

Revolutionary Spirit Wars
in Contemporary Haiti

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The Case of the
Monumental Pig



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2009

I participated
in the Ghetto
Biennale,
an event

organised by Leah Gordon and the Atis Rezistans group from the Grand Rue area of Port-au-Prince, Haiti. I had been invited because of a number of texts I had written about western representations of vodou; the history of zombies; and a complex set of correlations that linked the writings of the French surrealist

philosopher Georges Bataille to the revolutionary history of Haiti. My interest in Haiti derives from the images of voodoo that made their way to me through the vectors of mainstream mass media and popular horror during my childhood in 1970s Britain.¹

The diabolical seeds that were planted during my regular Friday night 'Appointments with Fear' led me on an a twisted academic path that found me, in the 1990s, writing a doctoral thesis about the 'video nasty' controversy from a theoretical perspective based on the writings of Bataille (or 'the Ian Brady

I. It is interesting to note how closely the representation of the vodou ceremony in Freddie Francis' *Dr. Terror's House of Horrors* (1965) – a film which deeply impressed my childhood imagination and kept me awake for weeks to come after watching it – coincides with one of the first ethnographic accounts of a vodou ceremony reported in Moreau de Saint-Mery's *Descriptions of the French Part of the Island of Saint Domingue* (1787) (translated by Spencer as *A Civilization that Perished – The Last Years of Colonial Rule in Haiti* (1985)).



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of social theory', as one of my supervisors memorably and unfairly referred to him).

It was towards the completion of my thesis that Haiti came to the fore of my research interests. I had been trying to understand how Bataille's theory of sacred revolution – understood as a massive, *acephalic* (headless), collective expenditure of social wealth, triggered by sacred ritual – could be applied to commodified representations of violent excess such as those incarnated in videos like *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980) or *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978), which had been banned in the UK in the 1980s amidst fears about their detrimental influence on young people.²

The clearest correlation I could find was in the metaphor of mass (mediated) contagions of destructive delirium which was

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2. Video Nasty was a popular term used by the British tabloid press to identify a number of low-budget, very violent horror films available in rentable video formats in the 1980s. The films were considered to be in breach of the Obscene Publications Act (1959) which was being circumvented by the new media format. The campaign led to the prosecution of 39 films for obscenity and the establishment of the Video Recording Act of 1984.

Energy of the sacred

characteristic of both Bataille's theory of revolution and the fears expressed by censors who believed that video nasties were capable of transforming 'suggestible' young people into sociopathic delinquents who could bring British society to the brink of moral chaos.³

Bataille's 'base materialist' theory of revolution insisted on the fundamentally dualistic nature of the sacred, moving between the poles of pure, ideal, productive and 'Good' elements and the abject, base, destructive and 'Evil' ones. For Bataille the deeply contagious energy of the sacred is constantly 'channelled' for the maintenance of social order.⁴

It was the magnetic metaphor underpinning the left and right-handed polarities of the sacred, along with Bataille's insistence of the materialist foundations of his theory, that orientated me in the direction of 'animal magnetism'. I traced fears of 'diabolical' mass-mediated contagion back through nineteenth century theories of crowd psychology and mass influence (which accompanied the emergence of the mass media) to the work of Anton Mesmer in the late eighteenth century.

In Henri F Ellenberger's *The Discovery of the Unconscious* – a classic account of Mesmer's life, the subsequent history of Mesmerism

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3. In *The Video Nasties: Freedom and Censorship in the Media* (1984) Martin Barker points out that these claims were influenced by the social unrest that followed in the wake of the Brixton riots in 1981. Although there was no causal link between the two phenomena an imaginary association was made by the government and popular news media at the time.

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4. In *Theory of Religion* Bataille argues that the archaic dualism of the sacred undergoes a fundamental alteration with the development of monotheistic militarism and imperialism. The two poles of the sacred are clearly separated such that the divine is imagined to be the domain of the pure, ideal and transcendental aspects of the sacred while the base, sinister and malefic elements become associated with materiality and profanity. It is the forces of malefic sacred materialism that Bataille believed must be activated against the universal moral order of Reason and Divine Right which reduces all human beings to servicing its delusional productive ends.

