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# The Violence of Aesthetics: Benjamin, Kane, Bolaño

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Master of Arts

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The Violence of Aesthetics: Benjamin, Kane, Bolaño

(Thesis Format: Monograph)

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

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The School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies

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London, Ontario, Canada

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## **Abstract**

This thesis is an attempt to grapple with and make sense of a particular type of violence which forms an integral part of contemporary aesthetics. This multifarious violence strives, and often fails, to transgress conventions of form and content through appealing to what Deleuze calls the violence of sensation, as opposed to the violence of representation or the sensational. Taking Walter Benjamin's distinction between mythic and divine violence as an entry to discussion concerning the poetic possibilities of the transgression of and redemption from violence, British playwright Sarah Kane and Chilean novelist Roberto Bolaño will be read not only as exemplifications of certain manifestations of the violence of aesthetics, but also as theorists of aesthetics in their own right.

Keywords: Walter Benjamin, Violence, Aesthetics, Sarah Kane, Roberto Bolaño.

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## Introduction

*So if I draw a boundary line, that is not yet to say what I am drawing it for.*

-Ludwig Wittgenstein

When faced with scenes of brutal violence in art, our reactions are, for the most part, limited. Generally, it is in these moments that we become truly entranced by the narrative thaumaturgy, we forget our place as readers or spectators, and we feel compelled to pass judgement or criticism on the text, to make the text speak and defend itself for its transgression against our sensibilities. Often, in these moments, the text seems to be pushing to step outside of the role usually ascribed to art as mimesis of reality and, as spectators, we force it back into the realm of representation where it would be more easily analyzed, comprehended, and critiqued. Only once the shock of the image dissipates and we are able to view it once again as art—away from life—do we begin our exegesis. That is to say, it is much easier to assimilate such images once they are allocated to the world of representation. But what exactly happens in those moments when representation seems to fail to contain its subject, when the image can no longer be said to coincide with the sensation it produces?

Contemporary literature has been tormented by the rift between works which purport to be realist and ones which seek in whatever way to breakthrough the confines of verisimilar writing. The debate between whether literature should be more faithful to realism or experimentalism has been played out in endless discussions and debates in the past several decades. In an interview with two American writers' who are most often

placed on the more 'experimental' side of the spectrum of literature, Ben Marcus asks Brian Evenson to reflect on the nature of violence in his work and on the unpredicted backlash it caused in the reading public. Marcus says that "to call a piece of writing violent because it renders violence is ludicrous. It shows an inability to separate representation from reality, an inability to acknowledge frame, a refusal to admit the ways in which actions become transformed in being translated into words. If you've ever been involved in real acts of violence, you can see how profound the difference is."<sup>1</sup> This, of course, is undeniably true. Representations of violence are not actual acts of physical violence against one's person. However, Evenson, who lost his university job and was excommunicated from his church for his writings, is perhaps being overly cautious about the nature of the violence of literature. He continues to admit that contained in language is an abstract coercive violence directed towards the world apart from language, the world of things. This world can, of course, act back, but never in language and most definitely never through literature.

Though the question of the lacuna between artistic portrayal and the subjects being represented is a constant concern, when violence is involved the situation inevitably becomes exacerbated. Violence is an easy way for an artist to gain attention. Flash a dead body on-screen, stage a rape in front of an audience, write a poem comparing your relation with your father with the Holocaust, and controversy is sure to follow; after controversy, questions of the morality of such depictions; after questions, either the rejection of such works or the quiet acceptance of the legitimacy of their

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<sup>1</sup> Evenson.

depictions; eventually, the controversy dies down and the work becomes reinstated as a mere artifact of culture. On the other hand, social and political violence seem to be inescapably present in contemporary existence and, it could be argued, art must faithfully reflect this. Some will inevitably take it upon themselves to bring these events to light, to use art as a means of allowing us an intimate glimpse at these events and as a way to engage in social or political critique.

There is another violence in art, deeper than the violence caused by the disturbing image or by the representation of social or political violence. In the former, we see a violence directed at the subject qua spectator, aimed to shock through utilizing the violence of the sensational. The latter is directed at the citizen-spectator. What these two dissimilar approaches share is a reliance on the image of what Deleuze calls the the “violence of the represented (the sensational [the shocking], the cliché [social realism]).”<sup>2</sup> That is, both of these techniques take as unproblematic the nature of representation and use the illusion of total mimesis to achieve their goal. The violence which aims to move beyond the represented, Deleuze labels “the violence of the sensation.” In its original context in his study of Francis Bacon, Deleuze meant this as the violence contained in the very act of painting, rather than any violent image this act could produce through representation. How, then, would the violence of sensation translate to literature? In what ways is the act of writing violence? What would a novel read like, feel like if it were written in such a way as to accentuate the violence of writing itself?

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<sup>2</sup> Deleuze, *Francis Bacon* 39.



This thesis is attempt at understanding—or if understanding is not possible, at least allowing the sensations of experience to fully reverberate— a certain nightmarish violence that haunts contemporary art. To do so, Walter Benjamin will serve as an intellectual guide through the barrage of images and assortment of paradoxical ideas which will arise out of such a study. By examining Benjamin’s distinction between mythic and divine violence, as well as how he might view these distinctions realizing themselves in artistic form, I hope to first of all examine the multifarious forms violence can take when thought of as a principle of aesthetics rather than as a problem of representation. After establishing some sort of foundation, I will move on to exegeses of the works of British playwright Sarah Kane and Chilean novelist and poet Roberto Bolaño. The violence which I will try to approach in this work is one which straddles the line between mimesis and reality. Benjamin, Kane, and Bolaño each refashion this separation through different means and to different ends.

Violence, and more so our understanding of violence in art, has slowly circumvented the apprehension of the pure violence that art is able to actually produce (transgression, cruelty, abjection, exposure, uncanniness, sadism and masochism, etc.). Instead, the urge now is to understand artistic violence as a sort of investigative artistic practice. It is no surprise, then, that these writers see in past artistic movements a more authentic aestheticization of violence which cuts much deeper and much closer to Deleuze’s ‘violence of sensation.’ In Kane’s fascination with the violence left unseen and unspoken in Greek tragedies she finds theatre’s dark centre in which the physical bodies portraying characters are insufficient and must be mutilated in as horrific ways as

possible. Benjamin's complex analysis of the 'sovereign violence' contained within the German *Trauerspiel* and the Spanish *auto-sacramental* reveal the ways which power institutes itself by creating its mythical foundation on un-transgressible law and the inescapable fact of mere life. Bolaño's invocation of the violence found in Renaissance painters and mystics—most notably his transcription of figures found in Hieronymus Bosch and Pieter Brueghel the Elder to a contemporary landscape, as well as his frequent mention of and reference to Sor Juana Inez de la Cruz—reveal contemporary literature's unwillingness to posit its own social and political violence in the same brutal light.

Language as violence in Kane and Bolaño is of a very different nature than that found in works such as Anthony Burgess' *The Clockwork Orange* or Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*. In the latter, language is used by the narrators as a violent means of establishing and controlling discourse. The narrative voice speaks to conceal, legitimize, or rationalize the violence being perpetrated. It always speaks from the position of power, from those inciting violence and attempting to establish themselves as law, as the figure of sovereign law. Thus, the images of violence in works such as these are always the body in pain, the body as the site of sadistic pleasure or of lack. The discourse the narrator creates in these works is always subjective and emotional, and the events they describe rarely have any element of ambiguity. In this way, these works shift the debate away from literature itself and towards a larger political and ethical debate. Kane and Bolaño, however, are hesitant to allow language to be employed by their characters in such a manner. Whereas in the previously mentioned novels, Burgess and Nabokov allow their narrators free reign to exercise language as a method of obscuring violence, while the authorial voice is

ominously absent, in the works of Kane and Bolaño violence takes on multifarious, fragmented and heteroglossic roles. While the writers I consider and examine are not ones who eschew the aesthetics of representation or mimesis in favor of a more radical, avant-garde rupture of literature as a mediating element, unable to bridge the lacuna that separates art from life, they are definitely writing in the wake of avant-garde art. Benjamin wrote at the cusp of the European avant-garde, and was innovative in his nuanced critique of surrealism. For Benjamin, Surrealism's success had little to do with its anti-bourgeois attitude nor with its radical fragmentation of aesthetics. Rather, it laid in surrealism's opening of experience and literature to sober intoxication. Surrealism's failure is that it took this too far. It never fully woke up from its Dionysian trance.

What is perhaps most compelling about Benjamin's oeuvre as a whole, what has continued to renew interest in him and draw scholars and writers to his work, is his openness towards letting experience wash over him and influence his scholarship. Benjamin, echoing and sometimes foreshadowing the later works of Freud, thought that the differentiation between the collective experience of history and the individual is often greatly overstated. The body politic and the individual body are intertwined and always inter-involved. "Benjamin claims that the effects of modern experience—the incursions of modern *anomie*, commodification, and violence—are inscribed onto the most monadic levels of an individual's psychophysical life."<sup>3</sup> In this way, the most banal of events or images is charged with meaning. The intellectual's duty should be to uncover the relation between personal and collective histories. The artist is urged to produce works which

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<sup>3</sup> Stewart 6.

collapse this distinction into images which open would the world to ‘profane illumination.’ However, this was not solely an intellectual conclusion to which he came, but also a personal credence which permeated his work to new and surprising conclusions. The First World War shaped his understanding of literature and the role of the storyteller. Strolling through the streets of Paris shaped his understanding of the role of artistic criticism. A visit to Marseilles produces not only a new understanding of the modern city under capitalism, but also a changed view on the nature of mysticism, subjectivity, Baudelaire, and love.

Similarly, neither Kane nor Bolaño wish to completely dispel with the project of an artistic avant-garde which would disrupt the foundations of representation and collapse the distance between art and life, between individual and collective histories. Both, however, see this as an ultimately failed project. First, Kane and Bolaño are well aware of the ultimate proximity of aesthetics to politics, but, unlike vanguardism, they view this relationship as ultimately something dangerous, to be approached cautiously and never to be fully accepted. Nevertheless, the politics of representation, and the aesthetization of politics, as Benjamin called it, are constant concerns and themes of theirs—Kane’s persistent referral to standard liberal issues of equality and representation; Bolaño’s pseudo-parodying—though the cynicism and scathing satire are nothing but sincere—of leftist political movements which inevitably ended in disaster. Second, Kane and Bolaño see conventions of genre as a way of avoiding producing works which would only utilize violence, instead of approaching it critically. That is, when the violence of aesthetics is taken up as a problem, genres and their conventions cannot be categorically

embraced or rejected. Contained in the artistic discourse of genre is a hidden violence which Kane and Bolaño take as their task to uncover.

Certainly, a long litany could be composed of writers who fit this description, writers who see the representation of violence as a problematic, but integral part of literature's ability to momentarily expand its boundaries outside of representation, and are therefore not willing to dispense with it outright. Jean Genet, Alejandra Pizarnik, Brian Evenson, Severo Sarduy, Cormac McCarthy, Pierre Klossowski, Kathy Acker, Angela Carter, Horacio Castellanos Moya are a few. Contained in their works is a dedication to an unwavering, but cautious examination of violent aesthetics. Though their styles greatly differ, for these writers violence forms an integral part of their aesthetic vision and not just apart of their thematics.

But why write about violence if we are not going talk about actual violence in the world? What use is a study which decontextualizes an idea from its roots in the world? What is the justification of such an act? Is this yet another in a long line of an intellectual's perverse fascination with violence? Undoubtedly, these questions preoccupied my writing and researching. It is a tenuous distinction between works of art which employ violence to desensitize, to bludgeon, to stupefy, or simply to shock and those which employ violence to elucidate, to critically evaluate, or to provoke a particular sensation in the viewer. Often, with artists who are worth our energies and critical faculties, both are present in the same work of art and rarely are they ever so easily discernible. This thesis takes as its central problem the violence contained in literature's endeavor to break formal boundaries and to shake the reader into realizing their place in

the act of viewing. A large part of this thesis will be to locate and define the viewer's role, and perhaps complicity in the violence of aesthetics. I am not examining violence *in* aesthetics, or representations of violence as such, and, instead, am looking at some more deeply rooted idea concerning aesthetic representation as a violence itself. As Francis Bacon frames the issue, the function of art should be to "unlock the valves of feeling and therefore return the onlooker to life more violently." This 'return to the senses' is part of Benjamin's project of 'profane illumination' which struggles against aesthetics as a tool of desensitization. If "[mankind's] alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order,"<sup>4</sup> it is the task of the artist to attempt to reclaim aesthetic pleasure, a recuperation that, as Bacon points out, invariably involves a violent gesture.

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<sup>4</sup> Benjamin, *Illuminations* 242.

## Chapter 1: Transgression, Violence, Aesthetics: Points of Departure

*“Our age not only does not have a very sharp eye for the almost imperceptible intrusions of grace, it no longer has much feeling for the nature of the violences which precede and follow them.” -Flannery O’Connor*

I would like to begin a discussion of the relation between violence, transgression, and aesthetics, though to do so may either seem unnecessary or futile. Unnecessary in the sense of superfluous, decadent. After all, received opinion, as well as many of the varieties of liberal theory, would have it that transgression is an outmoded religious-sociological concept, not at all germane to postmodern societies. Likewise, questions of aesthetics are fine, encouraged even, so long as they are confined to certain Aristotelean matters of mimesis—of questions of representation, reproduction, fidelity to certain ideological forms, etc. Dialogues concerning violence often prove to be futile, either resorting to an activist’s renunciation, to a commitment to fighting against the injustices of the cruel world, or to a resigned acceptance—or, more often than not, the adoption of a certain type of active forgetfulness—of the eruptions, the ruptures which resist easy classification and understanding.

Violence demands to be addressed. It demands interpretation, appraisal. It refuses to let itself be, to lay still as a bare fact. More than most others, the aesthetic of violence resists the ‘logic of exposure’ in which the facts seem to speak for themselves, without

the need of analysis or explanation. Violence subjected to the logic of exposure—be it psychological, historical, or ideological—can never fully understood nor contained within such models. Violence fully exposed is terrifying. Conversely, violence fully explained achieves nothing and can be more horrifying still. If it becomes too saturated with interpretation, the spontaneity and disturbing, unsettling aspect of the act or text becomes lost amid a plethora of rationale; the hermeneutics themselves become a style of violence, a sort of hermeneutics of cruelty which insist that the interpretation trumps the text, that violence can be reasoned into submission.

It is against these styles of interpretation and understanding I wish to argue. Though I cannot, and should not dispense with them completely. Their insistence on over-identifying with a particular interpretive method may obfuscate the complex nature of violence, nevertheless they do often pose challenging questions, even if the answers they provide are reductionist: Is violence truly on the rise? Have the technologies which developed out of contemporary late capitalism laid the foundation for a new wave of widespread violence or merely facilitated the widespread dispersion of the image of violence? What is the connection between the spectator to acts of violence and the spectator of aesthetic violence? What is the role the spectator in unmediated violence as facilitated by technologies which allow the immediate capturing of violence? Questions such as these indicate certain relations violence may take to certain sociological phenomena. They however fail to strike at the dark heart that is explosive nature of violence. They fail to capture that which gives violence appearance as such.



