

‘Batlló and Bataille: Four Photographs’

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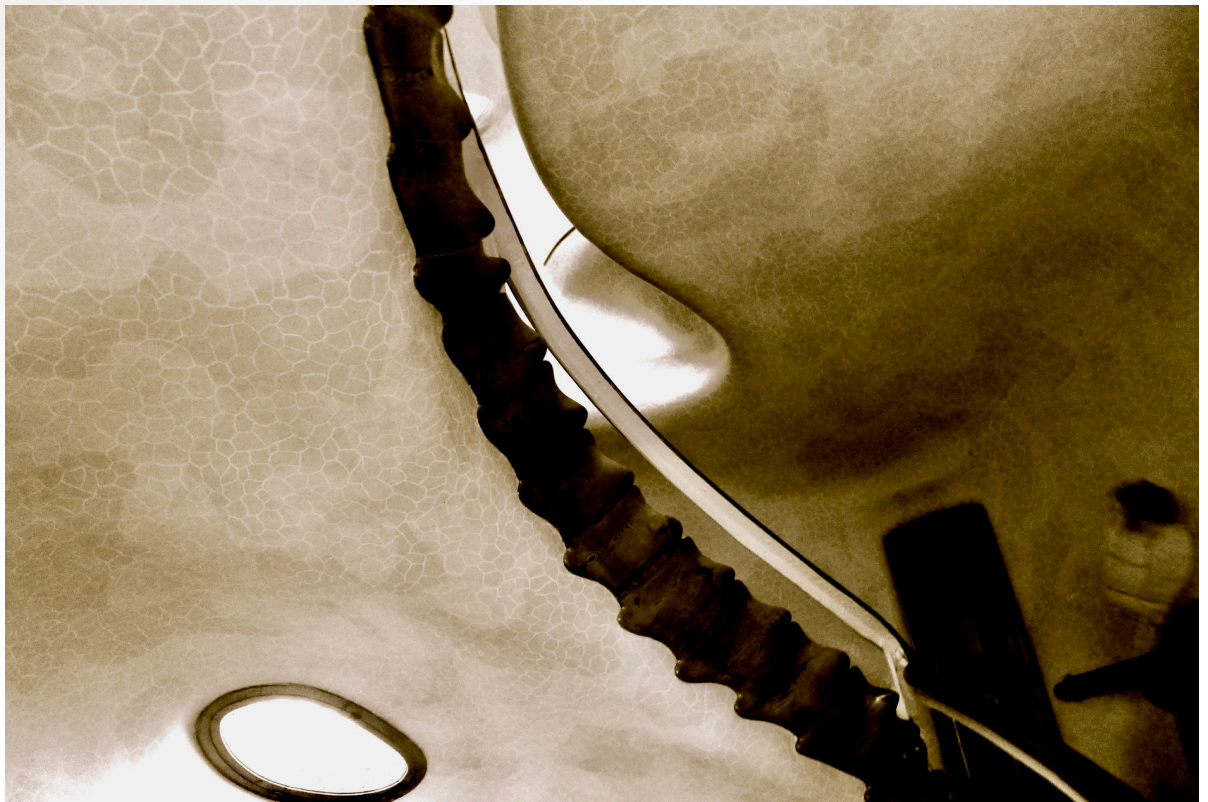
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Batló and Bataille

Four photographs

Chelsea Ko

‘Eroticism’, says French philosopher Georges Bataille, ‘is assenting to life up to the point of death.’¹ The word denotes a quality of the sexual that is beyond the pleasure principle: it is self-loss approximated at the height of life. Communication, of which eroticism is one, entails a provisional imperilling of selfhood, a moment of ‘risk taking’ that, in Bataille’s description, places the being ‘at the limit of death and nothingness.’² A sexual communication, which Bataille likens to a religious festival, ‘provokes an outward movement in the first place.’³ Unable to accomplish self-loss, this movement inevitably calls for a ‘retraction and a renunciation.’⁴ But it is the rule with eroticism that this initial recoil ‘organises the merry-go-round’ and, as Bataille concludes in *Eroticism* (1957), ensures the ‘return of the forward movement.’⁵

To the ecstasy of sex is thus added a measure of anguish, without which, in an unlikely consequence, desire would be satiated, self-loss completed, and the movement brought to a definite stop. Anguish fulfills the double role of stimulus and deterrent, for it ‘assumes the desire to communicate—that is, to lose myself—but not complete [sic] resolve [...] anguish is evidence of my fear of communicating, of losing myself.’⁶ Failing to transcend anguish, eroticism is nonetheless caught up in the act of transcending it: between the losing myself (release) and the fear of doing so (retraction), that which lies beyond the edge of tangible experience is dimly perceivable, albeit ultimately inaccessible to human understanding.

