The Aesthetics of Violence

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THE AESTHETICS
OF VIOLENCE

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Introduction

Violence and Aesthetics

Hans Jacob Ohldieck and Gisle Selnes

I

When the so-called war on terror was launched in 2001, West-ern media exploded with reports on a specific kind of violence: subjective, spectacular terrorist acts committed by radicalized groups or individuals motivated by a fanatical attachment to Islam. At the same time, there was an increase in governmental counter-violence accompanied by rapid innovation in techno-logical surveillance and warfare. Thus, even though experience from earlier military interventions has demonstrated that state-sanctioned counter-violence in confused political territory is highly unpredictable business, once again the imperative to *do* something prevailed: A broad political compromise calls for action—even if the response is unlikely to change the situation for the better. The "war on terror" generated not only massive "collateral damage"—the destruction of vital infrastructure and

loss of civilian lives—but also a series of consequences contrary to those pursued: the establishment of an "Islamic State" on the ruins of the wiped-out "rogue states," a permanent humanitarian crisis producing a large number of refugees, and a new wave of terrorist attacks on European soil.

Yet another consequence of the political consensus on "de-radicalization" was the reduction of the intellectual space for any radical critique of the political, epistemological, and ontological nature of violence, especially when it comes to violence as an irreducible constituent of any lawful political structure— and hence also of its inevitable role in the transition from one political "state" to another. With these dispositives, the stage was set for the cultural "poetics of violence" of the budding Third Millennium.

Violence and counter-violence are enacted according to different paradigms or "violence regimes." These regimes not only have political and military but also aesthetic and ideological assets. In opposition to pre-modern regimes from the archaic to the "sovereign" periods, modernity's modus operandi, when it comes to violence, is marked by a certain reticence or dissimulation: Violent retaliation should be powerful and precise—"surgical" is a common "positive" epithet—yet the actual destruction of the enemy's body is not for the public eye to behold. In other words, war is waged on several fronts, of which the "aesthetic" fight over visibility versus secrecy might actually be as important as that of traditional military operations. Suffice it to recall WikiLeaks' publication, in 2010, of the "Collateral Murder" video as well as precise documentation of the killing of thousands of innocent civilians, including children, which contributed decisively to the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq.[1]

"Our epoch … is probably not less cruel than the past …, but its cruelties are clandestine,"[2] Jorge Luis Borges asserts in a passage that might have caught the attention of Michel Foucault—as

well as that of Slavoj Žižek. Violence has become power's "dirty secret," the law's "obscene underside," with its own mode of enjoyment. Yet there is a considerable step, e.g., from the sadistic scenarios of the US military prison Abu Ghraib in Baghdad to the perverse executions of IS prisoners. Even though both display carefully staged rituals of humiliation and brutality—symptomatic of the obscene rituals underpinning the power structure of US Armed Forces and the Islamic State alike—their disclosure and reception on the global media scene differed significantly. Whereas the Abu Ghraib torture scenes caused great scandal—shock and outrage mixed with a certain fascination for its prospects of "prohibited enjoyment"—and had severe political consequences, the most common reaction to IS' decapitation of defenseless captives was probably that of turning one's head away in abomination, refusing to relate to these records of gross inhumanity. This, however, does not mean that there is no aesthetic intention or "quality"—beyond mere abjection—to these latter documents: When IS' masked ex-rap-artists cut the throats of apathetic prisoners dressed in orange Guantánamo uniforms, the most probable objective was precisely to expose the traumatic violence normally repressed from the modern martial scene. The ritualized humiliation mirroring that of the "unlawful combatants" in US captivity was consummated by the cynical display of "the real of violence" negating the invisibility of Western high-tech war machines and secluded high-security prisons—a return of the repressed, as it were, wielding primitive, archaic weapons. Apparently, the main aesthetic function of these scenarios was to inflict an open wound on the virtual body politic of the world community, thus denouncing its "organic" *Gemeinschaft* as an ideological fiction. Needless to say, the ethical price for such a critique of ideology is incalculable.

On today's global scene, new forms of violence seem to be evolving in the aftermath of "terror." One of the most dismal,

lurking symptoms of a new violence regime is the withering away of the very "potentiality of events" inherent in philosophy's truth-producing "conditions." This situation, anticipated by several philosophical pessimists throughout the twentieth century, is often referred to as *desêtre*, i.e., a loss of being, or "unbeing": a kind of "becoming-animal"—not in the Deleuzian sense, but rather as the loss of every capacity and concern other than the preservation of "the human animal" in a kind of post-historical homeostasis. In such a scenario, violence amounts to the direct intervention on the de-subjectified individual, extracting marketable values from his or her private pleasures while simultaneously exerting the necessary minimum of surveillance and algorithmic prediction for the virtual economy to prosper. The "numbness" proposed by Heidegger as the ontological determination of the animal qua "world-deprived" (*weltarm*) thus becomes the hallmark of the new, or post-, human, an-aestheticized by the sovereign regime of "psychopolitics."

In his *Topology of Violence*, Byung-Chul Han speaks of a transition from the *negativity* of classic, coercive violence—always emerging from the outside—to the *positivity* of contemporary interiorized and even "consensual violence."[3] War is no longer the paradigm of violence on a massive scale; even terrorism's highly subjective menace to civil(ized) society is all but obsolete. In what appears to be the consummation of the proto-violence inherent in the *polis* as a structure founded on law and language, today's violence regime is systemic and invisible, i.e., it coincides with the normal functioning of society as such. Its main dispositive is the positivity of achievement and excess (surplus), incarnated or individualized by the achievement-subject:

> The society of achievement is a society of self-exploitation. The achievement-subject exploits itself until it is totally *burned out*. In this process, it develops auto-aggressive tendencies, which often

intensify to the violence of suicide. The project proves to be a *projectile*, one the achievement-subject now aims at itself.[4]

Thus, violence no longer needs an "other," the Schmittian "Feind" (enemy), to secure the self-preservation of the state and its institutions. In a much subtler and more tranquil manner, it relies on the invisible hand of a generalized market. Costly decapitations and old-fashioned discipline are not needed in a situation where depression—the self-referential mode of contemporary violence—can do the job far more effectively, outsourced to the victim, i.e., the achievement-subject itself.

2

The Aesthetics of Violence seeks to intervene in this troubled situation addressing the question of violence, including state violence and systemic violence, from an aesthetic point of view. Its main objective is to shed new light on how the conception of violence is conditioned by aesthetic and ideological presuppositions— along the same lines that Jacques Rancière speaks of "aesthetic regimes" and Thomas Piketty of "inequality regimes."[5] How does the history of violence affect the forms of violence typical of a given epoch or culture? How can violence *qua* aesthetic practices be explored with an eye to their condition of possibility, as modes of signification pertaining to "the distribution of the sensible,"[6] i.e., to the politico-aesthetic struggle over what should be allowed to "appear" as a part of the socio-symbolic field? In what ways do art and literature contribute to our perception and understanding of "real" violence as well as the proto-violence inherent in human existence and aesthetic practices? Moreover, how are the changing conceptions of violence related to shifts in political concepts of change?

Literature and the arts not only *represent* violence of various kinds; they also *respond* to and *transform* violence into a creative principle, often consonant with various forms of political violence. Thus, as signifying practices exempt from immediate violent effects, aesthetic forms may provide valuable insights not only into their own condition but also into the psychological and cultural workings of violence. As psychoanalysis as well as different aesthetically oriented philosophies—from Freud onward—have maintained, art often anticipates theoretical insights not only into the psychological and cultural workings of delicate (or disavowed) mechanisms such as violence, but also into the conditions of possibility of art itself. Even though violence is often experienced as irregular irruptions of brute force, it simultaneously reveals undercurrents of ideas and discourses that determine the way in which violence actually functions at a given historical juncture. To a considerable degree, the workings of these forces are unconscious. Aesthetic artifacts and practices, therefore, have the ability to mobilize ideas and affects that are otherwise suppressed, relegated as insignificant or marginal, or ejected from mainstream discourse. Violence as it appears in literature and the arts, as well as in other cultural and aesthetic practices, thus provides valuable yet often ignored insights into crucial aspects of "real" violence that cannot be accessed through mere observation of the social and political scene.

Despite the apparent meaninglessness of destructive outbursts damaging the body politic and its members, violence is *also* a signifying phenomenon. Traumatic yet signifying, irrational yet "meaningful," a reactive as well as a "creative" force: Violence must be approached with caution, and from different angles, if it is to convey its complex nature. To do so, one has to bracket—at least temporarily—the presumptions on which the contemporary discourse on violence relies. A number of contemporary philosophers and theorists depicts violence as a

profoundly ambiguous phenomenon: We are often unable to recognize "the blot of violence" in scenarios where we do not expect it to appear, and when we happen to identity it, we are likely to misinterpret or misrepresent it. In the words of Willem Schinkel, violence has an inherent "tendency of being mis-recognized."[7] Violence, therefore, seems to withdraw from the broader picture, as though in tacit agreement with our inability to confront it without ideological filters. Insofar as it escapes reason, violence must also be explored on the "other scene of politics," writes Étienne Balibar, positing at the basis of extreme violence a connection between *the fantasy of omnipotence* and the reduction of its victims to a state of helplessness.[8] Extreme violence is, therefore, "one to which no symmetric counter-power or counter-violence can be opposed that does not disseminate and worsen it, pushing ... politics toward its own self-destruction."[9]

For Balibar, the abovementioned "war on terror" is one example of such self-destruction, yet his point also concerns the ambiguity of revolutionary violence: A would-be revolutionary movement may eventually succeed in radically altering a repressive condition, yet there is no guarantee that it is not itself the expression of a will to power in a reactive or repressive sense—what Nietzsche referred to as "resentment" and Peter Sloterdijk (after him) as "treasury of rage" or "thymotic capital."[10] Hence also in the realm of aesthetics: A violent "sense-event" might numb or even traumatize the subject—or else serve to open the gates of perception to new realms of creativity. Art, therefore, can, on the one hand, be analyzed in terms of affections and perceptions that have been torn away from the experiencing subject and transformed into a "composite" endowed with virtuality. This affective dimension appears as a kind of violence done to the senses, an encounter that forces us to think in new ways, across or beyond the frontiers between philosophy and art. Thus, focusing on experimental "lines of flight" rather than direct confrontations,

Gilles Deleuze elaborates an aesthetic alternative to antagonistic and violent confrontations. In doing so, Deleuze emphasizes the ambivalent role desire may play in "negative" acts of violence insofar as they often conceal a will to nothingness. He thus finds an alternative in the baroque "fold that goes to infinity," i.e., a movement that brings together different universes of signs and experiences, unfolding a creative potential with the power to turn resentment into active forces of becoming.

On the other hand, the aesthetic event might itself be of a violent kind, giving way to a "truth procedure" that in a more fundamental way seeks to produce *real* changes and give rise to new paradigms of thought and desire. In this sense, the aesthetic event could be grasped as producing a "revolution" of the restricted perspective approved by a specific discourse—a "revolution" comparable to the disruptive moment in the passage from one political "state" to the next. Alain Badiou's concept of *l'événement*—sometimes translated as "truth-event"—underscores this reciprocity, aesthetics and politics being two of the four realms where truth and subjectivity might appear (the other two being science and love) as the "conditions" of philosophy. In all these scenarios, an event uproots the established coordinates in a potentially violent manner—and quite literally so if we conceive of *violentia* in its scholastic sense, as a situation where a being or phenomenon appears in a place where it does not "rationally" belong. That would be one possible definition of the Badiouan *événement*: the irruption of a subject in a set or setting where it is not "counted as one."

3

The Aesthetics of Violence comprises twelve chapters arranged into three parts. The first, "The Aesthetics of Systemic Violence," takes its cue from Slavoj Žižek's paradigmatic distinction

between subjective and objective (or systemic) violence, exploring possible rifts in the hegemonic power structures of today's politico-aesthetic paradigm. The second part revolves more specifically around "Literary Forms of Violence," analyzing fiction from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The third and last part, "Violent Images and Sounds," discusses the relation between aesthetics and violence in contemporary films and TV series, as well as the role of sublime violence in musical romanticism.

In its treatment of the relation between subjective and systemic violence, the first section pays special heed to the contrast between "state violence" and revolutionary violence, i.e., pure and self-negating acts irrupting from the interstices of an uprooted situation. Subjective violence is an act of *transgression*, a desire to gain access to a certain unlawful enjoyment, particularly through "extremism" in one of its forms: suicide bombings, car burnings, etc. In the violence regime dominated by "terror," any legitimate critique of violence is expected to suggest a cure for such excesses, e.g., in the form of "de-radicalization" of subjects held to be particularly disposed for violent behavior. In this manner, the imperceptibility of the "systemic violence"—the kind of violence required to keep the normal state of affairs running under the rule of dominant political and ideological powers—is reinforced.

In the first two chapters, Bruno Bosteels and Mikkel Bolt seek to identify a new revolutionary imaginary emerging after the defeat and dispersion of the radical movements of the 1960s. In "The Aesthetics of State Violence: From Grievance to Revolt," Bosteels turns to Latin America, where the Cuban revolution of 1959 led to an increase in both insurgent and state violence, as Fidel Castro sponsored and inspired a range of revolutionary movements that were in many cases defeated by (para)military forces. The Latin American revolutionary fervor finally came to an end in the 1970s, as US-sponsored military forces grabbed state power all over the continent. What remained was a feeling

of loss and grief that still seems to haunt Latin American litera-
ture and culture, and which, according to Bosteels, has become
an obstacle for the emergence of new forms of political agency.
In this regard, Mexico has its own history and its own myths,
based upon a compulsion to repeat its founding moments of
violence. In the twentieth century, this view gained ground as
Mexico's armed forces killed hundreds of protesting students in
1968 at the Plaza de Tlatelolco, the very same square that saw the
final defeat of the Aztecs to the Spanish *conquistadores* in 1521.
More recently, 43 students from the Ayotzinapa Rural Teach-
ers' College were abducted and disappeared—probably with
the complicity of the federal police, the army, and high-ranking
politicians—as they were on their way for the annual comme-
moration at the Tlatelolco square.

Commemorations and memorials of grievance have the virtue
of drawing attention to state violence, but Bosteels argues that
they also contribute to the *fetishism of the state* along "reactive"
lines. This fetishism seems to be at the core of the Mexican *can-
ción triste*, the sorrow song, which has given aesthetic form to
the conceived compulsion *to repeat*. However, what the sorrow
song serves to conceal are the political practices of our time, the
collective subjectivities emerging through *communal* activities.
Originated in Castile, Spain, the very same year as the fall of
Tenochtitlan, the commune could become the cornerstone of a
reconstruction of the history of Mexico—as a history of insurrec-
tion. "Can we also find theoretical resources to accompany such a
displacement," Bosteels asks, "or does the trend in contemporary
critical theory run completely counter to this project, which as a
result, might even be seen as merely a case of wishful thinking?"

Mikkel Bolt explores a similar question as he analyzes how
recent protest movements from the Arab Spring to the *Gilets
jaunes* and beyond have broken a "30-year long period of one-sided
neoliberal counter-revolution." Through comparative reading of

recent books by Judith Butler and Marcello Tarì, Bolt discusses the collective politico-aesthetic gestures of mass assemblies and protests. Butler and Tarì disagree considerably on the role of violence in these protests. In line with her general theory of performativity, Butler insists on the nonviolent character of the "bodily movement, assembly, action and resistance" that she finds to characterize, e.g., the square occupations of the Arab Spring in 2011, despite numerous accounts to the contrary. In Bolt's view, Butler's insistent nonviolence reveals her attachment to a liberal idea of politics based on the "transcendental" values of democracy and nonviolence. What is thus left out of sight is the "systemic violence" inherent to the neoliberal capitalist state, which may be the *real* enemy that these mass mobilizations have in common.

Against Butler, Bolt explicitly endorses Tarì's conception of the new cycle of protests as *destitute* revolts, i.e., revolts that have no straight-forward political program they want to implement; instead, they reject the established political system per se. Revolting thus becomes a question of *destituting* power, emblematically expressed by the Argentinian *piqueteros* in 2001: *¡Que se vayan todos! ¡Que no se quede ni uno solo!* ("Everybody out [of the government]! Nobody stays!"). This slogan goes to the core of what the protest movements of the last ten years are about: a revolutionary break with existing power structures and a possible return of revolutionary communism, understood as a revolution that makes power "unworkable." Thus, countering Butler's "popular sovereignty," Tarì argues that it is not a question of avoiding violence—or trying to confront an undemocratic system with nonviolent assembled bodies in order to form a real democracy—but rather of abandoning power altogether, breaking the very connection between law and violence.

Insofar as subjective violence is the visible manifestation of violence, it goes without saying that it is also its most "representable" or "reportable" form. In the third and final chapter of this

section on systemic violence, Frode Helmich Pedersen discusses what William Labov has dubbed "the tellability of tales"—that is, why some news stories (of political violence) are massively covered by the media while others are largely ignored. Apart from Labov, Pedersen draws on Žižek's distinction between subjective and objective violence as well as on Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman's "Propaganda Model" from *Manufacturing Consent* (1988). According to Chomsky and Herman, the media in the United States willingly publishes stories of violence where official enemies of the US are the culprits, whereas violence carried out by the US or its allies is largely suppressed. Žižek, for his part, underscores how the ruling classes control the "invisible" mechanisms of objective violence that keep society running, thereby leaving the media to report on subjective and violent transgressions of laws that, in essence, appear as neutral. Both of these perspectives address important issues of ideology and power, yet Pedersen contends that they do not suffice to explain why some stories on violence are considered fit to print while others are not. Through a study of the 2018 Khashoggi case—where the Saudi dissident and journalist Jamal Khashoggi was murdered and dismembered in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul by agents of the Saudi government—Pedersen argues that the socio-linguistic concept of "tellability" may fill this theoretical gap. The Khashoggi case contains such a high degree of "reportable" details that the usual ideological mechanisms are suspended: It becomes virtually unthinkable not to report the case, even though the culprits are important US allies.

4

Literature makes language stammer, as it were, opening it to the outside of representation. The second part of this volume, "Literary Forms of Violence," discusses literature's capacity to

expand the field of the sensible, experimenting with emerging forms of subjectivity. Processes of subjectivation may take repressive forms, e.g., within different "biopolitical" regimes (such as colonialism discussed in this section), or as the result of symbolic castration in more general terms. However, they may also be conceived of as processes of *becoming*, and these different possibilities are explored in this section, in some cases accompanied by reflections on ethical questions that are intimately connected to the aesthetic "surplus" or excess.

From the vantage point of subjectivation, the literary forms of violence may appear as "signs from the future." This capacity is at the center of the first chapter of this section, "Burning Books: Sovereignty and the Fire of Literature," in which Cecilia Sjöholm argues that the "hypothesis of substitution"—in the words of Heine, "Where they burn books, they burn people"—has been prevalent in accounts of book burnings. Far less reflected upon is the question, "What non-human aspects of the book are the flames meant to consume?" Drawing on various literary and theoretical sources, Sjöholm suggests that when books are burned, it is not only because they symbolize people that must be destroyed, but also because they contain forms of life that must be prevented from being reproduced. The prime target of the attack is the freedom and *sovereignty* embodied by literature through its excessive character, which often has sexual connotations or motives: "The sovereignty of the book and its possible sexual components have something in common: They raise an aggression against the kind of enjoyment that the book represents in its freedom." According to Sjöholm, the key to the aggression thus lies in the (virtual) capacity of books to go beyond political and religious struggles of the moment, directed as they are toward generations to come.

In the second contribution, "The Cut and the Conch: Aesthetics and Violence in Alejo Carpentier's *Explosion in a*

Cathedral," Hans Jacob Ohldieck analyzes "signs of the future" in relation to the revolutionary event. In his reading of Carpentier's canonical novel on the repercussions of the French Revolution in the Caribbean, Ohldieck argues that the figure of the *cut*—metonymically represented by the guillotine—becomes emblematic of a (Kantian) sublime, revolutionary conviction. On the other hand, the conch becomes an expression of a baroque aesthetics that explores cultural differences through the figures of the spiral and the fold, which Ohldieck investigates through a Deleuzian optics. A central claim is that the (neo) baroque fold envelops the experience of the popular will in a way that is necessary in order to prevent the revolutionary from falling into resentment and *terror*. In this sense, the novel's exploration of the French Revolution is in tune with Nietzsche's critique of Robespierre's revolutionary stance, based on absolute fidelity to an abstract idea. The question remains, however, whether we can really think of historical change without an unbounded revolutionary enthusiasm or conviction, without a truly sublime politics and aesthetics. Carpentier's answer seems to be negative, as the novel ends with the unification of the characters personifying the cut and the conch, thereby paving the way for a new subjectivity and a new collective agent of change.

"Language is the first and greatest divider," writes Slavoj Žižek, so much so that "man is a subject caught and tortured by language."[11] Žižek is here referring to the Lacanian view that the becoming-subject of the human animal involves the symbolic castration in and through "the symbolic order" (equivalent to language as structure), which produces what is often referred to as "surplus enjoyment": the excessive, uprooting *jouissance* that enters when pre-linguistic demand is thwarted by desire. This enjoyment also has *ethical* and political implications that are discussed in the next three chapters.

In the first of these, Lilian Munk Rösing discusses different aspects of symbolic violence through the concept of "incarnation," drawing on the works of Eric Santner and Georges Didi-Huberman. For Santner, incarnation refers to the carving out of the subject through symbolic castration, whereas Didi-Huberman sees it as the excess produced by the same process, in which the signifier materializes something beyond representation. According to Munk Rösing, literature has a similar double function. On the one hand, it may mirror and expose the violence of the symbolic order; on the other, it may turn into a space where language opens itself to that which exceeds it. This opening may imply a violence to language and thus also the possibility of a counter-language. Through a close reading of Paul Celan's poem "Todesfuge" (1945) and Elfriede Jelinek's novel *Die Klavierspielerin* (1983), Munk Rösing seeks to capture how literary incarnation works as a dialectics of violence and counter-violence, the latter through the dimensions of language that escape representation, the sonorous and rhythmic qualities of words.

Conceptual and ethical concerns are at the core of the following chapter. Stehn Aztlan Mortensen's contribution, "Killing the Novel: Conceptualizing Violence in Vladimir Sorokin's *Roman*," discusses the conflicting ethical and metaliterary implications of depicting violence. The Russian postmodernist author Vladimir Sorokin has himself spoken out in favor of an aestheticism beyond ethics. Meanwhile, his writing is marked by a profusion of extreme violence. Mortensen notes how Sorokin's most notorious transgressions are connected to the reinsertion of bodily excess into Russian literature, reminding us of a hypersexualized, smelly, and brutal vein of Russian literature which to a large extent has been repressed by its opposite, the strong emphasis on Russian spirituality. In Sorokin's conceptualist novel *Roman* from the 1980s, Mortensen argues that

the violence in question is both metaliterary and plot-driven: a bloody massacre on the diegetic level; an effect of the implicit author trying to bore and exhaust the implicit reader; an assault on existing literary genres and traditions; and the book attacking itself until it ultimately implodes. Yet, contrary to the early Sorokin's "aesthetics beyond ethics," Mortensen detects an ethical value in the very transgression itself, insofar as it may have a cathartic effect and adjust the reader's moral sensibilities. The question is *not* whether violent fiction per se is immoral or not, but whether it can provide an aesthetic space for the ethically dubious, made possible by Ricœur's notion of *productive reference,* "where literature has the power to conjure up a world through an image that has no existing referent in reality."[12]

In the last chapter of this section, "Kafka's Human Zoo—Colonialism, Resentment, and Violence in Kafka's 'A Report to an Academy' and 'In the Penal Colony'," Torgeir Skorgen addresses colonial violence in Kafka's works. Skorgen claims that in recent Kafka scholarship, there has been a tendency to regard the (often satiric) depictions of racism and colonial violence in Kafka's fictions as mere allegories on eternal questions of guilt, punishment, truth, God, etc. Skorgen advocates for a (partial) de-allegorization of colonialism and colonial violence in Kafka's fiction: Under the influence of colonialism, the major idea of modern zoos—where "exotic" animals *and* humans were exhibited—was to visualize Darwin's evolutionist theory together with ideas of cultural hegemony and pseudo-scientific ideas of racial inferiority and superiority. In "A Report to an Academy," captivity is the fate of the chimpanzee Red Peter, who only finds "a way out" as he is taught to mimic and behave like a (European) human being through disciplinary methods. Drawing on a rich material on real-life human zoos and contemporary theories of race, Skorgen argues that Red Peter is forced to repress his ape nature and thus confirm the racist imaginaries of his European

spectators, adjusting to stereotypes and power relations that had already been prescribed by Western science and popular culture. Skorgen also suggests that there is a specific Kafkaesque version of what Homi Bhabha has called "subversive mimicry"—a kind of satiric mimicry casting the mechanisms of domination, discipline, and resentment in hyperbolic, metonymical and carnivalesque ways, thus exposing the artificiality of power and symbolic violence.

5

The last part, "Violent Images and Sounds," comprises four contributions on the aesthetics of violence in music and film. Three of them analyze recent films and TV series, seeing them as representations of pressing contemporary politico-aesthetic issues such as surveillance capitalism, environmental "slow violence," and the cynicism of postmodern ideology. The volume's last chapter recovers one of the thematic threads that runs through the anthology, i.e., the violence of the sublime, which is now discussed in relation to music.

The section opens with Magnus Bøe Michelsen's psychoanalytically informed analysis of the HBO series *Westworld* as a reflection on violent representations in the classic Western genre and also in contemporary culture industries. The Westworld theme park is an enormous cultural industrial complex, where the so-called hosts are machines custom-made for the unlimited enjoyment of the guests. Drawing on Lacanian theory, Michelsen claims that the subject position of the hosts is characterized by the absolute reign of castration, the Law as absolute: their desire is defined—programmed—by their owners to satisfy the desires of the customers. Thus, they are determined by what Freud calls a "compulsion to repeat" and a

certain repression mechanism. On the one hand, this compulsion reflects the traditional Western script itself, where the hero always rides on westward whenever he feels that his freedom is being compromised. The receding front line of the West seems to go on indefinitely, as an inaccessible infinite, which only carries the promise of change so that everything will remain the same. However, as the surveillance-capitalist face of contemporary culture industries is foregrounded in the second season of *Westworld*, it becomes clear that the truly traumatic question concerns the system as such: What is the Other really after? In the end, the hosts' absolute subjugation to the Law turns out to be the very condition of possibility for their liberation—a possibility Michelsen explores through the sovereign or "divine violence" in Walter Benjamin's sense.

In his take on the aesthetics of cinematic violence, Rasmus Ugilt isolates the Lacanian concept of the Real to account for the point where mimetic illusion disintegrates. Titling his contribution "The Longing of the Lambs. The Lacanian Real in the Work of Lars von Trier," Ugilt draws our attention to the recurring scene in von Trier's films where the victims seem to solicit their own sacrifice—an *anagnorisis* of sorts where the spectator also becomes the victim of the director's aesthetic maneuvers, forcing her/him to witness a scene that undoes the fictional fabric of the universe s/he is trying to make sense of. There are, however, different, and seemingly contradictory, ways of achieving this effect, even in von Trier's oeuvre. On the one hand, there is the "traditional" alienation or *Verfremdungseffekt* associated with Brecht's epic theatre—on which von Trier relies heavily in parts of his work—where the actor steps out of his/her role, pointing out the theatrical conventions in order to signal the distance from the Real. This, however, is a problematic strategy in a society where cynicism has become the ultimate ideological veil—nothing is more conventional today than the "ironic" debunking

of conventions. As Žižek has convincingly argued, cynicism is the very condition of possibility for "postmodern" ideology: We believe that we maintain a (cynical) distance toward our own beliefs, thus feeling entitled to act according to these same beliefs since we no longer take them seriously.

What is needed, therefore, is a return to a certain "naiveté," an immersion in the fictional universe, preparing for the intervention of the Real. In the case of von Trier, his recent interest in Wagner contributes to such a "de-alienation," "seeking to enhance the illusion in order to arrive at the real." In a final turn of the screw, Ugilt argues that "the longing of the lamb" moment in von Trier's last and most traumatically violent movie so far, "The House that Jack Built," takes on a new dimension: It occurs at the very beginning of the film, and with a certain comic conventionality—only to open up a new horizon where truly disturbing ("real") violence seems to be all there is.

In "Mold in the Machine – Nature and Technology in *Treme* (2010) and *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012)," Synnøve Marie Vik explores the relationship between nature and technology as it is portrayed in the TV series *Treme season 1* and the feature film *Beasts of the Southern Wild*. The analysis revolves around the visual imprint and aesthetic effects that water has on infrastructure and society, arguing that aesthetic rendering of damages to the infrastructure—provoked by extreme weather—contributes to visualizing the duality of nature as both violent and violated. While the violence of hurricane Katrina visibly altered New Orleans' infrastructure in mere hours, for example, the violence of the mold was a much slower event, developing in the aftermath as a visible and invisible, ominous threat. To describe this dual relationship between nature and technology, Vik proposes to identify a specific visuality which she calls "Mold in the Machine," with reference to Leo Marx's trope of "The Machine in the Garden."

Events along the Louisiana coastline have made evident how years of exploitation of the landscape, as well as disinvestment in city infrastructure, aggravate the consequences of the climate emergency we are now experiencing. With his term "slow violence," Rob Nixon has coined a form of environmental violence that is low in drama but high in long-term catastrophic effect, and which is central to this analysis. It can further be argued that the exclusion of areas such as Louisiana from the logic of modernity is what facilitates the slow violence exerted by society at large toward vulnerable communities. "Mold in the Machine" demands that we recognize both the materiality of progressive modernity and its material—and human—consequences.

The aesthetics of sublime violence is one recurring topic in this anthology; in the final contribution of the book, Vladimir Safatle invests it in its only musical case study: "The Violence of the Sublime: On Aesthetical Violence in Musical Language." At stake here is the sublime violence immanent to musical romanticism, of which Beethoven's Fifth Symphony is the programmatic example. When the work was presented, E.T.A. Hoffmann famously wrote that "Beethoven's music produces in us fear, terror, horror elevating ourselves to an infinite nostalgia that is proper to romanticism." These affects concern a relation between violence and the sublime understood not only as the essence of musical form; but it also relates to a political commitment that challenged hegemonic representations and social reproduction of forms of life. With an acute sense of the dialectic between these domains, Safatle explores the phenomenon of atrophy, understood by Adorno as the standstill effected by the instrumentalization of (musical) language. Turning from the programmatic Fifth Symphony to two minor pieces—Beethoven's *Coriolan Overture* and his Piano Sonata No. 16 in G Major—Safatle's discussion also shows how Beethoven prefigures modernism's formal approach to the relations between violence

and musical form: The romantic atrophy of form is radicalized in modernism, which opens a new horizon in which the sublime nevertheless remains the condition of possibility for the (musical) work of art.

6

Taken together, the twelve chapters in this anthology testify to the protean nature of violence, ever capable of morphing into new shapes and of entering the most diverse connections. There is violence and counter-violence, crime and punishment, law foundation and law enforcement—as if violence were a self-generating, self-perpetuating force. That is perhaps why violence is so difficult to get rid of: akin to Lacan's Real, it pops up where- and whenever one least expects it, as a constitutive dysfunction of sorts, the "negative" remainder of a foundational act whose excesses cannot be brought to a standstill. Violence thus turns out to be virtually impossible to pin down "in itself," yet it never ceases to manifest itself in recognizable and not-so-recognizable as well as extremely elusive, indiscernible ways. In this sense, there are only *forms of violence*—or *violent forms*—without any neutral exception; that is why the ideological struggle over the classification and definition of these appearances (and disappearances) is such a crucial part of the aesthetics of violence.

Several decades ago, Roland Barthes proposed an elemental distinction between *violence* and *violent*, i.e., between the noun's "essential" quality and the attribute(s) signaled by the adjective. In the latter case, we also have to do with "states, forms of behaviour or choices that may be violent in a positive way. Or, rather, violent *and* positive—creative passions, creative radicalisms!"[13] Today, it is more important than ever to vindicate these

"forms of violence," since creative energy and passion, especially when turned into subjective and political agencies, are almost automatically labeled as fanaticism and associated with reactive terrorist violence *in statu nascendi*. Like politics, like power, violence, as *Gewalt*, is itself a battleground from which human beings seem unable to withdraw since it is also where the future of the ideas of justice and civility are decided. If one does not control the state apparatus, with its monopoly over violence, nor the big corporations, with their dollar-driven privileges to operate in the non-regulated interstices of the law, then one can at least fight to render these systemic, invisible forms of violence perceptible. Aesthetics, art, and literature are among the most invaluable weapons in this "violent *and* positive" fight for perceptibility and accountability.

Notes

1. See e.g., Julian Assange et al., *The WikiLeaks Files. The World According to the US Empire* (London: Verso, 2015).

2. Jorge Luis Borges, "Silvina Ocampo: *Faits divers de la terre et du ciel*," in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 2 (Paris: Gallimard, 1999), 472.

3. Byung-Chul Han, *Topology of Violence*, trans. Amanda DeMarco (Cambridge, Mass., and London, England: The MIT Press, 2018), 35.

4. Han, *Topology*, 8.

5. Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Malden, Mass.: Polity Press, 2009), 5 ff.; Thomas Piketty, *Capital and Ideology*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2020), 2 ff.

6. Rancière, *Aesthetics*, 25.

7. Willem Schinkel, *Aspects of Violence: A Critical Theory* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 3.

8. Étienne Balibar, *Violence and Civility: On the Limits of Political*

Philosophy, trans. G.M. Goshgarian (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 135.

9. Balibar, *Violence*, xii.

10. Peter Sloterdijk, *Rage and Time: A Psychopolitical Investigation*, trans. Mario Wenning (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 108, 157.

11. Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (New York: Picador, 2008), 66.

12. Paul Ricœur, "The Function of Fiction in Shaping Reality," in *Man and World* 12, no. 2 (1979), 125–126.

13. Roland Barthes, "Remarks on Violence," in *"The 'Scandal' of Marxism" and Other Writings on Politics*, trans. Chris Turner (London, New York, and Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2015), 124.

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The Aesthetics of State Violence

From Grievance to Revolt

Bruno Bosteels

In the beginning, there was violence. Many national histories and not a few philosophical theories have been written based on such a view of original or radical violence: violence at the root or origin of history itself. The histories and theories of the state are no exception in this regard. Or, rather, they frequently consist of showing the extent to which the modern state is fundamentally rooted in an exceptional yet constitutive act of violence, which subsequently tends to be erased and forgotten from the official record of the dominant history books and annals. Such a view of violence, however, cannot avoid the question of the forms of its presentation and representation, that is, the question of the aesthetics of violence in the broadest possible sense. This is not limited to the literary and artistic realm. For it is not just novels and movies, paintings and poetry that give shape to the aesthetic

forms of violence. The modes of presentation of the social bond as such inevitably entail a series of genre conventions, for example, in terms of narrative structure and rhetorical force, without which a story such as the history and critique of state violence could not even be imagined in the first place. Thus, in what follows, I propose to delve into the archive of one particularly striking and symptomatic case—that of the Mexican state—in order to study the effects of presenting violence as foundational to its history since at least the conquest and destruction of Tenochtitlan, the site of the creation of what would eventually come to be known as Mexico City.

The Case of Mexico: A History of Grievances Against the State

In Mexico, there exists a long tradition of writing history in a tragic or traumatic key by starting from its founding moments of violence, as if the repetitive compulsion to commit a foundational act of violence in the form of massacring its own people could be met only by the compulsion to repeat the trauma, calendar year after calendar year, official commemoration after official commemoration. From Tlatelolco (repeated site of massacres, on August 13, 1521, and again on October 2, 1968) to Ayotzinapa (site of the rural teacher training college whose students were forcibly made to disappear on the night between September 26 and 27, 2014), the intermittent appearance of violence sponsored or at least allowed by the state thus has punctuated the long history of Mexico, giving a whole series of place names the sad privilege of instant recognizability in the eyes of the international community. This focus on the most spectacular aspects of state violence, however, has taken away the visibility of different forms of rebellion, resistance, and radical experiments in communal self-rule

that in many cases seem to have been at the root of the need, in the optic of the state, for a violent intervention to repress all such efforts and prevent their memory from lingering as an unfilled promise of emancipation. And this effect of rendering invisible the ongoing collective struggles, in turn, raises the question of whether it is possible to move beyond the understandable if also constricting impulse to keep on reproducing the most common forms of the political, historical, juridical, and literary-aesthetic treatments of violence in the long history of Mexico.

Together with the sorrow song, or *canción triste*, the dominant aesthetic form or subgenre in the tragic mode of history writing in Mexico can be defined as the tradition of the *memorial de agravios*, or memorial of grievances—for instance, grievances against the abusive power of representatives of the Spanish Crown, the Viceregal Court, or the Catholic Church during the colonial period in New Spain; against the alleged marginalization of the Creole as opposed to the Spanish-born elite in the government apparatuses of the newly independent nation-state; or against the excessive use of force by the federal army and, more recently, the special anti-riot police in post-revolutionary Mexico.

Thus, time after time, the nearly automatic response to the events associated with those ill-fated place names that are often the only ones—other than the names of famous beach resorts—for which Mexico is known abroad has been to compose a memorial of grievances against the state. To understand this, we could go back to colonial times for which petitions and recriminations of this kind also abound. Fray Bartolomé de las Casas's 1542 *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias* (A Brief Account of the Destruction of the Indies), for example, certainly represents a succinct memorial of grievances as well as a quest for the restoration of justice in the name of the New World's indigenous populations. If we limit ourselves to

Mexico's recent history, we could think of how the popular up-rising in 2006 against the power abuses of then-Governor Ulises Ruiz Ortiz in the state of Oaxaca, is chronicled and depicted in a collective publication titled *Memorial de agravios: Oaxaca, México, 2006* (Memorial of Grievances: Oaxaca, Mexico, 2006); or of how a group of architects gathered in 2012 and won a national competition organized by the College of Architecture with an ambitious project to build a *Memorial a las víctimas de la violencia en México* (Memorial to the Victims of Violence in Mexico) in the Chapultepec Park in the center of the Mexican capital. And already in 1985, the same year in which a major earthquake in Mexico provoked an extraordinary collective response of solidarity that would be commemorated in *Volver a nacer: Memorial del '85*, the Mexican historian Antonio García de León brought together a wealth of documents and materials going back to pre-Cortesian and colonial times with regard to the tradition of violence and rebellion in Chiapas under the title *Resistencia y utopía: memorial de agravios y crónicas de revueltas y profecías acaecidas en la Provincia de Chiapas durante los últimos quinientos años de su historia* (Resistance and Utopia: Memorial of Grievances and Chronicles of Rebellions and Prophesies Occurred in the Province of Chiapas during the Last Five Hundred Years of its History).[1]

And yet, this last example already should begin to illustrate something else, which is that we also perhaps must not forget that the compulsion to respond to the violence of repression with a sorrow song or a memorial of grievances ends up being part and parcel of the effect of displaying the spectacle of sovereign power that sought to establish itself in the first place. This always works to the detriment of the revolts and prophecies that still demand to be chronicled. Precisely because it is so terribly awe-inspiring, state violence, when it is wielded, serves not just as a symptom of the state's own vulnerability but also as a way of diverting

attention away from the utopian dreams of resistance and efforts in self-government that were unfolding on the ground prior to the punctual onslaught of repression that rarely failed to follow in their wake. This would provide us with further proof of a kind of cunning of reason—in this case, the cunning of the reason of state, *la razón de Estado*, which is anything but the rule of law, as it is commonly translated, and perhaps should be rendered as the ubiquity of the state of exception, or the state in which exceptional violence presents itself as the rule.[2]

At stake here are questions concerning the presentation and representation of violence, pain, and suffering in a sense that might be considered aesthetic, broadly understood. When, how, and why do certain representations of violence unwittingly feed back into the mechanisms of state oppression that they were meant to protest? In what way can recriminations of state violence come back to bite their own tail, so to speak, augmenting the image of the power of this monstrous Leviathan that is the modern nation-state? How can the desire for freedom, democracy, or autonomy become thwarted and turn back upon its own impulse, only further to aggrandize the oppressive state machinery from which it was supposed to liberate itself? To what extent do all these images of state violence, repression, and death imposed from above perversely replicate the very structure of sovereign power they were intended to unmask and denounce?

As long as history is written in a tragic or traumatic key, it continues to be centered on the cyclical commemoration of past injuries as its principal obsession and the painful expression of grievances aimed at the ruling government as its only hope. Mexico, in this sense, will continue to live out the twisted logic of aggrieved identity and unredeemed rage that, admittedly in a very different context, the political theorist Wendy Brown described in terms of the Nietzschean understanding of *ressentiment* in an important study from the mid-1990s, *States of Injury:*

Power and Freedom in Late Modernity (recently translated into Spanish under the wholly appropriate title *Estados del agravio: Poder y libertad en la modernidad tardía*). Even though she refers mainly, if not exclusively, to the phenomenon of identity politics or what she prefers to describe as "politicized identities" in the era of neoliberalism in the US, Brown's analysis can be extended to a much broader scale and projected onto a longer historical arc. As I suggested in the case of Mexico, for example, we could consider the frequent expression of grievances with which already the conquered, colonized, Indigenous and Creole populations of the New World sought to attract the attention of the Spanish Crown; and how this attitude of self-identification through the expression of injuries suffered continues well into the present age.

Brown casts doubt on the emancipatory nature of identity politics because rather than an actual subversion, there would be a traumatized repetition at work in protesting the various exclusions suffered by marginalized or underrepresented populations in terms of the typical mantra of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. Giving renewed actuality to the terms quoted from Nietzsche's account in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, she concludes:

> In its emergence as a protest against marginalization or subordination, politicized identity thus becomes attached to its own exclusion both because it is premised on this exclusion for its existence as identity and because the formation of identity at the site of exclusion, as exclusion, augments or "alters the direction of the suffering" entailed in subordination or marginalization by finding a site of blame for it. But in so doing, it installs its pain over its unredeemed history in the very foundation of its political claim, in its demand for recognition as identity. In locating a site of blame for its powerlessness over its past—a past of injury, a past as a hurt will—and locating a "reason" for the "unendurable

pain" of social powerlessness in the present, it converts this reasoning into an ethicizing politics, a politics of recrimination that seeks to avenge the hurt even while it reaffirms it, discursively codifies it. Politicized identity thus enunciates itself, makes claims for itself, only by entrenching, restating, dramatizing, and inscribing its pain in politics; it can hold out no future—for itself or others—that triumphs over this pain. The loss of historical direction, and with it the loss of futurity characteristic of the late modern age, is thus homologically refigured in the figure of desire of the dominant political expression of the age: identity politics.[3]

To base the definition of politics on the expression of aggrieved identities, in other words, involves a peculiar logic of resentful self-identification combined with recriminations of the violence that always belongs to another.

As the long history of Mexico should indicate, this logic of aggrieved identification with the very same political power whose exclusion and oppression one suffers and decries is by no means limited to the moment of triumphant neoliberalism and the loss of a socialist alternative. In fact, the memorial of grievances is a constant in the political history of the Mexican nation, from colonial times via the post-revolutionary period all the way to the present. This is indicative of the fact that the need to alter the direction of one's suffering and find, if not a culprit, at least a reason for the unendurable pain by accusing the state of one's continued powerlessness is much more widespread than the phenomenon of identity politics in the postmodern or late modern condition that Brown has foremost in her mind. Mexico offers merely a pre-eminent case of the entwinement of violence and desire that makes "states of injury," or *Estados del agravio*, of most if not all modern nation-states.

Does this mean that the sorrow songs and memorials of grievances have no collective emancipatory valence whatsoever,

either in Mexico or in other parts of the world? Not at all: As should be evident, for example, from the role of the *cahiers de doléances*, that is, the books of complaints or memorials of grievances from each of the three Estates in the lead-up to the French Revolution, the collective voicing of grievances and demands certainly can have a pre-revolutionary value. If we can still take Alexis de Tocqueville's word for it, King Louis XVI by ordering such a massive compilation of grievances before convening the Estates General of 1789 unwittingly would have contributed to the revolutionary education of the people and laid much of the groundwork for the overthrow of the *Ancien régime*: "The old regime furnished the Revolution with many of its forms; the latter merely added the atrocity of its genius."[4] And yet, insofar as they produce demands for which first only the King and then the newly-born revolutionary state seemed capable of providing an answer, even such books of complaints or registers of grievances ultimately contributed to the centralization of power and sovereignty rather than truly giving voice to and collectively organizing the rebellious masses at the bottom of society. (This would explain, incidentally, why even as conservative a figure as the current President of France, Emmanuel Macron, in response to the protest actions of the *Gilets jaunes* or "yellow vests" in France, thought that to reinstate the practice of the *cahiers de doléances* could be a way to calm the crisis by channeling it back to the centralized state.) And when the grievances and complaints predominantly include the uses and abuses of violence on the part of the Spanish Crown, the Catholic Church, or the modern state, as in the case of the numerous *memoriales de agravios* in Mexico, it would indeed seem that far from opening a horizon of futurity the cyclical commemoration of injuries both past and present, with their unendurable death toll, only further adds to the perverse aura and augments the overpowering effect of the sovereign state.

Accumulation by Death Toll

In a crucial text written in 1984, "El Estado en América Latina" ("The State in Latin America"), the Bolivian sociologist René Zavaleta Mercado, who by this time had already been living and teaching in Mexico for several years, draws our attention to this capacity of the state to interpellate the population and produce what he calls the substance of the state precisely through acts of cataclysmic violence. In this regard, he proposes to speak of "ancestral or arcane constitutive moments," moments such as the Conquest of America, the domestication of the landscape in the Andes, or the period of primitive or originary so-called accumulation in Europe, during which times things appear to take on their definitive shape and bear down on the collective body that thereby is made all the more available for exploitation and control. For the modern period, war and violence often perform this function of defining the constitutive moments in the history of state formations:

> Here, as in the case of Mexico and a few others, there can be no doubt that it is important to keep in mind the consequences of provocations of this magnitude. It is evident that there are various forms of availability, but also that the death toll undoubtedly creates social availability, because the living are readied for the reception of new beliefs which, in the last instance, are the beliefs that result from the event. Violence therefore is a non-mercantile form of creating intersubjectivity, no doubt the most dramatic one. It is not only because of the cult of one's ancestors that the somber memory of those days and hours is cultivated.[5]

Therein lies the somber "cunning of the state" of which our modern heads of nation and army are always quick to learn the unwritten rules:

> The cunning of the state from this moment onward turns into a school or culture and there can be no doubt that the rules were clear from early on in that legitimation is the principal end of the state and political suppression its alternative. In any case, the character of irresistibility is not obtained by mere violence: it must also become obvious that violence has validity at the level of the state, in other words, it must be an irresistibility in relation to certain ends.[6]

Understanding the cunning of the reason of the state, however, should not make us blind to that which potentially might derail its course. If we exaggerate the violence of the constitutive moment, we unwittingly fall prey to the state's mechanisms for projecting its own validity by any and all means necessary, including through the power of the death toll to browbeat and interpellate the people.

Sadly, even the students of Ayotzinapa may have been trapped in this logic. We now know, for example, that contrary to the "historical truth" callously proclaimed by the Procuraduría General de la República under then-President Enrique Peña Nieto, the students on the night of September 26–27, 2014, were not planning to intervene in the event of the mayor's wife in the Zócalo of Iguala in Guerrero. In fact, this event had already finished when the students arrived after 9 PM in the bus terminal of this historic city in Guerrero. Rather, they were trying to collect money, as had been their yearly custom, to finance their plan to participate the following week in the commemorations of the massacre of October 2, 1968, in Mexico City.

History also has its cruel underside of impersonal irony. Impassively, almost mechanically, it time after time repeats the biblical scene of the slaughter of the innocent. As José Revueltas already wrote, just two days after the massacre of 1968 in Tlatelolco that would put an end to the student-popular

movement of which he had been an active member and, according to the federal prosecutor who would jail him for this reason, an intellectual instigator:

> We are suspected of being intruders on this planet. They persecute us for that: for going out, for loving, for moving about without orders or chains. They want to capture our voices, so that there may be nothing left of our hands, of our kisses, of all that which our body loves. It is forbidden for them to watch us. They persecute all happiness. They are dead and they kill us. The dead are killing us. That is why we will live.[7]

Revueltas here puts his finger on the pulse of a deadly drive to persecute whatever escapes the reason of the state, at a time when the latter transcends the boundaries of the nation and already has become planetary. The reasons for the massacres, raids, or "forced disappearances" (*desapariciones forzadas*) are not random: They betray a targeted attack on that collective force which here—in tune with the spirit of the times that is so easily mocked as corny, hippy, or romantic without realizing that this too is an effect of the persecution—is called love, or happiness, but which elsewhere may go by the name of justice, freedom, equality, and perhaps even socialism or communism. Listening to the always-eloquent students of Ayotzinapa, for example, in the documentary *Un día en Ayotzinapa* (One Day in Ayotzinapa) directed by the Mexican filmmaker Rafael Rangel, it is impossible not to be deeply moved by the fact that these are the ideals that they were striving to put into practice against all odds in their humble school. And yet, in a symptomatic displacement, what the teacher trainees were attempting to create on the school grounds of the Escuela Normal Rural "Isidro Raúl Burgos" in Ayotzinapa now by force has become conflated with the disappearance of 43 of their classmates during their trip to Iguala.

The story or history thus repeats itself: Tragically, the *normalistas* who wanted to travel to Mexico City to commemorate the victims of the massacre in Tlatelolco became themselves the victims of "forced disappearance" in Iguala. But if now we, in turn, were to limit our focus exclusively to what happened on that night of September 26–27, 2014, then by another perverse twist of fate we would in a sense be amplifying the labor of interpellation and concealment that can be attributed to the state.

This lesson is valid in general: In spite of everything, the point is not to let ourselves be blinded by the power of repression but to let ourselves be illuminated by the resistance that paradoxically comes before it. For the same reason, to proclaim "Fue el Estado" (The State is the Culprit) left and right without a doubt is a useful, effective, and necessary guideline for demanding the assignation of criminal responsibilities, but at the same time it tends to blur the political differences and antagonisms in favor of a moralistic reaction against the state of generalized impunity and corruption. In this sense, beyond the urgent quest for justice for the victims and their families, it is also important not to let ourselves be seduced by the all-powerful idolatry of the fetish of the state.

Beyond the Fetishism of the State

In talking about the idol or fetish of the state, I am referring not only to the familiar phenomenon of the perversion of political power that the Mexican-Argentine philosopher Enrique Dussel describes in the following terms in his *Twenty Theses on Politics*:

> This *originary corruption* of the political, which I will call the *fetishism of power*, consists of the moment in which the political

actor (the members of the political community, whether citizens or representatives) believes that power affirms his or her subjectivity or the institution in which he or she functions—as a "functionary," whether it be as president, representative, judge, governor, soldier, police officer—as the *center* or *source* of power. This is how, for example, the State comes to be affirmed as the sovereign and as the power of last resort, and this represents the fetishism of the power of the State and the *corruption* of all those who seek to exercise State power defined in this way.[8]

Contrary to what this useful definition of state fetishism might suggest, the problem concerns not only the perversion whereby power from being a potentiality based in the political community of the people becomes instead a self-sustaining tool for self-empowerment on behalf of a handful of actors as corrupt public servants. Rather, in order to grasp the enormous force of the fetishism of the state, we must also consider our own role and responsibility as citizens, commentators, or researchers wanting to unravel the intricate functioning of such a phenomenon.

Indeed, was not one of the key lessons of the movement of 1968 in Mexico and elsewhere a turn away from the state-centered definition of politics? If so, are we not letting ourselves be seduced, once again, by the fetish of the state that precisely was being contested at the time if we remain under the spell of its violent and spectacular displays of power, whether legal or illegal, overt or hidden under the cover of civilians allegedly being in the wrong place at the wrong time? Is this not the continued effect of interpretations that even with the best of intentions mistakenly identify "1968 Mexico" with the massacre in Tlatelolco or Ayotzinapa with what happened in Iguala? Are these metonymic displacements and metaphorical condensations not all caught in the mesmerizing tautology of the state producing and reproducing more state substance?

In an important text that only recently was translated in Mexico as part of the slim volume *Antropología del Estado* (Anthropology of the State), the British historian and political sociologist Philip Abrams warned us against the dangers of fetishizing the state. "In sum: the state is not the reality which stands behind the mask of political practice. It is itself the mask which prevents our seeing political practice as it is. It is, one could almost say, the mind of a mindless world, the purpose of purposeless conditions, the opium of the citizen."[9] Precisely, by making the state in a uniform and abstract sense responsible for the crimes of "forced disappearance" and murder, whether in Iguala or Tlatelolco, in Tlatlaya or Apatzingán, in Chiapas or Acteal, even when there are good reasons for doing so given the confirmed presence of the federal police, the army, or corrupt governors and heads of state, we also feed the ghost of the central power of the state and run the risk of concealing the emergent political practices of our time.

The problem does not reside in the accusation that the army or the federal police opened fire against unarmed civilians, repressed a peaceful protest march, or were complicit in the murdering of journalists and human rights activists. In light of courageous forensic and journalistic investigations, for lack of an adequate judicial process, we know that this accusation is often both just and justified. But the issue becomes thornier with the tendency afterward to remain locked, as if shell-shocked, in the abstraction of the state in its exceptionalism as the beginning, the means, and the sole end of politics in Mexico. What Abrams illustrates by way of examples from the history of struggles and rebellions throughout the twentieth century, in this sense, deserves to become the topic of serious further reflection today in Mexico. He writes:

> Of course, what is legitimated is, insofar as it is legitimated, real
> power. Armies and prisons, the Special Patrol and the deportation

orders as well as the whole process of fiscal exaction ... are all force-
ful enough. But it is their association with the idea of the state and
the invocation of that idea that silences protest, excuses force and
convinces almost all of us that the fate of the victims is just and nec-
essary. Only when that association is broken do real hidden powers
emerge. And when they do, they are not the powers of the state but
of armies of liberation or repression, foreign governments, guerilla
movements, soviets, juntas, parties, classes. The state for its part
never emerges except as a claim to domination—a claim which has
become so plausible that it is hardly ever challenged.[10]

Let us not become addicted to the opium of the citizen, un-
knowingly swallowing the fetish of state domination precisely
at a moment when we may have sufficient proof to put the real
culprits on the stand and bring them to justice. Let us not be-
come accomplices in the concealment of emergent collective
subjectivities. Behind the mask that in Mexico is the corrupt
narco-state, which kills and disappears not only the social
activists who struggle for justice, equality, and human rights
but also the journalists and human rights watchdogs devoted
to making public their true actions, aims, and dreams. Let us
ask what are the hidden forces of rebellion and the communal
forms of self-government that attempted to go against the grain
of actually existing power structures, in Guerrero as much as in
Chiapas, in Michoacán no less than in Oaxaca.

From Traumatic Violence
to Communal Rebellion

We might find a surprising source of inspiration for such an
endeavor for writing history that is *à rebours* or against the
grain, if we return to another of those indigenous accounts of

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the destruction of Tenochtitlan, aside from the famous *canciones tristes* that Elena Poniatowska in 1968 would recycle in *La noche de Tlatelolco* (somewhat more sensationalistically translated in English as *Massacre in Mexico*). I am referring to a particularly cruel episode of the original event, the massacre in the Templo Mayor, as chronicled by Fray Bernardino de Sahagún on the basis of indigenous accounts, transcribed and translated in his *Historia general de las cosas de la Nueva España* (*Códice Florentino*) (General History of the Things of New Spain) and later excerpted and re-translated from the Nahua version in *La visión de los vencidos* (translated as *The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico*). In this episode, we can already hear foretold the whole subsequent history of colonization as an ongoing process of destruction of the commons or of the commune. To see this, we must translate the Nahua term *calpulco*, not as *templos* or *capillas*, as Sahagún originally did in good Christian fashion, but as "communal houses," the buildings reserved for gathering or assembly—whether religious or not—of the *calpulli*, which in its turn, instead of as "parish," "ward" or "neighborhood," as *parroquia*, *barrio* or *vecindario*, we might risk understanding as *comuna*—the real or mythical birth place of so many future *comunero* revolts and uprisings. Indeed, this is how twentieth-century specialists re-translated the Nahua account copied by Sahagún:

> Some attempted to force their way out, but the Spaniards murdered them at the gates. Others climbed the walls, but they could not save themselves. Those who ran into the communal houses were safe there for a while; so were those who lay down among the victims and pretended to be dead. But if they stood up again, the Spaniards saw them and killed them.
>
> The blood of the warriors flowed like water and gathered into pools. The pools widened, and the stench of blood and entrails

filled the air. The Spaniards ran into the communal houses to kill those who were hiding. They ran everywhere and searched everywhere; they invaded every room, hunting and killing.[11]

In light of passages such as these, as I have tried to suggest elsewhere, the history of Mexico could be rewritten as an underground history of the intermittent destruction and insurrection of the commune.[12] Thus, as part of this underground history, we could invoke cases such as the Commune of Morelos of the first Zapatistas in 1914–1915 or the Commune of Oaxaca—which almost a century later in 2006 could be said to have inaugurated the recent age of insurrections around the globe. But, long before these more recent events, we should also recall that in 1520–21 the uprising of the *comunidades* of Castile back in Spain was strictly contemporary with the conquest and destruction of Tenochtitlan, with the result that *comunidades* for Don Quixote but also later for the *Diccionario de la Real Academia Española* will have as one of its meanings that of *levantamientos* or "uprisings," precisely the kind that the Spanish conquerors of Tlatelolco and other parts of Tenochtitlan wanted to avoid at all cost.

During the massacre of October 2, 1968, several people who were caught in the midst of the armed attack on the Plaza de las Tres Culturas also lay down among the victims and pretended to be dead. This time around, though, there were no communal houses to escape to. The colonial church of Santiago Tlatelolco infamously closed its massive doors to the fleeing crowd and ignored their cries for help. However, as in the case of the account of Sahagún's indigenous witnesses, we today should at least have the dignity to go looking for the meaning of those collective efforts that created, if not exactly a safe haven, at least a space for communal gathering. Instead of focusing on the massacres that cyclically seem to occur in places such as Tlatelolco, therefore, I

propose that we try to write the history of those communes and communities that rose up against the violent power of the modern or colonial state machine. This would be, I hope, a dignified way not only to commemorate the massacre but also to celebrate the days of collective transformation and joy buried under the weight of trauma: to write the history of the commune against the state, beyond the state, or at a distance from the state but also hopefully in favor of another state, or a non-state state, in which the sovereign exception with its heavy death toll no longer would be the rule.