Walter Benjamin's 1920 essay *Critique of Violence* provides very helpful framework for understanding violence precisely because it does not fully inscribe it within any one sphere of life or attempt to contain it completely within the borders of any one framework. It allows that violence, as multifarious and heterogenous as it is, disrupts not only that which it constitutes as its object, but also the very apparatuses that attempt to view and make sense of it. It is important to note that the essay was written at a time when Benjamin was in the midst of a transition from what has retrospectively been called his "anthropological materialism,"<sup>5</sup> to which he would later return in his unfinished *Arcades Project*, to a more, though not completely, Marxist influence period marked by his connection with the newly established Frankfurt School and its developments in social and critical theory. The essay is also of great historical and philosophical import because it comes out of a lively correspondence with German legal theorist and jurist Carl Schmitt. This conversation, as it turns out, would have a greater influence on Schmitt, all of whose subsequent major work to follow (*The Concept of the Political*, *Theory of the Partisan*) carry a distinctive Benjaminian mark from this period, than on Benjamin, whose following works eschew such direct, sustained reflections on the socio-political divorced from reflections on art, culture, (non-mythic) history, etc.<sup>6</sup> As we will see, this essay was also crucial for Agamben in his work on bare life and biopolitics.

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<sup>5</sup> See, for instance: Vatter, Miguel. "In Odradek's World: Bare Life and Historical Materialism in Agamben and Benjamin." *diacritics* 38.3 (2008): 45-70. Project MUSE. Web. 30 Nov. 2012.  
And: Berdet, Marc. "What is Anthropological Materialism?" *Anthropological Materialism*. 8 April 2010. From a conference entitled *At the Crossroads of Magic and Positivism: Walter Benjamin and Anthropology*, 1-3 September 2009. Accessed: 29 November 2012. <<http://anthropologicalmaterialism.hypotheses.org/644>>.

<sup>6</sup> For more on this see: Hanssen, Beatrice, *Critique of Violence: Between Poststructuralism and Critical Theory*. London; New York: Routledge, 2000.

As such, by not being reducible to any one school of thought and by not reducing its subject, violence, to a single reified cause, Benjamin's short reflections on the nature, causes, and understandings and explanations of violence provide us with what Deleuze might label as a machinic assemblage, one that, like Benjamin's contemporary and luminary, Kafka, is not mechanical and concrete but rather "incarnated in very complicated social assemblages that, through the employment of human personnel, through the use of human parts and cogs, realize effects of inhuman violence and desire that are infinitely stronger than those one can obtain with animals or with isolated mechanisms."<sup>7</sup> Violence is a machinic assemblage for Benjamin in that it is comprised of various, multifaceted, and at times inimical forces and actors which at no time are reducible to any of their parts, nor to the sum of their whole. The social, political, historical, mythical, and even divine all have to be taken into consideration in order to fully examine violence and the ways it is manifested in the world.

With this in mind let us delve into the essay to see what we might uncover. Benjamin begins the essay by establishing his understanding of violence as contrasted to that of natural and positive law. All of these definitions of violence, including Benjamin's, agree on three points: that it must be understood in terms of its bearing on legality and justice—that is, on law and ethics; the importance of its relation to means and ends; and that violence is never legitimate as an end in itself. Natural law "perceives in the use of violent means to just ends no greater problem than a man sees in his 'right' to move his body in the direction of a desired goal."<sup>8</sup> It legitimizes violence insofar as it is

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<sup>7</sup> Deleuze, *Kafka* 39.

<sup>8</sup> Benjamin, *Reflections* 132.

used towards just ends. In contrast, positive law only views violence as legitimate if the means themselves are legitimate. Benjamin, however, asserts that this “antinomy would prove insoluble if the common dogmatic assumption were false, if justified means on the one hand and just ends on the other were in irreconcilable conflict. No insight into this problem [of violence] could be gained, however, until [...] mutually independent criteria both of just ends and of justified means were established.”<sup>9</sup> As Benjamin considers violence as a pure end unviable and illegitimate, he continues to dissect the means with which violence is constituted and legitimized.

Have thus established his foundation, Benjamin posits that violence, since it cannot be reduced to its ends, just or unjust, and therefore, cannot be viewed in terms of ethics and justice, is inseparable from some relation to law. As such, there are two possible relations to the law, Benjamin terms these mythic and divine violence/law. The former takes form as either law-making and/or law-preserving, and indeed these may and often do occur simultaneously. Mythic violence and law is that which is always inscribed within a circle of legitimizing and maintain its power; “power is the principle of all mythic law-making.” “Mythic violence is bloody power over mere life for its own sake.”<sup>10</sup> Benjamin cites police, as an extension of the modern state, as a key example of mythic violence’s conflation of law-making and law-preserving powers. In the police, Benjamin sees “violence for legal ends [which preserves the law], but with simultaneous authority to decide these ends itself within wide limits.”<sup>11</sup> Mythic violence’s true

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 141.

forcefulness precisely comes from its ability to suspend the distinction between these two functions of legal justification of violence. Mythic violence is one that reduces needs to contain subjects within the confines of the law; nothing can be allowed to transgress to law and remain outside. As such, mythic violence uses the threat of bare or mere life, of life devoid of any meaning and able to be reduced to the animalistic facticity of existence—to pure corporality.

The boundary between men and gods, between myth and life, does not exist. Or so Benjamin would have us believe. It is a mythic boundary which exists outside of writing, law and nature. This, however, does not mean that there are not consequences for daring to challenge the fate of this mythical frontier. Here, Benjamin reminds us of the myth of Niobe. A mother of either 14 or 20 children, depending on the source of the myth, half of them males and the other half female. Her own father a King who had dined with the gods and her mother a goddess herself. On the feast day of Latona, mother to Apollo and Artemis, Niobe dared raise her voice in defiance of fate, claiming that she and her children were more worthy of praise and worship than the goddess whose honor the town was celebrating. In retribution for this transgression, Latona ordered Apollo and Artemis to hunt and slay the sons and daughter of Niobe. After her children's deaths and her husband's subsequent suicide, Latona was robbed of speech and humanity, but not of life nor name nor symbols. She was turned into stone which stands at the top of Mount Sipylus and which occasionally weeps.

Here, Benjamin illustrates what he terms mythic violence. "Mythical violence in its archetypal form is a mere manifestation of the gods. Not a means to their ends,

scarcely a manifestation of their will, but first of all a manifestation of their existence.”

“Their [the gods Apollo and Artemis] violence establishes a law far more than it punishes for the infringement of one already existing.” Mythic violence is always a lawmaking violence, one that establishes an order and a rule whenever a daring individual goes against fate and reveals the absurd nature of the chasm between man and the gods. Only retrospectively can Niobe’s actions be called hubris, only once the boundary was established could it then be crossed. Niobe, therefore, was not punished, for she committed no wrongdoing. Rather, “in a world where the challenging of fate still corresponds to a certain hope of establishing a legal right, laws are still unwritten, and a law that cannot be violated does not result in punishment but ‘retribution.’”

The retribution the gods impart to Niobe is for her to become this boundary itself. To stand motionless. The voice that once let out cries of protest against her fellow mortals’ wanton worship of deities whose only degree of separation is their absolute and interminable power, is now muted. She is not killed but reduced to living stone, capable of feeling nothing but pain and sorrow. Nor is she erased, wiped from the memory of history, as was the nameless, identity-less wife of Lot. Her name persisted as a testament of the powers of god, as the law or the frontier made concrete. “It [mythic violence] is not actually destructive. Although it brings a cruel death to Niobe’s children, it stops short of the life of their mother, whom it leaves behind, more guilty than before through the death of the children, both as an eternally mute bearer of guilty and as a boundary stone on the frontier between men and gods.” Niobe-turned-to-stone is the sign of the writing of the law, its concretization.

Mythic violence, at first a lawmaking violence, and subsequently a law preserving violence, is always both ambiguous and powerful. Its ambiguity stems from its nature as a lawmaking force, establishing laws against the tempting of fate through retribution. “However unluckily [retribution] may befall its unsuspecting victim, its occurrence is, in the understanding of the law, not chance, but fate showing itself once again in its deliberate ambiguity.” Once the frontier is established as law, “the adversary is not simply annihilated; indeed, he is accorded rights even when the victor's superiority in power is complete. And these are, in a demonically ambiguous way, "equal" rights: for both parties to the treaty, for the gods and men, it is the same line that may not be crossed. Here appears, in a terribly primitive form, the mythic ambiguity of laws that may not be "infringed"—the same ambiguity to which Anatole France refers satirically when he says, "poor and rich are equally forbidden to spend the night under the bridges." To establish and preserve the frontier, the administrators of mythic violence must themselves cross the very boundary they wish to establish. Immortalizing Niobe in stone, perversely granting her wish to stand among the gods.

This ambiguity concerning its function as both law-making and law-preserving prompts Benjamin to state that “power is the principle of all mythic law-making.” Or that “Mythic violence is bloody power over mere life for its own sake.” The boundaries that are erected are like the frontiers established after a war, in the wake of violence, the victor draws lines which are both founded on and upheld by violence. To sustain these boundaries the mythic boundary-maker must constantly breach these boundaries in order to maintain them. Thus, mythic violence is always the violence of a guilt before the law.

But, if all mythic violence is to some degree self-destructive, constantly overstepping the boundaries it erects, is all violence legal and impotent to step out of the dialectic of law-making and law-preserving, and of the justification of means by the ends they engender? Benjamin asks: “Since, however, every conceivable solution to human problems . . . remains impossible if violence is totally excluded in principle, the question necessarily arises as to what kinds of violence exist other than all those envisaged by legal theory. [. . .] How would it be, therefore, if all the violence imposed by fate, using justified means, were of itself in irreconcilable conflict with just ends, and if at the same time a different kind of violence arose that certainly could be either the justified or the unjustified means to those ends but was not related to them as means at all but in some different way?”<sup>12</sup> This is to ask, is violence always already interconnected with its possible ramifications? Is there not a type of violence that is not caught up in ouroboros-like retroactivity in which means and ends, cause and effect are always self-serving and self-positing?

Benjamin posits a violence that answers the power-hungry mythic bloodlust named divine violence. Whereas “Mythical violence is bloody power over mere life for its own sake, divine violence pure power over all life for the sake of the living. The first demands sacrifice, the second accepts it.” We can understand what Benjamin means by divine violence by putting setting it in relation to mere life, a term Agamben would later take up, and language and law, understood as, in some ways, analogous to violence and in other the base on which violence is given form. The mere or bare life upon which mythic

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<sup>12</sup> Id. 140.

violence acts, both in asserting its means-without-endless power of decision in law-making and law-preserving and in the ambiguity necessary for maintaining this power, is, in fact, mythic violence's only true power. The gods are helpless to prevent another iconoclast from challenging fate, but they can both establish mythic boundaries and draw blood. "For blood is the symbol of mere life." Blood itself means nothing, or refers only to itself, until mythic ritual, such as sacrifice, place it within a wider symbolic order. The boundaries' primary function is not to prevent transgression, but to ensure guilt, to install law, to institute a written, visible legal system and an intelligible, though paradoxical symbolic order. Blood is thus serves as a reminder of Niobe, of her children's death, of the 'tiny differences' between man and the gods.

Divine violence is the brutal destruction of such boundaries, freeing man from the constant threat of mere life which legal, mythic violence imposes and thus expiating those enclosed within its borders. "Just as in all spheres God opposes myth, mythical violence is confronted by the divine. If mythical violence is law-making, divine violence is law-destroying; if the former sets boundaries, the latter boundlessly destroys them; if mythical violence brings at once guilt and retribution, divine power only expiates; if the former threatens, the latter strikes; if the former is bloody, the latter is lethal without spilling blood." Mythic violence first posits its power as that which decides, maintains and constantly evokes mere life (that which understands all men as their blood) and does so by retroactively establishing and subsequently maintaining (law-making and preserving, e.g., Niobe). Divine violence establishes the *sacred* character of man, of that which cannot be reduced to the fact of mere life, and thus no offense to it, no drawing of



blood, can harm. This leads Benjamin to state that “this idea of man’s sacredness gives grounds for reflection that what is here pronounced sacred was according to ancient mythical though the marked bearer of guilt: [mere or bare] life itself.”

After grappling with its complex argument, what makes Benjamin’s essay so useful for analysis is that, as a machinic-assemblage both in itself and in its understanding of violence. Indeed, Benjamin’s essay has been characterized as “braided rhetoric”<sup>13</sup> in which he develops a dichotomy of two contrasting terms—means/ends, law-making/law-preserving, mythic/divine. These pairs, rather than ‘unbraiding’ themselves or finding resolution, come to full tension and at the moment which they are about to snap, give way to new dichotomies. As many commentators have noted, the text seems to reflect whatever the reader might be looking for it. Instead of, as happens so often in the essay’s secondary material, lamenting this fact, lambasting other commentators, and herald myself as the champion of the correct reading, I see this ambiguity as one of the essay’s strengths. It presents various openings, allowing for a simultaneous reading of a text through, for instance, a Marxist, a bio-political, and a feminist perspective. Most importantly of all, it defies conventional understanding of violence, as either a fact of nature or as an implement necessary for establishing peace and order. Benjamin’s essay is totally urgent because it recognizes something outside of the realm of violence, law, language, the state, and land. Divine violence, as ethereal as it sounds, in fact requires a radically non-violent experience, or, as philosopher Simon Critchley put it, an “infinitely

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<sup>13</sup> Miller 232.

ethical demand.” This demand, in contrast with Kant’s categorical imperative, it decidedly rooted in a particular historic instant from which it cannot be abstracted.

More important for our purposes here is Benjamin’s insistence on a possible positive aspect of mere life. Though it is the object of mythical law’s violence, and the reduction of subjects to bare life is often the result of this violence, it nevertheless exists independently of and a priori to the foundations of law, of writing. It is the foundations upon which writing will build itself into a law, partitioning off and guarding sacred mere life as a promise, a reminded, and a threat. Divine violence further splits open this rift between law and life, consuming those who are caught in-between. In divine power, the injunction against killing cannot be reduced to the “fear of punishment that enforces obedience” because “the injunction becomes inapplicable, incommensurable once the deed is accomplished. No judgement of the deed can be derived from the commandment. And so, neither divine judgement, nor the grounds for this judgement, can be known in advance.”<sup>14</sup> Judgement is always retroactively adorned onto the reduction to mere life. The tumultuous, chaotic state of mere life in some ways demands writing, demands an ex post facto incorporation into a larger system of meaning and coherence.

One of the most contentious ideas in Benjamin’s work, especially as it has been adopted in recent critical political theories by thinkers such as Agamben and Derrida, is the figure of divine violence. Benjamin notably ends “Critique of Violence” on an almost messianic tone of hopefulness, asserting that divine violence would be able to break the dialectical deadlock created by law-making and law-preserving violence in which

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<sup>14</sup> Benjamin 299.

nothing, including those attempts to move away from its boundaries, is outside the reach of law. That is, the violence perpetuated by myth is a seemingly never-ending game of fissions and fusions, of ruptures and convergences. Mythic violence is something which never changes and which always returns. Divine violence is the result of Benjamin's search for a transgression which would not only destroy boundaries, but would greatly rupture—depose, as he puts it—the link forged by myth between violence and law. Benjamin posits divine violence as an ephemeral flash of salvation which can succeed where myth was doomed to the failure of an eternal repetition without change.

