



VIOLENCE

HUMANS IN
DARK TIMES

Brad Evans
and Natasha Lennard

CITY LIGHTS

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VIOLENCE

Humans in Dark Times

Brad Evans & Natasha Lennard



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INTRODUCTION

HUMANS IN DARK TIMES

Writing in the late 1960s, Hannah Arendt conjured the term “dark times” to address the legacies of war and human suffering. Arendt was not simply concerned with mapping out the totalitarian conditions into which humanity had descended. She was also acutely aware of the importance of individuals who challenge with integrity the abuses of power in all their oppressive forms. Countering violence, she understood, demands sustained intellectual engagement: we are all watchpersons, guided by the lessons and cautions of centuries of unnecessary devastation.

Mindful of the importance of Arendt in terms of thinking about violence, we deploy the phrase “humans in dark times” not as a description of something definitive but as a provocation. Just as we recognize that there are varying degrees of pain and suffering when it comes to the saturating capacities of oppressive power, so we also recognize every age has contingent problems that often reveal the worst of the human condition. As a result, we do not subscribe to the conceit that our times might be quantitatively deemed “lighter” on account of some triumph of liberal reason or

its veritable retreat. Instead, we pursue the ways in which new and old forms of violence appear in the contemporary moment, what this means in terms of emphasizing the political urgency and demands of the times, and how we might develop the necessary intellectual tools to resist what is patiently intolerable.

Across the world today, it is possible to witness the liberation of prejudice, galvanized by the emergence of a politics of hate and division, that plays directly into the everyday fears of those seduced by new forms of fascism. Such a condition demands purposeful and considered historical reflection. But here we immediately encounter a problem: if fighting violence and oppression demands new forms of ethical thinking that can be developed only with the luxury of time, what does this mean for the present moment when history is being steered in a more dangerous direction and seems to constantly accelerate?

Just as humans are not naturally violent, peace is not impossible. But in order for us to ethically develop styles of living that are suited to the twenty-first century, echoing the challenge set by Walter Benjamin, it is imperative that we develop a critique of violence that does ethical justice to the subject. To bring out the best in us, we have to confront the worst of what humans are capable of doing to one another. In short, there is a need to confront the intolerable realities of violence perpetrated in this world.

So we need to begin by recognizing that violence is not some abstract concept or theoretical problem. It represents a violation in the very conditions that constitute what it means

to be human as such. Violence is always an attack upon a person's dignity, sense of selfhood, and future. It is nothing less than the desecration of one's position in the world. And it is a denial and outright assault on the very qualities that we claim make us considered members of this social fellowship and shared union called "civilization." In this regard, we might say violence is both an ontological crime, inasmuch as it seeks to destroy the image we give to ourselves as valued individuals, and a form of political ruination that stabs at the heart of a human togetherness that emerges from the ethical desire for worldly belonging.

Victimization is but one part of the human condition. We also have the capacity to think and imagine better worlds. To accept violence is to normalize forms of coercion and domination that violate the bodies of the living. Through the subtle intimacy of its performance, it brings everything into its orbit such that the future can only appear to us as something that is violently fated. Every trauma left upon the body or psyche of the individual is another cut into the flesh of the earth.

In order for violence to be accepted there is a need for normalization. Such normalization depends upon immunization, like a surgical strike penetrating the body with such ruthless efficiency we no longer see it as being violence. While we might see cruelty as painful, we can reason beyond this, hence beyond the violence itself, for some greater political good. The violence in this regard is overlaid with a certain metaphysical cloak whose mask of mastery covers the desecrated body with a virtuous blood-soaked robe. That is

to say, violence is also an intellectual and pedagogical force, underwritten by formidable schools of thought whose very purpose is to hide things in plain sight.

We also know that violence is always mediated by expressed dichotomies of permissible and impermissible actions. Some forms of violence can be fully reasoned and excused, while others clearly go beyond the tolerance threshold. Let's connect this directly to the intimate realities of violence today. What we have witnessed since 9/11 has been a notable public shift in the modalities of violence from spectacular attacks (in which humans were often removed from representations of the crimes) toward violence that is more intimate and individualizing. Such violence seems to actually be more intolerable for us as the intimacy addresses a different register. While both are abhorrent, images of exploding towers are arguably easier to deal with than the more focused types of suffering we now witness, from unarmed black men being killed by white police, to civilians—including children and the elderly—being slaughtered during “imprecise” U.S. military operations in places like Syria, Yemen, and Afghanistan, to courtroom testimonies of more than 160 women who were assaulted by a doctor. There is something about the raw realities of intimate suffering which affects us on an all too human level.