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and hypnosis, and their role in the development of dynamic psychiatry
 – I came across the following quote:

*In Saint Domingue (pre-Revolutionary Haiti)
 Magnetism degenerated into a psychic epidemic amongst
 the Negro slaves, increasing their agitation, and the French
 domination ended in a bloodbath. Later Mesmer boasted that the
 new Republic, now called Haiti, owed its independence to him.*

Mesmerism
 in Haiti

Mesmerism⁵ was brought to Saint Domingue by the youngest of three brothers from the aristocratic Puységur family. Count Chastenet de Puységur arrived in Saint Domingue in July 1784 on a cartographic mission to plot the coast of the island. His two elder brothers were already famous devotees of animal magnetism in France. Armand-Marie-Jacques (Marquis de Puységur) is widely credited as the inventor of ‘artificial somnambulism’ or hypnotism. He is also reputed to have developed a means of magnetizing trees on his family estate enabling collective healings of his workers, a practice significantly similar to the vodou rituals which take place around sacred Mapou trees in Haiti.

On arrival in Saint Domingue the young Count Chastenet immediately set to work demonstrating the virtues of animal magnetism at the poor house in Cap Français. The miraculous successes of these demonstrations (and the ‘sensational’ effects of the cure amongst the women of the colonial administration) led to the rapid spread of Mesmerism throughout the northern part of the colony. Enthusiastic slave-owners reputedly used the practice to re-

..... 5. Mesmer’s theory of animal magnetism was based on the assumption of a vital, ethereal fluid permeating all physical bodies, from planets to molecules, which, when blocked, caused ailments of all kinds. The Mesmeric system combined new, ‘scientific’ theories of magnetic conduction between physical bodies with social networks of involuntary behavioural contagion induced by ‘action-at-a-distance’. The theory and practice of animal magnetism resonated with radical political and philosophical ideas that would go on to shape the French Revolution.

invigorate their depleted slave properties in order to extract further profit from them (McLellan, p.176-178). At precisely the same time, back in France, Mesmer and his Societies of Harmony had gained a reputation for being hotbeds of revolutionary fervour (see Darnton’s *Mesmerism and the End of the Enlightenment in France*) and were subject to an investigation by a Royal Commission intent on discrediting the practice by ‘scientifically’ disproving the existence of magnetic fluid. The authorities in Saint Domingue, aware of these investigations, cast a sceptical and cautionary eye over the practice as it spread through the colony. Once the practice passed out of the hands of the white elites and into those of the mulattos and blacks, the authorities were quick to act.

The first historian of the colonial period, Moreau de Saint-Mery (whose early ‘ethnographic’ accounts of vodou were mentioned above) reported that in 1786, in the northern parish of Marmelade, a mulatto named Jérôme and his black assistant Télémaque promoted a version of Mesmerism combined with ‘magical treatments’. The colonial authorities, no doubt still very concerned about the legacy of Mackandal (an influential herbalist, poisoner, vodouist and leader of a series of rebel Maroon uprisings against the French plantation owners in the 1750s) aggressively suppressed this new brand of ‘Creole Mesmerism’ (McLellan’s term), condemning Jérôme to the galleys and Télémaque to public pillory. According to his biographer, DM Walmsely, it was due to events at this time that Mesmer made his notorious claim that the black slaves’ confusion of animal magnetism with ‘black magic’ had led to their revolutionary uprising.