The point of debate surrounds what exactly this divine violence would be, how it would manage to break through the dialectic of mythic violence, and what the consequences of such a radical, yet bloodless and non-violent, violence would be. Though Benjamin makes no allusion to art or aesthetics in the essay, limiting his frame of reference to classical and Biblical myth and social disquiet in response to Sorel's essay, the search for the answers to these problems in the politico-social realm is, perhaps, misguided. As Arne De Boever points out in the essay "Politics and Poetics of Divine Violence," only mythic violence is strictly political and only it can be recognized politically. Divine violence appears as a poetic rupture of the fabric of politics, but never as part of the political proper. Through transgressing politics itself, Benjamin envisages a 'divine state of emergency,' as opposed to the mythic one Agamben reads in him. In this state, mere life—what he would later in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* call the "creaturely"—becomes the grounds for the catastrophe in which redemption and transcendence become possible, contrary to that state of exception in which the reduction

to bare life serves to reaffirm the sovereignty of law. The figure of the creaturely serves as an important link between Benjamin's political and social thinking and his literary essays. As De Boever asserts in comparing "Critique of Violence" with "The Storyteller," for Benjamin, the distinction between poetics and politics, between art and society is inconsequential. Or rather, they share the same wellspring in language, and viewing them as such allows us to open up new ways of conceiving of both.

Let us turn again to the aesthetics of violence and transgression to understand what the aesthetic implications of Benjamin's conception of violence may look like. What should first strike us as important are the way that violence continues, that despite the drive towards expansion and complete coverage which the law may possess, it seems to be always incapable of completely containing violence within its jurisdiction. Benjamin does not, however, take this failing to be a part of the structural functioning of the law, as either a scapegoating mechanism or as an instance the discourse-formation of power, as Bataille or Foucault might have it. Instead, violence has its own impetus and its own contingency outside of and apart from the law. Benjamin attempts to show 'law in its non-relation to life and life in its non-relation to law.'<sup>15</sup> Though the two are intimately intertwined, they each have their own separate mythic foundations. Law's foundation is in the originary myth of language, of representation, and of law's power to deprive this of individuals; life's foundations lie in the myth of something unsayable, of something unrepresentable.

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<sup>15</sup> Agamben, *State of Exception* 88.

Nevertheless, transgression persists. Violence is somehow always caught up the movements of transgression. Even when no socio-religious boundaries are broken. Even when no blood is shed, violence is always accompanied by a movement, by a carrying across. We can extrapolate from Benjamin two transgressive moments in which the law, the limit, is transgressed. One is that which by its character necessarily cannot be contained and thus bursts, shatters, and shakes with complete disregard. The other, by some contingent choice, compels itself into continuously recognizing yet another false start, to say: “No good. I start again,”<sup>16</sup> stuck, as it were, in a strange loop of repetition and denial. On the one hand, an assemblage of energies, on the other, a structure of compulsions and revisions. The former we could call a positive, authoritative, destructive transgression, invested as it is in the emotional, active disenfranchisement of boundaries and limits. The latter can be understood as an obsessional, powerless, stagnant transgression, one which can only transgress through repetition of the vain approach to the frontier which can never be crossed. One seeks in its violence to shatter, the other, in its strict formal observance, to question. One is volatile, the other sombre.

Artistically speaking, these two manifestations of transgression can roughly be equated with two broad aesthetic attitudes which we will call, following theorist Nelly Richard, negatory and refractory respectively<sup>17</sup>. That is, in their relation with both the formal and thematic standards of art, as well as with the dialogue that forms between art and spectator, negatory and refractory art maintain similar relational characteristics to the limits and boundaries of art. Negatory art, in the vein of someone like Artaud, seeks to

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<sup>16</sup> Beckett 50.

<sup>17</sup> Richard 19.

destroy the limits of genre and spectacle, to violently disturb its viewers from a life of complacency and “to restore us to our senses.”<sup>18</sup> “Everything that acts is a cruelty. It is upon this idea of extreme action, pushed beyond all limits, that theater must be rebuilt.” Any rule is fascist rule. Any sensibility which says something is not a good idea is one to be targeted and destroyed. Refractory art, conversely, transgresses in a much more subtle manner. Instead of a complete rejection of formal standard practices and conventions of genre, its goal is a reshaping through a meticulous, relentless questioning and probing. Whereas we can pictorially conceive of negatory art as attempting to be “off the charts” in its entirety by completely rejecting the idea of the chart to begin with, refractory is something more of a parabola, the zenith of which, the usually violent point at which it becomes unmistakably experimental for its audience, is always hidden, always just beyond the reach or the scope of the chart.

Benjamin’s differentiation between mythic and divine violence can help shed some light on these two aesthetic impulses. The negatory impetus is unmistakably mythic. German avant-garde performance artist Hermann Nitsch’s work, especially his ambitious *Six Day Play*, displays the characteristics of a vanguardist negatory art. The performance, which according to Nitsch was four decades in the making, takes place in a secluded, personal castle. Over the course of six days 1,000 guests witness and, oftentimes, assist with bulls being slaughtered accompanied by a full orchestra, a mocking—though not mock—crucifixion, hundreds of barrels of wine being consumed, and full bacchanalian feasts every night. Props and materials listed for the play include:

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<sup>18</sup> Nelson 55.

“1,000 kilos of tomatoes, 1,000 kilos of grapes, 10,000 roses, 10,000 other assorted flowers, and 1,000 liters of blood. Pigs and sheep will be provided, ready-slaughtered, from an abattoir. In addition, three bulls, whose meat will be prepared for consumption, will be slaughtered during three on-site actions. This will be performed by professional butchers under veterinary control.” An example of a more mythic, in both Benjamin’s and the common sense of the word, display of violence, dramaturgy and decadence would be hard to envisage<sup>19</sup>

The same as Benjamin defines mythic violence as both law-making and law-preserving, negatory art’s violent outbursts, in its complete disregard for the conventions of artistic practice, serve the same function. One need not look any further than the Hollywood slasher or horror genre—the *Saw* franchise, for example—to understand this. There was clearly some transgression in Nitsch’s performance. This transgression, in turn, served to establish certain concrete laws, such as the ones concerning the treatment of animals during filmmaking, and more abstract ones, e.g., what is considered ‘shocking,’ ‘outrageous,’ or even ‘unacceptable.’ The tradition which negatory vanguardism sought to destroy in turn co-opted certain aspects of the transgressive acts, but domesticated them for its own purposes, replacing real sacrificial bulls and blood with plastic and ketchup, all the while preserving the aesthetic of transgression and sacrifice itself. The ultimate paradox of negatory art, such as many avant-garde movements, seems to be the same as the myth of Niobe as Benjamin presents it. Transgression needs defined borders which it can cross, which it can patrol, and which it

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<sup>19</sup> Information retrieved from: [http://omt1998.nitsch.org/ien/6tage\\_e.htm](http://omt1998.nitsch.org/ien/6tage_e.htm) and [http://www.thewire.co.uk/archive/artists/hermann-nitsch/hermann-nitsch\\_das6-tage-spiel-des-orgien-mysterien-theaters-day5](http://www.thewire.co.uk/archive/artists/hermann-nitsch/hermann-nitsch_das6-tage-spiel-des-orgien-mysterien-theaters-day5)

can redefine. Sometimes, as Benjamin saw it, these demarkations are defined retroactively, as a rule which was unwritten until the moment of its transgression. Any border which is transgressed—even, especially, if that limit did not exist at the time of its transgression—ultimately serves to broaden and fortify the divide. Because it can only function by imagining a new law of which it is the master, negation can only successfully illustrate the law's normal functioning by presenting a grotesque inverse. It never achieves any status greater than the carnival. This type of transgression is always tradition's fortification.

Refractory art, on the other hand, functions self-consciously within the framework of tradition. It neither entirely rejects nor accepts the premises of tradition, but understands that they are in some ways unavoidable and perhaps even necessary. In many instances, the precise characteristics of what constitutes a work as experimental are difficult, even impossible, to locate and pin down. Whereas avant-garde's violence takes transgression as something of a coherent aesthetic unity—perhaps something in the vein of Bataille—experimental refractory art understand transgression as moments, points of departure, which can only have meaning if surrounded by something understood as normality or formalistic coherence. “For only mythical violence, not divine, will be recognizable as such with certainty, unless it be in incomparable effects, because the expiatory power of violence is not visible to men. Once again all the eternal forms are open to pure divine violence, which myth bastardized with law.” The mythical violence propagated by vanguardism functions by a delimitation of violence as formally and contextually separated, by a “bastardization with law.” Refractory art places violence in a



context which provides neither conclusive explanation nor delineation from the flow of expected narrative. Violence here often appears as a narrative event, but still somehow eludes interpretation.

In her book *The Insubordination of Signs*, Chilean theorist Nelly Richard draws on Benjamin's essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" to attempt to define the waves of art which came out of post-coup Chile which were grappling with the immediate trauma of fascism, violence, and, more generally, struggles over the interpretation of signs. Richard notes that the "predominate tendency" was "an epic resistance that would be the photographic negative of the official 'take.'"<sup>20</sup> Continuing, she asserts that "to have formulated meanings that were merely *contrary* to the dominant point of view, without taking aim at the larger order of its signifying structures, would have meant remaining inscribed within the same linear duality of a Manichaeian construction of meaning. It would have meant inverting the symmetry of what was represented, without questioning the topology of the representation."<sup>21</sup> In this way, what she calls, after Benjamin, refractory art is not mere negation, though that is certainly an element. It is a rupture and a deviation which creates new readers, new modes of interpretation.

Perhaps because it does not completely do away with tradition and with formal characteristics of narrative and genre, works which I designate refractory have a more visceral impact rather than the more pathological reaction which vanguardism seeks to elicit. By this I mean to say, that by engaging with conventions of, for instance,

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<sup>20</sup> Richard 4.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

storytelling, these works attempt to engage more directly and more intimately with the audience. In doing so, its violence remains ambiguous and unaccounted for—very similar to Benjamin’s divine violence. “The violence that Benjamin defines as divine is instead situated in a zone in which it is no longer possible to distinguish between exception and rule. [...] This is why (that is, insofar as divine violence is not one kind of violence among others but only the dissolution of the link between violence and law) Benjamin can say that divine violence neither posits nor conserves violence, but deposes it.”<sup>22</sup> The violence displayed is often this type of violence deposition. It is often senseless in that no explanation, even that of the excuse of transgression, is presented. It is only in larger context of, for instance, a narrative, a plot, a story, that this violence can truly be eruptive, disruptive.

It is in this way that experimentalism succeeds in ways vanguardism structurally cannot. Vanguardism, as expressed by Artaud, has the pretension of being the ‘future aesthetic,’ and its ultimate shortcoming is that it is. An anecdote Maggie Nelson relates in her book *The Art of Cruelty* tells of a time she lent Artaud’s *Theatre and Its Double* to a friend. His response: “‘Sounds a lot like Hollywood,’ my friend shrugged, unmoved.”<sup>23</sup> While vanguardism follows Artaud’s dictum to violently “return us to our senses”—to a state of mere live deprived of its humanness, a state of pure animal sensuality; experimentalism falls closer to Rancière’s idea of an art which is “emancipated and emancipating...when [it] stops wanting to emancipate us.”<sup>24</sup> We are, so to speak, expiated

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<sup>22</sup> Agamben, *Homo Sacer* 65.

<sup>23</sup> Nelson 27.

<sup>24</sup> Rancière, *Emancipated* 23.

of the guilt of spectatorship. This violence may allow for interpretation, its symbolic system may be an open one, but it is neither required nor imposed. In doing so, this type of art places a heavier emphasis on the role of the spectator rather than on the artist who is looking ahead to a future aesthetic. The violence in the latter is one which destroys one order by violently imposing its own, in the latter it is a “violence [that is] expedient of whatever has been refused an audience.”<sup>25</sup> In this way, the *ne plus ultra* of experimentalism is to shown what cannot be shown without breaking any rules, leaving all the boundaries in place, disruption without rupture.

The films of Michael Haneke are fine displays of what I have deemed refractory, both in their attention to the role of the spectator and in their handling of violence. As Richard defines refractory art as one that is especially attentive to creating a new readership, one whose hermeneutics are not derived from hegemonic traditions, this aesthetic must invariably pose the reader as one of its central problematics. This elevation of the receiver to form part of the aesthetic of art is in itself very problematic. Of course, attempting to involve the receiver is a risky procedure—this is always an imagined audience, but, as Benjamin points out: “even the concept of an ‘ideal’ receiver is detrimental in the theoretical consideration of art, since all it posits is the existence and nature of man as such.”<sup>26</sup> The persisting problem is always that art cannot be concerned with its reception, but it does have tools at its disposal which allow it to direct interpretation. This correlates to the impulses Susan Sontag discusses in “Against Interpretation.” Sontag sees several ways of dealing with the problem of interpretation,

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<sup>25</sup> Calasso 184.

<sup>26</sup> Benjamin, *Illuminations* 69.

with what the role of the reader in the work of art. What she deems “programmatic avant-gardism—which has meant, mostly, experiments with form at the expense of content” layer on meaning and interpretation as an integrated part of the content and form, ultimately leaving the surface work empty. As she puts it, these artworks “commit art to being perpetually on the run.”<sup>27</sup> Against this, she posits artworks, most importantly films, which are able to transcend interpretation through a commitment to a “unified and clean”<sup>28</sup> surface which would directly appeal to the sensation of the spectator.

Haneke’s vision is to completely implicate the spectator in the violence to which they are witness. Akin to Sontag’s call against the mimetic qualities of art and interpretation and for making works of art “more, rather than less, real to us,”<sup>29</sup> Haneke eschews the problematics of representation and focuses on creating films which strike to the core of sensation. He states in an interview that “the question—regarding violence—is not: How do I show violence, but rather: How do I show the spectator his own position vis-à-vis violence and its representation.”<sup>30</sup> Haneke refuses a simple answer. Instead of, for instance, showing the spectator’s complicity with, even desire for violence in film, Haneke’s aim with violence is the limit which stands between image and spectator, it “is always intended to push the audience to question its affective relationship to the image.”<sup>31</sup> *Amour*’s opening scene emphasizes and highlights the viewer’s role as spectator to the scenes about to unravel, we are literally bursting into the private lives of

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<sup>27</sup> Sontag 11.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in: Celik 61.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. 62.

characters. Any judgement we may pass or even sympathy we may feel the need to reciprocate must be filtered through the veneer of spectatorship. Haneke, however, does not insist on the purely relativistic or subjective aspect of the role of the spectator. His films demand that we both acknowledge our role as spectator to violence and not limit ourselves to it. To say that Haneke is a sadistic filmmaker, who enjoys watching his characters suffer as much as he enjoys watching his audience squirm, misses the point. Haneke is a masochist, who tortures his own art with the maxim that “the assent from the human body to the work of art and from the work of art to the Idea must take place under the shadow of the whip.”<sup>32</sup> As such, his films place the spectator face to face with the violence behind all works of art.

