Introduction

Violence and Aesthetics

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1

When the so-called war on terror was launched in 2001, Western 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 technological 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 misrecognized."[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 literature 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 Teachers' 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 commemoration 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 *canción 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 insurrection. "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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