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PERFORMING VIOLENCE

LIMITS AND TRANSFORMATIVE MEANS IN STAGED VIOLENCE

Davide Giovanzana

"Davide Giovanzana's work at the crossroads of theatre practice and theory has for more than two decades pushed for a new understanding of not just the performing arts and their research, but of excess and ethics in general. *Performing Violence* is a highly recommendable read for scholars and practitioners in all arts, without forgetting philosophers, who might find interest in Giovanzana's novel way of reflecting on philosophical questions through experimental theatre practice. Central for both traditional and digital theatres, violence forces the audience to engage with the performance both psychologically and somatically. The topic might be a perennial one, but Giovanzana's hands-on methods of dealing with it provide new solid results, especially helpful for the practitioners."

Max Ryynänen, *Principal Lecturer, Aalto University, Department of Art and Media*

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Performing Violence

This book offers an exhaustive approach to all forms of staged violence and an in-depth analysis of their emergence and repercussions (dramaturgically and physically).

This study explores instruments to surpass the dichotomic opposition victim-oppressor, to demystify the spell of violence, and to get rid of the morbid voyeurism often connected to staged violence, and eventually, it proposes transformative tools to explore empowering experiences through violence. Considering all the aspects of a theatre performance engaging with staged violence (the story displaying violence, the actors' embodiment of violence, the spectators' experiences of being exposed to violence, and the process of performing violence), this book proposes analytical and practical tools to explore the limit and to transform the experience of performing violence.

This book will be of great interest to students and scholars in theatre and performance studies.

Davide Giovanzana is a theatre director, researcher and lecturer in acting at Tampere University, Finland.

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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2025
by Routledge
4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 9781032847597 (hbk)
ISBN: 9781032857961 (pbk)
ISBN: 9781003519881 (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003519881

The Open Access version of this book was funded by
Tampere University Foundation sr.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Professor Anders Carlsson who allowed me to carry my artistic postdoctoral research, *The Imagination of Violence*, in his theatre department.

I would also like to thank the students of acting in Swedish at the Theatre Academy of Helsinki who took part in the exploratory workshops on violence[1]: Joel Forsbacka, Antonia Henn, Emilia Jansson, Matilda Kruse, Oksana Lommi, Herman Nyby, Martin Paul, Antti Saarikallio, Tom Salminen, Astrid Stenberg, and Emelie Zilliacus; Yuko Takeda for her presence and documentation during the workshop[2]; the photographer Keme Pellicer; the theatre research group T7 of Tampere University who provided invaluable insights; Till Baumhauer who exhibited parts of this artistic postdoctoral research, *The Imagination of Violence*, in the collective exhibition that he curated at Dresden Motorhallen; and Tytti Pohjola who provided accurate language revision.

And finally, I would also like to thank the Kone Foundation who financed my artistic postdoctoral research.

Notes

1 Three workshops structured my artistic postdoctoral research. The material developed in these workshops prompted this book.

2 For the full documentation of the workshops written by Yuko Takeda, see this link: https://davidegiovanzana.ch/the-imagination-of-violence-2/

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Introduction

Performing Violence: What Are the Limits of Staged Violence?

Prologue

This book documents the process, findings, and exercises developed during my postdoctoral artistic research at the Theatre Academy of Helsinki from 2017 to 2019. A specific event on Friday, 13 November 2015, sparked this research. That evening marked the premiere of a show I directed in Switzerland, titled *The Heart of the Monster*. This production aimed to explore what is 'human' in those deemed monsters and what could be monstrous in those considered normal. Inspired by Hannah Arendt's concept of the 'banality of evil,' the show juxtaposed four stories—three real and one fictional.

The true accounts were based on the lives of two serial killers: Aileen Wuornos and Jean-Claude Romand. Aileen Wuornos (1956–2002), a prostitute, killed seven clients, claiming that they had raped her and that she killed them as self-defence. Jean-Claude Romand (born 1954) deceived his family for 18 years, pretending to work for the World Health Organization in Geneva as a doctor. Unable to confront suspicions about his true activities, he ultimately murdered his parents, wife, two children, and father-in-law before failing in his suicide attempt. The third true story depicted Brigadier General Paul Tibbets (1915–2007), who, on 6 August 1945, dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima immediately killing approximately 80,000 people, with tens of thousands more succumbing later to radiation exposure. Tibbets was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross immediately upon completing his mission.

The fictional narrative depicted a condescending, racist Swiss bureaucrat who resented taxpayer money funding cultural projects for immigrants, viewing them as 'useless'. The show aimed to challenge the extent to which media and societal condemnation of 'monsters' can lead to *scapegoatism*, thereby hindering deeper engagement with our capacity for empathy and understanding someone else's opinion and feelings. The dramatization of figures like Romand and Wuornos, with their radical actions and extreme violence, paradoxically reassures the so-called normal individuals about their own moral standing; they comfort themselves with the notion, "Surely, I am not like them; I am not a monster." This narrative framework limits the

DOI: 10.4324/9781003519881-1
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opportunity to critically apply Arendt's insights and question the presence of banal evil in everyday life.

Anyway, we had just finished the show; it was 11 in the evening. The actors were relieved, and we were celebrating, sending messages, when suddenly someone in shock announced that, the same night, terrorist attacks in Paris had killed 130 people. A cold shiver ran through us all. It felt as though what we had just performed was meaningless in the face of this massacre. Worse still, it seemed our show was merely 'playing' at the monstrosity that can exist within the human heart. After that night, the internet was flooded with videos by the jihadist group Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). These videos typically featured two or three men staring directly into the camera, urging viewers to join their fight. Occasionally, a prisoner was beheaded. The videos mixed sadism with propaganda, promoting radicalization with narratives that proclaimed the global war would end with the ultimate victory of the ISIS state and encouraged individuals or small cells to 'attack.' What struck me was the intensity of the gaze and the commanding presence of these warriors. I was both fascinated and repelled by these videos, confused by my internal struggle. And I realized that, as actors, we cannot compete with this presence and intensity. If the theatre is meant to be a place where counter-narratives to hegemony, discrimination, and abuse are showcased, then in the face of these videos, I ruminated on the seeming powerlessness of theatre.

And then, it dawned on me that perhaps this is an important question that needs to be explored. I began to ponder: when we discuss violence, what mechanisms are triggered? What alternative discourses related to violence can theatre propose? Motivated by these questions, I decided to initiate a new research project, which took the form of a postdoctoral artistic exploration titled *The Imagination of Violence*.

Research Outline

This research merges practical and academic investigations to explore how violence is represented on stage and, by extension, in popular culture—including movies, music videos, TV series, and internet videos. It aims to delve into and elucidate the narratives and sensibilities of visual violence, which is not confined to distant battlefields but is prevalent in our everyday lives, both structurally and culturally. Art, especially theatre, has a long-standing tradition of aestheticizing violence, and theatre was one of the first mediums to represent it. Theatre, whose strength is to display the imagination of a community, responds to contemporary experiences of representations of violence (Bharucha, 2014). Violence demands anticipation (Duggan, 2012), and as anthropologist Robin Fox notes, a major human challenge related to violence is not the act itself but the imagination of it (Fox, 1989).

Contemporary conflicts, such as the war in Ukraine, the threat of terrorist attacks, violent eruptions in various European suburbs, refugee flows polarizing political debates, social tensions, gender discrimination, the precarity

fuelled by economic crises, and the systemic harassment unveiled by the #MeToo movement, are perpetually broadcast by various media. These portrayals shape our perception of violence and thereby our relationship to it. Additionally, the geopolitical shift following the Soviet Union's collapse led to a change in military strategies. Modern wars are less about territorial gain and more about maintaining ongoing crises that disrupt civil society. According to Claudia Pozzana and Alessandro Russo, the current strategy is not to seek peaceful resolutions but to sustain endless conflicts. Unlike Henry Kissinger's Vietnam-era concerns with ending war, the current aim for NATO's top military officers is to perpetuate war indefinitely (Pozzana, 29). This shift is driven by the dominant victory and globalization of the neoliberal system. Countries perceived as threats are not merely controlled but also financially exploited (Pozzana, 58).

In this view, war serves as the most evident and tangible manifestation of the profit-driven logic that underpins the neoliberal economy. Consequently, the logic of conflict and violence that supports neoliberal economies permeates all aspects of everyday life (Pozzana, 105). The pervasive violence at the heart of the capitalist economy warrants a broader examination. This crucial issue is discussed in the final part of this book, alongside Leonard Lawlor's work. The earlier chapters—one through four—focus on more specific and detailed phenomena related to violence represented on stage.

It seems clear that the term 'violence' acts as an umbrella encompassing a multitude of intricate phenomena that affect humans on various scales. This complexity prompts a legitimate enquiry: is an examination of terminology necessary? The facets of violence include physical, mental, psychological, structural, state, military, cultural, slow, and invisible violence. Additionally, there are various expressions of violence such as ferocity, force, aggression, hostility, brutality, cruelty, sadism, and power. The consequences also vary widely, ranging from trauma, shock, suffering, pain, and distress to seemingly contradictory responses like pleasure, excitement, and catharsis.

Disentangling and pinpointing the origins of this plethora of violent phenomena is indeed a daunting task. It should not be surprising, then, that this research sometimes draws analogies between seemingly incongruous elements. The primary perspective adopted here is that of the spectator: the research consistently considers the multifaceted nature of violence with the central question: what happens when violence is performed on stage? This leads to a further query: why is it necessary to stage violence? Eventually, the research focuses on the examination of narratives allowing or legitimizing the emergence of violence on stage and vice versa: what kind of narratives does staged violence hide or reveal?

From this viewpoint, if the stage is seen as a reflection or extension of a community, it seems clear that performed violence can mirror the varied experiences of everyday life. Thus, apparent incongruous juxtapositions are deliberate attempts to enhance understanding or clarify the focus of this research. This book should not be viewed as the definitive taxonomy of staged violence but rather as a prompt for further analysis and experimentation.

Moreover, assigning specific terms to each violence-related phenomenon can seem contrived, especially in scenarios where the types of violence are multiple and the phenomena related are multi-layered or overlapping. I have therefore opted to retain the broad term 'violence', even though it encompasses a wide array of actions. The work progresses by specifying and examining the situations, actions, and narratives that generate violence and their repercussions.

Recreating violent acts for dramatic purposes has a long-standing history. Before the advent of the mechanical reproduction of sounds and images, theatre served as the primary medium for depicting violence. This connection, recently reiterated by Erika Fischer-Lichte (Fischer-Lichte, 2005) and Mark Pizzato (Pizzato, 2005), associates theatre with the ritual of sacrifice, suggesting that theatre originated as a public display of violent acts. Throughout the centuries, debates over whether violence should be made visible on stage or kept hidden from the view of the spectators have engaged theatre makers and scholars from Aristotle (Aristotle, 1970) to Hans-Thies Lehmann (Lehmann, 2006).

In the 21st century, the proliferation of various media forms over the last 120 years—including films, television, computer games, and the internet—has dramatically changed how frequently we encounter images of violence. Through media, our relationship with representations of violence has evolved, becoming mundane and even banal. John G. Cawelti argues that public discourses on representations of violence in mass media are cyclical: horrific events leading to social condemnation or even uproars until the incidents are forgotten. However, as he claims, these discussions rarely address the actual issue (Cawelti, 2004). While Cawelti specifically refers to the US media, similar debates are increasingly global, particularly in what is perceived as the Western world.

Traditionally, in theatrical terms, 'violence' was understood as a 'stage fight,' which conventionally served to advance the dramatic action and was viewed primarily as entertainment. While the mechanics of rendering a stage fight effective and even spectacular have been scrutinized by several scholars (Suddeth, 1996, Hobbs, 1995, Martinez, 1996), the dramatic aspects of staged violence have received considerably less attention. Conversely, cinematic violence has been analysed from various viewpoints by scholars such as Braidotti (2002), Giroux (1994), and Neroni (2005), who have focused on contextualizing and theorizing representations of violence and how these 'representations of violence' normalize certain types of bodily performances.

However, it is only recently that staged violence from a dramatic perspective has been considered more than merely instrumental and has become the object of scholarly attention. A growing body of research examines the interconnection between theatre and performed violence from the perspectives of domestic violence (Nouryeh, 1990), gender (Ferris, 1999), terrorism (De Waal, 2016, Bharucha, 2014), and social (Beumers and Lipovetsky, 2009) or economic oppression (Evans and Giroux, 2015). These studies utilize representations of violence to deconstruct or unveil societal violence. However, most focus on a theoretical understanding of violence, often overlooking a holistic approach that integrates the physical experience of violence

by spectators (subjective experience), political discourses related to violence (narratives), and the fantasies produced by violence (the role of the imagination and the construction of violence on the spectator's mental 'stage').

This research considers the display of violence in all aspects that sustain a theatrical event: narratives, dramaturgy, content, rehearsal process, actor's work, spectator's reception, pleasure, and catharsis. These different aspects are explored across various chapters. Furthermore, even within the realm of staged violence, there are canons, especially Western ones, including works by Shakespeare, as well as contemporary Western playwrights such as Sarah Kane and Edward Bond.

This research does not aim to question or disrupt established canons but rather aims to examine canonical plays and explore other types of plays or performances that subvert these norms. I also find it legitimate to include some films in this discussion. Although cinema differs from performing arts, examining specific films can enrich this debate. One might wonder if the experience of a spectator is the same when watching a film as it is when attending a theatre performance. I assert that they are not the same. So, why include cinema in this discussion? Contemporary theatre is heavily influenced by visual culture, including movies and TV. Many modern dramaturgies employ cinematic techniques such as cuts, flashbacks, or parallel actions. Moreover, films often raise similar questions about the narratives behind the stories they display. Given this, when considering the 'narratives' that support specific societal discourses, I find theatre and cinema to be closely related. Therefore, including movies in this research helps to deepen the enquiry.

Before presenting the topics of each chapter, it is necessary to clarify three terms: dramaturgy, narrative, and content. By 'dramaturgy', I refer to how a story is told or displayed on stage—essentially, the composition of the main elements of drama, usually within the confines of written drama specific to the theatrical event. The term 'narrative' denotes a broader concept that extends beyond theatre to encompass socio-political frameworks. Narratives are the discourses developed by a community, society, or nation around specific themes. These narratives act as models that inform societal behaviour and shape the collective imagination, thus defining a nation's identity. Consequently, narratives wield a significant influence on community dynamics; they are the invisible scripts determining everyday life. In the context of this research on violence, narratives are considered a crucial factor in defining, legitimizing, or masking the presence of violence. This distinguishes the dramaturgy of a play from the type of narrative embedded within it. When discussing narratives, it is often possible to find several overlapping.

The term 'content' refers to the subject of a story, the meaning embedded within a story or event. For example, in the play *Romeo and Juliet*, discussed in the first chapter, the content is the love between the two young protagonists. The dramaturgy explores how this love is rendered impossible by the hatred between their families, leading to tragedy. The narrative addresses the masculine honour ideology that structures the society in which Romeo and Juliet live.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 examines violence from a dramaturgical perspective, questioning when violence is merely instrumental to the story or the object of the story itself. This examination considers the opposition between violence as instrumental and as an object from three aspects: dramaturgy, narratives, and representation. The dramaturgical discussion draws on Benjamin's seminal text, *Critique of Violence*, which views violence through the lens of legal systems, raising questions about violence as a means to enforce authoritarian discourse or, conversely, as an urge for resistance. Does violence serve merely as an external tool, or does it also affect its users? The narratives section examines the fallacy of contextualizing violence. The possibility to display a critical discourse when violence is staged is here challenged. This notion is confronted by Žižek's work *Violence*, which portrays violence as an inherent counterpoint of civilization. This segment analyses various types of narratives that either justify or condemn violence, exemplified by the TV series *Game of Thrones*. The representation section considers how trauma is staged and the strategies to address it, applying Arendt's ideas from *On Violence* to explore the politics of care within the theatre.

Chapter 2

While the first chapter examines narratives connected to violence and different strategies to deal with narratives, the second chapter delves into the content: what is the meaning of violence? It might be questioned whether this is a relevant enquiry: does the manifestation of violence have meaning, or might it simply exist without reason beyond its own occurrence? However, since violence often involves interaction and thus communication, it seems legitimate to explore what kind of meaning violence may carry, if any. Indeed, from the enquiry, a suspicion arises that there may be no tangible significance in the use of violence. This apparent lack of meaning could represent the most challenging position humans must confront.

This chapter explores this question from four different perspectives: sacrifice, community, language, and pleasure. In the first part, focusing on sacrifice, the concepts of ritualized killing and conscious self-sacrifice are scrutinized to question the frameworks that support the discourse and culture of sacrifice. Through the works of philosopher Giorgio Agamben, anthropologist René Girard, and psychologist Massimo Recalcati, this notion is examined and challenged by juxtaposing their approaches.

The second part, community, discusses the insights of theatre critic Erika Fischer-Lichte and transposes the questions examined in the previous part to the notion of community. Fischer-Lichte explores the means by which theatre can foster a sense of community.

The third part, language, revisits the works of Hannah Arendt and Slavoj Žižek, confronting them with this enquiry into meaning. It considers violence as an extension of language.

The final part, pleasure, examines the surprising turn of violence in generating excitement among viewers. This concept is discussed by confronting the works of sociologist Wolfgang Sofsky and media and visual culture theorist Max Ryynänen. Contrary to any discourse of morbid pleasure, Ryynänen posits that the experience of witnessing violence can provoke positive sensations and even impart knowledge about oneself (Ryynänen, 2022).

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 delves into the relationship between images and violence, complemented by practical work leading to theatrical examination. Unlike the previous chapters, this one employs a reversed procedure: it initiates with practical exercises and subsequently engages in theoretical exploration to test emerging hypotheses.

This chapter is structured into three parts, each presenting a specific exercise: (1) re-staging of violent images, (2) fun violence, and (3) playing the victim. The overarching question is: why perform violence? What motivates a theatre director or an artistic team to stage violence?

The first two exercises, and to an extent the third, investigate how mediated images of violence nurture specific narratives, which consciously or unconsciously shape the viewers' imagination, and thus their understanding and experience of the world. As Rustom Bharucha (2014) notes, contemporary perceptions of violence are predominantly influenced by media representations. According to Susan Sontag (2003), these representations do not explain violence; they simply 'haunt' us. These exercises explore this 'haunting' effect and the connection between images and violence, which involves the risk of aestheticizing violence and potentially transforming a victim into an object of aesthetic discourse.

The first exercise, Re-staging Violent Images, involves re-enacting violent scenes as depicted in iconic images and then transforming these images to generate new content. This process elicited diverse reactions, laying the groundwork for a theoretical enquiry into the commodification of violence in entertainment and advertising. This enquiry aligns with art researcher Nethersole's study of Renaissance violent imagery. This section concludes with an exploration of language's role as a body regulator, inspired by Recalcati's theory that language separates humans from their 'animality,' suggesting that the desire for violence is a longing to reclaim this lost 'animality.'

The second exercise, Fun Violence, extends this notion by examining the transformation of violence into something pleasurable. This section includes an interview with Kumpulainen, a long-time fencing instructor at the Theatre Academy of Helsinki, where the concept of pleasure emerged as a central theme in students' engagement with staged violence.

The third exercise, Playing the Victim, delves into the discourse surrounding violence as a form of manipulation. This exploration highlighted a significant and compelling aspect of everyday life scenarios that engender violence,

often manifesting in interhuman relationships such as romantic partnerships, familial interactions, and workplace dynamics. Traditionally, it is assumed that, in violent situations, there are clearly defined roles: a perpetrator who inflicts violence and a victim who suffers it. This exercise challenged such assumptions, prompting students to consider the multifaceted nature of violence, which can be physical, emotional, or psychological.

Through this exercise, students were encouraged to adopt a more nuanced approach to understanding violence. They explored various manifestations of violence and examined the complexities of each scenario. The culmination of this exercise was a student's project inspired by Roland Barthes's analysis of the violent underpinnings of capitalism as it infiltrates daily life. This analysis brought to light how the logic of profit is often intertwined with the role of the victim, suggesting that individuals might exploit their own victimhood as a means to gain from their perceived suffering.

Chapter 4

The fourth chapter, titled "Counter-Violence," explores alternative ways to depict violence. It presents five proposals. The first three proposals, inspired by written plays, provide dramaturgical solutions that offer varied approaches to violence by modifying notions of space, the magnitude of actions, and spectators' points of view. The remaining two proposals focus on practical implementations: the first on feminist community-based work and the second on theatre installation types.

Chapter 5

The fifth chapter summarizes the discussions from the previous four chapters and maps out the various phenomena related to staged violence. The aim is to provide a clear framework that can assist in identifying techniques or strategies for implementing violence on stage. This mapping covers four main areas: dramaturgy, content, affect, and potentiality. Dramaturgy refers to the strategies used to present a story on stage, and content refers to the underlying meaning of the story. Affect relates to the consequences of depicting violence on stage and thus influences the type of relationship that actors establish with the audience. The section on potentiality presents examples that exhibit a 'propositive' attitude towards violence—approaches to performing violence that move beyond merely instrumental, 'pornographic', or traumatic uses.

Conclusion

The conclusive chapter proposes a significant shift. While the previous chapters address ethical positions concerning violence, this chapter suggests a reconsideration of the actor's ontological stance towards violence. How might

it be possible for actors to engage with a less violent embodiment of violence? Drawing parallels to Lawlor's, Guénoun's, and Honneth's theoretical work on violence, encounter, and acting, this chapter offers a new perspective on the actor's role that could broaden the horizons when addressing the depiction of violence. The argument is further explored through an analysis of Roland Schimmelpfennig's play *100 Songs*.

Artistic Research Methodology

The methodology of this enquiry followed artistic research, which should be distinguished from practice-based research and scientific art-based research. Both practice-based and scientific art-based research are teleological, where the practice or art medium primarily serves as an instrument. In contrast, artistic research is a conundrum in its own terminology, marrying the idea of scrutinizing someone's own art while debunking the knowledge-making process and aiming at the transformation of human agency.

Artistic research is primarily understood as the examination of one's own artistic practice. It transforms practice into language, yet it also disrupts language—and thereby knowledge construction—through the practice itself. In my experience, the nature of artistic research inherently disrupts its own methodological approach. While this can complicate the establishment of clear investigative boundaries, it also enables more inclusive approaches that can dislocate specific hegemonic discourses or destabilize hierarchical knowledge structures. The methodology typically follows a loop model divided into four stages: an intuition sparks an artistic gesture (stage 1), which is then analysed (stage 2). This analysis is augmented by further readings on the subject (stage 3), and the insights gained from these three stages are transformed into language (writings), generating new hypotheses for practice (stage 4). These hypotheses are tested and contested, often sparking another artistic gesture that either fosters or challenges the previous loop, thus generating a new cycle. Each loop can develop the initial question, reconsider it, disrupt it, or open new territories of investigation (Bhagwati, 2014).

This book that you are reading is the result of this artistic research investigation. Three workshops shaped the whole practical artistic research. The first workshop investigated manifestations of 'violence' that are close to everyday life in Finland, leading to examinations of domestic violence and media portrayals of violence. The second workshop focused on embodying violent speeches or hate speech, fostering two lines of enquiry: the contrast between explicit and invisible violence, and the transformation of violence into something pleasurable. The third workshop continued exploring 'reverse' violence (violence as pleasure) and examined the notion of playing the victim.

This research did not focus solely on a single manifestation of violence or restrict itself to a specific time frame or region. Instead, it aimed to explore a wide variety of violent manifestations displayed on stage. It investigated how the subjective experiences of spectators are shaped by exposure to violent

images and narratives, and how actors and audiences project themselves into these narratives.

For instance, the pervasive gun violence in the United States creates ripples across various layers of public discourse, compelling political responses. However, the overlapping nature of performing on stage and on screen is less discussed, especially in understanding how narratives containing these performances are conceptualized by creators, actors, and ultimately the audience. These interpretations do not develop in isolation but are the result of lifelong exposure to various forms of violent entertainment or at least narratives addressing violence. Furthermore, popular cinema—one of the few forms of contemporary media reaching mass audiences—often becomes a contested space. Recent blockbusters have ignited heated online debates, particularly concerning the portrayal of white male characters. The link between violence and male bodies has been widely recognized (Connell and Pearse, 2015, Foakes, 2004), with the perceived loss of men's hegemonic status in society becoming a focus in popular cinema since the mid-1980s (Rehling, 2009). More recently, audiences appear to have become increasingly aware of gender representations in films, highlighting the fluidity and performativity of gender—a theme that seems to have originated in horror films (Clover, 1992) but has since permeated more mainstream genres (Inness, 2004). This research thus not only included various theatrical dramas but also reflected on pop culture influences and interhuman phenomena. My background as a white European male working with acting students in Finland undoubtedly creates unconscious limitations, where the primary cultural references are Western. I have endeavoured to be aware of this bias and to acknowledge this limitation in my work.

