxury was, thus, Nero's political religion, a belief system to keep the masses on his side. Following Champlin's argument, the excessive visuality of this condition, where absolutely everything was transformed into a *carnal image* ready for consumption, was symbolic of the essential theology, or atheology, of material luxury in Nero's Rome.

Despite all of the base pleasure, the sex, violence, torture, and murder, the objective of what we might call the imperial carnivalesque was the transformation or transgression of profane materiality into the sacred image no longer bound to

thingness. It is this escape from thingness that forms the hard core of Nero's obsession with luxury, a political theology which coincidentally closely parallels the contemporary obsession with celebrity and the luxurious life in late capitalism, and transformed the Roman citizen into homo spectator, or *man watching*, who was in awe of the spectacular atheological image. As Champlin (2005) shows, the same political theology also led Nero to live on beyond his own death in the form of various imposters, or Pseudo-Neros, that turned up in distant parts of the Roman world to pursue careers on stage. This strange situation, which came about because nobody believed that Nero was actually dead, shows how effectively the Emperor was in escaping his own body into a mythological image of himself to become a kind of Ancient precursor to Elvis who returns here, there, and everywhere post-mortem for one last performance. But before his enforced suicide in 68 and return in the form of various tribute acts, Nero had made use of a similar strategy in political theatre and in particular performance in tragedy which could explain his crimes to the people. Champlin explains how the Emperor *became* Seneca's *Oedipus*, in order to explain that his incestuous relationship with Agrippina was somewhere not his fault, and Aeschylus' *Orestes* so that he could work through her murder and show that his actions were, again, a reasonable response to her behaviour. Similarly, following the murder of his wife, Nero took on the role of Hercules in Seneca's play *Hercules Furens* to show how temporary insanity led to his brutality. Apart from political theatre, Nero also significantly constructed himself through what Champlin calls a *solar ideology*. Here, the Emperor was a product of the sun, the ultimate source of truth, *but* also the engine of luxurious consumption. This political theology of the luxuriousness of solar radiation held Nero's Rome together until 64 when fire consumed most of the city and signalled the beginning of the end.

Although there is dispute in the ancient sources about whether Nero was responsible for starting the fire that engulfed the city, Champlin (2005) constructs this apocalyptic event in terms of the Emperor's luxurious suicidal tendencies. According to this argument, Nero starts the fire in the circus and watches the flames rage across the city in a rehearsal of his own later suicide. The immolation of the city represents the destruction of the Emperor's second body in order to pave the way for the consumption of his physical body and the final consummation of his political theology of luxury which was always directed towards the escape from the thingness of the body. But in the interval between the fire and his suicide, Nero constructed his Golden House, which reflected the solar rays of the Emperor's reign and offered Romans a blinding spectacle of imperial power, that Seneca condemned for its fraudulence and spoke about in terms of the symbolism of the unhappy soul. Despite this Stoic critique, Nero's political theology of luxury went into over-drive in the wake of the great fire and the entire city became a party house. The winter festival, or *Saturnalia*, where normal rules of behaviour were suspended in the name of evasion of more serious popular unrest, seemed to colonise the entire city and Rome became an orgy of sex, violence, and feasting. Indeed, it is possible to argue that the orgy, where corporeal boundaries dissolve in a riotous fusion of ecstatic bodies, and the feast, where normal, necessary, consumption of food and drink is suspended in the name of excessive eating and drinking, are the classic symbols of Roman luxury. Given this possibility, then, perhaps the *other* key thinker of Nero's Rome is Petronius, a kind of negative version of Seneca, who Tacitus (2003) explains spent his days sleeping and nights enjoying himself.