Mesmer’s claim coincides perfectly, from a Bataillian perspective, with the accepted story of the foundational event which triggered the first slave-uprising of the Haitian revolution: the ceremony of Bois Caïman. This signal event in the history of Haitian independence took place on 14 August 1791 in Alligator Woods, on the northern plains of Saint Domingue, the site of Mackandal’s sermons before his capture and execution by the French authorities in 1758. During a secret gathering of rebellious slaves and their leaders, presided over by the

priest and former slave-driver Dutty Boukman, a vodou ceremony was enacted in which a black pig was sacrificed and a blood oath sworn to the god of the black slaves and to the spirit of Liberty.⁶

The idea of an historical coincidence between a religious ceremony involving blood sacrifice and the channelling of the contagious 'left-handed' forces of the sacred in the name of liberation from slavery with a materialist healing practice channelling blocked, corporeal matter-energy contagiously through human groups was about as Bataillan as a revolutionary historical event could get. And it was in pursuit of this mythical-material and historical coincidence that I found myself in Haiti.

THE STORY OF THE MONUMENTAL PIG

The designated residence for the international participants in the Ghetto Biennale was the Hotel Oloffson (made famous by Graham Greene's novel *The Comedians*). On my first day there I struck up a conversation with Cameron Brohman, a Canadian artist who was participating in the Biennale with the Brandaid project he had co-founded in 2009.⁷

When I explained to Cameron my reasons for being at the Biennale he recounted a story he had been told by Reginald Jean François, a Haitian-born deportee from the US with whom he was working, about a ceremonial ritual performed by a unit of United Nations military personnel on a sculpture of a pig in downtown Port-

6. There is some controversy concerning the historical facts and cultural significance of the Bois Caïman ceremony, a debate which has been recently re-kindled due to post-earthquake accusations made by Evangelical Christian leaders that Haiti is cursed by God because of a pact made with Satan at that time.

7. Brandaid is a non-profit 'micromarketing' project that supports and promotes the work of artisans in developing countries. At the time of the Biennale Cameron was developing a project which involved establishing a sustainable community of young artisans in the Cité Soleil district of Port-au-Prince who will produce model Tap-Taps – the brightly decorated local buses in Haiti – made from materials gleaned from local landfills.

au-Prince during the early phase of their occupation. After consulting with Reggie, Cameron offered to take me to the site where Reggie could recount the story.

The following is an annotated transcription of the video documentation I shot at the Plaza Italia, Port-au-Prince, on 14 December, during our visit to the monument of the ceremonial pig:

Reggie – So what else do you want to know about the pig?

John – *I'll tell you what I want to know about the pig... there are some things I know about the pig... I know the stuff about Bois Caïman.*

R – Bwa Kayiman?

J – *Bwa Kayiman, oui.*

R – What about it?

J – *Well, that they killed a pig and that set the whole thing off...*

R – No, they ain't killed a pig. The vodou spirits sent the pig for them to sacrifice. The pig couldn't get killed. It was an offering to the demon gods in order for this thing to work, for liberty and freedom and a contract had to be signed.⁸

Nobody killed a pig. The pig was an offering.

J – *By Boukman, right?*⁹

8. The Christian Evangelical notion that Haitians made an historical pact with Satan is popularly referred to as 'The Contract' in Haiti. The story is widely promoted by churches and missionary organizations as a pretext for anti-vodou campaigns there.

9. Dutty Boukman (which translates as 'Dirty Bookman') was a Jamaican born houngan (voudou priest) who presided over the ceremony of Bois Caïman. He was killed by the French shortly after the uprising and his head was displayed to try and dispel rumours about his invincibility among the insurrectionary slaves.

R – Was it by Boukman Cameroon? Boukman was a slave that the French people couldn't kill. They were shooting him, they were sticking knives in this man, they were tying him up, he was always coming out the chain, he was going to war with a big...you know back in the day their handcuffs or their kneecuffs weren't as proper and small as what we have now... they had some big ugly looking stuff with a big ball of iron lead, heavy ball, I mean it could be at least three to four hundred pounds heavy, to move around. So he was very amazing. They ended up killing him though...they figured he couldn't die.¹⁰