This research is characterized by the integration of theoretical enquiry with practical research. I acknowledge that this particular investigation might lack academic analysis or that the practical exercises are not fully disclosed. However, I hope that the intertwining of scholarly investigation and practical work offers a more holistic understanding of the various phenomena related to performing violence. This research aimed to cover a broad spectrum of applications: from a pedagogical perspective (strategies to embody or 'resist' violence), to dramaturgical examination (to unravel the mechanisms and rhetoric of violence), and to the position of the spectator (to explore how imagination is triggered by violence and how imagination, in turn, triggers violence). Although this research primarily focused on the representation of violence on stage, it is rooted in other fields affected by the manifestation of violence. An important aspect of this research is the relationship between violence and imagination. The focus extends beyond violence itself, examining the narratives that allow violence to surface, legitimizing it, even normalizing it, or keeping it invisible.

1 Violence as Instrument, Violence as Object

Physical, mental, or psychological violence applied to an individual or group has deleterious effects; it can traumatize, debilitate, injure, mutilate, amputate, kill, or annihilate. Violence is commonly understood as a means to achieve something, and discussions often centre on whether it is a justified or unjustified means. The Oxford Dictionary traces the origin of the word 'violence' to the Latin *violentia*, meaning "vehemence, impetuosity, forcibly." The etymology of the word is somewhat ambivalent: it could derive from *vis*, meaning 'force,' and *latus* (the perfect participle of *fero*, meaning 'to carry'), suggesting a meaning along the lines of "to carry force at or towards." Alternatively, it could come from *vi-o-latus*, implying "to carry out something through force." Here, the force, *vis*, becomes a subject of dispute, depending on whether it is viewed as an instrument (ablative case) or an object (accusative case). If violence is an instrument, it can be seen as an external device used to implement something without affecting the user or the 'receiver.' In such cases, the debate primarily concerns the legitimization of the use of violence. If violence is the object, its use becomes the 'something' that is implemented: it affects both the user and the receiver. In other words, both the perpetrator and the victim are subjugated to the violence. Violence then is not an external tool but affects everything: the victim, the perpetrator, and the surroundings.

This chapter examines these two distinct considerations—violence as an instrument and violence as an object—from several perspectives: (1) dramaturgy, (2) narratives, (3) representation, and (4) consequences. Initially, by examining Walter Benjamin's *Critique of Violence*, the enquiry discusses violence from a legislative viewpoint. After establishing a theoretical distinction between violence as an instrument and as an object, this chapter continues by considering examples of staged violence. It applies the theoretical framework (instrumental versus object) initially to Western canons of performed violence, specifically in William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and Sarah Kane's *Blasted*. From this analysis, it suggests that, on the one hand, violence as an instrument involves the notion of narrative, with the surprising twist that violence is used as a sort of mask to hide other forms of brutality. On the other hand, violence as an object involves the notion of trauma. Trauma, as

DOI: 10.4324/9781003519881-2
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discussed in this chapter, is considered from the perspectives of the spectator, the performer, and the dramaturg. Ultimately, this chapter aims to demonstrate that this dialectical approach to violence (instrument versus object) allows for the recognition that, when violence is represented on stage, it immediately becomes the vehicle either for consolidating a legal system (justified violence versus unjustified violence) or for experiencing crisis (trauma). This chapter concludes by assessing that, while there may be inadequacies in displaying trauma or violence on stage, it is perhaps within these *inadequacies* that alternative approaches can be found.

1 Dramaturgy; Violence and Freedom

Walter Benjamin, in his seminal text *Critique of Violence*, examines the use of violence within the sphere of law. The most elementary legal systems define the interconnection between means and ends. Benjamin argues that violence should be examined as a means and not as an end, stating that "the question is whether violence, as a principle, could be a moral means even to just ends" (Benjamin, 277). This implies that Benjamin focuses on the criterion for its use and not on violence itself. He identifies two legal systems: natural law, which is concerned with the justice of ends, and positive law, which focuses on the justification of means. Both systems validate the use of violence if it aligns with the law. Benjamin's proposition initially seems to categorize violence as an instrument, examining the notion of justified and unjustified violence. However, he extends his discussion to scenarios where violence exists outside of the law, suggesting that a legal system views individual violence as a threat to its integrity. He states that "violence, when not in the hands of the law, threatens it not by the ends that it may pursue but by its mere existence outside the law" (Benjamin, 281). This observation reveals a dual relationship of violence to law: violence is both a means, by which law is instituted and preserved, and an end of law itself. Thus, violence becomes not just a means, but also law-making and law-preserving, challenging the distinction between justified and unjustified violence. This is a surprising turn in Benjamin's text, which brings violence into the second category, violence as object, and to some extent nullifies any distinction between justified and unjustified violence. In fact, in both cases, violence becomes jurisdiction.

As mentioned, Benjamin's focus is on violence within the realm of legality. Yet, I aim to broaden Benjamin's discussion and to consider violence at all levels—among states, within states, among communities, and interpersonally—as establishing systems of 'norms' that may challenge recognized authority and strive to impose their own rights. Benjamin's examples suggest he is referring to physical violence, but it is worth considering whether other forms of violence, such as mental, psychological, structural, and political violence, can achieve similar results. For now, let us constrain this discussion to physical violence and explore its representation within the realm of fantasy and popular culture. If violence in pop culture is particularly recognizable, could it be viewed not

only as a challenge to authority but primarily as a desire to establish a personal legal system? In essence, could the glamorization of physical violence represent a seduction for freedom, implying that any form of represented violence is a claim for freedom?

1.1 They Fight!

Staged violence has a long and controversial history in Western theatre, relating to the debate over the aestheticization of violence. A perennial debate is whether violence should be shown on stage and whether exposure to such violence has positive or negative effects on viewers. Ancient Greeks chose not to display violence directly on stage, leaving the gruesome acts in their tragedies to the audience's imagination, whereas the Romans took the opposite approach by staging real murders in their theatres: convicted prisoners were dressed up as mythical heroes and were killed for real on stage (Coleman, 1990, 44–73). The modern critique prolongs this ancient debate and questions whether violence should be simulated or performed realistically on stage. Body art performer Mike Parr, among others, argues that responding to actual suffering with simulated violence trivializes reality and diminishes the authenticity of real pain and violence (Nevitt, 2013, 55).

Another ongoing discussion is whether violence can be considered sublime, ranging from medieval and Renaissance depictions of the suffering Christ to Quentin Tarantino's films. This raises two interrelated questions: does trivializing violence diminish its impact, and does the sublimation of violence help humans better understand themselves? This involves considering how violence is transposed into images and how accessible these images are.

Let us now begin to practically investigate these aspects and examine how violence is treated in the theatre. The question here is what happens when violence is considered as instrumental or as an object. Typically, violence appears in plays as a dramaturgical element. The protagonists may be reluctant to perform a dreadful action; they might feel pain or suffer from it, and they might refuse to go to war, but the cultural context supporting and legitimizing the violence generally goes unchallenged. Violence does not seem to be questioned in itself. For instance, in *Romeo and Juliet*, we could question the cultural context that supports sword fighting. The drama of the play intensifies when Mercutio and then Tybalt are killed. Even in contemporary productions of the play, the focus is on adapting the love story between the two teenagers, but the specific cultural context that supports sword fighting is not scrutinized. What could this cultural context be? We might consider whether the sword fight is underpinned by a culture of masculine honour ideology, which dictates that men must respond aggressively to threats or insults to maintain their masculine reputation (McCartin, 2023). Initially, Romeo refuses to duel, but after seeing Mercutio killed, he does not hesitate to avenge his friend's honour. It suggests that it is not merely the animosity between the two families that leads to the lovers' suicides, but the masculine

honour ideology that compelled Tybalt to kill Mercutio and Romeo to kill Tybalt. Even in the final scene, when the Prince summons the two families to reconcile, the underlying masculine honour culture is never addressed. For example, the 1996 movie *Romeo + Juliet*, starring Claire Danes and Leonardo DiCaprio, modernizes the sword fight significantly. In this version, the Capulets and Montagues are depicted as rival business empires, and their animosity is demonstrated in a shootout in the opening scene. The swords are replaced by guns, but the masculine honour ideology remains intact. As Benjamin described, violence is law-making; in *Romeo and Juliet*, as in many other plays, violence legitimizes a power system. Matriarchal society, patriarchal society, clan community, feudal society, revenge system, polis organizational structure, or kingdom —these are some of the legal systems identifiable in Greek tragedies and Renaissance plays. In most cases, the violence serves as an instrument supporting one of these legal systems. The brief stage direction often found in Shakespeare, "They fight," is not just mere choreography of a sword ballet aimed at reviving spectators' interest, but also the display of a specific power structure: masculine honour ideology.

Reginald Anthony Foakes, in his research *Shakespeare and Violence*, notes that the violence depicted in Shakespeare's plays is predominantly perpetrated by male characters. Foakes analyses whether this violence is a result of social or structural coercion, or a natural human instinct. He seeks a middle ground and suggests that violence is linked to male agency, which contributes to a patriarchal economic structure and ideological domination. According to Foakes, violence primarily represents a male expression of the aggressive desire to dominate. This aggression can manifest in various forms, including physical, verbal, or economic violence. He argues that, if violence originates from instinctual urges to defend oneself and one's tribe, it is synonymous with the male desire for status and respect in defending themselves and their community (Foakes, 2003, 11). For Foakes, Western civilization is based on aggressiveness that fuels the functionality of a competitive society.

This raises a spontaneous question: if the hypothesis suggests that violence is primarily an expression of male aggression to protect territory and loved ones, how then can we explain the presence of female violent characters? While Shakespeare's theatre offers limited roles for violent women, Greek tragedies present unforgettable, haunting female figures such as Medea or Clytemnestra. Hilary Neroni, in *The Violent Woman: Femininity, Narrative, and Violence in Contemporary American Cinema* (2005), responds that violent women are not inherently violent; rather, they are violent because they must communicate using the same language as men, such as the language of masculine honour ideology. Thus, violent women are depicted as violent when they adopt male-like behaviours.

1.2 He Dies with Relief…. Eventually

The previous section examined the use of violence as instrumental, with examples drawn from *Romeo and Juliet* which are typical in many plays.

The paragraph concluded by questioning whether violence is an expression of male aggressive nature, an idea supported by Hilary Neroni's film analysis. It seems clear that the 'traditional' self-enclosed drama migrated from the stage to the screen, but it is intriguing to consider whether the same happened with the use of violence. In Shakespeare's works and other plays up to the modern era, violence is typically instrumental. With the advent of cinema, this new medium seemed to enhance the graphic representation of violence but always inscribed within the dramaturgy of the story depicted by the movie, suggesting that violence is still regarded as 'instrumental.'

The use of violence in blockbuster movies or TV series will be discussed later in this chapter. Let us now examine contemporary plays that do not necessarily adhere to the Aristotelian topology. This section proposes that a shift in the use of violence can be identified after the Second World War. As contemporary drama moved away from Aristotelian storylines, violence also began to be seen not only as instrumental (serving the story) but as the object of the representation itself. In several contemporary dramas, violence is no longer just a tool supporting or legitimizing a legal system but becomes the focal point of the representation. It is no longer considered merely an excess of vitality that consolidates a legal system, but also as a traumatic experience that fractures reality.

Blasted by Sarah Kane (1995) provides a compelling example. Initially condemned at its premiere, the play was widely praised four years later following the author's death. The play is divided into two distinct parts. The first centres around two characters, Ian and Cate, in a luxurious hotel room. Ian, a self-confident, racist, and abusive man, rapes Cate. In the second part, a soldier enters the room and subjects Ian to various humiliations, including raping him and eating his eyes before committing suicide. The play concludes with Cate returning injured and caring for a 'transformed' Ian, who expresses gratitude for the first time in the play. Sarah Kane, a prominent figure in the in-yer-face theatre movement, uses violence as a catalyst to disrupt rational structures, shatter peace of mind, disrupt 'normal' communication, and expose the artifice of the 'norm' (Beumers, 2009, 36). Violence, in this perspective, is portrayed as a traumatic presence, depicting a traumatic 'reality' through theatricality (Duggan, 2012, 117). Intriguingly, while the play depicts various acts of violence, including cannibalism, the domestic violence—Ian raping Cate—remains unseen and is only revealed through subsequent dialogue. Critics have interpreted the rape of Ian by the soldier as retribution for Cate's abuse. However, as Kim Solga suggests, this interpretation of punishment seems trivial in the light of the play's broader depiction of violence. It is notable that this domestic violence is the only type not performed on stage, while all other forms are explicitly shown. Solga posits that Sarah Kane aimed to highlight the invisibility of domestic violence: a man raped by a soldier would be reported and condemned by the media, but a woman raped by a man often remains unnoticed. The fact that critics and scholars have not questioned why this initial rape remains offstage seems to validate this assumption (Solga, 2007).

As mentioned above, Sarah Kane and other playwrights of the in-yer-face movement used violence to break free from socially accepted forms. "In-yer-face" came to signify a theatrical movement that started in Great Britain in 1990, with Sarah Kane and Mark Ravenhill as its main representatives. Their radical, aggressive, even insulting attitude has been compared to various artistic, literary, and theatrical movements: the 19th-century French literary movement "le brutalisme," which advocated for crude realism, the British playwright group Angry Young Men of the 1950s, and the German artistic movement neo-naturalism of the 1970s, to name a few. Often, the harshness of Sarah Kane's theatre is likened to the cruelty of Antonin Artaud (Paavis, 2014, 261). What characterizes the in-yer-face movement is its attempt to evade compromise and shock the spectators. Ancient Greek theatre refrained from showing violence, allowing spectators to engage in the catharsis process. After imagining, empathizing, and identifying with the terrible deeds of the protagonist, spectators must take distance to let fear and pity affect themselves and inspire catharsis (or purgation). In contrast, the in-yer-face movement allows no distancing, instead plunging spectators into constant emotional shock. Rather than seeking a revelation (the Greek anagnorisis), this movement aims to evoke extreme and visceral bodily responses from the audience. It is a theatre that immerses spectators in an emotional journey that penetrates their bodies. But what kind of effect does this type of theatre, which relies heavily on repulsion, horror, violence, disgust, and abjection, produce among viewers? While difficult to evaluate, this chapter attempts to outline some potential effects. Often, in such theatre, the apparent story told is merely an excuse to force spectators into the nightmarish world of the protagonists (Paavis, 2014, 262). It is an attempt to make the audience experience pain and through that pain to break free from norms.

However, the conclusion of the play *Blasted* is slightly problematic because, rather than using pain to further a political agenda and deconstruct hegemonic discourse, the play ends with the traditional narrative of sacrifice. The abusive and traumatic relationship between Ian and Cate disappears after the violence inflicted by the soldier. Not only has Ian suffered from this violence, but Cate has too. At the very end, when she returns with food, her legs are covered in blood. During the second part, soldiers are ruling the city and a war is raging nearby. In such circumstances, food is scarce, and it is plausible that Cate sold herself to other soldiers in exchange for food. The soldier, after recounting the atrocities he has witnessed and committed, takes his own life. The play ultimately leads to a dead end of violence where only death or sacrifice can offer salvation. Ian, according to the stage directions, dies with relief and is then 'resurrected' and rescued by Cate. In this scenario, Ian and Cate are two survivors who find a new humanity, a kind of ground zero of humanity. Violence, paradoxically, becomes a means to exit the spiral of abuse and violence. In other words, violence erases all the mistakes humankind made, acting as a tabula rasa allowing the construction of a new

humanity. In this perspective, the play follows the traditional Christian narrative of the apocalypse or the more archaic narrative of sacrifice.

At this point in the enquiry, it is perhaps necessary to posit some suppositions concerning the treatment of violence on stage. Would it be accurate to affirm that when violence is approached as an instrument, as in *Romeo and Juliet*, the violence serves a specific narrative? This narrative does not necessarily need to be the main topic of the play; it can remain concealed, as is the case with the masculine honour ideology in *Romeo and Juliet*. And when violence is treated as an object, could it be assumed that violence is perceived as a form of tabula rasa, as if violence is both the problem and the cure simultaneously?

Before furthering this examination, it is necessary to broaden the discussion to include the relationship between theatre and sacrifice. Fichter-Lichte cites Nietzsche as the first to suggest a close connection between the origins of theatre and the ritual of sacrifice (Fichter-Lichte, 2005, 18). Building on Nietzsche's idea, Agamben proposes that the ritual of sacrifice is the very action that allowed humans to comprehend their 'humanity' (Agamben, 1991, 105). He suggests that humans are constantly striving to define what it means to be human, and above all, to certify that their existence is factual and grounded in reality. In this perspective, the ritual of sacrifice is an action that anchor the community with its surroundings. If this ritual serves as a foundation for humanity, what does it mean to theatrically transpose this ritual? Scholars have explored this process of 'aesthetization' of sacrifice, as a way to distance from the bloody ceremony and transform it into a civilized action. However, Agamben argues that this view should be reversed. Rather than seeing the connection between theatre and the sacrificial ritual as a distancing (an 'aesthetization' of the violent ritual), he sees it as an attempt to reclaim something that has been lost (Agamben, 2014, 8). According to him, while the ritual might have been lost, the need to 'anchor' humanity persists. Therefore, linking the aesthetic action to the memory of the ancient ritual responds to a societal need to find a "ground (to anchor"), especially in a historical moment perceived as 'ungrounded,' where people feel disconnected from what defines them as human or as a community.

From this perspective, introducing violence on stage is an attempt to reclaim this lost 'groundedness'—in other words, to recuperate a sense of humanity and community. This implies that any significant introduction of violence on stage, such as in *Blasted*, signals a societal need for 'grounding,' for rediscovering a lost humanity. Violence, then, could be seen as a lamentable but necessary means.

This last consideration nuances the previous suppositions concerning violence as an instrument or as an object. Violence could thus be considered from several standpoints: as supporting a specific narrative or legal system, as a longing for freedom, as a tabula rasa, and, lastly, as a means for 'grounding,' for reconnecting with the lost principles of a community, aiming to regenerate the significance of that specific group.

2 Narratives; the Fallacy of Violence (*He Rapes Her*)

The previous examination of Sarah Kane's play has highlighted the potential implications of treating violence as an object. However, the focus was primarily on the dramatic implications. It is also crucial to consider the impact on the audience of displaying violence, especially in relation to trauma. The portrayal of violence on stage is not a benign act meant to convey rational concepts. The act of performing violence, even if simulated, can permeate all layers of the theatre production. Lucy Nevitt meticulously describes the stage direction "He rapes her" (Theseus raping Strophe) in two different productions of Sarah Kane's *Phaedra's Love*. In Kane's own 1996 production at the Gate Theatre, the action was very brief. However, in Anne Tipton's 2005 production at the Bristol Old Vic, the action lasted more than ten minutes. Nevitt, when she saw it, described this specific action, which concluded the play, as so prolonged and disturbing that it obliterated all previous scenes. When she left the theatre, all she could recall was the violence of that last scene (Nevitt, 2013, 32). In this sense one is left to wonder if the particular emphasis on displaying the rape at length was really successful. All other discourses within the play faded, leaving only the memory of "He rapes her."

J. D. Martinez highlights the pitfalls of developing contextual discourses when violence is staged. According to him, staging violence demands a crafted display of technicalities to 'touch' the audience. Sound is specifically used to create suspense, lighting enhances a sense of threat, and rhythm manipulates the cardiac pulse of the audience's hearts. The anticipation of violence is stimulated in the spectator's mind, for instance, by playing intimidating music or darkening the lighting. These methods are employed to render violence 'visceral,' to make the audience feel the violence more acutely, or to use Martinez's phrase: to make the spectator 'vulnerable' to violence (Martinez, 1999, 79). As a theatre director myself, I concur with the necessity to rely on the crafted display of technicalities to render staged violence impactful. A simulated violent action can appear clumsy and ridiculous if not well orchestrated. A violent scene designed to arouse the audience's thrill must be skilfully constructed, requiring a beginning (a setup stirring the audience's imagination or anticipation), a middle (the climax of the violence), and an end (the release of tension). All these elements are crucial for the violent scene to achieve the desired emotional effect on the viewer (Martinez, 80). However, this demand for a visceral response to violence jeopardizes any intellectual contextualization. In other words, it destroys contents. To make staged violence effective, spectators need to be viscerally involved. This closeness does not allow for a distanced vision, which is a prerequisite for any critical discourse. Even if the theatre director intends to use violence to problematize violence itself, and thus insufflate a deeper understanding of it, the techniques to stage violence transform the violent action into the focal point of attention limiting the perception only to the action itself and not to a broader vision of it, i.e. at the culture or structure allowing this violence to emerge.

The option to execute real violence, to avoid the necessary orchestration which brings the audience so close to make the violence visceral, is not a valid solution. Real executed violence generates similar responses as simulated violence. Erika Fichte Lichte examines one of Marina Abramovic's famous self-injuring performances, *Lips of St. Thomas* performed in 1975 at the gallery Krinzinger in Innsbruck. She explains that the real executed violence on stage destabilized the spectators' position: they were unsure whether to enjoy the performance or intervene. After watching Marina Abramovic torture herself for two hours, some spectators stopped her (Fischer-Lichte, 2005, 215). Similarly as in Kane's example, the spectator's ambivalent position removed any contextual interpretation and focused attention solely on the executed violence. In such situations, it is impossible to 'understand' the violent action; the spectators can only be 'traumatized' by it.

As Nevitt points out, the laconic stage direction "He rapes her" includes a series of directorial choices that heavily influence the reception of the play: how much is actually shown, the duration of the action, the power struggle, the man's attitude during the rape, the woman's reaction, and so on. Going back to Shakespeare's direction "they fight," the violence of the fight does not question the violence supporting this type of violence. Violence is part of society, accepted and used as one element of dramatic action. In Sarah Kane's direction "He rapes her," the objective is not to support the culture of male dominance and female oppression. On the contrary, her aim is to denounce such violence and the culture that supports it. This presents the paradox of using violence to denounce violence. As a theatre maker I would be then impelled to wonder: what does a theatre director, who stages a play by Sarah Kane, want the audience feel? Being outraged? Demand for justice? Healing? It is legitimate to question whether this is the appropriate approach to achieve such a goal or if it only stimulates in the viewer the mimetic desire to perform such violence.

2.1 Civilized Violence

For the moment, I am particularly interested in examining what kind of narratives violence conceals (or reveals). The outbreak of war in the second part of Kane's play, from an Aristotelian perspective, appears senseless. It is gratuitous and has no direct connection to the first part. The play begins with an interpersonal power struggle and an abusive relationship within the confines of traditional kitchen sink realism and suddenly shifts; an irrational outburst of violence floods the stage. This violence disrupts nearly every level of the play: the interaction between Ian and Cate, the initial formal realism, and even the physical stage itself (the hotel room is destroyed by a mortar). While this 'unmotivated' eruption of violence might seem surprising within the logic of linear cause and effect characteristic of traditional Aristotelian drama, from another perspective, it can be entirely justified. Slavoj Žižek describes how power generates its own excess, which it must annihilate in an

operation that mimics what it combats (Žižek, 2009, 149). The war's outbreak is not an irrational event but rather the excess that the power system has produced. In the case of Kane's play, written during the raging Balkan war in 1993, the shocking wave of violence in the second part is the 'excess' produced by the power system of the first part; it is the hidden aspect of the violent logic of success (*a very expensive hotel room so expensive that it could be anywhere in the world*, the first stage direction of *Blasted*), the racist comments and condescending attitude of the white middle-aged male protagonist, and the couple's abusive relationship.

Žižek explains this notion of 'excess' by referring to the Abu Ghraib photographs. The world was shocked when CBS News published these images of torture and abuse in the prison camp in April 2004. The Bush administration and most American institutions condemned these actions, claiming that these American soldiers acted under unauthorized orders, suggesting a layer of military personnel who believe they are not bound by laws and international codes, or they acted of their own volition, breaking laws and codes and thus should be considered mutineers or traitors. Žižek argues that neither explanation suffices. What happened at Abu Ghraib cannot be reduced to the evil acts of individual soldiers. "Abu Ghraib was not simply a case of American arrogance towards a Third World people: in being subjected to humiliating tortures, the Iraqi prisoners were effectively initiated into American culture" (Žižek, 150). He suggests that, to sustain its values of democracy, freedom, and dignity, Western civilized society needs an obscene underside of violence. This can be seen in the humiliating high school or college campus initiation rituals, which occasionally become media scandals when a ceremony goes 'too far.' The indecency lies not so much in the violent act itself but in the fact that the victims of these initiation rituals will be the perpetrators in the next rite, indicating a tacit acceptance of humiliation and abuse behind the high value of these institutions. Žižek concludes that the perversion in Abu Ghraib's case is that the torture was displayed as a media spectacle, where the victims' bodies served as a backdrop for the supposed innocence of Americans, "the very core of the obscene enjoyment that sustains the US way of life" (Žižek, 151).