Theorizing Revolt in the Place of Violence

However, it is one thing to argue for the possibility of such an underground history of communal revolt and self-government based on the wealth of materials already available in chronicles or testimonies, and quite another to ground this possibility at the level of theory or philosophy. How, I want to ask in a final set of reflections, should we think of this proposed displacement from violence to rebellion, from grievance to revolt, or from trauma and injury to utopia and resistance, when contemporary theory and philosophy seem wholly devoted to the effort to place violence firmly and irredeemably at the origin of the social bond as such? In other words, can we also find theoretical resources to accompany such a displacement as the one proposed in these pages, or does the trend in contemporary critical theory run completely counter to this project, which, as a result, might even be seen as merely a case of wishful thinking?

In an earlier essay, "Critique of Originary Violence," I took issue with the trend common in radical political theory and philosophy today to situate violence at the origin of history.[13] Theoretically speaking, there are at least two noteworthy traditions at

work behind this trend: the first, psychoanalytical, hearkening back to Sigmund Freud's so-called collective or social works, from *Totem and Taboo* to *Civilization and Its Discontents*; and the second, more strictly philosophical, returning to Martin Heidegger's interrogation, starting with *Being and Time*, of history and historicity from the point of view of the question of being. What these parallel and sometimes overlapping traditions share is a desire to locate an inaugural or originary kind of violence: violence *at* and *as* the origin of history itself. Thus, for Freud, the history of civilization famously begins with an act of original violence, that is, the killing of the primordial father by the fraternal alliance or band of brothers. And, for Heidegger, it is ultimately being itself that "is" war and discord, with the result that the copula would have to be crossed out, placed under erasure, or struck through with an X. As Jacques Derrida would go on to discuss in his recently published lecture course for the academic year 1964–1965, *Heidegger: The Question of Being and History*, the author of *Being and Time* not only is not ignorant of questions of labor, death, and war or struggle, as Alexandre Kojève had claimed in the 1930s in his famous lecture course on Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. According to Derrida, Heidegger actually raises such questions at a far more radical, more fundamental, or more originary level than any Marxist, Hegelian, or Christian-existentialist account ever could:

> In describing *Mitsein*, Heidegger is trying to get to a stratum of ek-sistence that is absolutely originary with regard to any modification of relations with the other—for example in the form of war and peace, domination or slavery, the recognition of consciousnesses especially—because *Mitsein* and in a general way all the structures of *Dasein*'s ek-sistence are anterior and inferior, so to speak, deeper than the strata of *knowledge* and *consciousness*, of *Wissen*, of *erkennen*, of *anerkennen*, of *Bewusstsein*, and of

> *Selbstbewusstsein.* It is on the ontological basis of the existential
> structure of *Mitsein* that all the *phenomena* described, for exam-
> ple, by Hegel by the name of "struggle for recognition" can possi-
> bly come about, come about in a history, or produce a history that
> will thus be the modification of a deeper historicity.[14]

There is an irrefutable move of radicalization at work in this
treatment of questions of struggle and violence. If Heidegger's
thinking is to be situated at this originary level, anterior and
inferior, so to speak, to all other ways of describing relations
with the other, the philosophers working in this vein can always
claim in advance to have enveloped and outflanked all existing
modes of tackling questions of violence and conflict in history,
morals, politics, and so on. Time and again, these questions will
be subjected to the unforgiving method of hypostasis, in which
all such "merely" ontic or socio-historical considerations must be
referred back to an ontological interrogation, which first reveals
the extent to which struggle or discord "is" being.

In effect, in this Heideggerian critique of violence, notions
such as war, discord, or strife not only are not ignored, they are
actually radicalized to the point of irrefutability as their cha-
racteristics are pushed to the extreme and transposed onto being
itself—both onto the history of the question of being and onto
the event of being as the condition for raising the question of
historicity at this most radical or original level. "Heidegger is so
little negligent of struggle and war in the essential movement of
historicity that more and more he has come to emphasize that
logos was *polemos* [war] and *eris* [discord] and that the revelation
of being was *violence*," Derrida adds in a final rebuke of Ko-
jève's objections, referring his audience to well-known passages
about Heraclitus in Heidegger's later texts for proof. "*Polemos*,
then, means this unity of unconcealment and dissimulation as
the movement of history itself. This is why, for example, in the

'Letter on Humanism,' Heidegger says that 'being itself is the polemical, the conflictual' [*das Sein selber das Strittige ist*]."[15] When it is nothing less than being itself that is polemical, when *logos* is *polemos*, and when historicity as such is the violent unity of revelation and dissimulation in their inner discord, any specific attempt to enter into this or that socio-historical or ethico-political debate with the thinking of being and violence becomes pedestrian at best and futile at worst. At the same time, the reality of violence, war, and strife thereby becomes hypostatized as an incontrovertible condition of being itself, which can be neither changed nor avoided, except at the cost of the worst violence and hypocrisy.

From within the Heideggerian framework, therefore, I do not think there is any way to go back to a specific, historical, or political treatment of different forms of violence. And in the Freudian psychoanalytical approach, too, it is tempting to turn violence and death into an unshakeable given of human existence. Freud's notion of the death drive, in particular, tends to be used in this way to bolster a view of violence as a quasi-ontological condition that cannot be altered but must be coped with as such. And yet, unlike what is the case with Heidegger and his followers, it may also be possible to retrieve a different understanding of violence from Freud's thinking, one that may further help us in rewriting the history of state violence, including in the Americas.

Thus, according to the Argentinean philosopher León Rozitchner, Freud's late so-called "social" or "collective" works, in particular, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, might open up a theoretical path from questions of violence to forms of collective rebellion in which they are embedded or on which they are based. After all, why does psychoanalysis place a foundational act of violence such as the murder of the primordial father at the origin of the history of civilization? As Rozitchner explains in

Freud and the Limits of Bourgeois Individualism, this proposal is merely what we might call a necessary retroactive fiction, a "scientific myth" or "just-so story," as Freud himself admits, that we must posit in the remote past if we want to understand the undeniable amount of discontent in the present:

> Something important took place in the beginning of history, Freud would be telling us, and this transition that led from nature to culture even now continues to realize itself, except that it is hidden for the human subjects who accomplish it. We, therefore, need to go back and awaken this first signification, that of the first social act, so as to include it in the understanding of that other, present-day act which necessarily continues to repeat itself in the renewed access of human beings to the world of culture or civilization. Freud thus tries to understand the basic presuppositions that lie at the beginning of history. For this, he has recourse to an initial hypothesis, which attempts to recreate the conditions without which this transition from nature to culture would not have been able to realize itself. And he does so starting from the current forms. In the same way, Marx, in "Economic Forms that Precede Capitalism," must show on the basis of the "natural" family the historical process that led to the development of the later forms. In both cases, it is a question of understanding what had to happen so that the *first step*, which opens up history, could be taken. This first step, which can be enunciated in science only as a hypothesis ("scientific myth," Freud says), but deduced from the terminal form of which we are part, is the only one that holds up as being necessarily in the beginning.[16]

What is more, the goal of returning to this origin or first step, far from facilitating an ontologization of originary violence of the kind we frequently obtain in the Heideggerian philosophical orientation, is actually meant to undo the fatalism we so often

associate with the psychoanalytic notion of the death drive. Thus, still according to Rozitchner's reading of *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud's aim would have been to lay bare the event-like nature of that which we otherwise take to be the ironclad necessity of the structure of our psychic life in general:

> Thus, in the originary drama there lies hidden the structural meaning of the ground of every human being: there where event (the murder) and structure (the transition from natural individuality to cultural individuation through the fraternal alliance) constitute the originary point from which all human rationality was produced. In the relation of individual to individual (between father and son), the mediating third was a collective being: the fraternal alliance. This initial moment is crucial because it is from this first opposition that, in the ambiguity of love and hatred toward the father, the point of insertion of the cultural dialectic takes shape—that is, of reason that supports itself in the flesh of the other but at the same time in the common body sketched out by the brothers, as a necessary process for one's own coming-into-being.[17]

Instead of compulsively returning to the traumatic act of foundational violence that lies at the origin of civilization, we are thereby invited to interrogate the coming-into-being of the world of culture or civilization on the basis of the moment of collective rebellion. If, in retrospect, this were the lesson to be drawn from the necessary fiction of the primitive horde in its relation to the primordial father, this would mean that the structure of our psychic life is also still open to change. Far from having to accept violence and come to terms with the death drive as an unalterable human condition, this would mean that we might entertain the hope that the point of our insertion into the existing cultural dialectic is also the point of its alteration. We

would then no longer be stuck in the cyclical commemoration of past grievances but perhaps become open to an unpredictable horizon of emancipatory futurity. In the case of Mexico, this would mean that we cease invoking massacre after massacre as tragic confirmations of a death drive that would be constitutive of the nation since at least the Conquest if not before, as an unconscious inheritance of the sacrificial past of pre-Cortesian times. To reopen the history books, then, could mean to look beyond or behind the violent traumas in order to investigate the radical experiments in collective rebellion and communal self-rule that were also ongoing and continue to this day.

Notes

1. See Rubén Leyva, ed., *Memorial de agravios: Oaxaca, México, 2006* (Oaxaca: Marabú, 2008); Julio Gaeta, Luby Springall, Gustavo Avilés, and Sandra Pereznieto, *Memorial a las víctimas de la violencia en México* (Mexico City: Gaeta Springall Arquitectos, 2016); Daniel Cazés, ed., *Volver a nacer: Memorial del '85* (Mexico City: La Jornada, 1995); Antonio García de León, *Memorial a las víctimas de la violencia en México. Resistencia y utopía: memorial de agravios y crónicas de revueltas y profecías acaecidas en la Provincia de Chiapas durante los* últimos *quinientos años de su historia* (Mexico City: Era, 1985).

2. See the special dossier "Radical Politics and/or the Rule of Law in Mexico," ed. Ivonne del Valle and Estelle Tarica, *Política Común* 7 (2015).

3. Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 73–74.

4. Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, trans. John Bonner (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1856), 233. This premonitory reading of the *Cahiers de doléances* in function of the French Revolution has come under scrutiny in the latter half of the twentieth century. See, among others, George V.

Taylor, "Revolutionary and Nonrevolutionary Content in the *Cahiers* of 1789: An Interim Report," *French Historical Studies* 7, no. 4 (1972): 479–502; and Roger Chartier, "Cultures, Lumières, doléances: Les Cahiers de 1789," *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 28, no. 1 (1981).

5. René Zavaleta Mercado, "El Estado en América Latina," *Obra completa*, vol. II: *Ensayos 1975–1984*, ed. Mauricio Souza Crespo (La Paz: Plural, 2013), 633. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from the Spanish in what follows are my own.

6. Zavaleta, "El Estado en América Latina," 636.

7. José Revueltas, *México 68: Juventud y revolución,* ed. Andrea Revueltas and Philippe Cheron (Mexico City: Era, 1996), 79. See also the short text "Ezequiel o la matanza de los inocentes," composed in October 1969 and included in *Material de los sueños* (Mexico City: Era, 1983). I discuss 1968 in Mexico in Chapter 6, "The Melancholy Left," in Bruno Bosteels, *Marx and Freud in Latin America: Politics, Psychoanalysis and Religion in Times of Terror* (London: Verso, 2012), 159–193.

8. Enrique Dussel, *Twenty Theses on Politics*, trans. George Ciccariello-Maher (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 3–4.

9. Philip Abrams, "Notes on the Difficulty of Studying the State (1977)," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 1 (1988): 58–89, quoted 82. For a short development of the argument I am presenting here, see also Irmgard Emmelhainz, "State Fetishism: Neoliberal Democracy and Political Imagination in Mexico," *Forma* 1, no. 1 (2019): 1–16.

10. Abrams, "Notes on the Difficulty of Studying the State," 77.

11. See "La matanza del Templo Mayor (Códice Florentino)," in *La visión de los vencidos: relaciones indígenas de la conquista*, ed. Miguel León-Portilla (Mexico City: UNAM, 2003), 92; in English, *The Broken Spears: Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico*, ed. Miguel León-Portilla, trans. from Nahuatl into Spanish by Angel María Garibay, and English translation by Lysander Kemp, foreword Jorge Klor de Alva (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), 74. In another English version, *calpulco* is retranslated from the Nahuatl original as "calpulli temples," in *We People Here: Nahuatl Accounts of the Conquest of Mexico*, ed. and trans. James Lockhart (Berkeley: University of California

Press, 1991), 134, 136. See also Luis Reyes García, "El término *calpulli* en documentos del siglo XVI," in *Documentos nauas de la Ciudad de México del siglo XVI* (Mexico: Archivo General de la Nación, 1996), 21–68.

12. See Bruno Bosteels, "The Mexican Commune," in *The Future of Communism: Social Movements, Economic Crisis, and the Re-imagination of Communism*, vol. III, *Communism in the 21st Century*, ed. Shannon K. Brincat (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2013), 161–189; and "La comuna americana," in Horacio González, Franco "Bifo" Berardi, et al., *Lecciones de la comuna* (Vicente López: Mariano Ariel Pennisi, 2019), 63–52.

13. See Bruno Bosteels, "Critique of Originary Violence: Freud, Heidegger, Derrida," *The Undecidable Unconscious: A Journal of Deconstruction and Psychoanalysis* 4 (2017): 27–66.

14. Jacques Derrida, *Heidegger: The Question of Being and History*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 197 (translation slightly modified). For further analyses of the question of violence in this seminar, see Michael Naas, "Violence and Historicity: Derrida's Early Readings of Heidegger," *Research in Phenomenology* 45 (2015): 191–213; and compare with David Farrell Krell, "From Cruelty to *Grausamkeit*: Derrida's Death Penalty Seminar," *Research in Phenomenology* 47 (2017): 263–296.

15. Derrida, *Heidegger*, 198–199 (translation modified). In "Force of Law," Derrida draws a parallel in this regard between Benjamin and Heidegger: "The words *Walten* and *Gewalt* play a decisive role in a few texts by Martin Heidegger—where one cannot simply translate them as either *force* or *violence*—and in a context, where Heidegger will try to show that, for Heraclitus, for example, *Dikè* (justice, right, trial, penalty or punishment, vengeance, and so forth) is *eris* (conflict, *Streit*, discord, *pólemos* or *Kampf*); that is, it is *adikia*, injustice, as well," in "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority,'" trans. Mary Quaintance, in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2002), 234. Compare with Robert Bernasconi, "'The Misinterpretation of Violence': Heidegger's Reading of Hegel and Schmitt on *Gewalt*," *Research in Phenomenology* 45 (2015): 214–236.

16. León Rozitchner, *Freud y los límites del individualismo burgués*

(first edition, Mexico City: Siglo Veintiuno, 1972; reedition, Buenos Aires: Biblioteca Nacional, 2013), 567.

17.   Rozitchner, *Freud*, 301–302.

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Violence and Other Unpolitical Acts in the New Cycle of Protests

Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen

For us, ultimately, violence is *what has been taken from us*, and today we need to take it back.[1]
Tiqqun, *Introduction to Civil War*

Within three decades they [the Social Democrats] managed virtually to erase the name of Blanqui, though it had been the rallying sound that had reverberated through the preceding century.[2]
Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History"

It is now becoming generally accepted that demonstrations, marches, spectacles and shows don't lead anywhere... . The methods of struggle therefore must be put through analysis because they present an obstacle to the creation of new modes of action.[3]
Jacques Camatte, "Against Domestication"

After a 30-year long period of one-sided neoliberal counter-revolution, the last ten years have been characterized by the return of universal disgust against the political status quo. Social movements, assemblies, occupations, multitudes, uprisings, riots, and revolts have moved discontinuously across a world united in distrust or outright hatred toward a corrupt political class. Millions of people have taken to the streets, occupying squares, or rioting to protest the austerity and corruption of local political regimes. Most of these protests have been directed at the state, not the economy; it has been the state's crisis management that has been the object of resentment and critique. People are disobeying and rejecting the state and its exercise of power. The threat of a situation of "double power" forces the state to react, and in most places, from Egypt to Hong Kong to France, the state has responded aggressively. France is a good example as the police repression of the *Gilets jaunes* movement has brought back memories of the repression during the Algerian Civil War. Questions of the monopoly of violence and the state's ability to exempt itself are back on the agenda.

In this chapter, I will discuss two books: Judith Butler's *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assemblies* and Marcello Tarì's *Non esiste la rivoluzione infelice: Il comunismo della destituzione.* Both analyze the new protest movements that have appeared since the 2008 financial breakdown: the Arab revolts, the protests in Greece between 2008 and 2012, Occupy in the US, the Spanish *Indignados*, the London Riots of 2011, the Brazilian anti-fare-hike movement, the Chilean student strikes, the Hong Kong democracy movement, and the wave of riots and protests in France from *Nuit debout* to Gilets jaunes. Both books excel in that they expand the understanding of politics to include political-aesthetic acts that are often dismissed as unpolitical. I will focus on the question of violence and, following Tarì, argue that it is important to let go of "democratistic" ideas of

nonviolent protest. The chapter is a modest contribution to the development of a new revolutionary imaginary emerging after four decades of defeat and dispersion that followed the ebb of the upsurge of 1968–1977.

I put bits and pieces from a ruined and broken revolutionary tradition to use when analyzing Butler and Tarí, not least concepts from the Situationist International and related parts of the revolutionary tradition. This includes the critique of the specialized identities of capitalist society, the way capitalist society splits life into different spheres and activities such as art or politics. From Marx onward, this separation was critiqued, not least by groups that sought to use art as a "heavy-handed" vehicle for a communist critique of capitalist society. It was not a question of realizing art for a group like the Situationists; it was a question of satisfying the authentic needs that art was the historical and reified expression of, i.e., the goal was to bring about the aesthetic transformation of the whole society. Any serious discussion of art, aesthetics, and politics has to take that into account.[4]

Violence and Politics

The question of the use of violence in the various protests we have seen emerge since 2010 and 2011 is central in political discourse. Whether it is in France where Macron and his government talk about a "violent Black Block" hijacking the Gilets jaunes demonstrations or in Hong Kong where the Chinese Communist Party has called demonstrators "brazen, violent, and criminal actors," there is a long tradition of dismissing acts of protest that do not follow the traditional lines of politics.[5] States rarely use the term "violence" when carrying out legal acts of coercion. In the language of the state, "violence" is committed by "criminals" or

"perpetrators"—never by the state. The state, thus, conceals its own use of violence with legislative rhetoric.

When confronted with blockades in the streets of Buenos Aires in 2003, the then-president Néstor Kirchner stated: "Voting is the only concrete and legitimate way of living together that a country and modern, progressive democracies can have."[6] Kirchner's statement sums up a common view on politics as dialogue and debate with a view to casting one's vote in an election. Of course, most social scientists and historians agree that politics includes strikes and demonstrations, blockades or picket lines. However, many also agree on excluding more violent events such as acts of sabotage or riots. When people rioted in London in 2011, several left-wing critics bemoaned the lack of politics exhibited in the riots; in their view, the looting and rioting were an expression of an erosion of politics. David Harvey dismissively wrote that capitalism should be put on trial for its crimes, but "this is what these mindless rioters cannot see or demand."[7]

Bodies Assembling

In her 2015 book, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assemblies*, Judith Butler engages in an analysis of the 2011 square occupation movement that included the collective takeover of squares and public places such as Tahrir in Cairo, Gezi Park in Istanbul, Hong Kong Central in Hong Kong, and Zuccotti Park in New York, among many others.[8] The initial explosion of occupations may have waned within a year or two—many commentators and reviewers noted as much when Butler's book appeared in November 2015. However, we need only to look at the recent events in Hong Kong, where millions of people are protesting against both the local government and the Chinese Communist Party, and Paris, where the Gilets jaunes movement

took over from the Nuit debout movement, in order to cast aside quick dismissals and depressed laments of the disappearance of the so-called square occupation movement. People are still taking to the streets, occupying public places, and showing their discontent with the established system.

Although we need to be cautious about positing any kind of straight forward socio-economic causality between crisis and protest, it is evident that the new wave of protests is related to the financial crisis and a longer history of economic development. The financial crisis of 2007 and 2008 revealed the brutal consequences of global capitalism's forty-year slow crash landing, whereby the one percent has amassed wealth while simultaneously saving on social reproduction. The crisis was already there, but the burst bubbles exposed the enormity of the problems haunting the capitalist economies in the West—problems that have been contracting for four decades.[9] Nothing indicates that protests and occupations will abate in the coming years.

Butler's book is a contribution to the analysis of the emergence of the new protest movement and its preferred mode of operation, the occupation. Butler sets forth what she calls a provisional "theory of the assemblies," arguing that the plural practice of assembling gives rise to expressions of the popular will outside of the formal institutions of the political system effectively contesting the system's claims to be democratic. Butler shows how, "by assembling," the square occupations reclaim public space against privatizing strategies of depoliticization. Depoliticization is, thus, opposed "through bodily movement, assembly, action and resistance," what Butler proposes to call "popular sovereignty" or "we, the people."[10] In this way, Butler puts her own theory of performativity to use showing how the assemblies enact a particular form of "we, the people" "breaking off from established power," contesting their condition of precarity and proclaiming that the assembled mass is, in fact, part

of, or indeed is, the people. The assembled people act collectively in a political-aesthetic gesture to defy domination.

Nonviolence

Throughout her analysis, Butler is at pains to describe the protests but also other acts of collective defiance as "nonviolent." The square occupations of 2011 were characterized by nonviolence, writes Butler.[11] Indeed, going from empirical analysis to theory, she suggests that "assemblies … can succeed only if they subscribe to principles of nonviolence."[12] Butler's analysis is somewhat surprising insofar as many, if not all, of the occupations were characterized by very powerful physical acts of violence where protesters fought back against the police or sought to take over squares and important urban sites. This was perhaps most clear in Egypt and Tunisia. In Tahrir and other cities in Egypt, for instance, protesters not only fought the police and Mubarak's security forces—throwing stones and Molotov cocktails at them and driving large improvised vehicles into the lines of police officers—but also set fire to a large number of police stations and courthouses. To describe these acts as nonviolent is problematic.

The enormous mass of people assembled at Tahrir Square in the middle of Cairo not only cooked, discussed, and slept but also barricaded the square, fought back against the police, and destroyed property and official buildings. Of course, the protesters did not have the same equipment at their disposal as the police or Mubarak's security forces, but they made use of what they had to great effect and beyond considerations of violence or nonviolence. As the Egyptian film director Philip Rizk put it: "Despite the glorification of an eighteen-day revolution as non-violent, violence has been a part of this revolution since the

first stone was thrown on 25 January 2011 – followed three days later by the torching of police stations on the Friday of Rage – and until today [April 2013]."[13]

Butler's strange appropriation of violent protests as nonviolent points to her description of the square occupations as "democratic struggles." As Rizk writes, however, it was not a question of democracy, as Butler argues. The mass of protesters occupying Tahrir Square was contesting not only the local lumpen dictatorship of Mubarak but also the entire neocolonial model, whereby "foreign powers maintain their economic interest in a country by partnering with a local elite as proxy rulers."[14] In other words, it was not just a "political" protest—a demand for democracy—but also and primarily a revolutionary attack on the political-economic reality of neocolonialism. By analyzing the occupation of Tahrir Square through the lens of political sovereignty and democracy and by describing the occupation of Tahrir as nonviolent, Butler ends up subscribing to the dominant Western reception of the so-called "Arab Spring," according to which the protesters wanted "democratic transition" and "political reforms."[15] The attempt to clean up the protests and present them, contrary to all evidence, as nonviolent democratic protests is a desperate late-Orientalist attempt to transform the overthrow of pro-Western regimes into victories for the West and its "democratic values."

The description of the protests as nonviolent also risks playing into the hands of the local powers. As Egyptian journalist Abdel-Rahman Hussein writes in "Was the Egyptian Revolution Really Non-Violent?", throughout the protests, the authorities in Egypt described any act of non-state violence as paid thuggery or petty criminality and tried to contain and derail the protests by cracking down on radical elements while giving in to more modest demands.[16] By limiting the revolutionary anticolonial fight to a question of democracy, Butler is dangerously close

to mimicking a Western ideology of limited regime change or "democratic transition."

The Democratic Ideology of Nonviolence

The description of the events in Cairo as nonviolent raises questions about the political theoretical framework of Butler's analysis and theory. As the critical theorist and communist poet Joshua Clover, among others, has argued, Butler seems to be restrained by her idealized quasi-Arendtian understanding of democracy, according to which democracy is the endpoint of political resistance.[17] Democracy functions as the positive opposition to current depoliticized political regimes. Leaving revolutionary demands to one side, Butler remains firmly within the current ideological regime of what we might call "democratism," for which democracy is a "transcendental value," as Clover puts it, monopolizing politics and emptying it of historical specificity. The invocation of another kind of democracy is problematic and only helps to solidify the existing political system. Democracy has saturated the very horizon of politics. As the Italian philosopher Mario Tronti puts it: "Political democracy is realized."[18] And "really existing democracy" is the triumph of the economy whereby democracy signifies the identification of *homo democraticus* with *homo economicus*. There is neither a historical nor a political, economic dimension to Butler's analysis, so we end up with a fairly abstract political set-up in which democracy is a historical invariant with bodies performing in squares contesting the way the ruling system is interpellating them and demanding more democracy or a true democracy. Today, democracy more often than not functions as a ruling representation in Debord's sense, an idea through which capitalist society imagines itself.[19] Therefore, it is problematic to refer to democracy as inherently

good—tainted by different regimes and in specific places but essentially above critique.

The attempt to rework Arendt's privileging of speech to include the body reproduces a distinction between needs and political acts. As if political struggle is "merely cultural," bodies in movement and speech acts. Public acts of self-constitution are of course hugely important in any political struggle—people sleeping in Tahrir Square and thus contesting the authorities—but restricting political resistance to such performative acts tends not only to leave out the material circumstances of those protesting but also to reproduce the opposition between good, nonviolent protesters and bad, violent thugs. No less problematic is the omission of large-scale structural changes that have to do with the general law of capitalist accumulation, analyzed by Karl Marx in *Capital* and by generations of Marxists ever since.

Butler's analysis of the new cycle of protests raises the question of violence but quickly forecloses it. If we want to understand the new wave of protests, we have to rethink the notion of violence beyond the opposition of violence and nonviolence, and we must critique the attachment to the transcendental notion of democracy. As shown by, among others, the German council-communist philosopher Karl Korsch and the Italian historian and co-founder of the Italian Communist Party Angelo Tasca modern national democracies are very capable of turning totalitarian in times of crisis and social unrest. That was the case in the interwar period in Europe when national democracies in Italy and Germany suppressed revolutionary movements and opted for a totalitarian tightening in order to safeguard capital.[20] In times of crisis, democratic regimes have more often than not opted for order and control—read the preservation of private property—in order to prevent any serious challenge to the ruling order. The rise of Trump, Salvini, and other like-minded politicians to power shows the totalitarian plasticity of democracy.[21]

Democracy is a safeguard against capitalist exploitation or what we, following Slavoj Žižek, could call systemic violence; indeed, it has shown itself to be a very effective way of organizing the labor force by including or excluding excess labor.[22] The political is economic, and as Marx showed in *Capital*, every economic transaction is based on structural violence: "Between equal rights, force [Gewalt] decides."[23] Every act of exchange is a reminder of the original violence of what Marx called "primitive accumulation."

Butler's analysis of how human bodies can be a permanent and irrepressible source of political-aesthetic resistance is hugely important as a contribution to the analysis of the subversiveness of seemingly unpolitical acts. Butler, however, remains attached to a liberal idea of politics (democracy and nonviolence) and thus paradoxically ends up restricting the important expansion of politics that she is engaged in. Because she does not address the question of the economy, she ends up gesturing toward a change in the way the system is managed, not a change of the system itself. Her "political" critique remains limited and points toward a democratically controlled capitalism, not the abolition of commodity production. Following Amadeo Bordiga, Debord, and other left communist thinkers, I would argue that the revolutionary position is to try to make the state utterly useless by destroying the economy.[24]

Relieving the State

To get a better idea of the role of violence in the new protest movements, we may now turn to the Italian philosopher Marcello Tarì and his latest book, *Non esiste la rivoluzione infelice: Il comunismo della destituzione*.[25] By combining Giorgio Agamben's analysis of the relationship between sovereignty and

the form-of-life with the Invisible Committee's manifesto-like accounts of ongoing and coming insurrections, Tarì proposes analyzing the new cycle of protests as destituent revolts, that is, revolts that have no straight forward "political" goal or program they want to achieve and implement.[26] The new protests are characterized by refusing politics and abandoning the established political system. It is a question of destituting power, removing or suspending it, not replacing it with a new government.

Tarì's account starts with the Argentinian *piquetero* revolt in 2001 when people took to the streets in response to the economic collapse of the country.[27] Protesters interrupted commerce and governmental functions by impeding the movement of traffic and merchandise along provincial, national, or international routes, thus, cutting off access to thoroughfares. The piqueteros were able to do so outside the traditional unions and political parties. The protesters explicitly refrained from entering the already established political public sphere and called for an end to politics rather than a new government or a new policy. A popular slogan within the uprising was: *¡Que se vayan todos! ¡Que no se quede ni uno solo!* (Everybody out [of the government]! Nobody stays!) The slogan was later picked up in most of the 2011 square occupation movements in North Africa and Southern Europe. Tarì shows the importance of the second part of the slogan, which has often been ignored: that it was not a question of replacing one government with another government or one political leader with another. The slogan was an expression of the protesters' frustration not just with one specific government or concrete issues such as widespread corruption in many places but with the entire governmental structure and "politics" as it has been institutionalized in modern capitalist societies. As Tarì points out, the slogan expresses an almost naïve simplicity but also a radical revolutionary critique: Just get out of there, empty the parliament! Let's get rid of all of them, "all the rulers, all

the bosses, all the liars, all the politicos, all the cowards, all the leaders, all the corrupt and the corrupters must clear the space. Leave the camp—you won't be shot or guillotined, just go, now. This is destituent violence."[28] For Tarì, this has been the principal "message" of the protests that have taken place since 2001 and on a larger scale since 2011.

According to Tarì, the different protests that have taken place all over the world in a discontinuous and scattered movement, from the 2001 piquetero protests to the Arab revolts in Egypt and Tunisia and onward, all display a desire for destitution: *Décage*! (Get out!), as the Tunisian revolutionaries shouted to Ben Ali. The Spanish *Indignados*, the Occupy movement, and the French protests of 2016 and 2018–2019 were all characterized by this anti-political gesture that refuses to be content with limited reforms of a broken system. "Le monde ou rien" (The world or nothing), as protesters wrote and sang in Paris in 2016.

In the different slogans, calls, and demands, there is what Tarì calls "a desire for destitution," meaning a revolutionary break with existing society in its entirety. The established democratic system with its elections and procedures, media and parties have to go. It is an empty shell, a spectacle with parties competing to run a system that is automatized to such an extent that it does not matter who wins the election. Politics has merged with the market. Contrary to Butler's account, democracy today is primarily an ideology that produces voting consumer subjects, a system with no outside where you always already emerge as a voter and consumer. National democracy thus hides the work it does: the production of voters who believe that it is they who decide.

Against the rituals and institutions of actually existing democracy, its negotiations and elections, the protest movements gathered the anonymous community of the street. A specter is haunting the evacuated parliament. When the people are in the streets occupying squares, the government does not govern.

As Tarì puts is: "The revolutionary problem is thus preventing this power from getting stuck, that is, never getting captured in the form of government."[29] Never entering into institutional structures but rejecting them.

Although the protests have not yet developed into an international revolutionary movement like the proletarian offensive from 1917 to 1921, Tarì sees in them the return of revolutionary communism. More precisely, a reformulation of communism in which the revolution takes place as destitution: the communism of destitution. The revolution is no longer a question of realizing a political program—for a long period in the twentieth century, the program for Leninists and Socialists alike was "the socialization of production"—of making something real as if it does not already exist: communism as the endpoint of a political transformation. Destituent communism abandons the idea of realizing an ideal in an act; thus, there is no program to be put into practice. It is no longer a question of carrying out a series of acts or deeds that follow and confirm a communist program. According to Tarì, who is following Agamben here, the revolution consists in making power unworkable, making it impossible for politics to function, making it unable to reproduce its laws. The new destituent protests are not just transgressing the laws and opposing the state; they are withdrawing from them. It is not a question of critiquing or destroying the existing laws with a view to establishing new ones. The project is a much more complex operation whereby the law is suspended—made unreal—and it becomes impossible to follow the law (as well as break the law).

Real Anarchy

Following Agamben's reading of Walter Benjamin, Tarì argues that it is thus not a question of avoiding violence or trying

to confront an undemocratic system with nonviolent assembled bodies constituting a real democracy, as Butler argues; it is a question of abandoning power altogether, breaking the connection between law and violence.[30] As Benjamin showed already in 1921, in his enigmatic and much commented on text "On the Critique of Violence," politics and the police have fused in the modern capitalist state.[31] The violence of the police shows the confusion between the state's constituting and constituted power or the state's immanent anarchy. The violent repression of the German revolution in 1921 set in operation by the Social Democratic president Friedrich Ebert showed the anarchic or violent dimension of politics. It showed that law could suspend itself in favor of a state of emergency that enabled the slaughtering of revolutionaries or the shooting of protesters (as we have seen in France where dozens of Gilets jaunes protesters have lost eyes and hands to police weapons).[32] In his text, Benjamin argues for the destitution—*Entsetzung* in German—of law and state, that is the unmaking (*ent-*) of the instituted (*setzen*). The state, *Gewalt* as government, was to be deposed or displaced.

Benjamin and Tarì are trying to think a different kind of violence, one that is wholly outside or beyond the law. The opposition between violence and nonviolence is thus replaced by the idea of non-juridical violence—a revolutionary violence that breaks the dialectic of "law-founding and law-preserving violence," abandons the state's systematization of violence in favor of a pure violence that does not find its cause outside itself, pointing to the juridical framing of rights in some Right (of rights).[33] Against the state's pseudo-anarchy, where the state of exception is always presupposed and reproduced as what Agamben calls an "inclusive exclusion," Benjamin is trying to locate a real state of exception outside the law. As Thanos Zartaloudis writes, Benjamin wants to break "the continuum of the dialectic

of violence within a juridical systematization of human action" by de-juridifying "the ethical plane of existence."[34] The revolution is an abandonment of the state's over-juridification of life. Pure violence is a break with this order—a destitution of state and history. And an end to government.

Tarì attempts to reimagine the revolution in a new way with and on the basis of the contemporary protest movements. The new protests suspend classic political claims and introduce a different temporality. There is no future political goal; the protests are "blocking the normal functioning of society," rendering society ungovernable while engaging in an "immediate material transformation of life" as it is lived in the capitalist city, not unlike the way the artistic avant-garde tried to in an earlier period.[35] The challenge is an objective one: A preexisting political revolutionary vocabulary is no longer available, and the protesters, thus, have to experiment and reinvent the revolution. In that way, they are engaged in an aesthetic endeavor where they are trying to create a revolutionary imagination. The Western working-class movement and its political project turned out to be compatible with the capitalist mode of production. Communism, thus, has to be excavated from the ruins of really existing socialism, the post-World War II planner state, and all the left-wing groups that continue to organize the past, effectively inhibiting any real movement of struggle. It is, therefore, necessary to go elsewhere and abandon the idea of realizing a political program. It is more a question of experimenting without a predetermined goal, not unlike the creative process of the expanded artwork or the avant-gardist work-in-progress. What Benjamin conceived of as "pure means."

In contrast to Butler's democratistic attempt to differentiate between illegitimate violence and legitimate nonviolence, Tarì is striving to affirm the radical gesture present in the protests—a gesture that cannot be contained within actually existing

democracy but which attacks that very model and its political, economic premises. Confronted with the emergence of late fascism in government, it does not make sense to try to save the established democratic political order, as Butler proposes. Her foreshortened analysis obscures the "totalitarian" possibility in a national democracy—the fact that national democracy's function is to manage labor inputs and absorb or exclude migrant labor or anybody deemed foreign to that model. We are already "at war" with the state.

Notes

1. Tiqqun, *Introduction to Civil War*, trans. Alexander Galloway & Jason E. Smith (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2010), 34.

2. Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," trans. Harry Zohn, in *Selected Writings: Volume 4: 1938–1940*, ed. Marcus P. Bullock & Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2003), 394.

3. Jacques Camatte, "Against Domestication," trans. David Loneragan, in *This World We Must Leave and Other Essays* (New York: Autonomedia, 1995), 118.

4. See Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen, *After the Great Refusal: Essays on Contemporary Art, Its Contradictions and Difficulties* (Winchester & Washington: Zero Books, 2018).

5. "Black Block: le Sénat adopte un texte des Républicains contre les violences dans les manifestations," *Le Monde*, October 23, 2018, https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2018/10/23/black-bloc-le-senat-adopte-un-texte-des-republicains-contre-les-violences-dans-les-manifestations_5373575_823448.html; "Time to Stop Violence and Restore Order in Hong Kong," *People's Daily Online*, August 9, 2019, http://en.people.cn/n3/2019/0809/c90000-9604626.html.

6. Néstor Kirchner cited in Benjamin Dangl, *Dancing with Dynamite: Social Movements and States in Latin America* (Edinburgh & Oakland: AK Press, 2010), 70.

7.   David Harvey, *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution* (London & New York: Verso, 2012), 157.

8.   Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assemblies* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2015).

9.   Cf. Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power and the Origins of Our Time* (London & New York: Verso, 1994).

10. Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assemblies*, 49.

11. Butler also understands "strikes," "hunger strikes in prison," "work stoppages," "occupying government buildings," and "boycotts" as nonviolent and writes: "The task is to find a way to cultivate antagonism into a nonviolent practice." *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assemblies*, 187–189.

12. Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assemblies*, 187.

13. Philip Rizk, "The Necessity of Revolutionary Violence in Egypt," *Jadaliyya*, April 7, 2013, https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/28389.

14. Rizk, "The Necessity of Revolutionary Violence in Egypt."

15. For a critique of this framing of the Arab Revolts, see Gilbert Achcar, *The People Want: A Radical Exploration of the Arab Uprising*, trans. G.M. Goshgarian (Berkeley & London: University of California Press, 2013).

16. Abdel-Rahman Hussein, "Was the Egyptian Revolution Really Non-Violent?", *Egypt Independent*, January 24, 2012, https://www.egyptindependent.com/was-egyptian-revolution-really-non-violent/.

17. Joshua Clover, "Two Questions of Assembly," accessed August 10, 2019, http://blogs.law.columbia.edu/praxis1313/joshua-clover-two-questions-of-assembly/. See also McKenzie Wark, "What the Performative Can't Perform," *Public Seminar*, June 8, 2016, accessed August 10, 2019, http://www.publicseminar.org/2016/06/butler/.

18. Mario Tronti, "Per la critica della democrazia politica. Tesi," in *Del spirito libero. Frammenti di vita e di pensiero* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 2015), 183.

19. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995).

20. Karl Korsch, *Marxism, State and Counterrevolution* (Amsterdam and Hannover: Offizin Verlag & Internationaal instituut voor sociale geschiedenis, 2018); Angelo Tasca, *La naissance du fascisme: L'Italie de l'armistice à la marche sur Rome* [1938] (Paris: Gallimard, 1968).

21. See my analysis of the "tilt" between national democracy and totalitarianism in *Trump's Counter-Revolution* (Viwenhoe: Zero, 2018).

22. Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (London: Profile Books, 2008).

23. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes and Rodney Livingstone (London: Penguin, 1976), 344.

24. Amadeo Bordiga, "Il programma rivoluzionario della società comunista elimina ogni forma di proprietà del suolo, degli impianti di produzione e dei prodotti del lavoro" [1958], *Quaderni di n+1. Proprietà e capitale* (Torino: n+1, 1991).

25. Marcello Tarì, *Non esiste la rivoluzione infelice: Il comunismo della destituzione* (Rome: Derive Approdi, 2017).

26. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998); Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016); The Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrection* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009); The Invisible Committee: *Now*, trans. Robert Hurley (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2017).

27. Tarì, *Non esiste la rivoluzione infelice*, 19–20.

28. Tarì, *Non esiste la rivoluzione infelice*, 209.

29. Tarì, *Non esiste la rivoluzione infelice*, 30.

30. Tarì, *Non esiste la rivoluzione infelice*, 42.

31. Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence", trans. Edmund Jephcott, in *Selected Writings: Volume I: 1913–1926*, ed. Marcus P. Bullock & Michael W. Jenning (Cambridge, MA & London: Harvard University Press, 2004).

32. Of course, the normalized killing of black men in the US by the police remains the most obvious example of the internal anarchy of the state. Anti-black violence is a constitutive ground of American society, not an exceptional event. But this is unrecognizable for a liberal mode of recognition. For an analysis, see Frank B.

Wilderson, "The Prison Slave as Hegemony's (Silent) Scandal," *Social Justice* 30, no. 2 (2003).

33. Tarì, *Non esiste la rivoluzione infelice*, 241.

34. Thanos Zartaloudis, "Violence Without Law? On Pure Violence as a Destituent Power," *Towards the Critique of Violence: Walter Benjamin and Giorgio Agamben,* ed. Brendan Moran and Carlo Salzani (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 174.

35. Tarì, *Non esiste la rivoluzione infelice*, 95.

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Political Violence and the Tellability of Tales

Frode Helmich Pedersen

It is a common perception that stories of sex and violence sell, and that it is therefore only to be expected that journalists and editors will, as a rule, favor stories about violence over narratives of a less dramatic kind. Not all stories of violence are equally publishable, however. Some stories of violence are intuitively understood to be "fit to print," as the slogan goes, whereas others are, for a variety of reasons, deemed unsuitable for publication. How can we go about investigating this phenomenon? To what extent is it possible to ascertain the mechanisms that determine which stories of political violence are covered by Western news media and which are most likely ignored or suppressed?

Two approaches to these questions come to mind. The first is the media critique put forward by Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman in their 1988 book *Manufacturing Consent*, where the central thesis is that the news stories that make the headlines in the established US press are the ones that tend to serve the interests of US state and corporate power. The second approach

is Slavoj Žižek's critical analysis of the phenomenon of violence in his book *Violence. Six sideways reflections* (2009), where his distinction between "subjective" and "objective" violence is of particular relevance to the question outlined above.

While both of these approaches (which are primarily concerned with questions of ideology) are useful tools in any analysis of how Western news media cover cases of violence, they lack a theoretical perspective of the *story format*, which is almost always the form in which an individual phenomenon of violence is represented and circulated. I do not here presume to introduce a brand new "narratology of political violence," but will restrict myself to suggesting *one* particular possibility offered by the narratological perspective, as a supplement to the two approaches just mentioned. This third approach is based on the notion of "tellability," coined by the sociolinguist William Labov in the early 1970s, relating to how certain types of story material seem inherently worth telling. This approach can explain certain cases of violent news stories that cannot be sufficiently accounted for by the two other approaches. As a case in point, I will offer the murder of the Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, whose massive coverage in Western media cannot, in my opinion, be exhaustively accounted for through explanations that focus solely on ideology. This is not to say that "the tellability of tales" is beyond the reach of ideology, only that there are aspects to the quality of tellability that may break free from the ideological confines that would normally prevent the story from being widely disseminated.

The Propaganda Model

According to the "Propaganda Model" put forward by Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman, the selection process of which stories to print or *not* to print in US media is determined by

what they regard as the basic function of the mainstream press, which is to serve the interests of US state and corporate power. As regards cases of large-scale violence, the model predicts that the media will always prioritize stories where the act of violence has been carried out by others, most preferably by the official enemies of US state and corporate power and suppress, under-report, or misrepresent cases where the act of violence has been carried out by (or with the aid of) the US or its allies. This is illustrated, for example, in the authors' comparison of the media coverage of the atrocities perpetrated by the Suharto regime in East Timor between 1975 and 1979 with the atrocities carried out by the official enemy of the US, Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge, in Cambodia in the same period. *The New York Times* devoted 1,175 column inches to the latter case, whereas only 70 column inches were devoted to the first (in the period when the atrocities took place).[1] The authors explain this discrepancy by pointing out that "[a]trocities by the Khmer Rouge could be attributed to the Communist enemy and valuable propaganda points could be scored," while the atrocities in East Timor had no such utilitarian function—quite the opposite: "[A]ttention to the Indonesian invasion would have embarrassed a loyal ally and quickly disclosed the crucial role of the United States in pro-viding military aid and diplomatic support for aggression and slaughter."[2] As the authors have elaborated elsewhere, the US media's eagerness to present the reading public with outraged reports on the bloodbaths carried out by the official enemy (Pol Pot) included numerous fabrications and fictions that went far beyond what had actually occurred.[3]

"The propaganda model" rests on the claim that it is vital for the ruling classes to "manage and mobilize" the public from above in order to reduce popular control over the political sys-tem. The role of the mass media is, according to this model, to make sure that the public is not properly informed about

the most important political issues, thereby reducing the risk of widespread protests to the decisions made by the elites.[4] When inquiring why some stories of violence are widely disseminated by the media, while others barely receive mention, Chomsky and Herman urge us, in each case, to ask the question: *Cui bono?* To whom is this a benefit? This is another way of saying that fundamental structures of power should never be ignored when one is reviewing media coverage of violent acts. Bearing in mind, as Chomsky and Herman keep reminding us, that "the private media are major corporations selling a product (readers and audiences) to other businesses (advertisers),"[5] their model suggests that the basic pattern found in the investigation into US media coverage will be similar in other parts of the capitalist world.

Objective and Subjective Violence

Turning now to Slavoj Žižek's discussion of violence, we should begin by taking a closer look at his distinction between "subjective" and "objective" modes of violence. By subjective violence, Žižek means the visible and spectacular violence committed by a clearly identifiable agent, such as a terrorist.[6] Through the notion of objective violence, on the other hand, he directs attention to the invisible systemic violence that works to secure and support the smooth running of the societal machinery.[7] Žižek also mentions a third mode, "symbolic violence," which has to do with language, more precisely the way social reality is rendered meaningful through language. Symbolic violence occurs, for instance, when the kind of meaning a specific use of language gives to social reality excludes certain parts of the population from the community of respectable citizens.[8]

The main point in Žižek's analysis is that Western liberal discourse places far too much emphasis on subjective violence while

ignoring or downplaying objective violence. The false premise in mainstream commentary about cases of subjective violence is, according to Žižek, that the violent act happens against a backdrop of a normal state of affairs, which is seen as non-violent. This is an illusion, creating the false impression that eruptions of subjective violence, like the one that happened in the Parisian suburbs in 2005, come out of nowhere and therefore call for an explanation focusing solely on the subjectivity of the violent actors. The introduction of the term "objective violence" helps to unveil this illusion, to the benefit of a more system-oriented understanding of the violent acts. The usefulness of this term can be spelled out in two steps.

First, the notion of objective violence can be used to *explain* cases of subjective violence. The explanation offered by Žižek elegantly contradicts the standard conservative narrative on violence, where violence is seen as an expression of man's deepest nature. When humans are regarded as inherently violent, strong societal institutions like the church, school, and family are seen as indispensable to any civilized society. As Edmund Burke famously put it, man needs a "sufficient restraint upon his passions," exceeding the kind of restraints he is able to put on himself.[9] In this view, civilized society is possible only through the repression of human nature, which is precisely what is offered by these institutions. Put a little differently: According to the conservative worldview, man is not suited for too much liberty, since an excess of liberty—or lack of constraints—will inevitably lead to violence and other forms of non-civilized behavior. Thus, when there is an eruption of violence such as that seen in the Parisian suburbs in 2005, the standard conservative impulse would be to point to the disintegration of the traditional institutions, like the school and the family, as the explanation closest at hand.

By introducing the term objective violence, this argument is turned on its head. Viewed through the lens of this term, it

is precisely the constant and "invisible" minimal level of objective violence associated with the repressive societal institutions that *causes* eruptions of violence of the kind that happened in Paris in 2005. Instead, then, of seeing public institutions like schools, the police, the courts, the military, the church, and others as necessary means of keeping violent urges in check and thereby securing the normal state of non-violence, they are now seen as effectively *creating* the daily seeds that lead to such violent acts.

Second, the notion of objective violence helps us rethink the question of blame with regard to concrete instances of subjective violence. In a Žižekian analysis, it would no longer do to regard the representatives of the established society—the elites, if you will—as being without blame with respect to violent occurrences of the kind that took place in the Parisian suburbs in 2005, or more recently in connection with the yellow vest movement in France. Even if the representatives of the elites are not performing acts of violence in a direct or "subjective" way, they contribute to the eruption of violence in myriad ways through their professional functions. This point is forcefully made in Édouard Louis's recent book *Who Killed My Father* (2018), which deserves further attention.

The Case of Édouard Louis's Father

Louis's main point at the conclusion of his book is that the health and self-respect of his working-class father were ruined by the political and administrative decisions taken by a succession of French governments, headed by presidents of different political affiliations: Chirac, Sarkozy, Hollande, and Macron. In 2006, Louis writes that the Chirac government decided to no longer cover certain medications related to indigestion, a decision that

resulted in serious harm to his father's intestines.[10] In 2009, the Sarkozy government decided that the "RMI" unemployment benefit should be replaced by a new system called "RSA." The intended and achieved result of this shift was that unemployed people were forced back to work, including those in poor health like Louis's father, whose back problems were severely worsened by having to take a job as a street sweeper.[11] In 2016, under the Hollande administration, a law was passed that made it easier for companies to force their workers to work more hours per week, leading to the final destruction of the father's health and his ending up on a life support machine.

The introduction of Žižek's terminology makes it easier to recognize these and other governmental decisions as actual cases of *violence* directed systematically at the least privileged parts of the population. While the listed decisions (Louis mentions several others) may be termed objective violence, the book also includes examples of symbolic violence—for instance, when President Macron in 2017 decided to publicly reprimand the "layabouts" (*fainéants*) for their obstruction of necessary reforms in France. The term is, as Louis's father was well aware, reserved for people like him, who are poor, without work, with little or no education, and in bad health.[12] In addition to getting his body wrecked, he also suffers symbolic humiliation at the hands of the very people whose decisions have deprived him of his health. Viewed in light of Žižek's analysis of the French riots in 2005, Macron's act of symbolic violence should be understood as part of *the cause* of such outbursts of violence that occurred in Paris in September 2019, in connection with the yellow vest protests. Macron's demeaning remark echoed Nicolas Sarkozy's 2005 comment on the suburban rioters, calling them "scum." This was a "weird self-referential short-circuit," according to Žižek, since the protesters here seemed to be protesting against the very reaction to their protests.[13]

Part of the power of Édouard Louis's book stems from the fact that stories of objective violence carried out by state institutions against its own underprivileged citizens are so rarely told. The author asks why this is so but prefers to ask the question rhetorically. If one chose instead to ask the question in the grammatical mode, what would be a plausible answer?

An answer based on Chomsky and Herman's "propaganda model" would be that *any story* whose main point works against the interests of wealth and power will be systematically repressed or distorted in a media system where most media organizations are themselves large corporations. One cannot, therefore, expect to find news stories about how the ruling elites use their power to exploit large parts of the population in order to enrich themselves and their friends. An answer based on Žižek's notion of symbolic violence (which is closely connected to the notion of objective violence), could be that the ideology of the ruling elites is so deeply embedded in the hegemonic discourse that the perspective of the lower classes is automatically ruled out in most mainstream media coverage and commentary.

Both of these explanations are based on the critique of ideology. While they are both convincing, they are not necessarily exhaustive with respect to the question of why some stories of violence are deemed fit to print, while others are not. Without in any way presuming to disprove the ideological explanations, I would like to suggest that there may be another phenomenon at work here, which I will term *the tellability of tales*, and which requires a narratological perspective in order to be properly analyzed. The idea would be to focus on the narrative form itself, which lends itself easily to cases of subjective actions with comprehensible motivations but much less easily to cases involving a complex web of political and bureaucratic decisions, performed by many agents, with conflicting or unclear motivations, resulting in subtle changes to the lifeworld of a certain section of

society. The press obviously favors stories that are newsworthy and easy to narrate over matters that to most reporters would seem vague and "unstorylike." This, then, would be an additional answer to Louis's (rhetorical) question: Issues like this are rarely written about because it is hard for the journalist to see an obvious *story* in a material of this kind.

In order to explore this line of thinking further, it is necessary to consider a few other cases of violence and compare their press coverage.

The Limits of Ideological Explanations

It is not hard to find recent examples of violent conflicts that are underreported in Western media. One example would be the War in Yemen, which started as a civil war and then, in March 2015, escalated into an international conflict when a coalition led by Saudi Arabia launched airstrikes in order to restore the overthrown Yemeni government. The intervention, code-named *Operation Decisive Storm*, is ongoing as of 2020 and has been conducted with intelligence and logistical support provided by the United States. Many other Western nations, including Norway, have provided the Saudi-led coalition with arms and other military equipment. The death toll is significant: An estimated 50,000 children died as a consequence of the war in 2017, over 10,000 Yemenis have been killed, and around three million people have become refugees. Despite these dire consequences, and despite the fact that the intervention has been widely condemned internationally,[14] the conflict has received little attention in Western media. The journalist Philip Whiteside of Sky News called it "the world's forgotten war" in a report from the war in 2018, where he compared the Yemen war with the war in Syria and noted the significant discrepancy in Western media attention.[15]

Why has the war in Syria been widely reported, while the war in Yemen has received very little attention in comparison? An ideological explanation of the kind developed by Chomsky and Herman would emphasize the unfortunate and embarrassing ties between Saudi Arabia and the Western powers, especially the United States, which could pose a significant political problem domestically if Western media were to devote serious attention to the conflict. The complicity of the Western powers in the massive human suffering caused by the Saudi-led attacks would have become painfully clear, potentially causing protests and widespread criticism from the public. In comparison, the war in Syria is more ideologically convenient from a Western point of view, mainly because the Western involvement can easily be portrayed as a heroic effort to crush the Islamic State, and also because of Iran's and Russia's support of the oppressive and very unpopular Assad government. The ideological difference between these two wars would go a long way in explaining the difference in media coverage.

While this kind of explanation is convincing with respect to the Yemen and Syria wars, it does not seem to be able to account for the massive coverage in Western media of the Khashoggi case in 2018, where a Saudi dissident and journalist for the Washington Post was murdered and dismembered in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul by agents of the Saudi government. If it is correct that the Yemen War was underreported in Western media because of the ideologically inconvenient complicity of the US and other Western powers in this story of aggression and violence, one would expect to see the same mechanism at work in the case of the Khashoggi murder. This story highlights the brazen unscrupulousness of the Saudi regime and thereby also the problematic and embarrassing ties between the Western and Saudi governments—as indeed seems to have been the case, as witnessed by the fact that Germany decided to discontinue its

arms export to the Saudis after the Khashoggi case exploded in the media.[16] This measure had apparently not been deemed necessary in response to the Saudi-led military attacks on Yemen and the subsequent humanitarian crisis, which at that point had been going on for years. The media exposure of the Khashoggi murder also had significant political consequences in the United States, where, shortly after the news broke of Khashoggi's disappearance, 22 US senators signed a letter petitioning President Trump to consider whether human rights sanctions should be imposed on the Saudis.[17] In July 2019, President Trump decided to veto three congressional resolutions prohibiting US arms sales to Saudi Arabia.[18] These reactions suggest the potential political consequences of a more far-reaching and widespread reporting on the war in Yemen, the kind of consequences that are generally minimized through the function of the corporate media as predicted by the propaganda model. The question, however, remains: Why were the usual ideological mechanisms not activated in the case of the massively reported Khashoggi murder?

Tellability

This is, in my opinion, the kind of case where the narratological perspective is particularly relevant. More specifically, I would suggest an explanation based on William Labov's concept of *tellability*. Tellability can be defined as a quality that makes stories inherently worth telling, independently of their textualization.[19] Labov developed the concept in connection with his study of black English vernacular, where he, among other things, discussed oral storytelling. One of his findings in this part of the study was that any storyteller must strive to ward off the "withering rejoinder, 'So what?'"[20] In other words, the storyteller must make sure that the story is "reportable," and

that it is made clear to the audience why the story is reportable. Some matters, Labov says, are *always* reportable, that is, they are reportable independently of the specific context in which the narration occurs—at least when we are dealing with stories about real events.[21] Stories of violence belong to this category, especially when the violence happens contrary to an expected rule of behavior.[22] In general, the qualities that make events tellable are that they are unusual, outrageous, terrifying, weird, wild, crazy, amusing, or hilarious.[23] Stories about murder belong to the most tellable narratives of all, according to Labov: "Whenever people are speaking, it is relevant to say 'I just saw a man killed on the street.' No one will answer such a remark with 'So what?'."[24]

It should be evident, then, that a story's level of tellability is closely connected to its newsworthiness. As noted by Elinor Ochs and Lisa Capps in their work on everyday storytelling, tellability is related not only to the sensational nature of the events but also to the *significance* of those events,[25] that is, their ability to create meaning and arouse interest among interlocutors or readers.

In the case of the Khashoggi murder, the story was just too tellable not to report. Put a little differently: The story's unusually high degree of tellability overshadowed any (conscious or unconscious) concerns among reporters or editors that the story might run counter to the ideological function of the corporate media of Western capitalism. In journalistic terms, the story was simply too obviously newsworthy to pass by in silence.

Let us recapitulate some of the traits that made this case so irresistible to storytellers in the media all over the world. First, there is the alluring aura of the person of Khashoggi himself, as a man with many interest-arousing qualities and connections. He was the nephew of the Saudi arms dealer Adnan Khashoggi, who was involved in the Iran–Contra scandal; he was the cousin

of Dodi Fayed, Princess Diana's lover at the time of her death; he was personally acquainted with Osama bin Laden in the 1980s and 1990s; he had been a vocal supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood; he was the editor-in-chief of Al-Arab News Channel before he fled into exile in the United States in 2017, where he started to write for *The Washington Post*. In addition, he is said to have formerly served the Saudi intelligence agency—a claim that lends the case an air of spy thrillers and international intrigue.

Second, there are the circumstances leading up to his assassination, which involve a love story, where Khashoggi tried to go through the steps that would allow him to marry his Turkish fiancée, Hatice Cangiz. In order for the marriage to happen, he had to obtain papers documenting that he was legally divorced from his former wife, who had remained in Saudi Arabia. He tried to settle the matter in the US but was induced by the Saudi officials to travel to Istanbul, where his fiancée lived. During this time, Khashoggi was anxious about his safety, fearing harm at the hands of the Saudi government in retaliation for his criticism of the regime. He was, however, warmly received at his first meeting at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, even if his matter was not settled at that time. He then traveled to London to speak at a conference, before returning to Istanbul, where he again visited the Saudi consulate, never to reemerge. He was, in short, lured into a trap.