Tacitus' party animal and 'expert hedonist' is most famous for his surrealistic work *The Satyricon* (2011), or book of Satyrs, those phallic monsters of Roman mythology that fuse men, goats, and uncontrollable lust. Perhaps the essential text of Nero's Rome, *The Satyricon* is a strange, fragmented, work and the only section of it which survives intact, *Trimalchio's Feast*, is an orgy of luxury and excess, which classicist William Arrowsmith (1966) explains is also ultimately about death and the destruction of the self. According to Arrowsmith's interpretation of *The Satyricon* the reader must decide whether the terminal luxury of Trimalchio's feast concerns his attempt to escape the inevitability of death by clinging to the sensual world through fine things, or is itself a suicidal performance set on pushing consumption and luxury to such extremes that the base materiality of things eventually tips over into some other world where significance resides in the nobility of ideas and forms. Either way, reading *The Satyricon*, or watching Fellini's surreal 1969 cinematic version of the book, it is difficult to understand this vision of luxurious Rome in terms of Nero's realpolitik. Beyond the cynicism of political manipulation, and the intentional construction of a kind of base political theology, Petronius' book and Fellini's film capture the existential dimensions of luxury under Nero, which point to the collapse of order, structure, and significance itself in a strange, surreal, confusion of opposites, where even the division between life and death no longer really holds. In the case of Fellini's surreal version of *The Satyricon*, which he explained was a science fiction of ancient history, it is clear that the fragmentation of Nero's Rome is in some respects symbolic of the post-modern, Anti-Oedipal, period of the late 1960s / early 1970s which we might say led to the contemporary global consumer society we occupy today. But what we have seen in our contemporary post-modern, globalised, world is that the luxurious world of the carnival, the orgy, and the feast,

where consumption pushes towards the outer limits of materiality, cannot exist without the emergence of its counter-state, the moral, conservative, austere community, which refuses, or is forced to refuse material pleasure in the name of some higher truth.

In contemporary global capitalism this fusion, or confusion, takes the form of the neo-liberal system, which merges Weber's (2010) vision of austere capitalism with Sombart's (1967) economy of luxury, allocates austerity to the poor and reserves luxury for the super-rich. By contrast, in Rome the same split was between Nero, who pushed luxury towards its material limits and the Stoic philosopher Seneca who sought to oppose luxury entirely in name of a more austere life indifferent to thingness. For Seneca, Rome was a space of vice and empty luxury (Wilson, 2014). Quite apart from the Roman context, his vision of human life, which he inherited from Socrates, was of a battle waged between reason and the passions. Against Petronius, Seneca was clear that there is no happiness in empty, earthly, pleasure and that what matters in human life is calmness and tranquillity. In order to explain this philosophy, towards the end of his life, and in the teeth of Neronian luxury, Seneca wrote his book about the natural world, *Natural Questions* (2010a), where he sought to create a space for calmness in the contemplation of the cosmos which has order and reason beyond the turbulence of human existence. Where humans are endlessly unsettled, and driven by their passions which compel them to desire this, that, and the other object, Seneca found peace in the stability and permanence of the universe that exists regardless of the human condition. In his essay, *On the Constancy of the Wise Person* (2014b), he opposes this philosophy of moderation, stability, and peace to the endless change of desire which, in his view, produces

instability and injustice. Following Plato (1991), who connected the unstable man to the unstable political system in *The Republic*, Seneca relates desire to injustice in his tragic story *Thyestes* (2005), where the horrific tyrant Atreus forces his brother to eat his own children and drink their blood. We find the same story in *On Anger* (2010b) which explains that anger, the most destructive emotion, emerges from injury and the desire for revenge. For Seneca (2014b), the only reasonable response to the chaos of the passions is to throw them into relief through contemplation of the vastness of outer space which will reveal the indifference of things. He makes this point in his *Consolation to Helvia* (2014a), which was written in exile on the *barren rock* of Corsica, where he reflects upon the metabolism of luxury. On the culture of feasts, he says that the rich eat to vomit and vomit to eat, and creates a vision of apocalyptic collapse. In his view, this luxurious state is entirely unsustainable and will eventually end in catastrophe.

Of course, the problem with Seneca's stoicism was that he was himself a member of the Roman super-rich, but it is perhaps this situation which enabled him to see through things and look beyond materiality (Wilson, 2014). This is exactly what he says in his essay *On the Happy Life* (2014c), where luxury is a delusion, a mirage, and things are indifferent to human life. He tells us that the problem with the desire for luxury things is that it is always beyond itself and essentially exists in a state of lack. Long before Lacan wrote about desire in terms of lack, Seneca saw that it is impossible to capture the significance of life in the base materialism of things. Despite our possession of things, life slips through our fingers and we die every day. For Seneca, life is *mediatio mortis*, or a process of living towards death. In the face of this terminal condition, Seneca's response was to embrace minimalism, and enjoy