Although Žižek's interpretation of violence strongly brings forth a psychoanalytical dimension that is debatable, the link he makes between the war (or "the spectacle of war" in Iraq) and the Western way of life is central. Falk Richter's play *Seven Seconds (In God We Trust)* written in 2003 draws a parallel between these two aspects: the horror of the war in the Middle East and the seemingly safe everyday life in the USA. The play follows the misfortune of a US pilot on a mission to bomb unspecified targets. It opens with the pilot having an accident and not knowing what happened. Simultaneously, it describes the life of his family located next to a freeway off-ramp at the edge of an unspecified desert in the USA, whose tranquillity is disrupted by the alarm of an unclear threat. The play, rather than following a linear development of

events, is structured like a succession of chaos and panic. The source of panic is never clear, but it creates chaos. The text does not have characters but is written for "6 to 8 male and female voices." It does not create theatrical or dramatic situations but is a chorus of voices observing and commenting on the actions of the 'hero.' Unlike a tragic chorus, it is not a united voice but a polyphony shifting viewpoints. As stated in the stage directions, the delivery of the text should be direct, varying between propaganda speech-like quality and matter-of-fact tone. The play relies on storytelling techniques but allows for rapid changes of rhythms, viewpoints, and locations by having a chorus of voices; it oscillates between the pilot and his family, sometimes described as an inner monologue, sometimes as a description of facts, and sometimes as a journalist commenting on news. This style of writing enables the narration of horrific violent actions without showing them[1]. The fast pace of the text, combined with the continuous shifting of viewpoints, stimulates a sense of fear and constant threat. Violent or shocking actions are not displayed, but their narration combined with the incessant fast rhythm of the text stimulates these violent scenes in the minds of the spectators. A sense of palpitation and fright permeates the text. The action of the play lasts seven seconds, from the explosion damaging the aircraft to its presumable crash. Although the play appears to focus on the war in which the pilot is involved, the real violence, or the obscene violence to reuse Žižek's words, lies in the motto: *In God We Trust*, which is constantly repeated. This motto is used to divide the population into two categories: the good ones and the evil ones. The play reaches its peak of absurdity when the pilot realizes he will crash but cannot use bad language (say the "F" word, for instance) because the good people do not swear, otherwise "God might possibly think we're actually one of the baddies" (Richter, 2005, 20).

In an interview published by the French newspaper *Le Monde*, historians Boris Cyrulnik and Tzvetan Todorov explain that the notion of 'evilness' (someone being evil) is quite opaque. According to them, the temptation of Good is far more dangerous than that of Evil. In the name of Good, terrible and violent actions have been perpetrated with the conviction that these actions were necessary to achieve a greater purpose. They explain that Hitler was convinced he was fighting for the Good and managed to convince many Germans that they were participating in a noble cause. Osama bin Laden also aimed to create a better world, and so did Bush. None of them considered themselves evil; they all believed they were doing good, yet they all caused significant harm.

Richter's play follows this same idea; the motto "In God We Trust" is used to legitimize any kind of military intervention. In this logic, the 'good ones,' those who don't use bad words, are legitimized to destroy, kill, and annihilate those who are considered 'evil.' The horrors of war, which are relentlessly broadcasted by the media in search of sensational news, overshadow the real causes of these extreme violent actions. The strength of Richter's

play lies in examining what stands behind the terrible mission that the US pilot is carrying out. In the play, what stands behind are the slogans that the president is repeating:

– He (the US president) says threat fear shock danger self-defence and the motto
– Direct from the aircraft carrier IN GOD WE TRUST –that's the name of this aircraft carrier "IN GOD WE TRUST" and that's what's boldly written in bold letters on the side of the giant tanker that carriers two thousand men and women "IN GOD WE TRUST" and there these two thousand men and women wait in their small bunks for action
– IN GOD WE TRUST
…
– IN GOD WE TRUST isn't just a name, it's a way of life.

(Richter, 24)

The violence of the war is therefore sustained by an 'invisible' violence present in the seemingly serene everyday life. Although Richter's play could be criticized for oversimplifying reality, it attempts to highlight a type of violence that becomes unnoticed, 'invisible,' accepted, and thus normalized. It is not possible to separate the extreme visible violence of war (which is displayed in the media) from the invisible violence of slogans, propaganda, and empty speeches that prepare the ground for war. The notion of war as a spectacle or as a game is reiterated in the play at several moments: "a couple of colored dots on my computer screen, looks like that new computer game: Sega's Megasearch 2: Behind Enemy Lines," says the pilot (Richter, 19). And at the end, which ironically transforms the tragic events into a promotional TV movie, is then commented on by a viewer who finds it rather boring:

– I don't know but yes…boring
– you mean how these people die?
– yes I have to say monotonous always the same thing
– yes but that's exactly the point: the monotony of mass destruction
– perhaps it would have gripped me more if we could have seen a child dying slowly but these masses that kind of thing doesn't move me….

(Richter, 31)

The non-stop thirst for strong impact, characteristic of the media, exhibits its terrible violence here: it's not about informing, nor about conveying human empathy or dignity; it is all about finding shocking stories that grip the audience. Richter's decision to omit any representation of violence on stage, choosing instead to describe it, allows a focus primarily on the 'invisible' violence that sustains the more extreme violence. As in Kane's play, both the everyday 'invisible' violence and the terrible horrors of wars are juxtaposed. However, the plays treat violence in two distinct ways. In Richter's play, the

absence of any staged violence does not jeopardize the aim of the play to question the source of violence. The dilemma of such an approach is that it keeps violence in the realm of language and maintains the condition of violence as a distant and non-affecting spectacle. In Kane's play, the presence of violence viscerally reminds spectators of the distress that violence provokes. It emotionally displays the trauma connected to the experience of violence. The danger of such an approach is that it might focus mostly on the shock effect of the staged violence and dismiss any broader discourse related to the representation of violence. In this sense, it might participate in the race for sensationalism set by the media.

2.2 Justified versus Unjustified Violence

Paralleling the race for sensationalism, it appears that there has been a noticeable increase in graphic violence in many TV series produced by online streaming companies such as Netflix or HBO. Often, the massive presence of violence is assessed under the narrative of justified versus unjustified violence. Let us examine one of these TV series that heavily relies on violence. The opening scene of the very first episode of the popular TV series *Game of Thrones*, created by Benioff and Weiss, features King Eddard Stark who must behead a deserter. All the male representatives of the Stark family are present. The scene is gloomy, and the atmosphere is dark. Eddard Stark does not relish what he is about to do, but he must enforce the law which mandates that traitors be executed. Stark desolately follows the law and then tries to explain to his son why he had to kill the man. In this dialogue, the king appeals to laws to legitimize the violent action. In contrast to the righteous Eddard Stark, King Joffrey Baratheon enjoys watching violence, which for him becomes a pleasurable entertainment. The killings made for his delight are unnecessary and horrible. The more horrible the death of the victim, the greater Joffrey's pleasure. In *Game of Thrones*' narrative, a line is drawn dividing violence that is unwanted but necessary and violence that is gratuitous. This division qualifies most of the characters in the TV series: the righteous characters do not enjoy violence but are obliged to use it, and the despicable characters enjoy it. What emerges from this TV series, considered one of the most violent (Rosenberg, 2016), is a rather simplified reading of violence: violence is omnipresent, but some of it is necessary (justified) and some of it is unnecessary (unjustified).

This Hobbesian depiction of society perpetuates the notion of every human against every human, echoing the idea of the survival of the fittest and legitimizing the arms race. Hobbes considers that war is an existential condition, where every human is either fighting or preparing for survival. Self-preservation is a pursuit for power, putting humans in constant antagonism. War, as an existential condition, defines human life experience. It even collapses time: time is spent either fighting, anticipating the fight, preparing for it, or taking precautions against physical violation. Hobbes denies the

existence of a greater good. For him, all human activities are a perpetual and restless desire for power that ceases only in death (Patterson, 2017, 127). In a state where only self-preservation exists, where only war defines human existence, there is no metric to judge actions: nothing can be considered unjust; there is no right or wrong. Hobbes is categorical: in the state of nature, neither ethics nor law exist. He considers ethics not inherently innate to humanity but rather a quality related to human socialization, arising not in solitude but in society. Hobbes examines war, and by extension violence, as a detached entity, almost as an abstract phenomenon that occurs among humans, or rather, that humans employ. From a Hobbesian perspective, violence is considered instrumental.

In *Game of Thrones*, it is possible to identify a dual narrative: violence is presented as either justified or unjustified, but this masks a more brutal narrative: the survival of the fittest. So why then, in *Game of Thrones*, as in many other TV series or blockbuster movies where society is portrayed as every man for himself, is there still an effort to construct a seemingly justified versus unjustified narrative of violence? Is it an attempt to make graphic violence seem valid and acceptable to viewers? Or is it an effort to demonstrate that the 'righteous' characters can apply violence without being corrupted by it? That violence can be a despicable means to a justified end? That the world operates on the principle of the survival of the fittest? That violence is an 'external' instrument that humans can simply utilize to achieve their needs?

It is important to underscore the notion of violence and the imagery associated with it, particularly the figure of the hero. *Game of Thrones* and similar movies rely on a specific image of the hero that persisted until the Napoleonic wars. Until then, the purpose of the soldier was to intimidate the enemy, and their garments were designed to enhance the bodily stature of the soldier. Soldiers stood proud, brave, and defiant. The First World War, with the advancement of mechanical weapons, resulted in a carnage of these brave soldiers who were still standing trying to intimidate the enemy. The Second World War introduced a new bodily position for soldiers, who were now crawling, lying in the mud, and hiding (Courtine, 2006). The 21st century introduced yet another change, with soldiers sitting in remote locations, controlling and manoeuvring killing drones. Nonetheless, as *Game of Thrones* demonstrated through its eight uninterrupted seasons, the image of the brave, heroic, proud, defiant, and standing fighter remained in the collective imagination. Zoja, in his study on photographic images, notes how monarchs, aristocrats, and rulers are often depicted with swords, lances, cuirasses, and armours—all elements from a medieval imagery that no longer correspond with the actual position of modern soldiers (Zoja, 2018, 70). In this, the old imagery of strength survives, and it is perhaps possible to see it permeating the vastness of popular culture; singers now pose with a similar body position (brave, heroic, proud, defiant with the camera angled slightly from below) as if they are ancient fighters ready for war. This imagery has

also influenced sports culture. Nowadays, football players are photographed in the same attitude, not as individuals playing a game, having fun, but almost like brave and defiant soldiers ready for war.

2.3 Theatre on Terror: Resisting Narratives

Following the previous discussion on violence and narratives, it would be interesting to mention Ariane de Waal's research, *Theatre on Terror*. Her research does not focus directly on performed or staged violence itself, but rather on the narratives or discourses produced by the American and British military intervention after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, which was termed the War on Terror. More precisely, she investigated how individuals are subjectivized by the ideology put into action by the discourse of the War on Terror. She does this by analysing British plays produced between 2001 and 2014 that responded to, contested, or debunked such narratives. De Waal points out that the narrative of the War on Terror is not a clear, coherent discourse, but rather what Michel Foucault defined as a discursive formation. In The *Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault distinguishes between a discursive formation and a discourse. If the latter can be equated to a statement, the former defines the relationship among different statements. This relationship should be better understood as a web that brings together disparate elements that can even contradict each other or have gaps (Foucault, 2004):

> In this manner, the discursive formation of the 'war on terror' could be seen to organise the circulation of complementary and contradictory discourses, such as the 'clash of civilisations' thesis, the discourses of freedom, democracy, and liberation, of fundamentalism versus secularism, of militarisation versus pacifism, or of security versus civil liberties.
>
> (De Waal, 2016, 25)

The difference between a discourse and a discursive formation is that the discourse presents itself as a defined narrative which can be contested, while the discursive formation relies on intangible notions, on suppositions, on hints that haunt the community and therefore cannot easily located. It becomes a fog of notions. And this fog materializes itself as a sense of truth:

> It is precisely because "everything is never said" – or more accurately, because everything cannot be said – that the discursive formation effectively regulates what counts as truth at particular sociohistorical junctures.
>
> (De Waal, 25)

Within the paradigm of the War on Terror, the discursive formation profoundly affects individuals by imposing narratives that redefine their identities. Ariane de Waal, in her research *Theatre on Terror*, distinguishes between

plays set on the "front-line," meaning in the conflict zone, and those set on the "home-line," which occur within Britain. While the destructive impact of the so-called War on Terror is undeniable in conflict zones, it is also critical to examine its impact on Western citizens. Residents of Britain are no longer seen simply as individuals but are instead categorized as patriots or suspects, good or bad Muslims. In this way, the discursive formation of the War on Terror subjectivizes the inhabitants of Britain. De Waal identifies five categories where the discursive formation of the War on Terror finds its nodal issues at home: patriotism, Muslims, citizenship, women, and masculinity.

Briefly, these five points present the following nodal issues:

Patriotism: Citizens are forced to define themselves as either patriotic subjects or suspicious subjects (potential terrorists). Their patriotism must be demonstrated; otherwise, they might be categorized as suspicious.[2]

Muslim: Within the narrative of the War on Terror, a person who appears Muslim is automatically deemed a suspicious subject. This raises the question of whether all Muslims are necessarily terrorists, leading to the narrative diagnosed by De Waal: a good Muslim needs to prove that he (typically men) is not a bad Muslim. The underlying discourse suggests that Muslims are normally bad but some can prove they are integrated and support the values of Western society, i.e. that they are 'good.'[3]

Citizenship: The position of the 'normal' citizen also becomes precarious. The anxiety of a potential terrorist threat, reinforced by the constant War on Terror discourse, is not addressed through collective action that would strengthen citizenship. Instead, this anxiety is exploited by the neoliberal agenda to transform citizens into alienated, individualized consumers.[4]

Women: In the discourse of the War on Terror, women are often cast in the role of weeping wives, whose mourning legitimizes the 'sacrifice' of male soldiers.[5]

Masculinity: Veterans are viewed through the lens of war trauma affecting their masculinity. Paradoxically, only a war trauma causing PTSD allows a man to display fragile masculinity. The war's trauma distressingly enables the emergence of weakened masculinity; only those who have proved their masculinity through war are permitted to embody alternative forms of 'manliness.'[6]

The front-line plays focus on the relationship with the Other, equating the Other with the 'enemy' or the women of the enemy. While home-line plays, relying on verbatim techniques or comedy, manage to challenge the dominant narratives of the War on Terror, front-line plays struggle to break away from them. Three persistent ideas re-emerge even in plays that aim to criticize British intervention: (1) the enemy is faceless, devoid of identity, their language reduced to simple and grammatically incorrect sentences, eliminating any possibility of empathy[7]; (2) the enemy's land is portrayed as a place of horror,[8] implying that conditions there are far worse than in Britain; and

(3) Middle Eastern women need to be saved from the fanatics who want to oppress them. Citing Chakravorty Spivak, white men are saving brown women from brown men, De Waal points out the persistence of the colonialist thinking where Western people are bringing civilization and agency to the rest of the world.[9]

Another significant point from De Waal's research on front-line plays is the normalization of events that evade legal systems, such as the construction of facilities like the US Guantanamo Bay detention camp, where prisoners have no rights[10] because they are detained in a location outside any national jurisdiction. Similarly, war operations delegated to private companies like Blackwater allow for military assaults without accountability to any legal system or public opinion.[11]

De Waal's extensive research underscores that the line dividing home-line and front-line is porous. A war affects not only civilians in the Middle East, where military operations occur, but also those on the home-line in Britain.

2.4 Invisible Violence

As we have just seen, the discursive formation of the War on Terror serves as an instrument concealing other forms of violence that are inflicted upon individuals. This notion could be connected to the previous section to suggest that visible violence acts as a mask, distracting attention from more insidious forms of violence. In *Game of Thrones*, for instance, the emphasis on justified versus unjustified violence obscures a political agenda that legitimizes hegemonic power and violence. Before continuing the exploration of violence as an instrument and as an object, I would like to introduce a practical exercise that we developed with students called "invisible violence."[12] This exercise is an attempt to become aware of the 'masks' hiding other forms of violence, which, as the name suggests, remain invisible.

The exercise emerged from our discussion on the notion of legitimizing violence and how to challenge that idea. With the students, we pondered: what do we consider intolerable in this world? We left the studio and went home to continue this research individually. The next day, one student shared what he experienced at home: while researching topics he considered intolerable—such as priest and paedophilia, anal torture, mass execution—he was questioned by his girlfriend, who saw what he was typing. She asked what he was doing, and he explained that it was for his acting course. His girlfriend questioned the nature of a class that required such disturbing content. The conversation ended there; he felt ashamed and turned the screen away so she would not be disturbed by his searches. We realized at that moment that our exercise mirrored the shock value we aimed to criticize. We adopted a similar mindset to what we intended to deconstruct. We then shifted our focus to what should be intolerable but is not, whether because it is unseen or not considered violent. The results were striking, and the students developed a more nuanced and complex understanding of violence. It was no longer only

the extreme violence reported in the media but an array of behaviours supporting a subtle culture of violence that often remains unnoticed. We called this "invisible violence."

Invisible violence, as defined by Johan Galtung, is distinct from visible violence. Galtung divides violence into visible, which is generated by direct actions, and invisible, which results from structural and cultural violence. Galtung writes:

> (T)he direct violence, physical and/or verbal, is visible as behavior. But human action does not come out of nowhere: there are roots. Two roots are indicated: a culture of violence (heroic, patriotic, patriarchal, etc, etc) and a structure that itself is violent by being too repressive, exploitative or alienating. […] Cultural and structural violence cause direct violence … and direct violence reinforces structural and cultural violence.
>
> (Galtung, 2004)

Galtung suggests, that to understand visible violence, it is necessary to examine its generators: invisible violence, specifically cultural and structural violence. However, this link is not unidirectional, as cultural and structural violence cause visible violence, and visible violence, in turn, reinforces the values upheld by cultural violence and the power relations defining structural violence. This observation led us to become more sensitive to elements in our realities that might consolidate invisible violence. The exercise was stimulating yet distressing, for it seemed that, as Galtung described, the process is not only a feeding loop but also a rhizomic one. Even simple actions like buying apples from the store could be seen as part of a larger-scale feeding loop of violence.

The students examined three locations: the Theatre Academy of Helsinki, several gyms, and various hospitals. They defined one or two research questions for each setting and conducted fieldwork. For instance, the group studying gyms in the Helsinki area identified three categories: popular, medium, and exclusive. In the most exclusive gyms, they found that special training plans based on customer goals and needs were offered. In addition to the free personal training, a sense of welcoming and images of beautiful and toned bodies were displayed all over. However, they noticed a hidden violent narrative behind this pleasant service, the implication that there is a perfect body to strive for creates a dependency on the gym to attain this mythical ideal. The group focusing on hospitals observed that the architecture of health centres places patients in a subaltern position. Patients must wait their turns in corridors, in uninviting spaces, reducing them to mere obstructions to the healthcare personnel's flow. Patients are stripped of rights and must comply with the directives of doctors and nurses.

The group studying the Theatre Academy focused on the cafeteria, where they identified specific structural violence. The majority of the cleaners or cafeteria workers were of diverse ethnic backgrounds, while most students were

white. Among the students, unwritten rules about seating arrangements were apparent: central places were always occupied by acting students who spoke Finnish, dancers took peripheral places, and students from other departments sat randomly. This investigation was deepened as students examined personal experiences of invisible violence in their lives. The research became more personal and culminated in monologues that the students wrote, ranging from rites of malehood in central Finland, family pressure to succeed, psychological bullying at school, social pressure from institutions, to gender discrimination in relationships.

This student-led research does not claim to be exhaustive. The analyses were based on suppositions, and the conclusions drawn were limited. Therefore, the results should not be seen as absolute claims, but rather as forms of interrogation and potential awareness about the social and political use of space, power structures, and hegemonic narratives, all of which, as we have seen, contribute to generating forms of structural and invisible violence.

3 Representation; Can We Represent Trauma?

From the previous enquiry, a compelling question emerges: what do we represent when we perform violence on stage? As observed, when violence is transposed into a descriptive mode (as in *Seven Seconds*), the experience of violence remains distant, whereas when staged violence (embodied violence by the performers) transforms into a visceral experience for the spectators (as in *Blasted*), it raises questions about trauma. This leads us to ponder: can we represent trauma, or more precisely, what can we learn by displaying trauma on stage? What exactly is trauma? The term 'trauma' comes from the Greek word *trau*, an extended form of the Proto-Indo-European root *tere-*, meaning "to rub, to turn." *Trauma* in Greek refers to 'wound.' Though originally used only for physical injuries, today trauma is equally likely to refer to emotional wounds. A traumatic event can leave psychological symptoms long after physical injuries have healed. The psychological reaction to emotional trauma is now recognized as post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD, occurring after extremely stressful events like wartime combat, natural disasters, or abuse, with symptoms including depression, anxiety, flashbacks, and recurring nightmares.

Peggy Phelan and Roger Luckhurst are critical of the possibility to represent trauma. For Phelan, trauma is a shock that shatters social connections. During moments of devastation, the human body focuses on survival rather than understanding the event. Phelan asserts that "trauma is untouchable" and thus "it cannot be represented" (Phelan, 1997, 95). Luckhurst offers a more nuanced view, suggesting that "in its shocking impact trauma is anti-narrative, but it also generates the manic production of retrospective narratives that seek to explicate the trauma" (Luckhurst, 2008, 79). Patrick Duggan, citing Judith Herman, seems to describe this as the "central dialectic" of trauma: the conflict between the desire to forget and the compelling need to speak

about and 'relive' the traumatic events to understand and heal the wounds (Duggan, 2015, 26). This creates a problematic cycle where the individual seeks to relive the events to contextualize the trauma (and so to establish a narrative contextualizing the trauma), yet this 'reliving' recreates the shock and intrusion that disrupted social structures (disrupting any narratives).

Amid this cycle, something potentially constructive emerges. Duggan, reflecting on the debate between D. W. Winnicott and Jacques Lacan about the trauma of birth, notes that, for Winnicott, the disruption of life's continuity alters the "nascent ego structure" (Winnicott, 2001), while for Lacan, the separation of mother and baby is what constitutes the ego—the baby's construction of an independent self (Duggan, 29). Thus, trauma can be both constructive and destructive. Duggan concludes that trauma is not merely an encounter with death but the ongoing re-experiencing of having survived it. While the cycle may foster a sense of selfhood and consciousness, it may also cause a feeling of disconnectedness due to the cyclic disruption of social structures.

In the following paragraphs, I will examine Hannah Arendt's and Simone Weil's analyses of violence and its effects. Although their discussions primarily address the political spectrum, they are useful for understanding the implications of performing violence on stage, both from a narrative and from a corporeal perspective. The examination of trauma—both represented and experienced—will be developed further towards the end of this section and especially in this chapter's conclusive part.

3.1 Violence and Power

Hannah Arendt, in the second chapter of her treatise *On Violence*, examines the attributes of violence within the sphere of politics, exploring the interconnection between power and violence. She engages with a long-standing tradition that views violence—or war—as an extension of power, or politics. This line of thought includes diverse political thinkers such as the German jurist and historian Max Weber, who described the state as "a relation of men dominating men, a relation supported by means of legitimate violence"; the American sociologist Charles Wright Mills, who asserted that "all politics is a struggle for power; the ultimate kind of power is violence"; and the Prussian general Clausewitz, who noted that "war is the continuation of politics by other means." However, Arendt's original contribution lies in her clear distinction between these two concepts. Unlike others, she challenges the notion that politics is inherently organized around violence. For Arendt, what distinguishes power from violence is that power requires the approval of the population, whereas violence depends solely on the tools at one's disposal.

Power does not require justification as it is inherent to the political community's existence; it only needs to be legitimated—accepted and approved—by the community. However, while violence can be justified, it cannot be legitimized. Arendt views power as the capacity to act in concert, belonging

not to an individual but to a community, and existing only as long as the community remains united. Violence, by contrast, is seen as a coercive force. She thus concludes that power and violence occupy two distinct statuses, allowing her to argue that violence emerges when power wanes—appearing when power is shaken and potentially destroying it if left unchecked, yet it is absolutely incapable of creating power (Arendt, 1996, 95–96).