Such intimacy has also fed into and in many ways been driven by the pornographic violence of popular culture. Movie franchises, children's cartoons, and video games in particular seemingly excel in commercializing—and thus normalizing—the intimate possibilities of violence. Violence

should be intolerable. Instead, it is mass-marketed, promoted, and sold as entertainment.

Yet it would be far too reductive to say that people have become inured to violence. The fact that people may turn away from violence or try to switch it off is arguably an all too natural reaction to its forced witnessing. The challenge is how to find meaningful solutions to the raw realities of violence that don't simply end up creating more anger, hatred, and division. People are certainly frustrated that the seemingly daily exposure to violence doesn't become a catalyst to steer history in a more peaceful direction.

It was with this shared appreciation for the importance of rethinking violence that, in September 2015, we began the project leading to this book. Following an initial meeting in New York City, Natasha proposed an interview with Brad for the *New York Times* philosophy forum "The Stone." The resulting conversation, "Thinking Against Violence," ran in the *Times* in mid-December 2015 and appears as chapter 1 in this collection.

The interview's success in the *Times* made the public appetite for a broader discussion about violence urgently clear. We were also acutely aware that there was no point in discussing violence unless something could be done about it. If violence undoes any idea of humanity we might want to sustain and develop, we need to learn how to undo violence—even if that means interrogating what we mean by "humanity." But such undoing is not going to come about from the voice of a single individual. Violence demands a conversation with somber and honest reflection.

And it was with this conversational ethos in mind that we envisaged a series of conversations as a truly trans-disciplinary mediation with artists, writers, and cultural producers that would bring critical thought to bear on violence. Violence cannot be countered by retreating back into academic enclaves that privilege certain vantage points. Nor can the idea of the so-called “aesthetic turn” in politics be undertaken if the work of artists is merely appropriated to make a theoretical point. A conversation on violence demands creating an ethical platform based upon reciprocity, where the voice of the contributor is recognized as being a genuine and viable form of political intervention. Just as we don’t think that politics can be reduced to electoral procedures, so the call for more compassion, dignity, and love in the sphere of the political demands seeing art itself as integral to the political field. Hence, while the *New York Times* series (which successfully ran throughout 2016) largely featured renowned critical scholars, the ongoing *Los Angeles Review of Books* series continues to develop the conversation in more artistic but no less important directions.

“Humanity is in crisis,” Zygmunt Bauman told us in one of his last interviews before passing away, “and there is no exit from that crisis other than the solidarity of humans.” We hope this collection offers the critique—and the solidarity—adequate to our dark times.

—Brad Evans and Natasha Lennard

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ONE

THINKING AGAINST VIOLENCE

We are immersed in a relentless stream of real and virtual violence. How can we break the cycle?

Natasha Lennard interviews Brad Evans

December 16, 2015

Brad Evans is a political philosopher, critical theorist, and writer whose work specializes on the problem of violence. The author of ten books and edited volumes, and over fifty articles, he serves as a Reader in Political Violence at the School of Sociology, Politics and International Studies, the University of Bristol, UK. He is the founder and director of the Histories of Violence Project.

Natasha Lennard: The premise of your book Disposable Futures is that “violence is ubiquitous” in the media today. There seems to be plenty of evidence to support this claim—just look at the home page of this news site for a start. But the media has always been interested in violence—“if it bleeds, it leads” isn’t exactly new. And the notion that there is just more violence in the world today—more

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violent material for the media to cover—doesn't seem tenable. So what do you think is specific about the ubiquity of violence today, and the way it is mediated?

Brad Evans: It is certainly right to suggest the connections between violence and media communications have been a recurring feature of human relations. We only need to open the first pages of Aeschylus's *Oresteia* to witness tales of victory in battle and its communicative strategies—on this occasion the medium of communication was the burning beacon. But there are a number of ways in which violence is different today, in terms of its logics intended, forced witnessing, and ubiquitous nature.