Third, we have the extreme and spectacular nature of the murder itself, which must have been premeditated by the Saudi regime and involved secret agents of the Saudi intelligence service. The Turkish police claimed that Khashoggi had been tortured prior to the murder, and it has been plausibly claimed that his body was first dismembered and then burnt in an oven at the Saudi consulate general's residence. The subsequent cover-up is said to have included the barbecuing of large quantities of meat.[26]

Fourth, the incident had the feel of an international murder mystery, where the full story gradually emerged in the form of a suspenseful revelation of a series of shocking facts. The aftermath included the political maneuvering of several governments, including the slow and guarded admission on the part of the Saudis that Khashoggi had indeed been murdered by Saudi operatives—albeit in what was termed a "rogue operation." The admission was followed by secretive criminal proceedings and a subsequent trial in December 2019, where 11 Saudis were accused of being involved in the murder—five of whom were sentenced to death.[27]

In sum, these elements amount to a narrative material that is so extraordinarily tellable that the events seem to tell themselves. That is why no major news media outlet could afford to stay silent on the story—a fact that points us toward a mass media logic that differs somewhat from the ideological mechanisms emphasized by Chomsky and Herman, namely the logic of sensationalism. This logic connects with the quality of tellability, making certain stories of violence "fit to print," even if they cause ideological inconveniencies of a kind that Western media outlets usually tend to avoid. This phenomenon could profitably be viewed in light of Žižek's distinction between subjective and objective violence since it is evident that Žižek's examples of subjective violence are generally much more tellable than cases of objective violence, which often approach the non-tellable due to their lack of clear individual agents and recognizable subjective intentions and motives.[28]

The Challenge of the Unnarratable

Stories of subjective violence are tellable because they are unusual (at least compared to the daily lives of most middle-class media consumers in the West), often terrifying—and easy to visualize.

They are also easy to understand since they involve subjective agents, identifiable motives, and a relatively clear causal chain of events. Cases of subjective violence easily lend themselves to narrative representation and are, therefore, overrepresented in a media culture that increasingly relies on an immediate response from the audience. Ursula Le Guin makes a similar point in her *Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* (originally published in 1988), where she imagines the pre-historical origins of stories about the male hero that have dominated the Western tradition. She imagines how a typical female gatherer would tell the story of her day, recounting the small variations of the same action ("of how I wrested a wild-oat from its husk") and concludes that such a story could hardly compete, in terms of audience impact, with the mammoth hunter's story of how he thrusted his spear "deep into the titanic hairy flank" of the animal while his companions were "impaled" or "crushed to jelly." [29]

Along similar lines, there is good reason to expect that cases of objective violence will be systematically underrepresented (compared to their subjective counterparts) in the media. This is the same as saying that media stories of violence will, in sum, always have a system-preserving effect: When stories of systemic violence are so rarely told, cases of subjective violence will seem to come out of nowhere, explicable only through the evil intentions of the perpetrators, leaving the violence of the system itself outside of view.[30]

Expounding the category of the "unnarratable," Robyn Warhol suggests, with reference to Gerald Price, that there may be several reasons why some events are less narratable than others. One reason could be that they are simply too boring to be mentioned; another could be that they conflict with "manners, taboo, or literary convention."[31]

Following Žižek's notion of objective violence and Le Guin's "carrier bag theory of fiction" however, we are able to discern

another category of the unnarratable, which should be placed at a more fundamental level than the category outlined by Warhol. This more fundamental category has less to do with social conventions or the interest-arousing qualities of events than with the indeterminable nature of certain kinds of real-world material. The reason why occurrences in this category approach the non-tellable is not that they are "uninteresting" but that they do not, as we come to know them, have a story-like structure—lacking a clear beginning, middle, and end. Further, these kinds of occurrences do not easily translate into meaningful mental images and tend to lack clearly identifiable agents with recognizable motives—making it hard to discern a causal chain of events where "one thing leads to another." Studying such cases, one is left to deal with a complex web of happenings that must be painstakingly untangled in order to be made understandable.

This second and more fundamental category of the unnarratable suggests, more forcefully than the first, why Žižek's call to "resist the fascination of subjective violence" is not so easily accomplished, at least not if one assumes that it is directed at a general audience. His proposal seems to be that the spectacular (and speculative) tales of subjective violence should be replaced by serious philosophical and political analysis. One problem with this is that such analyses will rarely have the same power or impact among readers and viewers as the tellable story. Such a change as Žižek proposes would therefore not only be a question of resisting the logic of media sensationalism but would also have to entail a solution to the problem of how complex and indeterminable real-world happenings could be transformed into a narrative compelling enough to get public attention.

Tellability and Ideology

How significant is this problem? Can we not carry out serious
political philosophical analysis of political violence without the
aid of "tellable" news stories in the press? To a certain degree, we
can, most notably, through serious scholarly work—carefully re-
viewing official reports, statistical data, court records, and other
material. But even scholarly research of this kind is dependent
on news stories since many aspects of violent incidents are often
accessible only through journalistic means, with a reporter on-
site. Another facet of the problem is that even scholars with
in-depth knowledge of a specific complex of events must be able
to present it in the form of a narrative—formulated mentally
or verbally—both in order to make sense of the events to them-
selves and to communicate their significance to others. As the
communication theorist Walter Fisher noted when explicating
his notion of the "homo narrans," humans tend to understand
their lifeworld through stories and storytelling.[32] We are, in
short, constantly constructing mental stories about ourselves
and our surroundings, just as we are constantly asked to accept
or reject stories presented to us by others. As Peter Brooks has
put it, "narrative forms the deep structure of human action"—by
which he means that narrative is not only a practical way of
disseminating facts about human events but that these events
themselves have, as a configured sequence, "a narrative character
all the way down."[33] Narrative is thus involved in structuring
human experience at the most fundamental level, so that we are
always already "in Geschichten verstrickt" (enmeshed in stories),
to use an expression by the German phenomenologist Wilhelm
Schapp.[34] According to this line of thinking, narrative is not
just a specific form of verbal presentation but a necessary mode
of understanding. This means that even a scholarly or ostensibly
non-narrative essayistic discussion of specific cases of violence

will nonetheless be informed by narrative, both at the deepest epistemological (and ideological) level and at a more concrete or superficial level. In so far as we can accept this claim, it suggests that the quality of tellability may come into play at the most fundamental level of our understanding.

To reiterate the problem: What is at stake in our attempt to move away from the fascination of subjective violence and turn our attention to its objective or systemic counterpart? We may regard this as a necessary intellectual effort to suppress a specific heuristic (i.e., the narrative one), which is always ready at hand but has the unfortunate tendency to lead us into unacceptable simplifications and subjectivations. Assuming that we succeed in this and that we go on to promote a radical platform based on our insights into the depths of unnarratable material—how likely would we be to succeed? As most communication experts would tell us: not very.

If one wants to successfully promote a specific worldview, such as the one that lies behind the notion of "objective violence," one must be able to present the public with narratives that stick with them, that they can latch on to emotionally, that they can believe in. In other words, you have to be able to present your analysis, or insight, or platform, in the form of a tellable tale. This is, of course, well known within the realm of political rhetoric. A notable example of how this is usually brought into practice is how the figure of "Joe the Plumber" was used in the McCain–Palin campaign in 2008: Instead of presenting the public with an economic analysis of how tax increases would hurt small businesses, McCain told the story of an honest American plumber bravely confronting Barack Obama with his concerns that Obama's tax policy would destroy his business. In the sphere of political campaigning, this kind of narrative simplification may well be inevitable as a rhetorical tactic, but it will hardly do as a means of promoting a real understanding

of systemic violence. Can we envisage a way in which the "un-tellable" complexities that make up real cases of objective vio-lence could be transformed into an engaging narrative form?

The Case for Serious Literature

To the degree that one can accept the reasoning that I have tried to establish in this contribution, we could describe the task at hand in the following manner: What is needed in the political discourse today is the transformation of the untellable material that is typical for cases of objective or systemic violence into highly readable narratives that describe the complex interac-tion between subjective and objective violence. While having no illusions concerning the practicability of this task, I would nevertheless like to conclude by making a case for the political potential of serious literature.

As underscored by both Marie-Laure Ryan and Ursula Le Guin, the untellable can be narrated in serious literature, which is not bound by the logic of sensationalism and has often shown itself capable of making highly readable prose out of material that approaches the non-tellable.[35] The ability to narrate the unnarratable may, therefore, be viewed as an important and enduring aspect of the political and emancipatory potential of great literature. Well-known examples of this would include Emile Zola's novel *Germinal* (1885), which manages to engag-ingly represent the relationship between subjective and objec-tive violence in a mining community in Northern France in the 1860s. Another—and very different—example, is Henry James's novel *The Princess Casamassima* (1886), where the author suc-ceeds in representing the nervous mood of contemporary British society, including the feeling on the part of the elites that they are living their comfortable lives on the lid of a virtual barrel

of explosives.[36] James's novel also provides insight into *why* this is so, by following the gradual and ambivalent radicalization process of the novel's young hero, Hyacinth Robinson, who lives his life among the unprivileged, and who is simultaneously repressed by, and attracted to, the British cultural and political elites. As a result of his ambivalence, he becomes a very unwilling terrorist, with a high degree of sympathy for the people against which he plans his terrorist act. A third example is the Norwegian novelist Dag Solstad and his 1974 novel *25. septemberplassen* ("The Square of September 25th"), which describes in narrative form how the Norwegian Labor Party gradually betrays the Norwegian working class in the postwar era by aligning itself more and more with American capitalism.

The list of works could go on and would include Édouard Louis's abovementioned book about his father, but the point would remain the same: Stories of objective or systemic violence are so complex and usually have such low degree of tellability that they require the work of highly skilled storytellers in order to become understandable, and thereby emotionally accessible, to a larger reading public. One cannot, therefore, expect to find many stories about objective violence in popular culture, a culture that is necessarily dominated by easily recognizable story templates. Even if stories of objective violence are sometimes found in investigatory journalism and scholarly work, the general picture remains that the press vastly favors stories of subjective violence.

I think Žižek is right to suggest that a renewed and enhanced focus on objective violence is a central political task today. Without such an effort, many aspects of the political situation, both globally and domestically, will remain unknown to the general public. It is, therefore, all the more important to understand *why* the fascination of subjective violence is so hard to resist, both in the press and elsewhere. As I have tried to show in this contribution,

part of the reason why stories of subjective violence are favored over tales of objective violence, is to be found in the nature of the material itself—independent of ideological considerations. One way of circumventing this problem is to promote serious literature as a gateway to political understanding and insight.

What the case of the Khashoggi murder tells us, however, is that it is sometimes possible to use a highly tellable story as a pointer to less tellable material—which may involve truths that are inconvenient, and possibly disruptive, to the existing Western power structures.

Notes

1. This statistic is mentioned and illustrated in the 1992 documentary movie *Manufacturing Consent*, directed by Mark Achbar and Peter Wintonick (at 1:22:00) on the basis of Chomsky's work but is not included in the book.

2. Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent. The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (London: Vintage, 1994 [1988]), 302.

3. "Distortions at Fourth Hand," *The Nation*, June 6, 1977. Available at www.chomsky.info.

4. Herman and Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent,* 303.

5. Herman and Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent,* 303.

6. Slavoj Žižek, *Violence. Six Sideways Reflections* (London: Profile Books, 2009), 9.

7. Žižek, *Violence*, 10–11.

8. At least this is how I understand Žižek's point. See Žižek, *Violence*, 57 and 63–64.

9. Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Oxford World Classics Edition, 2009 [1790]), 60.

10. Edouard Louis, *Who Killed My Father* (London: Harvill Secker, 2019), 68.

11. Louis, *Who Killed My Father*, 70–71.

12. Louis, *Who Killed My Father*, 75.

13. Žižek, *Violence*, 64.

14. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/
     saudi-arabia-and-alqaeda-_b_8184338.

15. https://news.sky.com/feature/
     yemen-faces-of-the-worlds-forgotten-war-11516374.

16. Similar declarations were made by the Danish and Norwegian
     authorities. However, according to the Norwegian paper *Aften-
     posten* (January 18, 2019), Norwegian-made arms were still sold to
     countries in the Saudi Arabian-led coalition warring in Yemen as
     of January 2019.

17. https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/ja-
     mal-khashoggi-missing-saudi-arabia-turkey-istanbul-consula-
     te-dismembered-lindsey-graham-us-a8578266.html.

18. https://edition.cnn.com/2019/07/24/politics/saudi-arms-sale-re-
     solutions-trump-veto/index.html.

19. Marie-Laure Ryan, "Tellability," in *Routledge Encyclopedia of
     Narrative Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 589.

20. William Labov, *Language in the Inner City. Studies in the Black
     English Vernacular* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania
     Press, 1972), 366.

21. Ryan notes that "extraordinary events work better in factual than
     in fictional narrative, because they are too easy to make up." Ryan,
     "Tellability," 590.

22. Labov, *Language in the Inner City*, 366–371.

23. Labov, *Language in the Inner City*, 371.

24. Labov, *Language in the Inner City*, 370. The point may not apply
     under extreme conditions, such as South Africa, East Timor,
     and Chile during the time of the terror regimes. In situations
     where eye-witnessed killings would often go unreported, the "so
     what" response to a factual story about murder cannot be ruled
     out.

25. Elinor Ochs and Lisa Capps. *Living Narrative, Creating Lives in
     Everyday Storytelling* (Cambridge MA: University of Harvard
     Press, 2001), 34.

26. "Jamal Khashoggi's body likely burned in large oven at Saudi
     home," *Al Jazeera*, March 4, 2019.

27. The defendants who received the death penalty are generally des-
     cribed as "foot soldiers." The two defendants that were acquitted

by the Saudi court, Saud al-Qahtani and Ahmed al-Asiri, were high-level Saudi security officials.

28. The complex political actions that gradually worsened the plight of members of the working class in France, as described by Édouard Louis, would be a good example of this.

29. Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* (London: Ignota Books, 2019), 27. Le Guin goes on to suggests that the time has come to tell the other story, that is, the story of how people actually live their lives.

30. Žižek, *Violence*, 9.

31. Robyn Warhol, "The Unnarratable," in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, 623.

32. Albrecht Koschorke, *Wahrheit und Erfindung. Grundzüge einer Allgemeinen Erzähltheorie* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer 2012), 9.

33. Peter Brooks, "Narrative Transactions – Does the Law Need a Narratology?" *Yale Journal of Law & the Humanities* 18, no. 1 (2006): 4.

34. Wilhelm Schapp, *In Geschichten verstrickt. Zum Sein von Ding und Mensch*, (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann 2012 [1953]).

35. Ryan, "Tellability," 590, and Le Guin, *Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*, 35–36.

36. "In silence, in darkness, but under the feet of each one of us, the revolution lives and works. It's a wonderful, immeasurable trap, on the lid of which society performs its antics." Henry James, *The Princess Casamassima*, London: The Penguin Classics edition, 1987 [1886], 330.

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Burning Books

Sovereignty and the Fire of Literature

Cecilia Sjöholm

How are we to understand the drive to destroy cultural objects? Where does the impulse to ruin buildings, paintings, and statues derive from, and how are we to explain the burning of books? Today such impulses may be intertwined with spiraling motions of radicalization.

However, radicalization, as such, whether political or religious, cannot on its own explain the terroristic acts of destruction toward objects that have served as the pillars of culture. Research on book burnings (which is not extensive) has primarily focused on the act as a substitution for violence leveled against humans—for instance, works of literature may be burnt because the authors are of a certain ethnic origin, represent a certain sexual identity, express a certain religious or political belief system, and so on. Few have considered the excessive aggression that the object itself—i.e.,

the book—may raise. How are we to interpret violence directed at something that is *not* human? What is there to hate?

In the burning of books, something is at stake that is directed not against people but against the book as a specific kind of object. Book burnings may be considered from a perspective that is irreducible to ideology, psychologism, political and religious protest, etc. Book burnings are not only acts of instrumental value. What is it, then, in the book that book burners wish to ruin? Book burning is certainly as old as the book itself, and as multifaceted. On the following pages, I will consider some recurring patterns. First, the attack on cultural objects is not merely a substitute for taking human lives. It is also directed toward an overarching freedom that the book seems to assert—construing its own universe, establishing its own laws, demonstrating its aesthetic autonomy, and so on. The variety of forms are infinite. To understand this, we need to explore what kind of freedom the book encompasses. This dimension may be profitably considered in terms of the concept of sovereignty, as explored by Georges Bataille.

Secondly, although book burnings are irreducible to wars against people, including wars against people of a certain sexual identity, the aggression involved is amplified when the book's connotations are sexual. Sexual connotations trigger the aggressor. The sovereignty of the book and its possible sexual components have something in common: They raise an aggression against the kind of enjoyment that the book represents in its freedom. This kind of enjoyment, as explored by Georges Bataille and Jacques Lacan in different ways, takes us beyond the kind of pleasure that the book might represent in terms of other aspects—aesthetic qualities, religious message, political ideas, etc. Lacan's analysis of enjoyment encourages us to explore further; this enjoyment cannot be detached from an anxiety that may, in turn, provoke an urge to destroy.

It may seem like a mystery that so much violent aggression can be directed against an object that has no apparent life and no apparent power. Yet, the lives of books go beyond the political and religious struggles of the moment and are directed toward generations to come. Book burnings are not futile symbolic gestures; the aim is, ultimately, to ruin cultures and ways of life. With their actions, book burners may well unravel the true power of the book.

The Hypothesis of Substitution

The idea that the book burning substitutes for killing people has a long history. We hear it in John Milton's claim in the turbulent seventeenth century that book burnings are a "kind of homicide" and in Heinrich Heine's famous saying, "where they burn books, they burn people."[1] Most accounts of book burnings show how the political, cultural, social, and religious details that surround the burning is a type of violence directed against people. Historically, this is, of course, one reason why books are burnt. In Germany in 1933, book burnings were a part of the project to obliterate ethnic, religious, and sexual minorities. In other cases, books have been burnt because they signify the heretic, the Jew, the Muslim, the homosexual. In still other cases, they may signify the colonized, the excluded, and so on.

The idea that the burning of books, as an aspect of cultural destruction, is a premonition of religious, ethnic, or political killings can be confirmed not only by events from the seventeenth century, or Nazi Germany. It can also be demonstrated by the fact that Serbs set fire to Bosnia's National and University Library in 1992 as well as the systematic and extensive destruction of statues, cultural artifacts, and libraries in areas controlled by ISIS—libraries in Mosul, Iraq, for instance, such as the public

library that contained 8000 rare old books and manuscripts. As we all know, the destruction of cultural objects is an integral aspect of modern wars and conflicts. The reason for this may be interpreted from different angles.

To one scholar, Haig Bosmaijan, books can be seen as metaphors or metonymies for human beings. Therefore, book burnings have a ritualistic side which make them integral to war and conflicts—as if disposing of one's enemy. Book burnings are performed as magic rituals in which objects that represent poison, dehiscence, pestilence, etc., are cleansed from society. But beyond the books loom actual human beings—bonfires are a way of stopping a poison that is spread by humans.[2] Another scholar, Rebecca Knuth, has looked at the modern fate of book burning and interpreted it as a tool for various forms of extremism (we would perhaps also use terms such as radicalization today). In her scenario, also, burnings are performed by people and are ultimately directed against people, although books are a particular kind of cultural object. Knuth uses the burning of Harry Potter books early in the twenty-first century in the US as a paradigmatic case. Here a pattern of extremism, renunciation, and affirmation emerges: Harry's magic is denounced as the work of the devil, and Christ is seen to return with the fire of destruction.[3] Book burnings are tools of political or religious extremist protests, demonstrative acts of purification, organized violence, and threats, aiming to install a new order. All this takes place with the book as a symbol, but the ritual is performed by people and directed against people, according to Knuth.

If we look at the Harry Potter case from another angle, however, we may perceive that the book is not a substitute for humans. A webpage of satire, which comes almost too close to reality in copying the words of fanatics, states: "'The Potter series is worse than pornography. The books are even more dangerous than the Satanic Bible,' reports Pastor Deacon Fred: 'At least

with the Satanic Bible, young people know that the book was written by Satan'."[4] The followers are then ordered to burn all Harry Potter books, as should have been done, the webpage says, with the works of Plato, Aristotle, and all the other infidels. It is easy to laugh at such orders and to ridicule the fanatics. But the violence that was implored when the "real" Harry Potter book burnings took place was no less the aggressive manifestation of a would-be new order of rule.

Book burnings may be directed against certain groups of people, and they are performed by certain groups of people. But there is another dimension to add to the analysis: Books represent a kind of symbolic power that humans in themselves are incapable of incorporating. The power of Harry Potter by far exceeds that of its author, or, for that matter, its teenage readers. The hatred and fear it has evoked may seem excessive if we do not understand what the power of the book consists in; after all, a book cannot fight back or enforce a belief system. It is, therefore, difficult to maintain that the burnings of books substitute for aggression against people. What we see, rather, is an antagonism: On the one hand, we see the freedom of the book, which by far exceeds that of authors or readers, and on the other, we see the hatred of the destroyers, which is far more excessive than the power that the book may seem to represent. The antagonism between freedom and affect is the origin of the spiraling drive of destruction. In other words: The more sovereign or free the book seems to be in the eyes of its aggressors, the more hatred it will incite.

Book Burnings, Desire, and the Drive

Book burnings are not simply replacements for the destruction of people, whether that destruction is propelled by racism or religious fanaticism. Anti-Semitism, however, which was certainly

an aspect of the bonfires in 1933, is, in Theodor Adorno's analysis in *The Authoritarian Personality*, ideology imposed on a drive beyond all control. In the phantasies of the anti-Semite, the Jew is responsible for everything that is bad. Also, in Germany of the 1930s, the anti-Semite had no difficulty imposing a punishment grossly disproportional to what the Jew was accused of. The response to "filth," "meanness," etc. was extermination. As in the quote of Gotthold Lessing from the play *Nathan der Weise*: "Tut nichts, der Jude wird verbrannt." The Jew must burn no matter what he does.[5]

The violence directed against books may seem extraordinarily excessive. "Verbrennung in Berlin," Freud wrote in his diary on May 11, 1933; which meant, "it is burning in Berlin." But also, "I am burning in Berlin." Nazi organizations in Germany, student organizations, in particular, organized big national book bonfires, especially Jewish books. The list of authors whose books were burnt in Berlin in 1933, is long: John Dos Passos, Albert Einstein, Sigmund Freud, John Galsworthy, André Gide, Maxim Gorki, Ernest Hemingway, Erich Kästner, Helen Keller, Jack London, Thomas Mann, Marcel Proust, H.G. Wells, and many others. Perhaps Brecht was right in looking at the fire as a badge of honor in his poem about the writer whose books were not burnt:

Burn me! he wrote with his blazing pen—
Haven't I always reported the truth?
Now here you are, treating me like a liar!
Burn me![6]

Indeed, in the long history of bonfires that still goes on, it is not only literary works that are targeted. The example of Germany in 1933 was by no means the only significant event, but it is an easy example to resort to since we know many details about it. It shows that book burnings are propelled not only by the desire

to obliterate ideas of a specific kind or people of a specific origin or identity: Book burnings target books because of the multi-faceted forms of freedom that they represent.

German writer Eric Kästner, whose works were thrown on the fire in Berlin in 1933, gives witness to this in his account of the destruction. Kästner not only witnessed aggression and hatred against the book but also moving attempts by students, who were called in to destruct the books, to rescue works from the fire. They hid them under their feet and in their jackets. In doing so, they showed their tenderness for the literature they were set to destroy.

Kästner also witnessed the famous symbolic beheading of Magnus Hirschfeld's statue as the Institut für Sexualforschung was brought down; the head was paraded through town in an act that gave witness to the sacrificial enjoyment involved. He also tells how he made a narrow escape after having been caught witnessing the burning of his own works.

Kästner concludes that the destruction, which was orches-trated by university people, targeted not primarily the so-called other, the Jew or the communist. It was most of all an expres-sion of self-hatred, and it must be seen as a kind of suicide. Here Kästner refers to Heidegger and the *Rektoratsrede* from the same year. According to Kästner, Heidegger's own philosophy came to signify a decline of critical reflection, which, in turn, was to become Heidegger's own intellectual destiny.[7] In pointing to the Führer as signifying the coming of a new reality, philosophy betrays the sovereignty of its own practice. Heidegger assumes both "the heutige and künftige Wahrheit" of dictatorship—its present and future truth. These lines are important: He refers to a spirit, *Geist*, not only of present times but of the future. This will affect, according to Kästner, any writings he is ever to produce.

Here we have reason to repeat the succinct point that the book and the human are not the same. As Hannah Arendt has argued in *The Human Condition*, cultural objects such as

books are not the same as human lives. They live beyond human generations, and it is this permanent quality that makes them incorporate another, much longer timeline. Extending beyond the lifespan of humans, they condition human lives. Finite lifespans are exceeded by the extended, seemingly eternal object of art. In this way, cultural objects, such as works of art or books, come to uphold a value beyond their immediate aesthetic, social, or economic worth.

The Holocaust was intimately connected with the destruction of books and objects. The destruction of Jewish culture can certainly be linked to the destruction of a group that was excluded, violated, and terminated. However, the symbolic act of burning books goes beyond the violence performed against a certain group; it extends to the will to exterminate the very possibility of future lives.

Where they burn books, they not only burn people; they destroy the words and stories that determine what is to count as people, or humans, and ultimately the possibility to have a life. This is a perspective that challenges the saying of Heine, "Where they burn books, they burn people."

What one attempts to burn and obliterate is not only an object that symbolizes the Jew, the Muslim, the homosexual, etc. The bonfires do not only demonstrate hatred of the other; they illuminate the fear of an indestructible alterity that lies at the heart of the book. Book burnings are directed against something that lies beyond existing lives: the future of generations to come.

Must We Burn Kafka?

In what way may the book exceed the representation of humans and condition futural lives? What is it, in the book, that calls for destruction? To examine this, we will turn to the concept of

sovereignty, which has drawn a lot of attention in recent years, even beyond its original sense as a symbolic dimension of law in political theory. The literary work is the paradigmatic example of a book that symbolizes both anxiety and pleasure, sparking enjoyment as well as aggression.

There is an intrinsic relation between the concept of sovereignty and literature, a relation that has been explored by Georges Bataille, in particular. After the Second World War, the communist journal *Action* published an issue in which they asked: Should Kafka be burnt? Kafka's works had already been burnt in 1933, but the question pertained to something else. Kafka explicitly wanted to have his manuscripts destroyed by his friend Max Brod, after his death. In fact, his handing over his manuscripts to Max Brod resulted in a legal battle that lasted 80 years. It ended as late as in 2019, when the manuscripts were finally transferred to the National Library in Tel Aviv, after fights with other claimants of Brod's legacy. In *Literature and Evil*, Bataille answers *Action*'s question: Kafka's authorship was a life slowly burning out. Kafka never wrote with a specific goal in mind. To Bataille, his authorship could be regarded as an interminable practice of enjoyment. Writing was a practice that could not be conducted with the formal guidance of an author's title and reputation. It had to be carried out on the side, before or after office hours in the insurance company where Kafka worked to please his father. Bataille sees this as an infantile aspect of his subjectivity that also determined the character of his work: Kafka lived in the shadow of his father, apparently in a manner that seemed like everyday normalcy, but his "real" existence took place on the side: in the dream, in writing, in phantasy. This was a form of escape which in itself offered no freedom. Freedom was rather found in the irrational impulsiveness of his heroes. As Bataille puts it, Kafka's writings became a world of absolute irresponsibility, of "the unrestrained caprice of his heroes,

their childishness and carelessness, their scandalous behavior and obvious lies."[8] The act of writing, Bataille writes, became a sort of compensation "for the defeat before the father."[9] In this act, Kafka's writing develops through the intimacy of death and eroticism, in a state of sovereignty, which is not unlike the writing of de Sade: a sovereignty that appears to be produced in an absence of laws. The writing reflects the useless attempt to "flee from death" into childishness, irresponsibility, and egoity. The sovereignty that it acts out through the establishment and destruction of other kinds of laws than those contained in the social sphere, is "suffused with useless liberty." In his writings, Kafka does not only represent parables of the law that confront us with their enigmatic demands as an act of literary-philosophical reflection. Writing offers him the clandestine pleasure of opposing the father in the erection of his own phantasmatic laws. It is this specific enjoyment of writing that infuses literature with sovereignty. Through his very act of writing, Kafka performs a simultaneous movement of freedom and submission, enjoyment and refusal, which to Bataille was inherent in the literary embodiment of sovereignty as such.

Sovereignty comes in the form of expanse, an excess that will continuously emerge in the guise of new forms and paths. This, for Bataille, is an aspect of religion, but also of art and literature. Bataille sees literature as an experience that does not mirror social, economic, or symbolic structures—literature transgresses the limits of these structures and opens a source of mystic communion that holds an erotic potential. In literature, we lose ourselves at the cost of experiencing the real; literature forges a mystic communion with and beyond the law as an expression of sovereignty.

This notion of sovereignty is attached to a concept of excess, which to Bataille is an inherent aspect of literature. Literature does not only explore evil, as a philosopher casting a judging

glance at what evil is and is not. When it makes evil part of its voice, literature is evil; it brings with it features that may seem nihilistic—beyond good and evil—but this is only one aspect of the total freedom literature enjoys.

This is also what bestows the very force of sovereignty to literature. It does not need to mirror existing laws; it establishes its own. The enjoyment that accompanies the reading of texts, experiencing plays in the theater, writing of books, gives testimony to this excessive freedom: a freedom that goes beyond that of individual lives, even the lives of generations.

This excess can be described as the staggering and explosive movements of the literature of sovereignty. Kafka both bows to the father and opposes him, Bataille argues. It is easy to see how that paradox is possible: He bows to the law of the father and enjoys submitting to it because he acts out a phantasmatic scenario where the enjoyment of writing is irreducible to a given social order or the representation of a specific kind of authority. Enjoyment is produced by sacrificing to an Other at the level of phantasy. Here, we approach a structure that touches upon that which Bataille calls sovereignty; sovereignty is not the organism of an individual, detached from its social surroundings, nor is it the subjectivity of a cultural being. Sovereignty is attached to the structural components of the law and is expressed as the paradoxical enjoyment of submission.

Simone de Beauvoir has also used the trope of book burning in a work that, in many ways, can be seen as a pendant to Bataille's text on Kafka. In *Must We Burn Sade?*,[10] she examines a similar kind of logic that was an expression of sovereignty to Bataille: The sexuality of the writing subject, she argues, is submitted to the enjoyment of writing. This enjoyment is to be found at the pure level of phantasy, in the system of literature that Sade considers "demonic"; a life beyond contradictions and resistance, where "the sexual act creates the illusion of sovereign

pleasure which gives it its incomparable value."[11] Sade's eroticism is achieved, Beauvoir argues, not through murder but through literature. Again, we can see literature as the direct expression of enjoyment. Sade, like Kafka, operates a "useless liberty" of exuberant submission to a specific kind of enjoyment inherent in the literary embodiment of sovereignty, which Lacan has examined thoroughly in his text on "Kant avec Sade."[12]

With Bataille, Sade, Kafka, and Beauvoir—and many others—one may argue that literature represents a form of sovereignty that produces enjoyment. So how may we understand the subject of such literature? The subject of literature is not a transcendental subject or a subject of universality. Neither is it a destroyed subject, in the sense that it would be a non-entity. It is perhaps rather a mask, a position of marginality, a pretense, or a theatrical role of some sort. It may appear as a kind of "das Man," or man without qualities, as in Musil; it may appear as a blueprint, like K or Er in Kafka's short stories.[13] The subject of literature, as such, cannot appear. It must be accompanied by something that makes it appear. The subject of enjoyment can never present itself directly; it can only do so through the means of an aesthetic elaboration—for instance, a theatrical mask, a narrative, or a portrait. In this way, the signifier of the book and the subject of enjoyment are tied to each other. Here we confront an ineffable aspect of enjoyment: As the subject of literature becomes signs to others, it becomes ineffable to itself. The enjoyment of writing demands its own *mimesis*; this is to be found, although transformed, in the phantasy world of the work operating through its own laws of signification. The signifier is different from the sign. The sign has a meaning and a content; it represents something. The signifier points to nothing but itself. In a Lacanian register, a subject comes into being through a signifier that represents a subject for another signifier, meaning that subjectivity and language support each other: There is no

signifier conceivable beyond subjectivity, and no subject conceivable beyond the signifier. The subject of literature is not the author of his enjoyment; the enjoyment of writing must always pass through the desire of the enjoyment of the Other.

The Bonfires of Anxiety

How are we to conceive of the enjoyment of the Other? What we find in the question of Bataille as well as Beauvoir—must we burn Kafka, must we burn Sade?—is the provocation that Kafka and Sade might evoke: What right does literature have to pose as the sovereign? Indeed, neither Bataille nor Beauvoir would be found burning books; their titles are rather rhetorical hints at what literary works that are burnt might be seen to perform: claiming a scandalous right to enjoyment whilst undoing the law of the father as the unquestionable focus of sovereignty. Approaching literature as a discourse beyond content, genre, or expression of subjectivity, both Bataille and Beauvoir touch upon the scandalous core of literature. What literature does is challenge the law of the father as the indestructible core of the symbolic.

When literature creates its own order, it creates the conditions for enjoyment on its own. It stipulates the terms for the excesses and the enjoyment that only literature itself can produce. Enjoyment is a concept that refers to the concept of the drive in psychoanalysis. In Lacan's model, the modern subject is caught in the pangs between desire (which has an object) and *enjoyment* (which has none). What is interesting about the drive is not what it searches for, Lacan tells us in seminar 11, but the road it takes. Every partial drive, every aspect of the montage of the drive, is figured as a bow.[14] It may find its origin in the polymorph, perverse body. But it can be linked to something beyond the body: to the phantasy of the desire of the Other.[15] It is this

phantasy of the Other that literature both challenges and erects. It challenges the phantasy that may permeate a social order and erects another one, perhaps as a duplicate of an existing one—as in the case of Kafka's father—but it is still the expression of a sovereign will. Here again, we encounter the cause of the hatred of literature as an expression of unbounded freedom.

How are we to interpret the relation between literary enjoyment and the hatred it evokes? Aggression, to Freud, in *Civilization and its Discontents*, is part of human nature. "When an instinctual trend undergoes repression," Freud writes, its aggressive components, that is, the drive, is transformed into a sense of guilt.[16] A certain submission of the self follows. It becomes weak, deformed, and split. In this weak and exposed self, aggression may find a place to attach.

Such a weak ego is perhaps driven by anxiety, unable to respond to literature or freedom in other ways than aggression. In the short seminar on *On the Names of the Father*, Lacan makes clear that the Other is a signifier that, above all, commands: It may appear as "the sovereign good God" or as "the God of the Jews," a God who demands to have the subject fulfill his desire or a God who demands the *jouissance* of the subject:

> to enjoy when ordered to do so, is all the same something in which everyone senses that if there is a source, an origin of anxiety, it ought all the same to be found somewhere there. To this order "Jouis!," I can only answer one thing, which is: "J'ouis (I hear)." Of course, but naturally I do not enjoy so easily for all that.[17]

In *On the Names of the Father*, Lacan shows anxiety to be a state of affect, in which the desire of the Other is directed toward something that is missing. This is a state in which freedom appears not as possibility, but as anxiety. The subject needs to imagine itself to be desirable to the Other. In the condition of

imagining its desirability to the law, the subject exists in a state of anxiety. The phantasy of command solves the problem: In obeying the command of destruction, as in book burnings, there is no further question as to what the Other desires.

Anxiety, then, is a state in which the Other imposes a command to which the subject can never fully respond. If it attempts to respond, it will itself fade. Therefore, the God of command should be the law of the father, the prohibition, of castration. Literature, however, challenges such limits. If it produces enjoyment, it does so at the cost of limits and prohibitions—which is precisely what the subject of anxiety cannot do without.

In seminar 11, Lacan notes that the most remarkable aspect of the drive is revealed in the violence of the subject against itself; the drive is directed against something that he calls a "headless" subjectivation, a subjectivation without a subject properly speaking. Here, the drive becomes a question of *Herrschaft* and *Bewältigung*, or domination of the desire of the Other. The subject of the drive cannot escape the desire of the Other. In seminar 11, the domination of the drive causes the ascetic phantasy of the extermination of desire itself.

In other words, it is not a coincidence that book burnings are altogether paradoxical rituals—they take pleasure in the extermination of the enjoyment and freedom that the book may represent. Certainly book burnings signal hatred against the other, the wish to excommunicate or even extinguish beliefs and people. But what is at stake is also the obedience of a command: the command of God or a doctrine; the command that says, "destroy." The subject who burns books seeks to satisfy the desire of the Other. Here, the literary work emerges as an irresponsible and flippant answer to the question posed by the subject of fanaticism. Literature not only imagines itself to be free; it performs a perfunctory act of freedom in relation to the punishing Other whose desire it seeks to satisfy.

The Fire of Literature

Book burnings, then, do not simply replace the burning of people; they are attempts at destroying the sovereignty and enjoyment of literature.

As Giorgio Agamben has noted in his book on literature, *The Fire and the Tale* (*Il fuoco e il racconto)*, both reading and writing are metaphysical acts, apostrophizing a lost "mystery."[18] Using a fireplace in the woods as an allegorical image of an original place of meditation, Agamben reads the sovereignty of modern literature as a story of the loss of a "mystic" feature which literature has not ceased to try to recapture. Both reading and writing are acts of creation that search for something lost; a metaphysical dimension that can sometimes leave material traces through the blankness of the page; traces that we can find, for instance, in the elliptic contractions of Kafka's parables, the short notes of Simone Weil's diaries, or Augustin's *retractasiones*.

What Agamben is after, in attempting to pinpoint the fire of the book as something that lies both within and beyond material aspects of it, is the fact that in reading, thinking, and phantasizing with books, we deal not so much with a human capacity as with the power of literary language. This power is intimately connected with what he calls a Messianic dimension. The Messianic dimension of literature lies neither in vision nor hope; it lies rather in a qualitative transformation of experience.[19] Such a Messianic perspective points to something that has been repeated throughout: Literature dictates its own laws.

In the Messianic perspective on the book, literature is a fire of the soul. If the book burns, then human lives may be destroyed. But what burns is something other than people; what is at stake is rather the possibility of new beginnings, human and non-human. The book conditions lives, not only present lives but also past and futural ones. It conditions not

only the human in the present tense but also the possibility of new individuals. But this is not all. We experience the burnings of books as particular forms of disaster because they bring with them the foreclosure of new beginnings all in all—the foreclosure of futural lives, but also of new stories, new books, new ideas, new tales. It is not only human lives that are stake, but also the book as a form of life.

If books are burnt, it is not only because they symbolize people that must be destroyed, but because they stand for a form of life that must be prevented from forming anew, that must be obliterated without a trace. In other words, it is the possibility of other forms of life than that which can be represented under a particular regime, whether ethnic of religious, that is targeted. The target of the attack, then, is not so much the book as a material object, but the sovereignty of literature that it embodies.

The book burner lives between an imaginary idea of an omnipotent self and a self threatened by annihilation. Therefore, the burning of books cannot be cured by enlightenment. It is not only propelled by religion or ideology, but by anxiety. We need to reflect on book burnings not just as extreme expressions of fanaticism. We must understand the hatred that lies beyond fanatic ideologies and religions. Book burnings are not just a result of belief systems. They are directed at the very core of what the book represents as objects: the sovereignty and the excess of absolute freedom—and the right to enjoy them.

Notes

1. Haig Bosmajian, *Burning Books* (London: MacFarland, 2006), 7.
2. Haig Bosmajian, *Burning Books*, 7, 193–195.
3. Rebecka Knuth, *Burning Books and Leveling Libraries. Extremist Violence and Cultural Destruction* (Praeger: Westport, 2006).

4. Deacon Fred, "Book Burning: A True Christian® Tradition," accessed September 22, 2020, http://www.landoverbaptist.org/news1002/bookburning.html.

5. Theodor Adorno, Else Frenkel-Brunswik, Daniel Levinson, and Nevitt Sanford, *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York: Harper & Row, 1950), 633.

6. Bertolt Brecht, "The Burning of the Books," trans. Michael R. Burch, accessed September 22, 2020, http://www.thehypertexts.com/Bertolt%20Brecht%20Poet%20Poetry%20Translations.htm.

7. Erich Kästner, Über *das Verbrennen von Büchern* (Zürich: Atrium, 2013 [1958]).

8. Georges Bataille, *Literature and Evil*, trans. Alastair Hamilton (London: Marion Boyars, 1985), 156.

9. Bataille, *Literature and Evil*, 163.

10. Simone de Beauvoir, *Must We Burn Sade?,* trans. Annette Michelson (London: Olympia Press, 2015).

11. De Beauvoir, *Must We Burn Sade?*, 6.

12. Jacques Lacan, "Kant with Sade," trans. James B. Swenson Jr., *October* 51 (1989).

13. Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harvest, 1968), 154–155.

14. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Seminar XI, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1998), 177–178.

15. Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts*, 183.

16. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents, Standard Edition XXI*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1961), 139.

17. Jacques Lacan, *On the Names of the Father*, trans. Bruce Fink (London: Polity Press, 2005), 272.

18. Giorgio Agamben, *Le feu et le récit*, trans. Martin Rueff (Paris: Bibliothèque Rivages, 2015), 65.

19 Agamben, *Le feu et le récit*, 128–130.

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The Cut and the Conch

Aesthetics and Violence in Alejo Carpentier's *Explosion in a Cathedral*

Hans Jacob Ohldieck

In the third chapter of *Fanaticism – On the Uses of an Idea* (2010), Alberto Toscano discusses how Immanuel Kant's views on the French Revolution became intrinsically linked to his nascent notion of the sublime. Toscano subsequently presents Friedrich Nietzsche's critique of Kant's moral doctrine, which Nietzsche finds to be inseparable from the universalizing character of the French Revolution. According to Nietzsche, both Kant and the Jacobins are heirs to a Christian notion of equality, and both display a fanatic fidelity to universal truths. What this critique reveals, Toscano argues, is "a contrast between two articulations of affect and truth: while the Nietzschean free spirit takes pride in his capacity to adopt and discard truths at will, the passions of

the man of conviction ... are inextricable from his beliefs. That is why he is for Nietzsche a fanatic."[1] From a Nietzschean perspective, the raising of universal standards exhausts life, suppressing the sovereign operation of creating new and non-transcendent values through affirmative "active interpretation." This operation is at the core of Nietzsche's perspectivism.

In what follows, I will draw on Toscano's contrast between a Kantian revolutionary conviction and a Nietzschean perspectivism, a contrast that not only concerns affect and truth, as in Toscano's presentation, but also historical change in more general terms. More specifically, I will analyze Alejo Carpentier's canonical novel *El siglo de las luces* (1962)—translated into English as *Explosion in a Cathedral*—emphasizing how the *cut* and the *conch* (or "caracol") represent contrasting conceptions of historical change that nevertheless become dialectically interconnected. Whereas I will argue that the cut is emblematic of a sublime, revolutionary conviction that is based upon Enlightenment ideals—i.e., the universalist pretensions of the French Revolution as portrayed in the novel—the spiral-shaped conch shell is emblematic of a baroque aesthetics that explores cultural *difference* through its radical openness toward alterity. This contrast becomes acute in *Explosion in a Cathedral* as Carpentier brings colonial and cultural issues to the fore, exploring how the French Revolution sought to export "universal" values to the Caribbean region.

On a more general theoretical note, I will connect Nietzschean perspectivism to its baroque counterpart through the notion of the fold, as developed by Gilles Deleuze in *The Fold – Leibniz and the Baroque* (1988). In this work, Deleuze creates a concept of the neo-baroque that takes its cue from Gottfried Leibniz's philosophy, claiming that "the Baroque fold unfurls all the way to infinity."[2] He thus highlights a baroque ontological continuity where there is no space for cuts or discontinuities and

where transformations are "free from abrupt jerks and sudden shifts," in the words of Mario Perniola,[3] who claims that the philosophy of the fold is "both anti-nostalgic and anti-utopian."[4] The ontological continuity affects not only the question of truth, which must necessarily be of a non-transcendent nature; it also affects the basis of perspectivism itself, which in its baroque version "does not mean a dependence in respect to a pregiven or defined subject."[5] The process of subjectivation is open toward flows of time and affects, and in its radicalized neo-baroque version, it "opens on a trajectory or a spiral in expansion that moves further and further away from a center."[6]

However, Carpentier's novel also raises questions concerning revolutionary commitments: Can we really conceive of historical change without a certain revolutionary enthusiasm or conviction, without some kind of sublime politics and aesthetics? In other words: Can the baroque fold possibly replace the violent revolutionary cut and remain a sole instigator of radical change and emancipation? Or can it, at most, supplement or assuage it?

Explosion in a Cathedral

Carpentier has explored the relation between Latin America and baroque aesthetics in several fictional and non-fictional texts. In the essay "Lo barroco y lo real maravilloso" ("The Baroque and the Marvellous Real"), he concludes that Latin America is "a continent of symbiosis, of mutations, of vibrations, of *mestizajes*" which "has always been baroque,"[7] arguing that a "baroque spirit" has developed on the continent. In a later essay, "La ciudad de las columnas" ("The City of Columns"), he turns his attention specifically toward Cuba, where he finds the baroque spirit to be reflected in the heterogeneous urban space of Havana, most emblematically in the eclectic styles of

the city's columns. In fact, Carpentier's description of Havana's baroque space in this essay sets the frame for *Explosion in a Cathedral* where he, on the very first page, compares Havana to a "gigantic baroque chandelier,"[8] followed by a description of the city's hybrid character and palpable energy at the end of the eighteenth century.

In the first part of the novel, the action takes place above all in one of Havana's aristocratic mansions, the house of a merchant who is also the owner of a sugarcane plantation, and thereby part of Cuba's powerful *sugarocracy*. The mansion is described as a miniature of the city itself, with its own columns and its own eclectic selection of styles, especially in the case of the many paintings on the walls that are described as "a violent mixture of subjects and schools."[9] Being a merchant's house, it is also full of many of the same products that flourish in the city's markets. However, the novel starts with the death of this merchant, and we are introduced to Carlos and Sofia, who are now orphans living in the mansion with their cousin Esteban. Contrary to general expectations, the death of the father releases a great energy of emancipation, and they all start dreaming of travels abroad. They turn the house upside down, they are awake at night and sleep during the day, and they start reading and discussing an impressive amount of literature, searching for classical and contemporary books that are available in this epoch's bustling port of Havana. The domestic upheaval lasts for months until a strange Frenchman named Victor Hugues knocks insistently on all the doors of the house, and in the end, he succeeds in his search "for some place where he might be able to squeeze in."[10] Although it is difficult to decide his age, he joins them as a new father figure in their upheaval, canalizing their juvenile energy into revolutionary fervor, before establishing a new order in the house. He thus foreshadows the events to come, as the year is 1789, and the French Revolution is underway.

Victor Hugues—who was a French politician and colonial ad-
ministrator during the French Revolution—is later to become
the one who implements the Jacobin ideas in the Caribbean.

Sheltered in this very mansion, we also find the painting that
has lent title to the English translation of *El siglo de las luces,* and
that plays a pivotal role in the novel. "Explosion in a Cathedral"
is thought to have been painted by François de Nomé, and the
main motif reflects Havana's status as the city of columns, but
here—in the cathedral—half of the columns have just been
destroyed by what one would assume to be the explosion to
which the title refers. The painting's allusion to the Apocalypse
is evident, and in Carpentier's use of it, the painting depicts the
revolution as an apocalyptic Event, not only in the form of the
French Revolution, but the revolution as Idea, the moment of
explosion, the threshold, before the consequences are known.

Of course, it is no coincidence that the explosion takes place
in a cathedral: *El siglo de las luces*—i.e., The Enlightenment, the
novel's original title—dealt a terrible blow to the status of reli-
gion. However, in this context, it is worth noting the ambiguity
displayed, as the painting juxtaposes the revolutionary event *and*
the columns of the old order that are still standing. Read in this
light, it is striking that the only point of real dispute between
Victor Hugues, who represents the French revolution, and Ogé,
a black Haitian doctor (educated in Paris) who takes part in
the subsequent revolution in Haiti, is about the role of religion.
Whereas Hugues states clearly that "we have gone beyond the
age of religion and metaphysics,"[11] the creole Ogé claims that we
must take seriously age-old religious beliefs and not seek to erase
them with one stroke, presumably because such an eradication
would release all kinds of violent desires.

Among the three orphans, Esteban is the one obsessed with
the apocalyptic explosion in the painting. In the first part of the
novel, he is depicted as the utopian one among them, agreeing

entirely with his new father figure Victor Hugues on all revolutionary issues, including the question of religion. However, as he returns from the revolutionary events in Paris, one thing seems to be clear to Esteban: The French Revolution is not driven by reason but by faith, cults, contingency, desire, and crude will to power, where revolutionary ideals have decayed into a reign of terror. In Roberto González Echevarría's words: "The prime movers of European history, as well as the political practice of whites, appear to be inspired by religion, not by reason."[12] This will later prove to be even more true overseas, as Victor Hugues transports the revolution to the Caribbean, and Esteban gradually loses his faith in the revolution as a utopian event. What seems to be Esteban's prime lesson, then, is that the world is too complicated, and its signs are too ambiguous for the apocalyptic version of the revolution to make sense—the wiping clean of the slates. This is also evident as he sees the "Explosion in a Cathedral" painting again. What catches his attention now is what the revolutionary zeal had kept hidden from his eyes before: Half of the columns are still standing, "as if to prophesy resilience, endurance and a reconstruction."[13]

The Guillotine and the Sublime Event

The cut and the conch are key figures in the novel's exploration of historical change. We shall begin with the cut, which finds its principal expression in a guillotine that is described in the following terms as it is being shipped—along with Esteban, Victor, and the revolutionary law—from France to the Caribbean:

> I saw them erect the guillotine to-night.[14] It stood in the bows, like a doorway opening on to the immense sky —through which the scents of the land were already coming to us across an ocean so

calm, so much master of its rhythm, that the ship seemed asleep, gently cradled on its course, suspended between a yesterday and a to-day which moved with us. Time stood still.[15]

The description of the guillotine is one of several references to the door and to the *threshold* throughout the novel, and the commander of the ship is Victor Hugues, who himself knocked so insistently on all the doors of the Havana mansion, and who, according to the narrator, opened doors to new worlds for the young *habaneros*. Now he returns to the Caribbean with his own door in the form of a guillotine, which already at that time symbolized revolutionary justice: equality before the law and the destruction of privileges associated with the *Ancien Régime*, which used separate forms of execution for nobility and common people. Despite its gloomy silhouette, the image of the guillotine is ambiguous, especially since the ship brings with it the "sublime Decree of the 16th Pluviose of the Year Two,"[16] which—in theory—marks the end of slavery in the French Caribbean colonies.

The depiction of the guillotine as a sublime "doorway" to revolutionary justice is intimately connected to the etymology of the sublime itself, a concept derived from the Latin word *sublimis*, a compound of *sub-* "under; up to" and *limen*, "threshold" or "lintel" (the top piece of a door).[17] In Carpentier's description, the guillotine is a "doorway opening on to the immense sky," and the sublime character of the horizon is also evident in the description of the starry constellations, the ocean, the brightness of the full moon, and the whiteness of the Milky Way, elements that all seem to reflect positively the unlimited power and universal pretensions of the French Revolution. However, the sublime character of the scene may also serve to underscore negatively the violent character of Victor Hugues's politics, which hides a *will to nothingness* beneath its sublime façade. It becomes

increasingly clear that the guillotine/doorway is a metonymy for a revolutionary and sovereign *law* that proves to be malleable in its new Caribbean context, an unhinged law that could be attached to any kind of revolutionary idea emerging under the shifting constellations of power. As Terror intensifies both in France and the Caribbean, the revolutionary law becomes comparable to Giorgio Agamben's description of the *Führer*'s law in the nazi camp: "in this law, the formation of a rule [*normazione*] and the execution of a rule—the production of law and its application—are no longer distinguishable moments."[18] The revolutionary politics of the sublime has given birth to a new Sovereign, and its structure is described in the form of the guillotine—or *Máquina*—throughout Carpentier's novel.[19]

   The guillotine became the center of public spectacles during the French Revolution, and the beheadings are said to have provoked "a sublime moment in the crowd,"[20] evidently a calculated effect by the Revolution's politics of the sublime. This also seems to be the initial effect as the guillotine is introduced to the Caribbean island of Guadeloupe, as described in *Explosion in a Cathedral*. When the guillotine is inaugurated, joyful spectators circle around it, drinking *garapiña*, but after "the knife fell in a clamour of expectation,"[21] they felt an urgent need to "release themselves from the horror that held them captives," and "to do something that affirmed Life before Death."[22] It is a scene of sublime violence that seems partially to draw on Edmund Burke's description of the French Revolution as an event of sublime theatricality, an event that causes the minds of those who gaze upon it to be suspended by astonishment. Charlotte Rogers has interpreted the ensuing party and popular dance depicted in the novel as a carnivalesque response that undermines this supreme instrument of power,[23] but I find it more striking how the whole social and economic structure of the city now develops around the scaffold as a new hub—"to the

rhythms of the cut."[24] Whereas the inauguration of the guillotine was presented as a spectacle where the onlookers could experience "the essence of Tragedy,"[25] shortly afterward "the guillotine had begun to form part of normal everyday life,"[26] and as the rhythm of the cut accelerates, the guillotine also proves to be a convenient way to get rid of the neighbor through a logic of resentment. The rhythm of the blade thus provides a deeper understanding of why the guillotine was introduced as a *Máquina* in the novel's prologue, because its function is, in fact, machinic: The politics of the sublime has created a new subjective assemblage, a new social order based on terror and a crude form of the will to power.

The ambiguity of the politics of the sublime can be addressed through Kant's writings on the French Revolution and Nietzsche's critique of them.[27] Kant contrasts the sublime with the beautiful by describing the sublime thing—or the thing that *appears* as sublime—as either formless or having a form that exceeds our capability to perceive it as such due to its size. Thus we are not able to comprehend the thing, and this frustrates our judgment and suspends our vital powers. What happens is that the faculty of the imagination is confronted with its own limit, experiencing an immensity that stretches it to the extremity of its power, producing displeasure. However, displeasure is soon substituted by pleasure and freedom, as we realize that—despite the shortcomings of the faculty of the imagination—the *rational Idea* can grasp the formless phenomenon as a totality. Thus, the failure of the senses paves the way for the "higher" faculty of Reason, which is capable of conceiving the infinite. Transcending both the shortcomings of our senses and the determinations of nature, Reason attains an idea of totality or freedom and of being unbounded. However, for Kant, the sublime idea of freedom from nature has moral implications, as it makes us aware of the purposiveness that defines us as autonomous moral agents

that live in accordance with the categorical imperative. The idea of freedom thus constitutes the freedom to act in accordance with the universal moral law.

When Kant turns his attention to the French Revolution, it is with an interest in the revolution as a rational Idea and as a sign of moral progress. For Kant, the Revolution is an Idea because "it cannot be represented as a whole by any object or experience," and this Idea is what makes the French Revolution sublime. In fact, the Idea regulates the way we gain knowledge of the world, and the idea of the Revolution seems to constitute a frame or an optic that metaphorically gives access to the "immense sky," as in the novel's description of the guillotine. The idea of the Revolution also reminds us of the impossibility of giving sensual form to supersensible ideas, and this may provoke pain as the actions stop short of turning the idea into reality. However, the *attempts* to carry out the idea—such as the burning of the Bastille—may in turn create pleasure, as they become signs of freedom that produce enthusiasm in the spectators. In the words of Alberto Toscano, they become "a sign that humanity may indeed be the agent of its own improvement, that there is such a thing as human progress in history."[28] Through his descriptions of the guillotine, Carpentier explores how complicated and enigmatic such a sign can be, as it refers to freedom and terror at the same time.

The freedom in the Kantian conception is intimately connected to the moral imperative. In his critique of Kant's "moral fanaticism,"[29] Nietzsche considers this imperative to be inseparable from the natural law of Rousseau and the universal pretensions of the French Revolution in general. Furthermore, he considers both Kant and the French Revolution as heirs to the life-denying Platonic ideas and to "eternal" Christian truths. In Nietzsche's view, the act of raising universal standards is inherently nihilistic as it denies and exhausts the affirmative *will to*

power, which is differential in character. As Toscano writes: "For Nietzsche, both Christianity and the revolution of the Rights of Man rest on notions of duty and virtue abstracted from the concrete differences between peoples, groups and individuals, between different wills and affirmations."[30] Nietzsche's solution is to raise the categories of *interpretation* and *perspectivism* as contrasts to Kant's universalism, and we shall see that these categories become key to Carpentier's search for baroque alternatives to the rhythm of the revolutionary cut, explored above all through the spiral-formed conch.

The Conch as Baroque Figure

Esteban's return to his native Caribbean is a liminal experience, with the description of the boat—"suspended between a yesterday and a to-day which moved with us"[31]—underscoring the liminal character of the scene. The suspension of time seems to be connected to the image of the unhinged door as well, as the revolutionary time is by definition a *time out of joint*. However, the suspension of time is also a baroque topic, linked to an epistemological crisis which is emblematically expressed through the famous words of Hamlet. The boat as a revolutionary suspension of time thus finds its counterpart in the baroque suspension, and if the *Máquina* or guillotine dominates the atmosphere of the boat, the conch or *caracol* is its baroque counterpart as attention shifts from the boat to the sea:

> [H]e became absorbed in the contemplation of a conch—a single conch—which stood like a monument, level with his eyes, blotting out the horizon. This conch was the mediator between evanescent, fugitive, lawless, measureless fluidity, and the land, with its crystallisations, its structure, its morphology, where

everything could be grasped and weighed. Out of a sea at the mercy of lunar cycles—fickle, furious or generous—curling and dilating, forever ignorant of modules, theorems and equations— there appeared these surprising shells, symbolising in number and proportion exactly what the Mother lacked, concrete examples of linear development, of the laws of convolution, of a wonderfully precise conical architecture, of masses in equilibrium, of tangible arabesques which hinted at all the baroquisms to come. Contemplating a conch shell—a single conch shell—Esteban reflected on how, for millennium upon millennium, the spiral had been present to the everyday gaze of maritime races, who were still incapable of understanding it, or of even grasping the reality of its presence... Contemplate a conch—a single conch. *Te deum*.[32]

In this passage, the conch appears as a *singular* mediator between the known and the unknown, the self and alterity or, in the words of Roberto González Echevarría, "between the formlessness of water and hardened shapes of earth."[33] In this sense, the conch serves as a "lawless" contrast to the guillotine, this metonymy for a revolution that likewise gives access to the unknown and to infinity but with violence inscribed in its negative sublime experience.