Haneke’s violence itself takes strange, often contradictory forms. In the 2001 film *The Piano Teacher* the audience is witness to two distinct types of violence. One is an explicit, perhaps shocking, always graphic violence: the rape scene in *The Piano Teacher*, the murder of the dying wife in *Amour*, the systematic destruction of the apartment in *The Seventh Continent*. This is a violence which is often labelled by critics as ‘punishing,’ ‘distant,’ or ‘disturbing.’ This is complemented by a second, more subtle violence, one most exemplified in *The Piano Teacher*’s final scene. The main character, seemingly without cue or explanation, cuts herself, leaving a small, bleeding wound. Much more than the scenes of violence which precede it, this is a true act of masochism in the sense Deleuze gives to the word. “While sadism draws out the violence of the world in order to multiply it through a process of quantitative reiteration and accumulation, the dialectical

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<sup>32</sup> Deleuze, *Coldness and Cruelty* 22.

spirit animating masochism reflects the excess of violence in order to reconstruct it in a different format that nonetheless still preserves this excess.”<sup>33</sup> Haneke’s true violence is the juxtaposition of these two violences, one which destroys excesses and prohibits transgressions, the other which opens it up again. The more subtle of these violences is a “sovereign violence,”<sup>34</sup> a rupture from the world of law and myth as well as the particular law-making and preserving violence which accompanies and buttresses it. The poignant suicide in *The Seventh Continent* only comes after all family’s belongings are destroyed and their monetary lifesavings are flushed down the toilet. The piano teacher’s self-laceration only comes after she had an unsuccessful attempt to submit herself to the law of desire. The death and blood are incidental to the reclamation of sovereignty and the liberation of flesh and mere life.

Benjamin’s definition of transgression—not as destructions or disturbances, rather in terms of movement, as crossing frontiers, as moving across boundaries—stands in stark contrast to both the legal notion and the cultural conception of transgression. The given contemporary conception of transgression postulates that it is impossible to truly transgress because our society has become increasingly more tolerant and open to various acts, various interpretations, life choices, etc. The so called ‘transgression’ of tradition is not only allowed, but often celebrated. As Žižek would put it, we are constantly implored to “enjoy our symptom.” Common judgement has it that even some of our most violent impulse can today find outlet in the catharsis of video games and horror movies. The

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<sup>33</sup> Ma 19.

<sup>34</sup> Benjamin 300.

emergence of ‘gore porn’ websites which feature everything from surveillance tapes of suicides, murders, and rapes to real footage of wartime atrocities makes the tastes of even such a refined and cultivated transgressor as Bataille seem laughable and innocent. In so far as the “aim of [Benjamin’s] essay is to ensure the possibility of a violence that lies absolutely ‘outside’ and ‘beyond’ the law and that, as such, could shatter the dialectic between law-making violence and law-preserving violence,”<sup>35</sup> it seems that this other violence has either been completely incorporated into the law, or that we have seen the truly pernicious effects with which such violence affects.

Benjamin might agree that transgression is structurally impossible, not because everything is permitted but because nothing is allowed to exist independent of the law. For, as soon as an act is committed, it is simultaneously inscribed within the law, within a written, legal code of punishment, reward, guilt, and innocence. Frontiers are entirely legal entities in Benjamin’s sense of the term: written, explicit, buttressed by mythical violence, with punishable offenses. “Clearly *The Law*, as defined in its pure form, without substance or object or any determination whatsoever, is such that no one knows nor can know what it is. It operates without making itself known. It defines a realm of transgression where one is already guilty, and where one oversteps the bounds without knowing what they are [...]. Even guilt and punishment do not tell us what the law is, but leave it in a state of indeterminacy equaled only by the extreme specificity of the punishment.”<sup>36</sup> Faced with transgression, we are always in the place of the Traveller in Kafka’s *In the Penal Colony*, unsure how to judge the strange punishments set out before

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<sup>35</sup> Agamben 109.

<sup>36</sup> Deleuze 83-4.

us and meticulously explained. Has the harrow-machine malfunctioned or performed its duty perfectly? What degree of judgement or intervention are we allotted as foreign-witnesses to the strange spectacle? Do we have any other choice than to hastily cast off from the shores of this country, leaving the place to whatever strange devices and laws it can conceive of? As usual, Kafka leaves us hopeless. But outside this hopelessness... “Two tasks of the beginning of life: to keep reducing your circle, and to keep making sure you're not hiding somewhere outside it.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Kafka 91.



## Chapter 2: Sarah Kane: “Political Materialism and Physical Creatureliness”

*...the element that most outrages those who seek to impose censorship is form.*

- Sarah Kane

*...the gods loom over a foreign world, they become evil, and they become creatures.*

-Walter Benjamin

At the time of her suicide at the peak of her career, British playwright Sarah Kane (1971-1999) was both praised by her admirers for re-imagining the possibilities of the art of theatre to respond to the traumatic events of the 20th century and detracted by her opponents for being disgusting, degenerate, immoral and worse. She left a slim oeuvre comprised of five plays and one script for short film. These continue to generate polemic discussion as they are performed throughout the world, shocking its audiences with off- and on-stage male rape, sadomasochistic torture, castration, cannibalism and suicide. A combination of brutally realistic portrayals of sexual violence, symbolic interpretations of contemporary political unrest and complex theatrical, carnal analysis of the cultural motives behind them, Kane's work is at its core unnerving and thought-provoking. Despite her almost canonical status as one of the most polemical and challenging figures in the history of modern theatre, little scholarly work have dared to read her apart from her unfortunate biography and attempted to grapple with Kane outside of the realm of

theatrical analysis. This is to say, of the scholars who have written about Kane, few read Kane for the theoretical insight and philosophical cunning she provides.

A question lingers: is Sarah Kane's theatre a political one? While there are certainly several directions one could take to come to some sort of answer, I would instead choose to put Kane in dialogue with another playwright whose work also poses such a question in the same difficult manner. Indeed, the impact of Samuel Beckett on Kane's theatre is just as obvious and visible as is Artaud's. Where Kane drew inspiration from Artaud's theatrical philosophy of presenting the unrepresentable, she seems to have taken from Beckett certain key elements of narrative technique and even entire theoretical story lines. In fact, I claim, Kane makes her way into the theatrical world by enacting a speculative account of how the events leading up to the bleak post-apocalyptic landscape found in Beckett's work. Whereas Beckett explores the (im)possibility of ethics, or of any decision for that matter, after the apocalypse, Kane wants to know how these characters responded to ethical dilemmas in the midsts of a present, immanent catastrophe. Thus, at the end of *Blasted* we find out that the play was a sort of speculative prelude to Beckett's *Happy Days*—both main characters mauled, blinded, raped, one buried up to the neck, one desperately trying to commit suicide, one stupidly optimistic, one stupidly pessimistic, one dies but continues to talk, and the audience can't help but let out an anxious, yet soft laughter at the irreverently placed jokes.

This, then, will be my starting point in a discussion of Kane's particular brand of political theatre. We should be very careful in understanding what this phrase I have used—political theatre—means. It should not be understood as a theatre that is directly

championing any sort of political message, a particular party or ideology, or anything so simple and obvious. Rather, it should only be understood as a theatre which understands itself as political. As political no matter what. As political no matter what, even if this theatre itself might want desperately to be freed from politics, from cheap theatrical politics, and from cheap political theatrics. By talking about Kane's political theatre, I mean not to suggest some hidden agenda—feminist, Marxist, anti-capitalist, etc. I only mean to point out a certain posture, a certain pose, a certain approach to theatre and the sensation provoked by this approach which the present essay will work to define.

To further clarify, I might repeat Ken Urban's particular phrasing of the issue: Kane's theatre is an "ethics of catastrophe." Urban writes, "Rather than distinguishing right from wrong, the core of all moralistic enterprises, or conversely, flirting with a cynical amorality, where anything goes, Kane dramatizes the quest for ethics. [...] Kane gives us a world of catastrophe. [...] But Kane emerges from calamity with the possibility that an ethics can exist between wounded bodies."<sup>38</sup> Though I do not share Urban's final optimism that a good—"though *not* of the Good"—arises from the ashes and rubble at the end of a Kane play, neither do I share some commentators' bleak pessimism about the Kane's ethic drama. Indeed, if Kane's work attempts a dramatization of ethics, we should be hesitant to get caught in the trap to immediately condemn or condone her work; a dramatization of ethics is a becoming of ethics, a staging of the events leading up to, but never including the moment of ethical judgement. Furthermore, if little has been done to read Kane's work as a complex theoretical text, instead of the usual readings

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<sup>38</sup> Urban 37.

connecting her work to her biography, to her contemporaries, to some specific political end (feminism<sup>39</sup>, or a version of almost Brechtian political theatre<sup>40</sup>), there is little other recourse to action other than an elaboration on a gut-reaction.

Reading Kane through Benjamin allows us to open up and begin to make sense of the particularity of Kane's theatre. Not only does Benjamin's project open up the "world of catastrophe" that Kane attempts to stage, his particular mode of conceiving of the relationship between aesthetics, ethics, and politics allows for new configurations which allow the silence in Kane's 'Theatre of Disaster' to grow even louder. In Kane, we are faced with Benjamin's brutal and alarming assertion, alluded to in the previous chapter, that contained within mere or bare life—also referred to by Benjamin as the figure of the "creaturely"—is a positive, redeeming aspect. Kane shares Benjamin's "'imaginary anatomy,' [...] of the monster, fluid, protean, and unbounded."<sup>41</sup> As Adorno said of Benjamin: "In all his phases, Benjamin conceived the downfall of the subject and the salvation of man as inseparable."<sup>42</sup> This is to say, redemption, and perhaps ethics, can only take place inside the catastrophe. The creaturely appears in the ashes of the "downfall of man;" it appears in the catastrophe which rips from humanity its meaning in those moments of catastrophe when "life [is] captured at the (ever-shifting and mutating)

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<sup>39</sup> See: Tycer, Alicia. "Victim. Perpetrator. Bystander: Melancholic Witnessing of Sarah Kane's 4.48 Psychosis." *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 60, No. 1 (2007), pp. 23-36

<sup>40</sup> See: Carney, Sean. "The Tragedy of History in Sarah Kane's Blasted." *Theatre Survey*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (Nov., 2005), pp. 275-296.

<sup>41</sup> Gomel 24.

<sup>42</sup> Adorno 231.

threshold of the juridicopolitical order.”<sup>43</sup> This figure forms a powerful figure in Kane’s theatrical imagination as well and will open the way for a discussion of violence contained within the staging of catastrophe.

Kane’s short film *Skin*, written and produced directly following the controversy surrounding her first play *Blasted*, exemplifies the manner in which she deploys the political as an aesthetic pretense for creating the ground upon which politics will be plunged into catastrophe. This, of course, already assumes that the ‘catastrophes’ of politics itself are not yet the catastrophe with which Kane is concerned. Indeed, Kane’s theatre attempts to subvert the very ground upon which the political is commonly understood. At the film’s start, Kane sets up the narrative to lead the audience to believe that it will be a social critique. She self-consciously employs the aesthetics of class and racism and the ultra-rightwing connotations of the word ‘skin’ to invoke the imagery of social realism. In this way the violence throughout the majority of the film seems to be, at least by some perverse logic, justified. Justified in the sense of understandable; justified by some reasoning upon which we can speculate, hypothesize, comprehend, and eventually denounce.

However, the violence which occurs in the bedroom upsets this reading, our understanding of the film’s nature and of what it is trying to say about violence. The film subtly posits a juxtaposition between the violence which occurs at the church/cemetery and the violence which occurs in the bedroom. The violence at the church/cemetery is the violence of war. It is one faction declaring war and the other having no recourse but to

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<sup>43</sup> Santner 86.

accept and fight back in defense. Here, mythic violence is revealed: “power is the principle of all mythic law-making;” “mythic violence is bloody power over mere life for its [power’s] own sake.” The church bells toll and the police sirens sound, reminding us that the skinheads attacking the newly weds are not the only violence law-making force in the world and have some serious competition to deal with if they wish to be the most forceful or hateful. Aesthetically, we are still in Hollywood. We are still expecting a social critique of some nature and we still believe that we are making sense of what is going on.

The bedroom, in contrast, becomes a camp, a space of pure violent animality. We can ironically say, in comparison with the altruism that one lover will teach the other the facts of life and love, that in love one learns the facts of life, that Marcia reveals, or subjects to Bill the facts of bare life. Bill experiences the horror of bare humanness, of humanity stripped of all symbolic meaning, of a pure corporality that does not know class, race, or gender. Sustenance, pain, communication (though not language), and desire are the only things he knows. In the cafeteria at the beginning, Bill scoffs at his fellow skinheads for eating “brain and bollock, innard and eyelid, toenail and teeth, all wrapped up in a pig’s foreskin.”<sup>44</sup> One of his fellow skinheads makes a joke about putting meat on his bones: “Some meat on your bone. Your bone in some meat. Your meat in her mouth. Young mouth round some meat.” The bedroom scene sees this ludic prognosis come to fruition, taking the words in their most literal meaning. Bill begins his lesson by confessing his love of flesh. Blackness (surface, ‘skin’-deep) is both what repeals Bill

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<sup>44</sup> Kane 253-254.

and attracts him. Marcia proceeds to show Bill what skin truly is. She first scrapes his body clean of all social symbols, scouring the Union Jack and swastika into flesh and blood, residue of signs which have to power to bind him to humanity.

The violence of the bedroom is still the same mythic violence as before, just the other side. The violence that takes place in the church/cemetery is the legal manifestation of mythic violence; it is mythic violence incorporated into and interpreted by a system of power which wishes to utilize, to put to use, to harness mythic violence's power in order to establish and maintain rule. The violence of the bedroom scene is truly the mythic side of mythic violence. It is a ritualistic, extra-legal violence which does not serve to give punishment for his any of his actions, for his identity, or for his hatred, but to give retribution. "An intervention of law that is provoked by an offense against the unwritten and unknown law if called, in contradistinction to punishment, retribution."<sup>45</sup> Marcia is not punishing Bill, but insuring his inscription within bare life, the "marked bearer of guilt." A system of guilt, of a debt that can never be repaid but always demands its reimbursement. Thus, his symbols of law (the union jack, the swastika), are replaced with signs of the guilt of mere life (open wounds that Marcia carved into his back).

Despite the viscerally violent images of the proceeding acts, the most violent act of the film comes at the end when a nameless man, identified as Neville in the script, resuscitates Bill after he attempts suicide once in the safety of his apartment. Not only is this redemption unauthorized, not asked for, and not repay-able, it is the violence of condemning to life after guilt. If all of Bill's symbolic identity has been stripped from

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<sup>45</sup> Benjamin 298.

him, so has his guilt. The viewer does not fully know if he is repentant or contrite, he has performed no overt act of contrition nor shown no sign of repentance for his racist violence—the attempted suicide cannot be definitely said to be an act of contrition, it could be one of shame, or out of the desperation of being subjected to the very violence he once perpetrated. As a symbolic subject of life and law, he guilty regardless of any confession. Marcia showed this to him, introducing guilt by way of her blackness and extending it by way of his body. Neville’s act condemns Bill to continue, but to continue without the previous comfort of symbolic identity and without the release of death—after having been saved from death, he knows that death could not save him from the guilt of his mere life, that death is an affirmation (and perhaps the logical conclusion) of the mythic violence inflicted upon him by Marcia.

Neville, then, does not serve as a *deus ex machina*, a god from the machinery, maybe rather as a *deus ex animalia*, a god from the animals, a god out of the animals. He is not a god who performs a mechanistic function of salvation and denouement—What is the real conflict? What is being resolved? What is the hopeless situation only a god could remedy and death could not? It is instead an act of divine violence. In lawlessly—there is no rhyme or rule to his action—stealing Bill from death, Neville is “lethal without spilling blood.” He saves Bill from the guilt of bare life, but not from bare life itself—Bill is last seen slobbering and crying like a newborn. Kane, at her most cruel, “withholds the subject from erasing his fundamentally human lack, and with it, himself.”<sup>46</sup> This is to say, Bill is offered redemption, but it is neither a redemption he wished for nor one which

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<sup>46</sup> De Vos 149.



could save him. Cruelty in Kane is not that which inflicts pain or that which destroys symbolic identity. It is, in Benjamin's terms, a non-violent violence; non-violent not only in that it refuses to draw blood, but also in the sense that it precludes the final mortal blow.