We certainly seem to be entering into a new moment, where the encounter with violence (real or imagined) is becoming more ubiquitous and its presence ever felt. Certainly this has something to do with our awareness of global tragedies as technologies redefine our exposure to such catastrophic events. But it also has to do with the raw realities of violence and people's genuine sense of insecurity, which, even if it is manufactured or illusionary, feels no less real.

One of the key arguments I make throughout my work is that violence has now become the defining organizational principle for contemporary societies. It mediates all social relations. It matters less if we are actual victims of violence. It is the possibility that we could face some form of violent encounter that shapes the logics of power in liberal societies today. Our political imagination as such has become dominated by multiple potential catastrophes that appear

on the horizon. The closing of the entire Los Angeles city school system after a reported terrorist threat yesterday is an unsettling reminder of this. From terror to weather and everything in between, insecurity has become the new normal. We see this played out at global and local levels, as the effective blurring between older notions of homeland/battlefields, friends/enemies, and peace/war has led to the widespread militarization of many everyday behaviors—especially in communities of color.

None of this can be divorced from the age of new media technologies, which quite literally puts a catastrophic world in our hands. Indeed, not only have we become forced witnesses to many tragic events that seem to be beyond our control (the source of our shared anxieties), but also accessible smart technologies are now redefining the producer and audience relationships in ways that challenge the dominance of older medias.

A notable outcome of this has been the shift toward humanized violence. I am not only talking about the ways in which wars have been aligned with humanitarian principles. If forms of dehumanization hallmarked the previous Century of Violence, in which the victim was often removed from the scene of the crime, groups such as ISIS foreground the human as a disposable category. Whether it is the progressive liberal, the journalist, the aid worker, or the homosexual, ISIS put the human qualities of the victims on full broadcast.

One could argue that by focusing on “humanity” when considering acts of violence—the human face of victims—we assert that the

human is in fact indispensable (we might think of, say, newspaper paeans to victims after massacres). But you argue that this does the reverse and that violence-as-humanized and human disposability go together. Can you explain this a little further?

What we are engaging with here are two distinct types of violence, which, although appearing separate, often link and connect in subtle yet complex ways. On the one hand, we can point to the widespread disposability of human populations, those countless, nameless, and faceless victims, who experience violence often. Such populations live out a wide range of human insecurities, indignities, oppressions, and hardships. Yet these “disposable” populations, which are often contained, at times overflow their confinement to reveal the violence of the hidden order of politics. This is true whether we are talking about the Black Lives Matter movement, which has been galvanized by the spectacle of police brutality, or the bodies of refugee children like Aylan Kurdi, whose body washed up on the shores of a Turkish beach.

On the other hand, we have more orchestrated spectacles of violence, from real events to cultural and entertainment productions, which prove to be deeply significant in the normalization of violence and in producing the conditions for violence to come. We can explain this in terms of the interplay between disposable lives and sacrificial violence, onto claims for militaristic forms of justice. A number of philosophers have attended to the relationship between violence and the sacred. What concerns me are the ways in which sacrificial victims become loaded with symbolic

meaning to sanction further violence and destruction. That is to say, how the spectacle of a truly intolerable moment is politically appropriated to sanction further violence in the name of the victims.

We have seen a terrifying example following the recent attacks in Paris and in San Bernardino. As the Islamic State, or ISIS, continues to push the spectacle of violence to the nth degree, it brings together the sacrificial and the disposable in challenging ways. ISIS has a clear strategy that seeks to maximize its exposure through the most intimate forms of sacrificial violence. There is, however, a further outcome to its violence; it creates the very conditions in which a violent response becomes inevitable. Its violence seeks to create disposable futures. By focusing precisely on populations which are actually most likely to resist the calls for further war and violence, what is effectively witnessed is an assault on the imagination and the ability to steer history in a different direction.

Faced with such spectacles, our complex range of emotions—sadness, horror, fear, anger, and concerns for the safety of families, friends, and loved ones—are consistently mobilized to justify a violent and militaristic response. Or as President François Hollande of France recently remarked, what's now needed is the purest form of justice, a "pitiless war," as if the previous age of violence was somehow marked by compassion. This raises serious questions about how we might even think about breaking the cycle of violence, as the future already appears to be violently fated.