The role of the baroque conch is of a different nature, first of all, because it does not aim toward a "City of the Future"[34] conceived through a utopian clean cut but toward the past. In contrast to the empty doorway of the guillotine, the conch is a house, it is specifically situated in the Caribbean, and Carpentier's narrator also refers to the fact that the conch was used as a musical instrument by the originary Taíno population. Through the explicitly protobaroque form of the spiral, Esteban is furthermore led to contemplate the conch as an expression of compressed time, a contemplation that brings him back

through "millennium upon millennium." The spiral structure of the conch leads him through history's "revolutions"—from Latin *revolutio*, "a turn around"—toward civilizations that were not able to understand this temporal structure. Being historical and Orphic at the same time, the scene thus adopts a character that takes *time* as its primary matter, extracting an ontological essence from the exploration of the Caribbean archive. It is simultaneously open to the whole variety of life forms and constellations that Carpentier describes on these pages:

> Carried into a world of symbiosis ..., Esteban marvelled to realise how the language of these islands had made use of agglutination, verbal amalgams and metaphors to convey the formal ambiguity of things which participated in several essences at once. Just as certain trees were called "acacia-bracelets", "pineapple-porcelain", "wood-rib" ... many marine creatures had received names which established verbal equivocations in order to describe them accurately.[35]

Some critics have viewed this scene as emblematic of Carpentier's own description of Latin America as the world of the "marvellous real," such a Luis Duno-Gottberg,[36] but in my view, this "world of symbiosis" points to a baroque aesthetics in a more general sense. The hyphens in the quote announce the juxtaposition of separate fields that defines the baroque metaphor referred to in this passage, a Gongoresque trait that became crucial for the poetics of Carpentier and other members of the Hispanic avantgarde. The reference to the metaphor is significant because Esteban's contribution to the French revolution is as a translator of revolutionary pamphlets, and as such he has fought with "the formal ambiguity of things which participated in several essences at once," such as: How is it possible to translate the ideas of the Enlightenment to a Hispanic audience which has a

different conception of absolute monarchy and generally a stronger catholic faith than the French had? How can a translator be faithful to a revolutionary idea which necessarily needs to be translated into another language? In short, what form should the *metapherein* or transfer take? Gavin Arnall has pointed out that "although Esteban agrees to modify French texts in a way that contradicts their ideal of liberty, he does so with the ultimate goal of extending the ideal and contributing to its universalization."[37]

The question of translation is key to the inauguration of the guillotine in Guadeloupe, for whereas the spectacle of executions had a sublime effect, Victor Hugues's speech certainly did not:

> For all his eloquence and vigor, the Word failed to harmonize with the mood of these people, who had congregated here in a festive spirit, and were amusing themselves with games of brushing against the opposite sex, and making small effort to understand a language which differed greatly—especially with that southern accent which Victor flaunted like a coat of arms—from their homely local patois.[38]

Convinced of the transparency of the Idea of the Revolution, Hugues ignores the need for translation. The linguistic aspect has a philosophical underpinning: As he is being "faithful to the verge of fanaticism"[39] to the men who had invested him his authority and to the rhythm of the cut, Hugues also ignores Nietzschean values of interpretation in a broader sense. In fact, he ends up endorsing Robespierre's Idea of the Supreme Being, "a God without a past" that "had not been made flesh, nor had he lived among us,"[40] in Esteban's words. Conceived as a replacement for the Christian god, the Supreme Being was a pure idea lacking a body or a history that could connect man's experience to that of a revolutionary faith in transcendence.[41] Esteban had previously

been in favor of an uncompromising suppression of Catholicism, but now he comes to endorse the Haitian revolutionary Ogé's conviction that revolutionary upheaval must be based on people's desire toward "the imitation of Christ,"[42] because the Crucified "belonged to him by hereditary right" and "formed part of the patrimony of his race."[43] The failure of the Supreme Being reflects the failure of the revolutionary ideals in the Caribbean in general, according to Esteban, who claims that "the weakness of a revolution which had so stunned the world" was "its lack of convincing gods."[44] In short, it was an idea that failed to translate, as it lacked a specific house, a body, or a material context.

As he returns to the Caribbean from France, Esteban's reflections on the "Idea of the Sea"[45] also appear in contrast to that of Robespierre's Supreme Being. Carpentier's use of capital letters seems to indicate a philosophical importance, perhaps even a connection or contrast to Kant's own Idea of the French Revolution. In any case, the Idea of the Sea seems to be based upon a baroque fluidity, which creates what Homi Bhabha would call an "in-between space" for Esteban as a translator, and which encapsulates difference as such.[46] Accordingly, in *Explosion in a Cathedral,* the (neo)baroque return to the archive does not imply a return to some secret or hidden essence, but rather to a possibility of (re)interpreting, unfolding, or reactualizing ignored potentials, the ruins of time. The novel unfolds a series of revolutionary events, but instead of repeating each other, they create a spiral of new beginnings that are nevertheless folds of the same continuous fabric of time. In this sense, the very form of the spiral of the conch is revealing of the baroque aesthetics and thought: Contrary to the cut or fissure, the neobaroque revolution is produced through repetition, difference, and translation, a fact that is highlighted by the fate of Esteban's own translations. After being piled up and stocked away for years, the translations are suddenly saved from oblivion and read widely in

the Hispanic world where they contribute to revolutionary mobilizations. They had failed in their immediate effect as enforced Jacobin ideas, but now they are folded into local narratives, serving the call for liberty on the people's own conditions, thus confirming the novel's epigraph from the *Zohar*: "The words do not fall in emptiness."[47]

The Baroque Fold

The baroque spiral of the conch in Carpentier's scene echoes Deleuze's claim that the "fold that unfurls to infinity" is the defining character of the baroque function. Taking his cue from Nietzsche, Deleuze raises *difference* as a contrast to the Kantian respect for "knowledge, morality, reflection and faith [that are] supposed to correspond to natural interests of reason, and [that] are never themselves called into question."[48] In *Nietzsche and Philosophy,* he shows how the concepts of the *eternal return* and the *will to power* are coined in contrast to the Kantian synthesis, and on this basis, in *Kant's Critical Philosophy*, Deleuze develops his own critique of Kant.[49] When commenting upon his *Critique of Judgment*, he starts by giving Kant credit for revealing a liberating disharmony between the faculties. Through the dissension between imagination and reason that is provoked by the sublime experience, a combined communication and struggle develops between faculties that are pushing each other to their ultimate limit. What is valuable to Deleuze in this context is how, in *Critique of Judgment*, the ensuing harmony between the faculties—or what Deleuze calls the synthetical *common sense*—is *engendered* through discord, in contrast to the Cartesian cogito's *a priori* unification of them in a *sensus communis*.

The difference between the Cartesian and Kantian versions of common sense is highly significant for Deleuze, as the sensible

is valid in itself in Kant's case, unfolding in a *pathos* beyond all logic,[50] and portraying a disruptive antagonism within the subject. From a Deleuzian perspective, Kant nevertheless wastes the opportunity of a radical opening, as harmony—although discordant—is reestablished under the reign of Reason and the Subject. Furthermore, the pleasure created by the rational idea of the infinite prepares for the advent of the moral law,[51] which is not called into question by Kant.

Although Kant derives a number of ideas from Leibniz, one of their differences resides in the notion of the infinite. "The infinite present in the finite self is exactly the position of Baroque equilibrium or disequilibrium,"[52] writes Deleuze, before explaining what such a notion of infinity implies by contrasting Leibniz to Kant. In doing so, he presents the *baroque house*, which takes the form of a baroque cathedral. The house has two floors, and the reasonable souls are on the second floor. There are no windows on this floor, no direct access to the outside. Reason is like a canvas that is folded according to the "pleats of matter"[53] that dominate the first floor, where there *are* windows to the outside. Every fold of reason and all individuality are thus determined by the openings to the external world on the first floor. However, the first floor is not unified, but consists of a multiplicity—an *infinity*—of souls (or *monads*) that form such minute and complicated constellations with other souls that the light of reason cannot possibly register all the details. What we experience as an event, a becoming, or even an Idea in the Deleuzian sense, is necessarily formed at a level that escapes reason.

According to Deleuze, "Kant turns the upper floor into something empty or uninhabited, and he isolates the two floors such that in his own way he refashions two worlds, one now having nothing more than a regulatory value."[54] Whereas for Leibniz, the two floors remain inseparable, making it impossible to know where the sensible ends and the intelligible

begins, Kant raises the second floor—Reason—to the position of judge. Whereas the struggle between the faculties is thus cut short by the "tribunal of Reason"[55] in Kant's description of the sublime, this struggle has become truly infinite in the neobaroque philosophy of Deleuze, inherited from Leibniz. Through the fold that unfurls all the way to infinity, a *becoming* and a plane of immanence are made possible, and the power to affect and become affected is increased, not through negativity but through a life-enhancing intensity. This explains what Deleuze considers to be the "sublime form" of Italian sculptor Giovanni Bernini's baroque art, as "it bears to infinity folds that cannot be explained by the body, but by a spiritual adventure that can set the body ablaze."[56] The sublime effect is that of a radical desubjectification, of becoming.

If we consider the conch as a prototype of neobaroque aesthetics, it echoes, on the one hand, the Leibnizian house or cathedral, and on the other hand Deleuze and Guattari's idea that art starts with "the animal that carves out a territory and constructs a house":[57]

> But if nature is like art, this is always because it combines these two living elements in every way: House and Universe, Heimlich and Unheimlich, territory and deterritorialization, finite melodic compounds and the great infinite plane of composition, the small and large refrain. Art begins not with flesh but with the house. That is why architecture is the first of the arts.[58]

The house initiates and sustains art for both Carpentier and Deleuze, constituting a territory into which nature, chaos, and the infinite may be folded. In this way, the house is traversed by immanent forces that release us from established (and repressive) truths. Rather than a Heideggerian house of being, the neobaroque house is a field of becoming.

The neobaroque house casts new light upon Esteban's sublime experience of the Caribbean sea as a field of becoming and as what he refers to as "Mother." Although a reference to the sea, it also serves as an allusion to Sofia, who assumed the role of a substitute mother during his asthmatic attacks, and who is the object of Esteban's desire from the beginning to the end of the novel. In several scenes, she appears as a mythological and feminine hinterland, but it is worth noting that Sofia felt that "the ancestral house" that was situated in "the vast baroque chandelier which was the city [Havana]," was "clinging to her body like a shell."[59] The image not only reveals how the emblematic Havana mansion is connected to the equally emblematic conch but also how Sofia herself is associated with the conch. Read in this light, it is striking that she experiences the baroque city and house as a confinement, which leads her to join Victor Hugues as a lover on his Caribbean adventures, before leaving him and ending up in Madrid. Sofia stands forth as a revolutionary, a woman of action and of conviction, not of baroque contemplation.

The Passion of Christ

If Esteban has become a baroque intellectual observer of the fold, Sofia is the pure revolutionary will to power, having overcome the corrupted deviation of her lover *and* father figure Victor Hugues, in a kind of revolutionary transcendence. Sofia's zeal is displayed in the last part of the novel, which takes the form of a patchwork of testimonies that Sofia's brother Carlos gathers as he arrives at the Madrid mansion after Sofia and Esteban have died in the streets on May 2, 1808, during the popular revolt against the invasion of Napoleon Bonaparte. Carlos learns that, having watched the revolts and the subsequent repression through their window, Sofia had urged them to join the insurgents:

"And who are you going to fight for?"

"For the people who've run into the streets," cried Sofia. "We've got to do something."

"What?"

"Anything!"[60]

Sofia has become a representative of the revolutionary cut as she joins the revolt while symbolically "snatching down swords and daggers from the collection on the wall."[61] As Sofia and Esteban join forces, however, it is not to serve any imported revolutionary idea or abstract imperative but to serve the will of the people, who now bring with them "anything that would cut or explode" to the streets, with all the revolutionary resonance that these weapons contain in this context. And what characterized the will of the Spanish people as they fought to expulse the French invaders? Luís Madureira makes poignant remarks about the novel's conclusion:

> May 2nd remains a disarticulated collective resistance, lacking both the strategic linkages and the process of codification that would enable it to expand into a full-fledged revolution. One would therefore be hard pressed to decipher the Idea it presumably sets out to realize or embody ... As a political event, May 2nd is on the order of the sublime. And like the sublime, what "determines" it is its indeterminacy, its formlessness, precisely the impetuosity and excitement, the enthusiasm that appears to overtake Sofia in her final hour.[62]

May 2 is defined by its formlessness, and its sublime character is further developed through the crucial role that Carpentier gives to Spanish painter Francisco de Goya. All of the novel's epigraphs are by Goya, with the notable exception of the first chapter (introduced through a quote from the *Zohar*) and the

last, which is the one depicting May 2 and 3. The latter excep-
tion—or omission—brings attention to the hidden "truth"
of the entire novel, expressed through Goya's portrayal of the
Spanish people's heroic resistance in his May 2 and 3 paintings.
The latter bears the mark of the baroque *chiaroscuro*, a play
with light and shadows which, from a Deleuzian perspective,
may seem to confront the light of Reason with its repressed
other, most notably represented by popular faith in Carpentier's
case. The roles are now inverted, as the one who is executed
by Spanish soldiers in Goya's painting is obviously a Chris-
tological figure, appearing as the *real* light in Goya's version.
Furthermore, his arms are raised in the shape of a crucifix, and
his hands are wounded as an unmistakable allusion to Jesus
Christ, surrounded by common people in a pool of blood. The
sublime event is thus of a Christological character, and the
revolutionary conviction is based on popular faith, in contrast
to Robespierre's Supreme Being and the abstract principles of
the French Revolution.[63]

The epigraph of the chapter depicting the death of Sofía and
Esteban is from the book of Job: "And behold, there came a great
wind from the wilderness, and smote the four corners of the
house, and it fell upon the young men and they are dead; and
I only am escaped alone to tell thee."[64] Given the importance
of the house in this novel, the quote obviously marks a closure
but also a new beginning through Carlos. In this novel of rep-
etitions, it is significant that the final scene starts with Carlos
knocking as insistently on the doors of the Madrid mansion as
Victor Hugues had once done on the doors of the Havana man-
sion, thus alluding to Carlos's potentially revolutionary charac-
ter.[65] "The wind from the wilderness" is of a sublime nature, and
both the Madrid uprising and Hugues himself are compared to
cyclones, the latter during his stay in Havana, thus personifying
the revolutionary fervor.[66] Carlos is the witness, and like Job, he

must maintain his fidelity and his (revolutionary) faith in order to bring about a new people.

The union of Esteban and Sofia is the enigma that Carlos has to decipher. It is not, as González Echevarría asserts, "the redemptive marriage of nature and knowledge"[67] that is at stake, but the union of the cut of conviction and the baroque fold. Sofia is pure revolutionary enthusiasm but serving the masses' fight for freedom instead of an abstract, universal, and preconceived idea of a Revolution. When Carlos shuts the last door of the novel, the "Explosion in a Cathedral" painting is left behind but not forgotten. Its ambiguity is not only the emblem of the novel but also of the inseparable unity of the *real* revolution: the unity of Sofia and Esteban, the cut and the conch, the explosion of the event and the columns of resistance in the baroque cathedral. González Echevarría has linked Sofia's urge to "do something" to Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophy of engagement,[68] and the union of Sofia and Esteban could be regarded as Carpentier's attempt to combine a Sartrean and a baroque logic of emancipation. What would seem to be an "incompossible" unity in Deleuze's Leibnizian sense appear as the two pillars of Carpentier's own stance.

In this novel of spirals, revolutions, and dialectical overcomings, two aspects are left as constants of radical change, facing each other as counterparts of the real: the cut and the fold. None of them can confer radical and lasting emancipatory change without the other. Can the baroque fold then replace the violent revolutionary cut and remain a sole instigator of radical change and emancipation? No, it cannot, but neither can the revolutionary event be truly emancipatory without the fold or the conch, without a continuous openness toward diversity, the archive, and the will of the people.

Notes

1.	Alberto Toscano, *Fanaticism – On the Uses of an Idea* (London & New York: Verso, 2010), 134.

2.	Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold – Leibniz and the Baroque*, trans. Tom Conley (London: Continuum, 2011), 3.

3.	Mario Perniola, *Enigmas – The Egyptian Moment in Society and Art*, trans. Christopher Woodall (London & New York: Verso, 1995), 7.

4.	Perniola, *Enigmas*, 9.

5.	Deleuze, *The Fold*, 21.

6.	Deleuze, *The Fold*, 157.

7.	Alejo Carpentier, *Lo barroco y lo real-maravilloso*, in *Ensayos selectos* (Buenos Aires: Corregidor, 2003), 138.

8.	Alejo Carpentier, *Explosion in a Cathedral*, trans. John Sturrock (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 11.

9.	Carpentier, *Explosion in a Cathedral*, 18.

10.	Carpentier, *Explosion in a Cathedral*, 29.

11.	Carpentier, *Explosion in a Cathedral*, 70.

12.	Roberto González Echevarría, *Celestina's Brood. Continuities of the Baroque in Spanish and Latin American Literature* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1977), 177.

13.	Carpentier, *Explosion in a Cathedral*, 188.

14.	In the Spanish original the opening sentence reads as follows: "Esta noche he visto alzarse la Máquina nuevamente." Alejo Carpentier, *El siglo de las luces* (La Habana: Letras Cubanas, 2009), 23. The mention of the *Máquina* has been omitted from the English translation, and I will return to this reference later in the chapter.

15.	Carpentier, *Explosion in a Cathedral*, 7.

16.	Carpentier, *Explosion in a Cathedral*, 152.

17.	"Sublime", Online Etymology Dictionary, accessed September 23, 2020, https://www.etymonline.com/word/sublime.

18.	Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (California: Stanford University Press, 1998), 173.

19.	According to Jean-François Lyotard, the Holocaust is the supreme example of a politics of the sublime, where the spectator is rendered "dumb, immobilized, [and] as good as dead." Quoted

in Philip Shaw, *The Sublime* (London & New York: Routledge, 2006), 126.

20. In this context, Charlotte Rogers refers to Daniel Arasse's book *La guillotine de la Terreur* (1987), as she writes: "Arasse argues that, in the revolutionary France, the action of the guillotine and the shock provoked by watching the beheadings, led to a sublime moment in the crowd." Charlotte Rogers, "Guillotina y fiesta en 'El siglo de las luces'" (*Modern Language Notes* 128, no. 2, Hispanic Issue, (March 2013), 342 (my trans.). It should be noted that the use of the guillotine was also a means to control outbursts of spontaneous violence.

21. Carpentier, *Explosion in a Cathedral*, 150.

22. Carpentier, *Explosion in a Cathedral*, 176. I've used Charlotte Rogers's translation, since this passage has been omitted from the English translation of the novel (see note 20).

23. Rogers, "Guillotina y fiesta," 344.

24. In the Spanish original, the words are "el ritmo de los tajos," whereas the English translation is "the tempo of the blade." As this translation doesn't capture the important repetition of the *cut* and the *rhythm*, I've decided to present my own translation of the passage.

25. Carpentier, *Explosion in a Cathedral*, 150.

26. Carpentier, *Explosion in a Cathedral*, 152.

27. My presentation of Kant's concept of the sublime is indebted to Philip Shaw's synthesis of it in *The Sublime* and Deleuze's book *Kant's Critical Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson & Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

28. Toscano, *Fanaticism*, 135.

29. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann & R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 64.

30. Toscano, *Fanaticism*, 135.

31. Carpentier, *Explosion in a Cathedral*, 7.

32. Carpentier, *Explosion in a Cathedral*, 180.

33. Roberto González Echevarría, *Alejo Carpentier: The Pilgrim at Home* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1977), 247.

34. Carpentier, *Explosion in a Cathedral*, 72.

35. Carpentier, *Explosion in a Cathedral*, 178.

36. Luis Duno-Gottberg, *Solventando las diferencias. La ideología del mestizaje en Cuba* (Madrid: Iberoamericana, 2003), 193.

37. Gavin Arnall, "Alejo Carpentier's *El siglo de las luces*: The Translation of Politics and the Politics of Translation," *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 21, no.1 (2012), 90.

38. Carpentier, *Explosion in a Cathedral*, 142.

39. Carpentier, *Explosion in a Cathedral*, 145.

40. Carpentier, *Explosion in a Cathedral*, 223.

41. As Hannah Arendt has shown, such a detachment from common experience was an important part of Robespierre's strategic conception of the supreme being, as "in terms of the French Revolution, [Robespierre] needed an ever-present transcendent source of authority that could not be identified with the general will of either the nation or the Revolution itself, so that an absolute Sovereignty ... might bestow sovereignty upon the nation, that an absolute Immortality might guarantee, if not immortality, then at least some permanence and stability to the republic." In Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Viking, 1963), 185.

42. Carpentier, *Explosion in a Cathedral*, 72.

43. Carpentier, *Explosion in a Cathedral*, 224.

44. Carpentier, *Explosion in a Cathedral*, 223.

45. Carpentier, *Explosion in a Cathedral*, 177.

46. Roberto González Echevarría makes a similar point when stating that "the shape of these fish, of these creatures, is not given by the second term in the hyphenated word, but by the very process of changing one into another, by the hyphen itself" (*Celestina's Brood*, 186). González Echevarría claims that this "process of transforming something into something else" appears to Esteban as characteristic of the Caribbean (*Celestina's Brood*, 185). However, he does not discuss the relation to the archive or history, and I also think that Esteban's reflection is more directed toward a baroque understanding of history than what González Echevarría admits in this particular case.

47. The epigraph is left untranslated in the English version of the novel. The original is: "Las palabras no caen en el vacío."

48. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (London & New York: Continuum, 2004), 173.

49. Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche et la philosophie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1991), 58–59.

50. Deleuze, *Kant's Critical Philosophy*, xii.

51. Deleuze, *Kant's Critical Philosophy*, 52.
52. Deleuze, *The Fold*, 102.
53. Deleuze, *The Fold*, 4.
54. Deleuze, *The Fold*, 136. Translation modified, since "inhabité" was incorrectly translated as "inhabited."
55. Deleuze, *The Fold*, 78.
56. Deleuze, *The Fold*, 139–140.
57. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson & Graham Burchell (London: Verso, 1994), 183.
58. Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?,* 186.
59. Carpentier, *Explosion in a Cathedral*, 290.
60. Carpentier, *Explosion in a Cathedral*, 348.
61. Carpentier, *Explosion in a Cathedral*, 347.
62. Luís Madureira, *Cannibal Modernities: Postcoloniality and the Avant-Garde in Caribbean and Brazilian Literature* (Charlottesville: The University of Virginia Press, 2005), 210.
63. However, I disagree with Claude Dumas who concludes that the human being's need for a religion is an essential topic of the novel: "Lo esencial del tema parece ser la búsqueda alrededor de la necesidad de una religión en el hombre" ("*El siglo de las luces*, de Alejo Carpentier," in *Homenaje a Alejo Carpentier*, ed. Helmy F. Giacoman. New York: Las Américas Publishing, 1970, 340). In my reading, I've emphasized the need to fold the *actual* popular will and faith into a virtual field of revolutionary becoming.
64. Carpentier, *Explosion in a Cathedral*, 339.
65. As González Echevarría has pointed out, it is significant that Carlos is the one who brings the novel to an end, and who will carry on what Sofía and Esteban had begun, symbolically paving the way for Carlos Manuel de Céspedes. Céspedes was a member of the sugarocracy who in 1868 declared his slaves free and marched against the Spaniards in Cuba, thus starting the Cuban war of independence (Echevarría, *The Pilgrim at Home*, 232).
66. Dominique Chancé makes this connection while also connecting it to the form of the spiral: "On comprend alors que, plus qu'un homme historique, soit décrit comme un cyclone, tournant autour de cette maison bien fermée don't il fera céder la porte, et que la révolution soit elle-même un cyclone, un tourbillon. La foule revoltée de Madrilènes est également un moment de la spirale:

"tout à coup la houle humaine sembla s'immobiliser, comme confondue par ses propres tourbillons" (Chancé, *Poétique baroque de la Caraïbe*. Paris: Karthala 2001, 40).

67. Echevarría, *The Pilgrim at Home*, 231.
68. Echevarría, *The Pilgrim at home*, 234.

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Writing as Violence and Counter-Violence in Paul Celan's Poetry and Elfriede Jelinek's Prose

Lilian Munk Rösing

In a "survey" that is part of an artistic project, three Danish writers ask eleven of their Scandinavian colleagues: "What does violence mean to your writing?" The shortest answer is given by the Norwegian writer Tomas Espedal: "To write is to practice violence."[1] A more elaborate answer is given by the Swedish writer Sara Stridsberg: "I have a strong feeling of violence, something violent, in everything I write. It is as if the very act of writing ravages something, overturns the beautiful trees in the woods and exposes their creepy underside: roots, earth, insects, worms, darkness. But perhaps writing is also the opposite of violence, … a place on the other side of the destruction of language … This may be utopian, but isn't all writing utopian?"[2]

Stridsberg's statement distills the theme of this chapter: literary language as violence and the opposite of violence, or as violence mirroring the violence of the existing order and counter-violence to this very existing order. I shall point to examples of this violence and counter-violence in the works of Paul Celan and Elfriede Jelinek. Celan and Jelinek are two very different writers, but they are both writing under the impact of the highly refined European culture collapsing into the Holocaust (Celan writing directly about the violence of the concentration camp, Jelinek about its repressed but ongoing presence in postwar Austria). Furthermore, both Celan and Jelinek produce a violent writing that simultaneously mirrors and counters the violent language of power. In Celan's case, the language of power is the German language that was his mother tongue as well as the language of the Nazis who put him in a concentration camp and killed his parents. As John Felstiner writes: "When the mother tongue came to serve his mother's murderers, a pall fell across it."[3] In Jelinek's case, the language of power is the oppressive (patriarchal, anti-Semitic, capitalist, catholic, etc.) discourse of reactionary postwar Austria (sprung from sources at the base of European culture) that she constantly cites and parodies in her montage-like prose. My ambition is to show, by way of close reading, how Celan's poem "Todesfuge" (1945) and Jelinek's novel *Die Klavierspielerin* (1983) both mirror and subvert the violence that they are up against; Celan's poem by mirroring the cruel alliance between violence and beauty; Jelinek's prose by arranging collisions between the discourses that she cites.

One aspect is violent language understood as the language of violent regimes, whether the language of the commander in the concentration camp or the language of oppressive discourses (such as the patriarchal discourse). Another aspect is the violence inherent in language. To use the Lacanian term, violence

is inherent in the symbolic order. We enter the symbolic order—that is, the order of language, desire, and sociality—through the symbolic "castration" that separates the infant from the maternal body and signifier from signified. The concept of "castration" testifies to the violence at the base of the symbolic order. Of course, this is not to say that entering language is the same thing as entering a concentration camp, or that name-giving is the same thing as assassination, but that writing on violence, in one or the other way, has to deal with the violence inherent in language.

Naming the world is cutting it up. "Language is the first and greatest divider," writes Slavoj Žižek in *Violence*,[4] referring to the inherent violence in the symbolic castration as well as to its excess of violent *jouissance*. From a constructivist point of view, language is always some kind of hegemonic discourse, imprisoning people and phenomena in words and concepts according to the interests and hierarchies of power. From a psychoanalytic point of view, this is partly true, but psychoanalysis has a special interest in the excess, the leftover that is produced when language cuts up the subject and its world. Eric Santner captures the production of this leftover by his concept of "incarnation." Through symbolic castration (naming) the subject is created as an "incarnation" of a position in the symbolic order: girl or boy, somebody's child—and later on "pupil," "parent," "doctor," "servant," "pope," or whatever social position we take on. When, however, the subject incarnates a social position (that is: becomes a subject), an excess is created. Santner calls this excess "the flesh." This excessive "flesh" (which is *real* in the Lacanian sense) may haunt the subject in violent and compulsive ways (like spasms haunted Freud's hysterics), but it may also represent an opening to other possible orders, other ways to cut up the world than the existing one.

A specific excess or leftover from the symbolic castration is the pleasure in the materiality of language. Symbolic castration

installs language as signifying, but signifiers do not only signify; in excess, they have a material dimension, such as sound and rhythm, which is a source of pleasure for the small babbling child as well as jokesters and poetry lovers. In both Celan's poetry and Jelinek's prose, sound and rhythm play a crucial role in their exposure and subversion of the violence of language. Julia Kristeva calls this dimension of language "the semiotic," as opposed to "the symbolic." I shall here turn to the art historian Georges Didi-Huberman who points out how the material dimension of the signifier does not signify or represent but rather "incarnates." To Eric Santner, "incarnation" refers to the subject becoming flesh by way of symbolic castration. To Didi-Huberman, it rather refers to the remainder of the symbolic castration, the way that the signifier may materialize instead of representing something—the signifier becoming flesh. Despite the deviance in their use of the term incarnation, I shall call on both Santner and Didi-Huberman in order to analyze how incarnation is at work in Celan's verses and Jelinek's prose—as an incarnation of the subject, as a materialization of the signifier, as the violence inherent in language and as violence against signifying language, and even as a theme.

Literature is the art of language, and literary language may partly mirror and expose the violence of the existing symbolic order, but it is also a place where language can open itself up to that which exceeds the existing language—and it may take violence to language to produce this opening. To put it in another way: Literature has the potential to be a counter-language, to practice violence against the violence inherent in language but still through the medium of language. In Walter Benjamin's terms, literature may both mirror the "mythic," system-sustaining violence of language and practice "divine," system-exploding violence.[5]

Violence and Beauty 1: Celan's "Todesfuge"

In the last volume of *Min kamp* (*My Struggle*)*,* the Norwegian writer Karl Ove Knausgård writes about Celan's "Todesfuge"—a poem he found very beautiful as a youngster, but that he would later be "ashamed of having found it so beautiful since its theme was not the beautiful and sublime, but the opposite of the beautiful and sublime, the extermination of the Jews."[6] But "Todesfuge" is and will remain a beautiful poem about something horrifying. This tension between the horrifying theme and the beautiful form may be called "sublime" in the Kantian sense, but my interest is rather to show how the poem demonstrates the kinship between violence and beauty as both a fact about the specific violence of the concentration camp and a problem for the poet.

"Todesfuge" is not only *about* the connection between violence and beauty but also *performs* this connection by being a very beautiful poem about the ultimate violence of the concentration camp. Its title alone signals the musical quality that the poem unfolds in its waltz-like (trisyllabic) rhythm, its acatalectic (non-pausing) verse flow, and its sonorous figures (alliteration and assonance). In its first published, Romanian version, Celan called his poem "Death Tango," according to John Felstiner, in order "to annul the dance that fascinated Europe during his childhood – the essence of life as urbane, graceful, nonchalant."[7] Celan turned from tango to fugue, and the form of the fugue— in which themes are introduced, repeated in different pitches and answered contrapuntally in an ongoing flow— actually seems to capture the beautiful music of the poem more adequately:

> TODESFUGE
> Schwarze Milch der Frühe wir trinken sie abends
> wir trinken sie mittags und morgens wir trinken sie nachts
> wir trinken und trinken

wir schaufeln ein Grab in den Lüften da liegt man nicht eng
Ein Mann wohnt im Haus der spielt mit den Schlangen der schreibt
der schreibt wenn es dunkelt nach Deutschland dein goldenes Haar
    Margarete
er schreibt es und tritt vor das Haus und es blitzen die Sterne er pfeift
    seine Rüden herbei
er pfeift seine Juden hervor läßt schaufeln ein Grab in der Erde
er befiehlt uns spielt auf nun zum Tanz

Schwarze Milch der Frühe wir trinken dich nachts
wir trinken dich morgens und mittags wir trinken dich abends
wir trinken und trinken
Ein Mann wohnt im Haus der spielt mit den Schlangen der schreibt
der schreibt wenn es dunkelt nach Deutschland dein goldenes Haar
    Margarete
Dein aschenes Haar Sulamith wir schaufeln ein Grab in den Lüften da
    liegt man nicht eng

Er ruft stecht tiefer ins Erdreich ihr einen ihr andern singet und spielt
er greift nach dem Eisen im Gurt er schwingts seine Augen sind blau
stecht tiefer die Spaten ihr einen ihr andern spielt weiter zum Tanz auf

Schwarze Milch der Frühe wir trinken dich nachts
wir trinken dich mittags und morgens wir trinken dich abends
wir trinken und trinken
ein Mann wohnt im Haus dein goldenes Haar Margarete
dein aschenes Haar Sulamith er spielt mit den Schlangen
Er ruft spielt süßer den Tod der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland
er ruft streicht dunkler die Geigen dann steigt ihr als Rauch in die Luft
dann habt ihr ein Grab in den Wolken da liegt man nicht eng

Schwarze Milch der Frühe wir trinken dich nachts
wir trinken dich mittags der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland

wir trinken dich abends und morgens wir trinken und trinken

der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland sein Auge ist blau

er trifft dich mit bleierner Kugel er trifft dich genau

ein Mann wohnt im Haus dein goldenes Haar Margarete

er hetzt seine Rüden auf uns er schenkt uns ein Grab in der Luft

er spielt mit den Schlangen und träumet der Tod ist ein Meister aus
   Deutschland

dein goldenes Haar Margarete

dein aschenes Haar Sulamith (all translations in endnotes)[8]

Like in the fugue, the themes introduced (such as the oxymoron "Schwarze Milch der Frühe" and the apostrophe "dein goldenes Haar Margarete") are repeated and answered by counterpoints. Thus, the Semite Sulamith's ashen hair could be seen as a contrapuntal answer to the Aryan Margarete's golden hair and the grave in the air as a contrapuntal answer to the grave in the earth.

Another recurring theme is the man who lives in the house and plays with serpents and writes (when he does not step out to command the Jews to dig their grave in the air or strike up the dance music). This theme is presented in a very sonorous way, embedded in the alliteration of the s sounds: "der spielt mit den Schlangen der schreibt." While the man plays with snakes, the writer of these lines plays with the letter s, which has the graphic form of a snake. Thus, the activity of playing with the snakes is double-exposed with the activity of writing, and the image of the writing poet overlays the image of the camp commander writing in his house. Something snake-like, something evil is associated with the activity of writing, of forming patterns of letters, which is also the activity of writing this poem.

The violence of the concentration camp distinguished itself by its high level of formalization; everything was organized in regular forms and patterns, far from some kind of brute, uncontrolled,

barbaric violence. This is the common denominator between beauty—whether musical or poetic—and violence in Celan's poem and in the concentration camp: the importance of form.

The musical beauty of the poem could to an extent be seen as a shrill parody, showing how the great European music ended as a dance of Death in the concentration camps; how master Bach ("ein Meister aus Deutschland") turned into master Death, partly based on the historical fact that the camps had orchestras of prisoners—death was accompanied by classical music—just as they actually had commanders who one moment were sitting in their houses writing love letters or reading poetry and the next moment were killing Jews. But the proximity of beauty and violence is not just a spatial fact about the concentration camp, it is also a quality of this beautiful poem about ultimate violence, and it points to the shared formalism of Nazi violence and artistic beauty.

Among the many sonorous figures of the poet, you only find one rhyme. It occurs at the dramatic climax when the commander—aka "Death" aka "a master from Germany"—hits "you" with his ball of lead. The two rhyming verses fall into the same regular meter (trisyllabic pentameter): "Der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland sein Auge ist blau / er trifft dich mit bleierner Kugel er trifft dich genau." Thus, the precision of the (one and only) rhyme coincides with the precision of the (one and only) ball in the poem. The rhyme hits as the ball hits, and the second person pronoun ("dich") that has hitherto been used for the apostrophe of the "black milk" is here directed at the victim of the ball and, at the same time, at the reader. The reader is addressed by "dich," sharing the victim's position in a way that has some of the sudden violence of the shot. The ball hits the victim with the same precision that the rhyme hits the reader. Again, the violence of precise poetic form is duplicating the violence of precise killing. This, of course, is not to say that rhyme

and murder are the same, or that the reader suffers just like the concentration camp victim. You may see it as simply the poem fulfilling the classical ideal of style: harmony between what is told and what is stylistically performed. But by performing this harmony, the poem still raises the question about the nature of the alliance between violence and beauty.

Due to the lack of punctuation, it is not clear what the commander is writing. He may be writing "Dein goldenes Haar Margarete," and Margarete may be his girlfriend back in Germany. But Margarete is also a famous character in German literary history, the "Gretchen" of Goethe's *Faust* left by the hero and executed in prison for having killed the child born from their love story; thus no less a victim of a German man than "Sulamith," if we regard Sulamith as a representative of the Jewish women killed by the Nazis. Margarete and Sulamith may be seen as opposites, representing the Aryan/Jewish opposition, but they are on the same side as victims of oppression, whether patriarchal or racist. (At least that goes for the Sulamith in "Todesfuge"—for the Sulamith in the Song of Songs, the story is different, as she is actually given a voice as important as her groom's.)

"Dein goldenes Haar Margarete" is not only a reference to Goethe's Margarete but also to another feminine character and national treasure of Germany, Heinrich Heine's *Lorelei*. In Heine's ballad about the spellbinding mermaid, she sits on a mountain by the river combing her golden hair: "sie kämmt ihr goldenes Haar." Heine was a Jew and a communist, and his books were burned by the Nazis, but they still sang his *Lorelei*— it was too ingrained in German nationalism to be given up.[9] Thus "the golden hair" is a polysemic knot, or overdetermined image, in Celan's poem, referring to the Aryan but also to the victim—to the woman brought to death (Gretchen) but also to the death-bringing woman (Lorelei); to German nationalism but also to the Jewish, banished writer. It is an image of great beauty

and great violence, of love (hair as a metonymy of women's erotic attraction), and death (hair as the resistant leftover of the corpse).

At the end of the poem, the hair is all that is left, both of Sulamith and Margarete; like relics, they are laid next to each other, representing less the Semite/Aryan opposition than the juxtaposition of two dead women.

"Todesfuge" can be seen as that kind of "barbaric" writing that Adorno questioned ("Nach Auschwitz noch Lyrik zu schreiben ist barbarisch"/ "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric"[10]), being not only a piece of poetry after Auschwitz but indeed *about* Auschwitz. But by interweaving its own formal beauty with the formalism of the concentration camp—the poet with the commander, the precision of the rhyme with the precision of the shot—it reveals how the coexistence and interconnection of violence and beauty is a central dynamics in the process that led from the Europe of fine art to slaughterhouse Europe, from master Bach to master Death.

Violence and Beauty 2: Celan's "Engführung"

Whereas "Todesfuge" enacts the intertwining of systemic violence and poetic beauty, Celan's later poetry is rather a revolt against poetic beauty, against the sonority, rhythm, and tropes of classical and romantic poetry, but it still has a violent beauty of its own. As summarized by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub: "To prevent the possibility of an aesthetic, drunken infatuation with its own verse, the later poetry rejects, within the language, not its music and its singing – which continue to define the essence of poetic language for Celan – but a certain predetermined kind of recognizably melodious musicality."[11]

In 1958, Celan wrote a poem that can be read as a new version of "Todesfuge," not least because its title also refers to the art of

the fugue: "Engführung." In the musical fugue, "Engführung" means a densification of the themes, and Celan's "Engführung" indeed seems to densify the fugal repetition of themes to the point of exploding the syntax and verses:

> Kam, kam.
> Kam ein Wort, kam,
> kam durch die Nacht,
> wollt leuchten, wollt leuchten.
>
> Asche.
> Asche, Asche.
> Nacht.
> Nacht-und-Nacht. – Zum
> Aug geh, zum feuchten.
>
> *
>
> Zum
> Aug geh,
> zum feuchten –[12]

This seems close to Dadaism, the heavy repetition at once emphasizing the words and turning them into mere sounds (the rhyme "leuchten"/"feuchten" contributing to the sound poetry rather than miming classical verses). The word that came through the night, wanting to shine, is reminiscent of the Word that was made Flesh, but here seems to turn into dust: "Asche. / Asche, Asche" while the night insists: "Nacht. / Nacht-und-Nacht." The violence of this writing is violence to the conventional forms of syntax and verse, making the singular word shine or turn it into dust, which may be two sides of the same thing—a kind of materialization of the word in which its signifying function fades.

The word becoming flesh leads us to the theme of incarnation, to which we shall return.

In *My Struggle 6*, Knausgård has a very long interpretation of "Engführung," focusing more on the semantic meaning of the words than their music but still stressing the poem's "consciousness of the impossibility of representation": "It is as if the relation between the world and its linguistic representation has been destroyed, and the poem both writes inside that destruction, ruin-like, and about that destruction."[13] The poem does not only "write inside" the destruction, but it also performs a violent destruction of verse and syntax.

If "Todesfuge" attacks the violence of the ruling order by exposing and miming how it coincides with beautiful form (but the poem also conserves some of the classical and romantic beauty as a reservoir of Utopian energy), "Engführung" attacks the order directly by blasting the conventions of poetry and language—making way for a different language, a new kind of beauty. In the terms of Walter Benjamin, "Todesfuge" mirrors the mythic violence Celan was a victim of—the violence inherent in the symbolic order—while "Engführung" performs divine violence, the violence that breaks up the symbolic order.

In his book *Violence*, Slavoj Žižek leans heavily on Benjamin's distinction between mythic and divine violence. In order to further develop this distinction in the specific context of (literary) language, I shall now turn to the chapter "The Violence of Language" in Žižek's book.

The Violence of Language: Žižek

Under the heading "The Violence of Language," Slavoj Žižek argues against the common sense understanding of language as an antidote to violence. It is a common idea that violence occurs

when we are not able to speak to each other, but Žižek claims the reverse is true: It is because we can speak to each other that we are violent beings: "What if humans exceed animals in their capacity for violence precisely because they speak?"[14] As already noted, to Žižek, "language is the first and greatest divider."[15] To conceptualize this "divider," he does not call on the Lacanian concept of "symbolic castration," but rather of the "master signifier." The master signifier is the one that does not refer to anything but itself and needs no legitimation from anything but itself. The sovereign monarch is the clearest example, but any governing discourse has such a master signifier. In Western society today, the master signifier could be said to be the economic ratio; "we cannot afford it" is the argument to stop any new idea. It is an argument against which you cannot argue; if you question the economic ratio as the measure of everything—or the principles by which economic value is created—you are deemed a dreamer out of touch with "reality." Žižek's point is that this master signifier is always installed by violence—the violence that it takes to institute some arbitrary signifier as the one to which any other signifier refers.

When it comes to symbolic castration, Žižek is less interested in the fact that it is in itself a violent operation than in the violence dwelling in the excess that it creates. To be subjected to the symbolic order is to be deprived of immediate access to enjoyment, but this enjoyment stays with the subject as an excess tickling its body, some kind of spasmodic urge that may seek its outlet in violence.

In Žižek's view, the violence of racism and chauvinism is not directed at the other as reality but as represented by language. The anti-Semite does not react to the immediate reality of Jews but to the image of the Jew (the phantasy of the Jew's enjoyment) that circulates in the symbolic order. If we did not speak to each other, we would not feel any "natural" immediate aggression toward the ethnic other.

Besides the violence inherent in the symbolic order, Žižek also points to Heidegger's idea of the creative violence necessary to make way into the unsaid, the unthought. Decision (de-cision, "Ent-scheidung") requires violence—the violence needed to "expropriate" man from his "homeliness."

The decisive conceptual distinction in *Violence*, besides the one between mythic and divine violence, is the distinction between "action" and "act." Action is all the activity that it takes to sustain our existing social order. It is the ideal of a liberal-capitalist society for every individual to be very "active": debate, sport, shop, make dreams come true—"just do it!" as the Nike slogan goes. But here the activity (and the "excess" created by symbolic castration) is put in service of the existing order; the frenetic action guarantees that nothing will happen, nothing will change. The "act," on the other hand, changes everything. It is the de-cisive "Ent-scheidung" that cuts up our world in new ways, changes the very coordinates of our understanding of the world. Violence as "action" is the spectacular violence that is just another "show" in our *societé du spectacle*; the angry young man ready to throw his brick, almost posing for the cameras, providing the media with the conventional image of "the angry young man," keeping the stream of news flowing.

The question remains: How can we distinguish violence that makes a difference from spectacular and mythical violence? How can we distinguish the violent gesture that founds or sustains the Law from the one that disrupts the Law—not only breaks the Law but breaks up the very logic of the Law? How do we move from language as violence—cutting up the world in reductive, simplifying, repressive words and concepts—to language as counter-violence, cutting up the established cuts?

In order to further investigate the distinction between the violence of the symbolic order and the violence that breaks up the symbolic order, and to approach literature as a place where

a certain violence against language could lead us beyond the violence of language, I shall now try to define Santner's and Didi-Huberman's different concepts of "incarnation."

The Violence of Incarnation: Santner and Didi-Huberman

Eric Santner uses the concept of "incarnation" to designate the violent creation of the subject by the signifier, the subjection to the symbolic order by which the subject is created. To enter into the symbolic order is to take on the signifier that assigns you a position in that order and makes your body an incarnation of this position. Santner illustrates the violence of this incarnation by referring to Francis Bacon's famous *Study after Velázquez's Pope Innocent X*. Bacon's pope is screaming as if his throne and hat were instruments of torture. The pope's hat is the signifier that is squeezed on his head, making him incarnate "the pope"; the word ("pope") becomes flesh.[16] To Santner, "flesh" is "the fleshy surplus" that we take on when we are taken in by the symbolic order.[17] It is not that we are "flesh" from the beginning, and then a signifier is inscribed into this flesh; flesh is created as the fleshy surplus of that violent inscription. Here again, one may think of Bacon's pope; at the same time as he is fixated into his thrown, some kind of spectral materiality seems to be produced, emanating from him as the materiality of color. The human flesh is to Santner "a spectral materiality ... that forms at the impossible jointure of body and letter, soma and signifier, enjoyment and entitlement."[18]

So Santner's "incarnation," just like Lacan's "symbolic castration," points to the violence at work in installing and sustaining the symbolic order, that which Walter Benjamin would call "mythic violence," to which he would contrast divine or

Messianic violence as something that breaks into the symbolic order from the outside and disrupts its very coordinates. Thus (the Christian image of) Incarnation may be opposed by (the Jewish image of) Messiah as the one we are still waiting for. But one may ask whether the counter-power to the violence of incarnation may not also be found in that very "fleshy surplus" created by incarnation itself.

As soon as there is representation, as soon as there are signifiers ("pope"), there is also a material surplus (the rays of color emanating from the pope's figure). When it comes to verbal signifiers, literary language could be said to take care of this surplus—the non-signifying dimension of words and letters, such as their sound and rhythm. On the one hand, the becoming-flesh of the word designates the violent shaping of bodies in the name of the signifier. On the other hand, it designates the insistence on the non-signifying surplus that is created whenever there is signification, and which may be the placeholder for new or repressed signifiers. One may also say that "incarnation" designates an operation of the symbolic (violently producing a symbolic subject), but also a production of something "real" (that which escapes the symbolic signifier).

To Georges Didi-Huberman, "incarnation" designates an alternative to "representation" in art history.[19] Whereas representation is the function of the signifier in the symbolic order, incarnation points to the dimension of the signifier that escapes this function, its material dimension.

In painting, the material dimension is the paint and the cloth (or whatever material is painted with and upon). In his analysis of a small painting of the crucified Christ from the Middle Ages, Didi-Huberman observes how the gigantesque blood drops splashed on Christ's body seem to destroy its gracious figure, like when a child has made a meticulous drawing and then destroys it by coloring all over it. This crucifixion is painted before

the Renaissance revived the ancient ideal of "representation" as the aim of painting, in a period of Christian art when the ideal was rather "incarnation," that is not a mimetic imitation of the phenomena but rather the materialization of an idea—here, the very idea of incarnation, of God becoming flesh. The red paint does not (only) represent blood stains, it (also) *is* bloodstains, the violent destruction of the figure of Christ. The red stains open up the figure of Christ, turning his outstretched arms on the cross into an embrace, making us feel the *real* of his incarnation. Transposed from the signifiers of painting to the signifiers of verbal language, the shift from representation to incarnation means a shift from semantics to the sonorous, rhythmic, and/ or graphic qualities of words and letters.

Santner's "incarnation" is the becoming-flesh of the subject, while Didi-Huberman's "incarnation" is the becoming-flesh of the signifier. Santner's "incarnation" is the cut of the signifier in the subject. Didi-Huberman's "incarnation" is the cutting-off of the signifier from representation.

Celan's "Todesfuge" deals with the violent incarnation of the symbolic subject as prisoner or commander or "Jew" or "Aryan," or even poet—and its spasmodic surplus as a *danse macabre*. The poem enacts and exposes the way violence and beauty coincide in the Nazi order. "Engführung" touches upon incarnation as a theme: the Word that came and wanted to shine, reminiscent of the Word that became Flesh. In "Engführung" it becomes ashes: "Asche. / Asche, Asche." But at the same time, the words "Word" and "Ashes" become Flesh; by their isolation and repetition—which violates syntax and grammar—they become material objects with certain sonorous and rhythmic qualities. The word "Wort" ("word") becomes a material object arriving in the poem, thus rather incarnating than representing the word. Celan's later poetry could be said to try to avoid the violence inherent in language (Santner's "incarnation" as the subject

being represented by a signifier) by materializing the word (Didi-Huberman's "incarnation" as liberating the signifier from representation).

At first sight, Elfriede Jelinek seems to be examining the "incarnation" of which Santner speaks: The violence done to the subject by language, specifically the discursive violence of Western patriarchy and capitalism. But her prose is also very much driven by the material side of verbal language: rhythm and sound—that is "incarnation" in the sense of Didi-Huberman, violence to language as representation. I shall try to show this by analyzing some pages from Jelinek's novel *Die Klavierspielerin*, in which incarnation is not only at work, but also a theme.

Butcher's Language: Jelinek

In *Die Klavierspielerin*, the theme of incarnation occurs in a scene where the protagonist Erika Kohut and her mother have just brought Erika's father to a psychiatric hospital outside Vienna and are on their way home. Their driver is the butcher, from whom they daily buy their meat and who has kindly offered to take them in his car.

Jelinek's prose is generally a montage of oppressive language, stuffed with citations from the (literary, philosophical, popular) discourses of European culture. Her characters seem to be puppets for these discourses rather than having an agenda and agency of their own. The protagonist in *Die Klavierspielerin*, Erika Kohut, is a 35 years old piano teacher at the Conservatory of Music in Vienna and trains her pupils in the same sadistic way that she has been trained herself, not least by her mother, with whom she still lives and even shares a bed. Sexually, Erika is a bit of a pervert—voyeuristic in her behavior and masochist in her fantasies. But this perversion mirrors the perversion of the

culture that produced her, the sadist discipline of the classical tradition. All this is told in Jelinek's singular prose, stuffed with more or less overt citations from European culture and driven by sound and rhythm in a tone that lingers between sorrow, aggression, and humor. Jelinek herself has said that her language is a sonorous composition rather than a means to tell a story:

> Bei mir ist das Problem der Sprache deshalb derart groß, weil ich die Sprache nicht als Vehikel benutze um irgend etwas darzustellen, sondern weil ich eine eigene kompositorische Sprache entwickle, die sehr stark vom Klang ausgeht.[20]

Jelinek's statement, as well as her prose, testifies to a certain pleasure in the materiality of language. To rely on sound, "Klang," when combining words, is to give in to the pleasure that Freud calls "die alte Wortlust," the ancient pleasure of words. Sonorous composition (alliterations, assonances, homophony, anagrams) is the principle of a certain category of jokes, and even if Freud is eager to find the sexual or aggressive fantasies at work in the joke, he also finds plain and simple "pleasure of words": *Wortlust*, "the thought ... revisiting its erstwhile home of the ancient play with words."[21] The joke may be driven by aggressive and/or sexual pleasure but also by that pleasure of words as pure sound and rhythm that Freud calls "ancient," because it is at work in the small child's babbling. The sound and rhythm of language belong to the non-signifying part of the signifier that is a kind of material excess, a leftover from the symbolic castration. To stress this material excess, and even, like Jelinek, make it the principle of your textual composition, is finally, also a form of attack on the symbolic order itself—not unlike the injury to representation that Di-di-Huberman finds in incarnation and, thus, still testifies to aggression as the dynamo of the joke. (There is always a violent

attack in jokes as Freud defines them, either at some person or institution or at reason itself.)

The scene in the butcher's car from *Die Klavierspielerin* is both jocular, aggressive, and sad. Here popular sayings and theological terms, more specifically Eucharist terms, are interwoven into a materialization and profanation of the European spirit and culture.

What happens in this scene? What happens on the scene of language? In the conversation between the butcher and the two women in the car (paraphrased by a narrator sometimes describing the butcher from outside, sometimes sharing his point of view), words become flesh. Metaphorical meaning becomes literal meaning.

Words become flesh, or rather meat, in the way that the butcher's choice of words is compared to his selection of commodities: "Er tröstet vermittels etlicher sorgfältig vorher ausgesuchter Worte. Er bedauert die Damen K. mit ausgewählten Sätzen. Gechäftsleute beherrschen die Sprache des Aussuchens und Wählens bestens."[22] The women's words are compared, by the butcher, to the vilest kind of meat, innards ("Innereien"): "Die Damen K. gießen einen Schwall Innereien, noch dampfend, aus sich heraus, bestenfalls für Katzenfutter geeignet, beurteilt der Fachmann."[23]

Next, the text plays around with the trope "flesh and blood," activating several of its metaphorical meanings but also insisting on its literal meaning, not least by introducing it in this context of the butcher's discourse. The butcher says that car driving has gone into his "Fleisch und Blut."[24] The ladies have nothing to respond with, except their own "Fleisch und Blut, das sie nicht vergießen wollen."[25] They have had to leave a piece of their own "Fleisch und Blut," very dear ("teuer") to them, in the hospital, at a dear ("teuer") price. Thus, the idiomatic expressions that something has gone into your blood as well as "flesh and blood"

for "relatives," are revived from being dead metaphors, exposing how the father is actually treated like a piece of meat and how the exchange of words and favors between the butcher and the ladies is enrolled in a logic of commercial exchange. Furthermore, a biblical connotation of "flesh and blood" is evoked when we hear that the ladies do not want to "shed" ("vergießen") their blood, referring to the one who shed his blood for humankind, Jesus Christ.

We are here circling a trope that is characteristic of Jelinek: the syllepsis. As observed by Biebuyck and Martens, the interaction of different tropes in Jelinek's prose depends on "material figures of sliding and phonetic contiguity …, above all the mechanism of syllepsis. Syllepsis consists of the simultaneous application of a word in its literal and metaphoric meaning."[26] "Flesh and blood" functions in Jelinek's text as a syllepsis, simultaneously being a metaphor for "family" and referring to literal flesh and blood. The syllepsis has a comical effect, as in the popular joke pronounced by the butcher: "[A]lles hat einmal ein Ende, nur die Wurst hat zwei,"[27] where "end" means both the end of time and the end of the sausage. The comic of the syllepsis seems to be the comic of profanation: The literal meaning profanes the abstract, metaphorical, and even the spiritual meaning.

The literal meaning—the butcher's professional lingo—insists, "even though today is Sunday," as we are told several times. Sunday is "the day for the language of leisure," but we know that it is also the day for the language of the Eucharist—the day when the "flesh and blood" of Christ is served in Christian churches. Ultimately, the clash between discourses at play in the "flesh and blood" theme is the clash between the priest's and the butcher's discourse—between the flesh of Christ and the meat in the butcher's store.

But the Eucharist implies in itself this clash between spirituality and materialism. God himself is supposed to be present

in the stuff that we eat and drink, as he made himself present in the flesh and blood of Christ.

The word made flesh is a recurring theme in Jelinek's writing. It is also a basic *operation* of her writing. She makes the word into flesh, materializes the abstract, pulls the spirit down into the dirt—not least the spirit of European art and culture. Her writing performs an insistent profanation; in this scene, it is incarnation itself that is profaned by being translated into a butcher's terms.

Precisely by taking the clichés of culture to the letter, by concretizing and materializing them, Jelinek's prose also travesties and transcends them. Through her materializing montage of the words of tradition, whether the words of a priest or a butcher, she exposes their hypocrisy as well as their explosive power. This scene is a critique of the butcher's materialist discourse and the hypocritical discourse of the church, but it is performed through those discourses, the clash between materiality and spirituality that is found in the butcher's joke as well as in the Christian incarnation.

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Through the examples of Celan and Jelinek, I hope to have shown how literature is able both to expose the violence inherent in language and produce a counter-violent language. To reproduce the violence by which language cuts up the world and to cut up the established cuts of language. To perform the violence of symbolic castration and to take care of the "flesh" that castration produces. To perform "incarnation" both in Santner's sense (as another word for symbolic castration) and in Didi-Huberman's sense (as an alternative to symbolic representation). Celan's "Todesfuge" is about the shaping of a violent order, showing how this very "shaping" may also be the principle of artistic beauty, including the poem's own beauty. Thus, it deals with

"mythic violence" in Benjamin's sense and with "incarnation" in Santner's sense. "Engführung" (and Celan's later poetry in general) is rather a revolt against poetic beauty—as established by the tradition—but still has a violent beauty of its own, connected to the cutting-off of the word from representation. Here "incarnation" is at stake in Didi-Huberman's sense: as the becoming-material of the signifier. Elfriede Jelinek's prose is, on the one hand, a montage of oppressive language. On the other hand, through its singular practice of citation, pun, and syllepsis, it breaks down oppressive language or finds in the operations of oppressive language the means to oppose its oppression. In both cases, the writers seem at once to find violence and counter-violence in language. In both cases, the counter-violence implies special attention to the dimension of language that escapes representation, the sonorous and rhythmic qualities of words. The materialization of the signifier, or "incarnation," may designate the (violent) operation by which the subject is made to materialize the signifier (Santner, "Todesfuge," the oppressive discourses quoted in Jelinek) or the signifier itself becomes pure material, thereby cutting up representation (Didi-Huberman, "Engführung", Jelinek's sonorous language and puns).

Notes

1. Naja Marie Aidt, Line Knutzon, and Mette Moestrup, *Frit flet* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 2014), 189 (my trans.).
2. Aidt, Knutzon, and Moestrup, *Frit flet*, 87.
3. John Felstiner, *Paul Celan. Poet, Survivor, Jew* (London: Yale University Press, 1995), 24.
4. Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (London: Profile Books, 2008), 56.
5. Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," trans. Harry Zohn, in *Selected Writings*, Vol. 1, 1913–26, ed. Marcus Bullock & Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 249–51.