J – *So people know and recognise this pig? Is it the same pig?*

R – It's the pig. You see that pig, if you notice, the pig that we have here right now is not the pig we're going to see now. Coz that's a boar. It has tusks. I don't know what president it was but around thirty something years ago they claimed that all these wild boars we had weren't good for the people of Haiti because they had worms and ate children.¹¹ But at that time we had no problem with our pigs. So it was

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10. Stories about the invincibility of voodoo-inspired slave leaders are most strongly associated with François Mackandal who organized mass poisonings of food and water supplies and created a network of secret rebel slave organizations in the 1750s. Haitian folklore tells of how, when the French tried to burn the captured Mackandal, he escaped death by transforming himself into a mosquito. The wave of yellow fever that helped decimate Leclerc's forces during France's attempt to regain control of the colony in 1804 is believed by some to have been the work of the spirit of Mackandal. In 1758 a law was passed to prohibit the use of makandals, one of the terms used by the French authorities to describe 'magical weapons', pwens or 'body-guards' (McAlister, p.121).

11. In 1978, during the Presidency of Jean-Claude 'Baby Doc' Duvalier, the indigenous Haitian pig was diagnosed as having African Swine Fever and, under pressure from the US government, the population was almost entirely eradicated and replaced by an American pig that cost as much to feed as a Haitian human. See Leah Gordon's 1997 documentary film *A Pig's Tail*.

a way that the American government was trying to destroy the Haitian meat programme. These pigs could survive on anything. They won't get sick and we could eat them and we wouldn't get sick. So they said that we don't have enough knowledge. But it's a lie though. You guys have got cameras right, we've had that. It's all in the voodoo. I have a mirror and I can conjure a spell and I want to see where you are and I can see you through that mirror from the invisible realm. And these guys said we weren't good enough, we were stupid, we were ignorant, we didn't know Jack Diddly about anything. So they have white magic, which is that, and we have black magic, which is something else that they can't understand.

J – *So you think this [the video camera] is a power tool?*

R – Of course! Do you have the brain to create something like this? You have to be inspired by something invisible and it's called the white magic. It comes from the white man. Do you have the brain to create a satellite to roam the space and having a solar panel on it to keep it energised? This is not things from men. This is from spirits with powers, from angels, and they will give you the knowledge, the know-how, just like they give us the know-how to do things with the mirror. So it's the same world. It's just a different way of doing things. Us, we have a lot of smell, a lot of perfume, and a whole lot of things from the ground, and that mirror will have to be a real secret mirror that no one can see except for the purpose of seeing where your mum or your enemies are. So now they've got it with satellite dishes. This is a real crazy world. The modern world and our world are two different worlds. If you see Richard [Morse] the owner of the Oloffson, he's into white people's art, and he knows the difference between white magic and black magic.

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White art & black magic

J – *He's a smart guy.*

R – Richard? Yeh, genius man. The man can see things from another way. If the American CIA want someone to speak all they have

to do is put something in their water and start asking them questions and they'll answer. If the Haitian wants you to speak all they have to do is get a demon in you and you'll start speaking. You're going to tell the truth. It's the same thing. They just have different ways about it. That pig down there, that big boar, they said let's get all them pigs out of here. Guess what. The new pigs we have, they can't survive in that garbage. Before you know it they get sick and die, they need shots, they need doctors, they need all sorts of stuff. They can't eat garbage. Our old pigs could eat all that and stay strong and ask for more. The new one won't. For real! Our old pig would get in that garbage and eat all that up. Just like a goat can eat anything, the old pig eat more than anything.

J – So people are aware of this. So what are the UN doing?¹²

R – The UN are more aware of the Haitian history because the Haitians are not educated.

So they won't go the library and pick up a book and start reading about their history. But, what our parents will do is this: they will tell us about the story, from word to word, from way back till now. The reason they are calling us a third world or fourth world whatever – a dimensional different world from the real world – is that we're still living two hundred years ago, like we're here two hundred years later, that's our mentality.

Cameron – So what did the UN do?

R – The UN? They came over here...