It is precisely in moments such as these, that positive aspect of bare life, often ignored by critics, comes to light. The figure of human reduced to bare life is one that is always present but repressed, and which only appears at the moment of catastrophe "when communicative language is cut open."<sup>47</sup> Throughout the majority of the film, the dominant figure is that of the myth and the demand it places to subject bare life to law. The events proceeding the complicated *denouement*, Bill's racist barbarity and Marcia's ceremonial sadism, are part of Kane's "horror so deep only ritual can contain it."<sup>48</sup> The final bloodless violence is one that "shatters paralyzing and falsifying narratives and myths."<sup>49</sup> Unlike the previous acts which sought to release Bill from mere life through violence, the final act is one which recovers him to "the most forgotten alien land [that] is one's own body."<sup>50</sup>

More so than any particular appeal to or exercise in liberal political issues—race, gender, sexuality, the politics of language— the theatrical figure of mere life—or the creaturely—is Kane's true bond to politics and to ethics. More than the shattering of individual subjectivity or of the political discourse of selfhood, as she violently renders

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<sup>47</sup> Stewart 136.

<sup>48</sup> Kane 176.

<sup>49</sup> Stewart 11.

<sup>50</sup> Benjamin, *Illuminations* 132.

her characters subject to the power of mere life, she reveals that “human beings are not just creatures among other creatures but are in some sense more creaturely than other creatures by virtue of an excess that is produced in the space of the political and that, paradoxically, accounts for their ‘humanity.’”<sup>51</sup> Indeed, she uses various methods of eliciting the creaturely to appear out of the human—the bizarre and disturbingly sadistic mutilation, sex changes, and castration in *Cleansed*, the destruction of political allegory in *Blasted* and *Skin*, or the schizophrenic disfigurement of language itself in *Crave* and *4.48 Psychosis*—but the figure always emerges.

To return to the question posed earlier, it is not so much a matter of whether Kane’s theatre is political, but how it approaches, appropriates and utilizes the political as a part of its violent aesthetic of transgression. To achieve such a reading we must flesh out a more nuanced understanding the political, aesthetics, art, and the relation between them. I submit that as a way of opening up the political/ethical nature of Kane’s work in a more sophisticated way we should look to Jacques Rancière’s explanation of how the political enters into the aesthetic, namely via his conception of the distribution of the sensible. This will allow us to begin to give Kane’s work the theoretical attention for which it calls and will also open up new avenues of reinterpreting previous criticism and analyses of her work. However, instead of simply executing a textual analysis of Kane by way of Rancière, I also suggest that Kane is a theoretician in her own right and I will ultimately read her as such. Kane’s work, much like Benjamin’s, opens up new

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<sup>51</sup> Santner 26.

possibilities of thinking about the relation between theatre specifically, and more generally art, and politics in exciting new ways which may pose a threat to Rancière's conception of the intersections of aesthetics and politics.

To begin, we should take as our entry point into Rancière's work those places where he proffers separate definitions of the aesthetic and the political insofar as they relate to art. Politics, for Rancière is not some base relation of powers through which subjects are formed, meaning is produced, etc. For him, politics is a spatial configuration of objects and subjects in constant movement and interaction. "It is the configuration of a specific space, the framing of a particular sphere of experience, of objects posited as common and as pertaining to a common decision, of subjects recognized as capable of designating these objects and putting forward arguments about them."<sup>52</sup> Politics is thus connected to a both a temporal and a spatial relation between subjects and the objects with which they are in interaction. That is to say, politics becomes possible where and when experience happens as such. This possibility is achieved as a shared possibility that Rancière traces back to a foundational polis or community that allows for the possibility of this dialogue.

Politics moves from possibility to actuality when some conflict arises within one of these definitions of politics—for example, within the configuration of space, within the realm of experience, or within the realm of subjects designating objects. Rancière uses the term dissensus to denote this structurally constitutive element of politics which is based on contestation and conflict. It is here that politics proper—though not any one

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<sup>52</sup> Rancière, *Aesthetics* 24.

politic in particular—emerges. In the ‘dissensus’ concerning experiential knowledge, e.g., of space, objects, shared experience, etc., politics arises as a way of making new sense of the unsettled common knowledge that lay dormant and unchallenged until some event brought new interpretations, new possibilities of experiential knowledge, to light. With dissensus, the relation between politics and aesthetics starts to become clearer. “Art is a practice of dissensus. And it is by means of this dissensus, and not by enlisting in a cause, that artworks receive their specific quality and get linked to an external good: future emancipation (Adorno) or the response to a demand prescribed by the century (Lyotard).”<sup>53</sup>

In a manner similar to the way politics is based on a type of division, a type of split, in experiential knowledge as it pertains to the social sphere—which we will return to shortly—aesthetics too points towards a similar split in experiential knowledge as it pertains to a more corporeal experience—that of viewing, of seeing, of speaking, of listening, of all the things we might commonly associate with the arts. Furthermore, aesthetics in Rancière also forms a dividing line between art and non-art. A dividing line that excludes and includes, surely, but also one that forms the possibility for art and the aesthetic experience. The same as with politics in relation to a communal experience of shared space, aesthetics is a communal space of shared sensory experience. Aesthetics for Rancière is also structurally similar to politics in that it only properly rises up from possibility to actuality through disagreement, through a challenging of the very dividing

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 96.

line that constitutes aesthetics. Indeed, actual aesthetics is the moment in which there is a confounding of art and non-art.

There is, of course, a term familiar to anyone who has read Rancière around which I have been dancing and purposely avoiding talking about. Namely, this term is the distribution of the sensible. I have avoided speaking of this term so far in the hopes that defining this concept after talking about its constitutive elements (aesthetics, politics, dissensus) will lead us to a more clarified, precise, and less confused discussion. The distribution of the sensible is precisely the moment of intersection of aesthetics and politics. Keeping in line with his Aristotelean conception of possibility/actuality, the possibility for the distribution of the sensible is constituted by a division between what is perceivable, seeable, sayable, doable. The distribution of the sensible cuts across both the political and the aesthetic in that it forms a “common world by first establishing the modes of perception within which these [places and forms of participation] are inscribed.”<sup>54</sup> Dissensus is thus a gap inside of the distribution of the sensible, an empty space inside of the line that demarcates the perceptible and non-perceptible.

From the multitude of responses that Kane’s work provoked, one thing should be clear that all critics agree on—that her work is somehow trying to communicate something with the audience, not simply provide them with an easy theatre going experience or with talking points for a political debate. Perhaps both her work and the reactions it has elicited point to a sort of fifth-wall. The fourth, of course, is an imaginary wall which

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<sup>54</sup> Rancière, *Politics* 85.

actors use to turn a three sided stage into a complete room and to ‘block out’ the audience, thus giving their performance a more natural, realist feel. This fifth wall, in contrast to both the fourth, imaginary wall and to the remaining three of the scenery, is not so much an imaginary wall as it is a symbolic wall. This fifth wall would be the distribution of the sensible within the aesthetic regime which separates the aesthetic experience from the ‘lived’ experience and specifically from the ‘lived’ political experience. What should strike one as interesting is the lack of critics calmly reminding themselves, ‘It’s only a play. It’s only a play.’

Indeed, as commentator Christopher Wixson points out, Kane consistently employs two techniques which give her theatre a disorienting tenor: firstly, her work grapples with a disorienting alienated space and the identity we experience as a result of this space; secondly, it has an obsessive fascination with the graphic portrayal of brutally deformed, mutilated bodies. These generally are the result of a complex reworking of conventional (modern) theatrical content and form. Concerning the former, “Kane’s work is characterized by complex figurations of theatrical space navigated by increasingly dispossessed and disembodied characters.”<sup>55</sup> By, as literally as theatrically possible, blowing up the set or by staging those spaces which Agamben would call camps, Kane’s ‘alienated spaces’ are those of catastrophe in which only the creaturely could reside. The problem starts out as an almost purely formal one—that of the imaginary space that theatre constructs. It quickly moves, by means of Kane’s second technique of the gruesome portrayal of on-stage violence, to a problem of content.

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<sup>55</sup> Wixson 89.

It is here, in this confluence, this crashing of form and content, and the dialectic that arise from such a conflict, that the problem of the distribution of the sensible arises. Modernity, and modern theatre in particular, have grappled with the problem of representational space and of the (im)possibility of representation. As illustrated in the connection many have made between Kane and two of the dark demigods of modern theatre—Beckett and Artaud—her work is as much a return to these problems of modernity that were never resolved. Here we come to the crux of Kane’s theatre. The ultimate thrust of her work is to unsettle the complacent relation between the impossibility and necessity of representation. But, if we understand representation in the theatrical sense, we will have to understand that it is a problem of what can be said, done, seen.

Her work, then, put in Rancière’s terms, opens up new possibilities for a new distribution of the sensible. In order to accomplish this, Kane not only takes as her subject matter radical, scandalous themes, but she addresses certain problems of form specific to the theatre itself through the introduction of an element Benjamin would name ‘pure language’—theatrically reducing the performance of speech to a mythic origin when to name was to violate; mimesis as violence against reality. Indeed, shifts in form, content, and the relation between the two should be understood as essential to shifting the distribution of the sensible. It is in these shifts that the divide between what is visible and non-visible, sayable and non-sayable, doable and non-doable become apparent. Rancière points out the relation between the limitations of form within the distribution of the sensible, and transgressive subject matter: “The graphic representation of monsters or the exhibition of the blind man’s gouged eyes brutally undoes this tacit compromise in

speech between *making visible* and *not making visible*.”<sup>56</sup> Her work transgresses and unsettles the formal lines which demarcate theatrical possibilities of form and content through a dissensus with the distribution of the sensible.

Indeed, fascination with the representable, and particularly the visual and the seeable, accounts for the preponderance of Kane criticism. Kim Solga’s<sup>57</sup> argument is fascinated with the question of the visual, and particularly the representation of on-stage versus off-stage violence, which she detects as coded with signs of power. Her analysis rightfully points to what we have seen should be called the distribution of the sensible and the dissensus inherently contained within the sensible. Following the Greeks, Kane chooses to portray an important yet violent scenes off-stage, in-between scenes. What is disconcerting is the explosion of violence after the first scene and this off-stage rape have taken place. Thus, Solga’s argument might be concisely summarized through Lacan’s formulation of the “return of the repressed”—that which is repressed from the realm of representation, of visibility, (the Real) returns violently in the Symbolic.

However, if, as seen earlier, the distribution of the sensible is politic’s entry into art and vice versa, Kane’s work is of a political nature, not because of its adoption of any one particular thematic political issue—for instance, domestic violence, the Bosnian genocide, gender dysphoria. Here, the obvious should be pointed out. Theatre is always a site of political contestation apart from—especially apart from—any particular commitments, nodal points of connection to larger issues, etc. It is always of a political nature in that it concerns itself, by its very form, with demarcating and delineating the

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<sup>56</sup> Rancière, *Furture* 114.

<sup>57</sup> Solga 366.



sensible. Because the sensible always cuts across the political and the aesthetic, artists—working squarely within the sensible, in its manipulation, production, rearrangement—are always connected to the political in this way.

As a matter of fact, political art cannot work in the simple form of a meaningful spectacle that would lead to an ‘awareness’ of the state of the world. Suitable political art would ensure, at one and the same time, the production of a double effect: the readability of a political signification and a sensible or perceptual shock caused, conversely, by the uncanny, by that which resists signification. In fact, this ideal effect is always the object of a negotiation between opposites, between the readability of the message that threatens to destroy the sensible form of art and the radical uncanniness that threatens to destroy all political meaning.<sup>58</sup>

So, Solga is right to point out that “Sarah Kane’s *Blasted* demands such a witness by staging both realism’s enchanting illusions and the uncanny image of its vanishing point, the rape that is, the rape that is not, and the politics of their competing articulations.”<sup>59</sup> And in a sense, more than her attempts to analyze the visual in terms of gender politics, it is purely in these ‘uncanny image’ and the ‘competing articulations’ that Kane is truly political. Her idiosyncratic adoption of political issues is only but one of Kane’s borrowings—Greek, realist, and modern theatre, performance art, avant-garde

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<sup>58</sup> Rancière, *Politics* 63.

<sup>59</sup> Solga, 396.

aesthetics, slam poetry, and post-punk music shows are among some of the others. Kane's true politics lie not only in her content, nor in her form, but in the relation she forges between the two.

Similar to Benjamin's reading of surrealism, the theatre which Kane stages is an experiential, aesthetic-political image of the possibilities for opening up life to new configurations. Kane, like Benjamin, sees the problematic nature of the surrealists' quest to dissolve the distance between art and life, between aesthetics and politics. What Benjamin identifies as surrealism's "poetic politics," inevitably "deludes itself into believing a mobilization of aesthetic powers alone would be capable of changing the world."<sup>60</sup> Perhaps what we find in Kane's theatre is a reversal of the surrealist's transition from the "nebulous and mystical perspective of *metaphysical materialism* [...] to the politically effective perspective of *anthropological materialism*."<sup>61</sup> For Benjamin, this movement represented the artist-intellectual's role in creating a new space for radically new images which rest upon the process of profane illumination, the creation of an otherworldly rooted in the definite here and now.

Richard Wolin points out that Benjamin's conception of the artist in "Surrealism" is of one that "attempts to enlighten other left-thinking intellectuals concerning their complicity with the established social order."<sup>62</sup> If this is the case, Kane's strategy as an artist grapples with "enlightening" an intellectual milieu which has already comfortably assimilated once shocking or radical elements of surrealism, dada, performances art, as

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<sup>60</sup> Wolin 134.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

well as the triad of modernist playwrights—Brecht, Artaud, and Beckett. The space of catastrophe which Kane’s theatre creates is precisely one in which “political materialism and physical creatureliness share the inner man, the psyche, the individual, or whatever else we may wish to throw to them with dialectical justice, so that no limb remains untormented.”<sup>63</sup> Kane’s creaturely figures are ones which have survived the disaster of the space which was shattered to make way for this new space. If, as Benjamin suggests, “that it is precisely in the ‘disaster’ itself, inside the catastrophe, in the emergency of ‘bare life’ [...], that salvation is hidden,”<sup>64</sup> Kane’s dramatization of this catastrophe in *Skin* shows that, like Kafka’s messiah, this salvation only comes when it is no longer needed.

The question of ethics in Kane can now be taken up in a more nuanced manner. How should we take the claim made by Ken Urban, one of the few commentators to take up the bleak vision of ethics Kane so starkly and unadornedly stages, that *Blasted* “dramatizes the ‘ethics of catastrophe’”?<sup>65</sup> Instead of candidly examining Urban’s explanation, or of trying to provide our own explanation, we should make the claim that, instead of championing the few writers who know of, needless to mention critically engage with Kane’s work, the peanut gallery’s silence may indeed be the truth of her work. Turning the phrase around, Kane also exhibits and, in fact, provokes a “catastrophe of ethics.” Ethics—which in Kane, never cheaply disregarded by the claims made by

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<sup>63</sup> Benjamin, *Reflections* 192.