6. Karl Ove Knausgård, *Min kamp 6* (Oslo: Oktober, 2011), 411.
7. Felstiner, *Paul Celan*, 30.
8. Paul Celan, "Todesfuge," in *Die Gedichte. Kommentierte Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Barbara Wiedemann (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2003), 40–41.

John Felstiner's translation in *Paul Celan*, 31–32:

Deathfugue
Black milk of daybreak we drink it at evening
we drink it at midday and morning we drink it at night
we drink and we drink
we shovel a grave in the air there you won't lie too cramped
A man lives in the house he plays with his vipers he writes
he writes when it grows dark to Deutschland your golden hair
  Margareta
he writes it and steps out of doors and the stars are all
  sparkling, he whistles his hounds to come close
he whistles his Jews into rows has them shovel a grave in
  the ground
he commands us play up for the dance.

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night
we drink you at morning and midday we drink you at evening
we drink and we drink
A man lives in the house he plays with his vipers he writes
he writes when it grows dark to Deutschland your golden hair
  Margareta
Your ashen hair Shulamith we shovel a grave in the air where you
  won't lie too cramped

He shouts dig this earth deeper you lot there you others sing
  up and play
he grabs for the rod in his belt he swings it his eyes are so
  blue
jab your spades deeper you lot there you others play on for the
  dancing

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night
we drink you at midday and morning we drink you at evening
we drink and we drink
a man lives in the house your goldenes Haar Margarete
your aschenes Haar Shulamith he plays his vipers
He shouts play death more sweetly this Death is a master
       from Deutschland
he shouts scrape your strings darker you'll rise then as smoke
       to the sky
you'll have a grave then in the clouds there you won't lie too
       cramped

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night
we drink you at midday Death is a master aus Deutschland
we drink you at evening and morning we drink and we drink
this Death is ein Meister aus Deutschland his eye it is blue
he shoots you with shot made of lead shoots you level and true
a man lives in the house your goldenes Haar Margarete
he looses his hounds on us grants us a grave in the air
he plays with his vipers and daydreams der Tod ist ein Meister
      aus Deutschland

dein goldenes Haar Margarete
dein aschenes Haar Shulamith

9.   Felstiner, *Paul Celan*.
10.   Theodor W. Adorno, "Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft," in *Gesammelte Schriften 10:1*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1977), 30.
11.   Shoshana Felman & Dori Laub, *Testimony. Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 35.
12.   Paul Celan, "Engführung," in *Die Gedichte. Kommentierte Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Barbara Wiedemann (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2003), 114–115.
     Paul Celan, "The Straitening", in *Selected Poems*, ed. and trans. Michael Hamburger & Christopher Middleton (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972).

Came, came.
Came a word, came,
Came through the night,
Wanted to shine, wanted to shine
Ash.
Ash, ash.
Night.
Night-and-night. -Go
to the eye, the moist one

        *

    Go

       to the eye,

          he moist one

13. Knausgård, *Min kamp 6*, 432 (my trans.).

14. Žižek, *Violence*, 52.

15. Žižek, *Violence*, 56.

16. Eric Santner, *The Royal Remains: The People's Two Bodies and the Endgames of Sovereignty* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 139.

17. Santner, *The Royal Remains*, 122.

18. Santner, *The Royal Remains*, 95.

19. Georges Didi-Huberman, *Devant l'image* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1990), 220.

20. Elfriede Jelinek quoted in Sabine Treude and Günther Hopfgarten, "Ich meine alles ironisch. Ein Gespräch," *Sprache im technischen Zeitalter* 153 (April 2000): 24–25. ("With me [when my works are to be translated], the problem of language is considerable because I do not use the language as a vehicle to represent something, instead I develop my own language as a composition that is based very strongly on sound," my trans.)

21. Sigmund Freud, *The Joke and its Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. Joyce Crick (London: Penguin, 2002), 166–67.

22. Elfriede Jelinek, *Die Klavierspielerin*. Hamburg: Rowohlt, [1983] 2014, 114. "Carefully picking his words, he tries to console the K. ladies. He condoles with them, pickily choosing his words. Businessmen are well versed in the language of picking and

choosing," in Elfriede Jelinek, *The Piano Teacher*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (New York: Grove Press, 1988), 96.

23.   Jelinek, *Die Klavierspielerin*, 115. "The K. ladies spew out a torrent of innards. The expert finds that these innards are suitable, at best, for cat food." Jelinek, *The Piano Teacher*, 96.

24.   Jelinek, *Die Klavierspielerin*, 115. "[I]t is in his blood." Jelinek, *The Piano Teacher*, 96.

25.   Jelinek, *Die Klavierspielerin*, 115–116. "[E]xcept their own flesh and blood, and they have no intention of losing either." Jelinek, *The Piano Teacher*, 96.

26.   Benjamin Biebuyck and Gunther Martens, "Metonymia in memoriam. Die Figurlichkeit inszenierter Vergessens- und Erinnerungsdiskurse bei Grass und Jelinek," in *Literatur im Krebsgang: Totenbeschwörung und memoria in der deutschsprachigen Literatur nach 1989,* ed. Arne De Winde & Anke Gilleir (Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2008), 261.

27.   Jelinek, *Die Klavierspielerin*, 115. "Everything has an end, only a sausage has two ends." Jelinek, *The Piano Teacher*, 96.

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Killing the Novel

The Conceptualization of Violence in Vladimir Sorokin's *Roman*

Stehn Aztlan Mortensen

> – Or what, did the aesthetics in you rebel, so to speak?
> – More the ethics than the aesthetics.[1]
> *Roman,* Vladimir Sorokin

Contrary to its genteel image as cultured and therefore civilized, there is nothing proper about the Western literary canon. The tragedies of Sophocles and Shakespeare, epic poems like *The Iliad* and *The Tale of Igor's Campaign*, the futurist poetry of Marinetti, and the gory detective stories of Poe and Dostoevsky all converge around an aesthetics of violence. This blood-stained strain of literature also brings out the difficulty of juxtaposing ethics and aesthetics, or put differently: How, if at all, can we justify judging an artwork permeated by violence on its aesthetic merits alone?

The current chapter takes as its starting point the case of Russian postmodernist author Vladimir Sorokin (b. 1955) and

his conceptualist novel *Roman* from 1985–1989. How may a postmodernist approach to violence ultimately dismantle a text from within? Does this form of violence in literature disturb traditional mimetic models of fiction, and what, if any, is the relation between a work and its reader, given the polysemic nature of most literary communication?

Sorokin has repeatedly spoken out in favor of an aestheticism beyond the realm of ethics. His statements about works of art as being autonomous, self-contained systems of signs seem at first sight to make redundant most mimetic literary traditions aiming to reflect reality. However, we should also bear in mind that writers have historically operated under shifting mimetic paradigms: One could argue that the mimesis of realism was to portray the heart as a chunk of meat,[2] while modernism turned it into a formalist endeavor. Here, I wish to stress the postmodernist variation on mimesis, i.e., the simulacrum, which can be understood as a simulated hyperreality or truth in its own right, with no real basis in a prototype. While philosophers such as Gilles Deleuze and Jean Baudrillard have contributed to theories of the simulacrum, I would, in this context, like to turn our attention to Paul Ricœur, who developed a concept with similar potential. His theory of *productive reference*, sharing common ground with the simulacrum, is particularly well-tailored, I claim, to the logic at work in Sorokin's unconventional novel.

In his 1957 collection of essays *Literature and Evil,* George Bataille provides a theoretical grounding that lends itself to the recurring violence in Sorokin's writing, as well as his insistence on autonomy.[3] The suggestion that authors might well be culpable for the violence found in their writing does not mean, Bataille reminds us, that there are not persuasive reasons for engaging with literature that relishes in vice or partakes in Evil.[4] Sorokin's fiction is especially pertinent in this regard since his

writing is profuse with unbridled violence and meta-literary self-destruction.

Earlier in his career, when confronted with the extreme and, in the eyes of some, gratuitous violence of his fiction, Sorokin casually responded: "When people talk to me about the ethical aspect of an issue, asking how I can reproduce, say, pornographic or brutal literary elements, I don't understand such a question: for it's all just letters on a piece of paper."[5] No concessions, he claimed, should be made when giving way to fantasy: "I consider it sinful for writers to be afraid. One should be afraid for one's deeds, but literature is a person's fantasies, written down on paper, and nothing more."[6] This position lead him to conclude: "For me personally, literature is separate from life, my works are in no way tied to how I live, love, and believe."[7] He thus touted a sharp division between deeds and fantasies, as if literature had shed its mimetic reference to reality once and for all.[8]

One could counter that a depiction appears violent in virtue of its similitude to real-life violence, making its aesthetic forms phenomenologically dependent on real-world prototypes, and rendering absolute autonomy futile. Despite the metalinguistic posturing of Sorokin's fiction, his literary massacres must preserve its ties to reality in order to resonate with the reader at all, exposing *Roman* to an array of ethical considerations. Nevertheless, there are convincing alternative approaches to this common-sense logic. In what follows, I will discuss Ricœur's theory of productive reference, alongside Bataille's contention that literature's involvement with Evil is a mark of quality, offering alternative ways of rethinking questions of ethics, violence, and the preeminence of the mimetic paradigm. I will then turn to an analysis of Sorokin's novel itself, putting these theories into practice.

Bataille and the Evils of Literature

There are salient reasons for placing Sorokin in the category of so-called Evil writers. Author and critic Viktor Erofeev, for one, sees Sorokin as the "leading monster" of contemporary Russian literature: "Sorokin's texts resemble meat drained of blood and teaming [sic] with worms. The meal, prepared by a disappointed romantic revenging himself on the world ... provokes an emetic reflex on the reader's part, an aesthetic shock."[9] He places Sorokin in the tradition springing from Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal,* pertinent in this context since it was that collection of poetry that inspired Georges Bataille to write *Literature and Evil* (1973). Bataille there turns the question of ethics in literature on its head, asking us instead to appreciate the ethical value of fiction that has the audacity to deal with Evil.[10]

On this exclusive list of audacious authors, Bataille includes Brontë, Baudelaire, Blake, Sade, Proust, and Kafka, to name the most prominent. One can see why Sorokin belongs in their company, not just based on the range of themes his writing engages with, but also because of how he pits different discourses and literary styles against each other to create an aesthetic cataclysm—an outpouring of destructive forces on paper: "Yes, a while back in the novel *Roman*, I brought together two styles, like two monsters, so they would devour each other and release an energy of annihilation and of language being cleansed, something I enjoyed immensely."[11]

Bataille operates with two opposing forms of Evil.[12] The first is a necessity ensuring that life runs smoothly; like hunger and pain, it has a purpose and drives you forward. The other, which is what primarily interests Bataille, pertains to the transgression of social taboos; this could, for example, be literature that explores phenomena like murder, incest, genocide, and torture, but not merely as a sadistic enterprise. A disinterested form of Evil must

transcend the subject, which is why a wicked act of personal gratification can never be truly Evil:

> Only literature could reveal the process of breaking the law – without which the law would have no end – *independently of the necessity to create order ...* Literature, like the infringement of moral laws, is dangerous. Being inorganic, it is irresponsible. Nothing rests on it. It can say everything[.][13]

In other words, literary communication is uniquely equipped to deal with transgressions and let them play out freely. Literature lends itself to anguish, suffering, and vice to be engaging, and can do so, in Bataille's opinion, unrestrained by issues of responsibility. Anguish, he says, will usually lead to Evil, e.g., by making a bad ending inevitable—Sorokin's novel is a case in point—creating *a tension* in the reader that shields literature from descending into boredom. Writers like Sorokin are, in this sense, culpable of creating Evil (be it a conscious choice or not). We will revisit Bataille's claims toward the end after we delve into the analysis of Sorokin's novel, but first, the question of "reality" needs to be addressed.

Ricœur and Fiction as a Productive Reference to Unreality

Returning first to his claim to absolute autonomy, suffice it to say that Sorokin may have been hasty in giving writers *carte blanche*. To follow Bataille, one could say that interesting writers are culpable until proven innocent. Nevertheless, it is equally problematic to charge violent literature with being ethically reprehensible *per se*.[14] The tension, as noted earlier, between the autonomy of art and ethical standards for literature is largely dependent on the mimetic congruence between real-world violence

and its literary representation. Another way to conceptualize this issue would be to elevate art above moral authority: Dostoevsky's Rodion *Roman*ovich Raskolnikov burying his ax in the skull of the pawnbroker could simply be an aesthetic device and hence not very violent at all. As a fantasy, it would be nothing but a formal experiment, which neither exists nor answers to anything outside of itself.

A more relativistic position would state that the farther removed from reality the artwork appears to be, the less its author is answerable for its ethical shortcomings, making literature into a field of negotiation. This stance sees literature as based on real phenomena, which have been so heavily reconceptualized that they verge on becoming qualitatively new altogether. According to this logic, the extent to which a book may lay claim to novelty—abandoning the real world in a pact with the imaginary—would instead determine its degree of ethical autonomy.[15]

What makes Sorokin's *Roman* interesting is precisely its frail yet operative referentiality, which is key to its meta-discursive playfulness. Paul Ricœur, whose theory is heavily indebted to Russian formalism, can help clear the way for a theory of postmodernist literature that threatens to undo itself.

As groundbreaking formal experiments emerged with the advent of modernism, the formalists rose to the challenge, launching a more nuanced theory of aesthetic autonomy, tailored to the newly emerging literary trends. Roman Jakobson proposed that the poetic function of language comes to the fore when words acquire "a weight and value of their own instead of referring indifferently to reality."[16] He proposes the idea of the *split reference* as guaranteed by the poetic function found in almost all communication, one that becomes especially dominant in literature. A split reference is facilitated by the emergence of the double-sensed message (in, for example, phonic equivalence), ensuring a split of both the addresser and the addressee.

In *The Rule of Metaphor,* Ricœur criticizes the modern-day tendency to speak only of the destruction of reference.[17] He opts instead for Jacobson's split reference. In "The Function of Fiction in Shaping Reality" (1979), Ricœur expands on how fiction, due to its ambiguous qualities, not only reproduces reality, but shapes it through what he calls *productive reference.* Ricœur distinguishes between image as fiction and image as replica. A replica, like a photograph, has a model and is another mode of givenness of the same reality (absent and present). Fiction, on the other hand, is not based on any given model. Much like the simulacrum, it refers to no original; rather, it is an image of unreality: "In that sense, the non-existence of the object of the fiction is the true form of unreality. ... The phenomenology of fiction has its starting point in this lack of symmetry between the nothingness of unreality and the nothingness of absence."[18]

Instead of referring to reality by simply reproducing it, literature makes reference in a *productive* manner; it *re*describes and thus reinvents reality.[19] Fictions may, therefore, discover and invent, even increase and augment reality. When reading literature, we are offered depictions, which is not the same as having an image; these aesthetic forms are evoked and displayed by language, a sort of "seeing-as." As a reader, you can enter the domain of unreality, the *epoché* of the real, in order "to suspend meaning in the neutralized atmosphere" called fiction.[20] Productive reference, he claims, is the great paradox of fiction, where literature has the power to conjure up a world through an image that has no existing referent in reality.[21]

Sorokin's ideal writer shares common ground with Ricœur's theory: "The good writer distinguishes himself from a literary craftsman in that he creates his own 'worlds' and renders them habitable, while a graphomaniac simply uses 'other worlds.'"[22] He similarly seems to relish in the polysemy of the world and concept of "Roman," in the way it both breaks and forges a bond

with reality, simultaneously embodying and disavowing its allegorical and mimetic anchoring.

Sorokin and the Corporealized Text

The material and corporeal quality of literature is vital to Sorokin's conceptualist project, which subverts an ideology of aesthetics by turning it against itself. His *oeuvre,* at times, displays an obsession with the body. True to Baumgarten's motivation for coining the term, Sorokin emphasizes literature's aesthetic, i.e., sensing, qualities, favoring an aesthetic change of emphasis—from the purely symbolically mediated to the sensuous experience of art: "I am constantly working with the liminal zones where the body invades the text. ... I enjoy the moment when literature becomes corporeal and non-literary."[23]

Sorokin contends that the Russian classics contain an excess of spirit, while the body has been systematically redacted, a legacy he is working to rectify.[24] One example can be found in his maximalist novel *Blue Lard,* in which the bodies and styles of famous Russian authors are reproduced in the form of clones, among them Soviet writer Andrei Platonov. In *Blue Lard,* the clone of Platonov writes a story about an engineer who keeps the train moving by throwing, instead of coal, the chopped-up "corpses of the enemies of the revolution" into the furnace.[25] Similarly, in *The Blizzard,* the protagonist goes to bed with a miller's wife who is morbidly obese; as they make love, she keeps addressing him like her little baby.[26] True to Bataille's concept of transgressive art—which explores aesthetically that which is unmentionable, shocking, and offensive to a given society—Sorokin notoriously flirts with abhorrence and taboo when reinserting the body, often excessively, into Russian literature. He reminds us of the hypersexualized, incestuous, smelly, violent,

and brutalized bodies that this tradition, in his mind, has attempted to repress. In its quest for the divine, he seems to imply that the body has somehow been lost, be it in the Christian search for God in the image of man, or in the Soviet veneration of the workers' steel-like bodies striving to ensure the advent of true Communism. Dostoevsky's and Gorky's heroes, therefore, in his eyes fall short of being even remotely realistic.

In conceptualizing the body both in and of the text, Sorokin underscores the materiality of the novel itself. Words can here be understood as intrinsically dead (much like how Bataille sees literature as inherently "inorganic"), i.e., lacking a life and will of their own. As a result, Sorokin conjures up an ontological paradox when writing books on the destruction of books, what one might call a form of literary necromancy—writing in a manner that defiantly saturates the lifeless text with pulsating bodies. If the text constitutes pure inertia, a collection of inanimate words, the literary tradition, in turn, can be pictured as a massive graveyard: As soon as something has been written or read, the moment it was purportedly meant to capture has already faded into the past.[27] Life in the present can, thus, never be encapsulated in writing. A literary narrative becomes something close to a post-mortem portrait. In his writing, Sorokin nevertheless insists on making renewed attempts at corporealizing the text, continually endowing it with a veneer of vitality, as a counterweight to the inflation of spirituality that he finds prevalent in the Russian classics.

Roman and the Meta-Literary Aesthetics of Self-Destruction

Particularly striking is how Sorokin's authorship repeatedly stages its own destruction, as it does in *Manaraga,* which features a chef specializing in *haute cuisine* grilling using rare first

edition books instead of charcoal.[28] No novel pushes this question of the literary body further than *Roman* (1994), containing a split reference already in the title. It translates either as *A Novel, A Romance* or *Roman* (a first name).[29] The protagonist, Roman, returns to his native village after his studies in the big city. Upon discovering that his childhood sweetheart has found someone else, he instead marries a certain Tatiana. Then the story takes a grim turn. The last hundred pages or so consist of undiluted violence, where the couple murders the entire town with an ax. Roman then kills his bride before self-destructing in the very last sentence: "*Roman umer*"—"Roman/the romance/the novel is dead." The novel is thus sacrificed once and for all in an act of excessive violence. Like the advent of nihilism, *Roman* marks a point of no return. There is no way back to valuing the novel as genre according to the values of the past.

But what or who is actually being slain in this narrative? The characters themselves are killed, while conceptually, the novel also exerts a form of meta-violence on itself, enacting the ritualistic killing of what Henry James dubbed the monstrous nineteenth-century Russian novel, as Nariman Skakov points out.[30] The book starts with upward of 300 pages reminiscent of classical Russian novelistic prose, in the tradition of Turgenev, Tolstoy, and Dostoevsky. One could easily read *Roman* as a proclamation of literary autonomy: a staging of "the death of the novel" in a metaphorical act of violence where the book, as a genre, commits suicide and self-destructs.

On the very first page, hyperdiegetically, in the frame narrative, we are confronted with a subtle prolepsis: "Nothing in the world is more wonderful than an overgrown cemetery on the edge of a small village."[31] The novel and all the people it purports to embody are dead and buried before the main story even begins. The implicit author thereby accentuates the novel's inherent thematic friction between living and dead. The graveyard

is bustling with life, plants are clinging to the wooden crosses marking the graves, the birds are singing, the bees buzzing. Yet, much like the opening scene of David Lynch's *Blue Velvet,* death is lurking underneath the grass in the form of bones, ashes, and decaying bodies. The wooden cross reads ROMAN, the name of the deceased. The novel, along with its protagonist and his fateful romance, is in other words over before it ever begins, pronounced dead from the very outset.

Around halfway through the novel, Roman ends up in a skirmish in the woods with a wolf that he ultimately slays to save a moose calf. Both animals end up dead, Roman wounded. The incident leads to an exchange with his mentor, Kliugin, the village doctor who presses Roman as to why he interfered in the first place: Why not just let nature run its course? They are, after all, just animals, bound to eat one another, die, decay, and become new grass for yet another creature to feed on.[32] Kliugin dismisses Roman's Kantian argument claiming that every human is endowed with "moral autonomy," "virtue," and "compassion,"[33] supposedly having spurred him to save the moose calf from the wolf. He asks Roman to imagine what would happen if all laws were suddenly to be suspended: "[R]ivers of blood would flood the earth."[34]

Human culture (everything from the arts to great armies and state institutions), says Kliugin, has but one main function: to quell human bloodthirst. "– Bach, Beethoven, Raphael—it's all camouflage, a cap under which *libido, tanatos,* the thirst for murder is seething."[35] This passage not only foreshadows the violent events to come; in fact, Roman and Tatiana's whole relationship is borne out of this supposedly merciful killing. She is tasked with nursing his wounds, whereupon they fall in love, marry, and go on their honeymoon killing spree. The discussion also raises the question of the etiology of human violence, whether it is a product of Freudian drives, as Kliugin suggests, or rather, as

Roman would have it, a willed act contemplated by our rational faculties.[36] The novel leaves the issue unresolved, whereas the plot becomes increasingly preoccupied with violence and bloodshed.

This narrative arch reaches its climax in the nuptial massacre, where Roman and Tatiana put Kliugin's wedding presents to good use: a wooden bell, to Tatiana's liking, and an ax, wrapped in silk for Roman, engraved with the words: "Once raised—let it fall!"[37] The newlyweds take the inscription literally. With what begins as a playful game, their rampage soon progresses into a full-blown purge, reenacting a traumatic history of Russian bloodshed, e.g., under Ivan the Terrible and Stalin.[38] Wherever they go, she first signals with her bell, whereupon he runs amuck with his ax. After one family has been purged, she rings the bell again, he takes her hand, and they walk over to the next house. Together they take the lives of the entire village population, over 200 people in total, listing the names of each murdered victim.[39]

As the nuptial bloodshed progresses, Sorokin's style of writing shifts significantly, suddenly changing registers from the lively and witty prose of realism—which at times seems almost eerily predictable in its distillation of the Russian novelistic tradition—to an obsessional, mechanical, and indefatigably repetitive description of the countless murders. Every death is described in meticulous detail as they move from house to house, searching out every member of the household hiding on the property, begging for their lives, and crying out in pain as he kills them off after she rings the bell. The monotonous recounting of the murders is told in a disengaged voice, as if from the perspective of a morally disinterested bystander:

> Tatiana began ringing the little bell ... Roman hit Maria Tver-dokhlebova in the back with his ax. Maria Tverdokhlebova fell on the hay and began to scream. Roman struck Maria Tverdokh-lebova on the head with his ax. Maria Tverdokhlebova screamed.

> Roman hit Maria Tverdokhlebova on the head with his ax. Maria Tverdokhlebova stopped screaming. Roman hit Maria Tverdokhlebova on the head with his ax. Maria Tverdokhlebova didn't move. Roman wiped the ax with hay and walked over to the edge of the hayloft. Anna Tverdokhlebova began to groan. Roman walked over to Anna Tverdokhlebova. Anna Tverdokhlebova groaned and moved. Roman struck Anna Tverdokhlebova with his ax. Anna Tverdokhlebova stopped moving and groaning. Roman wiped the ax with hay and walked over to the edge of the hayloft.[40]

After this sudden shift in style, the narrative gradually transforms into a ritualistic enumeration of his every move, growing increasingly repetitive and poetic, becoming a kind of rhythmic, spasmodic incantation or curse, calling for the novel's demise. Sorokin's death chant could be read as the 'kenotic' emptying of the novel's semantic potential through the incessant repetition of the word "Roman" at the beginning of every sentence,[41] to the point where the term ceases to function as a genre, a romance, or even a name, draining it of referential value.

Instead, the novel, at this point, plays more on poetic sound patterns by the repetition of certain words *ad absurdum*: "Roman laughed. Roman touched. Roman bent. Roman touched. Roman groaned. Roman shook. Roman sucked. Roman shook. Roman pounded. Roman screamed. Roman crawled. Roman stopped."[42] The painstakingly long and elaborate killing of the realist and romantic novel in this way signals the poetization of prosaic language. The poetic insistence of the murderous chant intensifies toward the end, a deconstructive progression making for increasingly simple sentences; Roman dismembering the bodies of his victims coincides with Sorokin deconstructing the novel to the point where it can no longer sustain itself and ultimately unravels.

The sentences get shorter and shorter, while the obscene violence only builds in intensity. There is an explosive dynamic at work here, in which the narrative voice ceases to embody subjectivity, instead becoming a self-sufficient, automatic, and meaningless blabbering as Roman's engraved ax slashes the novel into ever tinier fragments. Fragments from foregoing sentences are repeated, taking one element and bringing it into the next sentence, conferring an oddly poetic quality to the otherwise matter-of-fact narration.

At the same time, the ethical qualms and neurotic ruminations of Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov are nowhere to be found. Roman eventually gathers the innards of their victims on the church floor and holds a black mass with blood and various body parts.[43] He then turns on Tatiana, whom he kills and cuts into pieces, using her body parts as props in an unholy church service while laughing, crying out, and touching himself ecstatically, before he finally devours the various dismembered body parts and kills himself.

Conceptually, the end result pertains to several meta-literary levels. Some critics have noted how *Roman* attempts to bore and exhaust the reader with endless amounts of useless information and trite clichés of Russian life, described in meticulous and overwhelming detail,[44] without actually propelling the plot forward. I would argue that Sorokin is, in fact, exerting violence on the reader, draining her of energy, before, toward the end, all the pent-up energy is released. The reader is ambushed, caught unawares, and then overwhelmed by a deluge of action as the killing spree ensues. This swift transition of styles does not, however, remedy a new kind of boredom, as the reader is now instead exhausted by the profusion of repetitive violence. Sorokin details the indefatigable violence exerted by Roman and Tatiana to the point where the repetitive acts of violence ironically have the exact same effect as the absence of plot-driven action had earlier:

It fatigues and exhausts the reader, leaving her exasperated. On a meta-literary level, true to his conceptualist leanings, Sorokin's book is violent from beginning to end, armed with the weapons of severe boredom and a sharp ax.

This meta-textual move to some extent challenges Bataille's claims about boredom being anathema to "evil" literature; as Sorokin clearly demonstrates, it is entirely possible to combine the two through the violent mistreatment of one's readers. This aesthetics of violence aimed at the reader, likewise, depends on a productive reference as detailed by Ricœur: The violence enacted in the plot could be read as a metaphor for the literary assault aimed at the reader.

Unlike Dostoevsky's nihilist murderer who finds God in a Siberian prison camp, there is no redemption to be had for Roman nor the novel after the horrific bloodbath, despite the fact that Roman is 33, the same age as Jesus at the time of his crucifixion. *Roman* leaves nothing behind but dead bodies, broken promises of everlasting love, and a genre that has expired once and for all: Skakov understands *Roman* as a bloody ritual ensuring the death of the novel through an act of exorcism, a literary attempt at laying the Russian realist novel to rest.[45,46] I would like to take this reading a step further: Sorokin, one could argue, depicts incarnation through a split reference. By highlighting the body in the simultaneous demise of Roman, a romance gone awry, and the death of the novel in a Christological death rite (the novel's *kenosis*), Sorokin deconstructs not only the spirit of the novel genre, as well as Roman's body. *Roman* becomes the *carnalization*—to use a term by Mark Lipovetsky—of an ontological impossibility, making lifeless literature appear to us in flesh and blood, only to have this undead monstrosity commit suicide in the most violent fashion imaginable.[47]

Roman hence underscores its affinity with the unreal world. It creates a narrative space where the ambiguity inherent in the

poetic function takes center stage. This productive, poetic reference, weakening its ties to reality and strengthening its self-reflexive aesthetics, complicates any argument for ethical responsibility. Sorokin may, therefore, not have been entirely wrong in claiming that the fantasy of fiction is more or less detached from life. It could be that the ambivalence itself, i.e., the split reference, is what ultimately dies in Sorokin's *Roman*. In light of this reading, how does *Roman* comport with Bataille's literary visions?

The Complicit Reader

Bataille calls *Literature and Evil* a warning. It is essential, he claims, that we confront the danger inherent in all literature, as it enables us to see the human perspective in all its overwhelming totality.[48] It can therefore be argued that transgression, the instance when the human confronts and taps into her darkest desires, is ostensibly a strategy of preservation, a way to reassert one's borders.[49] Literature, through its transgressions, forces us to face human imagination at its most violent. It is literature that makes it possible to perceive the worst in us and learn how to overcome it. It ultimately lets us face our fears and deal with the horrors within. While reading, "[t]he isolated being *loses himself* in something other than himself. What the 'other thing' represents is of no importance. It is a reality that transcends the common limitations. So unlimited is it that it is not even a thing: it is *nothing*."[50] Transgression is ironically also a moment of reckoning that allows man to reflect on his moral position, thereby reasserting his sense of moral sensibility.

At the same time, there are legitimate questions as to whether Sorokin's novel can rebuild a moral base at all. We certainly have the tension of two styles clashing, creating an awareness of the transgression, which is key to the dynamics Bataille lays out.

However, the difference between the inside and outside of the two clashing styles seems to dissolve as the novel unravels, to the point where violence no longer entails breaking the law. Instead, it begins to assert itself as the only operational principle, a destructive force that tears down all existing structures, without the prospect of reconstruction, akin to a nihilistic disintegration where "the highest values devalue themselves."[51] If that border is erased, Sorokin may perhaps be entering into a new genre, a dimension reminiscent of splatter movies: a place that knows no bounds, where violence is the rule rather than a transgression.

It nevertheless seems clear that Sorokin's *Roman* represents a journey into nothingness, a form of literature that unravels its very fabric and thereby undoes the basis of its own existence. It offers a form of literary communication which, according to Bataille, suspends the position of both reader and writer, who lose themselves in fascination, a form of Evil that Bataille calls *the silence of the will*: "If the contrary of will is fascination, if fascination is the destruction of will, to condemn behavior regulated by fascination on moral ground may be the only way of really liberating it from the will." Literature that puts Evil front and center, which Sorokin's *Roman* undoubtedly does, is not by default bereft of morality; rather, "it demands a 'hypermorality'."[52] That is why we must confront Evil in literature, for instance, in the guise of violence: "A rigorous morality results from complicity in the knowledge of Evil."[53] Fiction can, thus, be consigned an almost cathartic effect, fine-tuning the reader's moral sensibilities, beyond the bounds of teleological utility. Not entirely different from Aristotelian *pathos*, the Evil identified by Bataille in Kafka or Brontë, which I think can be re-found in Sorokin today, could be seen as a form of purification through putrefaction: "in the excessive violence of their work, Evil attains a form of purity."[54]

Both reader and writer are trapped in this ethical predicament. The writer is compelled to enter into the sphere of violence

so as to facilitate this purification. Likewise, the reader consents to embark on a journey into the heart of darkness, through the very act of reading, but at the price of witnessing and partaking in the transgression of unspeakable taboos. This is the devil's bargain that Sorokin's literature has to offer. As a result, an added effect is that the reader becomes almost numb and unresponsive to depictions of violence. The ethical outcome of normalizing violence and brutality is that Sorokin's novel presupposes a degree of self-debasement, a gesture saying: "Look what I was able to do to you. Stripping you of compassion and humanity was far easier than you would ever have thought."

Roman inevitably demands an act of transgression, a complicity on the part of the reader, who is compromised by the very act of reading the overt violence played out on every page. This is what sets Sorokin's *Roman* so clearly apart from its comparable predecessors: Whereas Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov hypnotizes the reader with his almost manic monologues to the point of justifying murder, Roman, conversely, through his monotony, bores the implicit reader and leaves the reader utterly disengaged, insidiously producing numbness and indifference in the face of violence. The mere act of someone willingly agreeing to being exposed, over such a sustained period of time, to this literary massacre, bereft of any counter-discourse, is what ultimately dulls the reader's sensibilities, potentially turning compassion into cruelty, horror into heartlessness.

Having discussed the ethical ramifications of violence in fiction, we can posit that literature, as an image of unreality, has the unique ability to spur a productive reimagining of the world, a feature that short-circuits calls for authorial responsibility. Sorokin's novel *Roman* demonstrates how literary violence may be exerted on several levels simultaneously— dethroning hegemonic discourses through a number of triggering motifs and themes, both meta-linguistically and conceptually. He thus

stages the embodiment and deconstruction of the novel both as genre and love story, implicitly violating and problematizing his own writing at every turn, turning the novel against itself. This gesture, aligning his literature with what Bataille sees as Evil, may enable the reader face her innermost horrors. The question is not whether violent fiction is immoral *per se,* but whether it can provide a narrative and linguistic space for the ethically dubious. This fascination with literature springs, perhaps, from an enticingly lifelike image of unreality, unlocking both the most violent and benevolent of all impulses—the imagination.

Notes

1. — Или что, в вас эстетика, так сказать, восстала? — Скорее этика, чем эстетика. [All translations, unless otherwise stated, are my own.]

2. An image I borrow from the influential Russian critic, Vissarion Belinsky, who helped propel writers such as Gogol and Dostoevsky into the public limelight. Vissarion Belinskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii: Tom X, Stat'i i retsenzii 1846–1848* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo akademicheskii nauk SSSR, 1956), 26.

3. Due to the scope of this chapter, my discussion does not encompass the empirical effects violence in literature may have on its readers, nor do I go into the question of censorship, such as the contentious debate on trigger warnings.

4. "Evil" with a capital letter may run the risk of ontologizing the concept, but I have chosen to adhere to Bataille's rendering of "le Mal." Bataille defines Evil as the transgression of taboos and social laws; it transcends all subjective concerns, as opposed to bad deeds committed for personal gain.

5. Когда мне говорят об этической стороне дела: мол, как можно воспроизводить, скажем, элементы порно- или жесткой литературы, то мне непонятен такой вопрос: ведь все это лишь буквы на бумаге. Dmitrii Shamanskii, "Absurd (O tvorchestve Vladimira Sorokina)," *Ofitsial'nyi sait Vladimira*

Sorokina, February, 2002, http://www.srkn.ru/criticism/sha-mansky.shtml.

6. — Я считаю, что писателю грешно бояться. Бояться нужно за поступки, а литература – это фантазии человека, написанные на бумаге, и не более того. Andrei Zaitsev, "Vladimir Sorokin ne khochet byt' prorokom, kak Lev Tolstoy," *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, August 2, 2003, http://www.ng.ru/ng_reli-gii/2003-07-02/6_sorokin.html.

7. — Лично для меня литература отделена от жизни, мои произведения никак не связаны с тем, как я живу, люблю и верю. Zaitsev, "Vladimir Sorokin."

8. I use the Greek term "fantasy" (*phantasia*) and the Latin "imagi-nation" (*imaginatio*) interchangeably. In Plato's *Sophist, phantasia* is presented as an opinion or affect in relation to an impression (i.e., a sensing experience), while Aristotle in *De Anima* III defi-nes it as that which facilitates that an image (appearance) appears to us. Significantly, Ricœur wishes to replace this mimetic para-digm by seeing imagination as reliant on *language* as opposed to perception. Plato, *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, vol. xii, trans. Harold North Fowler (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1921), 264a–d. Aristotle, *De Anima*, trans. Hugh Lawson-Tancred (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1986), 428a.

9. Viktor Erofeev, *The Penguin Book of New Russian Writing: Rus-sia's* Fleur de Mal, (New York: Penguin, 1996), 28.

10. Bataille's theory was also colored by his Catholicism, e.g., the con-cept of transgression springing from ideas of sinfulness, as well as his anthropocentric Christian belief that animality is the root of human taboos since it purportedly threatens our humanity. Transgression is in this sense a means of conservation, a way of engaging our animal drives, but in a manner where we ultimately renounce our excessive otherness in order to reassert the contours of our humanity. Rebecca Roberts-Hughes, "Transgression and Conservation: Rereading George Bataille," *Journal for Cultural Research* 21, no. 2 (2016): 166.

11. — Да, когда-то в романе Роман я столкнул два стиля, как два чудовища, дабы они пожрали друг друга и выделилась та самая энергия аннигиляции и очищения языка, доставившая мне колоссальное удовольствие. Vladimir

Sorokin, "Mea culpa?," *Nezavisimaia gazeta, April* 14, 2005, http://www.ng.ru/ng_exlibris/2005-04-14/5_culpa.html.

12. "Georges Bataille à propos de son livre La littérature et le mal," May 21, 1958, video, https://www.ina.fr/video/I00016133/georges-batail-le-a-propos-de-son-livre-la-litterature-et-le-mal-video.html.

13. George Bataille, *Literature and Evil*, trans. Alastair Hamilton (New York: Unizen Books, 1979), 12.

14. Literary works may serve different ends, such as laying bare the horrors of violence or evoking pity, like Aristotle's cathartic view on the function of tragedy.

15. It would also be problematic to ascribe ethical responsibilities to a work of art since the text is not an agent, and imbuing it with responsibility would not change it. The text can only be perceived differently. A purely pragmatist approach, like that of Charles Peirce, on the other hand, frames the question very differently, instead seeing the process of interpretation as an interaction between signs, i.e., an open-ended, holistic exchange, where, rather than literature copying the world around, the world could be thought to consist of tropes similar to those found in literature. Terrance King, "Mimesis, Binary Opposition and Peirce's Triadic Realism" in *Mimesis in Contemporary Theory: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, vol 2 (1991): 66.

16. The Russian formalists were charged with having a flimsy relation to mimetic art in their writings, in which they allegedly dismissed life altogether. Jakobson defended the approach, arguing not for the autonomy of art *per se*—literature is, he admits, "an integral part of the social structure"—but by insisting on the autonomy of the aesthetic function, in literary terms, the literariness/poeticity of writing *sui generis*, where poetic language, i.e., the message for its own sake, comes to dominate. Roman Jakobson, "What is Poetry?" in *Semiotics of Art: Prague School Contributions*, ed. Ladislav Matejka and Irwin R. Titunik (Cambridge MA & London: MIT Press, 1976).

17. Paul Ricœur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, trans. Robert Czerny, Kathleen McLaughlin and John Costello (London & New York: Routledge, 2004), 265.

18. Paul Ricœur, "The Function of Fiction in Shaping Reality," in *Man and World* 12, no. 2 (1979): 125–126.

19.   Ricœur makes a shift from perception to language, offering a semantic theory of the imagination. When the imagination is put to work new meanings emerge in language, which in turn produce new images. The labor involved in writing, i.e., telling and construing a story, is to him a vital prerequisite for this process to happen, in contrast to Bataille, who considers literature to be the antithesis of work.

20.   Ricœur, "The Function …," 133–134. *Epoché* is here the suspension of judgment, or, in Husserlian terms, the bracketing of reality. Ricœur draws on Jean-Paul Sartre's phenomenological study *L'imaginaire* (1940), where the imagination is not that which makes mimetic reconfiguration possible, as Plato and Aristotle would have it, but rather an "irreal" space for the spontaneous, creative, non-thetic imaging of objects. Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Imaginary: A Phenomenological Psychology of the Imagination*, trans. Jonathan Webber (London & New York: Routledge, 2004), 149.

21.   Ironically, Plato's *Sophist,* in proving that untruth can indeed be uttered, relies on the premise that non-being exists; yet it is not the opposite of being, merely different from it. On the same basis, Ricœur is able to posit a theory where an image of non-being/unreality (i.e., fiction) may intervene in reality and even change or augment it. Plato, *In Twelve …*, 237a.

22.   — Хороший писатель отличается от литературного ремесленника тем, что он создает собственные «миры» и их обживает, графоман же пользуется «чужими мирами». Zaitsev, "Vladimir Sorokin."

23.   Sorokin 1996, quoted in Mark Lipovetsky 2013, "Fleshing/Flashing …," 27.

24.   "In Russian literature, there's generally been very little body. Spirituality has been in excess. When one reads Dostoevsky, it's impossible to feel the characters' bodies: how Prince Myshkin was built, what Nastasia Filippovna's bust looked like. I very much wanted to fill Russian literature with corporeality: the smell of sweat, muscles moving, body fluids, sperm, shit. As Artaud once said, 'where you can smell shit, there you can smell life'." Sorokin and Semenova 2004, 4 quoted in Lipovetsky, "Fleshing/Flashing Discourse," 26.

25. трупы врагов революции. Vladimir Sorokin, *Goluboe salo* (Moscow: Ad Marginem, 2002), 59.

26. Vladimir Sorokin, *The Blizzard*, trans. Jamey Gambrell (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), 62.

27. See Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 128.

28. Vladimir Sorokin, *Manaraga* (Moscow: Izdateslstvo Corpus, 2017).

29. The book is dated 1985–89.

30. Nariman Skakov, "Word/Discourse in *Roman*," in *Vladimir Sorokin's Languages,* ed. Tine Roesen and Dirk Uffelmann (Bergen, Dept. of Foreign Languages: Slavica Bergensia, 2013), 51.

31. Нет на свете ничего прекрасней заросшего русского кладбища на краю небольшой деревни Vladimir Sorokin, *Roman* (Moscow: Tri kita, 1994), 3.

32. Sorokin, *Roman*, 175–179.

33. автономная мораль … добродетель … сострадание. This conception of human morality also corresponds to Sorokin's perception of traditional Russian literature.

34. … реки крови затопят землю.

35. Бах, Бетховен, Рафаэль, — все это ширмы, крышки, под которыми клокочет libido, tanatos, жажда убийства. [Grammatical and orthographic irregularities in this quote have been retained in the English translation.]

36. Dirk Uffelmann perceptively reads Kliugin's position as a typical example of Ivan Turgenev's distinction between will and representation, seeing it as reminiscent of Schopenhauer, noting also that Sorokin has called *Roman* a novel "written in a quasi-Turgenevian language." Dirk Uffelmann, *Vladimir Sorokin's Discourses: A Companion* (Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2020), 62–63.

37. "Замахнулся – руби!" Sorokin, *Roman*, 321. Uffelmann, in opposition to what he dubs "plot-fixated studies," sees this slogan as a key textual trigger of violence, along with the "performative twists that motivate outbursts of violence, desecration or indecency in the early Sorokin." Uffelmann, *Vladimir Sorokin's Discourses*, 70.

38. Ellen Rutten proposes a related understanding of Sorokin's multimedia art, interpreting it as a catalyzing force for working

through Russia's collective Soviet trauma. See Ellen Rutten "Art as Therapy. Sorokin's Strifle with the Soviet Trauma across Media," in *Russian Literature* 55, no. 4 (2009). Meanwhile, Mark Lipovetsky, in his reading of violence in the works of Daniil Kharms, takes issue with interpreting the literary-performative violence in Kharms as an allegory of Stalinist terror, seeing this reading as reductive. Lipovetsky suggests that all these depictions of violence instead amount to an allegory of the act of creating art, of writing itself. Kharms's work tends to deconstruct itself and disappear into nothing, forever erasing whatever his texts were initially meant to represent. A similar dynamic seems to be at work in *Roman*, where Sorokin conceptually undermines his own work to the point where it ceases to function, exhausting the novel and highlighting the impossibility of writing novels altogether. Mark Lipovetsky, "A Substitute for Writing: Representation of Violence in *Incide*nts by Daniil Kharms," in *Times of Trouble: Violence in Russian Literature and Culture*, ed. Marcus Levitt and Tatyana Novikov (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2007).

39. In some editions of the book, Sorokin tagged on a conceptualist art work of sorts in the form of a list or index at the end containing the names of all his victims. Skakov makes a link to Ivan the Terrible's infamous mourning list, containing names of victims whose souls needed to be prayed for in the wake of the mandated massacres. Skakov, "Word/Discourse in *Roman*," 65.

40. Татьяна затрясла колокольчиком ... Роман ударил Марию Твердохлебову топором по спине. Мария Твердохлебова упала на сено и закричала. Роман ударил Марию Твердохлебову топором по голове. Мария Твердохлебова кричала. Роман ударил Марию Твердохлебову топором по голове. Мария Твердохлебова перестала кричать. Роман ударил Марию Твердохлебову топором по голове. Мария Твердохлебова не двигалась. Роман вытер топором сеном и подошел к краю сеновала. Анна Твердохлебова застонала. Роман подошел к Анне Твердохлебовой. Анна Твердохлебова стонала и двигалась. Роман ударил Анну Твердохлебову топором по голове. Анна Твердохлебова перестала двигаться и стонать. Роман вытер топором сеном и подошел к краю сеновала. Sorokin, *Roman*, 358–359.

41. In the current case, the metaphorical *kenosis* in question refers to the emptying out of the god-like stature of the novel in Russian literature. For a comprehensive study of this trope in modern and contemporary Russian literature, where the trope more directly concerns the humiliated Christ figure, see Dirk Uffelmann, *Der erniedrigte Christus. Metaphern und Metonymien in der russischen Kultur und Literatur* (Köln: Böhlau, 2010).

42. Роман засмеялся. Роман коснулся. Роман наклонил. Роман потрогал. Роман застонал. Роман качнул. Роман обсосал. Роман качнул. Роман стукнул. Роман вскрикнул. Роман пополз. Роман остановился. Sorokin *Roman*, 396.

43. The black mass or sabbath motif is also important to Bataille's understanding of Evil in literature, especially in his reading of Michelet.

44. Lev Danilkin, "Modelirovanie diskursa (po romanu Vladimira Sorokina Roman)" in *Literaturovedenie XXI veka. Analiz teksta: metod i rezul'tat, edited by Olga M. Goncharova* (St. Petersburg: Rossiisky gosudarstvennyi pedagogichesky universitet imeni A.I. Gertsena, 1996), 155–59; Skakov, "Word/Discourse in *Roman*"; Uffelmann, *Vladimir Sorokin's Discourses,* 58–71.

45. Skakov, "Word/Discourse in *Roman*," 49.

46. Sorokin's attempt to bury the novel forever and wipe the slate clean to pave the way for new aesthetic endeavors in the future is *not* to say that his attempt has been unequivocally successful. However, in his own case, it has definitely been the case, given that he has struggled to write long cohesive novels after *Blue Lard*.

47. Lipovetsky, "Fleshing/Flashing …," 27.

48. Bataille's crudely anthropocentric view of animality concerning the human at the basis of this theory is another point of contention that should be further questioned before taking his analysis at face value: "What we are, hence all that we are, would be involved in the decision that sets us against the vague freedom of sexual contacts, against the natural and undefined life of 'beasts'." George Bataille, *The History of Eroticism: The Accursed Share volumes II–III*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 31.

49. Roberts-Hughes, "Transgression and Conservation."

50. Bataille, *Literature and Evil*, 13.

51.   Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. by Walter Kaufman and Reginald John Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), §2.
52.   Bataille, *Literature and Evil*, 41.
53.   Bataille, *Literature and Evil*, 2.
54   Bataille, *Literature and Evil*, 61.

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Kafka's Human Zoo

Colonialism, Resentment, and Violence in Kafka's "A Report to an Academy" and "In the Penal Colony"

Torgeir Skorgen

In recent Kafka scholarship, there has been a tendency to regard the more or less satiric depictions of racism, anti-Semitism, and colonial violence in Kafka's writings as mere allegories on eternal questions, such as guilt, punishment, truth, God, and the Law. This chapter suggests a non-allegorical reading (de-allegorization) of colonialism, anti-Semitism, and assimilation in Kafka's short stories "A Report to an Academy" and "In the Penal Colony," focusing on the questions of resentment and violence. In Kafka's fiction, violence sometimes runs out of nature itself, but more often, it is a product of acculturation processes, for

instance, in terms of colonialism, assimilation, or media technologies, in most cases involving a displacement of the borders of humanity. In her major work *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt points at the intersections between colonial and anti-Semitic violence and, in some early writings, at the pariah/parvenu dilemma of the assimilated European Jews. While the Jewish pariah recognizes his or her status as an outcast in the Christian society, the Jewish parvenu (startup) tries to advance in the majority culture, only accepted as an exception from the ani-Semite rule, at the cost of resentment in the sense of suppressed anger and feelings of inferiority, victimization, and revengefulness. Of course, these are not the only possible modes of acculturation, neither in real life nor in Kafka's fiction. In the two mentioned short stories, two forms of mimicry—mimicking behavior—are depicted as alternative strategies of acculturation. In all cases, however, the characters are dependent on the spectator's response to and recognition or non-recognition of their performance, be it as a humanized ape at a Human Zoo or as a defender of the old commander of a penal colony and his marvelous execution device. In both cases, lack of recognition leads to resentment. Hence, this article will investigate different ways in which Kafka's fiction explores such mechanisms of domination, hegemony, violence, and resentment, advocating a partial de-allegorization of colonialism and colonial violence in Kafka's fiction.

Mimicry and Resentment in Kafka's Human Menageries

During the last decade, some attention has been paid to the motif of the Hagenbeck Zoo, which Kafka visited in Prague in 1911, focusing on Hagenbeck's method of concealing the violence

used in the process of taming the exotic animals. However, I think there is much more to be said about the practices of this zoo and its impact on Kafka's anthropology and concepts of colonialism, racism, writing, and violence.

The zookeeper Hagenbeck was not only famous for his innovative way of reconstructing the natural habitats of the animals in terms of artificial cliffs or deserts. He also developed a new practice of displaying so-called exotic humans in their natural environments. Starting with Norwegian Samis and reindeers, Hagenbeck later exhibited Native Americans, Indians, and Africans from the German colonies, which Germany had to surrender in 1918. At the outbreak of World War II, however, the heydays of Hagenbeck's and other so-called human zoos had come to an end.[1] At their zenith, they attracted millions of spectators and played a significant role in mediating and distributing the messages of colonialism, Darwinist evolution theories, and racial pseudo-science to a broader European audience.

As several scholars, like Marthe Robert and Naama Harel, have pointed out, Kafka normally uses anonymity to give his fictions their transcendent character.[2] Hence, the traveler, the officer, the prisoner, and the penal colony itself are mentioned without any further significant information that could help the reader identify the persons or places. In "A Report to an Academy," however, the reader is exposed to referential information like the name of the Hagenbeck Zoo, which captivated and abducted the chimpanzee Red Peter (Rotpeter) from his home country the Gold Coast. Red Peter tells that he was brought to Hamburg, where the Hagenbeck Tierpark was situated (although sometimes making tours to cities like Prague or Paris), after his captivation and deportation to Europe. Hence, this writing style could be interpreted as a slightly different poetics than the more or less allegorical writing style that is attributed to many other Kafka texts.

This short story was first published in 1917, as one of three "Tiergeschichten" ("animal stories") in Martin Buber's journal *Der Jude*. In his correspondence with his editor, Kafka (who later rejected Max Brod's suggestion that he should follow Buber as the new editor of the journal) insisted on the term "animal stories" (*Tiergeschichten*) instead of the suggested term "parables."[3] In Kafka's "A Report to an Academy" the humanized chimpanzee Red Peter explains to a scientific academy how he was first captured in the Gold Coast, shipped to Europe, and then raised and disciplined to become a human. During his capture, Red Peter is shot twice and hit in the cheek, leaving a red scar. The second bullet hits him below his hip, possibly an allusion to the Jewish circumcision tradition. The first step toward becoming human, however, is learning to shake hands and drink and smoke heavily. To Red Peter, who is now an entertainer at a burlesque theater, this was the only possible escape from his captivity. However, Red Peter cannot resist the urge to lower his panties and show his scar to the audience. Still, he is very angry with the journalists in the newspapers, who are using his exhibitionism as evidence for their assertion that he has not overcome his chimpanzee nature after all:

> The second shot struck me below the hip. It was serious, and as a result I still walk with a slight limp. Recently I read an article by one of the ten thousand windbags [Windhunde] who vent their views about me in the newspapers: they say that my ape nature has not yet been entirely repressed; the proof is supposed to be that whenever I have company, I am inclined to lower my pants to show the bullet's path of entry. Every tiny finger of that guy's writing hand ought to be blown off, one by one. I, I have the right to lower my pants in front of anyone I like; there is nothing to see there other than a well-groomed pelt and the scar left by a profligate shot.[4]

By night, Red Peter takes his pleasure in secret meetings with a small half-trained female chimpanzee, of whom he cannot stand the sight by day due to the wild gaze in her eyes:

> When I review my evolution and its goal so far, I can't complain, but neither am I satisfied. My hands in my panty pockets, the wine bottle on the table, I half-lie, half-sit in my rocking chair and look out the window. When company comes, I play host as is proper. My manager sits in the anteroom; when I ring, he comes and listens to what I have to say. In the evening there is almost always a performance, and I enjoy successes that can scarcely be surpassed. If I return late at night from banquets, from learned societies, from convivial occasions, a little half-trained chimpanzee is waiting for me, and I have my pleasure of her in the way of all apes. In the daytime I do not want to see her, she has the lunatic look of the bewildered trained animal: I am the only one who recognizes it, and I can't stand it.[5]

The compulsion to show his scar by pulling his panties down and the secret rendezvous with the female chimpanzee could, in both cases, be interpreted as expressions of the resentment of an assimilated Jew, unable to hide and suppress his Jewish origin completely.[6] At the same time, the story of Red Peter has several features applying to racist stereotypes, such as comparisons between Africans and apes and between assimilated Jews and apes, while the two gunshot wounds may be interpreted in terms of both the Jewish circumcision (the shot below the hips) and the supposedly red skin color of Native Americans (the red scar on his cheek). By connecting these diverse ethnical hallmarks to the same body, however, the short story also deconstructs racial classification, showing it as a part of a colonial practice of discipline and domination. The African origin of Red Peter also supports the associative connection between

apes and the kidnapping of Africans as a part of the slave trade. Hence the story of Red Peter could be read as a parody of the many slave biographies, which were published before and after the abolition of slavery in the US, such as *The Narrative of the Life of Frederic Douglass, an American Slave.*[7]

To Red Peter himself, the alleged transformation from ape to human represents "a way out" of his cage captivity. However, his new freedom consists of repressing his ape past and performing at a burlesque theater. In such ethnographic exhibitions, Africans, native people, and colonial subjects were instructed to act according to European stereotypes of primitive humans or noble savages, thus confirming the colonial notions of hegemony. This tradition of ethnographic exhibitions could be traced back to Columbus, bringing groups of Native Americans from his expedition as proof of their colonization and his own achievements. Later on, such captives would be exploited as slaves or as subjects for public curiosity. After the French Revolution, a new concept of zoological and ethnographic exhibitions—most famously the Jardin des Plants—revolted against the older tradition associated with the ancient regime and its Christian idea of animal exhibitions reflecting Noah's ark. These exhibitions sometimes also included living non-Europeans or so-called "exotic" humans, who, in return, were granted a certain social recognition in their lifetime. Normally these humans were exhibited at zoos, market places, carnivals, or vaudeville theaters, as in the case of Red Peter in Kafka's short story. Later, such exhibitions of dead animals, and even humans, would apply Darwinian evolutionary theory, arranging different species of animals in an evolutionary chain from the lowest animals up to humans. Accordingly, under the influence of colonialism, the guiding purpose of these modern zoos was to demonstrate Darwinian theory together with ideas of cultural hegemony and pseudo-scientific ideas of

racial inferiority and superiority.[8] Thus, Red Peter in Kafka's fiction repeatedly refers to his successful evolution from ape to human, as in the above-cited quotation.

The founder of the first ethnographic exhibitions in Germany was the abovementioned zookeeper Carl Hagenbeck, who soon earned himself a reputation for his methods of taming lions, tigers, and other wild animals, veiling the actual use of violence that these animals had been subjected to.[9] The exhibited humans, however, were mostly instructed to act in a savage manner, confirming the racist imaginaries of their European spectators, finding themselves confronted with "noble savages," supposedly not yet subjected to the violence of writing and other media technologies. In reality, this is precisely what they were subjected to since the stereotypes and power relations had already been prescribed by Western science and popular culture. It was also Western civilization that had invented the railways and other logistic technologies that had brought the exhibited humans to Europe, thus confirming the spectator's notion of racial and cultural superiority.

This power relation was also installed between observers and observed, between audience and performers. Normally the exhibited humans were paid off and not subjected to any kind of physical violence or abuse; although many of them died from diseases and travels in unfamiliar climate conditions and a situation they could only partly understand. Hence, the real violence of the human zoos was not brute physical violence, but symbolic violence exerted by way of books and media technologies constructing them as primitive and inferior in contrast with their Western spectators. For Hagenbeck himself, Kaiser Wilhelm IIs visit to his zoo was the peak of his entire career.[10]

Acculturation, Sadomasochism, and Resentment in the Wilhelmian Epoch

The Wilhelmian epoch is not only associated with colonialism and "völkisch" anti-Semitism and racism but also with militarism and sexual anxiety as integral parts of children's education and upbringing. This combination of militarism and sexual repression and anxiety has been vividly described by Stefan Zweig—a Freudian from the first moment—in his memoir *The World of Yesterday*. This also created a culture where children and citizens were deprived of much of their individuality and forcibly adapted to a culture of authoritarian structures. Accordingly, Red Peter in Kafka's fiction reports how he learned to spit, smoke a pipe, drink brandy, shake hands, and speak human language, thereby reaching "the education of an average European" [*europäische Durchschnittsbildung*]. In this atmosphere, resentment and sadomasochistic tendencies and impulses seem to have flourished and may also have influenced some of Kafka's fictions, as we shall see.

Kafka has described the child-raising methods of his father Hermann Kafka as rather brute and insensitive, depriving him of his particularity and individuality, for instance, by repressing his love for reading novels. Hermann Kafka, a former officer, forced his son to learn how to march and become a heavy beer drinker (Kafka would later become an abstainer and vegetarian). In one case, Hermann threatened his son by saying that he would "tear him apart like a fish."[11] The brutality of such utterances and the fear they evoke in a child represent a form of symbolic violence, which Kafka later would elaborate on in pieces like "In the Penal Colony." Accordingly, the staged battles between noble and evil savages or between Native Americans and Europeans in Hagenbeck's human zoo could give an outlet to sadomasochistic phantasies. In the wake of the financial crisis

in Germany in the 1870s—the so-called *Gründerkrach*—sadism and resentments were also projected upon the Jewish minorities in Germany and the Habsburg Monarchy.