the fleeting nature of life. In his view immortality cannot be found in luxurious things and the splendour of consumer goods, but rather in thought and contemplation, which takes the philosopher out of time and places them in a kind of universal space (Seneca, 2010a). While Nero sought to access luxury through things, but eventually pushed through the material towards the true space of luxury in death, destruction, and apocalyptic consumption, Seneca sought to escape the material, what he called the *indifferent things*, in order to find luxury in the exercise of the mind – contemplation, thought, and reason. If Nero's luxuriousness eventually led towards a kind of dark, apocalyptic, atheology, there is no doubt that it is possible to find a similar kind of theology or atheology in Seneca who wanted to leave the material world behind for the purity of thought. In this respect the Roman Stoic clearly follows Plato's theory of the forms from *The Republic* (1991), which places the immaterial space of ideas above the base world of things, and in such a way creates a kind of religion of reason. Perhaps more darkly, Seneca's (2010b) turn to ideas, thought, and reason over things also led him to see suicide as the ultimate form of human freedom. Following Socrates, who made his execution at the hands of the city his own, Seneca's final response to Nero's apocalyptic atheology, which involved the practice of forced suicide, was to find freedom in the decision to take his own life. In *On Anger* (2010b), he notes that the path to freedom runs through the veins of the body. In order to escape Nero, Seneca knew that he could simply open any vein in his body, and take flight into the luxurious world of reason.

This is precisely where the story of Nero and Seneca leads. After the fire of 64 Nero saw plots everywhere. As Seneca points out in *Thyestes* (2005), the sun itself, source of solar power, abundance, and luxury, went out, and the city became a dark

space of political suicide. In 65 Seneca took his own life. According to Tacitus (2003), the philosopher cuts his wrists, but then resorts to Hemlock when his blood congeals. Finally, when the Hemlock fails to take effect, he suffocates himself in a steam bath. Seneca's escape from the world of indifferent things into the luxurious space beyond the material was finally complete. By 68 it was Nero's turn to transgress base matter. Rebellion had broken out in the provinces and come to Rome in search of the Emperor. Nero's guards fled. Before his executioners could complete their work, he drove a dagger into his throat, dying before their eyes (Romm, 2015). According to Suetonius (2007), Nero's final exclamation was 'What an artist dies in me!', which simultaneously captures the Emperor's tendency towards spectacle and his deep desire to somehow escape from the base materiality of life into some other space. It is this space, the atheological space of luxury, which I would argue unites the criminal Nero and the Stoic philosopher Seneca, and perhaps shows how the difference between material luxury and austerity ultimately converges in a space beyond thingness. In philosophical terms I think this is precisely how we should understand the relationship between Seneca and Foucault (1990), for example. While Seneca sought to cure restlessness and manage his domestic economy, in his later works Foucault made self-making a transgressive, aesthetic, practice concerned with the limit experience. Where the Roman Stoic was about learning to live with lack, Foucault's notion of the care of the self becomes about the escape from limits. However, on closer inspection the difference between these two positions conceals their ultimate similarity. Both thinkers were concerned to move beyond things and find the true space of self-identical luxury. In the final section of the article I want to conclude by showing how it is possible to theorise this space of self-identical luxury through reference to Freud's classic paper on the

suicidal death drive, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (2001), and finally the works of perhaps *the* modern thinker of luxury, Georges Bataille.

III

Towards a Thanatology of Luxury

In many respects it is possible to see psychoanalysis as a modern version of Seneca's stoicism. Where Seneca sought to control irrational desire in the name of some higher truth, Freud believed that repression is necessary to control human instinct which is ultimately set on suicidal self-destruction. This is precisely the role Oedipus plays in psychoanalysis. In the 1st century the same mythological figure became Nero's apology for incest. By contrast, Freud took Sophocles', and coincidentally Seneca's tragic character, Oedipus, and transformed him into a symbol of the need for self-control, or what he called *repression*. The stoicism of psychoanalysis thus resides in its vision of a life lived within limits under conditions of severe prohibition. In various works Freud sets up the potential costs of transgression, including most famously his late period work *Civilization and its Discontents* (2010), where misery is seen to be necessary in order to oppose apocalyptic destruction. For Freud, the human is *naturally* a violent self-destructive creature that desires transgression and is *essentially* determined to return to the peace of life in utero because individuation is a traumatic condition and life is hard to take. But before *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud develops this thesis in his classic work on *Thanatos, Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (2001), where he explains the horror of the human that is pre-programmed to desire its own demise in the luxuriousness of death. In much the same way that Oedipus originates in Freud's self-analysis, he finds the roots of Thanatos in his observation of his grandson's childish game of fort / da. In order to master the trauma of his mother's departure

and eventual return Freud's child plays fort / da (here / go) with a wooden toy he is able to retrieve in his own time. For Freud, the child's game is a symbolic means to the mastery of unpleasure and the creation of a state of pleasure where he feels comfortable and secure. In other words, if he can control the toy's departure, he can feel better about his mother departure.