<sup>64</sup> Stewart 8.

<sup>65</sup> Urban 36.

multicultural, postmodern relativism, but which are also always unsettled by the ease with which these judgements are passed and accepted—forms the central narrative dilemma both for her characters and the impossibility of critique for her audience. Ethics is Kane's Godot which neither shows up nor is even so much as named, but, formally speaking, whose absence is the basis of her work.

But this is not the absence of ethics that would be associated with an apathetic viewpoint; rather, an absence of the possibility of grounding ethics in something that doesn't, taken to a logical extreme, lead to catastrophe. When speaking of the paradox that critical arts comes up against when it considers community and exclusion, Rancière states: "Human rights, having been the weapon of dissidents who used them to contrast one people with that which their governments professed to incarnate, then became the rights of the victimized population of new ethnic wars, individuals driven from their destroyed homes, raped women and massacred men. These rights thus became specific to people who were unable to exercise them."<sup>66</sup> Kane attempts an ethics—via the visible and the non-visible, i.e., via a dissensus through profane illumination—that seeks to accomplish two consecutive goals. The first is to bring to light the aesthetic nature of ethics, that ethics is in many ways based on the visible, the perceivable. The second is an attempt to disrupt, to introduce dissensus into this aesthetic of ethics. If ethics is, as Rancière contents, "the kind of thinking in which an identity is established between an environment, a way of being and a principle of action,"<sup>67</sup> does that make Kane, ironically more in line with the initial conservative reactions to her work than with her defenders, a

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<sup>66</sup> Rancière *Aesthetics* 117.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

sort of theatrical terrorist, “the witness of the secret terror that underlies the social order?”<sup>68</sup>

To attempt to answer this, I would like to return to my preliminary remarks on the nature of Kane’s critical reception. Certainly, to answer the question of ethics raised by placing Kane and Rancière in dialogue, we must first examine our relation to her work as spectators and commentators. By way of digression and analogy I would like to open up a dialogue about the difficulty of interpreting Kane. To do so, I would like first to take a detour to compare Kane with Sade in an interesting and hopefully fruitful way. The parallel between Sade and Kane in their mixture of philosophical rumination juxtaposed over an otherwise completely unsettling scenery is unmistakable. In fact, the crux of Ken Urban’s essay “The Body’s Cruel Joke: The Comic Theatre of Sarah Kane” ultimately repeats the lesson in metaphysics Sade proffers us in *Philosophy in the Bedroom*: ‘The same body that philosophizes, that thinks lofty thoughts, that ponders metaphysics, is the very same body which is now being penetrated, which shits, which comes, which pisses, etc.’ Urban notes that during the final scene in *Blasted* we encounter such a ridiculing, a vulgar parodying of metaphysical debate in which the content of the discussion is contrasted by the stark, bare corporeality of the characters on stage. At this point in the play, the fictional world has been completely blown apart, the characters violently raped and mangled, left in the remnants of what was once a hotel room—the site of the play’s initial domestic dispute and violence. The two main characters find themselves mutilated,

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 114.

blinded, raped, violated in numerous ways and yet still capable of engaging in an, albeit absurd and darkly humorous, theological discussion concerning the existence of god.

A further parity can also be found in a certain dynamic relation between the text or the work itself and a certain response it elicits from critics and commentators. In his essay “The Romanticism of Contemporary Ideology,” Paul Hamilton offers one of the most well-aimed summations of the wide array of responses that Sade’s work has provoked. He splits reactions into three general camps—those that pertain to an analysis and critique marked by an underlying materialism, those marked by idealism, and those marked by romanticism. By framing the large body of criticism that a writer such as Sade has evoked in broad philosophical terms rather than political ones or in certain national-aesthetic ones (for example, Sade’s influence on the French avant-garde, Latin American Magical Realism, etc.), Hamilton opens up the possibility of advancing towards a more nuanced critique.

These criteria can surely also be applied to Kane as much as they can to any other writer. It is in the distance between text and meta-text, between the piece of art and the criticism which attempts to make sense of the artwork that a certain paradox arise vis a vis writers such as Sade and Kane. Sade lays a devilish trap for his readers. His works point towards a dissensus within criticism itself, a lacuna within a divide, so to speak. As Hamilton notes, “to vindicate Sade at one point is simply to permit his violence at another.”<sup>69</sup> That is to say, a materialist reading of Sade, or Kane for that matter, looks at, for instance, the textual violence committed against women. This is taken in materialist

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<sup>69</sup> Hamilton 318.

terms and is either condemned by some brand of humanism, or it is praised for its potential for liberation. However, a materialist reading overlooks the philosophical overtones contained within the work. Here, idealism steps in and attempts to grapple with these issues, but ultimately, as Hamilton points out, it either leaves the violence untouched or unwittingly legitimizes it by abstracting it from its particular politico-historical (maybe even aesthetic) circumstances.

Kane, however, lays a possibly even more cunning trap for her critics. Whereas Hamilton points to romanticism as a third way which could mediate between the savage materiality and the 'deconstructive' idealism which leave victim's violence unquestioned, Kane closes this off as a possibility as well. For, to read Kane through romanticism would necessitate the same amputation of some part of her work. If materialism excluded the theoretical, and idealism the social-political, romanticism might be the negative re-inclusion of the dissensus found in Kane back into an intelligible, ideological order. Here we should give pause to reflect on what may be an inherent violence left almost silent in Rancière—the violence of the dissensus. Without a doubt, the fissuring of the sensible order—when it is indeed the entire sensible order at stake and not only some strategic part—must entail some degree of violence. Benjamin would argue that this violence has to be one that disrupts the aesthetic order, but does not attempt to establish a new one. Rancière's theory lacks the possibility for a non-violent violence, for what Benjamin calls divine violence. The violence of dissensus is only violent insofar as it transgresses the sensible in order to reestablish sensation within the boundaries of representation. As Kane

shows, divine violence is not necessarily some social or political violence, nor even the representation of violence. It is the violence directed at us, at the subject qua spectator.



### Chapter 3: Bolaño, Literature and the Memory of Evil

Of all the problems developed and unraveled in the works of Roberto Bolaño, none has proved to be as troublesome and unsettling, both to critics and a larger audience, than that of violence. A pervasive current runs through and even unites his work. Whether it is the almost flippant attitude towards genocide propounded by the table-top war-game loving protagonist of *The Third Reich*, the avant-garde, skywriting murderer-poet Carlos Wieder, or the more than three hundred pages dedicated to listing in clinical detail the victims of femicide in Northern Mexico in 2666, violence is ubiquitous. Bolaño shows at the same time an erudite knowledge of the history of violence in literature, a sensitivity towards his subject matter, and an unwavering dedication to confronting horror. It is not only that the violence he develops is particularly gruesome or truly all of that shocking for someone who keeps up to date on current affairs. The problem seems to hint at something much deeper than the horror of coming to face with mimetic violence. It is the particular way which he narrates or refuses to narrate this violence which makes his work so intricate yet unsettling. Indeed, while brutal scenes of bloodshed are a prevalent occurrence in Bolaño, what gives his work its distinctive character is an insistence on confronting darkness on its own terms, on giving the silence a voice and a place to be heard. Like a strange addition to Benjamin's infamous passage, Bolaño seems to say that any document of civilization can become a document of barbarism, just wait and see. "It all begins with poetry and literary workshops, and ends with murders, torture, and

violence, whether in the Northern desert of Mexico or in the forests in the south of Chile.”<sup>70</sup>

It is in this way which Bolaño demands to be read, not only in conversation with the many voices of world literature which he has undoubtedly joined, but also in dialogue with those who attempt to make sense of violence without narrativizing. As writer and critic Jorge Volpi noted, Bolaño’s “novels are essays but still remain novels.”<sup>71</sup> Nevertheless, as will be discussed later, narrativity is an important part of how violence is understood. Though a constitutive part of narrative, it is more important the ways in which violence refuses to take part. Bolaño’s works provide insight into violence and narrative, and the roles they play in each other’s functioning. In this essay I hope to elucidate how this relation functions in Bolaño, and also to extrapolate from this a larger theory of violence in dialogue with Benjamin and Blanchot, two thinkers similar to each other as well as to Bolaño in distinct ways. Not only can Benjamin and Blanchot help us to understand Bolaño and the violence inherent in his work, but Bolaño speaks back, accentuating and challenging certain aspects of their work in addition to illuminating the affiliation between the two thinkers. As such, this chapter will engage in a short analysis of Bolaño’s oeuvre, focusing on his work as a cohesive whole which together forms a poetic statement, but not a systematic theory or an ideology, about violence. More so, it will use Bolaño as a jumping off point to discuss various aspects of the relation between violence and literature. It will be the intention here to draw out a reading of Bolaño’s

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<sup>70</sup> López-Vicuña 160.

<sup>71</sup> Quoted in López Bernasocchi, 419.

violence and to attempt to put it in conversation with the two aforementioned thinkers as well as with relevant Bolaño criticism.

To begin, let us examine Blanchot's conceptualization of the interplay between two seemingly very distinct forces—language and violence. Blanchot, reflecting on the nature and origins of writing, dread, and the violence of literature, comes to the conclusion that speech itself is inherently an act of violence. “All speech is violence,” Blanchot writes, “a violence all the more formidable for being secret and the secret center of violence. [...] Thus begins that astonishing future of discourse wherein secret violence, disarming open violence, ends by becoming the hope and guarantee of a world freed from violence (and at the same time constituted by it).”<sup>72</sup> Speech rips the world asunder, categorizing and imposing limits on an otherwise chaotic and meaningless world. Replacing carnal presence with a negative signifying capacity, speech becomes an impossibility of relation to the world. Literature, moreover, exacerbates this distance, enhancing language's distance from the world. However, as much as he sees speech as an omnisciently permeating violence, Blanchot sees the absence or impossibility of language as equally ruinous. “Silence in Blanchot is a gentle violence, a quiet devastation.”<sup>73</sup> Whereas language is the “secret center of violence,” silence is the concealed foundation of language. If the disaster is that which is always looks back upon retrospectively, if “it is the limit of writing,” silence is the disaster which cannot be written. “Neither reading, nor writing, nor speaking,” Blanchot says, commenting on the emptiness at the center of

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<sup>72</sup> Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation* 42.

<sup>73</sup> MacKendrick, *Immemorial Silence* 19.

writing, “this is not muteness, but perhaps a murmur utterly unheard of: thunder and silence.”<sup>74</sup>

This violence, at the same time underlying and comprised of language and silence, forms the basis of what Blanchot calls the two slopes of literature. On the one slope, literature, usually prose, which believes in the “transparency of prose,” in the possibility of the power of language to represent, to mimic reality, and to convey meaning. On the other, literature, usually poetry, which seeks to use language to move past itself to “the underside of the world,” to a mute, pre-linguistic world “encountering speech at the edge of the world, speech which as we know is the murderer of existence,”<sup>75</sup> to the incomprehensible reality of things, objects, and meaning. Ambiguity, as Simon Critchley points out, is key to understanding Blanchot’s understanding of literature. For Blanchot, “ambiguity is the truth of literature, and perhaps also the truth of truth, which is to say that truth is something duplicitous and bivalent.”<sup>76</sup> The two slopes may never meet—there may never be a literature which could wholly fulfill the requisites, to reveal the world in plain sight and with plain language, and to uncover the mystical world beneath language. However, as Critchley points out, their separation is ambiguous. The poetic slope of literature wishes to expose the “intangible grain of things” yet can only “produce gobbets of utter transparency that reduce the elusive to the banal.”<sup>77</sup> Whereas on the other slope, a writer like Flaubert “writes in the most transparent kind of

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<sup>74</sup> Blanchot, *Writing* 99.

<sup>75</sup> Blanchot, *The Gaze of Orpheus*, 53.

<sup>76</sup> Critchley 62.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

prose” strives to convey some sense of the world as it is yet, in the end, uncovers the “horror of existence deprived of the world.”<sup>78</sup> This ambiguity is what defines literature as distinct from language; it is the unraveling and revealing of the ambiguity of language. One must always remember that underpinning the ‘two slopes of literature’ and bringing about its ambiguous nature is the dynamic interaction and inter-connectedness of violence and language.

Bolaño’s writing of violence is both paradoxical and unsettling. There are no places left in which the reader can hide, and fewer where they would want to. However, it is not an eruptive violence, which, in an instant, causes some bucolic tranquility to deteriorate or which interrupts some otherwise happy, pleasant scene. Nor is it a violence which deems everything to be damned from the start—violence as one item on an itinerary of evil and malicious phenomenon. Rather, it is a subtle and multifaceted violence which permeates and constitutes part of the very core of being. Bolaño’s violence occupies the abyssal space of the fold between language and silence, in which representation becomes a way to disappear; in which to speak and to not speak amount to the same; in which as images move closer to the surface, the more indistinguishable and unrecognizable they become. Formally, Bolaño’s writing fully embodies this ambiguous relationship between Blanchot’s two slopes. As Helena Usandizaga claims in her essay “El reverso poético en la prosa de Roberto Bolaño,” Bolaño’s narrative enacts a “poetic reversal” which, without stepping outside of narrative, establish a discursive dialogue with poetry. In doing so, Bolaño explicitly explores the space where the two slopes approach but never meet. Here,

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<sup>78</sup> Blanchot, *The Gaze of Orpheus* 52.

the engagement with the discourse and canon of poetry has a fairly precise function. The figure of the poet in Bolaño is always linked with madness, with an openness toward the world which almost inescapably ends in disaster, blood, and murder. The narrator of *Amulet*, Auxilio Lacouture, the self-proclaimed “mother of Mexican poetry,” begins the novella telling the readers: “this is going to be a horror story. A story of murder, detection and horror. But it won’t appear to be, for the simple reason that I am the teller.”<sup>79</sup> Against the backdrop of a post-1968 Mexico—a year in which hundreds of students, workers, and artists were massacred and the university occupied by police forces, which haunted the consciousnesses of those sympathetic to the left; and later became viewed as the triumph of Latin American right-wing violence in the 20<sup>th</sup> century—the poet-narrator indeed avoids, nearly refuses, to dwell on the subjects of death, assassination, or bloody revolt. Poems stand in place for the events which they describe; the tumultuous personal lives of poets become more important than the social upheaval around them; an almost mystical devotion to the idea of literature is the most important way of interacting with the world.

*Amulet* is, in many ways, a re-imagining of *testimonios*—firsthand accounts most notably of the events of Tlatelolco massacre of 1968 in Mexico, and the Chilean coup d’état in 1973. The impetus of these experiential works is, of course, to bring the events, repressed and denied by official state ideologies, back into public memory and to create more open cultural debates. However, in contrast to other artistic interpretations of the *testimonio*—most notably Ariel Dorfman’s 1990 play *Death and the Maiden*—, *Amulet* has no pretenses of grappling with the traumatic memory brought on by such events. To state

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<sup>79</sup> Bolaño, *Amulet* 1.

this differently, while works such as *Death and the Maiden* engage in critical self-reflection—opening up the genre of the *testimonio* to critical interpretations which shape the ways we think about trauma, memory, guilt, and the role of narrative in each of these—*Amulet* engages in a poetic disavowal of the *testimonio*. The force of horror of the *testimonio* is precisely that it works entirely within that slope of literature which conveys the world as it is and events as they happened. Its creative progeny show, very often with the help of psychoanalytic structures, that the events it describes—as horrific and disturbing as they are—uncover truth about the world, not so much because they are firsthand accounts, but because firsthand accounts are inescapably interlinked with the process of storytelling, of narrative.