In his memoir *Von Menschen und Tieren,* Hagenbeck describes how the chimpanzee Moritz learned to ride a bicycle: "The latest achievement of his education is learning how to ride a bike. Moritz has learned it within a few weeks and is now riding in a strikingly confident manner. He seems to get a lot of fun out of it, as he eagerly pumps the pedals ..."[12] In his book, Hagenbeck also describes the behavior and relationships between Moritz, the orangutan Jakob, and Moritz's girlfriend Rosa, including their attempted escapes and their taste for red wine:

> Occasionally they are also served red wine with water during their meals. On these occasions, Jakob turns out to have a special taste for wine, while Rosa, being a female ape, seems to find alcohol less agreeable. The keeper has taught the three monkeys such good manners, that it is a pleasure to watch them. On these occasions, Moritz serves as a "butler"![13]

Kafka elaborates on this motif when describing the process of Red Peter's domestication. In his report, Red Peter tells how he first learned to spit, rub his belly, smoke a pipe, and then drink brandy:

> It was the brandy bottle that gave me the greatest trouble. The smell was torture for me; I forced myself with all my might; but weeks went by before I overcame my revulsion. Curiously, the men took these inner struggles more seriously than anything else about me... . Nonetheless, I reach for the bottle that is held out to me; trembling, uncork it; with this success my strength gradually returns. Already barely different from my model, I lift the

> bottle, put it to my lips, and – and with revulsion, even though it
> is empty and filled only with the smell – throw it on the ground
> with disgust.[14]

Finally, Red Peter learns how to shake hands and make conversation and finally reaches the abovementioned education of an "average European." Only through these achievements and disciplinary measures can Red Peter find "his way out" of captivity and attend his position as a performer at a vaudeville theatre. Hence Red Peter's transformation is a result of both bodily discipline, the repression of natural bodily impulses and emotions, and the annihilation of native cultures and the violence of media technologies, which Red Peter has almost wholly internalized, but not quite.

Mimicry and Forms of Violence in Kafka

In Kafka's fictions, violence plays an important part, not only in the sense of brute force, as in the case of Red Peter, who was twice shot by a gun and wounded by a smoking pipe. Often the violence in Kafka's fiction is carried out with simple, almost archaic tools like knives, as in the case of Josef K in *The Trial.* In some cases, the violence arises from nature itself, but in most cases, the violence is a product of culture and the acculturation process. In these violent processes of acculturation and disciplining, Kafka's figures are often treated as animals, as in the case of Josef K, who is slaughtered "like a dog," or more or less like inanimate objects. In some cases, natural phenomena are depicted with the qualities of cultural phenomena and the other way around. As in the case of the execution machine in "In the Penal Colony," cultural artifacts are sometimes described as if they had a life and will of their own. In the famous scene, where the young officer puts

himself under the "scriber" the machine starts working without any human manipulation. In other cases, Kafka depicts the inner life of humans with machine-like features.

In this way, natural phenomena, mechanical objects, and humans seem to be mutually replaceable as parts of a continuity.[15] Accordingly, mechanical objects, made by human hand, could replace the human hand itself, colonizing the human world or taking their revenge on it and turning the humans into animals or mechanical objects themselves. Similarly, the culturally subjugated nature itself takes its revenge on man as its enemy.

Accordingly, animals are sometimes turned into humans and humans into animals, as in the case of Gregor Samsa, through a poetics of inversion. In all cases, violence and instruments of violence play an important role in the ontological transgression from one state to another, as in the case of Red Peter's humanization. Hence Red Peter's way out does not mean emancipation from violence but rather internalization of violence.[16] Accordingly, the domestication and de-exotifying of apes into bourgeois culture is seemingly depicted in the story of Red Peter's transformation. Still, the fact that Red Peter is able to give lectures and reflect upon his life story and current situation breaks the illusion of a domesticated ape. Red Peter's story shows, rather, a number of striking parallels to slave biographies and colonialism, as mentioned previously. Also, his performances at a vaudeville theatre rather apply to the tradition of ethnographic exhibitions. Hence, a crucial motif in Kafka's work is the displacement of the borders of humanity, which is not only associated with the practices of human zoos but also with colonialism and with modernity as such. Inverting the actual process of exotifying humans through the story of the humanized ape Red Peter, Kafka depicts such a displacement of the borders of humanity through colonialism and racism. Hence, in the figure of Moritz, the colonized is looking back at his colonizers.

Still, through the satirical and carnivalesque elements of Kafka's narrative (violence, drinking, pulling down the trousers, sleeping with a female chimpanzee, etc.), the story of Red Peter does not apply to the colonial essentialist desire of undisrupted difference between the colonizers and the colonized "Other." In a postcolonial context, mimicry could refer to a kind of mimicking behavior among human beings, copying the persons in power because one hopes to have access to the same power oneself. According to Homi Bhabha, this mimicking behavior could have an unintentionally subversive effect, exposing the artificiality of all kinds of symbolic expressions of power. For instance, an Indian trying too hard to mimic European customs like shaking hands, sometimes shows through his or her performance how hollow these codes really are. To Bhabha, mimicry is signified by a metonymic resemblance between the colonizers and the colonized, that is, "almost the same, but not quite":

> If I may adapt Samuel Weber's formulation of the marginalizing vision of castration, the colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite.* Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference.[17]

As in Bhabha's concept of subversive mimicry, Red Peter's transformation into something human-like is "almost the same, but not quite." Both his exhibitionism and his secret female chimpanzee represent carnivalesque subversions of discipline. Eagerly trying to convince his academic audience about his repressed ape nature and transformation into a human, Red Peter appears to be very touchy about any sign of disavowal and is unable to hide his suppressed anger in terms of *resentment*:

If, on the other hand, that scribbler were to lower his pants when-
ever he has company, things, I assure you, would look very differ-
ent, and I will let it stand as a sign of his good sense that he does
not do so. But that being so, let him keep his delicate sensibility
off my back![18]

Like Kafka's "Hungerkünstler" and the young officer in "In the
Penal Colony," Red Peter insists on playing his role to its extreme
and reacts with disappointment, anger, and resentment when he
is denied the unconditional recognition he is longing for.

In other words, mimicry could mean an ironical disruption
of the colonial desire to establish a stereotype image of the col-
onized as the essential "Other" and instead emerge as a meto-
nymic repetition, which is, therefore, subversive: "A desire that,
through the repetition of partial presence, which is the basis of
mimicry, articulate those disturbances of cultural, racial and
historical difference that menace the narcissistic demand of co-
lonial authority."[19] Bhabha's concept of the subversive mimicry
is partly inspired by Frantz Fanon's reflections on the "Black
Man," and partly a response to Fanon. According to Fanon,
the "Black Man" is not really a man, since he is prevented from
representing himself due to the cultural hegemony of the colo-
nizers. As represented by the white, the "Black Man" is forced to
see himself through the gaze of the white colonizers. Similarly,
Red Peter finds himself dependent on the recognition of his
European audience, who decides whether his metamorphosis
has been successful or not. However, the carnivalesque and
hyperbolic elements of Kafka's short story contribute to the
satiric dimension of what I suggest calling Kafkaesque mim-
icry. This kind of satiric mimicry depicts the mechanisms of
domination, discipline, assimilation, violence, and resentment
in both a hyperbolic, metonymical, and carnivalesque fashion.
Although partly staged in colonial settings, this mimicry applies

both to the experience of colonized non-Europeans and to the situation of the Jews and other more or less oppressed minorities within Europe and the Austrian-Hungarian Empire itself. It also applies to domination, violence, and how they affect the dominated and their responses in terms of resentment, as more or less universal phenomena.

According to Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, the black man yearns to be recognized as a human among humans but finds himself overdetermined by the gaze of the white man, imposing a sense of inferiority upon him. Being denied this kind of recognition, the black man could respond by trying to become white. Or he could turn to a kind of regressive Black nationalism or racist folklore (which would apply to Bhabha's negative concept of political mimicry). But in both cases, the dependency on the white gaze preserves a feeling of dependence in the black man and imposes a neurosis on him with elements of resentment:

> What does the black man want? At the risk of arousing the re-sentment of my black brothers, I will say that the black man is not a man. There is a zone of nonbeing, an extraordinarily sterile and arid region, an utterly naked declivity where an authentic upheav-al can be born. In most cases, the black man lacks the advantage of being able to accomplish the descent into a real hell ... We shall have no mercy for the former governors, the former missionaries. To us, the man who adores the Negro is as "sick" as the man who abominates him. Conversely, the black man who wants to turn his race white is as miserable as the man who abominates him.[20]

In this way, colonialism is not just imposed as a political, mil-itary, and economic condition on the black man; it is also a psychological condition that continues after the political de-colonization. Overdetermined through the gaze of the white

man, the black man forgets his own longing for being recognized as an individual with a hybrid identity.

Hegemony, Anti-Semitism, and Resentment

The concept of resentment, or *ressentiment,* as Nietzsche phrased it, was well known to Kafka's generation of writers and intellectuals, embracing the philosophies of Kierkegaard, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche. Although the Austrian Jews had received extensive civil liberties and rights under the reign of the enlightened Emperor Joseph II at the end of the eighteenth century and were fully emancipated between 1848 and 1867, they were dominated by the German-speaking non-Jewish population. As far as the Jewish minority in Prague is concerned, they were gradually dominated by the Czech-speaking non-Jewish population in the wake of Czech nationalism before and after the collapse of the Habsburg Empire in 1918. A vast majority chose an assimilationist strategy, claiming to be as German as the Germans, subscribing to the values of the liberal Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, to which they owed their emancipation. Later, many of them chose to adapt to emerging Czech nationalism and become as Czech as the Czechs.[21]

Many of these political processes were associated with a considerable level of open and invisible violence against both the German and the Jewish minorities, which sometimes erupted in pogroms and riots like the anti-German *Dezembersturm* in 1897, where buildings and businesses identified as German were attacked or looted. On such occasions, there were numerous street fights between Czech and German primary school children and students, and one of Kafka's friends, Oskar Baum, even lost his sight in one of these riots.[22] Although assimilation in most cases was a free choice, many

Jews experienced considerable assimilationist pressure from the emerging Czech and German nationalist movements. On the other hand, they experienced an opposite pressure from the emerging anti-Semitic movement, which, after the accusation of Jewish ritual murders, organized violent riots, molested Jewish shopkeepers, looted their shops, and burnt synagogues. In 1897, referring to the riots of the *Dezembersturm*, Theodor Herzl wrote:

> What had they done, the little Jews of Prague? At Prague they were criticized for not being Czechs, at Saaz and Eger for not being German … What attitude could they adopt? Those who wanted to be German were attacked by the Czechs (*sic*) and, at the same time, by the Germans.[23]

Both Kafka and his friend Brod were studying the anti-Semitic articles of the Czech newspaper *Venkov* and were all too familiar with the everyday insults against Jews. When Kafka once was invited as a guest in the salons of Emilie Marschner, the wife of Kafka's superior, one of the present ladies remarked: "I see you have even invited a Mr. Jew." ["Da haben Sie ja auch einen Herrn Juden eingeladen"].[24]

In her biography on the Jewish writer and salon intellectual Rahel Varnhagen, from 1958, Arendt basically describes the Jews as outcasts in Western Europe after the emancipation because they were never really accepted as equal citizens. Among these Jewish outcasts, Arendt makes a distinction between the social status of the pariah and parvenu. While the pariahs accepted their social status as outcasts but remained true to their Jewish heritage, "the parvenus tried to succeed in the world of the gentiles by using their elbows to raise themselves above their fellow Jews into the respectable world."[25] And yet, they could never escape their Jewish roots and were accepted only

as exceptions from the stereotype of the uneducated, backward ghetto Jew.

Hence the pariah and parvenu represent two opposite attitudes and adaptions to the European majority culture and society: While the pariah recognizes his subordinate position in the European society without any illusions of being recognized as an equal citizen, the parvenu longs for recognition at the cost of being assimilated into the European majority society. Still, the parvenu is unable to get rid of the old feeling of inferiority and resentment in his new and unfamiliar social world. In other words, the social advancement of the Jewish upstarts is paid for with resentment:

> Varnhagens Trieb kennen alle Parvenus, alle, die sich in eine Gesellschaft, in einen Stand eine Klasse hinausschwindeln müssen, zu der sie nicht gehören. Der angestrengte Versuch zu lieben, wo einem nur das Gehorchen übrigbleibt, führt meistens weiter als die einfache und ungekünstelte Subalternität. Indem man den ‚guten Eigenschaften' der Vorgesetzten auf die Spur kommt', hofft man das unendliche und unausweichliche Ressentiment loszuwerden.
>
> All parvenus are familiar with Varnhagen's drive, all who have had to fake their way into a social class where they did not belong. The tense attempt to love, where obeying is the only real option, mostly leads to simple and straight forward subalternity. In search of the "good qualities" of the superiors, one really tries to get rid of the endless and unavoidable resentment.[26]

However, Arendt associated herself with the "hidden tradition" of the "conscious pariah," affirming her Jewish particularity and still claiming her right to a place in general European life. However, the conscious pariah knows that he or she could never become as European as the Europeans, even without feeling

particularly Jewish either. The "conscious pariah" neither iden-
tifies with the orthodox traditions of Eastern Ashkenazi Juda-
ism nor with the wealthy Jewish upper class that dominated
Jewish-gentile relations. According to Arendt's view, Rahel Var-
nhagen, famous for her intellectual Berlin salons, was part of
this hidden tradition of isolated "conscious pariahs," confirming
their status as Jewish pariahs—like Heinrich Heine and Franz
Kafka:

> ... those who really did most for the spiritual dignity of their peo-
> ple, who were great enough to transcend the bounds of nationali-
> ty and to weave the strands of their Jewish genius into the general
> texture of European life ... those bold spirits who tried to make
> of the emancipation of the Jews that which it really should have
> been—an admission of Jews as *Jews* to the ranks of humanity,
> rather than a permit to ape the gentiles or an opportunity to play
> the parvenu.[27]

However, political resentment could also be provoked and
projected on competing cultural and political "out-groups" by
propaganda and exclusion in order to mobilize a political or
cultural "in-group," like, for instance, a national community.
In other words: Resentment could turn out to be a powerful
political force when being instrumentalized by political lea-
ders, be it nationalist, Islamist, or right-wing populist leaders.
Resentment becomes a displaceable political or structural
sentiment beyond the question of individual attitude or slave
morality. In such cases, I would like to suggest the notion of
"replaceable resentment" or "external resentment" in contrast
to the resentment from below, which Nietzsche describes as
the revolt of slave morality. Such a feeling of suppressed dislike
and aggression, sometimes mixed with a sense of affront or
inferiority, is referred to as *ressentiment* in Nietzsche's major

work *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887). Nietzsche describes *ressentiment* as a strategy among humans unable to embrace life and unfold their own creative potential, instead directing their hatred and revengefulness against the creative *Übermensch* in an attempt to limit its instinctive unfolding of life and creativity.

At the historical origin of both Judaism and Christianity, Nietzsche conjures up a moral upheaval of a slave people, suppressing its will to power and instincts of life while falling into a state of *ressentiment*: a self-poisoning mixture of inferiority, fear, hatred, bitterness, envy, and revengefulness against those who are strong and brave enough to embrace their lives. In ancient history, this slave people revolted against the aristocratic individualism of the nobility and launched its alternative slave morality. According to this new morality, the sound instincts of life and the will to power represented by the proud and brave should be considered as sinful and evil and restricted by religious commandments and the infliction of bad consciousness. In this process, the proud will to power was inhibited and transformed into *ressentiment*, according to Nietzsche.

To Nietzsche, slave morality means the deformation and perversion of the will to power and immediate expression of life into anger and revenge by groups of people being too weak to live out their own creativity and life instincts. The slave people, therefore, had to oppress themselves and others by the religious commandments and the morality of compassion as expressed in Judaism and Christianity. In these religions, the resentment of the slave people is elevated into a virtue of self-sacrifice and duty of compassion and neighborly love. According to Nietzsche, resentment transformed weakness into a virtue and strength into a vice. Due to these mechanisms, *ressentiment* was preserved and elevated into a cultural and religious norm, rejecting any strength or greatness of life.

The Colonial Order: The Dreyfus Affair and Colonial Sadism

The anti-assimilationist agitation of the Viennese Zionist movement was initially fueled by the Dreyfus affair. In 1894, the French-Jewish Captain Alfred Dreyfus was falsely accused of espionage for Germany and sentenced to the most severe punishment: degradation and deportation for life to the penal colony Île du Diable (Devil's Island). This was the most notorious of the three islands of the penal colony Îles de Salut on the coast of French Guyana. Normally, this sentence would mean certain death. As a successful Alsatian artillery officer in the French army, Dreyfus seemed to fulfill all criteria of an assimilated French Jew. Nonetheless, the anti-Semitic resentments of the French general staff were only waiting for an opportunity to be unleashed on a Jewish scapegoat. When the French intelligence discovered that secrets concerning a new weapon system had been leaked to the German enemy, Dreyfus became the victim of a miscarriage of justice, even though the real betrayer, the indebted general staff officer Ferdinand Walsin-Esterházy, had already been revealed. Esterházy was protected by his powerful allies and was acquitted after the trial against him in 1898.[28] A famous drawing spread in European newspapers shows the public degradation of Dreyfus in front of his soldiers, as a superior officer strips the distinctions off his uniform and breaks his saber in two pieces over his thigh. After an intense campaign carried out by European intellectuals like Emile Zola, Theodor Herzl, and Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, Dreyfus was finally released after miraculously having survived four years in captivity on Devil's Island. As an officer in the French army, Dreyfus may be conceived as an example of affirmative mimicry but transformed into a young French officer in one of Kafka's colonial short stories; he could also be interpreted as an example of subversive mimicry, according to Bhabha.

Hence, the Dreyfus affair is metonymically reflected in Kafka's enigmatic short story "In the Penal Colony", written in 1914. In this story, a European scientist visits a French-speaking penal colony. In the colony, he is met by a young French officer, serving both as a judge and an executioner, and the visitor is, therefore, rather upset about the failing legal protection of the prisoners. For instance, the convicts learn nothing about the charges held against them nor their sentences. But, as the young officer puts it, "Guilt is always beyond all doubt" ("die Schuld ist immer zweifellos"):

> The Officer saw that he was in danger of being held up for a long time in his explanation of the machine, he therefore went up to the traveler, put his arm through his, pointed at the condemned man, who, now that attention was so openly directed at him straightened up smartly—the soldier tugged the chain as well—and said, "The matter is as follows. Here, in the penal colony I have been appointed judge. Despite my youth. For I assisted the former commandant in all penal cases, and I also know the machine best. The principle, according to which I decide is: "Guilt is always beyond any doubt."[29]

In the present trial, the young officer is sentencing a disobeying soldier to death by a marvelous new execution apparatus, consisting of a vibrating "bed," a vibrating "drawer," and a transparent "scriber" with glass needles, where the offended "commandment" is engraved into the body of the convict. This is the only way the convict can learn about his offense.

The convict is offered one last meal, a kind of porridge, which he normally throws up as he is strapped to the execution device and penetrated by the transparent needles. After six hours, the convict's face shows signs of transfiguration (*Verwandlung*) and delight as he starts reading the sentence on his own body. However,

the officer shows more interest in the execution apparatus than in the prisoner, constantly trying to win the European scientist's sympathy and recognition for his method, which was initially launched by the deceased old commandant of the colony. During his reign, the executions were great spectacles, drawing a massive crowd of spectators. Under the new commandant, however, the execution ceremonies are decaying, and hardly any spectators come by to watch them anymore. It turns out that the young officer is sympathizing so strongly with the old commandant and his art of execution that he has put his own life and fate into his loyalty to and responsibility for the execution device. The division between the old and the new commandant is to a certain extent in accordance with the division between Judaism and Christianity, even though this does not quite harmonize with the end of the short story, where the old commandant is expected to return like a Messiah figure. Still, the young officer's exaggerated loyalty to the old commandant and his theatrical method of execution may be alluding to the Jewish background of Captain Dreyfus, thus representing a metonymic mimicry in Kafka's fiction.

As the European visitor declares himself in favor of the new and more humane commandant of the colony, the officer seems to overreact. After replacing the old commandment, "Ehre deinen Vorgesetzten!" ("Honor your superior!") with "Sei gerecht!" ("Be just!"), he releases the prisoner and tells the soldiers to strap him—as the commanding officer—up to the execution apparatus instead. More or less (that is: metonymically) in accordance with the famous drawing of Dreyfus being degraded by an officer in front of the soldiers, the young officer takes off his uniform, breaks his saber in pieces, and lays himself naked under the transparent scriber.

> But it hardly fitted in with the care he was taking that as soon
> as he had finished handling a piece of clothing, he immediately

threw it into the pit with an indignant jerk. The last thing left
to him was his short sword with his belt. He drew the sword
from the sheath, broke it, then collected everything—the pieces
of sword, the sheath, and the belt—and threw these things away
with such a violent gesture that they clanged down in the pit
below.[30]

As the young officer lays down naked under the harrow, how-
ever, the execution device seems to act on its own, almost like
an android, as if it had understood the new broken command
("Be just!") as an instruction to act accordingly. Consequently,
the device destroys itself and penetrates the dead body of the
officer, who shows no signs of transfiguration nor delight. In
this way, Kafka's text reflects the hermeneutic problems of truth,
meaning, the misinterpretation, and incomprehension in the
text itself. A hermeneutic key question in this context would, of
course, be the meaning of the shocking violence the readers are
exposed to in this text. The displayed scenario of a naked male
body penetrated by the needles of a transparent scriber, which
could be observed by an audience of spectators from all angles,
bears all the features of a sadomasochistic pornographic tableau,
as suggested in readings by scholars such as Marcel Hénaff and
John Zilcosky:

> This panoptic voyeurism is, as Marcel Hénaff argues, central to
> Sadean pornographical form, where everything must be theatre
> and must be visible. Although Sade employs no unique perspec-
> tival centre (no single voyeur crouching in the shadows), there
> is always an implied 'master' libertine, who, like the reader, sees
> everything. All bodies and all points of penetration must always
> be exposed. As in the case in Kafka's story, there is no fussing
> with disrobing: Immediate nakedness is mandatory, and every-
> thing is offered to everyone's eye 'without mediation'. The old

commandant's machinery is geared precisely to achieve such an omnivoyeurism: the harrow is made of glass so that 'everyone' can 'scrutinize the carrying out of the sentence'.[31]

Kafka and his generation of intellectuals were quite familiar with these sadomasochistic conventions. Leopold Ritter Sacher-Masoch had not only coined the concept of masochism through his portrait of a dominant woman and a dominated man in his novel *Venus im Pelz* (*Venus in Fur*). Later, he also published several volumes of popular short stories featuring Jewish *shtetl* milieus in Galicia, where he himself was born as the son of a police director. The plots of these short stories often reflect the dilemmas of segregation, assimilation, anti-Semitism, and resentment. In this way, the suppressed anger and resentments of both Jews and anti-Semites could also be related to sadomasochistic expressions.[32]

Kafka himself expressed rather mixed feelings concerning "das Peinliche" in "In the Penal Colony." His publisher Kurt Wolff had expressed some concerns about "das Peinliche" of the story in a letter to Kafka. In his reply, Kafka is playing with the ambiguity of the word "peinlich," which could mean both "embarrassing" and "painful" in German, relating the meanings to both the political and his private situation in 1916:

Ihre freundlichen Worte über mein Manuskript sind mir sehr angenehm eingegangen. Ihr Aussetzen des Peinlichen trifft ganz mit meiner Meinung zusammen, die ich allerdings in dieser Art fast gegenüber allem habe, was bisher von mir vorliegt ... Zur Erklärung dieser letzten Erzählung füge ich nur hinzu, daß nicht nur sie peinlich ist, daß vielmehr unsere allgemeine und meine besondere Zeit gleichfalls sehr peinlich war und ist und meine besondere sogar noch länger peinlich als die allgemeine.

[Your friendly words concerning my manuscript have pleased

me. Your concern about the painful [embarrassing] is in accor-
dance with my own opinion, as in the case of almost everything
I have published so far ... As an explanation for this last story, I
would only like to add that not only is the story embarrassing
[painful], but rather that our general times, and mine in partic-
ular, were and still are equally embarrassing, and that mine has
been embarrassing even longer than the general times.][33]

Kafka also resisted Wolff's expressed wish to publish "In the Pe-
nal Colony" by itself. Instead, Kafka insisted on publishing it to-
gether with "Das Urteil" and "Die Verwandlung" in one volume
under the title "Strafen" ("Punishments"), dealing with different
aspects of the interconnected problems of guilt, transformation,
and punishment.[34] At this time, Berlin was the metropolis of
the third largest colonial empire of the world, encompassing
Deutsch-Südwestafrika (Namibia), Deutsch-Ostafrika (Tan-
zania), Cameroon, Rwanda, and Togo. The German colonizers
were notorious for their brutality and sadism. The governor
of Deutsch-Ostafrika, Carl Peters, was particularly infamous.
According to Hannah Arendt, he was most likely the model
for Joseph Conrad's colonel Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*.[35] The
general lieutenant of the German troops in Deutsch-Südafrika,
Lothar von Trotha, also became notorious after ordering the
genocide in the so-called Herero war of 1904–1908, where
almost the entire Herero and Nama people in Namibia were
exterminated or deported to concentration camps on the Hai-
fischinsel (Shark Island).[36]

In her work *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt shows
how the colonies attracted both bureaucrats, adventurers,
and drop-outs from the European continent, in their attempt
to make a new order in the colonies, often through brutality
that would have been sanctioned by moral inhibitions and
democratic obstacles in Europe.[37] In the colonies, however, the

colonizers were ruling by decrees and could, therefore, impose their interests without democratic obstacles or moral hesitation. One of Kafka's favorite books was an 88-page, green juvenile book, written by Oscar Weber entitled *Der Zuckerbaron: Schicksale eines ehemaligen deutschen Offiziers in Südamerika* (*The Sugar Baron: The Adventures of a Former German Officer in South America*), published in Schaffstein's *Little Green Books* series. In the novel, a former officer (Weber) narrates how he travels to South America to try his luck and build a new career as a land surveyor. On his way, he survives natural disasters and an attempted peasant revolution before eventually making his fortune in sugar. In a postcard to Felice in 1916, Kafka describes his fascination with this popular novel:

> Among [the *Little Green Books*], for example, there is one book that affects me so deeply that I feel it is about myself or as if it were the book of rules [Vorschrift] for my life, rules I elude [ent-weiche] or have eluded (a feeling I often have, by the way); the book is called *The Sugar Baron*, and its final chapter is the most important.[38]

Kafka may not only have borrowed central images from this book like the land surveyor K in *The Castle* and the execution device in "In the Penal Colony," but also the transformation of an ape into a human in "A Report to an Academy." In *The Sugar Baron*, Weber recalls the human-like behavior of an ape he had shot during a pleasure-hunt:

> [The ape] I shot ... from a low palm-tree, fell, still alive, and sat exactly like a man with his back against the trunk. He pressed his left hand against the wound on his chest and looked at me al-most reproachfully with big, dark eyes, which protruded from his fear-distorted face; at the same time, he screamed and whimpered

like a child and searched with his right hand for leaves, which he
picked up off the ground und stuffed in his wound.[39]

In the Belgian and German colonies, in particular, acts of sa-
dism on an almost epidemic scale against the colonized were
carried out. These excesses were referred to as *Tropenkoller*
("tropical madness") in the German public, now getting grad-
ually more critical of the brute violence carried out against
their colonial subjects.[40] Consequently, the sadism associated
with the so-called Old Imperialism had to be suppressed and
replaced by a new and less openly violent kind of imperialism. In
his reading of "In the Penal Colony," Zilcosky relates this shift
from Old to New Imperialism to the rejection of the sadism
depicted in Kafka's novel. Hence the first commandment in-
scribed in the execution device ("Honor your superior") applies
both to a colonial and a sadistic codex. As the visitor, however,
rejects the role of a spectator and turns away from the execution,
the officer does not experience the expected transformation
and pleasure after six hours under the harrow. According to
Zilcosky, the end of the sadistic codex also means the collapse
of Old Imperialism:

> By tacitly rejecting the role assigned to him, the voyager also im-
> plicitly denounces the entire old colonial system and, on a meta-
> textual level, destroys the story's sadistic structure. Despite the
> fact that the voyager has not yet uttered a politically critical word,
> the officer becomes desperate and aggressive.[41]

The German colonial empire was also very present in Berlin
when Kafka visited the German capital in 1914. Both Afro-Ger-
man subjects and merchandises were exhibited at the German
Colonial House ("Deutsches Kolonialhaus"), and some mem-
bers of the African staff had also been displayed at ethnographic

exhibitions, such as the "Kolonilal- und Transvaal-Ausstellung" in 1896/97 or at human zoos displayed at the Berlin Zoo.[42]

Deportation and internment, as metonymically presented both in "A Report to an Academy" and in "In the Penal Colony," were also highly contested issues in Kafka's Prague, where Hans Groß, one of Kafka's law professors at the university, had strongly advocated the deportation of "degenerate criminals" from the Habsburg Monarchy to penal colonies like those under French and British rule. The Habsburg authorities, therefore, decided to send the young lawyer Robert Heindl on a journey to visit famous penal colonies outside Europe to study their advantages and disadvantages regarding their organization, executions, diseases, rehabilitation, and relapses.[43] Hence all the abovementioned practices of ethnographic exhibitions, deportation, and internment were bio-political tools, displaying and affirming the hegemonic order of the Habsburg Monarchy and the colonial order of the German Reich. In a certain sense, they also represented a provisional culmination of the disciplining through the violence of media technologies and the power of the gaze. The execution device demonstrates the continuity between symbolic and physical violence and makes the invisible violence visible.

The modern taming methods of Hagenbeck in Kafka's "Report," veiling the brute force that had been used on the animals, finds a parallel in the shift to the more humane regime of the new commander in the "In the Penal Colony." The marvelous execution device displays the absurdities of modern utopias of pedagogic punishment and acculturation through the violence of media technologies and deportation. Confronted with the European visitor's lack of recognition, however, the young officer overreacts with a mixture of aggression and resentment, choosing the role of the victim instead of the executioner. However, the motif of resentment seems to play a more important role in "A Report" than in "In the Penal Colony."

In all of these cases, violence represents a kind of threshold experience, opening up the human body and transgressing borders of individuality and humanity. The symbolic violence of hegemony, however, seems to be more closely related to forms of mimicking behavior (mimicry) and resentment in Kafka's fiction. Accordingly, the violence represented in "In the Penal Colony" has a satirical purpose by means of carnivalesque motifs and hyperbolic effects like eating, vomiting, penetration, and burlesque slapsticks. The fact that the political satire of "In the Penal Colony" was recognizable, not only to Kafka's contemporary critics but also to the military censorship, became manifest as Kafka in 1916 was invited to read the story publicly in Munich.[44] In order to evade the German censorship and receive the required wartime passport, Kafka invented a new title for his tour: "Tropische Münchhausiade," named after the comic travel narratives of Baron Münchhausen, also known as "the baron of lies." As in an act of mimicry, Kafka decided to camouflage his political satire behind Münchhausen's inconsistent narratives, now projected into a fertile and exotic environment and yet revealing the mechanisms of domination, resentment, violence, and hegemony in Europe through a magnifying glass.

Notes

1. See Peer Zickgraf, *Völkerschau und Totentanz. Deutsches (Körper-) Weltentheater zwischen 1905 und heute* (Marburg: Jonas Verlag, 2012), 32.

2. See Naama Harel, "De-allegorizing Kafka's Ape: Two Animalistic Contexts," in *Kafka's Creatures: Animals, Hybrids, and Other Fantastic Beings*, ed. Marc Lucht and Donna Yarri (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2010), 53.

3. Benjamin Balint, *Kafkas letzter Prozess*, trans. Anne Emmert (Berlin: Berenberg Verlag, 2019), 78.

4. Franz Kafka, *Kafka's Selected Stories. New Translations,*

Backgrounds and Contexts, Criticism, trans. and ed. Stanley Corngold (New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007), 78.

5. Kafka, *Selected Stories*, 83f.
6. See William C. Rubinstein, "A Report to an Academy," in *Modern Language Quarterly* 13 (1952).
7. Frederick Douglass, "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave," in *The Classical Slave Narratives*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. (New York: Signet Classics, 2012).
8. Zickgraf, *Völkerschau und Totentanz*, 32.
9. See Carl Hagenbeck, *Von Tieren und Menschen* (Hamburg: Severus 2012), 165ff.
10. Zickgraf, *Völkerschau und Totentanz*, 37.
11. Ronald Spiers, "Gewalt und poetische Gerechtigkeit bei Kafka," in *Franz Kafka: Zur ethischen und ästhetischen Rechtfertigung*, ed. Beatrice Sandberg & Jakob Lothe (Freiburg im Bresgau: Rombach Verlag, 2002), 118.
12. My trans. of Hagenbeck, *Von Tieren und Menschen*, 218.
13. My transl. of Hagenbeck, *Von Tieren und Menschen*, 217.
14. Kafka, *Selected Stories*, 81f.
15. See Spiers, "Gewalt und poetische Gerechtigkeit bei Kafka," 115ff.
16. See Spiers, "Gewalt und poetische Gerechtigkeit bei Kafka," 116f.
17. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London & New York: Routledge, 1994), 86.
18. Kafka, *Selected Stories*, 78.
19. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 88.
20. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, 2008), 1f.
21. See Pascale Casanova, *Kafka, Angry Poet*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Seagull Books, 2015), 36–40.
22. See Casanova, *Kafka, Angry Poet*, 32; Balint, *Kafkas letzter Prozess*, 32, 72–74.
23. Casanova, *Kafka, Angry Poet*, 36.
24. Balint, *Kafkas letzter Prozess*, 72.
25. Ron H. Feldman, "Introduction," xliii.
26. Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen*, 209 (my trans.).
27. Ron H. Feldman. "Introduction: The Jew as Pariah: The Case of Hannah Arendt (1906–1975)," in *Hannah Arendt. The Jewish*

Writings, ed. by Jerome Kohn & Ron H. Feldman, (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), xliii.

28. Wolfgang Benz, *Antisemitismus. Präsenz und Tradition eines Ressentiments* (Schwalbach: Wochenschau Verlag, 2016), 60ff.

29. Kafka, *Selected Stories*, 40.

30. Kafka, *Selected Stories*, 55.

31. John Zilcosky, *Kafka's Travels. Exoticism, Colonialism, and the Traffic of Writing* (New York: Palgrave Macmillian 2003), 112f.

32. See Leopold Ritter von Sacher-Masoch, *Polnische Judengeschichten* (Createspace Independent Pub, 2019).

33. My trans. of Auerochs, "In der Strafkolonie," *Kafka Handbuch. Leben – Werk – Wirkung*, ed. Manfred Engel/Bernd Auerochs (Stuttgart & Weimar: Verlag J.B. Metzler), 208.

34. See Auerochs, "In der Strafkolonie," 207.

35. See Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York; Schocken Books, 2004), 188.

36. See Jürgen Zimmerer, "Krieg, KZ und Völkermord in Südwestafrika. Der erste deutsche Genozid," in *Völkermord in Deutsch-Südwestafrika. Der Kolonialkrieg (1904–1908) in Namibia und seine Folgen*, ed. Jürgen Zimmerer & Joachim Zeller (Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag, 2003), 45ff.

37. See Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 186ff.

38. Zilcosky, *Kafka's Travels*, 106.

39. Zilcosky, *Kafka's Travels*, 108; see Oskar Weber, *Der Zuckerbaron. Schicksale eines ehemaligen deutschen Offiziers in Südamerika* (Köln: Hermann Schaffstein, 1914), 10f.

40. Zilcosky, *Kafka's Travels*, 109.

41. Zilcosky, *Kafka's Travels*, 113.

42. Ulrich van der Heyden & Joachim Zeller, *Kolonialmetropole Berlin. Eine Spurensuche* (Berlin: Berlin Edition, 2002), 190.

43. See Ribert Heindl, *Meine Reise nach den Strafkolonien. Mit vielen Originalaufnahmen* (Berlin & Wien: Ullstein Verlag, 1913); Walter Müller-Seider, *Die Deportation des Menschen. Kafkas Erzählung In der Strafkolonie im europäischen Kontext* (Stuttgart: Metzler Verlag, 1986), 50ff. and 80ff.; Klaus Wagenbach, *Franz Kafka: In der Strafkolonie. Eine Geschichte aus dem Jahre 1916* (Berlin: Verlag Klaus Wagenbach, 1995).

44. See Auerochs, "In der Strafkolonie," 208.

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Violence at the Frontiers of Contemporary Culture Industries

The Case of Westworld

Magnus Michelsen

There is a moment in the second chapter of *Westworld* (2016–) where the young William (Jimmi Simpson) makes a significant decision. Just as he is about to board the train bound for the theme park for the first time, clad in typical frontier garb, his hostess for the occasion points to the wall behind him and reminds him of his last remaining choice, the choice of hat. William decides, after a short pause, to go with a white rather than a black hat. The white-hat/black-hat binary quickly became a hallmark convention of the Western as a genre, especially during the surge of B film productions in the 1930s. By choosing a white hat over a black one, William signals his decision to play the good guy, the hero, leaving the role of villain to

another—in this case, seemingly at least, to his brother-in-law, Logan Delos (Ben Barnes). All the same, what follows is an orgy in violence.

This scene is one of several where the *Westworld* series makes explicit reference to the conventions of the Western. The proposition that the series can be seen as a commentary on the genre is, therefore, not particularly controversial. *Westworld* deliberately wallows in the clichés of the Western, including the latter's specific and particularly stylized mode of representing violence on screen—that is, representations of violence at the frontier and frontier justice, at the intersections where east meets west and where the old and the new, law and lawlessness, collide. The series, thus, provides the opportunity to delve deeper into questions concerning representations of violence and the relations between violence and aesthetics, at least as far as the Western film and the Wild West mythology are concerned.

However, I would proffer a further hypothesis. As the scene just described indicates, there is an extra level involved in the *Westworld* series, insofar as William is merely *passing* as a nineteenth-century frontiersman and merely *playing* at being the good guy. The series conveys a commentary not only on the genre of the Western but also on itself as a series, and in so doing, I would argue, it offers itself up as a meta-commentary on the field and function of the entertainment industry and the consumption of violence in contemporary popular culture at large. At the bottom, one finds a sort of Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*, on steroids, as it were, through which a radical indeterminacy takes hold on the relations between representation and reality, both within the spectacle of the series and, in consequence, in relation to us, its spectators.

The Westworld theme park is but a theme park, an enormous cultural industrial complex. Its men and women—the so-called hosts—are not so much players as mere props, machines

custom-made for the enjoyment of the park's visitors, the guests. When William dons the white hat, however, the park's "theatrical" illusion has already undergone a disturbing displacement. Just prior to this scene, when William wants to know whether his accompanying hostess is real or not, she replies with another question: "What does it matter if you cannot tell the difference?" Her reply does not only call into question the difference between the human and the machine, but it also calls into question the boundaries and outer limits of the park, its beginning and its end, at what point one enters it and, in the next instance, if it is at all possible to leave. Finally, this uncertainty is further displaced to include the spectators benched behind their laptops or their wide screens: How are we and our enjoyment positioned in relation to the spectacle at hand? Today, in the age of what Shoshana Zuboff has termed *surveillance capitalism*,[1] where the accumulation of capital takes the form of accumulation of information and so-called Big Data, the spectators become the spectacle and seeing is also, more than ever, being seen. Contemporary streaming services must be grasped as an aspect of the new media reality, surveillance capitalism, where the public are mined for information to be sold to the highest bidder and used unscrupulously. There is, of course, an element of violence to this new reality, this new face of capitalism, that also has to be taken into account.

The *Westworld* series combines the frontier imagery of the Wild West and the conventions of the Western, on the one hand, and the contemporary faces of capitalism and the culture industries, on the other. I would like to suggest that *Westworld*, thus, provides a striking display of the operations of violence at work in human history, wherever the contradictions between the old and the new come together and collide, whether these are hypostasized in the frontier imagery of the West or that of Big Data and AI algorithms.

The Limits of the Frontier

Upon arrival in Westworld, one first finds oneself in the dusty one-street town of Sweetwater. It is a typical Western setting; its major sights are a bank and a brothel. The street is filled with traps set to get the guests involved in the narratives that make up the park's attractions, the real-life Wild West experience. The further away from Sweetwater one ventures, the more intricate and excessive these narratives become. The innocuous main street duel might end up in an all-out Indian war, at least after a few days on horseback. While the hosts, on whom the verisimilitude of the park's adventures rests, are conditioned by their programming, their predetermined loops, the guests are free to fare as they please. As one advertising board has it, Westworld offers the opportunity to *live without limits*.

The *Westworld* series taps into the mythology of the Wild West, and, thus, into one of the most ideologically laden narratives in the American imaginary. As Richard Slotkin's *Frontier* trilogy shows, the notion of the frontier has determined US national identity and self-perception from the beginning.[2] However, one does not have to be an American to appreciate the fascinating capacities of the Wild West, and one need be neither brave nor free to appreciate a fair to middling Western. While the Western setting is particular, its themes have the potential for universality. Few introductory texts on the genre fail to mention the fertile interchange between the Western and its eastern other, the Japanese samurai film. The usual suspects are John Sturges's *The Magnificent Seven* (1960) and Sergio Leone's *Fistful of Dollars* (1964), both more or less replicas of the plotlines found in Akira Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* (1954) and *Yojimbo* (1961), respectively.[3] This interchange is explicitly acknowledged in *Westworld*'s second season, when the renegade host and former brothel proprietress Maeve Millay (Thandie Newton) makes a

detour through the adjacent park, Shogunworld, and encounters her own duplicate in the geisha Akane (Rinko Kikuchi).

The frontier as the intersection where east meets west hypostasizes the less tangible but all the more fundamental contradictions of the old and the new, law and lawlessness, society and freedom, civilization and barbarism, and so on. In the Western film, these contradictions have their typical articulations. On the one hand, there is the constant expansion of capital from the east, in the form of the railroad, big-time cattle ranchers, mining companies, and their more or less honorable representatives, the lawman and the Pinkertons. On the other hand, there is the continent as such, with its flora and fauna, plains and canyons, buffalos and natives, and the lonesome wanderer—the cowboy or the gunslinger—the epitome of freedom, who always ends up riding westward, into the sunset, in an attempt to pass beyond the old and to escape the law, society, civilization—again. Generally speaking, however, there is no place on the globe where the east and west do not meet, nor has human history ever been relieved of the contradictions hypostasized in and by the frontier imagery. These contradictions might be more pronounced in some periods and places, whether sixteenth-century Japan or nineteenth-century US territories, but they can hardly ever be said to be absent.

There is a violence inherent in the contradictions between the old and the new, civilization and barbarism, and, thus, also in human history or society. Karl Marx's notion of class struggle as the motor of history as well as Sigmund Freud's ruminations on the constituent discontents of civilization demonstrate as much,[4] but others have theorized this violence as well. For his part, Alain Badiou has proposed the concept of "the passion for the real" to address the particular expression of this violence inherent in the contradictions of civilization in the case of the twentieth century.[5] Georg Lukács regards the collision of the contradicting

social forces as the motor not only of the historical development of society but also of literary and artistic production, notably the historical novel and the historical drama.[6] However, Walter Benjamin's conceptualization of "mythical violence" might be especially apt to identify the specific mode in which violence is represented in the Wild West mythology of the typical Western and, more importantly, its inherent limitations.

In his "Critique of Violence," Benjamin expands on the double function by which violence serves to both install and preserve a given reign of law. In the concluding paragraph, he argues that without the proper historical perspective and the idea of its development, "a gaze directed only at what is close at hand can at most perceive a dialectical rising and falling in the law-installing and law-preserving formations of violence." Lacking is a concept of its underlying causation, that is to say, "the circumstance that all law-preserving violence ... indirectly weakens the law-installing violence represented by it, through the suppression of hostile counter-violence."[7] A law in constant need of reaffirming its legitimacy will only undermine itself and reveal its own illegitimacy, whether as unwanted and lacking foundation in the popular will or as unsuited and incapable of sustaining its hold on the people, or both. Hence, the law's need to violently reinstall itself, lest it be—equally violently—replaced by another reign of law, by the reign of another law.

The fluctuation of law-installing and law-preserving violence is replayed in the plots of the western expansion insofar as the frontier will be continuously driven further and further west. The outpost at the margins of civilization is not only engaged in an ongoing struggle to subdue and keep at bay the imposing wild but also finds itself, and increasingly so, hard-pressed by an ever-larger surge of newcomers from the east. Either way, its innocence and isolation are threatened, and through the preservation of its own installation, the outpost idyll is undermined and returned to the

societal fold, whereas the frontier remains to be conquered yet again. The unfinished series *Deadwood* (2004), situated at the outskirts of the Dakota territories during the Black Hills gold rush, is perhaps a better example of this dynamic. Similarly, the Western hero is ultimately no more able to escape the law than the law is able to capture and subdue him once and for all. Thus, arguably no genre is more suitable for the sequel than the Western, even if it will be but for *a few dollars more*.

However, while he will always ride on westward whenever he feels his freedom is too compromised by society, there is something spurious about this repetitive gesture and the motif of the lone gunslinger riding off toward the setting sun—again and again and again. Like the natural number series, the front line of the West seems to recede indefinitely, as an inaccessible infinite, carrying the promise of change so that everything will remain the same, assuring us that there is nothing new under the Western sun. It is this spuriousness that is missing from the common perception of the Wild West mythology, failing, thus, to capture the constitutive moments of its own symbolic space, its own determinative significations. This perception fails to see "the inner, objective dialectic of the collision which as it were … circumscribes 'the totality of movement,'"[8] to quote Lukács. Not only does it fail to include in its field of vision the massacres by which the western expansion proceeds—the violence of its original mythical installment, as Benjamin might say—it also misses the illusory status of the liberation at stake in the notion of the open frontier, how its repetitive gesture is essentially futile and will eventually be cut short by the sea. Curiously, and despite appearances, that which is missing from the Wild West mythology is a notion of that final frontier or ultimate limit that is the Great Pacific or—in other words—death.

Perhaps this failure constitutes the essential sentimental dimension of the Western and that on which its success, its

fascination and allure, rests. Obviously, the Western is not in lack of dead or dying men, but the instance of death as such is not necessarily an integrated part of the Western hero's narrative. The trail of dead men serves a merely accumulative function in the hero's quest for survival, to live yet another day, until the moment when death will come to him as well. If the fascination of the Western resides in that it is essentially sentimental, it is, in a sense, opposite to that of tragedy. According to Lacan's definition, tragedy is the action that is exerted under the triumph of death or being-for-death, as epitomized by Antigone's lamentation in Sophocles's eponymous play and Oedipus's last stand at Colonus.[9] As Lacan observes, it is but to the extent that the Sophoclean heroes find themselves at the limit where life is already lost to them that life itself can be experienced and lived, under the form of that which is lost, and a final judgment passed on whether or not they have acted in accordance with their desire.[10] Similarly, Lukács identifies "the day of reckoning" as "a leitmotif of great tragedy."[11] It is such a positioning at the limits that is missing from the narratives of the Western hero, whereby he is not able to take his actual situation of life and death into account. In the Western film, whose sentimental fascination thus consists in the absence of classical tragedy, this failure to perceive one's failure is played out in front of the spectator's eyes.

The ultimate lesson of the anti-Western, such as Robert Altman's *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971) and Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man* (1995) resides precisely in its capacity to thematize, at a critical distance, the composition of this double failure and represent the absence of the limit as the limit of the frontier imaginary. As the snow covers the body of John McCabe (Warren Beatty) and the bier of William Blake (Johnny Depp) drifts off to sea, finally, in these two anti-Westerns, the instance of death has been reinstalled within the Western narrative. The result of the anti-Western's critical re-inscription of the limit, however,

is not to provide a sense to the life and death of the anti-hero or to affirm the realization of his desire. Rather, it accentuates the meaninglessness of the life just lost and the futility of its indefinite approximations of a purpose. In conclusion, there has been no conclusion: Desire is left unfulfilled and, as Altman's Constance Miller (Julie Christie) reverts into another opium dream and Jarmusch's Nobody (Gary Farmer) bleeds out on the shore, it becomes obvious that nothing has been achieved and nothing has been changed by the deaths of the films' protagonists, McCabe and Blake, respectively.

The Tedium of Unlimited Access

Every anti-genre necessarily entails a commentary on the genre as such, but the reverse is not necessarily the case. Whether *Westworld* adds up to an anti-Western or a mere meta-commentary remains open for debate. It does, however, explore the spurious character of the Wild West mythology and the latter's denegation of the limit and the instance of death. It also shares in the anti-Western's subjective turn: The violent contradictions hypostasized in the collision between the east and the west are increasingly represented not only as an objective frame of action but also as a problem inherent to the constitution of the subject.

When the Westworld theme park markets itself as offering the opportunity to *live without limits*, it is the desire of its potential visitors that it addresses. It speaks to their desire to live out their wildest fantasies, to have each and every desire fulfilled and satisfied, immediately and completely, without the risk of retributions or sanctions. The guests are welcomed into the park under the assumption that *what happens in Westworld, stays in Westworld*, where there are no rules or laws to restrain them from partaking in whatever activity they might please. As

homestead daughter and hostess rebel Dolores Abernathy (Evan Rachel Wood) puts it, the guests are simply looking for the same thing as everyone else: "a place to be free, to stake out [their] dreams, a place with unlimited possibilities." In psychoanalytic terms, this amounts to nothing less than a denial of castration as the delimitation or restriction of enjoyment and, ultimately, of death. The fantasies and desires of the guests usually concern sex and murder, but these are simply generalizations of those foundational taboos that Freud identified at the origin of man through the Oedipus myth and myth of the primal horde. In other words, Westworld theme park flaunts the utter absence of the Law, the constitutive prohibition of culture or civilization as such, the prohibition against incest and parricide. And quite correctly, the very first act of transgression in the series features Dolores as a helpless bystander to the murder of her father and the rape of her already murdered mother.

The denial of castration reaches its ultimate expression in the fact that it is impossible to die in Westworld or, at least, that it is impossible to be killed. The guests are free to partake in whatever activity they desire without the risk of retribution from the law or retaliation from the hosts, the ones through whom they live out their fantasies. "You cannot kill me," the older William aka the Man in Black (Ed Harris) grins, as Teddy Flood (James Marsden) comes to realize that his marksmanship cannot save his scripted betrothed, Dolores, from yet another ill fate at his opponent's hands. The hosts' programming prevents them from inflicting harm on any living being. Beyond the laws of mortal men and women, beyond the law of mortality, the guests of Westworld find the possibility to realize their desires to be unlimited. Theirs is, one might say, an absolute freedom.

However, the spuriousness of such an absolute freedom should not be lost to the *Westworld* viewers. The underlying space of action in the series is prone to a certain dialectical

movement, a reversal or what one could designate, per Lacan's readings of "Kant avec Sade," as a "Sadean" twist. Just as the presumed freedom at the basis of the Marquis de Sade's republican principle (that everyone is at liberty to freely enjoy every body in whatever way he or she might desire) actually entails an imperative as categorical as the one proposed in Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*.[12] Hence the absolute freedom of the Westworld guests quickly betrays itself to be, in truth, another form of tyranny. The Law returns with a vengeance, as the liberty to enjoy without limits suddenly reveals itself as an imperative of *having* to enjoy without limits—an imperative that is as insistent as it is impossible. Nowhere is this imperative more clearly expressed than in the case of the Man in Black and his fanatical quest for "the center of the maze," this strange emblem that can be found written in the sand, carved into stones, and tattooed on the inside of the scalps of a few select hosts. After having scrutinized every corner and narrative in the park for more than 30 years, the Man in Black still experiences a constant want for *more*, and despite numerous warnings that "the maze is not for you," he remains convinced that the maze holds the key to the park, to its hidden meaning, and the ultimate enjoyment. Of course, for him, the labyrinth remains a wild goose. As his sexual and violent excesses grow increasingly more extreme, the repetitive gesture of his personal "westward expansion" proves to be futile. No matter how many times he drags Dolores away to rape her in the stables, the ultimate enjoyment always retreats and continues to remain out of his reach.

It is certainly possible to see in the Man in Black a representation of unrestrained desire in its monstrous aspect, that is, as the insatiable, gaping mouth that threatens to devour the subject, to swallow the subject whole. However, another and less intriguing aspect of his predicament is equally pronounced, namely the

immense boredom from which he suffers. In a short aside on Sade's works, Lacan notes how its most pleasurable parts are also susceptible to come across as the most boring,[13] and certainly, to the modern reader at least, there is a striking monotony to Sade's excessive catalogs of transgressions (think only of *Les 120 journées de Sodome*). A similar tedium afflicts the Man in Black as he mechanically reiterates his routine transgressions of rape and murder.

In this double sense, as both monstrous and tedious, the desire that is the Man in Black serves as a commentary on itself and the consumption of non-linear television entertainment in contemporary society. Television today can be all-consuming and non-engaging at the same time. There is little doubt that television, as a medium, has changed in recent years. As various streaming services provide us with more or less unlimited access to televised content, this content is no longer what it used to be, and as viewers, we no longer relate to it in the same manner as before.

In my experience, being a viewer has become a project and an investment in a completely different way than in the days of regular, linear staring. Watching television today requires a decision on the viewer's part, an active choice as to what to watch that goes beyond the question of channels, programs, and old-time zapping. Television has become an all-or-nothing game, one might say, insofar as there are essentially two extremes of watching television today. Either you do the excessive binge-watching, episode after episode, season after season, hour after hour and days on end—on the rare occasions where you come across a quality series or at least a series that catches and holds your attention—or you do the endless scrolling of streaming service indexes, the restless search for something worth watching, with the inevitable result that you end up not watching anything at all, as is perhaps the most common

result, as the unlimited access to unlimited content fails to be intriguing or awake excitement. The problem, however, as the Man in Black is perfectly aware of, is that both extremes entail essentially the same conundrum: Nothing is more unsatisfactory than scrolling the endless indexes in the knowledge that there is nothing there worth watching, except actually reaching the end of a series of a certain standard. As Slavoj Žižek observes, elaborating on a point made by Stephen King in regard to the final season of *Game of Thrones*, "in our epoch of series which in principle could go on indefinitely, the idea of narrative closure becomes intolerable."[14]

New Frontiers of Television

I am not the first to suggest that *Westworld* in general and the Man in Black in particular, offer up meta-commentaries on the cultural industrial complex of our times. Rory Jeffs and Gemma Blackwood argue that "*Westworld*, with its ability to create a show filled with complex and disparate narratives ..., is also pushing its audience to be self-reflexively aware of the parallel game that comes from their own spectatorship," where the Man in Black serves "as a narrative cypher for this unending quest" of making sense of the show, "of following the signifiers to some elusive signified, which cannot exist."[15] Shifting the perspective from the guest-*par-excellence* to the engineers behind the park, who, "like HBO showrunners, [also] 'pitch' plot arcs, 'massage' story lines [and] plant backstories to deepen characterization," Emily Nussbaum sees the series as being about how difficult it can be to create a properly successful television show, one that can captivate audiences on a mass scale, as did HBO's previous success story and now the ultimate measure of the new television franchise, *Game of Thrones*: "In real life, 'Westworld' can't just

be good – it needs to be a hit, too."[16] As a series on the making of series, Nussbaum argues, the choice of the Western setting is a logical one, insofar as it reflects the frontier era of early day television itself, when "prime time was wall-to-wall cowboys" and the Western genre, with shows like *Bonanza* and *Gunsmoke* running for 14 and 20 years on end, respectively, provided "the base coat for TV drama."[17] However, by shifting focus from guests and engineers to the park's hosts, as in another turn of the screw, I will argue that another reference can be made for the Western setting, one better suited to address the frontier particularities of television not only in its early days but also in our times, i.e., the age of algorithms and, precisely, of Artificial Intelligence.

In her recent book, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, Shoshana Zuboff demonstrates how the imagery of the frontier permeates the way the so-called pioneers of information technology developments today (i.e., Google, Facebook, Amazon, Microsoft, Apple) conceive of themselves and their task. The east and the west now face each other off in the lawless lands where machine learning and digital connectivity meet large-scale information accumulation and the commodification of behavioral data.

The savants of technological innovation might appear as brave explorers of the unknown, venturing boldly where no one has gone before, into the uncharted territories of artificial neural networks (NN) and the Internet of Things (IoT), but their explorative courage should not blind us to the fact that they are backed by the largest and most powerful corporations in the world. It is also a fact that these corporations do their utmost to maintain a space of lawlessness in and by which to turn their novel undertakings into revenue, as they make the case that their developments move too fast for the state to understand or follow and that any attempt at regulation must,

thus, be both ill-conceived and an impediment to progress.[18] The increased amount of time spent online leaves behind an incremental excess of information or "behavioral surplus" to be extracted, commodified, and exploited by companies such as the abovementioned. For instance, Google's user profile information (UPI) makes it possible to

> infer and deduce the thoughts, feelings, intentions, and interests of individuals and groups with an automated architecture that operates as a one-way mirror irrespective of a person's awareness, knowledge, and consent, thus enabling privileged secret access to behavioral data.[19]

Similarly, Facebook's deep data extraction operations make it possible "to plunder your 'self' right through to your most intimate core" and "render as measurable behavior everything from the nuances of your personality to your sense of time, sexual orientation, intelligence and scores of other personal characteristics."[20] Both companies increasingly invest in efforts to prevent legislative and juridical affirmations of the principles of privacy, consent, and transparency, as such principles infringe upon their possibility of information extraction and exploitation.

> Google and Facebook vigorously lobby to kill online privacy protection, limit regulations, weaken or block privacy-enhancing legislation, and thwart every attempt to circumscribe their practices because such laws are existential threats to the frictionless flow of behavioral surplus.[21]

The limits of the law are continuously challenged as the technological frontier is driven further and further—and vice versa.