It seems that the media only access the humanity and struggle of oppressed populations once we have had (literal, visual) exposure to spectacular violence enacted on their bodies. I think of the example you cite—of the child Aylan Kurdi dead on the Turkish beach or of the unarmed teen Michael Brown’s body seen lying in the Ferguson street for three and a half hours. And that the corpses of privileged white people are often not used as a media spectacle in the West (indeed, publications and social media platforms scramble to ban ISIS execution videos). Does part of our world being “violently fated,” as you say, relate to the fact that we often only find empathy and solidarity after we’ve seen people as victims of violence?

There is also a need to be mindful here of the power relationships invested in what we might term the mediation of suffering. How we encounter and narrate the spectacle of violence today is subjected to overt politicization, which prioritizes certain forms of suffering, and, in doing so, concentrates our attentions on those deaths that appear to matter more than others. Politics in fact continues to be fraught with claims over the true victims of historical forces. Part of our task then remains to reveal those persecuted figures subjected to history’s erasure. But we need to go further. Indeed, while much has already been written about the recurring motif of the victim in terms of developing forms of solidarity and togetherness, there is also a need to be mindful today of the appropriation of the humanitarian victim—who is now a well-established political figure—for the furtherance of violence and destruction in the name of global justice.

In his book The Better Angels of Our Nature, Steven Pinker argues that there is objectively less violence in the world, but it is not clear to me how we could or whether we should quantify the history of violence in this way. It makes no sense, to me, to say there is more or less violence now than ever. Or at least I would challenge any attempt to do so as problematically historicist—privileging our current notions of what violence even is as something timeless and unchanged throughout history. But we can talk about a spreading spectacle and its qualities. How do you respond to efforts and findings of Pinker, which are being popularly accepted?

There are a number of issues to address here. We shouldn't lose sight of the fact that many dedicated organizations and individuals are doing tremendously important work documenting the casualties of war and conflict. Whether we are talking about the meticulous research involved in revealing the forgotten testimonies of victims, or efforts to record and detail the "collateral damages" of more recent campaigns, these measures are crucial in holding power to account. No life should be collateral. This requires recording and continued vigilance.

Yet, as you intimate, there is a need to avoid falling into the methodological trap set by the likes of Pinker. Not only does his work lead to the most remiss historicism as violence can be judged in terms of various scales of annihilation, it is ethically and politically compromised in the extreme. These attempts to offer quantitative reflections on violence in fact lead precisely to the forms of utilitarian calculations through which some forms of violence are continually justified or

presented as the “least worse.” As a result, the human dimensions to the violence—for example, the qualitative aspects of it—are often written out of the script.

Such approaches are in fact incapable of answering the ethical question “when is too much killing enough?” Just as there is no clear line to be drawn concerning levels of tolerable casualties, can we justify the acceptance of 1,000 deaths but declare 1,001 too many? Each form of violence needs to be critiqued and condemned on its own terms. Only then can we think of breaking the cycle of violence by moving beyond overtly politicized dichotomies as good and bad, just and unjust, tolerable and intolerable, that rely upon such quantifiable derivatives.

Pinker’s specific claims are historically dubious in respect to the relationship between liberalism and violence. What is more, the classifications he uses conveniently fit his preexisting normative positions and worldviews. Yet, as we know, what actually constitutes an act of political violence is intellectually fraught and deeply contested. The recent mass shootings in the United States, for example, illustrate how both the naming and quantification of violence remain loaded with political determinism. While some incidents, like the massacre in Colorado Springs, continue to be narrated by focusing on the mental health of the individual perpetrators—hence avoiding any broader systemic critique of gun laws, political allegiances, and religious beliefs, et cetera—others, such as the recent attack in San Bernardino, immediately connect individuals to broader historic forces.

What about how we use the term “violence”? I have written before that it is used carelessly in the media. For instance, I have seen news reports that say a situation “turned violent” when in fact only property was being damaged or destroyed. That suggests that property can be a victim of violence. With regard to Ferguson, reports said that protests “turned violent,” which suggests the situation was not violent already, ignoring the fact that there is no background state of peace or nonviolence when young black teens are being gunned down by police with impunity. Do you think we need a better conception of what actually constitutes violence? Do you agree that the word itself is used irresponsibly? How might we conceive of a better way to apply the term?