However, since his symbolic solution to the problem of his mother's disappearance in no way impacts upon her real reappearance, Freud notes that his grandson feels the need to repeat his game ad nauseum. Thus Freud invents *the compulsion to repeat*, which he suggests is evidence of our inability to master traumatic events that have already taken place, and symbolic of our most basic limitation, what he calls *the inertia of being*. The metaphysical condition of the inertia of being essentially means that we are limited creatures who can only develop so far before we feel the need to return to the start. In the same way that Freud's grandson wants to hold onto his mother and repetitively seeks to ensure her return, the notion of the inertia of being suggests we are always already on the way back to the beginning even when we think we are moving forward into the future. Basically, life is a circle and every move forward is also a move back towards the beginning. In Seneca's words, we are dying every day we are alive (Romm, 2015). This is the darkness of Freud's theory, which resides in his view of what the return to source means - namely the oceanic state before birth where we are lost in inuterine fluids and have no sense of self. Since it is impossible to achieve this state once we have been born, Freud's point is that we unconsciously seek out the annihilation of the self in addictive self-destructive acts that *either* temporarily enable escape from the pain of individuation or more fatally, result in our extinction. Freud calls this will to self-destruction the

Nirvana Principle because his view is that what we desire in death is the annihilation of the self, desire, and thirst, which is also precisely what Buddhism identifies with the nothingness of enlightenment. However, while Buddhism looks forward to the annihilation of the self, Freud thought humans needed to find ways to oppose their self-destructiveness. In his view opposition to Thanatos, or the death drive, could be found in Eros, or what he called the life drive, which pushes humans to survive and reproduce.

We are, therefore, in Freud's view, caught in the tension between the life drive to persist and survive and the dark death drive, or Thanatos, which pushes for a return to nothingness in the flatline of death. Akin to Seneca, whose stoicism was concerned with opposition to the obsession with what he called *indifferent things*, Freud (2001) found in humans a drive towards the luxuriousness of death, what he later explained through the idea of the oceanic state where the self dissolves into a state of ecstatic unity, which he sought to fight off through his insistence on the necessity of Oedipus and repression to ensure human survival. While desire is useful, because minor pleasure enable humans to cope with the trauma of life, what Freud could not tolerate is our suicidal tendency towards the endless expansion of pleasure and its cancellation in the luxurious state that transcends materiality in the complete annihilation of the self. Thus Freud the moralist was in favour of the defence of the self, which must protect its borders, and fight off the kind of luxury that took hold of Nero and Rome in the 1st century. However, while Freud offers a moralistic take on the problem of luxury, which stops short of Seneca's (2010a) stoic vision of the luxurious cosmic unity of all things, it is possible to find an alternative view of luxury and the luxurious in the work of Georges Bataille and in particular his

three volume study on what we might call the economics of excess, *The Accursed Share* (1991, 1993). Where Freud's moralism and defence of Oedipus confirms the conservatism of his political vision, Bataille's interpretation of luxury is far more radical and, we might even argue, offers a kind of *Neronian ethics* of the luxurious. Bataille starts his massive work *The Accursed Share* (1991), which, he notes, is a book about luxury, with the claim that the fundamental problem of humanity is how to cope with its excess or luxury. He points out that in the first instance excess is recycled in order to stimulate further production. However, his next question is to ask what happens when there is no more growth left and the organism or economy can no longer expand. What happens when there is no more space and no more time? This was, of course, the problem of Rome, and remains the problem of Empire today. Space runs out and, in the case of contemporary Empire, there is similarly little time available to increase productivity. When reinvestment in the name of further growth is impossible, Bataille's answer is that excess transforms into useless expenditure, lavish consumption, and luxurious waste. Moreover, he explains that there is no moral issue in this turn to expenditure, because luxury is a kind of cosmic, planetary, condition, which originates in the way that the sun expends itself in its tendency towards radiation.