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¹². In February 2004, shortly after the 2nd ousting of President Jean Bertrand Aristide, the UN drafted a Security Council resolution to send a multi-national force to Haiti for three months 'to help to secure and stabilize the capital, Port-au-Prince, and elsewhere in the country' (UN Security Council resolution 1529). This was followed by the creation of MINUSTAH (United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti) in June 2004.



C – With the pig.

R – With the pig?

C – Yeh.

R – Well... we have the Sri Lankans, the Jordanians, the Bangladeshis who came to war here in 2004 with the Chimeres.¹³ The UN said 'Hold on. These guys have vodou!' They couldn't understand why they couldn't stop a bunch of untrained guys with guns, roaming the streets and warring with them when they're well-equipped and well-trained. So what the Sri Lankans did was go down to the pig

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¹³. The term Chimere was used after the ousting of President Aristide in 2004 to describe armed gangs of his supporters from the poor neighborhoods of Port-au-Prince. It is a very controversial term in the recent politics of Haiti. Traditionally a deeply pejorative swear word meaning violent 'monster', 'ghoul' or 'ghost', it was widely used in Haiti to describe the worst kind of person. It was also used specifically by the wealthy elites as a derogatory term to describe very poor and unemployed people. In 'Epithets without Borders' Richard Sanders claims that the term was part of the military linguistic arsenal used to vilify and dehumanize the enemy during the ousting of Aristide.

monument with drums, guitars, violins and rattles and all sorts of stuff and they started singing to the pig. And after they started singing to the pig, they put strange markings on it, weird markings.

See that's the ceremonial pig right there.

You see all them strange markings on him? They were never there. The American folk they destroy all that pig. They're like 'this pig is bad pig'. So they gave us new pigs. But the new pig is not that strong. They can't survive the heat. But this pig survive everything, except human beings. So humans killed the pig. But when the UN came here in 2004, the Sri Lankans came in military clothes and robes, like the Arabs does, and they came here and started singing and playing drums to the pig, and we were all around looking at this, and to me this was strange because these guys have a gun mission, to come here with the guns, stop the bad guys, kill 'em, put them to jail and then go back home. But these guys were doing some strange stuff. See that, that's a cross and that's a mark on the ear. They're tying this pig up because they believe the monumental pig¹⁴ still has certain powers that have the Haitian folks going crazy. Look around the leg. They're tying it up with their mystical powers. You see the back? This is a cross in red graffiti. When it was fresher you could see better the other stuff they put on. They want the pig to slow down. They cornered the pig down, all four sides. They're not playing. They're stopping the pig from the North, East, West and South. To them this pig exists right here in the spirit world. That's why it's got its monument here.

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14. The sculpture is one of several bronze replicas of the Florentine Boar (or *Il Porcellino*). The sculpture in the Mercato Nuovo in Florence is itself a replica of the original, which was a bronze copy of a Hellenistic marble original. Visitors to *Il Porcellino* put coins into its mouth for good luck and rub its nose to ensure their return to Florence. I have not been able to ascertain how and when the replica arrived in Haiti and whether or not the monument is associated by local people with the pig sacrificed in the Bois Caïman ceremony. However some Evangelical accounts about 'The Contract' claim that Haitians worship an iron effigy of the pig. I have as yet found no evidential support for these claims.

So that's the story of the pig. This guy here he's blind right. He's going round the pig and he wants some money. See if I was lying I'd be dying by now because I can see what happened in 2004 and he's doing it now. It's no coincidence that they keep playing music to the pig. Believe me man! It's straight jacket. And not just them. We had some Baptist missionaries who came around 1988/9. They were playing Christian music to the pig and they were putting their hands upon the pig and cursing it: 'In Jesus' name you big fat pig get out of here! We're chasing you off. If you think I'm lying this is where I sell mahogany and wood carving, right there. I'm here 24/7, except three or four months from now. I haven't been around lately, coz I'm doing work over at the airport. But this is where my shop, my paintings, my mahogany and things go, right there.

He ain't gonna stop until you pay him for that pig man. That thing is real.



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