Violence remains a complex problem that defies neat description. The German philosopher Walter Benjamin saw the task of developing a critique of violence adequate to our times to be one of the most significant intellectual challenges we face. How can we critically engage the problem of violence and remain ethically sensitive to the subject while doing justice to its victims? Too often violence is studied in an objective and neutral way, forgetting that human lives are being violated and that its experience is horrific and devastating.

Violence does, however, remain poorly understood if we simply attend to mere bodily attacks. Not only is psychological abuse clearly a form of violence, often we forget how some of the most pernicious and lasting casualties of war are intellectual. There is also a compelling case to be made for arguing that extreme social neglect, unnecessary suffering

caused by preventable disease, and environmental degradation could also be written as forms of violence, given their effects on lives. Key here is to recognize both the systematic and all too human dimensions to violence, which requires us to look more attentively to the multiple forms violence can take, teasing out both its logical consistencies and novelties.

You do, however, raise an important point: once we start to objectify violence—for instance, argue what its main referent objects should be—it is easy to retreat back into established moral and normative positions that neatly map out justifiable versus unjustifiable forms of violence. The justifiable being the violence we are willing to tolerate, the unjustifiable the intolerable. With this in mind, it's much better to ask how violence operates within a social order. By this I mean to question regimes of power, less by their ideas and more by the types of violence they tolerate, while asking how such violence serves to authenticate and disqualify the real meaning of lives.

So where does this leave us intellectually? Rather than encouraging a debate about the true meaning of violence, I'd like to deal with your final question by proposing the urgent need to think against violence in the contemporary moment.

As Simon Critchley intimated in a very powerful piece in “The Stone” in 2011, breaking the cycle of violence and revenge requires entirely new political and philosophical coordinates and resources to point us in alternative directions.

I'd like to add to this discussion by drawing attention to Auguste Rodin's sculpture *The Thinker*, which is still arguably

one of the most famous human embodiments of philosophical and critical inquiry. The symbolic form given to Rodin's isolated and contemplative sculpture alone should raise a number of critical concerns for us. Not least the ways in which its ethnic, masculine, and all too athletic form, speaks to evident racial, gendered, and survivalist grammars.

But let's consider for a moment what the thinker is actually contemplating. Alone on his plinth, the thinker could in fact be thinking about anything. We just hope it is something serious. Such ambiguity was not, however, as Rodin intended. In the original 1880 sculpture, the thinker actually appears kneeling before *The Gates of Hell*. We might read this as significant for a whole number of reasons. First, it is the "scene of violence" which gives specific context to Rodin's thinker. Thought begins for the thinker in the presence of the raw realities of violence and suffering. The thinker in fact is being forced to suffer into truth.

Second, there is an interesting tension in terms of the thinker's relationship to violence. Sat before the gates, the thinker appears to be turning away from the intolerable scene behind. This we could argue is a tendency unfortunately all too common when thinking about violence today. Turning away into abstraction or some scientifically neutralizing position of "objectivity." Yet, according to one purposeful reading, the figure in this commission is actually Dante, who is contemplating the circles of hell as narrated in *The Divine Comedy*. This is significant. Rather than looking away, might it be that the figure is now actually staring directly into the abyss below? Hence raising the fundamental

ethical question of what it means to be forced witness to violence?

And third, not in any way incidental, in the original commission the thinker is actually called “the poet.” This I want to argue is deeply significant for rethinking the future of the political. *The Thinker* was initially conceived as a tortured body yet also as a freethinking human, determined to transcend his suffering through poetry. We continue to be taught that politics is a social science and that its true command is in the power of analytical reason. Such has been the hallmark of centuries of reasoned, rationalized, and calculated violence, which has made the intolerable appear arbitrary and normal. Countering this demands a rethinking of the political itself in more poetic terms, which is tasked with imagining better futures and styles for living among the world of peoples.

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TWO

THEATER OF VIOLENCE

From Sophocles to soccer, or Donald Trump to Kendrick Lamar, we are all players on history's bloody stage.