Nevertheless, in attempting to draw attention away from the mode and style of delivery in order to further accentuate the content of the witness itself, that is, by utilizing the “transparency of prose,” works that attempt dramatic interpretations of *testimonios* without critically examining the foundations of the genre itself, fail to shed light on the deep Chilean theorist and critic Nelly Richard notes that in works such as *Death and the Maiden*, “no enunciative unsettling or significant rupture sought to disorganize the series of figurations by which history and memory were symbolized in accordance with the terms established by the dominant narrative.”<sup>80</sup> Bolaño exemplifies a tendency not only to refuse such terms, but also the ground of the very discourse which makes such dialogues possible. In this way, *Amulet* is not a critical examination of the *testimonios* which arose out of a turbulent and bloody period in history, nor is it an outright rejection

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<sup>80</sup> Richard 19.

of the merits of such accounts. *Amulet*'s disavowal comes from a refusal to carry on, a refusal to recount clearly, if at all, anything other than the stories of poets and artists. Auxilio tries and fails at symbolically rejoining a world in which her refusal would mean little, if anything, in which it would be expected of her to form a coherent narrative of history. "I came back to the world. I've had it with adventures [...] I was content with everyday life. [...] Then the everyday began to expand like a soap bubble gone crazy, and popped. I was back in the women's bathroom on the fourth floor of the Faculty of Philosophy and Literature and it was September 1968."<sup>81</sup> Although her failure brings her back to the time she spent locked in the university bathroom as police and military occupied the campus, this is not a traumatic return to an important historical event, as in the *testimonios*, but rather a return to the sensation of such violence being so close at hand—less like a victim representing their catastrophe, and more like a mystic recalling the sensation of solitude. Immediately after this revelation, Auxilio tells us that this memory causes her to "mumble and stutter [...] I decided to stay there and wait in that watery sunlight [...] My senses held me pinned in a purely spatial world, so I couldn't say whether a long or a short span of time elapsed."<sup>82</sup> She gets caught in a poetic trance that, although rooted in history, refuses to accept this as the its final cause.

The poetic disavowal found in *Amulet* has as much to do with criticizing language and narrative techniques used to represent reality and violence as it does with a critique of the particular poetics of history employed by such narratives. Auxilio, as the 'mother of Mexican poetry,' finds herself as a "body traversed by history" which has come to

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<sup>81</sup> Bolaño, *Amulet*, 106.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.



“distrust the deception of a language and a discourse that are intended to be transparent in the context of the codes of realist narrative or testimony.”<sup>83</sup> Critic Celina Mazoni notes that many of the poets to come out of this generation in Chile were “forced to undergo a profound process of self-reflection in order to reject the clichés that, like all forms of automated repetition, insist on the feelings of grief, distance, and loss.”<sup>84</sup> These feelings are, of course, a natural part of the “standpoint of the vanquished”<sup>85</sup> and were crucial to the *testimonios* which sought to draw attention to abuses of human rights, forgotten and repressed events, and the pain suffered by those “vanquished” who lived through these events. However, when *testimonios* are translated into artistic practice, as in *Death and the Maiden*, this standpoint, subversive as testimony itself, strengthens the dominant narrative of victim/victimizer. As Richard points out, quoting Adorno on Benjamin, these artistic adaptations fail to truly account for the “standpoint of the vanquished” because they take for granted the conditions that allowed the victor to win. They fail to attend to “things which were not embraced by this dynamic, which fell by the wayside—what might be called waste products and blind spots that have escaped the dialectic.”<sup>86</sup>

*Amulet* dramatizes the struggle against these homogenizing tendencies and acts to open up a space in memory that lies between “assimilating (incorporating)” or “expelling (rejecting)”<sup>87</sup> history. The figure of the poet in Bolaño, mad and open to experience, intervenes in this space as the possibility of passively viewing history while actively

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<sup>83</sup> Manzoni 84.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>85</sup> Richard 21.

<sup>86</sup> Adorno, quoted in Richard, 20.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

working against the grain of history, endeavoring to redeem its failures. That is, the poet is a figure that believes in the potential of changing history. As such, Auxilio “is, to borrow a phrase from Vonnegut, a woman unstuck in time.”<sup>88</sup> In her poetic meditation all history blurs together—“the year 1968 became the year 1964 and the year 1960 became the year 1956. But it also became the years 1970 and 1973 and the years 1975 and 1976.”<sup>89</sup> All places level out into a cemetery at the end of history—a cemetery in the year 2666, a forgotten cemetery under the eyelid of a corpse or an unborn child, bathed in the dispassionate fluids of an eye that tried so hard to forget one particular thing that it ended up forgetting everything else.”<sup>90</sup> Auxilio is a type of Angelus Novus, or at least well on her way to becoming one. Meditating, locked in the university bathroom as students are being massacred, she becomes the ‘mother of Mexican poetry.’ Unlike Benjamin’s Angelus Novus, she is not yet detached from history. She has still managed to elude that progress which might carry her unwillingly into the future, the past anchors her to it. She still belongs to history, still feels the responsibility no matter how impossible to take part in it, and still futilely attempts to “awaken the dead and to piece together what has been smashed.”<sup>91</sup> The novel, perhaps one of Bolaño’s least viscerally violent, does not derive its horror from the explicit recounting of bloody events. Instead, it insists, with Deleuze, that contained within the writing of a story there is a violence which can only be brought out as sensation.

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<sup>88</sup> Turner.

<sup>89</sup> Bolaño, *Distant Star* 32.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>91</sup> Benjamin, *Illuminations* 254.

The paradoxical nature of Bolaño's writing—delicately balancing on the thin dividing line between the banal and the profound, the mundane and the horrific—is the also consequence of the conflict between the “two aspects of violence to which Bolaño repeatedly refers: violence as an integral part of the generation to which the author belongs and violence as an inevitable element.”<sup>92</sup> Bolaño does not shy away from the defining, generational violence as one of the most central of his themes. He sees it as an integral and necessary part of his vision of literature which responds to and interprets the bloody and catastrophic events which define the world and which invariably shape the literature that inhabits that world. However, he distinguishes between the historical-generational violence perpetrated by Nazis, femicidal serial killers, and repressive governmental regimes, and something much deeper and much more sinister. A deeply inhuman—and even anti-humanist—violence which perpetrates its crimes through silence.

To reformulate and elaborate this in Benjamin's terms, there exists a theo-historical violence which determines the unique nature of individuals and the nature of the historical moment to which they belong. But this is not to be confused with the irreducible, elemental violence which perpetuates itself and which cannot be expiated—what, as we have seen, Benjamin labels ‘divine violence.’ For only through the former division of violence can we expiate ourselves; this is a type of violence which can be redeemed and can be redeeming through a continuation of the historical dialectic which it initiated. For the latter, no redemption is possible. Under its judgement we are always guilty. Any endeavor that could be undertaken by an actor to atone for divine violence is

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<sup>92</sup> Burgos 139.

inevitably a constituent of the mythical violence of history. Guilt, for Bolaño, has a similar Janus-faced quality. “To live without guilt,” Bolaño says in an interview, “is like living outside of time, in an eternal present, in a jail of Soma [the drug from Aldous Huxley’s *A Brave New World*]. To live without guilt is to abolish memory, to perpetuate cowardice. If I, as a victim of Pinochet, feel guilty for his crimes, how can someone who was his accomplice, either by action or omission, not feel guilty.”<sup>93</sup> Memory is the guilt of the living, of those who are indebted to the inescapable past. The two seem to be almost indistinguishable; to remember is to take part in guilt, but it is only through this guilt, this remembering that the present is able to continue.

In this way—by invoking the abyss, by writing silence, and by insisting on the deeply violent nature of literature—Bolaño manages to bring writing to a place in which it seems to go beyond itself. The deceptive simplicity of the language itself and Bolaño’s predilection for popular, generic fiction—most notably the detective novel—both serve to conceal in plain sight the horrors embedded within his fiction. Bolaño’s writing understands itself as such—as part of an interconnected system of representation, canonical discourse, and literary interventions. If part of this writing’s goal is to divulge the hidden world of violence—to engage in what Blanchot calls the impossibility of the “writing of the disaster”—language and literature show themselves to be the largest obstacle to and the only method of accomplishing this. Instead of outright rejecting the

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<sup>93</sup>Bolaño, *Between* 119.

canonical discourse of literature, as problematic as it at times is, Bolaño makes use of it as though it were tool which only serves its function when broken.

The secret of evil, the silence of literature, finds its way into texts via these ellipses. As such, it is always a secret silence. Furthermore, the poetic fragmentation of narrative greatly alters the text's relation to genre. Bolaño's leitmotif of the detective—present in his work from his earliest poetry to his final, posthumously published novels—simultaneously highlights the dark mystery Bolaño sees at the heart of all literature as well as his fascination with pulp fiction and popular literary genres. The figure of the detective is itself enigmatic. It is often unclear exactly who they are, what their motives are, or even if they are in fact detectives. However, clearly and constantly these detectives are literary at heart—as in *The Savage Detectives*, in which the titular detectives are two young *poètes maudites* in search of a reclusive and Delphic poet whom they consider to be the founder of their literary movement. “Effectively, in inciting the reader to solve a mystery that, apart from remaining unnamed and forming its core, *Amulet* presents itself as a way of accessing another dimension, one in which poetic language, as much for its form as for its content, both signifies and opposes political violence.”<sup>94</sup> To return to the discussion of the role of history in *testimonios*, Bolaño's detectives are not concerned with uncovering the veracity of events, nor is the trope of the detective exploited as part of a postmodern project to question the deep Truth of History. On the contrary, the detective stands as the restoration of the mystery of literature.

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<sup>94</sup> Ferrer.

Thus, the “poetic reversal” which Usandizaga identifies in Bolaño’s works acts to bring to light and to complicate the relation between narrative and representation. Poetry intervenes in fiction to rupture the appearance of cohesiveness and to create a space in the fabric of the fiction in which silence is not forced to speak or to take part in language, as, at the same time, is allowed to remain an integral, formative part of the text. The poetic reversal or intervention in Bolaño’s work is a means to opening the possibility of writing itself. If the writer is someone who finds themselves “having nothing to write, of having no means of writing it, and of being forced by an extreme necessity to keep writing it,”<sup>95</sup> poetic interventions in fiction are a technique to preserve what Blanchot calls the silent secret of literature, the solitude and madness of an over-proximity to language. In the ellipses that these interventions leave behind—the traces of an unspeakable transcendence, memories detached from history—a space is created in which horrors greater than those of collective history are possible, in which a bloodless violence is able to take place. “In Bolano's fiction--and in this it is radically distinct from philosophical reflection and journalism--the secret of evil is and must remain a secret.”<sup>96</sup> It should be added, then, that his fiction accomplishes this by way of poetic interventions into the fabric of narrative.

On a visceral level, the unsettling quality found in novels such as *Amulet* is derived not from the shock value of the image of some horrific act. Although there are indeed unsettling descriptions and horrifying events, there is something deeper at work, something that is at the same time present in and absent from works which rely more heavily on their shock value to disturb. Without a doubt, Bolaño is indeed torn between

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<sup>95</sup> Blanchot, *Gaze of Orpheus*, 5.

<sup>96</sup> Andrews.

the immediate and lasting impact that these scenes bring about and their inherently artificial qualities, between art's mimetic capacity and art's capacity for authenticity. Aesthetically, this is what gives Bolaño's work such appeal. It enlivens the dialectic between the world of sensation than to that of representation. If, as Deleuze claims apropos of Francis Bacon's monstrous aesthetic, "the violence of sensation is opposed to the violence of the represented (the sensational, the cliché),"<sup>97</sup> Blanchot, Benjamin, and Bolaño remind us that the two are never as far apart as we might like to believe. Just as Warhol's reflections on death come from newspaper clippings, and Goya's *The Disasters of War* take the more popular, commercial form of prints, sensation is only skin deep and the represented is never merely what it appears to be.

The "shallow depth" Deleuze speaks of by using a term adapted from Clement Greenberg's study of modern painting, is the moment when the field of perspective is flattened, the Figure of the painting and the field on which it is painted come into conflict and this in turn "rips the painting away from all narrative, but also from all symbolization."<sup>98</sup> That is, it collapses the subject and the context which demarcates and sets the subject off as separate, leaving the figure alone to contend without being able to fall back upon signification or meaning. The "violence of sensation" is the very act of painting with no recourse to the symbolic system in which it is taking part. For Bolaño with writing, as with Bacon and painting, the violent act of creation greatly surpasses any one of the particular horrors which is depicted. Bolaño is interested in those points between horrors, for "as soon as there is horror, a story is reintroduced, and the scream is

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<sup>97</sup> Deleuze, *Francis Bacon* 39.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, xiv.

botched.”<sup>99</sup> Like Bacon’s figures, screaming at some unrepresentable, invisible horror always outside of the painting, Bolaño’s true horrors are bloodless, offstage, and not incorporated into the narrative.

The emotional and stirring sensation that Bolaño causes such controversy among both critics and larger audiences comes more from the *afterimage* of violence, the lasting sensation of an ominous evil that cannot be reasoned or described into submission. The putrefying body of a factory worker found in the desert and described in clinical detail; a pornographic snuff film meticulously documenting a rape and murder; the lasting impact Nazism had on the psychology and the intellect of the world; the poems written the day after the world had ended. We could call these, after Deleuze, Figures of violence. Bolaño could be said to have the same impulse as Bacon to move away from the “to break with representation, to disrupt narration, to escape illustration, to liberate the Figure: to stick to the fact,”<sup>100</sup> though, because his medium is different, his strategy must be as well. Unlike writers such as Phillip Sollers, Severo Sarduy, or Kathy Acker who attempt to reproduce in narrative form the violence and discontinuity which form the basis of their thematics, Bolaño sees narrative as a crucial part of the ruptures which define his work. However, genres and the specific types of narrative that they engender and make way for are always only a tool. Each has its limits, its breaking points at which meaning and significance fail. Bolaño utilizes these genres and takes them to their point of rupture. “At the same time, this allows him to play with all possible genres: mystery, detective, romantic,

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 3.



encyclopedic, without ever falling into the rhetorical web of any of them.”<sup>101</sup> A shallow depth in which it becomes impossible to separate the figures of violence from the narrative context which surrounds them. Unadorned language and genre-inspired form becomes a way—perhaps the only way—of conveying the complexities and ambiguous nature of violence.

In an anti-humanistic vein similar to Blanchot, Bolaño negates the claim that writing is, or can be, used as a tool for the humanistic struggle against violence. Not only does every writer, poet, journalist, and academic in Bolaño end up in some way part of the machinery of violence, moreover, to repeat Benjamin again, literature itself ends up in complicity with the project barbarism. “Bolaño suggests that writing – and culture in general – is profoundly marked by the barbarism of the present: it cannot escape it, nor can it detach itself or constitute itself into a privileged, safe, or civilized space.” Bolaño grapples with—and perhaps even revels in—the feeling of the impossibility of analysis that this violence engenders. Indeed, his writing of violence formulates violence in the most problematic mode possible, while simultaneously revealing little or none of the possibility for resolving the issues. Instead of excavating and unearthing the causes and the roots of violence in order to facilitate the passing of moral judgement, or engaging in a purely poetic dialogue with violence and evil—as does Baudelaire, a frequent reference in his works—Bolaño’s performance of the writing of violence is a deeply rooted, careful critique of violence. “Bolaño's anti-humanist view of literature shares significant elements with the French literary tradition, in particular with ‘poètes maudits’ such as

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<sup>101</sup> Quoted in López Bernasocchi, 419.