Hannah Arendt's proposal to dissociate power and violence has often been criticized for oversimplifying the understanding of political action. A critique can be raised against Arendt's distinction between power and violence through the situation of tyranny described by Etienne de La Boétie. De La Boétie characterizes a phenomenon he calls "voluntary servitude," which elucidates how a despotic power structure legitimizes its existence through violence. He posits that a tyranny, to maintain itself, must be confined to a few individuals. These individuals, however, impose a system of oppression that is accepted by a large number of people. He questions why the majority does not rise up and overthrow the tyrant. According to de La Boétie, this is because the tyranny creates a pyramidal system of violence and oppression. The tyrant dominates a small group directly beneath them—say, for the sake of demonstration, 15 individuals. Each of these 15 then oppresses another 15 beneath them, resulting in 225 individuals who, in turn, oppress another group of 15 each, and so on. The violence initially exerted by the tyrant is replicated down the chain of command (De La Boétie, 2015, 45). This voluntary servitude exists because each oppressed individual, in turn, oppresses others, thus accepting their servitude in exchange for the power to dominate others. Instead of rebelling, the population consents to the tyrant's violence, thereby legitimizing their power. This pyramidal structure of oppression and violence enables the tyrant to secure their position, transferring violence to every level of society, including intimate interpersonal relationships among neighbours and within family units.

This form of systemic oppression was exemplified in the Stalinist system, which deeply permeated Soviet society and persists to this day. The anthology *Performing Violence: Literary and Theatre Experiment of New Russian Drama* by Beumers and Lipovetsky extensively examines contemporary Russian theatre dramas, particularly those from the first decade of the 21st century. The authors argue that a common thread among these diverse theatrical experiments is the pervasive presence of violence, a legacy of decades of state-imposed violence. This endemic violence not only influenced daily interactions but also shaped the populace's mentality. Journalist Masha Gessen, in her book *The Future Is History: How Totalitarianism Reclaimed Russia*, discusses why democratic changes were unattainable post-Soviet Union. She attributes this to a societal mentality so deeply ingrained with oppression that it was unprepared for change. Following a period of chaos after the Soviet collapse, the population sought the return of a strong, totalitarian leader reminiscent of the Soviet era, [one who would be] "able to put back things are they were and bring back the grandeur of the Russian people" (Gessen, 2017, 337).

Hannah Arendt's proposition to dissociate power and violence, though often criticized, offers a daring, alternative perspective on political actions that extend beyond mere conflict. In her view, politics should promote friendship and care rather than hostility and coercion. This argument is particularly compelling in the final chapter of her treatise, where she explores the relationship between violence and revolutions. Here, Arendt introduces a significant shift from the negative tone of the preceding chapter. Initially, she dismisses any analysis of violent human behaviour—specifically aggressiveness—from a purely biological standpoint. Instead, she contends that social injustice and the desire for change drive the use or the non-use of violence. Violence, thus associated with the notion of change, assumes a positive connotation, and Arendt notes the 'vitality' within violent actions, suggesting that violence can be a necessary means to foster a new community and a new humanity. Quoting Georges Sorel, she acknowledges the vigour of youth associated with violence, raising the question: is the act of violence a prerogative of youth, and are the praises of life and violence intertwined?

However, Arendt cautions against romanticizing violence and youth, stating that, while violence can dramatize injustices and garner public attention, it does not necessarily lead to social progress. Citing Irish activist and nationalist William O'Brien, she argues that "violence is the only means to ensure that moderation is heard," positioning violence as a tool for reform rather than revolution. Nonetheless, after evaluating violence in relation to power and as a mechanism for change, Arendt concludes that violence does not bring about change but merely perpetuates its use, often leading to a more violent world. She contends that violence, therefore, should not be seen merely as an instrument but as a force that impacts both the victim and the perpetrator. This insight is crucial for understanding the use of staged violence, highlighting a paradox: while onstage violence may serve as a necessary outcry, making visible the invisible, its presence could also undermine any potential for critical discourse due to its profound impact on everyone involved.

3.2 The Excess of Force

Simone Weil, from a completely different perspective, examines the effects of violence by analysing the Greek epic *Iliad*. The *Iliad* could be compared to *Game of Thrones*: it is a long poem about an endless war, where the protagonists are engaged in a cruel carnage. The descriptions of the countless battles are detailed and vivid. Similar to *Game of Thrones*, a sense of ferment mixed with physical exhaustion can be sensed by the reader when going through all these fights. In this poem, the notion of revenge is pervasive throughout the text; however, there is no attempt to justify or legitimize this absurd and ongoing violence. The war happened, and they are simply fighting. It remains a mystery why this violence is accepted and why it is present. There is a particular aspect that is striking in the *Iliad*: the description of someone dying,

which consists of the repetitive insistence on underlining the moment when 'life' leaves the body. Simone Weil opens her treatise by examining the final battle between Achilles and Hector, and especially how Hector's body is reduced to an inanimate object. One second ago, there was someone, and then, in an instant, there is no one:

> When he had thus said the shrouds of death enfolded him, whereon his soul went out of him and flew down to the house of Hades, lamenting its sad fate that it should enjoy youth and strength no longer.
>
> (Weil, 2016, 4)

Simone Weil considers this poem an excursion into the excess of force. Unlike Hannah Arendt, Weil does not distinguish between power, violence, and force; these terms are interchangeable in her treatise. For Weil, what characterizes Greek thinking is the longing for a balanced life. The virtue of living a good life is to find equilibrium among the different phenomena of life. In this perspective, the *Iliad* serves as a warning against the excess of force:

> The dust rose from Hector as he was being dragged along, his dark hair flew all abroad, and his head once so comely was laid low on earth, for Jove had now delivered him into the hands of his foes to do him outrage in his own land.
>
> (Weil, 33)

Violence transforms bodies into objects; Hector's body is reduced to just a thing, devoid of spiritual life, leaving only the material. For Simone Weil, violence reduces humans to mere matter. However, violence affects not only the victim by denaturing their humanity but also the perpetrator. Weil observes the transformation of another 'hero' in the text:

> Two days later, it is Ajax's turn to be terrified: Zeus the father on high makes fear rise in Ajax. He stops, overcome, puts behind him his buckler made of seven hides, trembles, and looks around at the crowd, like a wild beast.
>
> (Weil, 16)

For Weil, violence transforms both the perpetrator and the recipient. According to Weil, this is the central message of the *Iliad*: the temptation to use force to solve problems transforms humans into things.

I would like to take a moment to digress. In January 2015, I was in Palestine and Israel to lead two workshops on contemporary commedia dell'arte. My approach primarily emphasizes the dramatic dimensions of the archetypes to unleash repressed desires, fantasies, and strong energies that are typically constrained in everyday life. This method allows what I call the

"shadow of the human heart" to emerge, which can manifest as aggressive behaviour or as something poetic and fragile. Initially, I worked at the Ashtar Theatre in Ramallah and then at the Nissan Nativ Acting Studio Theatre School in Jerusalem. Initially, with the Palestinian actors, I noticed a significant degree of violence emerging from the improvisations, which I attributed to their daily reality of oppression and normalized brutality. However, I was surprised to find a similar level of violence in the improvisations by the acting students in Jerusalem. Using the same masks and exercises, actors from both sides—the oppressed and the oppressors—exhibited similar degrees of violence. This revelation was shocking.

Upon closer observation, I noticed similar manifestations of violence in the everyday lives of Israelis. For example, at the checkpoints, which clearly display power and humiliate Palestinians, I was struck by the fearful expressions of the Israeli soldiers. Travelling through Israel, I felt a pervasive tension and realized that the violence Israel exerts on Palestine also permeates Israeli society.

But why do we accept violence? Simone Weil suggests that violence obliterates any possibility of conceiving alternatives. On a daily basis, our souls confront violence, stripping away aspirations because our thoughts cannot wander without encountering the notion of death. Violence confines the body to mere 'material' existence, precluding any access to the infinite spiritual dimensions of life. Moreover, violence extinguishes all aims except those of material existence. Similarly, war obliterates all other objectives, including the war's own purposes. The war becomes endless because violence has obliterated any rationale for it. The end becomes inconceivable because it is unreachable. Our minds should find solutions, but they cannot; they are too overwhelmed by violence. Violence is accepted because it begets more violence.

This last observation may suggest a reversed vision of the Hobbesian worldview. Violence is not the natural state because humans inherently oppose each other, but rather violence itself creates the situation where every human is against every other. It is not the instrument emerging from a general state of human antagonism but the object that transforms all humans into predators and prey. According to Simone Weil, love is what reintroduces the soul to the body, which has been reduced to mere material by violence. Love is what maintains hope and preserves the spiritual being. And the poem is interspersed with nostalgic reminiscences of life before it was destroyed by war. During the final battle, as Achilles pursues Hector, Hector recalls the fountains at the entrance of Troy and briefly allows himself to drift into evocative memories:

> Close by there stood the great stone tanks, handsomely built, where silk-gleaming garments were washed clean by Troy's lovely daughters and housewives in the days of peace, long ago, before the Greeks had come. Past these did they run their race, pursuer and pursued.

The poem endlessly describes the agony of violence. According to Weil, the profound lesson from the Greeks is that the enemy is not demonized. To the Greeks, the enemy remains a person with dreams, desires, fears, and love. Even as he faces defeat in his final battle against Achilles, Hector is portrayed as a man filled with love for his wife, his children, and his city. Reciprocally, his wife loves him and mourns his death:

> Dear husband, you died young, leaving me a widow alone in the palace. Our child is still tiny, the child you and I, crossed by fate, had together. I fear he will never grow up. For not in your bed did you die, holding my hand and speaking to me prudent words which forever night and day, as I weep, might live in my memory.

It is uncommon for the winners' side to give voice to the enemy and let them express love and sorrow for those lost in battle. This is the significant lesson from the Greeks: not to hate your enemy. Greek literature is replete with examples where the enemy narrates the pain and sorrow inflicted by the Greeks. Another example is Euripides' tragedy, *The Women of Troy* (often called *Troades*), a poignant play for a Greek audience, where the brutality of the Greeks during the trojan war is recounted by the wifes of the soldiers killed by the Greek army. Weil, referencing the *Iliad*, like Arendt, advocates for a politics of friendship and care.

3.3 Politics of Care on Stage

In the context of a politics of care, the actual space given to discuss pain or violence can be seen as crucial. Who is granted the opportunity to speak about suffering? Finnish actress Anna Paavilainen, through her solo performance *Play Rape*, highlights the problem of being left alone to cope with trauma. In her career, she has been cast in several roles where her character was raped on stage. Although the rape scenes were simulated, she never had the opportunity to discuss the emotional impact of these scenes with directors or colleagues. This eventually led to her experiencing burnout. The paradox is that a simulated violent act—the rape scene—resulted in a real violent outcome: the actress's burnout. Often, actors required to perform violent acts, particularly rape scenes, are left to deal with the emotions stirred by these scenes alone. The prevailing attitude is that professionals should manage these feelings independently, leaving no room for the traumatic experiences to be shared and processed collectively. This approach can be destructive over time, and there have been multiple instances of actor burnout in Finland, where this research was conducted.

It is worth considering whether the politics of care proposed by Hanna Arendt and Simone Weil could be incorporated into theatre practices, especially in the portrayal of violence.

This next proposal may seem unexpected, but it originated from an exploration conducted by students during the third workshop of this research. Two students sought to determine if there could be such a thing as "positive violence"—violence that is not traumatic. After researching various practices and interviewing several theatre directors and educators, they chose to explore BDSM (Bondage Discipline Sadism and Masochism) because it is predicated on consensual violence. While BDSM is often initially viewed as cruel—pleasure derived from inflicting pain—the students' investigation uncovered many surprising results. Contrary to common assumptions, the BDSM practice involves considerable care between the participant inflicting pain and the one receiving it. Everything is pre-negotiated and agreed upon, facilitating a deeper exploration of pain within safe boundaries. This practice of checking in to ensure ongoing consent could beneficially be applied to theatre rehearsals involving simulated violence.

Paradoxically, the BDSM practice, which openly relies on violence, appears to provide a tangible way to address the potential trauma of performing violence on stage. It could allow for the sharing of potentially traumatic experiences and finding ways to heal together. In such a context, the person subjected to violence can no longer be viewed merely as a victim. By ritualizing consent at the beginning and end, both the 'victim' and the 'perpetrator' engage in a mutual agreement and take responsibility for each other's care. This practice could potentially be adapted to other contexts where power, or other forms of violence, is depicted. The nascent tradition of intimacy coordinator and its rapid spread among the film industry and theatres as coach for intimate or violent scenes demonstrates that there is a need to verbalize and define protocols for performing violent and potentially traumatizing scenes. As Simone Weil argued the embodiment of violence (as perpetrator or as victim) is an action that affects everybody. And in this perspective a politics of care is not only welcomed but even necessary.

3.4 I See the Delivery-Man with Blood Spurting from His Throat

After examining Hanna Arendt and Simone Weil, it is also possible to widen the impact of violence and further the exploration on how the representation of trauma affects and disturbs performers. Theatre director Katie Mitchell, in an interview following her 2016 production of Sarah Kane's play *Cleansed* at the National Theatre in London, recounted the nightmares suffered by the cast during rehearsals. *Cleansed* is considered Kane's most brutal play, a veritable horror show where love is tested through torture. Much was made about spectators leaving or even fainting during performances, which the National Theatre appeared to publicize (*The Guardian*, 2016). But what was the experience of actors when rehearsing and performing this play? If spectators' fainting were widely reported, little was said about the nightmares endured by the cast while rehearsing and performing these gruesome scenes.

Seven years prior to Mitchell's production of *Cleansed*, in 2009, Tim Crouch wrote and directed a play called *The Author*, which paradoxically

seems to be a direct response to Mitchell's approach. In Crouch's play, four performers sit and directly engage with the audience as if sharing personal experiences. They discuss another play they had previously performed together. In this earlier, unnamed play, the four are interconnected: one is the author who wrote and directed the play, another portrays the father, another is the daughter, and the fourth is a spectator. During the show, the performers are addressed by their real names: the performer playing the author is Tim,[13] the actor portraying the father is Vic, the daughter is Esther, and the 'spectator' is Chris.

The specifics of what happens in this unnamed play are never explicitly revealed. It can be inferred that an incestuous act occurs that is extremely violent, but no details about what exactly transpires on stage or concerning the incest itself are provided. Through fragmented information shared by the performers, the audience learns that the play was violent and shocking, employing graphic effects to stun the spectators, and that the production process was particularly challenging for the actor playing the father. He mentions that the director, Tim, 'pushed' him to explore the darkest parts of himself. The actors discuss how they managed to embody their roles, with Tim explaining his artistic motivations for delving into the realm of violence. An ongoing theme is the handling of violence, especially the violent images that permeate our lives. Do we deny them? Accept them? And as Tim Crouch suggests, do we display them to provoke reflection? The performers also discuss the audience's reactions, the use of 'special' effects to impact viewers, and feedback from critics. The spectator, Chris, reveals that he fainted at the end of the show.

The dramaturgical solution adopted by Tim Crouch allows spectators to mentally recreate the "phantom play"; they collect fragments of information given by the performers and, like assembling a puzzle, they reconstruct the entire play about incest in their minds. This technique is so effective that, when I attended the performance, I began to question whether the unnamed show had actually been performed, or if I was attending a kind of lecture-performance-discussion about that production. What is striking here is that Tim Crouch aims to interrogate violence, the production of images of violence, and their impact on us. He asserts that, as an artist, he is compelled to depict violence. However, no violent acts occur concretely; the actors merely inform us that they performed 'violent' actions. These 'images' of violence that Tim insists on showing are, however, never actually shown. They manifest only in our minds, on an imaginary stage. We are so inundated and surrounded by such images that it is very easy to 'see' again the rape of a woman or the beheading of a prisoner. One recurring element is the questioning of the audience: are you OK? Can we continue, or should we stop? The intent is to shift focus onto the spectators; they become the protagonists of the play. Their decision about whether to continue or not becomes the core question of the show. The critical issue is not whether the show should be interrupted, but the right to say no in everyday life.

During the show, quite at the beginning, a spectator left the room. I was surprised. After the show, I discovered that this 'exit' was staged. Tim Crouch

wanted to subtly indicate that it is acceptable to refuse, to say no. Daily life bombards us with many kinds of images, and it is difficult not to see them, as Tim points out. Yet the status of these images remains unclear, as if they were unreal. Tim Crouch, however, seeks to restore their 'reality':

> Vic: We spent a lot of time on the computer—watching reports, understanding the situation, looking at images. Some people said that the things that happened in the play were too extreme, but they're nothing compared to what we looked at.
>
> (Crouch, 2009, 38)

By playing with the general assumption that reality is often more shocking than any fiction humans can conceive, Tim Crouch nudges us to accept that, even if this unnamed show is repulsive, it is not as horrendous as reality can be. Consequently, the audience tends to regard this unnamed show as something that has genuinely occurred, even though the spectators have no concrete understanding of what transpired on stage:

> Esther: And it happened there, in a room in Chelsea. That beheading. With us gathered around the laptop. On a coffee break while we were working on Act Two. That's where it happened.
>
> (Crouch, 52)

As Esther explains, the killing occurred concretely. From the moment they witnessed it, it was real. The distance provided by the computer and the internet doesn't negate the reality of that action. Every time they view the video, the man is killed, and the physicality of that video is inflicted on the watchers, whose bodies absorb such images. Herein lies the strongest point of the show. Vic and Esther share their process as actors with the audience: they must embody both a victim and a perpetrator. Vic mentions that he was cast as the father probably because he looks like an 'evil' man, but in reality, he is very gentle. Throughout the show, it becomes apparent that this 'violence' has affected him. Vic explains that, in the rehearsal process, he and Tim observed people affected by wars and noted how their bodies moved, how the brutality 'abstracted' their bodies. Vic demonstrates how his body language changed as a result. Just as the war abstracted the bodies of these soldiers and victims, Vic has been damaged by this immense absorption of violence. His transformation reaches a climax when, after the last show, he brutally kicks a spectator. Esther, too, suffers from this absorption of images to the extent that she begins to superimpose internet images onto reality: "Or when the supermarket delivery arrives, and I open the front door, I see the delivery-man with blood spurting from his throat" (Crouch, 55). The actors, Vic and Esther, observe the process of abstraction, change, and distress happening to them. Even the spectator, Chris, is affected by the show; the flashing lights make him faint. Finally, the author, Tim, is also impacted by

the show, or by the ease of accessing terrible images and his inability to stop searching for increasingly violent content. The message of the play is quite clear: as spectators, we are not immune to the exposure to violent images. The viewing of violent images feeds the imagination, which then randomly confuses reality. What Tim Crouch describes is nothing less than the process of trauma. By displaying actors who have been traumatized by a violent performance, he challenges the audience, questioning their stance towards violent images.

While Tim Crouch frames the traumatic experience through the retelling of the experience, Kane simply throws the trauma in the face of the audience, without offering keys to interpret it. Both performances ignite the imagination, but in radically different ways. Tim Crouch offers a 'safe' intermediary; the audience watches someone who has been traumatized and this person relates their experience. There is an intermediary between the trauma and the spectators. To put it bluntly, one speaks about violence while the other shows the violence. The problem with Crouch's performance is that it only observes the effects. The danger of such an approach is that it does not differentiate between different types of violence; in Crouch's plays, all violent images are the same, yet there are cultural differences between similar acts of violence. As discussed above, the rape of a woman is not perceived in the same way as the rape of a man. Sarah Kane's performance, however, strips away any possible elements that could distance the spectators from the traumatic experience. It viscerally impacts the audience. It invades the spectator's imagination and body, which in turn can then aggressively respond to the performance. In fact, Sarah Kane was incensed that the press so vehemently attacked her play, *Blasted*. She stated:

> The press were screaming about cannibalism live on stage, but, of course, audiences weren't looking at actual atrocities, but rather at an imaginative response to them in an odd, theatrical form, apparently broken-backed and schizophrenic, which presented material without comment and asked the audience to craft their own response. The representation of violence caused more anger than the actual violence. While the corpse of Yugoslavia was rotting on our doorstep, the press chose to get angry, not about the corpse, but about the cultural event that drew attention to it.
>
> (Duggan, 127)

Perhaps it would be possible to suggest that the invasion of the imagination is felt as violence itself. The imagination is an intimate aspect of the self that defines the relationship between inner feelings and the external world. To strike it might feel like an aggression. In this case, the staged violence—the fake violence, the cultural response to actual real violence—can have a similar effect to real violence. It does not aid in understanding the actual violence; it simply traumatizes.

4 Conclusion: Care, Inadequacy, Imagination

Before concluding this chapter, it would be indispensable to sketch out the different implications of the representation of violence that have been scrutinized in this discussion. It is necessary to clarify that this enquiry does not claim to cover all possible ways to represent violence on stage. This investigation, intertwining theory and practice, should be viewed as a series of potential readings of violence in theatrical settings. What follows is a sketch of potential articulations that may aid practitioners in dealing with represented violence. This chapter presented two distinct approaches to violence—as an instrument or as an object—and explored this dialectic through three main areas of enquiry: (1) dramaturgy, (2) narratives, and (3) representation.

The first area of enquiry, dramaturgy, aimed to examine how violence, whether as an instrument or as an object, is considered in dramaturgy. From this initial observation, it emerged that violence could be implemented on stage either as a consolidation of a legal system or as a longing for freedom. When violence is approached as an object, it could be considered as a form of tabula rasa, or as an attempt to 'ground' a person or group of persons. Certainly, even within this first area of enquiry, it would be possible to assert that these categories can overlap each other. However, the purpose of this enquiry is to articulate possible readings of violence, and therefore, it seemed important to maintain these categories as distinct.

The second area of investigation, narratives, explored the possibility of contextualizing violence. However, it proved problematic to offer a broader conceptual framework while representing violence, especially when considering violence as an object. In fact, as discussed, the representation of violence, to be effective, strives to elicit a visceral response among viewers, cutting off any possibility for a broader analytical discourse. Slavoj Žižek, nonetheless, suggests reversing the enquiry and, instead of considering how to inscribe violence within a wider structure, aims to examine what allows violence to emerge. This led the enquiry to examine the widespread narrative of justified versus unjustified violence, pointing out that, in such cases, violence masks other types of narratives that could encompass other forms of violence.

The third area, representation, questioned whether it is possible to represent trauma. It suggested that violence cannot be considered an external device; it transforms both the victim and the perpetrator, dehumanizing them and reducing them to 'things.' Even represented violence, or "fake violence," impresses upon viewers' imaginations in much the same way, affecting them similarly.

As emerged from this examination and the examples reviewed, there is a difficulty in rendering justice to the trauma and its cycle of repetitions that a person experiences. The attempts, whether through inscribing the trauma into a narrative or making the audience experience the trauma, seem to lead to impasses or at least to some inadequacies. This inability to adequately discuss the trauma (to render palpable the distressing experience and provide a meaningful and protective framework) creates a second type of violence.

This is what the sufferer-survivor of trauma experiences: after the initial traumatic violence, the silence and inability to discuss the distressing experience create a second mode of violence that prevents the person from fully reclaiming their life.

Perhaps it is exactly in this inability to speak properly about the trauma (or even about the violence) that a solution could be found. Surely, avoiding the representation of trauma on stage is probably not the correct solution, and thus something else should be found. Theatre should remain the arena where the community can explore the difficulties, potentials, and shadows of being in this world. But as Duggan asserts, theatre:

> will never be able to do justice to the original [traumatic] event nor to the psychological repetitions of that event. However, theatre and performance have the apparatus through which they can make an attempt to articulate the impossibility of trauma's articulation
>
> (Duggan, 2015, 114).

If theatre is inadequate to represent trauma, it can at least discuss the inadequacies of representing trauma. And through the impossibility of speaking properly about trauma, through these inadequate performances, the audience might experience their own gap. They might experience and hopefully transcend their own inabilities to deal with or speak about a personal trauma, and perhaps heal from it.

This approach of inadequate performances could also allow us to escape the dialectical approach to violence (instrumental versus object) presented so far in this chapter and instead consider the problem from another angle—not the narratives or the trauma (instrument versus object) but what kind of imagination about violence we harbour.