Our *New York Times* series of wider dialogues on violence began with the following conversation with the renowned philosopher and writer Simon Critchley—a professor of philosophy at the New School for Social Research in New York City and the moderator of the *New York Times* forum “The Stone.” Simon is a critical philosopher who is often associated with the anarchist tradition. Throughout his extensive corpus of work, he has raised important questions on the meaning of tragedy, along with the tensions between violence and our metaphysical longings for love and togetherness. In this conversation a range of issues are discussed, from the continued importance of tragedy and how we might make sense of the forty-fifth president of the United States to Shakespeare, soccer, art, and music.

Brad Evans interviews Simon Critchley

March 14, 2016

Simon Critchley is the author of many books, including *Bowie*, *Memory Theatre*, and *Notes on a Suicide*.

Brad Evans: I want to start the discussion by raising a seemingly basic yet elusive question: what actually is violence? In terms of media spectacles and popular culture, violence seems ubiquitous in liberal societies. Yet the very term “violence” continually escapes meaningful definition and critique. What do you understand by the term?

Simon Critchley: It is true, “violence” can be used in a very wide and somewhat vague manner. So let me try to restrict our discussion to physical violence of a rather direct form. Let’s say that violence is behavior that uses physical force in order to cause damage, harm, or death to some living thing, whether human or not. It is pretty clear that we are not all going to be able to agree on a definition of violence, but let’s see where this idea of it takes us.

First, violence cannot be reduced to an isolated act that could be justified with reference to some conception or principle of justice. Here I borrow a line of thought from the historian and cultural theorist Robert Young when he writes that violence “is a phenomenon that has a history.” Violence is not so much a question of a single act that breaks a supposed continuum of nonviolence or peace. Rather, violence is best understood as a historical cycle of violence and counterviolence. In other words, violence is not one but two. It is a double act that traps human beings in a repetitive pattern from which it is very hard to escape. Violence,

especially political violence, is usually a pattern of aggression and counter-aggression that has a history and stretches back deep into time.

This is how I would understand the patterns involving race and racialized violence that have taken on added urgency of late. Violence is not an abstract concept for those subjected to it but a lived reality that has a concrete history. To try to judge the racial violence that defines current life in the United States without an understanding of the history of violence that stretches back to colonization, the forced transport of Africans to the colonies of the Americas, and the implementation of plantation slavery is largely pointless. We have to understand the history of violence from which we emerge.

In that respect, as your colleague Richard Bernstein has argued, even massive historical events like the September 11 attacks don't necessarily provoke serious thinking on the problem of violence.

One way of looking at 9/11—let's call it the standard way—is that the United States was at peace with the world and then terror came from the sky and the twin towers tumbled. In that view, 9/11 was a single act that required a justified reaction, namely war in the Middle East, the infinite detention of suspected “terrorists” in places like Guantánamo Bay, and the construction of the vast institutional apparatus of Homeland Security.

But another way of looking at 9/11 is looking at what Osama bin Laden said about the matter. In a 2004 video

called *The Towers of Lebanon*, where he first accepted responsibility for Al Qaeda's role in the 9/11 attacks, he justifies the attacks by claiming that they were a reaction to the persistent violation of Arab lands by the United States, especially the use of Saudi Arabia as a base during the first Gulf War. Bin Laden even adds that the idea of 9/11 came to him as a visual memory of watching TV footage of the Israeli bombardment of West Beirut's high-rise tower blocks in 1982. If the "Zionist-Crusaders," as he pejoratively puts it, could put missiles into towers, then so could Al Qaeda. Thus the idea for 9/11 was born.

The point is that if we are to understand violence concretely, then we have to grasp it historically as part of a cycle of action and reaction, violence and counterviolence, that always stretches back further than one thinks. If one doesn't do this, then one ends up like Donald Trump, emptily promising to flatten ISIS with bombs. It's in this light that we might also consider the Theater of Trump that has exploded with truly disturbing and racially coded violence in recent days.

If violence shouldn't be theorized in the abstract, as you rightly insist, we must pay attention to how it is enacted. In this, the importance of theater, which is a recurring theme throughout your work, is often overlooked. What do you think theater has to offer here?

We live in a world framed by violence, where justice seems to be endlessly divided between claim and counterclaim, right and left, freedom fighter and terrorist, believer and nonbe-

liever, and so on. Each side appears to believe unswervingly in the rightness of its position and the wrongness, or indeed “evil,” of the opposition. Such belief legitimates violence and unleashes counterviolence in return. We seem to be trapped in deep historical cycles of violence where justice is usually simply understood as vengeance or revenge.

