Political Violence and the Tellability of Tales

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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, underreport, 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 providing 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 system. 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 reviewing 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 themselves 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 "untellable" complexities that make up real cases of objective violence 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 interaction 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 engagingly represent the relationship between subjective and objective 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 succeeds 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 *Aftenposten* (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/jamal-khashoggi-missing-saudi-arabia-turkey-istanbul-consulate-dismembered-lindsey-graham-us-a8578266.html.
18. https://edition.cnn.com/2019/07/24/politics/saudi-arms-sale-resolutions-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 described 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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