The documentary *HyperNormalisation* by Adam Curtis deconstructs the narratives of surveillance and normalized violence in Western politics, reflecting on the escalation of violence in the political sphere. Is the presence of violence indicative of a lack of power, as Arendt suggested, or is it a need to 'ground' political action, as Agamben suggests? At one point in the documentary, there is a series of endless footage from various Hollywood movies depicting the destruction of North American city skyscrapers by natural catastrophes, alien forces, or supernatural evil creatures. Amazing images of buildings exploding, smashing, falling, and burning waltz like a dystopian carousel. After this long panorama of destruction that seems to exactly reproduce the attack on the Twin Towers on 11 September 2001, the commentator informs us that these movies were made before September 11. That was probably a similar feeling shared by many while watching the tragic event: "This looks like a movie!" The tragedy with this attack is that we had already seen it before. It already existed in our imagination. When the Central Intelligence Agency and the National Security Agency cited a failure

of imagination as a reason why they could not prevent the attacks, the failure was not so much in preventing them, but in imagining something else. It was not a failure of US intelligence agencies alone; it was a failure of a large worldwide population to think of something else. As Evans and Giroux point out in their essay, *Disposal Future: The Seduction of Violence in the Age of Spectacle*, "violence not only becomes performative, functioning as a kind of representational politics but is also packaged so as to mimic the unbridled monopolization of pleasure now associated with images of killing, brutality, and cruelty." The co-presence of violence in media, blurring violence in politics, and violence in pop culture affect our capacities to remain astonished. Similar to what Arendt and Weil suggested, a progression of violence in the media might diminish our ability to think of something other than violence. The return to the initial dilemma regarding justified versus unjustified violence is that such dichotomic discourse hides more problematic issues related to violence, as described by Arendt and Weil. How can we imagine something other than violence?

Anthropologist Robin Fox declared that the problem of violence is not a question of whether humans have a violent nature or if violence is social; for him, the problem consists in the imagination of violence. According to Fox, human beings have a consciousness out of context. He argues that humans still have a consciousness that is adapted to the Upper Paleolithic (Old Stone Age, 40,000 BC). But starting with the agrarian revolution, humans have engaged in an acceleration of technological development that is faster than what our consciousness can assimilate. Humans have not had time to adapt to these changes and still cling to archaic modes of thinking. Especially during the last centuries, technological invention has far surpassed what humans are truly able to comprehend and process. He argues that humans still think they are handling a piece of wood when they are actually handling atomic bombs. German anthropologist Walter Burkert, in his famous *Homo Necans* (from Ancient Greek: the killing human), demonstrated that the "hunting human" (the human that kills) from the Paleolithic period survived the agrarian revolution and still exists within the "agrarian human." The "agrarian human" retained inside the consciousness of the "killing human" and found ways to let this consciousness express itself in various ways, such as through the rituals of sacrifice. The way we relate to violence, the way we imagine violence, is not adapted to the actual state of power in our hands. Our consciousness is not adapted to the violence that it is possible to apply with today's technology. We have a problem of thinking about violence in a different way. Narratives such as justified versus unjustified violence keep the problem of violence within a certain limit of understanding violence. Violence is still discussed as a desirable or undesirable means. And maybe here, theatre can offer an alternative to this recurring posture towards violence. Theatre could instead propose to approach violence from a totally different angle that is able to shatter traditional narratives that support the use of violence and instead consider what are the limitations of staged/performed violence.

Notes

1 This type of writing is nothing new. Many contemporary plays employ similar structures of polyphonic voices narrating events that blend fiction and reality. One noteworthy play is *Genova 01* by Fausto Paravidino, which recounts the tragic confrontations between participants of the protests against the G8 meeting in Genoa, Italy, in 2001 and the police. Like Richter's play, it oscillates between different points of view, attempting to elucidate the inconsistencies in the police reports. The play aims to examine the extent to which the Italian government authorized brutal interventions.
2 See for instance: *The People Next Door*, by Henry Adam (2003), *Osama the Hero*, by Dennis Kelly (2005), and *Talking to Terrorists*, by Robin Soans (2005).
3 See for instance: *Shades* by Alia Bano (2009) and *What Fatima Did...* by Atiha Sen Gupta (2009).
4 See for instance: *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat: An Epic Cycle of Short Plays* by Mark Ravenhill (2007), *Pornography* by Simon Stephens (2008), and *Stuff Happens* by David Hare (2004).
5 See for instance: *Motherland* by Steve Gilroy (2007) and *Days of Significance* by Roy Williams (2008).
6 See for instance: *The Two Worlds of Charlie F.* by Owen Sheer (2012), *Men in the Cities* by Chris Goode (2014), and *Black Watch* by Gregory Burke (2006).
7 See for instance: *The Empire* by DC Moore (2010).
8 See for instance: *How Many Miles to Basra?* by Colin Teevan (2006) and *Fallujah* by Jonathan Holmes (2004).
9 See for instance: *The Night Is Darkest Before the Dawn* by Abi Morgan (2009) and *On the Side of the Angels* by Richard Bean.
10 See for instance: *Guantanamo* by Gillian Slovo (2004).
11 See for instance: *Stovepipe* by Adam Brace (2008).
12 This exercise was developed commonly with the acting students of the theatre academy. It took place during the first workshop of the postdoctoral research.
13 Since the author of the play and the performer embodying the author-director are the same person: Tim Crouch, in order to avoid confusion between the two I refer to the author of the play when I write 'Tim Crouch' and I refer to the performer (author-director of the unnamed play) with 'Tim.'

2 Does Violence Have Meaning?

This chapter examines a problematic question related to the manifestation of violence: does the use (or presence) of violence provide any meanings? At first this question is examined by considering a special case related to violence: the act of killing. From a dramaturgical standpoint, the death of a character in a play is a major event that usually marks a turning point in the story. As we saw in the previous chapter with *Romeo and Juliet*, the deaths of the two lovers create a change in their families. When faced with the extreme act of taking another person's life, the spectator is urged to wonder: why is someone being killed? Is the death of a person something meaningful or is it a senseless act? What does the act of killing, or self-killing, reveal about human nature? This, of course, is linked to the larger question: what is the meaning of violence?

The theatre of Pirandello examines the shattering of identity against the backdrop's paradigms defining so-called normality. His theatre, which he calls *Naked Masks*, tears down and simultaneously praises the dexterous ability of humans to create masks upon masks in order to navigate the external imperatives of common morality and the inner socially unacceptable and even obscene desires. In his view, the identity of a person is a castle of cards that magically stands up and, if everything goes fine, finds a way to interact with others with a sense of composure. He calls this a healthy madness. However, in most of his plays, the experience of death crumbles down this castle of cards. There is a sense that, facing the incomprehensible event of death, all the tricks and masks that a person has invented to balance social imperatives and inner impulses are wiped out, and the human is left naked (Giovanzana, 2015).

A similar phenomenon can be traced in Shakespeare as well, particularly in *Hamlet*. The Prince of Denmark wonders for most of the play whether he is bound to follow the role of the vengeful son or if he can exist outside the role that society has cast upon him. The philosophical soliloquies that lead him, in the fourth act, to wander in the graveyard and encounter the skull of Yorick, the fool that enchanted his childhood, are interrupted by the funeral of Ophelia. The sight of her dead body brings Hamlet out of his deliberations

DOI: 10.4324/9781003519881-3
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and impulsively drives him to embrace the deadly revenge narrative. Death, then, seems to acquire a special meaning that is supposed to be delivered upon encountering it.

Recently, I saw a theatre play in Finland based on the American cartoon characters: *The Simpsons*. The show was called *The Pimpson*.[1] It used the famous cartoon characters to depict a typical dysfunctional family. The first part of the show focused on the inability among the family members to communicate: the nodal question, which nobody was able to face openly, was the suicide of the youngest child (Maggie). Even if the actors mimicked the exaggerated behaviour of the cartoon characters, the story followed a realistic narrative. In the second part, the story reached a grotesque peak where surprisingly the parents (Homer and Marge) died, and the two remaining children (Bart and Lisa) plunged into an auto-destructive cocktail combining coke and vodka. The second part of the show surprised the audience for its incongruous succession of events and the debates after the show focused on elucidating the destructive turn displayed. The explosion of grotesque violence, death, and addiction urged the spectators to find an explanation. Here, contrary to *Hamlet* or Pirandello's plays, the encounter with death did not bring forth any further consciousness. Why did the director present such an apocalyptic end? It seems then that the vision of violence cannot be gratuitous. This leads me to repeat the above-mentioned questions: is the death of a person something meaningful or is it a senseless act? What does the act of killing, or of self-killing, reveal about human nature? And lastly what is the meaning of violence? These are the questions that this chapter wishes to examine.

1 Exposing Senseless Violence

The play *La Reprise*, directed by the Swiss-Romanian theatre maker Milo Rau, explores the notion of the meaning of death. Premiering in 2018 at the Théâtre National Wallonie Bruxelles, the play relates the true and terrible death of Ihsane Jarfi, who was beaten to death by four individuals. The play was co-written by Milo Rau, dramaturge Eva-Maria Bertschy, and the actors, based on excerpts from the trial report, interviews with Ihsane's family members, and encounters with the murderers.

Two features recur in the show: the proximity of the lives of the murderers to the performers, especially one who shares a similar social background—living in a city with an extremely high unemployment rate, working in a mine factory before becoming unemployed, and living with an alcoholic mother. Another actor used to walk his dog near where Ihsane's body was found, giving a sense that this barbaric act could have been committed by one of the performers on stage. It was a matter of micro-choices, even of good or bad circumstances.[2]

The second recurrent aspect of the show is the serendipity of the situations leading to the death. As Milo Rau noted, Ihsane happened to be in

the wrong place at the wrong time. The narrative emerging from the show, which reproduces part of the declaration made at the trial, suggests that the four murderers did not plan to kill. They were celebrating a birthday and subsequently went out, probably just looking for some fun. They stopped in front of a gay bar where Ihsane was also celebrating a birthday. The four men started harassing an acquaintance of Ihsane; he intervened, and since the men were looking for women, he offered to guide them to a place where they could find what they wanted. He got into their car. Ihsane was homosexual and apparently, the conversation in the car turned to oral sex, at which point the four men began beating Ihsane to death. Why they started to beat Ihsane is unclear. Did they plan to kill a gay Muslim? Probably not. It seems that it just happened, as it could also have not happened if Ihsane had not stepped into the car.

The show emphasizes this senseless death, the stupidity of it, which drove one of the performers, who actually followed the trial, to madness. Implicitly, an explanation lingers over the show—the killing is explained by the social misery of the town. The show repeatedly refers to the city's unemployment, to the lack of job prospects (one job for every 20 people), suggesting the town had collapsed into a desperate situation that generated a structural violence, which erupted in the car. The obvious explanation is that this death is the result of structural violence. But this does not explain everything. The death remains a mystery. It seems that no full explanation for this death is possible, and this impossibility to explain is something unbearable, impossible to accept. Paradoxically, in this absence of explanation resides one of the strengths of this performance.

The play adopts a documentary style, with actors serving more as narrators who describe events, delineate their understanding of situations, and detail their investigative efforts. They perform brief scenes, representing rather than fully embodying various characters. The production maintains a measured pace, devoid of emotional outbursts, except during the final act where the killing is re-enacted. This approach might suggest a Brechtian distance, yet it transcends even Brecht's techniques, aligning more closely with Pasolini's vision outlined in his 1968 manifesto for a new theatre. According to Pasolini, actors should focus on comprehending and conveying the text rather than forming emotional connections with the characters they portray or with the audience. He argued that actors are not messengers who transcend the text, but carriers of its meaning. Their talent lies in making their thought processes transparent on stage; the more adept the actors, the more clearly the audience can perceive that the actors have understood their roles (Pasolini, 1998).

In this context, an actor's skill is not judged by how convincingly they inhabit a character, but by how well they grasp the character's motivations and the circumstances dictating their actions, ensuring that the audience recognizes this understanding. For Pasolini, the act of embodying someone else equates to pretence and deception, which elicits emotional responses from the audience at the expense of rational comprehension. In Milo Rau's

production, the actors grapple with the daunting task of comprehending the incomprehensible, explicitly presenting this challenge to the audience. The narrative and documentary quality of Rau's performance shares similarities with Tim Crouch's work, suggesting that this method could offer a valuable performative solution for deconstructing violence without resorting to shocking or traumatizing stage effects.

1.1 The Danger of Theodicies

The anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes recalls a similar incident to that in Milo Rau's show, where in July 1993, Amy Biehl, a white American Fulbright student, was brutally killed in the Gugulethu township of Cape Town, South Africa. At the time, South Africa was devastated by the apartheid regime, with the population still living amidst frequent outbursts of violence. On that fateful day, Biehl had agreed to drive her friend home to Gugulethu. Upon parking her car, she was dragged out by four men and stoned to death. Her exchange programme was set to end the following day when she was scheduled to fly back home. Her death was abrupt and senseless; despite warnings from many colleagues about the dangers of the area, she insisted on going, saying, "I am not a settler, I am Amy, a comrade. I am one of you," referring to the residents of Gugulethu.

During the trial, one of the killers, Ntbeko Peni, expressed deep remorse, acknowledging that she was indeed one of them. Surprisingly, Amy Biehl's mother forgave the killers, even whispering to Scheper-Hughes during a trial break, "Amy had to die!" (Scheper-Hughes, 1999, 27). This shocking statement underscores the complex nature of interpreting human behaviour, especially regarding violence. Scheper-Hughes argues that, while anthropology aims to make sense of human behaviour, it becomes morally ambiguous when addressing violence and suffering. She references Immanuel Levinas, who notes that:

> the danger of all theodicies – of all attempts to make coherent and meaningful the suffering of others – is rationalizing and rendering acceptable the useless suffering and death of the Others. In all theodicies the arbitrary character of suffering and death is hidden.
>
> (Scheper-Hughes, 19)

According to Levinas, one should not attempt to explain why someone suffers, as he considers such efforts immoral. It is crucial to maintain a proper distance and respect towards the suffering of the Other, ensuring it is never idolized. However, many, like Amy Biehl's mother, Linda, are left to ponder the meaning or even the necessity of their child's death. Linda described to the anthropologist that Amy was intensely competitive, a high diver and marathon runner. She cherishes a photo where Amy, crossing the finish line of a marathon, displays a mix of ecstasy, pain, exhaustion, and relief.

Linda clings to the belief that Amy died in Gugulethu as if breaking through the finish line of her most challenging race (Scheper-Hughes, 27). Nancy Scheper-Hughes empathizes with Linda's struggle to imbue her daughter's death with a narrative of triumphant struggle, viewing the stoning as a final heroic test, akin to her last marathon. This belief even enabled Linda to connect with and embrace the mother of one of Amy's killers (Scheper-Hughes, 29). Yet, Scheper-Hughes, echoing Levinas, warns of the moral risks in transforming victims into martyrs, suggesting that this narrative can obscure the raw brutality of violence and suffering with a layer of supposed transcendence. This approach, while comforting, may conceal the inherently perverse and traumatic nature of such violence.

In the final scene of *Romeo and Juliet*, when the two families weep for the deaths of their children and reconcile, one can easily interpret these deaths as a type of sacrifice that enabled the eternal feud to cease. In this sense, the deaths could be seen as meaningful, offering catharsis: they transcended the conflict between the two families. However, at no point in the play is there a critique of the culture of violence that led to the tragic finale. Even in the final scene, which is supposed to end the devastating war between the families, the very substratum that nourishes the culture of masculine honour ideology is not questioned. The very reason that caused all the terrible accidents remains unaddressed. Here, the attempt to provide a reason for the suffering, to assign a meaning to the violence, actually masks the real nature of the violence. The logic of providing a reason for violence might, in fact, become a mask hiding other, possibly more pernicious forms of violence. This procedure of masking violence is most noticeable in the concept of sacrifice.

As introduced at the beginning of this chapter, the enquiry into whether violence has meanings is articulated into four main topics: sacrifice, community, language, and pleasure. Initially, the question of sacrifice is examined from an ethnographic and philosophical perspective. Two thinkers, René Girard and Giorgio Agamben, are placed in dialogue. From this discussion, violence is considered as the cement of society. The examination then moves towards the concept of self-sacrifice, discussed through the work of psychologist Massimo Recalcati, considering self-sacrifice as a perverse economy of exchange, or even as a way to mask a more brutal form of violence.

The examination then shifts to the notion of community. Through the lens of Erika Fischer-Lichte, the link between sacrifice and community is examined by discussing theatre performances at the turn of the 20th century. Fischer-Lichte blurs the lines between sacrifice and self-sacrifice and focuses on the procedures that raise a sense of community among spectators through the self-sacrifice of the actress. From this study, I suggest that the contemporary heritage of this modality finds expression in two distinct applications: in the contemporary transposition of the ancient Greek chorus that aims to create a sense of community and in the use of violence, which enhances a liminal experience among spectators.

This chapter continues its enquiry by juxtaposing Arendt's ideas of vitality and violence with Žižek's comparisons of phatic language and violence. Violence is perceived as the failure of language and, as Žižek claims, occasionally violence serves no other purpose than simply demanding attention. The examination concludes with Sofsky's and Ryynänen's considerations on the disturbing interlink between violence and pleasure.

2 Sacrifice and Perverse Sacrifice

The term 'sacrifice' originates from the Old French word *sacrifise*, which itself derives from the Latin word *sacrificium*. This Latin term is composed of *sacer* (sacred, holy) and *facio-facere* (to do, to make). In this sense, sacrifice means to make something sacred. However, the word *sacer* in its Proto-Indo-European root may come from *sek* (to cut). We could then imply that sacrifice means to cut off from the world, to set something apart from ordinary reality. Thus, a sacrifice is a rite that consecrates by setting someone or something apart from mundane reality. It is an act of exclusion and simultaneously, due to its holiness, an act of reverence.

Even though the sacrifice implies a consecration of holiness, especially towards the victim that is sacrificed, human sacrifice has been rejected by modern sensibilities as a barbarian and uncivilized act. The French philosopher René Girard, drawing upon ethnographic, literary, and psychological materials, and especially on anthropologists like Burkert and Frazer who have attempted to rehabilitate the human sacrifice (Burkert, 2005, 45), highlighted the close connection between violence and the channelling of violence through sacrifice. He even suggested that the contemporary attitude towards violent rituals such as human sacrifice (refusing them as barbarian and uncivilized acts) mirrors what is portrayed in Euripides' *The Bacchae*, written in 405 BC. In this tragedy, King Pentheus refuses to allow the Dionysian cult to be celebrated in his town. The play depicts the conflict between Pentheus, often seen as rational and civilized, and Dionysus, who represents instinct. Dionysus, emphasizing the sensual experience of the world, promotes spiritual power by exciting the connection between humans and beasts. He comes to Thebes to avenge the insult of not being fully recognized and acknowledged as the son of Zeus. In response to resistance from King Pentheus, Dionysus' anger grows disproportionately, leading to the horrific death of King Pentheus. The play concludes with Dionysus destroying the city of Thebes and announcing similar fates for other cities. The violence in this play is an inexplicable explosion; the anger of Dionysus is baffling. It simply happens and befalls King Pentheus and his city. The play does not attempt to provide a meaning for this violence, leaving the audience bewildered and in awe of such a merciless demonstration of power. The play is often interpreted as illustrating the need to maintain a balance between the rational and instinctual aspects of the human psyche, showing that, if the rational tries to deny the instinctual dimension, the 'animality,' violence will simply explode.

2.1 Channelling Violence

The French philosopher René Girard, in his 1972 book *The Sacred and the Violence*, radically re-examined the concept of sacrifice. According to Girard, sacrifice is not an exceptional case, a regulatory concept, or merely a symbolic event, but a tangible manifestation of society's relationship with violence. Girard acknowledges the challenge of discussing the meaning of sacrifice due to the lack of empirical evidence to support speculative theories. However, he finds support for his theory in the study of Ancient Greek tragedies, aligning the science of myth with ethnological discoveries made by the Cambridge Ritualists.

Girard proposes that the essence of the sacrificial ritual lies not in the expiation of sins but in its function as a conduit for violence. He carefully notes that violence cannot be eliminated but can be controlled or redirected. The sacrifice serves to divert potential communal violence towards a less threatening target—the victim—whose death does not jeopardize the survival of the community. Thus, while violence is still expressed, it does not lead to the community's destruction; sacrifice is, therefore, a form of control.

Societies that engage in sacrificial rituals, according to Girard, typically lack a formal juridical system. Yet, both sacrificial rituals and jurisprudence serve a similar function: preventing the escalation of violence. By positing that society is founded upon sacred killing, Girard does not endorse violence; rather, he highlights its impediments to societal development since violence paralyses a society's functionality. The solution, then, is to tame violence to ensure it does not harm the community.

Girard argues that societies must develop collective inhibitors to prevent the eruption of violence, much like individuals have internal inhibitors that restrain them from violent acts. He claims that societal structures have evolved collective and cultural formulas involving a sacred victim to forestall violence. The role of societal interdictions and taboos is to carve out a non-violent space essential for humans to embrace their humanity. These interdictions form the bedrock of society, making the sacrifice a ritualistic transgression of these taboos. Violence is paradoxically tricked and redirected outside the community onto the scapegoat, the sacred victim, who is then sacrificed.

But where does this initial violence that threatens the community originate? René Girard views humans not as natural allies but as sources of potential conflict. He posits that interactions between individuals can generate a storm of reciprocal violence which, if unchecked, may lead to the total extermination of the community. In response to the potential escalation of violence, it cannot simply disappear but must be redirected onto a substitute—the unanimous violence of all against one. This unanimous violence is thus a founding act. The victim allows the foundation of the community: he or she permits the community to come to existence.

Humans find themselves in a precarious position, unable to deny their inherent capacity for violence, yet knowing they must not let it dominate their existence. If they allow violence to erupt unchecked, it could swiftly destroy the community; conversely, if they completely deny its existence, it might erupt unexpectedly and with even greater force, potentially annihilating the community. According to Girard, the purpose of the sacrificial ritual is to acknowledge the presence of violence and maintain it at a safe distance. Thus, Girard explores why humans might be potential destroyers of each other, suggesting that the ritual of sacrifice is an essential social mechanism to control and channel inherent violence within a community.

Girard does not define violence as a sort of instinct or germ external to human beings, nor does he view it as divine intervention or structural force compelling violent actions. Instead, Girard identifies the origin of violence in the confrontation among equals, which he terms "mimetic crisis" or "mimetic violence." Notable examples include the biblical rivalry between Cain and Abel. In this story, Abel, the favoured brother, knew how to channel violence through sacrifice, whereas Cain, unable to manage his violence, killed Abel. Girard describes this scenario as "un-distinction," where the social or hierarchical order is not respected, such as when a son kills his father and sleeps with his mother (Oedipus), a citizen challenges a king (Antigone), or a human defies a god (The Bacchae).

To grasp Girard's perspective, we must recognize that "un-distinction" itself constitutes a form of violence. This idea starkly contrasts with modern thinking, which typically views difference as an impediment to harmony among humans (Simon, 1973). Girard emphasizes this as a significant modern misconception about violence. In his view, the violence in *The Bacchae* stems from the loss of differentiation between Pentheus and Dionysus. The essence of ancient tragedy often involves the disintegration of the social order. The protagonist and antagonist, engaged in a mimetic crisis, are perceived as equals, and this lack of differentiation poses a threat to the social structure. This tension leads to the mimetic crisis that precipitates the sacrificial event. When violence erupts, it is catastrophic and inexplicable, as seen in *The Bacchae*.

This dynamic might suggest that contemporary violence is triggered by conflicts between modern sensibilities—which advocate for a lawful, equitable state—and the insistence on clear, sometimes archaic, distinctions within highly structured organizations. This clash between old and modern values manifests in various scenarios, notably in states of war versus states of civil war.

As Hegel discusses in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, war represents a critical juncture where the *Geist* (spirit or discourse of history) achieves its *telos* (ultimate purpose) by uniting individuals with the state. Hegel does not claim that war is the sole method to achieve this unity, nor does he elevate war above all other endeavours. However, he suggests there is no higher unifying force than war. War is the business of the state, but the state is comprised of

individuals and these individuals are conducting a war on behalf of the state. The individuals, the soldiers, do not appear as individuals but act in unison with the other soldiers to accomplish the state mission.

War should not be praised or desired, but it can be the means in which the *telos* of *Geist* is accomplished. According to Hegel, the Geist of a community transitions from tribal or familial structures to a more organized, collective framework (Patterson, 2017, 98). In this perspective, civil war represents the crumbling of the Geist, marking a regression to tribal, clan, and family structures. This situation casts a paradoxical light on the concept of progress, which appears inextricably linked to violence. The dichotomy between tribal societies and structured societies seems to be resolved through organized violence, such as that conducted by armies during war. Consequently, violence serves both as a threat and as a mechanism that secures the structure of society. It is a threat when the society falls into un-distinction leading to a civil a war. And it secures society's cohesion when the violence is retained within specific institutions: either the institution of the sacrifice (Girard), or the institution of police and army (Hegel) or the institution of legal system (Benjamin).