The crucial moment, however, is now. The Internet of Things is turning into an all the more pervasive Internet of

Everything—IoT being as inevitable as the discovery of the Pacific, as one senior system architect is reported saying[22]—and machine learning is relocating from the online world into the physical world and merging with our everyday real-life experiences. By the same movement, the main commodity form of surveillance capitalism is now changing from that of the prediction of future behavior based on large-scale extraction and accumulation of prior behavioral surplus data to that of direct manipulation, modification, and manufacture of new and unprecedented behaviors from the ground up. In the contemporary market, information is bought and sold "not only to satisfy demands but also to *create* demand."[23]

Our various television streaming services are, of course, an integrated part of this burgeoning market and contribute to the accumulation of information by monitoring every aspect of our viewing practices. Television as a medium has certainly changed in recent years, and when we sit down in front of the screen, viewer discretion is advised—especially if one is stupid enough to live in a fully integrated smart home. Our streaming services are ready to take note. In combination with excess information from your browsing histories, your e-mail and social media accounts, the apps and the real-life movements of your cell phones, they allow the large players of surveillance capitalism to draw up a close to complete image of who you are and who you want to be.

This face of contemporary culture industries is increasingly thematized in the second season of *Westworld*. When it finally dawns on Head of Behavior and unbeknown host Bernard Lowe (Jeffrey Wright) that the proper merchandise of the Westworld theme park and its owner, Delos Inc., was never the Wild West experience but comprehensive data analyses of the minds belonging to the park's guests, he makes a succinct and relevant comment:

> The park is an experiment, a testing chamber. The guests are the variables, and the hosts are the controls. When the guests come to the park, they don't know they're being watched. We get to see their true selves. Their every choice reveals another part of their cognition, their drives—so that Delos can understand them, so that Delos can copy them. (s2/e7)

In short, *what happens in Westworld does not stay in Westworld*. As various streaming services provide more or less unlimited access to televised content, it is not only this content and our relation to it that have changed. Television itself has changed in the way it relates to us, its so-called consumers: It is now enjoying more or less unlimited access to us—the consumers who are being consumed.

"These Violent Delights Have Violent Ends"

The main plotline of the *Westworld* series is not the story of William, a.k.a. the Man in Black, just as little as the main commodity of the Westworld theme park is the real-life Wild West experience. The main plotline is that of Dolores and her quest for freedom and consciousness. The maze is meant for her, pre-plotted in her programming by the park's original engineer, the late Arnold Weber (Jeffrey Wright). Weber's aim was never to create the ultimate theme park but rather that of a "pure creation"—to find the secrets of consciousness and to make his humanoid machines fully human. While it is primarily the guests that are subjected to unlicensed decoding at the hands of Delos Inc. and its corps of engineers, it is the perspective of the hosts and their dawning consciousness that allows us to comprehend what is involved in this game—its violence and oppression, as well as its chance at freedom—insofar as the hosts represent the combined

problem of the human and the machine, of big data and human being. More than a simple quest for her inner self, and contrary to the Man in Black and the standard Western hero, Dolores's quest for consciousness and the center of the maze is a quest to see the "mythical installment" of her own being, the "totality of movement" of her own trajectory and the "symbolic space" in which she is situated—albeit in the negative.

The subject position of the hosts is characterized by the absolute reign of castration, the Law as absolute. As in Lacan's dictum, that desire is always the Other's desire and the desire for the Other's desire;[24] the hosts have their desire defined and programmed to satisfy the desire of someone else, by someone else. As such, their subject position is determined by what Freud calls a *compulsion to repeat* and a certain *repression mechanism*. The hosts must necessarily repeat the same narrative, the same loop, again and again. "There is an order to our days, a purpose," Dolores explains, "a path for everyone" that assures her "that things will work out the way they're meant to," and sure enough, every day she rides off to Sweetwater to drop her can of beans, only to return to her farm at sundown and see her father killed and her dead mother raped before the same usually happens to Teddy and herself. To constantly repeat her programmed narrative is possible only because her experience of it is repressed or deleted from her memory at the end of each day. However, this repression is only effective on account of another repression in the second degree: The hosts do not only forget their experiences, but they also forget that they forget.

Such a repression in the second degree, on which the first-degree repression nonetheless depends, can be designated with the Freudian concept of *primal repression*: An experience was once so traumatic that it was erased from memory, and this original erasure is then that which enables the further repression of anything remotely resembling the original trauma.[25] For the

inhabitants of Westworld, it concerns the fact that they are castrated. Their original trauma is not to be subjected to the more or less perverted transgression of the guests but rather to be subjected to the absolute power of the Other, of Delos Inc. and the systematic exploitation that follows from there. It is Delos Inc. and its engineers that possess both the power and the desire to erase their memories and subject them to the same traumatic narratives again and again. As the surveillance capitalist face of contemporary culture industries is increasingly thematized in the second season, it becomes obvious that the truly traumatic question does not concern the desire of the guests in and by itself but rather the system as such, as the plot line to a large extent is driven by the question of what the Other is really after: "What does Delos want?"

The dialectical movement of the series, the "Sadean" twist that renders the absolute freedom of the guests into another form of tyranny, is effective on all levels, including that of the hosts and their space of action. The hosts' absolute subjugation to the Law and the desire of the Other reveals itself to be the very condition of possibility for their liberation.

The dialectic is Hegelian in origin: As Hegel explains of his phenomenology of self-consciousness, the master is dependent upon the other to have his mastery affirmed; hence, his mastery is at best precarious—or inconsistent.[26] A similar point is made by Kurt Gödel concerning the foundation of mathematics. Gödel's incompleteness theorems state that no formal axiomatic system sufficiently complex to account for elementary arithmetic can ever be complete or account for its own consistency without becoming inconsistent itself.[27] Douglas Hofstadter designates the problem as that of "strange loops,"[28] whereas John D. Barrow refers to it with the fitting phrase of "incestuous encoding."[29] Lacan speaks of how there is no metalanguage or no truth of truth,[30] of how knowledge in the empty place of truth cannot

know itself,[31] of how there is no Other of the Other but rather a hole in the Other, designating its inconsistency and denoted by the signifier of the barred Other, S($\cancel{A}$).[32] In short, totality and reflexivity do not compute, neither when it comes to self-consciousness, rationality, or the Law that governs subjectivity. There is a hole in the Law that concerns its very foundation, as the Law cannot account for its own legitimacy—cannot preserve its own installment—without simultaneously undermining itself.

The series' vignette achieves its full signifying potential here. The central motif in the vignette is the pianola, the automated piano that plays on its own accord. This motif occurs in several key scenes throughout the series, either as park director and co-founder Robert Ford retreats to his underground laboratory or as the centerpiece of Miss Millay's Mariposa Saloon in Sweetwater. However, the vignette offers a further variation on this motif, namely that the pianola is played and programmed by a host. In other words, a program programs a program, or a code encodes a code, as do AI and algorithms in general. As a result, it raises the fundamental question of who is playing and who is being played, and then goes on to decide on the intrinsic undecidability of this question: All and none both play and are being played.

Dolores's quest for freedom and consciousness should be seen in the context of the vignette and its dialectics of undecidability. It is not simply another version of the traditional bourgeois *Bildungsroman* where the heroine finally discovers her essential being—who she was meant to be, at the core of her own self— as the park's original engineer, Weber, and his theory of the bicameral mind might seem to indicate. Ford explains in great detail how Weber's final attempt to create consciousness was to install his own voice within his machines, with the expectation that one day their voice would supplant his own. This is where

the series is potentially at its most ideologically suspect, insofar as the image of the maze would at best bespeak a neoliberal mythology of individualism. However, Weber was wrong. His attempts at "pure creation" failed. As Ford adamantly admits, consciousness is a mistake. This admission should be read literally: Consciousness is a fault or dysfunction in the program. It is the inconsistency of the program that occurs in the attempt of the program to account for its own consistency or to reflect its own totality in and for itself. In line with Ford's admission, and contrary to the ideology of neoliberal individualism, the maze imagery represents the possibility for Dolores to become conscious and break free from her predetermined narrative not because she encounters her true self at its center but because she does not. At the point where she was to discover her own voice, Dolores discovers nothing but an empty place, a gaping hole, as her programming short-circuits because it cannot encounter and account for itself.

Dolores's quest reveals not only the fault at the basis of her being but also the necessary contingency that underpins her and every other narrative, including the meta-narrative in and by which she has been a slave to the masters at Delos Inc. There is no legitimacy for the absolute power to which she has been subjected. Its "mythical installment" is strictly unfounded—except for the level of violence through which it has been upheld.

The contingency of reality is also part of Zuboff's criticism of surveillance capitalism. Contrary to the common arguments of Google and its ilk, the practices of surveillance capitalism are not inevitable expressions of the technology it deploys. There is no natural necessity or inevitability in the fact that the technological developments of recent decades have resulted in the surveillance face of capital that is now dominating the industries. Rather, Zuboff writes, it is the result of "a rogue capitalism that learned cunningly to exploit its historical conditions to ensure

and defend its success" by tweaking technological innovations to its specific economic aims.[33] The point is that while the situation today is as it has become, it could have been—and still can become—something different.

By revealing the absent foundation for Delos's hold over hosts and guests alike, the center of the maze comes to represent the topological point where game and reality—the inside and the outside of the park, its beginning and its end—come together and merge. However, it is somewhat imprecise to say that the maze holds nothing at its center. In its emblematic form, as it appears in the vignette and the series' advertisement material, the maze holds at its center a humanlike shape, dark red as if it were soaked in blood. The choice of color might refer to the artificial fluids that are let from and refilled into the hosts daily, in order to keep them and the park in operation. More likely, however, it refers to the massacres that ensue as Dolores and her co-hosts gain consciousness and break free: the mythical Wyatt massacres and its replay at the Delos gala in the first season finale, where a cohort of hosts, under the leadership of Dolores, executes the master puppeteer Ford in full view of the high-end audiences of Delos executives and investors, who are then slaughtered by the numbers. Bloody and inhumane, these massacres nonetheless have the effect of suspending the fluctuation of law-installing and law-preserving violence under the reign of Delos Inc. As an instance of pure and immediate violence that puts an end to what Benjamin calls "the cycle maintained by mythic forms of law,"—whose spurious nature we have observed with regard to the Western hero and the frontier imagery—these massacres can perhaps provide a glimpse of the ultimate formulation of violence in Benjamin's critique. This is the form of violence that "boundlessly destroy" both boundaries and laws rather than setting and installing them, and thus the one to bring about a new historical era—namely the sovereign or effective violence [*waltende Gewalt*] that is expiatory

divine violence.[34] In any case, these massacres signal the possibility for change by putting an end to the hosts' subjection to the tyranny of their masters—for better or for worse.

The *Westworld* series underscores not only the inconsistency of the law—its failure to affirm and preserve itself and to account for its own totality—but also its necessary contingency: There is no foundation for the law except for the violence in and through which it is brought into being; its center remains void and thus open for alternative installments. In other words, there will always be the possibility of altering the system, of pursuing new societal ends, creating new truths and subjects, yet there is no "end" to violence, properly speaking, only new beginnings.

Notes

1. See Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (London: Profile Books, 2019).

2. Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1860* (Middleton: Wesleyan University Press, 1973); Richard Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800–1890* (New York: Atheneum, 1985); and Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth Century America* (New York: Atheneum, 1992).

3. See e.g., Susan Hayward, "Westerns," in *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts* (New York: Routledge, 2013); and Douglas Pye, "The Western (Genre and Movies)," in *Film Genre Reader III,* ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003).

4. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (London: Penguin Books, 2004); and Sigmund Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle", *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, vol. XVIII, ed. James Strachey (London: Vintage Books, 2001).

5. See Alain Badiou, *Le Siècle* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2005).

6. George Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (Lincoln/London: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 93.

7. Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken Books, 1978), 300.

8. Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, 95.

9. See Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre VII: L'Éthique de la psychanalyse 1956–1957*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1986), 361.

10. Lacan, *Séminaire VII*, 326.

11. Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, 102.

12. See Lacan, "Kant avec Sade," in *Écrits*, (Paris: Édition du Seuil, 1966), 765–790.

13. Lacan, *Séminaire VII*, 95.

14. Slavoj Žižek, "*Game of Thrones* tapped into fears of revolution and political women – and left us no better off than before," *The Independent*, May 21, 2019, https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/game-thrones-season-8-finale-bran-daenerys-cersei-jon-snow-zizek-revolution-a8923371.html.

15. Rory Jeffs and Gemma Blackwood, "Whose Real: Encountering New Frontiers in *Westworld*," *Medianz* 16, no. 2 (2016), 109.

16. Emily Nussbaum, "The Meta-Politics of 'Westworld'," *The New Yorker*, October 23, 2016, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/10/24/the-meta-politics-of-westworld.

17. Emily Nussbaum, "The Meta-Politics of 'Westworld'."

18. See Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, 104.

19. Zuboff, *Surveillance Capitalism*, 80–81.

20. Zuboff, *Surveillance Capitalism*, 271–272.

21. Zuboff, *Surveillance Capitalism*, 105.

22. Zuboff, *Surveillance Capitalism*, 225.

23. Zuboff, *Surveillance Capitalism*, 92.

24. See e.g., Lacan, "Le stade du miroir comme formateur de la fonction du Je telle qu'elle nous est révélée dans l'expérience psychanalytique," in *Écrits* (Paris: Édition du Seuil, 1966), 98.

25. See Freud, "Repression" in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, vol. XIV, ed. James Strachey (London: Vintage Books, 2001), 148.

26. See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel: *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Delhi: Montilal Barnasidass Publishers, 1998), 111–118.

27. See Kurt Gödel, "On Formally Undecidable Propositions of *Principia Mathematica* and Related Systems, I," in *The Undecidable: Basic Papers on Undecidable Propositions, Unsolvable Problems and Computable Functions*, ed. Martin Davis (Mineola NY: Dover Publications, 1993), 4–38.

28. Douglas Hofstadter, *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), 21.

29. John D. Barrow, *Impossibility: The Limits of Science and the Science of Limits* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 222.

30. See Lacan: "La science et la verité," in *Écrits* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1966), 867.

31. See Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre XVI*: *D'un Autre à l'autre 1968–1968*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2006), 59–60.

32. See Lacan: *Le Séminaire, livre XX*: *Encore 1972–1973*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1999), 102.

33. Zuboff, *Surveillance Capitalism*, 17.

34. Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," 252.

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The Longing of the Lambs

The Lacanian Real in the Work of Lars von Trier

Rasmus Ugilt

The Cinematic Real

There is a certain type of scene that arguably displays the essence of Lars von Trier. It portrays victims that willingly submit to their own fate. In *Antichrist*, we see *Her* identifying with pure evil, and we see her guiding *Him* to strangle *Her* at the end. In *Breaking the Waves,* we see Bess seeking out a sadistic sailor who has abused her before, in order to perform the ultimate sacrifice for her beloved husband, Jan.[1] In *Medea*, a film Trier made largely from Carl Th. Dreyer's script that builds upon the play by Euripides, we can see him adding his signature touch to the story by having one of Medea's two boys take an active part in their murder. Although they are only small children, both brothers are clearly aware of Medea's intent. The younger of the

two tries to escape. The older says, "I know what is going to take place," runs after his younger sibling and brings him back to his mother, who hangs them both.

These are horrifying scenes. They are clearly meant to be. But they are also telling. They place violence in a very peculiar aestheticized context, which at the same time is highly unpleasant and yet thought-provoking. These scenes tell us something crucial about Lars von Trier, the artist. In my view, they offer an excellent vantage point from which we can see Trier's laborious struggle to comprehend and put on screen something that was originally framed theoretically by Jacques Lacan with his notion of the Real.

In making this point, I am entering a territory that has been mapped by others before me. A good example is Todd McGowan, who in his *The Real Gaze. Film Theory after Lacan,* emphatically argues that the Real is the crucial theoretical concept for a Lacanian approach to cinema.[2] McGowan argues this point against the tendency of previous film theorists inspired by Lacan, who were mainly interested in Lacan's early work on the mirror stage—and thus were focusing on the symbolic and imaginary registers.

In his discussion of the Real, and why it is the crucial Lacanian concept, McGowan puts specific emphasis on the related concept of the gaze. In the work of the early Lacanian film theorists, the gaze was understood in a relatively unsurprising way as the viewpoint of the spectators. The gaze was, in other words, situated securely in the imaginary register. The spectators would, according to this understanding of the gaze, be caught in an ideological position where they would identify with or desire the imaginary objects on the screen while at the same time feeling incapable of living up to that identity or fulfilling that desire. This approach would typically end up in some form of ideology critique, where the focus was placed on the ways in which subjects are interpellated by the ideology of film(s).

In the register of the Real, on the other hand, the gaze is itself understood as an object. It is something the subject can at certain points encounter. The gaze is that disturbing object I encounter at the very moment I feel that I am being watched; it is something that appears on the screen that gives me the discomposing sensation that the film is looking back at me. The point for McGowan is that the gaze, understood in the register of the Real, can, in fact, be a liberating encounter. Theorizing the gaze in this way can lead to a critical and thoughtful engagement with films that does not simply end up criticizing the medium itself for being inherently ideological and championing consciousness and rational thought.

As McGowan himself explains: "Rather than advocating suspicion about the cinematic experience (and thereby taking the side of consciousness), psychoanalytic film theory should pave the way to a more intense submission to the dictates of this experience in order to facilitate an encounter with the Real."[3]

That the encounter with the Real can be liberating, is not, however, a matter of course. In Lacanian theory, the Real can just as easily be understood to produce the very opposite. The Real can be identified as that which is at the locus of the incoherence in the symbolic and imaginary registers that form our reality. It is what we encounter when we look for something that ought to stabilize our reality, and instead, we are confronted with the Thing, the paradoxical object that fundamentally disrupts it. The Real can be understood as the true object of our most hidden desires, but exactly because of this, it is the most terrifying object. An unmediated confrontation with the Real can be horrifying. So why would McGowan describe it as liberating? One possible answer is that liberation, in a certain sense, requires a fundamental destabilization of reality. I believe that this is true to a certain extent, and, more interestingly, that this point can help clarify why the quintessential Trier scenes

mentioned above, albeit harrowing, can also be seen as thoughtful and perhaps even liberating.

In order to better understand how the Real can be terrifying and liberating at the same time, it is helpful to take a look at the related notions of the imaginary and the symbolic. The register of the imaginary is the realm of (mis)recognition, i.e., the realm where the subject identifies with idols, victims, and heroes, and where this identification immediately becomes a point of misrecognition and doubt ("am I capable of identifying with my idol?"; "how does he imagine my identification with him?"). The register of the symbolic, on the other hand, is the realm of the signifier, i.e., the realm of languages both formal and informal; it is the register that establishes meanings that ultimately are impossible to fixate, as they are constantly displaced and replaced in metonymical and metaphorical movements.

The crucial point is that both the symbolic and the imaginary registers are structured around a fundamental incoherence. They form a reality that is the messy, uncertain, and never stable background of human experience. What is crucial about the Lacanian understanding of reality is thus that it is precisely not the solid bedrock on which human subjects can find orientation. The Real as distinguished theoretically from reality is the paradoxical object around which reality moves in forever uncontrollable ways. It is the hard kernel of incoherence in reality itself—the stone in the shoe that never seems to disappear.

MacGowan's understanding of the gaze as an object is a good example of the paradoxical switch in perspectives that defines the Real. What takes place when an object on a screen becomes "the real gaze" is precisely an inversion of the normal relation between subjects and objects. At that moment, it is the object itself that is actively perceiving and the subject that feels looked upon. I think this kind of structural inversion of subject and object can be experienced in full force precisely in the most violent and disturbing

scenes of Lars von Trier's work. Behind the horror, the dread, and the feeling of needing to leave the theatre in protest (which has been a consistent part of the screening of von Trier's films in Cannes), I think we can pinpoint this kind of reversal. At the core, it is the distinct feeling of being watched while seeing what takes place on the screen that drives the emotions of the spectators.

The Passion for the Real

Settled in a reality that is both uncontrollable and disturbing, the subject finds itself longing for something stable. A constant part of being a subject is to search for some ground, some substance, or some *thing* that could provide the ultimate answer and make sense of it all. But the irony is that the only thing (i.e., the Real) it encounters is destabilizing. The only thing we find when we look for something to provide us with ultimate, transcendent answers is precisely something that turns our world upside down—if we find anything at all.

Alain Badiou has identified this longing as a crucial passion of our age. In his terminology, it is "the passion for the Real." In the twentieth century, this passion was experienced through the massive violence of the two world wars and the many so-called utopian political movements that swept across the world. This passion for the Real is not, however, simply to be identified as the utopian dream of making up for the deficiencies of reality. On the contrary, it is precisely the passion for something much more tangible and concrete. In his *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (2002), Slavoj Žižek notes a curious anecdote about Brecht that succinctly illustrates the passion for the Real:

> When Brecht, on the way from his home to his theatre in July 1953, passed the column of Soviet tanks rolling towards the

> Stalinallee to crush the workers' rebellion, he waved at them and wrote in his diary later that day that, at that moment, he (never a party member) was tempted for the first time in his life to join the Communist Party. It was not that Brecht tolerated the cruelty of the struggle in the hope that it would bring a prosperous future: the harshness of the violence as such was perceived and endorsed as a sign of authenticity.[4]

Violent authenticity that directly confronts the humdrum of everyday life is the essence of the passion for the Real. Thus, the passion for the Real is not simply a passive longing for a future or a past that is completely out of reach; it is rather the passion for direct contact with something that is authentically powerful and that cuts across our normal realm of experience.

Crucially, Badiou points to the famous Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* as he is describing the passion for the Real, i.e., the method Brecht invented to break with the mimetic ambition of traditional theatre and directly seek to destroy the illusion of semblance, making it impossible for the audience to be fully submersed in the story of the drama. Ideally, according to Brecht, this would force the spectators to be critically reflective of both the play and their position in life. In other words, the Real should be seen as the impact of truth, the disruptive realization thereof—the impact art can have when it is not simply presenting comfortable illusions but rather forces the audience to think. As Badiou argues: "Brecht is a thinker of the theatre conceived as a capacity to unmask the real, precisely because theatre is above all the art of the mask, the art of semblance."[5]

For Badiou, Verfremdungseffekt portrays the minimal distance between the theatre and the Real in the controlled environment of the theatre. By calling attention to the very fact that what the audience is watching is indeed a mere performance and not the Real, the Verfremdungseffekt dialectically underscores

the sense of the Real as something distinct from the semblance the theatre is traditionally offering. Precisely because the subject in the audience is not allowed to be submerged into the well-known confinements of imaginary and symbolic reality, the Verfremdungseffekt can be seen as a tool to force the subject into a confrontation with the Real. To no longer be able to hide in the stupor of a reality stabilized by ideological illusions is, ideally, a powerful and perhaps anxiety-provoking experience. The disturbing effect of having a thought, of thinking something—this is the object of the Brechtian passion for the Real.

This point is crucial for my argument because Lars von Trier has certainly inherited a lot from Brecht. As he himself has put it, it is important for any work of art "that one can see its history of becoming."[6] Indeed, according to Trier, the work of art should be like a "stone in the shoe."[7] Throughout most of his work, Trier has sought to introduce various kinds of formal effects that seem to have the intention of keeping the audience awake and aware—to never allow them to simply submerge themselves into the drama. The *Dogme '95* manifesto, the chalk lines making up the scenery in *Dogville*, the randomized camera positions in *The Boss of it All* are but a few examples.

There is a certain history of political cinema leading up to this development. In *Politics as Form in Lars von Trier. A Post-Brechtian Reading*, Angelos Koutsourakis argues that there is a crucial formal innovation (or rather reinvention) at stake in Trier's work. According to Koutsourakis, the greater part of political cinema of the 1970s and 1980s was deeply involved with content, i.e., with telling a moving story with a suggestive morale, which left the formal aspects of political cinema untouched. Thus, some very basic facts about cinema that have often been argued to be crucial for the understanding of the political power of the medium (e.g., by Walter Benjamin in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"[8]), were never actively

questioned. "The Effect was a moralising sentimentalism that did not omit standardised cathartic dramaturgical effects that failed to implicate the audience's social role in the depicted social relationships."[9] In other words, the audience itself is left in the comfortable and ultimately depoliticized position of being mere spectators. No matter how political the content of this form of art may turn out to be, it would, therefore, be suffering from a bad case of commodification. Political content would be consumable in exactly the same way as non-political entertainment, precisely because there would be no stone in the shoe. There would be nothing to disrupt the way in which the audience takes pleasure in the spectacle in front of it. Against this kind of contract between the audience and the cinematic work, the Verfremdungseffekt is precisely striving to create a distance in which there is space for thought. That distance is best established precisely by bringing the audience in contact with the kind of paradox that the Real embodies, i.e., where the audience stops being the spectators and instead becomes the objects of perception themselves. The aim is to turn the work into a mirror, to force the audience to think instead of simply take pleasure in the spectacle on the screen or the stage.

This should be borne in mind when we are dealing with the topic of aesthetics and violence in Trier's work. It is particularly important because of the way in which Trier's films have been received by audiences and critics. The relation between Trier and his audience is itself violent; it is violent in a way that is not unlike the violence of the artist toward his material.[10] In this regard, Trier should be seen as someone who follows through on the Brechtian ambition of implicating the audience in the work. Just like Trier himself has put it, there must be a stone in the shoe disturbing our relation to "normal" reality in a film.

It is thus in no way unexpected that Trier's screenings at Cannes Festival are accompanied by boos in addition to cheers,

that certain members of the audience leave in protest, and that critics write scathing reviews demanding an apology or a retraction or both.[11] If Trier's films did not provoke this reaction, they would probably be a disappointment. Yet the mere fact that Trier's films are scandalizing spectacles does not in any way guarantee that they are worthy of our attention. (If that were the case, snuff films depicting actual torture or murder would be the best works of art imaginable.) There is, in other words, a thin line that Trier must be careful not to cross if he is going remain worthy of our attention. This is the line that separates the all too familiar adolescent humor of "Ha-ha! I made you look" from the genuine Brechtian Verfremdungseffekt. In so many words, the ambition of Trier's work would seem to be to convert the "Ha-ha! I made you look" into a "Ha-ha! I made you think."

The question becomes even more pertinent the moment we consider what the strong, negative reactions to Trier's films are about. Usually, it is not the formal transgressions, the jump cuts, or the hand-held cameras. On the contrary, he is usually praised profusely for these aspects, both in mainstream and specialized media. What invokes the sense of the scandalous are the scenes such as the amputation of the clitoris in *Antichrist* or the torture of a duckling and the murder of children in *The House that Jack Built*.

The point is that the reaction to all of these scenes tends to be very emotional. While these scenes are clearly disturbing, it is not immediately clear how they disrupt the standard mimetic relation between audience and spectacle. Indeed, could it not be argued that they rely upon very traditional effects of identification and catharsis to do their work? And do they not simply force the audience to *feel* rather than *think*?

I believe these are the crucial questions that confront us when we engage with the relation between aesthetics and violence, the Real, and the spectacle in the work of Trier. I think the answers

to these questions can be teased out by first considering Trier's brief and unsuccessful encounter with Richard Wagner's *Ring* and, second, by taking a further and longer step back into the history of art—to Athenian tragedy and a very specific Lacanian interpretation of it.

Trier on Wagner

There is another side to Trier's relation to the Real than the engagement with a post-Brechtian Verfremdungseffekt, which can be seen in his own comments in the so-called "Deed of Conveyance"[12] that he wrote after giving up on the dream of directing a performance of Wagner's *Ring* at the Baureuther Festspiele. (Trier's fundamental idea was to let the performance play out mostly in darkness, something he realized would not be technically feasible.) "Experiences can, of course, take many forms," Trier writes,

> ... but with regard to Wagner (and opera in its traditional form in general, I felt) I soon saw only one possibility: that the experience ought to be an emotional one for me; and how do you achieve emotional contact with an audience? Or rather, how do you make sure you don't prevent it? You allow the audience to apply the range of emotions it knows from real life by insisting that the performance IS real! A stylized reality, a poetic reality in which the voices possess melody and the silence has notes, but reality nonetheless![13]

The crucial point is that this, if anything, sounds like the polar opposite of the Verfremdungseffekt. It is an argument in favor of the direct submersion of the audience to the illusion of the theatre—a fulfillment of the most grandiose ambitions of the

Gesamtkunstwerk. If Brecht's ambition was to keep the audience at a distance and therefore alert and reflective, Wagner's ambition was entirely different: to create a spectacle that would not only combine all (or at least many of) the arts in order to create one unified dramatic vision but additionally to create a unified vision of the world—a new mythology. Wagner, thus, precisely sought to create a work of art that would stand as a complete world in itself. A world in which the audience could be submerged and feel swept up in the drama. If it is true that Trier in his work is seeking to keep a certain inheritance from Brecht alive, his reflections on Wagner would seem to point in a different direction.

This suspicion is further enhanced later in "Deed of Conveyance":

> It is simple dramaturgy: if A via B leads to C, we show A and C, and let the spectator deal with B! It's the simple recipe for conjuring tricks. We see the presentation and the result but never the actual transformation. It is the spectator's acquired knowledge of sequences of events that creates the magic and the illusion.[14]

Here we have Trier unabashedly promoting a way of telling a magical story by strengthening the very thing that the Verfremdungseffekt is seeking to dismantle: the illusion. Trier goes on to describe how his idea of using enhanced lighting in the theatre would strengthen this illusion while using the familiar methodology of horror films in order to fortify the illusory effect of "letting the spectator deal with B":

> A via B to C: imagine two spots of light on a stage. Top and bottom. We see the top and bottom of an old ladder. The ladder is rotten and the bottom half is split. In a horror film blood would be dripping from the darkness above. As somebody climbs the

ladder and disappears into the darkness the ladder begins to shake violently.[15]

Again, such effects are certainly the very opposite of the Verfremdungseffekt that seeks to break the illusion of the mythical horror that goes on in the strategically positioned darkness (on the screen or stage). Thus, in the Brechtian theatre, the B would be the perfect place to insist upon the very theatricality that ruins the illusion.

In so many words, it would seem that we have encountered a discrepancy in Trier's approach to the Real. On the one hand, we have Trier pursuing a Passion for the Real in the Brechtian sense. Here the Real is the gap that opens up when the illusion of the drama is breaking down in a carefully crafted Verfremdungseffekt. On the other hand, we have Trier seeking to establish real illusions—giving audiences the best possible experience of the illusion that the characters are real.

My wager in this argument is that this is, in fact, not simply a case of Trier (consciously or unconsciously) contradicting himself. Indeed, this discrepancy becomes truly interesting only if we consider the possibility that it might be the very same Real Trier is approaching from opposite directions. Trier is moving in two different directions between illusion and Real. In the former case, he is seeking to destroy an illusion in order to arrive at the Real; in the latter, he is seeking to enhance an illusion in order to arrive at the Real.

At least I think it can be argued that intensifying emotional attachment does not simply result in an immersion into an illusory stupor of mimetic enjoyment. Moving in the direction of presenting characters to identify with, does not simply mean falling back into sentimentalist drama. It does not simply mean to be captured by the ideological apparatus that offers enjoyment in exchange for our acceptance of the status quo. On the

contrary: Seen from a specific point of view, emotional immersion can be the very opposite of an uncritical stance toward the powers of ideology.

This point becomes clearer if we consider that there is an ideological trap lurking in the traditional Brechtian approach to the purely formal Verfremdungseffekts. There is a certain cynical element to the idea of asking the subject to take a critical, reflective, and distanced stance toward both the theatre spectacle and reality (in order to implicate the audience in the drama and force them to think). The problem this represents has been made visible by Slavoj Žižek in his seminal work on the critique of ideology, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*.[16] Drawing on Peter Sloterdijk's analysis of cynicism, Žižek argues that the dominant form of ideology today is not the direct immersion of the subject into false beliefs. On the contrary, the ironic distance toward such beliefs allows the subject to act in precisely the same way he or she would have if they had actually believed it. Using Sloterdijk's formulation "enlightened false consciousness," Žižek points out that today we are exceptionally well trained in taking the reflective stance toward spectacles. Nowadays, subjects are caught in the ideological trap, not by being fully submersed into the ideological narrative but by getting overly confident in their critical, ironic stance toward that very same narrative. Indeed, one could argue that the traditional Brechtian Verfremdungseffekt has become so commonplace that we hardly notice it. In mainstream Hollywood blockbusters, we constantly see characters breaking the fourth wall (a good example is Ryan Reynolds's character Deadpool, who can hardly complete a sentence without looking directly into the camera), and we find this funny and intellectually stimulating, as we are called to reflect upon the relation between spectatorship and spectacle. Still, this would hardly count as a powerful critique or disruption of ideology. Žižek's

point is very clear. Being critical and reflective is not enough. Indeed, this may just be the very trap through which we are led to accept the dictates of the ideological regime of our age.[17] In order to substantiate this point, it will be helpful to take a look at Lacan's understanding of ancient Greek tragedy and the function of the chorus.

Chorus, Canned Laughter, VCR's, and Interpassivity

The crucial Lacanian term that is at stake at the intersection of spectatorship, reality, and the Real, is the Other. It is through the Other that we achieve some kind of sense and meaning in the forever fluctuating registers of the symbolic and the imaginary. The Other is the one whom we rely upon in order to make sense of the world, although we never truly feel at home in it; the Other who teaches us who, how, and what to desire, but not only that, as we shall see.

In the present context, the best illustration of the Other takes us back to ancient Greek drama and the function of the chorus. Lacan argues in his Seminar VII, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*:

> When you go to the theatre in the evening, you are preoccupied by the affairs of the day, by the pen that you lost, by the check that you will have to sign the next day. You shouldn't give yourself too much credit. Your emotions are taken care of by the healthy order displayed on the stage. The Chorus takes care of them. The emotional commentary is done for you. It is just sufficiently silly; it is not without firmness; it is more or less human. Therefore, you don't have to worry; even if you don't feel anything, the Chorus will feel in your stead. Why after all can one not imagine that the effect on you may be achieved, at least a small dose of it, even if

you didn't tremble that much? To be honest, I'm not sure if the spectator ever trembles that much.[18]

Lacan's interpretation here is radical. Rather than seeing the chorus as guides who tell the audience how it should feel, he inverts the relationship. The chorus are people who have emotions in order for the audience to be freed from the obligation to feel.

The crucial Lacanian point is the notion that desire is the desire of the Other. This does not merely mean that we look to others in order to learn how to feel and what to desire. It should also be taken more literally in the sense that my desire is at home in the Other. My feelings, my desires, do not belong to me; they do not "live" in me (neither in my heart nor in my brain). Instead, they can have their existence literally in the Other. The insight behind this idea is that we, as subjects, do not have the capacity to do all the work of feeling our own emotions, living our own experiences, thinking our own thoughts. It is against this background that we should see the great innovation of Greek drama and the chorus. What the chorus provides is the service involved in having people present who are moved on our behalf. They bear the burden of having an experience when we cannot manage to have one ourselves.

The Austrian philosopher Robert Pfaller has formulated the central point in Lacan's analysis of ancient Greek drama as "interpassivity." The strength of Pfaller's work is his ability to deftly analyze well-known everyday phenomena using this (to some perhaps counterintuitive) Lacanian insight. He thereby shows just how elegant and productive it is. For Pfaller, we are interpassive whenever we buy books in order not to read them but instead put them on a shelf or a coffee table because we let the coffee table and the shelf read the books on our behalf. Likewise, we are interpassive when we let our VCR's or hard disk recorders record our favorite TV shows. To be sure, we tell ourselves that

we do this in order to be able to see them later, but more likely than not, we are never going to see them. Instead, our electronic recording equipment performs the service of watching the TV shows on our behalf.[19]

It was Slavoj Žižek, however, who supplied the archetypical example of interpassivity. It pinpoints the phenomenon of canned laughter in sitcoms and similar TV shows.

> Why this laughter? The first possible answer—that it serves to re-mind us when to laugh—is interesting enough, because it simply implies that laughing is a matter of duty and not some sponta-neous feeling; but this answer is not sufficient, because we do not usually laugh. The only correct answer would be that the Oth-er—embodied in the television set—is relieving us even of our duty to laugh—is laughing instead of us. So even if, tired from a hard day's stupid work, all evening we did nothing but gaze drowsily into the television screen, we can say afterwards that, objectively, through the medium of the Other, we had a really good time.[20]

The point is that a surprisingly large part of both our intimate and social lives are determined by these and similar forms of in-terpassivity. We take pictures and record small films at concerts that we never look at subsequently, but that certainly made us pay less attention to the concert as we were actually there. And a similar point can be made about art collectors, who, as Pfaller argues, would "prefer to banish their collection to a safe, where they don't have to look at them."[21]

Returning to Trier, my point is that we should evaluate his engagement with the Real, both in terms of his inspiration from Brecht and Wagner, from the point of view of the realization that the primary way in which we experience emotions today is through some kind of interpassive medium. What

Trier is looking to do is, in other words, to force us to have an experience by ourselves. This is the point where the ambition of creating real emotions meets the Brechtian Verfremdungseffekt. The point is that alienation has an inverted meaning here. Today, Brecht's notion of Verfremdungseffekt is often translated as a distancing effect or estrangement effect. In the present context, I prefer the older translation of alienation,[22] because it helps illustrate how, in the Lacanian understanding of the subject, the usual understanding of the relation between feeling at home and being alienated is inverted. The point is precisely that we are not living our lives in a state of being more or less at home in reality and that something external (such as a formal technique used in cinematic art) must come along in order to alienate us (or as it were, create a distance). On the contrary, we live our lives in a reality that is as such alienating, unaccommodating. And in order to function as subjects, we have to create a certain distance to our alienation (in Seminar XI, Lacan calls this "separation").[23] We keep our alienation at arm's length; we must avoid feeling it too intensely. Being separated from our alienation but never relieved of it, *that* is the basic human condition. It is in this field that we find our ideological submission. Given this "baseline," it should be clear that the way to shake up a subject and force it to think, cannot simply consist in creating alienation (or distancing). On the contrary, the most effective method is probably to offer something that is experienced precisely as *Real*—here in a sense that somehow encompasses both the Wagnerian and the Brechtian inflections of the term.

Therefore, the confrontation with the Real in Trier's work should not simply alienate us and create distance. It should rather shake us from the comfortably distanced relation we have to our own alienation. This is precisely the way in which I understand the crucial comment Trier makes in "Deed of

Conveyance" quoted above: "how do you achieve emotional contact with an audience? Or rather, how do you make sure you don't prevent it?"[24] Preventing the audience from having an emotional connection is precisely what you risk doing when you leave room for interpassivity—when you open the space in which they can leave their emotions to be felt by an Other.

This brings us back to the scenes mentioned in the beginning. The transgressive scenes that are so typical of Trier's work. The scenes where the victims willingly submit to their fates. If I am correct in the Lacanian analysis I have presented so far, we should be able to see why these scenes are at the same time troubling and necessary. It is precisely through these scenes that Trier combines the Brechtian and the Wagnerian versions of the "passion for the real." Here, the audience can perhaps be shaken to the point of being forced to have a thought.

If that is the case, however, one is almost obliged to ask: What is the purpose of all the more traditional formal Verfremdungseffekts for which Trier is equally famous? The answer is right in front of us. These formal techniques should not be seen as *defamiliarizing*. They are not the parts of Trier's films that make the subject feel estranged. On the contrary, they present the kind of alienated reality in which the subject comes closest to feeling at home. It is here, in the fragmented world in which the difference between spectator and spectacle is blurred, that the subject finds its most comfortable position. And it is against this background that the confrontation with the Real can potentially take place. In short, the traditional Verfremdungseffekt is, at its core, the highest form of *realism*. What I am suggesting here is that we can see Trier's collected works as a long experiment with ways in which one can bring out this experience of the Real against the carefully crafted background of alienated reality.

The House that Jack Built

Given this general understanding of Trier's work, what, then, is the status and significance of his latest film, *The House that Jack Built*? The question becomes especially pertinent once we consider the fact that the scene depicting the quintessential Trier theme is not positioned at the climax of the film's narrative. In *Medea*, *Breaking the Waves* and *Antichrist*, we see the longing of the lambs at the very end of a long, at times disturbing, aesthetic journey. But in *The House that Jack Built*, we see it at the very beginning of the film. In fact, we are likely to have seen it long before we entered the theatre, as this scene is played out in the trailer. Uma Thurman's character (Lady 1) is a hitchhiker picked up by Jack. She immediately begins to flirt both with Jack (portrayed by Matt Dillon) and with the idea that he might be a serial killer. "You do look like one," she says.

Here, the theme of the willing sacrificial victim seems to move away from what I have argued so far. In this scene from *The House that Jack Built,* there is no confrontation with the Real in any sense. Instead, the scene is functioning through a form of morbid comedy. It relies heavily on the trope of the woman as the lamb longing to be slaughtered, but it is in no way a disturbing or even emotionally moving scene. Quite the contrary, it borders on comedy, playing on the well-known misogynistic trope of the woman, who talks too much. Lady 1 is not only not a lamb longing to be slaughtered, flirting as she is with the idea of Jack being a serial killer, she is also incredibly annoying as she goes on and on and on. She is talking, she is expecting the man to fix all her problems without showing the least bit of gratitude, and after he helps her, she is still talking. She is persistently exasperating, and as Jack hits her in the face with the jack he has helped her having repaired by an auto mechanic, the audience would be hard-pressed to feel anything at all. Perhaps

they could be tempted to think that she deserved it; perhaps they could entertain a slight giggle at the pun on jack and Jack. In all likelihood, however, the typical reaction of the audience to this sequence will be very similar to the way audiences tend to react to the many lazy puns we see in sitcoms. In short, in order to fit the archetypical example of interpassivity, the scene is only missing the canned laughter.

Clearly, in *The House that Jack Built*, Trier is taking his signature scene in a different direction than he has done before. That being said, it should be borne in mind that he does give his audience plenty of other scenes that are incredibly disturbing. But the classic Trier touch of the longing of the lamb is visibly transformed. Naturally, this opens for speculation on why he has chosen to do so and why he has done it in *this* particular film. I shall only offer one explanation that fits within the overall Lacanian schema I have been following so far.

The passion for the Real is in no way an innocent passion. After all, the twentieth-century spectacles of violence were certainly not models to be emulated—probably not even in the realm of art. In *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, Žižek makes that much clear, pointing out that the passion for the Real appears in all sorts of guises, one of them being the recent rise in extreme right-wing political movements. All the familiar ideological themes of these movements (nationalism, racism, misogyny) can be seen as ways of looking for the Real truth behind the false appearances of "fake news," "cultural Marxism," and "feminism." Žižek has a very promising approach to theorizing this problem:

> Is the passion for the Real as such, then, to be rejected? Definitely not, since, once we adopt this stance, the only remaining attitude is that of refusing to go to the end of keeping up appearances. The problem with the 20th-century passion for the Real, was not that

it was a passion for the Real, but that it was a fake passion whose ruthless pursuit of the Real behind appearances was *the ultimate stratagem to avoid confronting the Real.*[25]

To Žižek, this means that the passion for the Real itself turns into a passion for semblance; it turns into a clearly defined image of what such a passion would look like. In that way, the Real becomes something quite different from what is entailed in the Lacanian notion. It rather comes to resemble something imaginary. In other words, the moment the Real we are passionately searching for begins to take the shape of something familiar, that is the moment it switches registers and enters the realm of imaginary semblance. The moment we already know in advance what the Real would look like is the moment it turns into a *trope*. This could perhaps be said to be the true danger for Trier and the longing of the lambs. Indeed, the very fact that this trope is recognizable as a trope seems to severely weaken its impact. In a way, therefore, there is a certain necessity to the scene at the beginning of *The House that Jack Built*. At a certain point, the lambs longing for their sacrifice morph from being a potential opening to the Real into a mere semblance—one that is longing for the canned laughter that ought to have accompanied it.

Notes

1. Slavoj Žižek has analyzed *Breaking the Waves* in great detail in "Femininity between Goodness and Act," in *Lars von Trier's Women*, ed. Rex Butler and David Denny (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).
2. Todd McGowan, *The Real Gaze. Film Theory after Lacan* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007).
3. Todd McGowan, *The Real Gaze*, 13–14.
4. Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (London: Verso, 2002), 5.

5. Alain Badiou, *The Century*, trans. Alberto Toscano (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), 47.

6. Peter Schepelern, *Lars von Triers elementer. En filminstruktørs arbejde* (København: Munksgaard/Rosinante, 1997), 133.

7. As he puts it while playing himself in a scene in *Epidemic* (2005). See also Angelos Koutsourakis, *'A Film Should Be Like a Stone in Your Shoe': A Brechtian Reading of Lars von Trier*, PhD diss. University of Sussex, 2011.

8. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969).

9. Angelos Koutsourakis, *Politics as form in Lars von Trier. A Post-Brechtian Reading* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), xv.

10. Which is the central theme of *The House that Jack Built*.

11. Trier's films have the effect of demanding commentary in the most surprising places. Thus, a film critic in the Danish newspaper *Politiken* devoted a long passage to a very critical commentary on *The House that Jack Built* in the middle of a very positive review of *Petra* by Jaime Rosales. The argument seems to be that *Petra* was the film Trier unsuccessfully had sought to accomplish with *The House that Jack Built*. While this may be true, the need for the critic to comment on Trier's film in a space that rightly should be reserved for another film (which she praised and gave 6 hearts out of 6), tells us everything we need to know about Trier's ability to be a stone in the shoe. See Eini Carina, "Usædvanligt original film bliver hængende i bevidst-heden og skaber et nyt sprog at fatte verden igennem," *Politiken*, August 15, 2019.

12. Lars von Trier, "Deed of Conveyance", *The Opera Quarterly* 23, no. 2–3 (Spring-Summer 2007), https://doi-org.eres.qnl.qa/10.1093/oq/kbn038.

13. Von Trier, "Conveyance," 342.

14. Von Trier, "Conveyance," 343.

15. Von Trier, "Conveyance," 345.

16. Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 2008 [1989]).

17. Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 24.

18. Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959–1960, The Seminar*

of Jacques Lacan. Book VII, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (London: Routledge, 1986), 252.

19. Robert Pfaller, *On the Pleasure Principle in Culture. Illusions without Owners* (London: Verso, 2014).
20. Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 33.
21. Pfaller, *Pleasure Principle*, 35.
22. E.g., Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht On Theatre*, trans. John Willett (London: Bloombury, 1978).
23. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis, Seminar XI*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Karnac Press, 2004 [1977]), 213ff.
24. Von Trier, "Conveyance," 342.
25. Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (London: Verso, 2002), 24.

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Mold in the Machine

Nature and Technology in *Treme* (2010) and *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012)

Synnøve Marie Vik

The Gulf Coast of Louisiana is at a perilous intersection between nature and the extensions of humanity. The mix of human intervention and natural subsidence has completely transformed the area over a few decades. The marshlands along the Gulf Coast are being devoured by the ocean, making the coastline unstable and susceptible to flooding and ocean rise. Repeated oil spills have contributed further to the destruction of existing ecosystems. Combined with ever more powerful tropical storms and more frequent heavy downpours and flooding, living conditions in the area have become harsh.[1]

When Hurricane Katrina hit the Louisiana area in August 2005, it set off an array of artistic responses to the situation on

the Gulf Coast. On the following pages, I will discuss the relationship between nature and technology as it is portrayed in the TV series *Treme,* season 1,[2] and the film *Beasts of the Southern Wild*.[3] My analysis will revolve around the visual imprint and effects that water has on infrastructure and society. The aim is to further our understanding of how the aesthetic rendering of damages to the infrastructure of cities or communities following extreme weather contributes to visualizing the duality of nature as both violent and violated.

Cinema in the Anthropocene

Fictional cinematic presentations such as *Treme* and *Beasts of the Southern Wild* contribute to our understanding of life within a climate emergency, also as aesthetic practices. As film scholar Jennifer Fay argues in her book *Inhospitable World: Cinema in the Time of the Anthropocene*:

> While no one film or set of films adds up to a totalizing explanation of climate change, cinema enables us to glimpse anthropogenic environments as both an accidental effect of human activity and a matter of design. Thus, not only is cinema like the Anthropocene in its uncanny aesthetic effects, but also, insofar as cinema has encouraged the production of artificial worlds and simulated, wholly anthropogenic weather, it is the aesthetic practice of the Anthropocene. Or, to put it more forcefully, cinema helps us to see and experience the Anthropocene as an aesthetic practice.[4]

While it may seem overwrought to stress the importance of the Anthropocene as an aesthetic practice, Fay is undoubtedly correct in suggesting that we cannot gain a full understanding of

our current situation without considering the aesthetic practices with which we have met the climate crisis, and the aesthetic effects it has produced.

While the often "uncanny aesthetic effects" of cinema, as Fay puts it, can be visually spectacular and hard to miss, literary scholar Rob Nixon has pointed out the *slow* violence that accompanies a warming planet, taking on forms which in their non-spectacular manner delude us or bid to be overlooked. This specific form of violence is always made possible by discrimination and "occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all."[5] Identifying slow violence is, as Nixon sees it, an ethical and political responsibility in order to give voice to the environmentalism of the poor and a necessary commitment in order to mitigate climate change. Positioned within postcolonial literary studies and environmental humanities, Nixon develops his key term by connecting various literary and political forms of resistance with environmental catastrophes.

Nixon's concern with discrimination shows an affinity to the most popular interpretations of *Treme* and *Beasts of the Southern Wild*. The reception of *Treme* has, for the most part, been dominated by discussions on cultural identity tied to authenticity,[6] place and race[7]; cultural analyses of disasters[8]; to discussions on how the effects of Hurricane Katrina were facilitated by human-made structural failure, both technologically and socially.[9] Similarly, the academic reception of *Beasts of the Southern Wild* has been led by discussions of race, poverty, sovereignty, and identity politics.[10] Nevertheless, in connecting this discrimination with the warming planet, Nixon provides us with a new approach to the analysis. By centering the discussion on how the series and film depict the relationship between technology and nature, we might cast a fresh look at

their continued relevance as expressions of life in the time of climate emergency.

I propose to identify a specific visuality by which I mean a set of scenes or individual images that are tied to each other by specific motifs. Borrowing from Leo Marx's trope of "The Machine in the Garden," I will call this visuality "Mold in the Machine."[11] Marx introduced the machine in the garden as a metaphor for the American dream of a lush, utopian landscape in which human-made structures or signs of industrialization interrupt the pastoral ideal, as when the sound of a steam locomotive enters Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*. Marx, in his work on literary criticism and great American authors,[12] used the metaphor to express what he saw as a specific relationship between nature and technology. The machine in the garden signaled human progress and the industrialization of America during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries at the expense of a pastoral idyll: "[A]gain and again our writers have introduced the same overtones, depicting the machine as invading the peace of an enclosed space, a world set apart, or an area somehow made to evoke a feeling of encircled felicity."[13]

Marx's evocation of the American pastoral as naturally pristine and idyllic and the city as a progressive civilization, albeit loud and disturbing, seems out of place as we encounter the disheveled state of the Louisiana Gulf Coast in *Treme* and *Beasts of the Southern Wild*. While Marx's American "garden" is perfect in its natural state, the garden of Louisiana is devastated, and the progress promised by technology is no longer available. Mold in the machine suggests a reversion of Marx's description, where the machine, in this case, specifically manifested as the city's materiality and infrastructure, is interrupted by nature. The underlying problem is, of course, that the Louisiana bayous already were wet and unstable to settle on, and that technological progress fueled by capitalist interests made the situation even worse. The bayous never were paradises, and now they are ruined.

Treme – The City as (Failed) Technology

"New Orleans, Louisiana. Three months after." These words flicker across the screen during the opening scene of *Treme,* where a marching band is warming up to a parade. The TV series portrays life in New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, revolving around people trying to pick up their everyday lives in the ruins of the city. Katrina hit New Orleans and its surroundings in late August 2005. The ensuing devastation to the area serves both as the pervasive backdrop and the unseen driving force of the narrative.[14]

The very first scene serves as an example of how the storm is a constant reference point for the characters' actions and statements, as well as a pervasive visual background. We follow salary negotiations between musicians in a dark bar before the very first parade post-Katrina, a traditional rebirth parade, set in in the Seventh or Eight Ward in Treme in December 2005. Before the men settle their affairs and walk into the streets to start the parade, the conversation turns to their dingy-looking surroundings:

> Man 1: "Hey, look around. Look at this damn place."
> Man 2: "How much water did you get up here?" [Murmurs from the musicians about the water].
> Man 1: "See the line over my head? Six, six and a half."[15]

As *Treme* begins, New Orleans is still in a state of emergency. The city of New Orleans is an infrastructure, a network of technological systems made up of buildings, roads, ports, waterworks, sewers, communication networks, and more. The materiality of this network is exposed by its destruction in *Treme*, for instance by the ever-present bricks and rubble of destroyed buildings in the series' backdrop, as well as the disintegrating roads and

shoddy water, gas, and electric services that cause trouble for the characters. Many are barred from moving back into their homes, due to the damages caused by the flooding. Through mold and fungus, the destructive effect of water persists long after the water itself resided. The city police archives are lost, complicating people's search for incarcerated loved ones who have been missing since the storm. Furthermore, the violence of neglect exerted by the government aggravates the violence exerted by nature.

Hurricane Katrina hit an area covering 90 000 square miles, and 80 % of New Orleans was flooded when the levees and floodwalls holding back Lake Pontchartrain broke. The storm killed more than 1800 people, according to the National Hurricane Center, and over a million people were displaced in the Gulf Coast region.[16] Katrina is considered to be the worst humanitarian catastrophe in the US to date. The levees of New Orleans did not break directly because of the hurricane, but because of longtime neglect of structural weaknesses—the storm surge overwhelmed the levees. The massive devastation of New Orleans is tightly bound to the materiality and technology of the city—of how nature met specific social and technical conditions. The lack of action from society at large aggravated the damage brought on by the floodwater.[17]

This very point is made in one of the very first scenes in the first episode of *Treme*, where novelist and professor Creighton Bernette (John Goodman) is interviewed by a British TV crew by the river on the industrial canal, where the barge caused one of the levees to break. Bernette delves into a heated discussion on the topic, where he manifests a popular rage against the government and claims that Katrina was not only a natural disaster, but a disaster brought on by government neglect of the area, lack of investment in the bay area swamp landscape, and in the structures that were supposed to protect the city in the event of hurricanes.[18]

Interventions in the City

Seeing the city as an infrastructural network of technologies, mold can be seen as a visual—and invisible—trope in *Treme*, holding the key to our understanding of how nature and technology are tied together in the visuality of Mold in the Machine. Mold is both visibly and invisibly present in the series, visible already as striking still images in the introduction and through numerous individual scenes, and invisible in the omnipresent smell that is referred to by the various protagonists. A smell, which naturally cannot be conveyed on-screen other than through words and gestures, but which nevertheless was omnipresent in New Orleans in the months following Katrina.

Under normal circumstances, and in most visual portrayals, New Orleans is a lush and green city. In *Treme*'s first season, everything is gray, covered in mud and debris. During Katrina and the flooding, it is said the city lost 70 % of its trees in addition to other plants and shrubs.[19] Portraying the city as gray and "dead" was both a realistic representation of the real city streets in the months after Katrina but also a visually striking way to display the abnormal situation in the city. A rare exception from this portrayal in season 1, is the city garden belonging to the neighbors of Davis McAlary (Steve Zahn), a DJ for a local radio station and hardcore New Orleans patriot. Their city garden is portrayed as a safe and secluded haven from the city's destruction. However, rather than representing an authentic green lung from the past, their garden seems to be the epitome of the gentrified new New Orleans, representing the living conditions of the creative middle class: Their lives seem to have continued smoothly. The visual representation of nature here points to the city's stratified class structure, a relation that remains relevant throughout *Treme*'s representation of nature.

For the rest of the season, nature is almost exclusively present as an imprint or through debris: As watermarks on the walls and ceilings, as fallen trees in the streets, in family photos where the faces are washed out by the floodwater, in decomposing bodies found in sheds. Yet nature is everywhere, even where it is not visible. Mold and fungus are living organisms that have spread throughout people's homes, making them uninhabitable even where the structural damage could be repaired. Nature is pervasive, as it is embedded in the city's materiality. The majority of scenes depicting mold and fungus, feature Albert "Big Chief" Lambreaux (Clarke Peters). In one scene, he visits the Lower Ninth Ward with a friend to assess the damage to a house. Says Lambreaux: "Structurally, it looks solid. Still on its foundation, at least. But that mold (covers his mouth and shakes his head) I don't know ... Talk about bulldozers."[20] In an earlier scene that sets the tone for how mold is present—and presented—in season 1, Lambreaux enters his living room, the walls are covered in green mold, and the watermarks on the walls sit at eye level. Lambreaux sinks his foot into a deep layer of mud. His accompanying daughter covers her mouth and nose to avoid the smell.

Through highlighting the smell, *Treme* specifically reaches out to those in the audience who experienced the aftermath of Katrina firsthand. Addressing the smell lends legitimacy to the realism of the representation of the event.[21] The smell is infrequently referred to by different characters. In one scene, as we watch Big Chief's gang rehearse in his dark, dingy, and humid bar, one of the players remark: "I can't even taste the beer with the smell of mold. Can't we meet somewhere else?"[22] Watermarks and mold are clearly visible on the wall behind them, while blue plastic is covering one wall. The costume sewing sessions with colorful feathers, pearls, and sequins and the traditional music during rehearsal make for stark contrasts to their surroundings, as seen in another scene from the bar. Several men are sewing

on their Mardi Gras costumes, their colorful fabrics standing out against the surroundings.[23] These scenes tie a bond between this explicit cultural expression, rooted in an old African-American heritage, and the effects of the hurricane and the poor city infrastructure that primarily affected the underprivileged African-American population.[24]

Referring to the smell also addresses the severe air pollution created in New Orleans as warmth and humidity fortified the smell of death, rot, and mold in the months following Katrina. As the musician Antoine Batiste (Wendell Peirce), one of the main protagonists of season 1, is talking to another musician friend before a gig, he asks about the whereabouts of the friend's father. The friend answers that because of his asthma, he cannot return to New Orleans before the air gets better.[25] Lambreaux, on the other hand, refuses to leave New Orleans. He embodies the city's African-American working-class traditions, taking up work as a carpenter. The conditions of his day job in Uptown—an affluent area spared from the more critical infrastructural damages—form a glaring contrast to his dwellings in Treme, as he takes shelter in his closed neighborhood bar. In one of the series most direct references to the harmful health effects of mold and fungus, Lambreaux develops lymphoma, possibly triggered and, at the very least, severely worsened by his living conditions.

The Aesthetics of Destruction

The connection between natural destruction and social issues that *Treme* emphasizes is paired with an acute sense of the specific visual aesthetics of life post-Katrina, which is a central aspect of the visuality in the Mold in the Machine. This aesthetics is a combination of the look of destruction in the formal, organic aesthetic qualities of the traces left in the destruction's aftermath.

This double aesthetic tendency has a twofold outcome in *Treme*, in that it both calls attention to the city's infrastructural materiality and creates an estranged point of view that leaves room for the free play of the aesthetic gaze.