Baudelaire and Rimbaud. In these authors poetry cannot make us more human, but it can force us to look at the dark or demonic side of our culture, leading us to acknowledge our hypocritical complicity, as Baudelaire suggests.”<sup>102</sup> However, as we have seen previously, a poetic anti-humanist stance such as Baudelaire’s is greatly complicated when adopted and weaved into the narrative fabric by Bolaño. This critique of violence grapples with understanding its origins without reducing it to a simple causal relationship. At the same time it can appreciate and marvel at the nightmarish beauty of violence while maintaining a critical distance from its fascinating form. Though it has all the complexities and nuances as philosophical reflections on the nature of violence such as Benjamin’s, Girard’s, and Bataille’s, Bolaño’s critique of violence accomplishes something that the essay is unable to accomplish. It is able to fully implicate the writer and the reader in the hermeneutics of violent discourse. Bolaño’s wide-reaching narrative is able to encompass heteroglossic compilation of works of violence including philosophical essays, sociological reflections, poetic eulogies, and bureaucratic records.

It is worth discussing as a point of reference and to help clarify Bolaño’s position on violence, a related theme that has equally a strong presence in Bolaño and that receives much critical attention—evil. Indeed, as many critics have been quick to point out, “Bolaño takes on evil as the most consistent theme in his narrative.”<sup>103</sup> As much as violence plays a crucial role in his brand of narrative—of disruption, unresolvedness, fragmentation, ellipsis—evil plays an equally central role in giving his narrative cohesion,

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<sup>102</sup> López-Vicuña, Ignacio 159.

<sup>103</sup> Cárceres 44

albeit in a different manner. María Pía Lara, one of the foremost scholars on the relation between narrative and evil, informed by Kant and especially by Arendt's attention to the importance of narrativity, claims that narratives are central to our understanding of evil, even more so than philosophy and theology, because they necessitate the use of reflective judgement. Different from determinate judgments—those analyses which attempt to describe and categorize evil using abstract universal concepts—the exercise of reflective judgement is a direct consequence of narrating evil. “Only by finding expressive and original ways to describe those actions can we provide a general concept to describe a historical atrocity.”<sup>104</sup> To engage in the narration of evil is to actively employ a hermeneutics of evil, of giving meaning and name to that evil which constantly haunts the world. “Judgment, in other words, is provided in the construction of meaning; it is captured in the narration of evil.” So, for Lara, the role of evil in narrative is to provide at least the raw materials for the beginning of aesthetic reflections that aid in moral reflection.

Drawing from an essay by one of the founders of Latin American surrealist poetry, Aldo Pellegrini, Chilean literary critic Alexis Candia Cárceres notes in “Evil of all evils: The ‘Aesthetic of Annihilation’ in the Narrative of Roberto Bolaño,” that there exists a fine distinction between destruction and annihilation. Destruction, on the one hand, “confronts us with a new reality of the object, it charges it with meaning that it did not have before.”<sup>105</sup> Annihilation is an infertile act, without meaning or product, opposed

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<sup>104</sup> Lara *Narrating Evil*, 9-10.

<sup>105</sup> Cárceres 49

to the “orgy of aesthetic destruction”<sup>106</sup> in that there is no beauty to be found after annihilation. The writing of annihilation, to draw a parallel with Blanchot, is that which reveals its violence in a stubborn refutation of things as they are. Conversely, contained within the structure of destruction is a violent parallax shift which may leave the object intact, but which destroys the viewers perception of the object qua object. The writing of annihilation attacks the object; the writing of destruction attacks the perception of the object. Cárceres interprets Bolaño’s writing of evil as one that functions as annihilation. Decomposing bodies, murders without reason, and senseless femicide are nothing more than what they seem. Cárceres claims, reworking the famous Gertrude Stein dictum: “A dismembered woman is a dismembered woman.”<sup>107</sup>

Contrary to Cárceres’s claim that Bolaño’s is an “aesthetic of annihilation” behind which lays nothing more than the self-propelled drive to annihilation, in which “there is no attempt to show beauty or a sense of humor, because Bolaño shows annihilation to be simply nothing more than a record of annihilation.”<sup>108</sup> This would suggest that Bolaño’s is an empty critique, a journalistic exposé on the squalid nature of humanity with a few scattered literary references amongst its pages. In this estimation, Bolaño’s writing of evil is impoverished and infertile. It is at the same time too vivid and too shallow for it to allow for any growth or expansion after it has ravished its object; a writing of evil behind which is nothing. Cárceres sees Bolaño as a writer who “erects a small paradise that must be placed in the middle of the enormous underworld that constitutes the ‘Aesthetics of

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<sup>106</sup> Pellegrini.

<sup>107</sup> Cárceres, 49.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 69.

Annihilation.”<sup>109</sup> If his really is an “aesthetics of annihilation,” it would be one which cannot confront its own horrors, Bolaño’s writing would be one that leaves literature shallow and purposeless, only able to function as that type of writing which pretends to represent the world as it is, to pass along the representation of horror, evil, and violence from the world to the reader.

This viewpoint would leave literature as empty as a “small paradise” in a world devoid of inhabitants. Cárceres’s fault comes from seeing in Bolaño a clear and simple demarcation of literature apart from history and apart from the world: “I don’t believe that there is an attempt to exorcise evil in Bolaño. Bolaño sees very clearly the scope and the boundaries of literature.”<sup>110</sup> However, it is precisely literature’s borders that constitute the evil of literature—literature’s inability to step outside of itself, its inability to either remain in silence or to speak of those silences. True, as we have seen, Bolaño’s idea of literature is anti-humanistic, but this in no way should mean that the project of literature is empty, that it is nothing more than an archivist of the ravages of history. Cárceres, too, is hesitant to overestimate literature’s power to intervene in the world, to work against evil—after all, one of Bolaño’s major themes is artist who took their art too far, who ‘sacrificed everything’—including humans—for their art. No character better personifies the dangers that occur when the distinction between art and life are blurred than Carlos Wieder of *Distant Star*.

At the end of *Distant Star*, a mysterious detective employs the help of the struggling-poet narrator in tracking down, identifying, and following the fascist poet,

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 71

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 72.

artist, assassin, and skywriter Carlos Wieder, alias Carlos Ruiz-Tagle, alias The Infamous Ramírez Hoffman. In the final scene, the detective exits the building confirmed by the narrator as being the residence of Wieder, he pays the narrator, and refuses again to disclose for whom he works. As they are about to part, some words are exchanged. “Nothing like this has ever happened to me,” the narrator confesses. “That’s not true, said [the detective] very gently. Worse things have happened to us, think about it.”<sup>111</sup> During the pre-coup days of Chile, the narrator and Wieder had been fellow young poets in attendance of various poetry workshops, daydreaming about transforming the face of new Chilean poetry, but mostly interested in the beautiful young women also present at the workshops and poetry readings. Wieder soon emerges not only as a poet, spearheading the avant-garde New Chilean poetry and skywriting poetry over the skies of Santiago, but also as something close to the embodiment of evil: “Carlos Wieder, a vanguardist delirious with aviation, poetry, and blood.”<sup>112</sup>

Wieder is a vanguard artist carried out *ad absurdum*. The line between art and life is blurred to murderous and disastrous effects. The young women whose beauty he admires eventually become the subject of both his art and his crimes; they are killed and their bodies photographed for an exposition shown to high ranking fascist officers. Mimicking and taking to lengths both homicidal and absurd Breton’s epigram that “the surrealist act par excellence is to go out to the street and shoot into the crowd,” Wieder, as well as the numerous neo-fascist writers categorized in encyclopedic form in *Nazi*

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<sup>111</sup> Bolaño, *Distant Star* 149.

<sup>112</sup> Brodsky, Roberto. “Perdidos en Bolaño.” in *Roberto Bolaño, la escritura como tauromaquia*. Ediciones Corregidor, Buenos Aires, 2002, 84.

*Literature in the Americas*, exemplifies Bolaño's fascination with the links between literature and evil—of which, he says in an interview, “are numerous.” The novel as whole, with its ending that is bloodless yet violent through its ambiguity, is the cause of Cárceres's vacillation concerning Bolaño's ‘borders.’ On the one hand, the novel does illustrate the seldom talked about consequences of the dissolution between art and life and *almost* serves as a cautionary tale against this. This leads to the view that “Bolaño sees very clearly the scope and boundaries of literature.” Literature is part of yet distinct from the happenings of the world. However, on the other hand, this does not lead Bolaño to a clear definition of literature's “scope and boundaries.” Bolaño, instead, insists on grappling with this problem by never letting literature escape into itself, by always keeping it open no matter how unsettling the consequences may be. “The theme of Bolaño's novels, more than literature itself, is its perverse and frightful borders.”<sup>113</sup> It is not so much that Bolaño sees literature's borders clearly. Rather, like Blanchot, he sees those borders as one of literature's central problems.

Bolaño's works redefine the role of interpretation by “resisting the implicitly historicist conventions of interpretation, such as that of national philologies and the extraction of global experience from there (German literature vs. Mexican literature, for example), or the postmodern cultural contact models of approaching the transgression of spatial and temporal boundaries from an angle of hybrid and flexible identity.”<sup>114</sup> He accomplishes this via a violence gesture against interpretation, by pulling the reader

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<sup>113</sup> Aguilar, Gonzalo. “Roberto Bolaño, entre la historia y la melancolía.” in *Roberto Bolaño: la escritura como tauromaquia*. 146.

<sup>114</sup> Herlinghaus, *Narcoepics* 193.

increasingly closer to the violence being portrayed, by portraying more violence, and by continually aestheticizing violence. It is a history of violence told from the point of view of Benjamin's "tradition of the oppressed," which seeks not only make certain events known, but to shake the foundations of what it means to know history. Bolaño's work constantly confronts us with fact that "the violence, the real violence, can't be escaped, at least not by us."<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Bolaño, *Last* 106.



## Conclusion

Though he never travelled outside of Europe, Benjamin did make one brief visit to Latin America. Most fittingly, it was an exploratory trip to Mexico, with Baudelaire as a guide, and took place entirely within a dream. Collected in “One-Way Street,” a short vignette titled “Mexican Embassy” begins with an epigraph from Baudelaire in which he states “I never pass by a wooden fetish, a gilded Buddha, a Mexican idol without reflecting perhaps it is the true God.” Benjamin continues to describe a dream in which he forms part of a party charged with exploring the mountainous jungles of Mexico. There, his group finds a religious order that had somehow managed to survive untouched “from the time of the first missionaries till now, its monks continuing the work of conversion among the natives.” The narrator and his group are lucky enough to be able to witness one of the order’s ancient ceremonies, unchanged since the beginning of colonial times. At its climax a priest “raised a Mexican fetish. At this the divine head turned thrice in denial from left to right.”<sup>116</sup>

Benjamin illustrates the dark fear of modernity—the inability of secular modernity to confront its own reverse image, to confront a radically violent negativity that negates both the object and the criteria for its judgement and comprehension. “What is the troubling issue of ‘Mexican Embassy’ if not the presence of religious images on a plane where the criteria for distinguishing truth and identity from transgression and barbarism have become inverted?”<sup>117</sup> Perhaps this troubling matter comes from a characteristic

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<sup>116</sup> Walter Benjamin. *Reflections*, 67.

<sup>117</sup> Herlinghaus, *Violence* 19.

unusual for Benjamin. For Benjamin, as touched upon in his essay “Surrealism,” modernity begins at awakening, be it from a dream, a religious trance, an intoxication, the entrancement of commodities, etc. The moment of abandon can give an “introductory lesson [...] but a dangerous one.”<sup>118</sup> Dangerous insofar as the moment of awakening must come, the self must return in order for it to have changed. “This loosening of the self by intoxication is, at the same time, precisely the fruitful living experience that allowed these people to step outside the domain of intoxication.”<sup>119</sup> In contrast to another fragment in “One-Way Street” in which he dreams of a Mexican shrine being excavated from the barren ruins of Weimar and awakes laughing, no such moment comes in this dream, not even as the irony of laughter. Modernity is caught in its own trap. If part of Benjamin’s project was to “attempt to deduce an image of transcendence while to remain wholly *within* the boundaries of the empirical world of experience,”<sup>120</sup> here we find an instance in which Benjamin failed to contain the sacred within the confines of the profane, the return from intoxication was denied, and in this short passage the project of ‘profane illumination’ was jeopardized.

This nightmare image poetically illustrates that “there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.” Waking up from this dream would mean waking up from the images of history—to fail to “to take control of a memory, as it flashes in a moment of danger”—and to run the risk of forgetting or of remembering in such a way that the part serves only to justify the present. Here,

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<sup>118</sup> Benjamin, 179.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

<sup>120</sup> Wolin, *Walter Benjamin* 126.

Benjamin is engaging in what he called “organized pessimism”: “to organize pessimism mean nothing other than to expel moral metaphor from politics and to discover in political action a sphere reserved one hundred percent for images. This sphere, however, can no longer be measure out by contemplation.”<sup>121</sup> Benjamin achieves this through a “dialectical optic” in which the aura of the mysterious dissipates while leaving the mystery intact. In this perceptive shift, we are able to perceive “the everyday as impenetrable, the impenetrable as everyday.”<sup>122</sup> That is, there is world which is only accessible by images, apart from the mystery of their meaning—what Deleuze calls the sensation of the image. It is the ‘profane illumination’ at the heart of modernity.

Benjamin’s fear, as illustrated in “Mexican Embassy” and explained in “Surrealism,” is that this moment was impossible, that no waking would occur and that the everyday and the mysterious would forever remain separate. In the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Benjamin wrote: “The astonishment that the things we are experiencing in the 20th century are ‘still’ possible is by no means philosophical. It is not the beginning of knowledge, unless it would be the knowledge that the conception of history on which it rests is untenable.” Writing violence means refusing to wake up. Only in the world of dreams are mimesis and reality totally fused, only there does the image of a tiger become fantastically infused with the power to inspire horror, fear. Kane and Bolaño are caught in this nightmare of humanity, but they have learnt how to dream lucidly and how to harness the power of images.

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<sup>121</sup> Benjamin, *Reflections* 217.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

Benjamin writes about artists who would create a “positive concept of barbarism” through adopting “a total absence of illusion about the age and at the same time an unlimited commitment to it.”<sup>123</sup> Thus, Benjamin provides the formula for a new style of artist, one who embraces barbarity not out of hate of humanity or civilization, nor out of a wish to violently establish law. Rather, it is a recourse to barbarity as a last resort to preserve civilization.

Holding on to things has become the monopoly of a few powerful people, who, God knows, are no more human than the many; for the most part, they are more barbaric, but not in the good way. Everyone else has to adapt—beginning anew and with fresh resources. They rely on the men who have adopted the cause of the absolutely new and have founded it on insight and renunciation. In its buildings, pictures, and stories, mankind is preparing to outlive culture, if need be. And the main thing is to do it with a laugh. This laughter may occasionally sound barbaric. Well and good. Let us hope that from time to time the individual will give a little humanity to the masses, who will one day repay him with compound interest.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Benjamin, *Selected* 733.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 735.

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