2.2 Burning Differences

The play *Incendies* (2003)—in English, *Fires*—written by the Lebanese theatre maker Wajdi Mouawad, focuses on the devastation that civil wars ignite. The Lebanese civil war and the invasion by the Israeli army serve as the backdrop to a terrible event that involves a mother and her child. In the play, we follow two siblings, a brother and a sister, who embark on a quest to understand what happened to their mother when she was still in her native country. The play parallels the real life of the author, who left Lebanon as a child and emigrated to Canada with his family.

The play starts in Canada, with the mother having died, and her two children returning to her native country[3]. The quest of the two siblings consists of finding their father and their brother. When their mother was a teenager, she had a son who was taken away from her. Years later she tries to find him. This journey to find her son leads the mother to a dreadful culmination. The terrible discovery that the two siblings are making is that their father is also their brother: in a series of events the mother has been imprisoned, and the perpetrator who tortures her and rapes her is nothing else than her son who was taken away when she was younger. The climax point is the un-differentiation between the mother and the son, and likewise Oedipus Rex, the war that devastates the country is on a second plan. In the Greek tragedy, the un-differentiation between the child and the parents, Oedipus killing his father and sleeping with his mother, is what causes the plagues that devastate the country. It is tempting to think that perhaps what causes the plagues in the mother's native country is the fact that un-differentiation among families can happen. In this perspective, the ending of the play is striking: the mother

who faces the son in a trial set in Canada does not ask for revenge, but simply for acknowledging who they are. She aims to re-establish the 'difference,' and by doing so she re-establishes their lost dignity.

2.3 Carnage!

In line with the theme of the previous play but from a totally different angle, Yasmina Reza's *God of Carnage* (2008) reverses the question of violence and differences. The play has a completely different mood; it is a comedy that sarcastically tears down the moral conventions and the façade of well-off people. The play starts with two couples meeting. It is a traditional bourgeois comedy with unity of space: the living room of one of the couples, unity of time: one evening, and unity of action: the discussion among the two couples. The two couples do not know each other, but they are meeting because their 11-year-old children go to the same school, and one of them has beaten the other and broken his teeth. The parents want to discuss the incident in a so-called civilized way, as they like to repeat. To brighten up the evening, coffee has been made and a pie has been baked.

Although both couples appear to be wealthy, differences emerge. The husband of one couple is a lawyer working for a dubious pharmaceutical company, while the wife of the other couple is an academic researcher writing a book on the massacre in Darfur. The researcher's husband comes from a humble social background and is a self-made wholesaler. The lawyer's wife is a wealth manager, taking care of her husband's finances. It is the wealthy couple visiting the researcher's home. Behind the respectable façades, two worlds collide: the world of finance, where profit is the main goal, even if it involves questionable choices, and the world where ethics apparently take precedence. The situation is further complicated by the fact that it is the researcher's son who has broken the teeth of the wealthy couple's son. This reverses the parents' roles: the son of the alpha male has been beaten up, and the son of the ethical parents is the violent one. Thus, it is not just a matter of two children fighting but also the worldviews of their parents being at stake. Can the wealthy father accept that his son has been beaten up? Can the genocide researcher accept that her son is violent? Although both couples wish to find a communal and rational solution, clashes arise due to their different social classes.

The comedy of the play lies in the tension between maintaining the mask of civilized persons and moments when the characters behave selfishly and childishly. This is the mechanism of the comedy: these four adults, who condemn their children's infantile behaviour, behave worse than the kids. While it is clear from the beginning that the situation will degenerate, the question is to what extent it will do so. As the evening progresses, their discussion touches on loaded topics such as sexism, racial prejudice, and homophobia. The play reaches its climax when the adults become like beasts, biting and beating each other without restraint.

The production I saw was performed at Keski-Uudenmaan Teatteri in May 2023. Here, I wish to point out two notes from this particular production. The first was the absolute delight the actors experienced in performing this play, especially when it degenerated and the four actors acted like animals, jumping on sofas, and covered in blood. In a discussion I had with one of the actresses just after the show, she expressed her joy in embodying this character and becoming violent. I wonder what made them so ecstatic. Was it the shift from respectable characters making hard attempts to maintain the mask of civilized, well-educated, and empathetic persons towards the release of their animalistic impulses? Similarly, the spectators also enjoyed watching the characters dive into their darkest spots. A sense of delight was shared in the theatre between spectators and actors. The notion of pleasure in performing and watching violence is examined later.

Here, I would like to reflect on the second note. At the very end of the play, when all social masks have been ripped off and the characters are in a liminal animalistic state, the child of the researcher's couple calls their parents. The kid, who was supposed to stay overnight at a friend's place, is homesick and wants to come home. The house is in complete disarray, with blood, vomit, and spit everywhere. Furniture is destroyed. The mother gently tells her child to make an effort and stay at the friend's place for the night. The child is worried about the hamster that has disappeared and wonders how it will survive and what it will eat. In the original script, only the mother has this final dialogue on the phone with the child, but in the Keski-Uudenmaan Teatteri version, this dialogue became a collective discussion where all four parents participated, trying to figure out what the hamster could eat in the woods.

> She'll eat … she'll eat leaves … acorns, horse chestnuts … she'll find things, she knows what food she needs … worms, snails, stuff that drops out of trash cans, she's like us, she's omnivorous … See you soon, sweetheart.
>
> (Reza, 2016, 57)

Suddenly, after this explosion of violence, the differences were wiped out, and what remained was the characters' most profound sense of humanity: the care for their children. They finally came together and shared a sentiment of love. They all spoke very gently, listening to each other with care. Does this suggest that violence, when openly embraced, serves as a channel that erases social constructs and allows the most profound sense of humanity to emerge?[4]

The very final line seems to indicate that, in their new humanity, they must reinvent themselves:

> MICHAEL. What do we know?
>
> (Reza, 57)

This aligns with Girard's argument that violence, when not properly channelled, returns in a more destructive and pernicious way. At the beginning of the play, the four characters wear their social masks and behave in a civilized manner. However, this well-mannered behaviour hides the structural violence of social class disparity. Only the release of this violence and the collective beating of each other allowed them to surpass these barriers. This surprising ending parallels the ending of *Blasted*, examined in the previous chapter. In both plays, the experience of violence seems to allow the protagonists to rediscover a new form of humanity that brings them closer.

However, I would consider that the spectators' experiences—one traumatic, the other ecstatic—generate different perceptions of the plays. In Kane's play, it provides a sense of a dystopian future where only broken humans will survive. In Reza's play, a comical sense of utopia seems to prevail: if only we would allow ourselves to beat each other from time to time, we would let the social masks fall.

2.4 Consciousness Out of Context

Girard stresses that nowadays humans are struggling between two positions: on the one hand, there is the idea that all humans are equal and societies strive for an undifferentiated state of law; on the other hand, humans tend to create islands of strong differentiation within society. Girard refers to these two positions as the contrast between the ancient and the modern. The *ancient* refers to a system based on differentiation, while the *modern* refers to a system based on undifferentiation.

The Italian neuroscientist Franco Fabbro examines the evolution of human organization (Fabbro, 2018). He particularly focuses on the transition from hunter-gatherer communities to agrarian and city structures. The latter led to the universalization of values, such as the promotion of universal human rights (what Girard calls the *modern*), while the former promoted clan laws and group interests (what Girard calls the *ancient*). The emergence of cities (7,000 years ago) is a relatively new phenomenon in human history (1.8 million years). According to Fabbro, the human brain took millennia to develop and adapt specific awareness that helped humans live in clan communities. The emergence of cities promoting different values must be considered a shock (Fabbro, 86). It is therefore understandable that, within city structures, humans tend to re-create clan culture. This clash is not without problems. Fabbro argues that hunter-gatherer societies created stronger ties among clan members but maintained a constant war-like relationship with other groups (Fabbro, 85). The agrarian revolution, which developed cities (and universal values), allowed the emergence of states and later empires that secured stability and peace within their territories. However, this also created a sense of loss and alienation among individuals, who longed to re-create clan-like connections. Additionally, the concentration of power in nations led to the creation

of more destructive weapons and more mechanical and technological ways to apply violence. As Fabbro pointed out, the last century has been the most violent in terms of the number of victims (Fabbro, 107–111).

This is, to some extent, what anthropologist Robin Fox describes in his book *The Violent Imagination*, where he argues that the problem of violence today is a problem of consciousness out of context. He suggests that human consciousness is still at the level of development of the Pleistocene era (2,500,000 to 11,000 years BC). Since then, technological development has been too rapid for the brain or consciousness to keep pace. According to Fox, humans today still behave as if they hold sticks, but in reality, they handle machine guns and atomic bombs.

2.5 Violence and Humanity

René Girard, starting from textual analysis, offers a formidable interpretation of the sacrificial ritual and its repercussions in a community. However, the jump from ritual practice to an aesthetic representation of such practice—in our case, a theatre performance—is left unquestioned. Girard seems to assume that, if it is possible to extract indications about the sacrificial ritual from the theatrical text, then the link going in the other direction, from the ritual to the theatre event, is obvious. In other words, if it is possible to trace back to the foundational violence, to the primordial event that precedes the theatrical representation, then the opposite does not need to be demonstrated.

However, it is worth examining what happens in the transition from the ritual to the representation of the ritual when the sacrifice is no longer accomplished but represented or even dramatized into a story. Agamben, by referring to Philo of Alexandria (Agamben, 2008, 30), points out the unreliability of the human condition. Agamben wonders: how can I be sure that what you say is true? How can I be sure that your actions mean something for the community? From this perspective, humans constantly need to make their actions and words credible. This search for credibility, for the significance of actions, is a condition of anxiety that defines humans' struggle to assert themselves as members of a community or belonging to a site.

In this sense, humans need to find the initial action that would certify this belonging to a community and this presence in the world. They need to find a foundation act that would testify their anchoring to reality. Similar to Girard, Agamben considers this initial action in the oldest of religious practices: the sacrifice (Agamben, 1991). However, unlike Girard, Agamben does not consider violence as a human feature that needs to be deviated. For Agamben, violence is the very initial action that defines the human condition:

> The unnaturalness of human violence is a historical product of man, and as such it is implicit in the very conception of the relation between nature and culture, between living being and logos, where man grounds his own humanity.
>
> (Agamben, 107)

The foundational action, the sacrifice, is the action that determines violence within the human sphere. According to Agamben, philosophers and thinkers have tried to absolve humans of their violence, to find justifications and meanings explaining it. However, violence, as the foundational action that grounds humans and gives them credibility, is something that cannot be absolved. The unbearable mystery is that the sacralization of life derives from the sacrifice. The artistic transposition of this mystery should not be understood as an attempt to aestheticize the barbaric ritual but, on the contrary, as an attempt to rediscover this mystery and reconnect with foundational violence.

Agamben, in order to examine the relationship that literature maintains between the act of telling and the mystery that generated this need to tell, refers to the story told by Gershom Scholem at the end of his research on Hebrew mysticism (Agamben, 2014, 7). The story narrates that when Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism, had to accomplish a difficult task, he went to a specific spot in the woods, lit a fire, said the prayers, and what he wished for happened. When, a generation later, the Maggid of Mezritch faced a similar problem, he went to the same spot in the woods and said, "We don't know any more how to light the fire, but we know the prayers," and everything happened according to his wish. Another generation later, Rabbi Moshe Leibovitz of Sassov was in the same situation. He went into the woods and said, "We don't know any more how to light the fire, we don't know how to say the prayers, but we know the place in the woods, and this should be enough." And in fact, it was enough. But when another generation passed and Rabbi Israel of Ruzhin faced the same problem, he stayed in the castle and said:

> We don't know any more how to light the fire, we don't know any more how to say the prayers, we don't know anymore where the spot in the woods is, but of all this, we can tell the story.

And once more, it was enough.[5]

Agamben stresses that this tale can be perceived as an allegory of literature; in its historical process, humanity moves further away from the sources of the mystery and slowly loses the knowledge of what the *fire* taught. But from all this, humans can still tell the story. What is left of the mystery is the story, and "this should be enough." The last comment from the rabbi, "this should be enough," is difficult to understand. Agamben wonders if it is really credible that we can be satisfied with a story that no longer has any connection with the *fire*. By saying, "but of all this, we can tell the story," Agamben points out that what is told are all the steps in losing the *fire*; it is a narration of the entire process of losing the *fire*. What is told is the story of forgetfulness, the loss of the *fire*, the loss of the prayer, the loss of the location, the loss of mystery. Agamben concludes that all narration is the memory of the loss of the *fire* (Agamben, 9).

I would be tempted to establish a parallel between this explanation provided by Agamben and the process of theatricalizing the ritual of sacrifice.

In this perspective, it is possible to suggest that ancient Greek tragedy is the memory of the loss of foundational violence. It is not an attempt to step away from the bloody ritual, to civilize it, but on the contrary, it is an effort to rediscover its mystery and what led to the loss of its mystery—the story of the loss of foundational violence that brings together the community. As examined in the first chapter, Agamben connects violence to the search for mystery and the foundational act. The presence of violence in a cultural artefact (theatre piece, movie, video clip) could then be read as a desperate attempt to anchor society, to find a ground on which to attach a community. It is a scream asking: is this real?

It becomes evident that the sacrifice and the narration of the sacrifice (what we now call drama) or, in other words, the mystery and the story of the mystery, are two indispensable aspects of ancient Greek tragedy. But how is it possible that one element, whose presence manifests the irrefutable evidence of the loss of the other, can attest to the absence or even avert the memory? Where there is drama, the sacrifice is gone; where there is mystery, the story cannot yet exist. In this impossible situation, the narration of the loss is the narration of a crisis. The representation of the ritual of the sacrifice in a theatrical event is the display of the crisis of the sacrificial event. The whole question then is: is this enough? And if so, in what way? Or for what purpose?

2.6 The Perverse Sacrifice

The Italian psychologist Massimo Recalcati identifies two forms of sacrifice: one he calls symbolic sacrifice, which will be discussed in the next chapter, and a second, he calls *fantasma sacrificale*. *Fantasma* in Italian can mean either ghost or fantasy in the sense of hallucination, vision, and thus delusion. In this context, the sacrifice is perceived as a self-delusion. I will translate *fantasma* as perverse sacrifice. The perverse sacrifice emphasizes the action of cutting (from the definition of sacrifice: *sek-*, to cut) and makes this removal the very goal. It is important to distinguish between sacrifice and perverse sacrifice. Sacrifice is an action that a community performs towards another individual, where the victim does not choose to be killed. In the case of perverse sacrifice, an individual deliberately decides to self-sacrifice. The person willingly chooses to embody the role of the victim, willingly choosing to sacrifice themselves.

According to Recalcati, the refusal of pleasure defines the perverse sacrifice, and this very refusal of pleasure, of enjoying life, becomes the extreme masochistic form of pleasure. The perverse sacrifice elevates the renunciation of life as the highest form of life. In the perverse sacrifice, the sacrifice does not appease violence, as René Girard argued, but on the contrary, it simply demands more violence; it demands more perverse sacrifice. And the demand is made in the name of an unclear ideal that exists outside the life of the

individual. The person engaging in perverse sacrifice sacrifices their life for something unclear, usually presented as having a higher purpose than mere existence.

Massimo Recalcati points out the economy of exchange behind such an attitude: the person sacrifices their life to get a better reward later. It is a logic that justifies self-harm and self-violence. This logic, when scaled up, brings about fundamentalists ready to sacrifice themselves for the good of the race, the cause, or the religion. This logic exalts those who have sacrificed themselves as heroes, avengers, punishers, and retaliators. Recalcati notes that the logic of the perverse sacrifice places value not on the individual but on something external. This external something is what Lacan defines as the Other—a set of constructed values, images, imperatives, and models that loom over an individual's life, which Recalcati links to the notion of the Superego.

Recalcati points out that every human being is free, but this freedom is hard to deal with because it means that, in every choice, the individual is alone. There is no one to dictate what is right to do. It is the decision of each person, and each person is left alone with their choices. Freedom is thus a very frightening position that offers no consolation. It is therefore understandable that humans, in the face of freedom, prefer to follow a set of rules and values provided by an external authority, to follow someone who dictates the right decision, someone who can console, someone who embodies the role of the Other, the role of the commandment.

Agamben furthers this notion in his essay *What Is the Commandment?* (Agamben, 2017). Agamben refers to a scene described in the novel *The Standard* by Alexander Lernet-Holenia. Towards the end of World War I, an Austrian officer of the transnational Austro-Hungarian army is shocked to notice that his commands are not obeyed by a Hungarian regiment. The Austrian officer consults other officers, bewildered and unsure of what to do in the face of this mutiny. He hesitates, and when he is about to give up, he finds another regiment from another country ready to follow his orders and open fire on the rebellious regiment. A command given by an officer to soldiers is fulfilled by the mere fact of being uttered. Whether the soldiers obey or not does not question the validity of the command. The commandment is perfect by its mere utterance. Agamben continues by affirming that power is defined not only by its capacity to be obeyed but also (if not mainly) by its capacity to give orders. A power ceases to be effective when it stops giving commandments. A power that gives orders will still find a few people ready to follow the commandment. Agamben concludes by claiming that, if a power is unable to give orders, that is the only moment when power collapses. He claims that this is what happened when the Berlin Wall fell on 9 November 1989. The obedience did not stop; it was the command that ceased.

From a psychological point of view, this means that the soldiers stopped following the Other when the Other no longer functioned as an authority. It is evident how fragile the position of the Other is and, as Recalcati explains,

how this Other can be taken or replaced by any value system. Humans are willing to sacrifice their lives and submit to an Other providing security. Recalcati claims that we are more willing to sacrifice our lives, to renounce our desires, and to submit to an Other rather than face the abyss of freedom and choose to fulfil our desires (Recalcati, 2017, 71). This renunciation creates aberrant situations where individuals decide not to fulfil their desires and simultaneously become envious and resentful towards those who choose freedom and pursue their desires. The economy of this sacrifice consists of the following transaction: I renounce fulfilling my desire, and something bigger should happen to me later. I can also place myself above others because I have chosen a life of sacrifice. Therefore, as Recalcati points out, the sacrifice is not a pure sacrifice but a form of exchange.

For Nietzsche, this has been the cleverness of Christianity: by making God human in the form of Jesus Christ and making him die for our sins, it places the believer in a position of eternal debt that they must repay through continuous sacrifice (Recalcati, 57). It is a pernicious contract imposed upon individuals: the debt of God's death is impossible to repay. The logic of following the rule of the Other can reach a paradoxical position where an individual is more willing to fulfil someone else's dream than their own. According to Nietzsche, a person prefers to let go their own freedom and their own dreams so that they do not have to face the anxiety of choices. The person transforms their own anxiety into a non-choice: the person renounces their own life and decides to fulfil someone else's vision. The psychology of mass movements, like Nazism, exploited this logic, where the concept of identity was defined by the degree of sacrifice. Hitler, in his book *Mein Kampf*, reiterated the spirit of sacrifice that the Aryan race was capable of. According to him, the Aryan race is able to submit their personal interests in the name of the majority, of the state (Recalcati, 97). Inferior races are dominated by personal interests and instincts; they are the mark of a life without consistency. In contrast, the Aryan person, who is able to sacrifice themselves for the good of the state, is the image of a superior life on which human civilization is built.

Sixty years later, Putin, during a public debate, had a similar discourse describing the Russian race as being able to sacrifice itself for a greater good (Gessen, 2017, 437). It is evident how the logic of the perverse sacrifice is reused and turned inside out: give me your life, and you will be rewarded by belonging to a superior race. The problem resides in the willingness to submit. As we have seen in the previous chapter with the example of De La Boétie, in *Discourse on Voluntary Servitude*, by accepting submission, violence finds its legitimization.

2.7 Theatrical Suicide

Suicides are not necessarily violent acts per se. Suicide could be even a relief for someone. However, in this discussion on representation of violence, I consider it beneficial to examine suicide as a violent act of someone taking their

own life: a form of self-inflicted violence. As Camus stated, suicide is perhaps the only genuine philosophical question (Camus, 1975, 11). Dramatized suicides, whether on stage or off stage, are not only acts of violence but also powerful theatrical events that often crystallize the entire play. The significance of suicide permeates the performance. One of the most famous examples is Ophelia's suicide, which impels Hamlet to finally confront Claudius. Even though Western culture is dominated by the Christian church condemning suicide, dramatized suicides do not respond to such criticism. For instance, Ophelia, Juliet, and Romeo are not condemned for their suicides. Despite the Christian condemnation, suicide tends to carry the ancient Greek and Roman attributes of dignity and honourable death (Edwards, 2007, 105).

As Marlena Tronicke points out in her research, *Shakespeare's Suicide*, suicide is often correlated with the question of free will and determinism of the character. Additionally, the decision to stage the suicide on stage or off stage, even if it does not affect the dramaturgy, changes the audience's impression of a character. Although men tend to commit suicide on stage and women off stage, this paradigm is not solely about gender. The method of suicide also affects the perception of the character. Tronicke discusses the ways in which Romeo and Juliet kill themselves: Romeo by drinking poison and Juliet by stabbing herself with a dagger. Tronicke reads the play as a reversal of gender roles, where Juliet acquires male attributes and Romeo more feminine features. According to her, drinking poison is usually associated with a woman's death, while stabbing is associated with a man's (Tronicke, 2018, 35). Therefore, the final suicides are not only the deaths of the two lovers but also statements about gender paradigms.

In *Titus Andronicus*, one of Shakespeare's most violent plays, the humiliated Lavinia, who suffers from rape and mutilation, is denied the possibility of suicide. She does not have the choice to reclaim her agency and dignity. In this play, the idea of suicide as a manifestation of free will is demonstrated *ex negativo* (Tronicke, 19).

However, this notion of suicide as an expression of free will is contested in the following two case studies. In both plays, *Death of a Salesman* and *Europe Connexion*, the suicide (in the first case) or auto-destruction (in the second case) seems to be a manifestation of personal determinism but turns out to be a trap in which the protagonists fall.

In Arthur Miller's *Death of a* Salesman (1949), the protagonist, Willy Loman, is a mediocre businessman who cannot cope with his failure to achieve his ambitions. He projects his unrealized ambitions onto his son, Biff, who does not want to follow his father's path. Instead of accepting this, Willy refuses to accept Biff's desires, to the point of distorting the reality and wanting to believe that his son will absolutely try by all means to follow his steps. Since the family cannot afford Biff's tuition, Willy devises a scheme: he will buy life insurance and then die, so the insurance money can pay for Biff's education. Miller vividly depicts Willy Loman's obsession, to the point of sacrificing his life for his son.

What is evident here is the tension between structural violence and individual violence. Willy Loman embraces the narrative of self-sacrifice. The mediocrity of his life is redeemed by this act of sacrifice; he finally earns enough money to provide for his family, paying for the house and Biff's tuition. He believes he has achieved his dreams. However, latent in the play is the fact that Willy Loman is trapped by the obsession with material success. This invisible structural violence is transferred onto the individual. Willy did not have to apply violence to himself or commit suicide; he had a family, a home, a loving wife, and two children. But in his mind, these are not sufficient measures of personal success or happiness. The structural violence that pushes individuals to measure their happiness according to social status drives them to do anything, even engage in violent means, to gain the reward of belonging to the circle of the successful. In Willy's perspective, suicide is meaningful. The justification of his suicide masks the harsh reality of the structural violence sustaining the society in which Willy lives.

A contemporary adaptation of Arthur Miller's play is *Europe Connexion*, written in 2015 by Alexandra Badea. This violent play illustrates how the mechanisms of power circumvent democratic institutions. Written as a long, seamless monologue, the play follows a lobbyist at the European Parliament who works for a large agrochemical company. His job is to ensure that a special law favouring the agrochemical company is passed by the European Parliament. To succeed, he employs various stratagems to combat different adversaries. He battles against special ethical and ecological commissions that examine whether the company respects environmental regulations. He also needs to discredit an ecological activist favoured by the media, who contests the new law for promoting the ruthless agrochemical company.

We follow how the lobbyist navigates through different media storms and waves of popularity that define political life at the European Parliament. The strength of the play lies in plunging the spectators inside the European Parliament; it is a terrifying journey into the cerebral cortex of a lobbyist. The implacable logic of speculation, destruction, and ruthless strategies also applies to his own life, which ultimately ends in total burnout and the destruction of the lobbyist persona.

Similar to Willy in Arthur Miller's play, the protagonist in *Europe Connexion* does not recognize that the implacable logic of speculation transforms his life as well. He believes the battle is among humans and that he can defeat others, but he fails to acknowledge that, by fighting, he feeds a structural system of profit based on a neoliberal economy that expunges everything, including the human beings who work for it, in the name of gain. The life of the lobbyist is sacrificed to ensure that the logic of gain continues. Each time he defeats his adversaries and believes he has succeeded; he also defeats himself. The more he serves his company and ensures its prosperity, the more he destroys himself.