This is where theater can help, especially tragedy (but I think this is also true of the best movies and TV dramas).

It is useful to consider the Greeks. The history of Greek tragedy is the history of violence and war, from the war with the Persians in the early fifth century B.C. to the Peloponnesian Wars that run until that century’s end; from the emergence of Athenian imperial hegemony to its dissolution and humiliation at the hands of Sparta. In 472 B.C., in the oldest extant play we possess, *The Persians*, Aeschylus deals with the aftermath of the Battle of Salamis in 480. It was therefore somewhat closer to the Athenians than 9/11 is to us. More than half of our surviving Greek tragedies were composed after the outbreak of the Peloponnesian Wars in 431. *Oedipus the King* was first performed in 429, two years after the beginning of the Peloponnesian Wars, during a time of plague that is estimated to have killed one-quarter of the Athenian population. The plague that established the entire environment of Sophocles’s play is not some idle musing. It was very real indeed. It killed Pericles, the leader of Athens, that very same year. The frame of tragedy is war and its devastating effects on human life.

Greek tragedy, particularly with its obsessive focus on the aftermath of the Trojan War, is largely about combat

veterans. But it was also performed by combat veterans. Actors were not flimsy thespians or the Athenian version of Hollywood stars but soldiers who had seen combat, like Aeschylus himself. They knew firsthand what violence was. Tragedy was played before an audience that had either participated directly in war or were indirectly implicated in war. All were traumatized by it, and everyone felt its effects. War was the life of the city and its pride, as Pericles argued. But war was also the city's fall and undoing.

How might we respond in a similar way to the contemporary situation of violence and war? It might seem that the easiest and noblest thing to do is to speak of peace. Yet, as Raymond Williams says in his still hugely relevant 1966 book, *Modern Tragedy*: "To say peace when there is no peace is to say nothing." The danger of easy pacifism is that it is inert and self-regarding. It is always too pleased with itself. But the alternative is not a justification of war. It is rather the attempt to understand the deep history and tragic complexity of political situations.

The great virtue of ancient tragedy is that it allowed the Greeks to see their role in a history of violence and war that was to some extent of their own making. It also allowed them to imagine a suspension of that cycle of violence. And this suspension, the kind of thing that happens in the trial at the end of Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, was not based on a fanciful idealism but on a realistic and concrete grasp of a historical situation, which was something the Greeks did by focusing history through the lens of myth.

The slim sliver of hope I have is that the same could

be true of us. To see the bloody events of the contemporary world in a tragic light exposes us to a disorder that is not just someone else's disorder. It is our disorder, and theater at its best asks us to take the time to reflect on this and to imagine what a world where violence is suspended might look like.

With that in mind, I'd like now to turn to Shakespeare. In Stay, Illusion! The Hamlet Doctrine you show how Shakespearean figures are relevant for understanding the ways in which deeply tragic questions concerning life, death, and love are embodied today. What is it about Shakespeare that still captures the violence of the times?

From the beginning to the end, Shakespeare's drama is a meditation on political violence. Whether one thinks of the wild excesses of *Titus Andronicus*, the vast majestic sweep of the history plays, or the great tragedies, Shakespeare had a tight and commanding grip on the nature of political power and its relation to violence and the claims and counterclaims of justice. What is most powerful about Shakespeare is the way in which his historically coded reflections on the politics of his time are combined with intense and immense psychological intimacy. Shakespeare, like no one before or since, binds together the political and the psychological.

To take the play that I know best, *Hamlet*, it is not just that this play is a drama of violence in a surveillance state where power is constituted through acts of murder (the Castle of Elsinore and the state of Denmark is clearly some kind of allegory for the late Elizabethan court and police state),

but also that we feel an awful proximity to the effects of violence on the mind of the young Danish prince and the way in which it drives his feigned madness into something more real and frightening, as when he confronts his mother with terrifying psychic violence (act 3, scene 4).

What answer does *Hamlet* give that helps us understand our current political situation? Simply put, the play counsels us that time is out of joint. What people often forget is that Hamlet's father, before he was himself murdered, killed Fortinbras's father. And therefore it is fitting that *Hamlet* ends not just with the prince's death but also with the military occupation of Denmark by the forces of young Fortinbras, who is Hamlet's twin, insofar as they are both the sons of murdered fathers, one by the other.