Akin to Seneca's theory of the natural identity of all things in his *Natural Questions* (2010a), Bataille's (1991) view is that existence itself is luxurious because life constantly exceeds itself in the creation of organisms which emerge, merge, and re-emerge from base matter. In nature itself, Bataille (1991) notes that there are three forms of luxury – eating, death, and sex – and that these modes of expenditure represent the means by which individual organisms emerge from and then merge

with universal matter or what Seneca thought about in terms of the cosmos. On sex, Bataille (1991: 12) famously, and enigmatically, states that ‘the sexual act is in time, what the tiger is in space’. This means that sex involves the luxurious consumption of one organism in the name of the emergence of a new organism from base matter. Like the tiger, which *exceeds* space, and represents what he calls a point of *extreme incandescence*, sex escapes time in moments of ecstasy which break out of the normal flow of temporality. In the intense moment of orgasm the self ceases to exist in matter and a new being potentially appears which will similarly exceed itself in some other self. Thus Bataille (1991) conceives of sex and death in terms of the constant over-flowing of the self in universal matter and it is this theory which represents his thanatology of luxury – a story of luxury which revolves around the death of the self in matter and the potential emergence of the new from this universal substance. This is Bataille’s *general economy*, which is based on excess, superabundance, and luxuriousness, and forms the basis of his radical ethics of the unity of all matter. While the modern, dynamic, economy of Hobbes, Mandeville, and Smith relies on the endlessness of desire and the ceaseless production of luxury in order to stimulate economic growth, it remains a *restricted economy* on the edge of Bataille’s more general conception of economic metabolism because it never escapes the gravity of things, which cannot confer intimacy upon man. This is precisely what Seneca knew and Nero unconsciously realised – the thing is a kind of limit and real luxury resides beyond the scope of the material in theological or atheological space.

In *The Accursed Share* (1991, 1993) Bataille follows Seneca in his suggestion that it is possible to attain intimacy and escape the restricted economy of things through

contemplation. Here, he refers to Buddhist thought, and suggests that the philosophy of the annihilation of the self points towards the possibility of intimacy with the universal substance of nature. He makes the same point in his *Theory of Religion* (1992) where he reflects upon the transgressive power of the corpse, which he considers essential precisely because it reveals the limit of base matter and, as a consequence, opens out onto the luxurious universe of the sacred. In a sense this attempt to approach the intimate space of luxury and the luxurious through the austerity of bare materiality parallels Seneca's vision of *indifferent things*, but in a sense also Weber's (2010) original spirit of capitalism. In Weber's view, the first capitalists were industrious and worked hard not for the sake of things themselves, but because of what work and productivity could say about devotion to God and the world of spirit. It was only later, when the Calvinists' value rationality (*wertrational*) tipped over into instrumental rationality (*zweckrational*) that the economy started to become its own end – Weber's dreadful 'iron cage'. Here, the purpose of production becomes consumption which is transformed into a kind of profane form of religiosity. Inside this more or less entirely secularised economic world view, luxury becomes about fine things and nothing more. However, Bataille's (1991, 1993) point is that the unconscious dimension of the sacred remains and it can be reached either through absolute austerity, where the body itself withers away, or infinite luxury, which entails the expansion of the consumption of fine things to the point where finery becomes absurd and collapses back towards base materiality. When this happens material luxury burns itself out, the fantasy of objective value in the world dissolves, and the route back to intimacy with the world is revealed. This is what luxury means for Bataille – the luxury of communion with the universe, rather than the debased luxury of things.