3 Violence and Community

Let us now question how this notion of sacrifice is applied in the praxis of making theatre. Erika Fischer-Lichte's book *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual* offers interesting considerations of the notion of performative sacrifice. Her work examines at length mass performances by Max Reinhardt, the Olympic Games, the Soviet mass spectacles, the Nazi Thingspiel movement, and the Zionist performances in the USA. Here, I will limit the discussion to Max Reinhardt's work and the Olympic Games and suggest how Fischer-Lichte's examination could be applied to contemporary theatre.

The word sacrifice, as seen in the definition, implies the notion of removing something. This entails the idea that something is in excess and needs to be cut away. Erika Fischer-Lichte prolongs this idea and applies it to the performance: the performance needs to display an excess in order to activate the sacrifice. In this case, it is the performers who are performing an excess. This excess is primarily an excess of energy, an excess of the actors themselves, an excess of their own limits. The performers by going beyond their own boundaries, they accomplish the *sacred cut* that departs them from the spectators: the performers sacrifice themselves. However, the sacrifice, meaning the performance of excess, is not an end in itself but rather a means to establish a community. As we have seen previously, sacrifice is understood as the catalyst for the institution of the community.

In Max Reinhardt's production of Sophocles' *Electra* in 1903, the performance ended with a frantic, energetic, wild, feverish dance that symbolized the death of Electra, interpreted by the actress Gertrud Eysoldt. Critics reported that the audience was astonished by Eysoldt's performance; some were ecstatic while others were repelled (Fischer-Lichte, 2005, 2). Even if the spectators were divided, everyone agreed that Eysoldt had crossed a boundary. This boundary, as Fischer-Lichte explains, is the line that "the actor has to draw through acting should differentiate more or less clearly between the violence that is done to the character being played and the actor's own body that does not actually suffer from such violence" (Fischer-Lichte, 4). In other words, a division must be made between the actor's body (private body) and the character's body (fictional body). These two bodies can also be called the phenomenological body (the private body) and the semiotic body (the fictional character's body).

In a traditional theatre setting, the audience should not feel threatened by the actor's integrity. Even if a fictional character is killed on stage, as spectators we must know that the actor is safe. We cannot accept, as spectators, to witness silently the real murder or injury of a person. This apparently was not the case in Eysoldt's performance, as the spectators were troubled. Eysoldt commented that, when she read the play, she was broken by what happened to Electra. She felt extreme violent distress and wanted to find a way to manifest the violence that she felt. Fischer-Lichte comments that, as

a result, "she sacrificed her integrity for the sake of the impact of the performance." In this view, she sacrificed herself. During the performance, two kinds of sacrifice were performed: the sacrifice of Electra and the self-sacrifice of the actress Gertrud Eysoldt. It was this second sacrifice that "transposed the spectators into a hypnotic state" (Fischer-Lichte, 9).

It is important to mention that what Eysoldt did also endangered the primacy of the text. In a context where European culture of the late 19th century was primarily a text culture, and where literature from ancient Greece was highly regarded, disrupting the linear narration of a Greek drama with the exaggerated outburst of the body was a provocative gesture that put text and performance into tension.

3.1 The Performance of Excess and the Controlling Gaze

Max Hermann (1865–1942), who published his 20 years of research on early German theatre history in 1914, claimed that what defines theatre as an art form is not literature but performance. He even distinguished between the two by asserting that dramatic text is the matter of an individual, while theatre is the matter of a collective, of a community (Fischer-Lichte, 19). Performance in the cultural context of the turn of the 19th century was mainly considered an expression of primitive, exotic, and medieval popular culture, which displayed a spectacle of excess. In the late 19th century, new genres of cultural performance such as circus performances, colonial exhibitions, and striptease shows emerged (Fischer-Lichte, 20). However, these performances:

> did not determine the self-image and self-understanding of its members. Performances such as these were created to represent and embody otherness, i.e., that which the modern (male) European excluded from his own self-image. In these performances, it was exposed and displayed before his controlling gaze.
>
> (Fischer-Lichte, 20)

Essentially, what stands outside the modern Western subject becomes *otherness*. This *otherness* that Fischer-Lichte mentions is a form of excess that European culture tries to exclude from itself. I am aware of the possible confusion between the Lacanian *Other*, discussed in the previous chapter, and this notion of otherness introduced by Fischer-Lichte. Although both could be considered receptacles for something that stands outside the subject, they have different statuses. The Lacanian *Other* refers to the notion of authority, while Fischer-Lichte's *otherness* encompasses all those bodily or behavioural manifestations that are considered unacceptable by Western morality.

The tension between body and text has a critical impact, for it should not be simply reduced to a dichotomy between body and mind. In fact, as Fischer-Lichte points out by referring to Judith Butler, "performances do

not express something that pre-exists, something given, but they bring forth something that does not yet exist elsewhere but comes into being only by way of the performance that occurs" (Fischer-Lichte, 20). The display of a text implies the existence of a pre-given order to which we must submit. In contrast, the display of bodies represents the experience of encountering, negotiating relationships, and defining a community.

The emergence of this new form of theatre focusing on community (body) rather than the individual (text) is likely a cultural response to societal changes. The turn of the century was characterized by two opposing developments: on the one hand, increased industrialization and urbanization creating anonymous masses, and, on the other hand, a strong emergence of individualism. The clash between the new cult of the individual and the anonymous masses endangered the whole social system. Moreover, the division of labour introduced by industrialization fragmented the social fabric. Therefore, new forms of integration and bonding were needed. According to Fischer-Lichte, theatre provided an answer. Quoting Hermann, she claims that "theatre appeared to be capable of transforming individuals into members of a community" (Fischer-Lichte, 30). Although the community experience was temporary (lasting only for the duration of the theatre event), it was nevertheless a community: a bodily co-presence of actors and spectators that generated an experience of community. However, this community experience was made possible only through the self-sacrifice of the actress.

3.2 Strong Energetic Bodies

Most of Max Reinhardt's (1873–1943) performances dealt with transitional identity. A hallmark of his performances was the occupation of space by the masses (actors moved everywhere, even into the spectators' space), the use of technical devices (music, lights, smell) to create strong atmospheres, and dynamic, energetic bodies moving throughout the space (Fischer-Lichte, 50). Fischer-Lichte emphasizes Reinhardt's ability to create strong atmospheres that impacted the spectators. "It was their atmospheric effect which dominated over any kind of symbolic meaning" (Fischer-Lichte, 57). This very atmosphere allowed spectators to live a special experience and temporarily belong to a community generated by the theatre experience. As long as the performance lasted, individuals from different geographical, social, religious, and political backgrounds were bound together.

Reinhardt, instead of relying on a theatre based on illusion that required the audience to remain seated and immobile in the darkness, wanted to create a theatre that infected the spectators with strong, energetic bodies. Like powerful machines emulating new steam power, performers electrified the space with their wild dances[6]. Most of all, what overwhelmed the audience was the excess of violence on stage, previously unknown. Reinhardt bridged a gap between elitist culture and popular culture, transforming the so-called sacred

texts into mass events by blending highly regarded drama with circus-like means, emphasizing the body and providing thrill and entertainment.

Alongside the idea of vitality and excess, Pierre de Coubertin (1863–1937) believed that to respond to the social crisis of the turn of the century, a new religion requiring new rituals and ceremonies was necessary. By proposing to reintroduce the Greek Olympic Games, he suggested celebrating "the religion of muscles" (Fischer-Lichte, 70). Coubertin associated the myth of Pelops' dismemberment and rebirth with the implementation of specific behavioural rules during the games (sexual abstinence, diet of cheese and figs, etc.), suggesting that the Olympic Games were performed as a rite of passage—a ritual of initiation. In this view, it was not texts and monuments that established a bond between individuals but performative means only—the rituals of the religion of sports, the cult of excess. Additionally, the strong emphasis on atmosphere enhanced the experience of the rituals: there was a clear orchestration of music, movements, and symbols (such as the lighting of the Olympic fire) designed by Coubertin to create a sense of solemnity, a sacred ceremony, and quasi-religious feelings (Fischer-Lichte, 79).

However, there is a paradox with the Olympic Games. On the one hand, they celebrate the fundamentals of the survival of the fittest, praising self-assertion and the affirmation of the autonomous individual. On the other hand, they acclaim emotions, passions, and liberate the body's potential in a society that tends to regulate bodily behaviour. This ambivalence has likely made the modern games so popular. Another aspect that made the Olympic Games attractive was that these festivities, celebrating the body and the individual, established a kind of parallel world, a heterotopia. This new world did not aim to replace the existing one; it just existed every four years during the Olympic Games. The Olympic Games presented themselves as a form of utopia where humanity could regenerate and reconnect with higher values that, according to de Coubertin, modern society had abandoned. The Olympic Games "presupposed the possibility to reshape modern society in a way that its negative consequences were abolished without changing the fundamental principles of industrialism and capitalism" (Fischer-Lichte, 86). It is noteworthy that the performance of excess also facilitated the emergence of a sense of community among the spectators.

3.3 A Feeding Loop

When World War I broke out in 1914, one of the reasons that can explain the prevalent enthusiasm in most European nations was the feeling of a loss of identity. "There was a widespread belief that war would purge Europe, which was willing to make sacrifices for such a holy cause and bring about a new spring" (Fischer-Lichte, 89). After the war, after thousands and thousands were killed, each nation insisted that these victims sacrificed themselves for a holy cause and that these heroes must be remembered. However, the

war did not bring the expected new spring. On the contrary, the war demolished traditional cultural and political orders. The social distress and disarray gave rise to violence. Critics usually consider mass spectacles as a response to this societal violence and suggest that they were inventions of totalitarian regimes to manipulate the masses and control this distress. Fischer-Lichte suggests, instead, that these mass spectacles responded to a "deep yearning for communal experience" (Fischer-Lichte, 90). There was a desire, a need to be reassured that "even in times of upheaval and change, history will never cease to be a continuum and that by its very course, it confirms the community's identity rooted in and guaranteed by its history" (Fischer-Lichte, 92).

Fischer-Lichte claims that the success of these mass spectacles and their ability to establish a community among actors and spectators were due to the fact that they were performed during liminal times. This notion of liminal time remains rather vague in Fischer-Lichte's discourse. According to her, liminal time is a historical moment when a society finds itself in transition. For instance, the turn of the 20th century to World War I was a moment when societies were changing and looking to redefine their identities. In such moments, individuals long to reconfigure their ties with the community. Fischer-Lichte concludes by asserting that the Soviet mass spectacles, the Nazi mass spectacles, and the Zionist pageants "exposed impressive similarities on the performative level, while on the semiotic level, i.e., in terms of cultural, political contexts and prevailing discourses, they seem almost incomparable" (Fischer-Lichte, 204). This last comment, however, is rather surprising. It seems that on a semiotic level they also shared a similar narrative: the notion of sacrifice and martyrdom. The narrative of sacrifice, self-sacrifice, and violence has been, in my opinion, the key factor that allowed the community to be united. On a symbolic level, the display of victims (or martyrs) generates a feedback loop among the witnesses-spectators. The violence inflicted on the victims spiritually wounds all the members of the victim's community. The sacrifice made by community members has been made for all the members of the community. Therefore, in both situations, either as victims or as martyrs, the rest of the community is called to strengthen communal ties and respond, for the sake of the community, to the violence—either by engaging in a process of revenge or by carrying out further sacrifices.

Before continuing the discussion on mass spectacle and its contemporary adaptation, I would like to digress on the narrative of revenge connected to the instrumentalization of victims. I recall attending a conference titled "After Tragedy" organized by the international group Performance Philosophy at Austin University. Professor and playwright John Patrick Bray presented a lecture performance titled *First as Tragedy, then as Exceptionalism: Art and Memory after 9/11*. In that lecture performance, he combined personal memories of the day when the Twin Towers were attacked with reflections on performances he had attended afterwards, which attempted to address or heal from that event.

John Patrick Bray emphasized the importance of not being told how to remember that dreadful event. He rejected the idea that his memories of September 11th should be instrumentalized and transformed into a hegemonic narrative for a political agenda, namely the War on Terror. As he concluded the lecture performance:

> NEVER FORGET! I've woven the chant 'never forget' throughout the paper. It was a declaration by our media (including news reports and Hollywood blockbusters) on how we were supposed to remember and observe, until whatever it is they wanted us to remember would be a surrogate for our lived experiences. I won't forget, but I won't let society dictate how I'm supposed to remember.
>
> (Bray, 2024)

After the 9/11 attacks, the philosopher Ida Dominijanni, in dialogue with Judith Butler, explained that the United States suddenly found itself vulnerable. The inability to accept this vulnerability led to the aggressive reaction of the Bush administration. The trauma of the attack was not collectively processed but was transformed into a narrative of revenge, summoning American citizens to unite in a battle against an unspecified enemy. As we know, this created more violence (Repubblica, 2024).

Let us go back to the previous discussion. Nowadays, it is possible to note traits inherited from the mass spectacles described by Fischer-Lichte in contemporary theatre (late 1990s and early 2000s): most prominently, the use of chorus in theatre performances and the presence of violence. At the end of the 20th century, there was a noticeable resurgence of forms of choric theatre in contemporary performances, but the image of a harmonious collective group of humans has been replaced by the disenchanted representation of a group of alienated people (Fischer-Lichte, 241). Rather than displaying a self-organizing community defining its own identity and placing itself within a historical continuity, the contemporary representation of the chorus shows individuals shaped by consumerist society, sharing unified and globalized dreams.

We could infer that the use of the chorus in the mass spectacles was a means to urge the audience to join in the collective bond. It was, in this view, an affirmative agency. In the contemporary shift of the chorus, it displays the tension between the individual and the community: the longing to affirm oneself and the need for one's existence to be acknowledged by those around them. As pointed out by Hans-Thies Lehmann, in contemporary post-dramatic theatre, dialogues are approached as monologues. The characters are not engaged in conflictual exchanges but rather speak next to each other, as if their speeches are merely added together, all in the same direction. After modern drama, which obliterated the chorus to glorify the emergence of the bourgeois individual, contemporary theatre responds by pushing the phenomenon of the bourgeois individual to its limit, displaying an assembly of people lost in their individuality.

The contemporary shift of the chorus is to display a paradox: the accumulation of these bourgeois individuals recreates, with their cacophonic desperate screams, the sense of a chorus. Christoph Marthaler, Bob Wilson, Peter Stein, Alain Platel, Rodrigo Garcia, and Pippo Delbono are among the most famous theatre makers who, during the late 20th century, presented this form of contemporary choric theatre where absurdity coexisted with anxiety. However these forms of ambiguous chorus (trying to establish a community but being isolated in their own alienation) reveal an alienated chorus devastated by the structural violence of neoliberal societies. Perhaps the presence of the chorus in these performances could be seen as the longing for something that the violence of ruthless capitalism worshipping individualism has torn apart. Or in response to the War on Terror political agenda, a longing for a sense of community without having a hegemonic discourse instrumentalizing togetherness.

3.4 From Represented Suffering to Experienced Suffering on Stage

If we look at the structure of traditional drama (or Aristotelian drama), there is often a protagonist and at least one antagonist. Customarily, the protagonist and the antagonist are in *agon*, or in other words, in conflict or struggle. Even the terms prot*agon*ist and ant*agon*ist contain the word *agon*. Protagonist means the first combatant, and antagonist is the one opposing the protagonist. In ancient Greek comedies or tragedies, this *agon* took the form of opposing principles. For instance, what opposes Antigone to King Creon is the law of the polis (King Creon) against the law of the clan (Antigone). Similarly, what opposes Clytemnestra to Agamemnon is matriarchal law (Clytemnestra) against patriarchal law (Agamemnon). Thus, we could say that theatre is a display of conflicts, and therefore there has always been a fascination with suffering, pain, agony, and violence. This interest is not simply a morbid pleasure in the pain inflicted on others. St. Augustine describes the power of seduction that violent games have on viewers. The sociologist Wolfgang Sofsky tries to interpret this power and excitement as an attempt to overcome personal fears (Sofsky, 1998, 56). Hans-Thies Lehmann pointed out how the notions of terror and pity, which since antiquity have defined the delightful backdrop for tragic bodies, do not have the same impact in modern and postmodern society (Lehmann, 2006, 62). Nowadays, terror and pity (*eleos* and *phobos*, as defined by Aristotle and reused by Schiller) are translated simply as laments (or weeping) and tremor (or frisson). Lehmann claims that the representation of suffering is the evocation of the unrepresentable, or what Bataille calls the ob-scene (the off-stage). This is perhaps one of the biggest challenges of theatre: the attempt to display the incomprehensible (the not-understandable) through the body. The body is the carrier of the memory of suffering; besides individual traumas that each of us bears, the body is already the place of suffering where culture disciplines and imposes its paradigms.

We have previously seen in the examination of mass spectacle the shock of real suffering embodied by the actress Eysoldt. Before that turning point, the mimesis of suffering imposed that torture, torment, and physical pain should be pretended. The real sensation of suffering should have been aroused among spectators but not actually performed; the suffering and violence should have been only pretended. However, contemporary theatre, or post-dramatic theatre as defined by Lehmann, brought to completion the process initiated by the work of Max Reinhardt. The understanding of mimesis in post-dramatic theatre is that it is no longer a mimesis of suffering (an imitation of suffering) but a mimesis to suffering (an imitation towards suffering). The novelty of post-dramatic theatre is the transition from represented suffering to suffering experienced on stage: physical, strenuous actions performed on stage, actions placing the performers in real dangerous situations, performers addressing spectators' ethical stances. Spectators in front of these types of performances have to renegotiate their position as spectators. The tacit agreement between actors and spectators, where spectators can witness terrible actions and thoughts on stage without feeling responsible for them and thus not urged to intervene, is questioned by these new types of performance.

The theatre group La Fura dels Baus, during their theatre parades, physically aggressed the spectators who had to find ways to escape the performers. The theatre maker and choreographer Wim Vandekeybus and Jan Fabre pushed their performers to execute vigorous actions until reaching a level of exhaustion that brought them to their physical limits, creating real danger for the performers' integrity. Romeo Castellucci exhibited bodies that were either sick or altered. Elizabeth Streb, with her group Extreme Action Company, explores the potential and limits of physical actions. Felix Ruckert explores real sadomasochistic acts (slapping, biting, whipping) on stage. The experience of suffering and concrete bodily danger places the body at the centre as the medium for contesting and transgressing societal norms and power structures.

In 2013, the Colombian performer Raul Vargas Torres created a physical theatre performance called *Yo Soy Usted (I Am You)*. Created in Switzerland, it toured in Finland, Colombia, Mexico, Hungary, Germany, and Lithuania. This show playfully and tragically combines autobiographical elements referring to the violent history of Colombia. The performer, Raul Vargas Torres aka Néné, juxtaposes symbols of power, abuse, and entertainment in a carnivalesque manner. What is impressive, and here is the possible lineage traced from the actress Eysoldt, is the special dramaturgy that does not focus on the narrative (Aristotelian) but rather on the body. Torres considers that dramaturgy should be a display of bodies at risk, which he calls the impermanent body. In his show, and in all Torres' performances, the body is key to displaying danger, tumult, crisis, and the experience of being in this world. The dramaturgy consists of a transition from one state of the body's energy to another. Similar to Eysoldt, Torres offers his body without compromise,

urging the audience to respond somatically. However, Torres does not aim to impart tragic or cathartic feelings but rather to summon a carnivalesque response to life. The performance, rather than being a display of narrative and thus placing the spectators in a clear position of detached observation, becomes a disturbing experience for the spectators. The use of violence is not a means to shock or attract spectators but an enticement to bring them into a liminal space. The performance aims to reconfigure the position of the spectators, almost physically engaging with them. In this experience, spectators find themselves in a situation of transition (Fischer-Lichte, 254). They are urged to redefine their concept of aesthetic experience and their sense of relating to others or to otherness. In this view, by offering spectators an experience of excess, violence, and liminality, the show aims to infuse a sense of potentiality and urge spectators to break free from the condition of alienated individuals.

3.5 Methodological Violence

The Swiss playwright Friedrich Dürrenmatt wrote in 1955 a play, *The Visit of the Old Lady*, which is a grotesque and cruel transposition of the Greek tragedy *Bacchae*. The play starts with the villagers of a small Swiss town, Güllen, celebrating the arrival of the old, famous, and rich lady Claire Zachanassian, who returns to her native village for revenge. She offers 1 billion Swiss francs if the villagers kill Alfred Ill. Many years earlier, when Claire was very young, she was engaged to Alfred Ill. She even became pregnant. Instead of acknowledging paternity, Ill paid two drunks to claim they had slept with Claire. Humiliated and considered a prostitute, the young woman had to flee the village. Over the years, through a fortunate marriage, she became very rich.

At first, the whole community is scandalized by Claire's proposal. Moreover, Ill has become a prominent person in the village. However, Güllen is no longer the important village it once was, and the villagers are suffering from this downturn. In the days following Claire's proposal, Ill notices that the villagers are spending more and more money. He realizes that they are already investing in his potential death. A new euphoric state emerges in the village, and everyone starts hoping that something will happen to Ill. Finally, the villagers all meet and collectively kill Ill.

Claire's role is similar to Dionysus in *Bacchae*; she is the one inducing the sacrifice. The villagers of Güllen, in this collective murder, regain their unity. However, Dürrenmatt's agenda is not so much concerned with the hidden mechanisms of violence in a community but rather in examining the mask of morality. Güllen, behind its scandalized attitude, is ready to sacrifice one victim to restore its lost order. It is interesting to note that unlike *Bacchae*, where the killing of Pentheus is carried out by an ecstatic chorus out of control, the killing of Ill by the villagers happens calmly, almost in a civilized manner.

Here, we can point out a possible contrast between the understanding of violence in ancient times and the 20th-century experience of violence. In *Bacchae*, violence is often linked to the notion of aggression, where the human becomes a wild beast. However, the Second World War introduced another form of violence: one that is organized, planned, and methodical. This led Hannah Arendt to define the banality of evil: ordinary men, behaving like bureaucrats, exterminating millions of people, and having in their mind not the ethical issue of having exterminated human life, but solely the need to please their superior. This contrast between aggressive violence and calm, civilized violence is discussed in the next chapter.

3.6 The Birth of the Hero

The Russian play *The Drunks* (2009), by brothers Mikhail and Vyacheslav Durnenkov, follows a similar grotesque approach to *The Visit of the Old Lady*, aiming to display the mechanism of building a community through ritualistic sacrifice. In a provincial town in Russia, the local mayor wants to seize the opportunity of the return of shell-shocked soldier Ilya from the Chechen war to turn him into a hero. He hopes this political manoeuvre will earn him credit and help him get re-elected. However, when Ilya arrives home from the hell of war, he is beaten up and thrown off a train for being drunk. When he finally makes it home, he discovers his wife has cuckolded him with a new man and is informed that he will never see his son again.

Later, Ilya finds himself caught between the mayor and the chief of police, who are both competing for the next election. The mayor and the chief of police use him, the future hero, for their personal interests. The mayor wants to make a public celebration of Ilya's return and use it as propaganda, while the chief of police keeps Ilya in jail by all means to prevent the mayor from making the public celebration. Eventually, Ilya is killed in a bar fight. With Ilya's death, the mayor can finally publicly celebrate Ilya as the dead hero the town was longing for. The transformation of a simple person into a hero gives the town a symbol of dignity that was lost among its citizens. Ilya is the poor victim sacrificed for political and egotistical needs. He is not a hero in the sense that he willingly sacrificed himself for the sake of his land; he is the true victim, despised, humiliated, and beaten by all. Yet, in a Girardian turn, he farcically saves the community. Naturally, he does not save anything. He is used by the power system to elevate the image of the ruling class.

What is displayed here, and this is the strength of the play, is the empty rhetoric about heroism. Heroes are not celebrated as ethical models but are instrumentalized for political means, as unifiers of the community. As soon as the power system chooses Ilya as the hero, it becomes clear that it is better for everyone that he dies. There are many historical examples of individuals becoming national heroes the day after their death. For instance, the Swiss hero

Wilhelm Tell represents the spirit of insurgence and resistance against the tyrannical Habsburg dukes. Wilhelm Tell, punished by the duke and forced to shoot an apple placed on his son's head with an arrow, eventually encouraged the oppressed population into open rebellion against the duke and led to the famous pact of mutual defence among the three founding Swiss cantons. The legend tells that Wilhelm Tell, after leading the insurrection and liberation, died while trying to save a child who was drowning in the Schächental River in the canton of Uri. Here again, the hero had to die to remain an iconic and imperishable model.