This encapsulates Bataille’s central thesis of eroticism: its failure to achieve self-loss is key to its link, however tenuous, with death. The underlying rationale of such reasoning hinges on another key notion: that eroticism is not a one-way street leading to a given goal, but a *movement*. It is a movement charged with an antipathy against stability, against the dictates of rules and reason. Bataille calls it a ‘wild turmoil’ that is ‘given in the “little death”’—a little death that is a ‘foretaste of the final death.’⁷

Any representation that does not adhere to the extreme empiricism of Bataille’s thought can only succeed no more than sketching a fuzzy outline of it. These photographs, which I took on a visit to Antoni Gaudí’s Casa Batlló in Barcelona many years ago, are no exceptions. Admittedly, they were the results of a happy coincidence: the genius of Gaudí, it is true, confers on every image an aestheticism that is at once solemn and delirious. Upon

¹ Georges Bataille, *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality*, trans. by Mary Dalwood (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986), p. 11.

² Bataille, *On Nietzsche*, trans. by Bruce Boone (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 19.

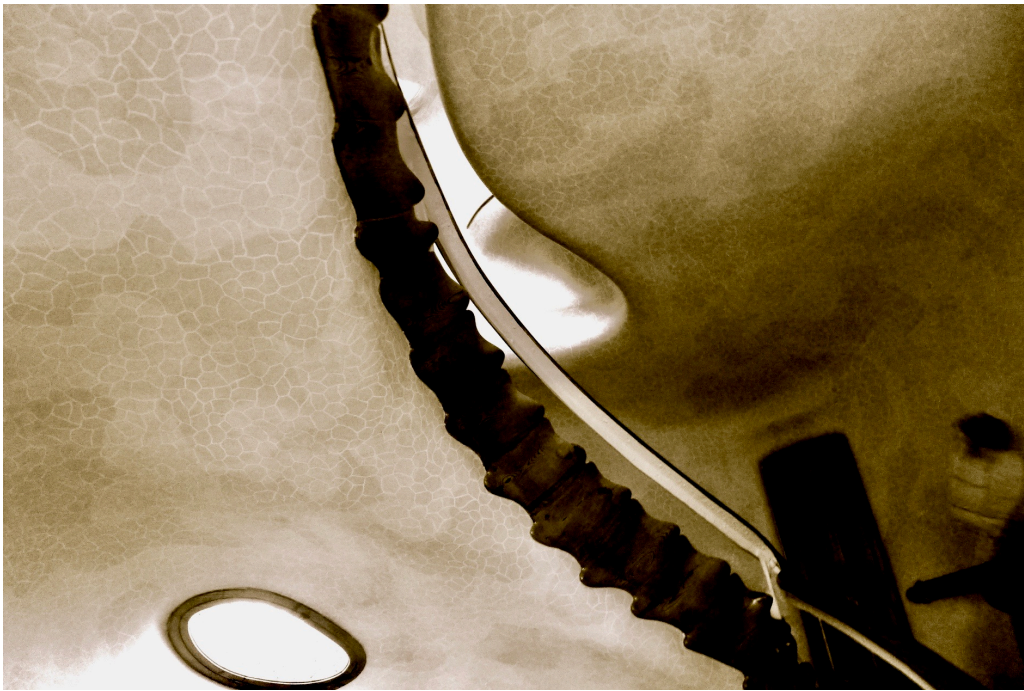
³ *Eroticism*, p. 207.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. by Leslie Anne Boldt (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), p. 54.

⁷ Bataille, *The Tears of Eros*, trans. by Peter Connor (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1989), p. 20.



entering Casa Batlló for the first time, my awe of its entrancing beauty was translated into the automatism of snapping away.

Looking at those photos now, I detect what seems to me a resonance with the Bataillean conception of movement: the sinuousness of the architectural lines—the swirls and whorls—all symbolise a tendency away from structural order while,

at the same time, a sense of equilibrium is maintained precariously by an inner harmony between these architectural elements and the space in which they are enclosed. Sensuous is a term that is frequently applied to the description of Gaudí's designs, and it is an element of his work that is further intensified by its constant strife between order and chaos. And therein lies the essence of Bataille's theory of eroticism: a movement that struggles, against the will to restrain it, to its impossible completion.