So the point of Shakespeare is not to give us simple answers or reassuring humanistic moral responses to violence but to get us to confront the violence of our own histories. "Hamlet" gives us many warnings, but perhaps the most salient is the following: if we imagine that justice is based on vengeance against others, then we are truly undone.

How can we connect insights such as this to the historic and evidently prescient contemporary relationship between violence and sport? Are sporting arenas perhaps the real theaters of our times? Are they inevitably bound up with the problem of violence in both its glorified and its vilified forms?

Ah, now you're talking. Sport is obviously the continuation of war by other means. And sports stadiums are undoubtedly

the closest thing to ancient theaters that we have, especially in terms of scale (nearly 15,000 people sat in the Theater of Dionysus in Athens). It's fascinating to me that when Bertolt Brecht was trying to imagine the ideal audience for the kind of epic theater he was developing in the 1920s, he pictured a sports crowd. That is, a crowd that is relaxed and not anxious, sitting under lights rather than in the dark, and that has knowledge of what is happening and a passion for it, rather than people either looking perplexed or quietly taking a nap, as usually happens in New York theaters. I think there is a lot to Brecht's idea.

Sport is obviously violent, and it is violence that we want to see. We want to see people putting their bodies on the line for their team and leaving their bodies on the field. This is why the whole debate about concussions in the NFL is so hypocritical, to my mind. Sport is a place where bodies break. If you don't agree with it, then don't watch it.

But sports is not just some gladiatorial spectacle of violence. It is violence honed into skill and masterful expertise, what psychoanalysts would call "sublimation." It is violence refined and elevated. And sporting drama is only made possible through an elaborate set of rules, which have to be observed and with which all parties agree.

But what is in the background of the rule-governed physical violence of sport is something more complex, something closer to what the ancients called fate. This is particularly the case with the sport that I take it you and I hold dearest, what our American pals call soccer. For the real fan, what is at stake in a soccer match is a sense of profound

attachment to place, whether town, city, or nation, a sense of identity that is almost tribal and that is often organized around social class, ethnicity, dialect, or language. But what is driving the whole activity is something closer to destiny. This is usually experienced when one's team loses, as one has the sinking feeling that England must when playing Germany and the game has to end with penalty shots.

But the key phenomenon of sport in relation to violence is that although sport can and does spill over into actual violence (whether through hooliganism or ethnic or racist violence), this usually doesn't happen. As a fan, one follows the physical, violent intensity of the game with a mixture of intense passion and expert knowledge of what is happening, and then the game ends and one goes home, often a little disappointed. I think sport, especially soccer, is a wonderful example of how violence can be both made spectacular and harnessed for nonviolent ends. At its best, one accepts defeat, respects the opponent, and moves on eagerly to the next game.

The subtlety of the potential for nonviolence you express here seems crucial. In particular, how might we develop the necessary intellectual tools adequate to these deeply violent and politically fraught times?

My response is very simple: art. I think that art at its most resonant and powerful can give us an account of the history of violence from which we emerge and can also offer us the

possibility of a suspension of that violence. Art can provide an image for our age.

For me, this happens most powerfully in popular music. For me, as for many others, one of the most coherent and powerful responses to the racialized violence of the past year or so was Kendrick Lamar's *To Pimp a Butterfly*. With dazzling linguistic inventiveness, steeped in intense inward knowledge of traditions of jazz, soul, and funk, Lamar does not provide easy solutions or empty moral platitudes but confronts us aesthetically with the deep history of racialized violence. You hear this very clearly on a track like "Alright." It is what Public Enemy, Curtis Mayfield, and Marvin Gaye did so powerfully in previous generations.

Some days I am inclined to agree with Nietzsche when he said that without music life would be error. Music like Lamar's doesn't give us the answers, but it allows us to ask the right questions, and it does this with a historical and political sensibility suffused with intelligence, wit, and verve. Great music can give us a picture of the violence of our time more powerfully than any news report. It can also offer, for the time that we listen, a momentary respite from the seemingly unending cycles of violence and imagine some other way of being, something less violent, less vengeful, and less stupid.

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