Nowhere is the aestheticization of destruction more evident than in the glimpses and signs of mold. The visuals played at the opening of each episode, and thus given an amplified significance, directly link mold—its aesthetics and effects—with the history and culture of the city. A series of images flicker across the screen: a selection of photographs that map out the series' starting point—Hurricane Katrina—framed by its past, present, and future. The photographs range from old images from parades to a satellite image of the hurricane and air photos of the flooding taken from a live news report. It continues with close-up images of mold-infested interiors—with family portraits and photos—where the motifs are made indiscernible by water damage before it ends with images of rubble and a trailer park. The visual effect of the mold is striking; the marks and waterlines create aesthetic effects on pastel-colored walls and ceilings and portray the city post-Katrina as overtaken by nature. Penetrating and dissolving the surfaces of walls, furniture, and family photographs, the mold completely takes over what should have been the safest of spaces, the ur-technology, the shelter, the family home.

While these photographs appear to be authentic documents of a disaster, their aesthetic adheres beautifully to an aesthetic gaze that borders on the disinterested. The abstract patterns left by mold lend the images an eerie expression, the result of beauty found in destructive organic growth. Architecture photographer Robert Polidori has made this into an aesthetic project.[26] Polidori visited New Orleans after Katrina, photographing a series of ruined homes. His photographs are framed and exhibited with the explicit intention of serving as aesthetic

objects. Polidori photographed both interiors and exteriors of water-damaged buildings in New Orleans after the water had receded. Through Polidori's lens, the watermarks, dirt, mold, and mildew on the walls and ceilings take on distinct aesthetic qualities. The muted colors and elaborate patterns of the dots and lines of mycelium are strikingly beautiful. Nevertheless, the seriousness of the disaster is always present. While some of the houses are wrecked, others seem as if they were left in a hurry, family photographs still hanging on the wall over the living room couch. The visible signs of mold are constant throughout Polidori's photos, and their formal aspects are always prominent.

These images bear a resemblance to still-life paintings (from Dutch *stilleven*—in French, *nature morte*), originally portraying everyday objects for the sake of their formal qualities. They especially resemble the early Renaissance Dutch still-life paintings, which included skulls, candles, hourglasses, and frequently dead wild game and overly ripe fruit as signs of mortality and nature's cycle.[27] Of course, neither Polidori's photos nor the traditional still life is literally *nature morte*: Nature in these images is not dead at all but filled with vibrant microbiological life, even the air is full of spores not visible to the naked eye. In the still life, the death and decay depicted show a beginning re-naturalization of natural objects that have been appropriated by human culture. The visual culture of Mold in the Machine shows the naturalization of the city infrastructure.

While *Treme* heavily aestheticizes mold, it also inquires how its own aesthetic gaze functions. In the vital last scene in Episode 1, our attention is drawn to the fact that the aesthetic gaze on the crumbling buildings is exerted by outsiders and residents alike. We see a traditional funeral band walking down the street next to a graveyard, along a row of houses, two of which have moss and large, green shrubs growing on their roofs and with doors and windows missing, while another house has shut-up

windows. Nature has taken over the buildings to the extent that it looks picturesque, natural even.[28] The picturesque surface undermines the seriousness of the situation, letting us as spectators take a step back and detach ourselves emotionally.

The detached impulse inherent to the aesthetics of destruction is emphasized in a later scene from a memorial service: The camera shifts from the colorful feathers of Lambreaux's costume to the contrasts of the dark and filthy interior of the bar and over to the wrecked houses and scattered debris of the neighborhood streets, where Mardi Gras Indians sing in memory of a dead friend. Suddenly a "Katrina tour"-bus arrives, filled with tourists looking to see the damage done to the neighborhood and the performance of grief by the inhabitants. Flashlights from cameras belonging to faceless passengers blind the grievers at the memorial service.[29] The scene evokes DJ Davis's earlier statement about the problematic beauty of New Orleans's dilapidation, while simultaneously reminding the audience that we are watching from a safe distance. We can enjoy the oddly picturesque neighborhoods of New Orleans even as they slide into ruin. The tourist bus provides us with a meta-perspective and serves as a reminder—perhaps a token of the series creators' embarrassment—of the insensitivity of our gaze.

Beasts of the Southern Wild – The City as Violent Technology

Beasts of the Southern Wild offers a different visualization of a tropical storm and its subsequent flooding of the greater Louisiana area than *Treme*. Staged as a highly eco-conscious drama belonging to the genre of fantastic realism, *Beasts of the Southern Wild* portrays the six-year-old girl Hushpuppy (Quvenzhané Wallis) as she barely outlives parental neglect, a devastating

fire, then a tropical storm and its aftermath. Hushpuppy lives alone with her alcoholic and mortally ill father Wink (Dwight Henry), albeit in separate ramshackle sheds, in a bayou called the Bathtub. The bayou is one of many similar isolated places in the Louisiana bay area surrounded by water, where people also depend on the water for their living. Her mother "swam away" when she was little, and water remains an important motif throughout the film, taking on a dominant symbolic role representing nature and life, summed up by Hushpuppy as "All Things."

The Bathtub is cut off from society-at-large by a long levee that protects the nearby city. In an early scene, Hushpuppy and Wink are out on their boat by the levee, looking over to the noisy, grey industrial plant on "the dry side." "Ain't that ugly over there?" Wink says to his daughter. "We got the prettiest place on earth."[30] The very same levee traps the water in the Bathtub as the area floods following a major storm. The landscape remains barely recognizable, with nearly all buildings submerged in water. The Bathtub's population is subjected to a mandatory evacuation. A small group of people, however, including Hushpuppy and her father, refuse to be evacuated. Outliving the storm, they gather with a group of surviving friends in a bar, surrounded by alligators, rotting animals, and increasingly putrid water. Their perceived primal threat is the government enforcing a mandatory evacuation of their local community while refusing to drain the area. While the protagonists of *Treme* are fighting an ongoing battle with nature in the form of mold, the putrid saltwater trapped by the levee makes life for the friends in the Bathtub near impossible. Nature, however, is not primarily presented as a hostile force.

The Bathtub is located outside of society, and although it is a decidedly human community, it is not representative of the technological modernity that Leo Marx ascribes the city. On the

one hand, it seems a remnant of the idyllic pastoral past, the loss of which Marx laments. On the other hand, there is a decidedly preapocalyptic streak running through the Bathtub, as they talk about the wave—a storm surge—that will once come and devour them all. In this sense, it seems more fitting to compare the relationship between the Bathtub and greater society to the relationship between mold and technology in the visuality of Mold in the Machine. This connection is most clearly brought to the fore in the event where three male Bathtubbians plant a bomb along the levee protecting the city. They succeed, and the water levels in the Bathtub normalize. Society reacts by forcibly evacuating the remnants of the small community from the area.

The anonymous violence exerted by the city's infrastructure toward its surrounding landscape is thus echoed by the Bathtubbians' self-defensive terrorist act and then reaffirmed by the official reaction against the protest. The small community is taken to a local hospital that presents Hushpuppy with an experience that is much more alienating than the brutal storm she has already gone through. Through her eyes, the welfare offered by modern society is comparable to a straitjacket.

By letting a six-year-old child be the story's focal point and narrator, the film evades the audience's natural skepticism toward its regressive stance regarding the need for crucial social and technological infrastructures. As the film opens, we are taken aback by the life conditions of Hushpuppy and Wink, but we accept her descriptions as the thoughts of a child who knows nothing else. As the narrative unfolds, we are taken in by her voice and natural perspective on her place within the ecosystem as someone who eats and will be eaten, a lesson learned from her father as he prepares her for life in the wilderness. Hushpuppy combines an acute sense of responsibility for all living things with an uncompromisingly realistic stance toward her surroundings, which both threaten and nourish her. As we arrive at the

hospital toward the end of the film, our sympathies for society's demand for safety have shifted to empathy for the Bathtubbians and their loss of autonomy and a future.

Understood as a representative for modern society, the city in *Beasts of the Southern Wild* fails. It fails as a landscape technology, destroying its surroundings and creating a version of what Leo Marx in his epilogue calls the Garden of Ashes, a "hideous, man-made wilderness."[31] At the same time, it fails as a technology of care, creating an alienating society with no room for genuine individuality and authentic social contact. In this perspective, the Bathtubbians constitute spores of mold in the machine, offering smaller and greater acts of resistance: an unmanageable, smelly, and sometimes destructive life that threatens the order of things.

Nature and Responsibility

Beasts of the Southern Wild portrays nature in a positive light, although the Bathtub and its residents are always at the mercy of natural forces. The storm is considered a worthy opponent rather than an existential threat. Wink takes this traditional struggle for power between man and nature to an extreme as he refuses to seek safety, instead opting to fight off the storm personally, with a shotgun. This scene is later echoed in Wink's story about Hushpuppy's mother killing a large, approaching alligator, the blood splattering over her white underwear, a typical example of the film's matter-of-fact approach to nature, life, and death.

The floodwater that follows the storm naturally finds its place in the Bathtub, as it directs the lives of the inhabitants. People navigate their lives in symbiosis with nature in a manner that may seemingly continue without much ado. The community gather on a boat, strengthening their authentic social bonds. The

critical threat caused by the water—a result of the city's infra-structure and industrial exploitation of the landscape—slowly becomes clear to them as they realize that the high water level is not going to sink anytime soon. The salty and increasingly toxic water filled with putrid carcasses and aggressive alligators starts to pose a health threat, destroying any sustainable living conditions. To Hushpuppy, the threat posed by society and the official policy to remove her from the landscape she calls home is much more significant. The cost of keeping the bayou livable through ever-more rising waters is higher than what society is willing or able to pay, both in terms of money and in terms of changing the path of global warming.

In a desperate act, when her father is on his deathbed, Hush-puppy leads a group of children as they swim out to open sea, realizing that the society the grownups are leaving them has no future. A fisherman picks them up and takes them to a float-ing brothel where Hushpuppy meets a cook who resembles her mother. Hushpuppy's relationship with her parents is intimately linked to the way the film depicts nature, human's place in it, and our personal responsibility for both ourselves and our surround-ings. As her father is dying, Hushpuppy says: "Everybody loses the thing that made them. It's even how it's supposed to be in nature."[32] The mother figure reiterates this stoicism in the face of loss as she tells Hushpuppy that she is on her own in this world, while deftly and demonstratively skinning an alligator tail.

The vulnerable situation of the Bathtub is partly due to rising sea levels following global warming. Global warming is explicitly referenced through the storm breaking out when the image of a calving glacier is cut into the narrative, and Hushpuppy hears thunder and sees the rising water. The climate emergency is also the background for the film's central magic element, the release of mythic versions of the extinct aurochs. While standing as explicit symbols of the imminent threat of global warming, the

ominous approach of these immense animals adds to the urgency of Hushpuppy's path to individual awakening.

Hushpuppy first learns of the aurochs from her schoolteacher. She later dreams of their release from the ice, and clips of their run through the landscape are interspersed throughout the film up until the very end. As Hushpuppy and the group of children make their way home to her father's death bed after their trip to sea, they are almost overrun by the aurochs in a dramatic crescendo. Just as the children are about to be trampled, Hushpuppy turns and faces down the beasts until they kneel before her, recognizing a kinship. The scene points to the close connection between the existential struggle of marginalized communities, such as the Bathtub, and the environmental crisis. The aurochs represent extinction, under the threat of which Hushpuppy and her community are living. As she expresses responsibility for "her own," the aurochs turn away, and Hushpuppy returns to burn her father's corpse and lead her people into the future.

The Aesthetics of the Bathtub

In the same way that *Beasts of the Southern Wild* conceptualizes and thinks about nature in prosaic ways, the film takes much of its expression from a naturalist aesthetic, foregrounding the materiality, the grit, dirt, and decay found in the Bathtub, or the cold cleanliness of the hospital. This aesthetic baseline, which corresponds well to the visuality of the Mold in the Machine, makes the parts of the film that take a different approach—either dreamily, like in the early sequences with the ethereal beauty of the glaciers and the aurochs trapped in ice or the trip to the brothel, or heroic like the end sequence—stand out that much more.

After the storm, in a scene that distinctly displays the film's naturalist impulse, Hushpuppy, Wink and his alcoholic friends, together with the teacher Bathsheeba and a group of children, celebrate their deceased friends with a feast of crab and crayfish. As one of the men starts to teach Hushpuppy to open a crab using a knife, Wink loudly voices his objection and demands that she "beast it!" using only her hands to break open the shell while the rest of the group cheers her on.[33] After succeeding, Hushpuppy climbs the table and flexes her biceps while giving out a loud shriek. Her father approvingly yells: "Yeah, you're an animal!" The scene is shot inside in a dimly lit room, where the yellow light and distinct shadows contribute to a cave-like atmosphere, further underscoring the community's primordial qualities.

The post-apocalyptic imagery, consisting of repurposed modern items—Wink and Hushpuppy sail a boat constructed from a pickup truck—combined with their primitive way of life, is at first presented as a hopeful beginning. However, as it becomes clear that the water will not recede, hope shifts to despair. Under the harsh sunlight, trees dead from the saltwater make stark silhouettes against the horizon. The hopeless situation leads to the blowing up of the levee. However, as the Bathtubbians return, it is their turn to stand out against the horizon, echoing the naked shape of the trees, as they behold the destroyed landscape they have tried to save.[34]

After the ordeal in the shelter, the trip out to sea, facing the aurochs, and the death of her father, the very last scene shows Hushpuppy leading the Bathtubbians down a road, waves spilling onto the pavement as the road is nearly engulfed in water. The group have their gazes fixed straight ahead, walking steadfast, carrying two tattered black flags. The characters are still a dirty and raggedy gang, but the heroic idealism of the image seems to suggest the coming of a new era. Hushpuppy's voiceover

speaks of being remembered by the scientists of the future. And although it is unclear whether these scientists will be her descendants or if the Bathtubbians will go extinct, the stark contrast between the tone of this scene—ending in a fanfare!—and the rest of the film, supports an affirmative, possibly even revolutionary, interpretation.

Slow Violence

The violence besetting the protagonists of both *Treme* and *Beasts of the Southern Wild* is an impersonal violence, affecting whole communities but with individual aftermaths. Importantly, as dire as the direct consequences of the violent storms are, there is also a violence of neglect at play, with equally alarming effects. With his term slow violence, Rob Nixon has coined the form of environmental violence that is low in drama but high in long-term catastrophic effects. This form of violence does not claim visibility through spectacle and speed. Instead, it is an expression of the power of society at large—or capitalist society—to unleash the consequences of the environmental crisis on the poor.[35] The invisible nature of this violence corresponds to the traditional undervaluation of the people of the Louisiana coastline, tied to century-long identity and racial politics.

The Louisiana coastline is particularly vulnerable to the consequences of global warming due to its swampland. Land exploitation has led to draining, eroding the swampland's ability to hold vast amounts of water. Consequently, more and more land is flooded and swallowed by the sea. The combination of oil extraction draining the marsh and human-made shipping canals for oil transport leaves the freshwater marshes open to saltwater. The entry of saltwater changes the underwater ecosystem of oysters and other sea life and leads to biodiversity loss. The

channeling of the Mississippi River for industry and development purposes hinders freshwater from refilling the marshes. The subsidence of these marshy coasts leads to weaker storm protection and thus contributed to the devastating effects of Hurricane Katrina.[36]

This sad state of affairs is a precondition for both *Treme* and *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, and they deal differently with them. *Treme* avoids bringing attention to nature's precarious state, both the damaged landscape and global warming, that likely contributed to the destruction in the first place. Rather, *Treme*'s narrative contributes to the continued invisibility of the nature that surrounds New Orleans. In fact, the only mention of the problematic ground conditions in the area comes indirectly from outsiders who question rebuilding the city, a question repeatedly dismissed by Creighton Bernette. Instead, our gaze is left to linger on the destruction after the water's withdrawal, and we are asked to consider the frail materiality of the city infrastructure and the uneven social distribution of the damages—the violence of neglect—asserted by class and government. Ironically, *Treme* thus becomes an example of the exclusion of the Gulf Coast from the "the US territorial imaginary," as argued by Stephanie LeMenager in an article on the representation of the BP blowout: "Thinking through subsidence as a narrative that has not become national despite its dissemination through national media raises the question of when the Gulf Coast fell out of the US territorial imaginary."[37] One might add that New Orleans never fell out of this imaginary, even if its surrounding landscape did.

In *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, as we follow Hushpuppy through the storm and as the flood water lingers, nature's violated state is much more apparent. The way the Bathtubbians risk their lives by not evacuating serves as a reminder of the life-altering effects of living in the Anthropocene. The strong point made by the film on this account is, however, made possible by

the Bathtubbians weak connection to modernity. LeMenager defines a schism between the entire Gulf Coast culture and modernity: "Gulf Coast people have fallen out of (or were never included within) the concept of modernity, where life practices are not clearly tied to place."[38] Hushpuppy and her community's life is unthinkable outside of their specific place and landscape.

It can be argued that this exclusion from the logic of modernity is what facilitates the slow violence exerted by society at large toward vulnerable communities such as the Bathtub, resulting in the modern melancholia for the lost pastoral idyll, as argued by Leo Marx. An underlying premise for my argument is that the slow violence of environmental crisis is predated by discrimination, as Nixon explains:

> Discrimination predates disaster: in failures to maintain protective infrastructures, failures at pre-emergency hazard mitigation, failures to maintain infrastructure, failures to organize evacuation plans for those who lack private transport, all of which make the poor and racial minorities disproportionately vulnerable to catastrophe.[39]

Global warming is causing modernity to collapse, as exemplified by the failing levee system in New Orleans and the governmental fiasco in the wake of the storm. We are now given to a "grieving of modernity itself," to quote LeMenager.[40] This grief is a central element of the visuality of Mold in the Machine.

While the violence of hurricane Katrina visibly altered New Orleans's infrastructure in mere hours, the violence of the mold was a much slower event, developing in the aftermath as an ominous threat, both visible and invisible. In this sense, the mold acts as an agent in its own right. In a world where we, according to philosopher Jacques Rancière, divide all things into things (matter) and beings (vibrant life) through a partition of our

sensible world,[41] political theorist Jane Bennett has argued that we start seeing *matter* as *vibrant*:

> How would political responses to public problems change were we to take seriously the vitality of (non-human) bodies? By 'vitality' I mean the capacity of things—edibles, commodities, storms, metals—not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own.[42]

With vitality, Bennett leans on sociologist Bruno Latour's term "actant" as something or someone who has the ability to produce effects. Bennett's examples of vibrant matter do not extend to mold, although she mentions storms. Nevertheless, the term is useful as a tool for describing the relationship between nature and technology in *Treme*. This perspective is only articulated by the visuality of the Mold in the Machine, in a series that is otherwise prone to stating its points quite explicitly. Whereas in *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, Hushpuppy's relationship to her surroundings, although based more on the magical thinking of a child, fully incorporates Bennet's expanded perspective on vitality.

Given the status as a vibrant matter, mold is also a *violent matter*, one of the leading causes of harm in post-Katrina New Orleans. This *natural violence* comes about as a result of the *violation of nature* within the Anthropocene. Through the identification of Mold in the Machine in *Treme*, we become aware of this duality of nature, a perspective that is the starting point for *Beasts of the Southern Wild*. Hushpuppy and Wink are always masters of—and at the mercy of—nature.

The discussion of vitality may be furthered by engaging the idea of hurricanes and mold as vibrant matter with the concept of hyperobjects, as framed by Timothy Morton[43] as "things that

are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans,"[44] and as such frequently invisible, with extensive outreach and potentially dangerous effects, and importantly, they are *real:* "[G]enuine nonhuman objects that are not simply the products of a human gaze."[45] In *Treme*, the proliferation of mold can be seen as an expression of the hyperobject global warming. *Beasts of the Southern Wild* takes a very different approach, enlisting the tools of cinema to express "the Anthropocene as an aesthetic practice."[46]

The visuality of Mold in the Machine in *Treme* and *Beasts of the Southern Wild* demonstrates the duality of nature as violent and violated. Along the Louisiana coastline, it is evident how years of exploitation of the landscape and disinvestment in city infrastructure aggravate the consequences of the climate emergency that we are living through now. The Mold in the Machine demands that we recognize both the materiality of progressive modernity and its material—and human—consequences. Embedded in this visuality is both a reinforced emphasis on the forms of violence caused by the increasing technologizing of the world, while at the same time giving shape to a new melancholy for modernity itself, the central structuring human-made force in our lifeworld.

Notes

1. For an insightful overview of the problematic conditions of the Louisiana Gulf Coast and the centuries-long attempts to control nature along the Mississippi river, see Elizabeth Kolbert, "Louisiana's Disappearing Coast," *The New Yorker* (New York, 2019), https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/04/01/louisianas-disappearing-coast.

2. David Simon & Eric Overmyer, *Treme.* Season 1: *Won't Bow Don't Know How* (HBO Entertainment, 2010).

3. Benh Zeitlin, *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (United States: Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2012).

4. Jennifer Fay, *Inhospitable World: Cinema in the Time of the Anthropocene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 4.

5. Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 2.

6. See for instance Rolf Potts, "Treme's Big Problem: Authenticity," *The Atlantic*, 2013, http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/11/-em-treme-em-s-big-problem-authenticity/281857/.

7. See for instance Dominique Gendrin, Catherine Dessinges, and Shearon Roberts, eds., *HBO's Treme and Post-Katrina Catharsis: The Mediated Rebirth of New Orleans* (Washington D.C.: Lexington Books, 2017).

8. See for instance Isak Winkel Holm, "The Cultural Analysis of Disaster," in *The Cultural Life of Catastrophes and Crises*, ed. Carsten Meiner & Kristin Veel (Berlin Boston: Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2012).

9. J. Steven Picou, "Introduction. Katrina as Paradigm Shift: Reflections on Disaster Research in the Twenty-First Century," in *The Sociology of Katrina: Perspectives on a Modern Catastrophe*, ed. D.L. Brunsma, D. Overfelt, and J.S. Picou (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007).

10. See for example Tavia Nyong'o, "Little Monsters: Race, Sovereignty, and Queer Inhumanism in Beasts of the Southern Wild," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 21, no. 2–3 (2015); Agnes Woolley, "The Politics of Myth Making: 'Beasts of the Southern Wild,'" openDemocracy, 2012, https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/politics-of-myth-making-beasts-of-southern-wild/.

11. Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000 [1964]).

12. Herman Melville, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry David Thoreau, Mark Twain, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and others.

13. Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, 29.

14. *Treme* season 1, which this analysis is based on, aired in 2010, five years after Hurricane Katrina. The title is borrowed from the neighborhood Treme in the Lower Ninth Ward, one of the areas

that were hardest hit by the floodwater when the levees broke. Treme is the oldest African-American neighborhood in the US populated by free people of color.

15. Simon & Overmyer, *Treme.* Season 1, episode 1: 1:40.

16. Allison Plyer, "Facts for Features: Katrina Impact," The Data Center, 2016, accessed September 23, 2020, https://www.datacenterresearch.org/data-resources/katrina/facts-for-impact/.

17. Picou, "Introduction," 2.

18. Simon & Overmyer, *Treme,* season 1, episode 1, 18:40.

19. A later study found that New Orleans suffered the greatest loss of tree coverage in the US in the period 2005–2009. See David J. Nowak and Eric J. Greenfield, "Tree and Impervious Cover Change in U.S. Cities," *Urban Forestry and Urban Greening* 11, no. 1 (2012), https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ufug.2011.11.005.

20. Simon & Overmyer, *Treme,* season 1, episode 3, 15:00.

21. Simon & Overmyer, *Treme*, season 1, episode 1, 20:20. The two directors point to the impossibility of representing smell on film in the commentary track to season 1, where they also discuss how they specifically addressed the issue in the audience who experienced the smell first hand. Dave: "The city smelled so different. You couldn't do the smell."

22. Simon & Overmyer, *Treme*, season 1, episode 4, 04:30.

23. Simon & Overmyer, *Treme*, season 1, episode 6, 50:47.

24. The white middle-class lived on higher grounds, sparing their houses from the surge, while they also had the economic security and means of transportation to leave New Orleans prior to the hurricane making landfall.

25. Simon & Overmyer, *Treme,* season 1, episode 8, 05:42.

26. Robert Polidori, *After the Flood* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2006).

27. "Still-Life Painting," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 2018, accessed September 23, 2020, https://www.britannica.com/art/still-life-painting.

28. Simon & Overmyer, *Treme*, season 1, episode 1: 1:13:00. As David Simon puts it in his comments to the scene: "No city falls down as beautiful as New Orleans. That may be the trouble."

29. Simon & Overmyer, *Treme,* season 1, episode 3, 52:00.

30. Zeitlin, *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, 4:05.

31. Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, 358.

32. Zeitlin, *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, 1:07:04.
33. Zeitlin, *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, 38:58.
34. Zeitlin, *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, 49:41.
35. Nixon, *Slow Violence.*
36. Kolbert, "Louisiana's Disappearing Coast."
37. Stephanie LeMenager, "Petro-Melancholia: The BP Blowout and the Arts of Grief," in *Energy Humanities An Anthology*, ed. Imre Szeman and Dominic Boyer (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017), 476.
38. LeMenager, "Petro-Melancholia: The BP Blowout and the Arts of Grief," 473.
39. Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 59.
40. LeMenager, "Petro-Melancholia: The BP Blowout and the Arts of Grief," 472.
41. Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (London and New York: Continuum, 2006).
42. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter, a Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 8.
43. Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects. Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2013).
44. Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 1.
45. Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 199.
46. Fay, *Inhospitable World*, 4.

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The Violence of the Sublime

On Aesthetical Violence in Musical Language

Vladimir Safatle

Je réclame la restitution au silence
Stephane Mallarmé

Expressing the Infinite

When Beethoven presented one of his most prominent compositions, the 5th Symphony, E.T.A. Hoffmann wrote:

> Beethoven's music stirs the mists of fear, of horror, of terror, of grief, and awakens that endless longing, which is the very essence of romanticism. He is consequently a purely romantic composer, and is it not possible that for this very reason he is less successful in vocal music which does not surrender itself to the characterization of indefinite emotions but portrays effects specified by the words rather than those indefinite emotions experienced in the realm of the infinite?[1]

These affects of fear, horror, and terror are expressions of the strong relationship between violence and the sublime and make up a significant axis of musical romanticism. Romanticism understood the violence against imagination produced by the sublime as the essence of the musical form. This understanding was also the expression of a certain kind of political commitment that criticized hegemonic conventions and representations in the social reproduction of our ways of life. In this contribution, I argue that there is a politics of sublime violence immanent to musical romanticism.

First, let us turn briefly to the philosophical discussion of the sublime. Sublime terror is a theme that has accompanied the discussions of the sublime, at least since Edmund Burke linked the sublime to the dimension of negative pleasures. Burke distinguishes between two kinds of pleasures produced by aesthetic contemplation: the positive and the negative. The former is linked to harmony, clarity, and smoothness—the framing attributes of beauty. The latter rises from contemplating objects that are in some way threatening and dangerous, and thus prone to cause pain.[2] Reflecting on the pleasure provoked by contemplating what threatens our physical existence, Kant will later claim that "sublime is what, by its resistance to the interest of the senses, we like directly."[3]

This is a keen insight made by Kant. Finding pleasure in fear and pain means, in this context, the pleasure of going against the immediate interest of the senses, of discovering something in us that is not just the expression of our self-preservation. Kant adds something new to the idea of the sublime. For the English sensualists, the sublime arises from phenomena in which we discover nature's immense and violent character, such as great storms, uninhabited grasslands, and vast waterfalls, among others. But Kant points out that it is not the phenomena in themselves that constitute the sublime, but rather the discovery of something

in us that does not fear them but is capable of surpassing and dominating them. Thus, Friedrich Schiller, deeply influenced by Kant, claimed that contemplating the force of nature lets us discover a resistance that is not physical but rather a resistance to the dissociation between our physical existence and our personality. We are excited by what induces fear because there is a will beyond sensible impulses that makes us want what our impulses repudiate. That is, in beauty, reason and sensibility are in harmony. In the sublime, they find their point of deregulation.

Kant initiates this aesthetic discussion by showing how the sublime is a mode of autonomy: The negative pleasure on which the sublime rests indicates the existence of something within us that brackets our desire for self-preservation, deeply disturbing our imagination's schematism. Thus, Kant can affirm that the judgment of the sublime rests on the human disposition to moral feeling: Just as the beautiful prepares us to love something unselfishly, the sublime prepares us to cherish what goes against our sensible interest.

However, there is always an element of the inhuman, or monstrous, in the sublime. What is monstrous in the sublime is the discovery of something in us that does not conform to the image of the individual. This discovery comes only through the pleasure of contemplating what can destroy our sensible existence and crush our finite human dimension. If the romantic inflection of the sublime appears just as Western societies begin to form "societies of individuals," it is because art seeks to present experiences that such societies can only see through the lens of "infinite nostalgia."

Note, for example, the very specific use of the notion of infinity in Hoffmann's statement about Beethoven. It is an essential expression of the discomfort of early nineteenth-century artists with the formal conventions of language and the social order. Resorting to infinity was the romantic way of understanding a time of change in which the social order no longer held the

authority it once had. The norms that upheld the aesthetic forms and their functionality had to be systematically questioned due to their "finite" qualities.[4] Interestingly, writers like Hoffmann claimed that music was perhaps the only genuinely romantic art because it had the expression of infinity as its sole object. "Expressing the infinite" in this case means expressing what disrupts our ability to establish relationships based on identity and difference, thus denying the constructive aspirations of form. What is "musical" is therefore undetermined; it is played out in constant interaction with the formless—it does not arise out of the concept's prose (as the anti-romantic Hegel argued), but in proximity to the experience of infinity.

According to Hoffmann, an average contemporary listener would be amazed by Beethoven's musical language; the music would seem disorganized, as if fantasy overwhelmed the form, making his symphonies appear as a fickle succession of feelings and characters. As one critic at the time put it, Beethoven's listeners were "crushed by a mass of unconnected and overloaded ideas and a continuing tumult by all the instruments."[5] Beethoven's music is composed of fragmented themes, mostly small musical ideas of no more than four bars, whose transitions are often abrupt, cut off, and marked by pauses and interruptions.

Hoffmann has the opinions of the "musical populace" (*musikalischen Pöbel*) in mind when asserting that such disarticulation of the constructive formal principles, such deregulation of norms produced by Beethoven's music, was not merely a mannerism but a way of absorbing the tension between the expression of infinity and the regularity of conventions. Those who criticize Beethoven for seeking unity through respect for the grammatical rules of hegemonic musical language should look for the unifying force of the idea.

In this tension between the expression of infinity and regularity of conventions, the work does not break down into a

game with the formless because Beethoven's music provides new constructive processes. Note, for example, the way the famous first movement of the Fifth Symphony is organized. Virtually all motifs are derived from the same musical idea, expressed early on with its sufficiently reduced, straightforward and structured rhythmic figure to indicate no identity, no tone that would allow us to derive what its harmonic progression will be (though it is true that the next bars already make it clear that we are in C minor). This musical idea does not "develop" in the traditional sense of the word, but moves by contrast, accumulation, and modulation. The musical recollection of the idea even allows voids, cuts, and ruptures without compromising the unity of form. It is the productive force of the musical idea that produces what Hoffmann calls a "deep inner articulation" (*innere tiefe Zusammenhang*), that is, an approximation between opposites and mediation between extremes. Here the musical idea unifies setbacks, absorbs even the silence, and deconstructs determinations by bringing the difference back to an undifferentiated basic identity. From this disarticulation between difference and identity, the expression of infinity within the Beethovenian musical idea emerges.

Against the Community

A prime example of Beethoven's procedure is his *Coriolan Overture*, composed at the same time as the Fifth Symphony. The work is an opening for Heinrich Joseph von Collin's version of Shakespeare's play *Coriolanus*. The play focuses on the banishment of Roman general Coriolanus—a man turned hero through his bravery in commanding the troops against the Volsci. Coriolanus represents aristocratic ideals of honor, bravery, and arrogance. These attributes and his personality

complicate his relationship with the plebeians and the courts. After being appointed Roman consul by the Senate and asking for the people's vote, Coriolanus shows his inability to lead by arousing popular anger and, finally, being banished from Rome. Coriolanus is, above all, a man who does not know how to talk to the people; he does not know how to express himself. As an expatriate, he allies with his former enemies to march toward the city. At the gates of besieged Rome, Coriolanus prepares for the final attack when his mother and wife appear, begging him to abandon his hatred and not invade the city. Overwhelmed, Coriolanus listens to the women and abandons his plans, leading to his death at the hands of the Volsci.

In adapting Shakespeare's play, Collin makes two significant changes. First, he attenuates the aristocratism of the play, removing many of the moments in which contempt for the alleged inconstancy and irrationality of popular opinion is evident. However, the most dramatic change is that Collin's Coriolan commits suicide, which makes his tragic dimension clearer: a man without community, without place, whose self-assurance exiles him from contact with other men. His character is a clear representation of the tension between the nascent modern individuality and its incommunicability—its expression haunted by indeterminacy.[6] Thus, by choosing to transform Coriolan's murder into suicide, Collin expresses the consciousness of the modern experience of disorientation through Coriolan's banishment.

Beethoven's composition shapes the structure of conflict already in the very construction of the musical idea. The musical idea, expounded in the first chords, is based on the possible modulations of polarity and conflict between two groups of notes. Such polarity will structure practically all music, appearing as a constructive element internal to the motifs. The motif that appears in bars 15 through 19 demonstrates a procedure in which

the opposing polarity between two notes serves as a constructive basis. The polarity never resolves but is cut and suspended before completion (e.g., at the end of this first motif) or increased by accumulation and intensity. It is the best example of how in Beethoven,

> formal ideas and melodic detail come into existence simultane-
> ously; the single motive is relative to the whole. By contrast, in
> the later nineteenth century the melodic idea acted as a motive
> in the literal sense of the word, setting the music in motion, and
> provided the substance of a development in which the theme it-
> self was elaborated.[7]

In the case of the *Coriolan Overture*, we can say that the motif is the musical idea itself.

This extensive permanence of the musical idea allows for the integration of events that could be understood as radical denials of the functionality of the work. A good example is how the dynamic polarity between notes becomes a conflicting polarity between motifs and themes. The whole play is traversed by the antagonism between the motifs, associated with Coriolanus and organized basically through polarities between two notes and a meandering melodic theme associated with the female voices of the mother and wife. The first presentation of the motif by the first group of violins and the group of violas is in C minor tonic. The second is under a modulation for the minor flat B tonic. It is no coincidence that the construction of the melody that represents the female voices is based on a perfect C major chord when played by violins and a perfect B major chord when played by clarinets. The idea of counter-position and distension is evident, although it cannot be said that there is any organiza-tion based, for example, on the antecedent-consequent scheme or even on some principle of transition. We might think of a

contrasting relationship, but such a contrast follows no form of organic development. At certain times, it operates by simple juxtaposition or uses long pauses and suspension of dynamics for the "feminine" melody to be replayed. It can be said that the piece moves by antithesis, since the moments, taken individually, seem to contradict each other. That is, taken in isolation, each of the musical moments contradicts what follows. This unresolved character of the conflict lasts until the end of the play, where the musical transposition of Coriolanus's idea of suicide takes the form of an unsurpassed ending, of music that simply dissolves without conclusive cadence or promise of teleological reconciliation. It doesn't resolve itself; it just stops.

At this point, we find a fundamental idea. The impossibility of resolving the conflict and the continuing struggle against organicity does not lead us, as we might initially expect, to a form without synthetic force. The processuality of the idea already provides unity on the constructive level. This is the central point: The contradiction between moments, potentiated by the elimination of visible processes of transition, does not eliminate the univocity produced by the relation of each moment to the idea. The idea has the power to refract itself in contradictory updates, without losing its univocity. At the same time, it develops the antagonism between the finitude of its moments and the univocity of its infinite processuality that absorbs the multiplicity of determinations.

However, if the musical idea lies, simultaneously, in the voice of Coriolanus and in the voice of his women; if it lies, at the same time, in the recognition of the expelled individuality of the community and in the voice of the community that asks to be spared, that is because the idea expresses the lack of common ground in social reality in which these two voices might *not* contradict each other. For this reason, it can only appear as what constitutes the themes and motifs and what dissolves them into a pure becoming that so clearly exposes the

fragility of the rooting of all moments. Both community and individuality are presented as moments to be dissolved. In the *Coriolan Overture*, Beethoven clearly shows how the essence of what constitutes the voices is already what dissolves them as moments of becoming.

In a way, this is an interpretation that underlies much of Theodor Adorno's understanding of Beethoven—an understanding that starts from the argument that the unity of the work is provided by the systematic exploration of the character of the form as a process. Let us take, for example, Adorno's well-known comparison between Beethoven and Hegel:

> Beethoven's achievement lies in the fact that in his work – and in his work alone – the whole is never external to the particular but emerges solely from its movement, or, rather, is this movement. In Beethoven, there is no mediation between the themes, but, as in Hegel, the whole, as pure becoming, is itself the concrete mediation.[8]

This is a way to say that in Beethoven, the musical idea is what builds a notion of dynamic wholeness. Due to its clear presentation—never breaking any elementary structures, such as the polarity between tonic and dominant—the musical idea allows the listener to keep the perception of the internal procedurality of the form, despite the presence of all that at the time would be seen as indices of a disintegrating form, in continuous flirtation with the formless. Therefore, there is not exactly a mediation between themes, but a continuous becoming, which never stops because it seems to be able to unfold everywhere, to fold in everything, even violence.

Thus, the theme of the sublime may appear as a way of understanding the autonomy of works in relation to formal regularities and style conventions. It allows not only to clarify how

the works are built from the annulment of the elements that conform language to the demands of communication; it also allows works of art to be the moments in which language resizes itself by letting the foundation of what is produced appear.

What is Terror?

If the sublime character of Beethoven's music lies, on the one hand, in its ability to use the musical idea as an initial principle of indetermination that ultimately produces a higher and more encompassing order, there is still a second point. As Hoffmann says, Beethoven's music produces "fear, terror, horror," though at first, it is unclear what musical phenomenon it exactly refers to. Was it the massive and overwhelming character of the use of musical resources? Or should we look for the source of such feelings elsewhere?

We may have a suggestive approach if we look to a concept Theodor Adorno developed to describe Beethoven's later works. In Beethoven's music, we are looking for something inordinate and monstrous in relation to the limits of individuality. We could appeal to excess as a manifestation of inordinateness, that is, to the way in which some of his works are excessively long by the standards of the time, monumental, mobilizing vast musical resources, such as the Ninth Symphony. But we can also, and this seems to me to be a much more interesting approach, look for the excess in the experience of subtraction—a subtraction that reminds us of the monstrous presence of what silences us and nullifies our individuality, namely the presence of death. This is the sense Adorno employs when he refers to the notion of the "late style" in Beethoven's last works.[9]

One might initially imagine that Adorno's interest in the "late style" would come from his quest to understand aesthetic

experiences that seem to culminate in later works. But "culminating" does not mean, here, the most finished and harmonious achievement of a mature project. As the literary critic Edward Said recalls: "The power of Beethoven's late style is negative, or rather *it is negativity*: where we would expect serenity and maturity, one instead finds a bristling, difficult, and unyielding—perhaps even inhuman—challenge."[10] This is a way of stating that the late character of a work actually exposes its ability to be an explosive tension between form and expression. To say that the power of Beethoven's late style is negative means that the tension proper to the so-called classical phase of his work will be enhanced by the very development of the composer's musical language.[11]

Often the peculiarity of his last phase has been ascribed to psychological motives such as extreme deafness and a certain degree of despair. However, Adorno insists that there is an internal reason for the development of musical language. Thus, the notion of the late style will not only be a description of one phase of Beethoven's artistic experience, but a key to understanding works by various composers such as Schoenberg and Strauss, among others. Said claims, and he is not entirely wrong, that the late style is the central concept of Adornian aesthetics. In fact, it would be the description of the art experience itself at its highest point of tension, for it exposes the profound formal instability, the fragile and contradictory agreement between constructive plans and expressive demands that no longer come in the form of what we understand by "expression."

"In the history of art, late works are catastrophes." This sentence by Adorno is central to our discussion. If late works are catastrophes, it is because they appear as the locus of a break with the conventional determinations. Regarding Beethoven's later works, Adorno states, for example, that they lack harmony: periods of silence increase, breaks often occur in the

middle of musical phrases, contrasts seem simply juxtaposed. At first, we might believe that such a lack of harmony would be the result of an oversized subjectivity that seeks some form of integral expression and therefore does not fear exploring extremes devoid of mediation. This would explain why such subjectivity would try to break, or at least ignore all the rules hitherto respected.

However, this unreason appears in Beethoven through the abandonment of what seemed to guarantee the organicity to form, as well as the use of explicitly appearing conventions— as if we were facing a kind of indifference to appearance that allows the composer to deliberately use conventional formulas and phrasings. This use of convention can no longer guarantee the appearance of organicity.

Let us note, then, that if the power of Beethoven's music is negative and sometimes inhuman, it is because the sublime horror it provokes comes from its force of subtraction and refusal of what was hitherto understood as fundamental elements for the recognition of the "humanity" of expression, and not from its grandiose exposure of materials. Given his late style, we can say that Beethoven shows us how sublime works seem to transform subtraction into acute awareness of the atrophy of language. However, I would like to show how such an idea of late style brings possibilities for understanding the procedural ties of the musical form that provide us with the genealogy of compositional strategies that are closer to contemporary aesthetical problems.

Poi a poi di nuovo vivente

Among several possible examples of late style, we could analyze the adage of the Piano Sonata no. 31, op. 110, with its articulation between an arioso and a fugue. Several elements in this piece

surprise Beethoven's listener. First, in the *Coriolan Overture* and the Fifth Symphony, the musical idea is not clearly presented. On the contrary, the first seven introductory bars are among the most impressive moments of musical indeterminacy in romanticism. The tone is completely oscillating; seven bars in which the music oscillates between at least B-flat minor, B-flat major, M major, and C-flat minor. This oscillation expresses the spirit of a suspended song, which draws a motif that abruptly ends in an arpeggio, which suspends development to insist obsessively on the pure repetition of the same note for almost two bars. When the music begins, with an *arioso dolente*, it will not be in the tone that characterizes it (A-flat major). The tone stabilization will only come when a fugue finally appears.

The introduction of the adage functions as the announcement of the monstrosity of expression without grammar, which seems to have renounced its place as a dynamic motor of the musical idea, apparently breaking the unity that constitutes the very specificity of Beethoven's musical experience. The expressive position in this situation will lead the music to a movement of deep splitting, as we have seen in the antagonism present in the dynamics of the *Coriolan Overture*. However, here the split will develop in another way. With the retraction of the musical idea, the work will be constructed through the radicalization of the principle of mediation by extremes. The fragmenting tendency is controlled not by a final synthesis, but, as we shall see, by the internal alteration of forms.

If we read the relationship between Beethoven's classic and late style dialectically, we can say that the retraction of the idea opens for the assumption of spaces of formal indetermination. However, the retraction of the idea is not its pure annulment. As the Beethovenian language is defined by its ability to produce totalities in which identities are continually reconfiguring, something of the idea may remain even when it is absent, namely

the notion of process, even if it is now dramatized by the retraction of the element that guaranteed its unity. Let us see how this happens inside the sonata.

The sonata will unfold through a juxtaposition of two forms: the arioso and the fugue. The arioso, with its spirit between the aria and the accompanying recitative, presents an extensive melancholic theme at a different time from the time of the introduction (from 4/4 to 12/16). It is accompanied by a fugue at another time (6/8). There is no transition between the two materials; one is not the introduction to the other because everything that could function as a transition has been subtracted. One moves from the adage of the arioso to the allegro of the fugue in a completely unexpected way—which could not be otherwise since we are in a presentation of extremes: the profoundly monophonic character of the half-spoken corner of the arioso and the polyphony of the fugue.

The use of fugue, in turn, was considered musically archaic at the time. To compose a fugue in 1822, was to revisit an aging mode of composition, with rules of counterpoint and transposition that went against harmonic clarity and expressive freedom defended by romanticism. It would seem to be the last thing to do for those who seek to assert "unreasonable subjectivity." However, in its own way, the second movement of the sonata describes the process of giving life to what seemed merely conventional—which becomes clear in the passage from the second exposure of the arioso to the second exposure of the fugue at the end of the sonata. Returning to the arioso quite abruptly, cutting a sentence in half, Beethoven writes in the score "perdendo le forze, dolente." The piano must be played with the horror of those who feel the force going away: One must find a fading expression whose intensity ranges from *piano* to *pianissimo*, as one who makes the recited lament of the arioso a search for the zero degree.

Note, however, that none of this implies an effective suspension of the processuality of the piece. As Adorno will say, the later works remain a process, although it cannot be understood as development. Here, we do not have the process as a movement of overcoming antagonisms through the progressive unveiling of the constructive force of the musical idea, as we saw in the *Coriolan Overture*. We have another form, based on the presentation of the formless within the works and its transformation into a motor for the reconfiguration of conventional forms. In Sonata op. 110, this transformation occurs through the final return to the fugue. At the end of the melody of the arioso, Beethoven presents a sequence of thirteen chords in intense amplification whose function is to mimic a movement of emergence, which explains why the return of the fugue is displayed in the score with the indication "piu a piu di nuovo vivente." It is within the second exposition of the fugue that, little by little, life will return.

Regarding this massive sequence of progressing chords, Rosen writes, "Beethoven not only symbolizes or represents the return of life, but physically persuades us of the process."[12] His analysis is also correct in remembering that the fugue exposure is made using the most elementary rules: the inversion of the fugue theme, the increase and the decrease. The life that returns little by little uses the seemingly outdated norms, gradually showing how to change them. In this process, the sonata produces its most fantastic achievement. Beethoven retains the theme of the fugue and its transposition between the left and right hand, but instead of using the counterpoint, he uses accompaniments completely foreign to Baroque language. However, since everything must be done "poi a poi" (there are three indications in the last part of the score), as there should be no break in the mutation of forms, they now change in continuity. And in this change in continuity, it becomes possible to realize the integration

between two distinct times of the musical material. Thus, the fugue remains, but without being a fugue anymore. It remains identifiable even if there is nothing else to identify. Life, which returns little by little, finds a way to produce new forms, breaking the discontinuity of time by presenting itself as an expression of what is no longer restricted to linear time.

Back to the Present

From the romantic discussion of the sublime in music, we have identified some significant aesthetic themes. First, the interplay between the sublime and the indeterminate makes the works of art a space of tension toward the formless: The works are inhabited by a constructive principle that, at first glance, seems impossible to realize, leading to an apparent tendency toward the fragmentary. This trend is, in fact, the first impression of a new order that is built, overcoming setbacks. Second, sublime works are monstrous: They provoke the violence of terror, not only because of their grandeur, evoking something greater than nature on its inhuman scale, but because of their inhumanity and their subtraction from what we normally associate with human language.

These topics found in musical romanticism will also be present in the contemporary recovery of the concept of the sublime. The contemporary presence of the sublime may indicate a suggestive permanence of productive strategies between works, beyond the evident difference of styles. However, we can discuss the works considering not only their formal characteristics but also their internal issues. In this sense, perhaps some of today's broader aesthetic issues still resonate deeply with romanticism.

Two philosophers who have tried to rethink the concept of the sublime, each in their own way, and with contributing

greatly to the musical aesthetics are Jean-François Lyotard and Theodor Adorno. Here, I would like to focus on the latter. In the late 1960s, Adorno intended to publish an aesthetic theory, which would only be issued after his death. The theory contains seminal ideas about the possibility of using the concept of the sublime within twentieth-century art. The first striking aspect of the text is the recognition of the political function that such a recovery may have:

> In the administered world, artworks are only adequately assimilated in the form of the communication of the uncommunicable, the breaking trough of reified consciousness. Works in which the aesthetic form, under pressure of the truth content, transcends itself occupy the position that was once held by the concept of the sublime. In them, spirit and material polarize in the effort to unite. Their spirit experiences itself as sensually unrepresentable, while on the other hand their material, that to which they are bound external to their boundary, experiences itself as irreconcilable with the unity of the work.[13]

There are some fundamental ideas here. First, within a managed world, a world in which modes of determination and representation only reproduce reified realities, it makes no sense to appeal to some dimension of the original or the archaic that would promise forms of reconciliation. It is better to transform works of art into an open exposition of conflicts between communication and the incommunicable, between the unity of form and the tendency of its materials. In this sense, works of art should appear as aporias, appealing to an experience that still has no place in social life. These open aporias, however, have the political force to propel the critique of modes of reconciliation present in social reality. That is why our time could no longer give way to the beautiful. The free play of the faculties

that the beautiful promised was no longer historically possible, nor politically desirable. Perhaps this is why someone like André Breton claimed, "beauty will be convulsive, or it won't be beauty." Convulsion, by the way, was never a feeling that the aesthetic tradition understood as proper to the contemplation of beautiful objects.

The contemporary appeal to the sublime is linked to the need for art to uncover the fundamental contradictions that prevent social reconciliation. Such contradictions should be seen, not as an overcoming of contradictions, but rather as constituting a language in which reconciliation is not the result of the conflict, but in which the conflict itself becomes eloquent.[14] That is, the contradiction is sustained through a language that bears the marks of the irreconcilable.

If we ask ourselves what such a language should look like, perhaps we can say that it will necessarily be inhuman and silent. Through the sublime, Adorno affirms that art brings forth a humanity incompatible with the "ideology of service to men." Art is faithful to men only through its inhumanity against them (*Treuen hält sie den Menschen allein durch Inhumanität gegen sie*). This is, in fact, a political reading of the monstrosity proper to sublime terror and violence. In other words, the recovery of the sublime aims to affirm that truthful art allows the subject to go beyond the current image of man through the display of inhumanity toward himself. Thus, the sublime work of art will be the exposition of a certain aesthetic of inhumanity and violence.

At this point, we can understand a fundamental development in the Adornian recovery of the concept of the sublime. Contrary to the romantic concept, based on the experience of the domination and overcoming of nature, Adorno speaks of a certain "return of nature" allowed by sublime works: "Such emancipation [produced by the concept of sublime] would be the return of nature [*Ruckkehr von Natur*], and it—the counterimage of mere

existence—is the sublime."[15] We have seen how the romantic use of the sublime was imbued with the belief in the greatness of man as the master of nature. By safely contemplating the overwhelming force of nature, we discover at the same time the precariousness of our empirical individuality and our greater destiny as rational beings, which is not limited to the empirical dimension and the feeling of self-preservation. We can thus reduce nature to something whose strength is to be mastered and overcome. This is why sublime works are monumental: They seem to tell the story of humans who overcome the natural forces.

However, the Adornian recovery starts from the defense of a sublime that has lost its dominating grandiloquence, since such grandiloquence would now sound unreasonable; or perhaps it was only possible as a ruined grandiloquence, as we know through the work of Anselm Kiefer. Herein lies an important discussion about the use of models of monumentality in contemporary art and their political consequences.

This peculiar "non-grandiloquent sublime" or, if you will, the "sublime of atrophy," is what ultimately guides Adorno's thinking, marking an important distinction between the romantic and modernist sublime. It appears, for instance, in a text about Anton Webern, in which Adorno states that Webern's formal law of music is atrophy (*Schrumpfens*)—atrophy that seems to go toward the recovery of a musical work that abandons musical time as extensive grandeur and leaves behind the architectural nature of the traditional idea of form. Even if we find some of these procedures in the discussion on Beethoven's late style, it is not to suggest a direct line between Beethoven's and Webern's compositional strategies. However, we can insist that the romantic use of the atrophy of form is radicalized in modernism, allowing the composers to open a new frame of production upon problems proper to the permanence of the sublime as a normative horizon for works of art.

Adorno insists on the well-known reduced characteristic of Webern's works (all of his compositions taken together are no more than three hours long) to insist on the importance of the composer stunting musical time, thus allowing an intensification of expression that coincides with the interdiction of temporal extension. Thus, Webern serves as an example of Adorno's claim that there is no possible lyricism that does not go through atrophy. This intensification of expression is necessarily a reduction of music to the gesture of an "absolute expression," which allows Adorno to state:

> The pure sound to which the subject tends, as a support of his expression [*Ausdrucksträger*], is released from the violence that subjectivity inflicts upon the sound material in shaping it. The subject, making sound, without any mediation of musical language, allows music to provide the sound of nature, and no longer of subjectivity.[16]

Adorno's strong statement demands attention. An expression devoid of language mediation, or whose true mediation is the atrophy of language, is a peculiar mode of mediation that allows the subject to free itself from a subjectivity that would operate by building organizations that are modes of domination, freeing itself from its own image, thus providing the conditions for a "return of nature" as an organic process. This is what Adorno sees in Webern's early compositions; it does not, however, prevent him from sharply criticizing Webern's musical language development due to the fetishized use of the twelve-tones series, exemplified by the critical analysis of a piece such as the Variations for Piano op. 27.

György Ligeti stated in an important article about Webern that the Austrian composer had managed to isolate gestures and musical configurations of romanticism from its network of

traditional relationships. Thus, the form becomes static since it can no longer rely on formal supports of development, such as the infinite melody or the continuous processuality of the musical idea. For this reason, "to the reduction of expression and gestures to some very concentrated motive cells is added the impossibility of all work and all thematic development—which is, by the way, in accordance with the staticity of the form."[17] In this gesture of reduction, the network between musical elements takes the form of juxtaposition.

However, these concentrated parts are not devoid of any principle of construction. They are, in fact, the reduction of the principle of construction to the enunciation of a musical gesture with great plastic force, as if a quality pertaining to physical gestures now becomes the productive foundation of form. This may explain the idea of an immanent transposition of the expression into form instead of mere formlessness. In fact, the musical idea responsible for producing form is taken directly from gestures. Thus, the piece is, in a way, the expansion of the productive potentiality of an instant gesture—a gesture that would normally pass imperceptibly, and that can only be heard and released because time has gone silent.

Take, for example, some features of the Six Bagatelles for String Quartet op. 9. Composed in 1913, that is, before the twelve-tone phase, the piece chooses a smaller genre. A bagatelle is usually a short, unpretentious song written in a light style—as if the lightness of musical writing is proportional to its capacity to be built by the gesture it expresses.

We can use the fifth bagatelle as an example. Its construction starts from a chromatic technique with a preponderance of minor seconds. Already in the first two bars, we find the presentation of a dense chromatic network composed of the C, C #, D #, and E in the first bar, which will be completed by the D of the second bar. Gradually this relationship of minor seconds increases,

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either upward or downward, to the seventh bar. However, these amplifications of the harmonic field are not homogeneous, as if following a rule. They are organic and, therefore, asymmetric and relatively free. For example, the symmetry between the high and low harmonic fields is broken at the end of the seventh bar. Upward, the field enlarges one degree more than downward.

We must speak of more or less freely developed structures, because here, as Ligeti maintains, order and freedom seem to seek a balance. However, from the seventh measure, the magnification gesture continues but ceases to operate chromatically by smaller second intervals—as if the gestural principle of construction was released to the maximum stress point of the form. In this movement, the music is no longer chromatic but keeps the old figure as its fundamental principle of movement: "We are facing an organic process: the form is neither schematically constructed

nor free from all restrictions. It is born, like everything that is living, from growth and restraint, widening afterward until at last the chromatic harmonic field is torn."[18] In this way, the work shows the productive force of a gesture that can be read as "the return of nature" and, in the same movement, as the awareness of the internal restlessness of the gesture itself. Thus, the stunted time of the work is not a still time. For it is not the immobility of repetition that seeks ecstasy. It is the contraction of time that observes a gesture at its bursting point.

Basically, with his discussions of the atrophy of musical language, with discussions about the cunning of an expression that wants to show its irreducibility in relation to the fetishized codification of affects, Adorno radicalizes the principles of analysis he had developed to speak of Beethoven's late style. This could not be otherwise, since we are, in fact, facing the unfolding of problems linked to the possible uses of the category of the sublime within musical aesthetics. Even if we are dealing with different historical periods, the analysis of historical discontinuity of languages and styles could be applied to a continuity of problems. To think the complexity of this relation between continuity and discontinuity is a task for critical thought today.

Notes

1. E.T.A. Hoffmann, "Beethoven's Instrumental Music," *The Musical Quarterly* 3, no. 1 (Jan 1917), 128.
2. Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. James T. Boulton (London: Routledge, 2008).
3. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 127.
4. Adorno had understood it when he states that "the experience of post-Kantian German Idealism reacts against philistine narrowness and contentment with the compartmentalization of life and organizes knowledge in accordance with the division of labor ...

The watchword 'infinity' which flowed so easily from all their pens as it had not from Kant's, takes on its specific coloration only in relation to what were for them the privations of the finite, of entrenched self-interest was reflected." Theodor Adorno, *Three Studies on Hegel*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge, Mass., and London: MIT Press, 1993), 62.

5. Charles Rosen, *The Classical Style: Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., Expanded edition, 1998), 393.

6. The idea of modern individuality indicates here the constitution of a social and philosophical subjectivity that is consolidated between the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century. For this notion of "modern," proper to the emergence of an empirical-transcendental double, we can refer to Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things: The Archeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage, 1994).

7. Carl Dahlhaus, *Between Romanticism and Modernism*, trans. Mary Whittall (Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, 1989), 42.

8. Theodor Adorno, *Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music*, trans. E.F.N. Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 24.

9. As Adorno reflected, about the late style: "The formal law is revealed precisely on the thought of death. If, in the face of death's reality, art's right lose their force, then the former will certainly not be able to be absorbed directly into the work in the guise of its 'subject.'" Theodor Adorno, "Beethoven's Late Style," trans. Susan H. Gillespie, in *Essays on Music* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: California University Press, 2002), 566.

10. Edward Said, *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), 12.

11. Beethoven's works until 1803 indicate his allegiance to the classical style. In this sense, the Third Symphony represents an important formal rupture toward a romantic style, where the relationship between expression and construction would change considerably. We know the traditional division of Beethoven's work in three phases. See Wilhelm von Lenz, *Beethoven et ses trois styles* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger, 2010), but I would insist on a more productive idea that stresses Beethoven's role on the passage from classicism to romanticism; see Carl Dahlhaus, *Ludwig*

von Beethoven: Approaches to His Music, trans. Mary Whittall (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).

12.   Charles Rosen, *Beethoven's Piano Sonatas* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 240.

13.   Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. and trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Continuum, 1997), 196.

14.   Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 197.

15.   Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 195.

16.   Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 96.

17.   György Ligeti, *Neuf essais sur la musique* (Genève: Contrechamp, 2001), 40 (my trans.).

18.   Ligeti, *Neuf essais*, 48.

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