In Volume III of *The Accursed Share* (1993), which is subtitled *Sovereignty*, Bataille understands the sovereign less in terms of the power to command and more through the ideas of waste and the superfluous. That is to say that the sovereign is sovereign because it has no utility and stands outside of the *restricted economy* where everything has a purpose that enables something else to happen and so on. Although Bataille never mentions imperial Rome in his writings, Nero, the most luxurious of the Emperors, would be the sovereign figure par excellence precisely because he more or less forgot about his role of Freudian father and lost himself in pointless performances. Of course, Champlin (2005) makes the case that much of what has passed for Neronian excess was actually realpolitik concerned with the destruction of rivals and elevation of the people to a political force, but I would suggest that the other, more philosophical approach to understanding Nero's behaviour resides in the view that his excesses were concerned with an attempt to escape from the thingness of the world and realise his political sovereignty in the true sovereignty of theological or atheological space. In other words, Nero sought to use the orgy and its confusion of bodies and limbs to escape the isolation of his own base matter. Given that Nero's story eventually results in suicide reveals that he went further than one of Bataille's (1993) key figures of crime and cruelty, Sade. Indeed, Bataille makes the point that the problem with Sade's approach to luxury was that his transgressions never went far enough. He never escaped his own body, but remained caught in what Bataille's calls his own *moral isolation*. He attacked and destroyed others, but ultimately never escaped his own limits.

Writing in the 1940s, Bataille (1993) sought out the solution to the problem of luxury ironically in the political religion of the Soviet Union and particularly Stalinism, which

he thought could move towards the destruction of the self and its immersion in a kind of communistic theology without God. In Bataille's view this luxurious annihilation of the self in world is impossible under conditions of capitalism which represents what he called *sovereignty denied*. Ironically, we might say that capitalism also represents *luxury denied* precisely because of its very attachment to the world of things, where value is contained in base matter. However, my view would be that even though capitalism involves the *denial of luxury* it is possible to recast Bataille's thesis today and rethink his turn to Stalinism in terms of an ecological vision of a world beyond the current model of neoliberal capitalism and what Hardt and Negri (2000) call Empire on the basis that the contemporary obsession with fine things pushes towards the outer limits of materiality and verges on the turn to a universe of intimacy where *all things are in all things*. It is the tendency towards this transformation, which I think is implicit in the development of contemporary consumer capitalism, that I capture through the Latin term *luxus* - *luxus* means excess, extravagance, opulence, indulgence, and luxury, but also 'moving beyond' and transgression. In this article I have shown how it is possible to trace the tendency towards *luxus* in the history of Rome, and particularly the luxuriousness of Nero and the Stoicism of Seneca, and also locate a similar logic in the psychoanalysis of Freud, and especially his essential work on luxury on the outer limits of pleasure, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (2001). Finally, I have sought to show how we can find a similar thesis in the work of Georges Bataille, who subverts Freud's moralism in the name of an ethics of luxury which recalls the history of Nero and the philosophy of Seneca.

The value of this reading for contemporary capitalism resides in its ability to reveal the true logic of luxury, which is that it is not really concerned with the profane world

of things, but is constantly seeking to move beyond the material sphere into theological or atheological space. Simply put, this means that the contemporary capitalist model, which is now caught between the twin infinitives of material austerity and obsessive consumption of fine things, is unsustainable and that it will eventually tip over into a new system characterised by true luxury beyond materiality characterised by intimacy with the world. There is no doubt that the emergence of this *general economy* will produce enormously traumatic effects, precisely because the contemporary global system is defined by its attachment to the endless growth of the profane economic system, but this is why my history of Nero, Seneca, Freud, and Bataille is also a history of violence, destruction, and suicide. From the profane side of things, the leap into the sacred universe of luxury will always look like death, because it represents a move towards a more stable state where things dissolve into universal substance that exceeds individual self-identity. At the moment the move to this luxurious state can only be imagined through fiction, which include visions of what the world would look like without humans. While Quentin Meillassoux (2009) imagines the primal universe before the invention of human life, what these fictions think through is the possibility of the future of the planet without humanity (Weisman, 2007). As Eugene Thacker (2011) points out in his work *Divine Darkness*, Bataille's thought comprises a similar story. While I have sought to focus on Bataille's work on economy to show how he imagines the end of materialism in the emergence of a state of luxury beyond things, Thacker shows how his trilogy of books on mysticism, which are collectively known under the title *Summa Atheologica*, follow the same logic – the apocalyptic destruction of the world of objects in the creation of a new dark atheological space. Perhaps this is the luxurious fate of contemporary capitalism, a fate we can imagine through the history Rome which is our past *and* a

kind of sci-fi future, and theorise through the works of Seneca, Freud, and the master thinker of luxury, Bataille. What each of these thinkers show is that *there is no luxurious object*. The very idea is a contradiction in terms because luxury is always beyond the profane world of things.

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