The list of such heroes is long. My youth was influenced by the presence of Che Guevara, but we can also include Jean-Paul Marat, Abraham Lincoln, Joan of Arc, Lenin, and, of course, Jesus. Moreover, the death and sacrifice of the hero for the community become a debt that future generations must pay. In this sense, heroes are used as sacrificial victims whose deaths are supposed to gather and strengthen the community.

4 Violence as Language

Hannah Arendt, referring to George Sorel, Frantz Fanon, and other philosophers and anthropologists, points out a certain line of thought that associates youth with violence. Violence brings the *élan vital*, the vital momentum, the vitality. Conversely, where there is life, there is struggle, battle, and fighting. Paraphrasing Fanon, Arendt claims that this tradition considers violent actions a prerogative of young people, those who are full of life. It is interesting to note that the paperback edition of Slavoj Žižek's book *Violence*, edited by Profile Books, displays on the cover a picture of a young man, full of life, in the *élan*, in the impetus of throwing something, possibly a stone. From the image, it seems that there is a revolt, and presumably, the young riotous man is attacking the police.

Žižek's approach to violence is mainly from a psychoanalytical point of view. He explores the ambiguous relationship humanity establishes with violence as part of the repressed sphere. Violence is the ugly but necessary substratum supporting civilization. Violence is then approached as a form of desire, either repressed, embraced, or projected onto otherness. The sense of violence as the expression of desire is reinforced by the witty and playful definition of this book's chapters as movements of a symphony (adagio, allegro moderato, andante ma non troppo, etc.). From this point of view, could we then wonder if the image of a young man, full of vitality, throwing stones, placed on the cover of a book about violence, is the expression of the desire to espouse violence as the performance of youth, of vitality, of vigour?

Following this line of thought, it is possible to identify several dramas that support this idea. Let us concentrate on three among them: Frank Wedekind's *Spring Awakening*, Edward Bond's *Saved*, and Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*.

4.1 Romeo and Juliet, Spring Awakening, and the Limit of Communication

In 2018 I was asked to direct *Romeo and Juliet* in the state puppet theatre of Latvia. When I got the request, I wondered what more could be said about *Romeo and Juliet*. Audience comes in already with so many expectations as a romantic love story. And, moreover, is it a comedy or a tragedy? At a closer reading, I noticed that in almost all the acts, Romeo and Juliet, for different reasons and in different situations, threaten to kill themselves. Of course, this repetitive invocation to suicide for different reasons enhance the comical aspect of it, but then with the final death of the two lovers in the last act, the play slides into the tragedy. When I started working on this project in 2017, there was the internet phenomenon of the Blue Whale. The Blue Whale was a mysterious group to which teenagers subscribed. It was led by an unidentified master of ceremonies who sent daily challenges to the subscribers. It consisted of 50 challenges, with the last one ordering participants to jump off a high building.

The Blue Whale became viral because several teenagers died by jumping off from a building. I then searched more into this challenge culture and realized that on the internet it was full of videos that teenagers were posting about different types of challenges—for instance, eating washing products, holding electric cables, burning their skin, lying down on the railway tracks under a passing train, etc. There was a strange tone in them, because they were posted as fun, usually the person underdoing the challenge was laughing, but they evidently flirted with death.

With the dramaturge of the play, Karlis Krumins, we interviewed the Latvian psychologist Nikita Bezborodovs, who specializes in teenagers' self-harm and suicide. He explained that everybody has self-destructive thoughts. According to him, the issue is not so much having such thoughts or desires but rather the continuum of these thoughts: how recurrent they are. If the subject is inclined to create a continuous narrative of self-harming thoughts, that might be worrying. I asked him about the challenge culture among teenagers. He answered that there might be several aspects involved: one is status pressure. If one person in a group does an especially risky challenge, all the members of that group might feel obliged to replicate it.

Another aspect is the ambiguous desire to test personal fears. We all have different fears, and for some of us, there is a longing to surpass these fears. A third aspect is to feel stronger. If an action is considered dangerous and I am able to do it, then I will be braver than those who are too afraid to accept the challenge. According to him, self-destructive behaviour among teenagers is a form of communication. The violence is a desperate need to express emotions that cannot find channels or articulation through speech. After this interview, the dramaturge and I discussed *Romeo and Juliet* and self-destructive thoughts with teenagers in a high school. We were surprised when the teenagers started to share intimate self-destructive thoughts with us that, as they

said, they could not tell their parents or friends. We were surprised that they shared this pain with us, two total strangers they had seen for the first time.

And so, this is how we decided to approach the suicide in *Romeo and Juliet*, and their repeated intimations to do it: not so much as the fight between the two families but rather as the response to the impossibility in communication between the teenagers and their parents.

Frank Wedekind's play *Spring Awakening* goes even further in the communication contrast between teenagers and adult. Here the communication is hidden behind the mask of morality, leaving the teenagers alone in the discovery of their own sexuality. What is brilliant in Wedekind's play is the fact that the lack of communication creates guilt among the teenagers who don't have positive figures or role models with whom to engage and share their concerns about what is happening in them. Adults instead of responding and helping the teenagers in dealing with their sexual anxiety, they are as lost and hide behind empty moralistic discourses. The play, written in 1891, is striking for its precursory themes: homosexuality, masturbation, abortion, teenage sexuality, and rape. This play is also pioneer in staging the crisis of representation: fragmented dialogues, frenetic episodes, distortion of naturalism, and characters inaccessible to each other's. One of the most compelling moments in the play is at the end of the first act when Wendia and Melchior discuss the fact that their friend Martha is beaten every night by her father. Wendia admits that she envies Martha's experience and asks Melchior to beat her. Melchior does it and even in the following act, he rapes her. Moritz, a friend of Wendia and so part of this group of youngsters, feels guilty for his recurrent erotic dreams. He thinks that this is a problem and the growing sense of guilt caused by his hunting sexual dreams will push him to commit suicide. The school administration, hiding behind exaggerated sense of pity and false notion of what morality is, tries to shift the blame of the suicide on Moritz himself. Eventually, also the other two protagonists of the play, Wendia and Melchior commit suicide. The power of this play is to present this tension between the emptiness of moral rhetoric and the struggle to face desire, sexual impulses, and morbid wishes. The so-called morality that is supposed to guarantee social cohesion is what creates the destructive violence. The needs of the teenagers are not listened and this non communication between generations is transformed into an unbearable guilt among the teenagers. The adults, instead of listening to what is happening to the youngsters, blame the youngsters even more for their sexual awakening, which is nothing other than a search for themselves. From the standpoint of the teenagers, only death becomes the solution to solve this tension.

4.2 Phatic Violence

What is striking in this play is the fact that language is not properly used. Language is not used as a channel for communication but rather as a way to

implement ideology (in the case of Wedekind's play: the bourgeois morality). Therefore, the teenagers must find other ways of expression. And the answer they find is to use violence. Žižek discusses the 2005 riots that exploded in several French cities which lasted for three weeks, plunging the French nation into a state of emergency. He comments that what characterized these revolts was the fact that nothing was demanded. There riots had no request, no target, and no agenda. He was stunned to see sociologists, intellectuals, and commentators trying to give a meaning to these riots. On several occasions, these riots were characterized as an attack to the values of the republic, or as Alain Finkelkraut claimed: they were an anti-republican pogrom and an ethnic-religious revolt.

But Žižek, as we saw in a previous chapter, warns against the hermeneutic temptation, which consists in providing message or deeper meaning to violence. For him, all these debates were missing the point: the point is that violence was used as a communication medium. The violence in the riot was used to make visible that there was a problem, and the problem was that these persons did not feel that they were part of the republic, they did not feel integrated. The violence was the medium and the medium itself was the message. By referring to linguistic Roman Jakobson, Žižek parallels the violence that exploded during these riots with the phatic communication. The phatic function consists in these attempts to keep the discussion alive even if there is no real content. The phatic function incorporates small talk about weather, ritualized formulas of greetings. Žižek, as example, brings this dialogue:

> "Well, here we are", he said
> "Here we are", she said, "Aren't we?"
> "I should say we are" he said.

The emptiness of the dialogue is to test if the other person is in contact with me. It is not important what is said; what is important is to check if the connection is happening. The phatic function checks simply if the channel is working. Žižek concludes that the riots in France were phatic communication. They attested to the presence of the interlocutor and checked if they were heard. "Hello, do you hear me? We are here!"

What lies behind this reading of violence as phatic communication is the implicit admission of language impotence. When language fails, other forms of communication are required. Franco "Bifo" Berardi, in his socio-political research on mass shooters, *Heroes: Mass Murder and Suicide*, points out a similar impotence of language. He indicates that often mass shooters consider the perpetrated massacre as a channel for their message to be heard. For the mass shooters; the message, the manifesto, the text, language itself, needs to be highlighted by violence. Berardi underlines that what brings together Pekka Auvinen, Anders Breivik, Cho Seung-hui, Dylan Klebold, and Eric Harris is their desire to be brought to the forefront of the media. Their violence is entangled with the desire to be broadcasted and visible, sometimes even to

a fantastical level. Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris, the two school shooters of Columbine, wondered which movie directors would make a movie about their massacre. Would it be Steven Spielberg or Quentin Tarantino? Finally, it was Michael Moore with *Bowling for Columbine* and Gus van Sant with *Elephant* who made movies about them (Berardi, 2016, 58). Nevertheless, their desire was fulfilled.

The paradox, claims Berardi, is that their atrocious desire is nothing other than fulfilling the neoliberal narrative of being successful. These individuals were on the margins; they felt like outsiders, not seen, not heard. They felt that, according to the aggressive hegemonic neoliberal narrative, they were losers. They had nothing to contribute to society, and society could not care less about them. Violence then becomes the means to become visible, to be heard. However, what is impressive is not simply pure violence. It is staged violence. These mass shooters orchestrated their massacres. They had a clear dramaturgy on how to conduct the operations. In their heads, the plans were repeated over and over. It already happened. They reified their desires through violence.

In this case, if violence is the concretization of a desire to negatively perform the narrative of success, then it is possible to understand why, after Breivik, the Nordic countries did not witness new mass shooters. The brutal killing by Breivik set the bar so high that no others dared to imitate it. It was no longer enough to kill 10 people; now it had to be at least 100. It is not only about violence; it is about the desire to shock that violence must reify (Berardi, 59).

As I write these lines (16 May 2022), I just heard on the radio that another mass shooting occurred in a supermarket in Buffalo, USA. This time, the killer, Payton Gendron, was wearing a helmet with a video camera recording and sharing the killing live on social media. (Sic.)

When we transpose this notion of violence as communication, or violence as the surrogate for language impotence, to the theatrical stage, we enter a very problematic and fascinating situation: we want to display the failure of language by presenting stories that expose violence as communication, and we do this by relying on a medium that is mainly based on language. Moreover, as we have seen earlier, the violence on stage cannot be truly performed. Therefore, we enter a strange loop that aims to show violence as the limit of language while using a medium heavily embedded with language and that can only represent simulated violence. Is this project doomed to fail? Or can we still learn something about violence and language? It is here that the notion of pleasure should probably be considered.

5 Violence and Pleasure

Wolfgang Sofsky, in his treatise on violence, points out that when the guillotine was used for the first time on 25 April 1792, its clinical and fast procedure left the assembled crowd disappointed. The new machine worked

perfectly, even too perfectly. The execution was immediate, leaving nothing for the spectators to see. They had no time to be horrified; there was no torture, no suffering. The executioner was reduced to a mere assistant pulling a trigger. Since the guillotine was adopted as the new democratic tool, and to compensate for the anticlimax and anti-spectacular beheading, the authorities transformed the whole guillotine event into a spectacle. The condemned were exposed through a public procession. The guillotine was elevated on platforms so that everybody could see it. The number of condemned beheaded on the same day increased considerably, and afterwards, the severed heads were shown to everyone. While the killing itself became clinical and clean, the atmosphere surrounding the event required a new dramaturgy to fulfil the craving for being horrified.

Sofsky insists on this desire to watch violence and the pleasure derived from such visions. He quotes Saint Augustine, who in *Confessions* comments on the temptations of violence. He tells the story of his disciple, Alypius, who, teased by his friends, wanted to prove to them that the gruesome spectacles in the Roman circus did not appeal to him. He went with his friends to one of these spectacles but kept his eyes closed, keeping his soul away from these atrocities. He should have closed his ears too, lamented Saint Augustine. An accident during a fight excited the crowd, which roared with clamour. Defeated by curiosity, and convinced he could dominate the temptation and still despise the dreadful events, Alypius opened his eyes. His body was pierced more fiercely than that of the gladiator; not only could he not take his eyes away from the bath of blood, but his soul drank avidly of the cruelty. He was no longer a man but part of the crowd, enchanting, screaming, and shouting with passion.

Sofsky notes the meticulous depiction by Saint Augustine of the transformation of his friend, particularly the magnetic fascination with the dreadful actions. He observes, as described by Saint Augustine, that in the case of someone witnessing violence, the fascination is with the action and not with the one who suffers the action. For Sofsky, the fascination of the spectators with violence is explained as witnessing a transgression. The spectators appreciate violence because the perpetrator does something they cannot do. They want to vibrate with the aggressor's energy. They desire something they cannot have, something they are afraid of. Thus, the spectators' enthusiasm is not only towards the violence itself but also frees them from their own terror. This is the irresistible power of violence, whose temptation cannot be resisted; spectators search for violence, but above all, they search for their own fear to be surpassed. By admiring violence, they are celebrating themselves, their own expansion and transformation (Sofsky, 1998, 102).

5.1 Shaking the Body

In line with Sofsky, the somatic and visual culture philosopher Max Ryynänen suggests considering violent movies not for the violence depicted in them but

for the physical experience they generate in the watcher's body. He calls these types of movies "somatic movies" because they can stimulate bodily reactions in the viewer. Ryynänen describes at length the physical reactions he experienced when watching films such as *Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2*, *Mission Impossible - Ghost Protocol*, and *Ichi the Killer*. His body felt itchy, his muscles tensed, and the soles of his feet became active. He even felt pain in his limbs (fingers, ears, tongue) when the same body parts were cut off from a protagonist in a movie. These excessive bodily reactions led him to think about his own boundaries and ways of being in his body.

Ryynänen claims that the act of watching violent movies has nothing to do with the violence present in the movie. For him, the experience or the knowledge gained is not about the content (sadistic pleasure) or context (satisfaction of establishing a theoretical frame explaining the emergence of violence), but in the bodily impact that violent movies can produce. He argues that we watch films to understand ourselves and to learn from our bodies (Ryynänen, 2022, 23). He compares this practice of watching somatic movies (violent movies) with Foucault's concept of the *Care of the Self*. Ryynänen stresses that Foucault's *Care of the Self* is not limited to a subtle and harmonious approach to the self but encompasses a broader approach to the body as a field for experimentation, similar to the bodily experiments that Stoics imposed on themselves. Stoics used to invent strange trainings, like the one described by Plutarch, where strenuous sport exercises were followed by serving a whole table full of delicacies, which were not meant to be eaten. The goal of such apparently absurd exercises was to explore the limits of the body. This idea was picked up by Foucault, who proposed gaining strength and self-control through flirting with one's own limits. In this sense, Ryynänen compares the bodily experience of watching somatic movies to a learning experience. He even wonders what the Stoics would have invented if they had had films to play with, enabling them to learn about themselves through them (Ryynänen, 19).

For Ryynänen, with horror, pornography, and fast-paced action films filled with visual tricks, films are no longer touching the audience for their narratives but for their somatic shock. Referring to Benjamin, he underlines the notion of shock, not so much as a condemnable commodity, but as a key concept for understanding modern culture: shock is a threat to the old, slow, upper-class, and cult-driven experience (Benjamin, 2008). In this perspective, the success of effect-driven films must be based on the way people enjoy being shaken up or forced to touch their limits (Ryynänen, 14). This proposal by Ryynänen could offer a different reading also of the visual and performance artist Hermann Nitsch. Nitsch was a leading figure of the Viennese Actionism. His performances often displayed nude bodies covered with blood. Often, his work had been criticized for nurturing fascination for violence, with the threat of desensitization to violence. However, it definitely forced the viewers to face their own limits and come to term with them. The suggestion developed by Ryynänen is deeply anchored in visual

culture and especially in movie analysis, but Susan Sontag also reiterates that in today's world, where people feel alienated or disconnected, they seek immediacy and an effect of presence. The content of the image (violent or sexual) is irrelevant as long as it provides the effect of immediacy and presence (Sontag, 2003, 6).

The artist and essayist Teemu Mäki, referring to Marquis de Sade, contrasts instrumentalized violence with cathartic violence. According to him, violence is most often framed as the result of previous experience or as a means to achieve something. This is what he defines as the instrumentalization of violence. Structural violence, which is violence that masks itself and pretends not to exist while destroying members of a community for the advantage of others, is instrumentalized violence. Additionally, the hermeneutic temptation to frame violence within a rational discourse of cause and effect is another form of the instrumentalization of violence:

> Structural violence doesn't have the kind of cathartic, orgasmic, life-affirming effect that for example martial arts violence can have. Violence that masks itself as anything but violence easily grows into a mountain. Instead the violence that is an end in itself, an embodiment of the will to power flowing as it is, conscious of itself, stays diminutive. Why? We need or find pleasure in experiences of winning, controlling or destructing others or ourselves. We need or find pleasure in losing ourselves in some bigger exuberant whole, forgetting ourselves, melting into something.
>
> (Mäki, 2000)

Similar to the description by Saint Augustine, Teemu Mäki also describes this desire for violence, or as he puts it, this desire for cathartic violence, as a desire to reach a limit, a transgression; it is the desire for transformation. This wish for an ecstatic experience of violence could be paralleled to the experience of the sublime professed by the Anglo-Irish philosopher Edmund Burke (1729–1797). Burke explains that there are certain experiences that provoke a sense of thrill, or shudder, even perverse pleasure, mixing fear and delight. These kinds of experience are what he calls sublime experiences. For him, the sublime is not an aesthetic experience of something beautiful, but rather the experience of something mighty, even threatening or violent, like for instance the experience of a tempest.

The passion caused by the great and sublime in *nature*, when those causes operate most powerfully, is astonishment: and astonishment is that state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror (Burke, 1968, 58).

For Burke, this experience of the sublime accompanied with terror or pain permits to transcend the inconsequential but nevertheless irritating daily struggle and offers to humans a perspective where pettiness is compared with infinity. The dreadful experience of the sublime is what empowers humans and allows them to overcome their everyday life.

Similarly to Burke's vision of the sublime, Mäki's proposition of a cathartic violence is what would allow humans to melt into a more vivid, exuberant wholeness. For sure, the praise of cathartic violence, as it is written here, is ambiguous and even slightly problematic. However, what I find interesting in Mäki's opposition between instrumental violence and cathartic violence is this distinction between violence for achieving ends and violence for the sake of violence. As long as violence is inscribed in a succession of cause and effect, it can be accepted to some extent, but when violence stands for itself, it becomes unbearable.

6 Conclusion

From the examination of this chapter, it is possible to infer that there is an impetuous necessity to explain why violence emerges. And if this need remains unfulfilled a sense of disarray pervades. Nevertheless, it is possible to point out at least three domains in which the occurrence of violence provides a vague sense of consequence—the violence cementing a community, through the collective sacrifice of a scapegoat (Agamben and Girard) or through the self-sacrifice of the performer (Fischer-Lichte), the use of violence as the last remedy to establish whatever channel of communication (Wedekind, Žižek, and Arendt), and violence as a form of pleasure to experience someone own's limits (Ryynänen and Mäki).

I would like to conclude this discussion of violence and its meanings by examining a play that brings us back to the beginning of this chapter. The play *Saved* by Edward Bond, written and performed in 1965, became notorious for being the last censored drama in England[7]. Much of the inflamed criticism revolved around the sixth scene, where a baby is stoned to death on stage. That controversial scene crystallized most of the debate, condemning the play for the gratuitousness of the dreadful action. The characters involved in that scene, Pete, Colin, Mike, Barry, and Fred, kill the baby out of boredom, for fun, because they have nothing else to do.

One of the actors from the 1965 original cast, Tony Selby, recalled a discussion with Edward Bond during rehearsals in an interview with *The Guardian*. Bond asked the actors if they understood the play. Selby, coming from a working-class environment, felt close to the characters. He remembered witnessing bored and neglected kids in his neighbourhood throwing stones at squirrels. For him, the step from a squirrel to a baby was only a leap of imagination. However, when the play was shown to a limited audience in a club to bypass censorship, critics were horrified. Jeremy Kingston in Punch called it "one of the nastiest scenes I have ever sat through." *The Telegraph*'s W. A. Darlington felt:

> no sense of horror, no dramatic illusion. I knew there was no baby in the pram, just as I could see there were no stones in the actors' hands. My only emotion was a cold disgust at being asked to sit through such a scene.

Philip Hope-Wallace from *The Guardian* remarked that it was "more horrible than anything in The House of Fred Ginger [another 1960s play about infanticide], if no more horrible than some episodes in Titus Andronicus."

What is surprising is that, even though Hope-Wallace compared the cruelty of *Saved* to that in *Titus Andronicus*, *Titus Andronicus* never suffered from any censorship. In *Saved*, there are three deaths in total, two mentioned and one performed on stage. In *Titus Andronicus*, there are 14 deaths, nine of which occur on stage, six characters have severed limbs, and there is at least one rape (if not two or three), one live burial, and one case of cannibalism. Yet, *Titus Andronicus* never faced the same fierce criticism as *Saved*. I would like to examine the cause of such different receptions of these two plays.

In *Saved*, we follow the adventures of three characters: Pam, Len, and Fred. Len falls in love with Pam, and they have sex. Len is a good guy, ready to commit to Pam, but Pam is attracted to Fred. Pam becomes pregnant by Fred, but Fred rejects her and the baby. One day, Fred and some pals kill the baby. Fred goes to jail. When he is released, Pam still wants to be with him, but Fred has another girlfriend. Throughout this time, Len remains close to Pam. The play ends with Pam and Len living in the same house with Pam's parents. When it comes to the actual violence, there are three key moments: in scene three, Pete informs his friends Colin, Barry, and Mike that he must attend the funeral of a boy he intentionally ran over. In scene six, the already mentioned stoning of the baby occurs. In scene eleven, Pam's parents have an argument, and the mother breaks a teapot on her husband's head. While the crude language used by the characters contributed to the censorship, the violence in this play cannot be compared to the graphic violence that erupts in almost every scene of *Titus Andronicus*.

In *Titus Andronicus*, the story of revenge is brought to absurdity: the Roman general Titus Andronicus returns from war with four prisoners who vow to take revenge against him. They rape and mutilate Titus' daughter and kill and banish his sons. Titus kills two of the prisoners and cooks them into a pie, which he serves to their mother before killing her too. The Roman emperor kills Titus, and Titus' last remaining son kills the emperor and takes his place. In my perception, the main difference between *Saved* and *Titus Andronicus* is that the violence in *Saved* lacks impact or justification. After Pete kills the boy with his car, he shows no signs of affection or remorse. Similarly, when Fred is released from jail, he remains unchanged. For Pam, the killing of her baby does not alter anything. All the characters remain the same before and after the killing.

In *Titus Andronicus*, although the characters perform horrible violent actions, their actions are dramaturgically justified. We have already discussed the fallacy of the notion of justified violence in Chapter 1. Here, I am limiting myself to examining the idea of accepted violence according to these narratives framing violence. Moreover, in *Titus Andronicus*, not only are the violent actions justified by the logic of revenge, but also the characters who commit these cruel actions are punished for their deeds. Therefore, in *Titus Andronicus*, the violence is framed within a specific narrative. The problem

with *Saved* is that the violence is not framed at all; it is just there, and the characters are indifferent to it. There is no justification for this violence—no narrative of revenge, no narrative of justified violence, and no narrative of social injustice or class discrimination. Nothing. This is probably what shocked the most: the inability to accept gratuitous violence. Violence needs to be inscribed into a specific narrative, into a continuum of cause and effect; otherwise, it becomes an excess, a transgression that cannot be accepted.

What is intriguing about *Saved* is the title itself. Who is saved? What is saved? Are some persons saved? Is something saved? Does the title imply a Christian reading of the play, suggesting that the killing of the baby is a form of sacrifice? Bond insists that the play is optimistic, claiming that the final scene, which plunges Pam, Len, and Pam's parents into general indifference, is a positive ending. But in another interview, Bond also affirmed that it is the baby who is saved. He is saved from growing up in a neighbourhood that offers nothing but violence. He is saved from becoming like the hopeless, brutal characters in the play. Bond also wrote a manifesto about violence, where he claims that violence is something humans inherently know. He uses the metaphor of a dog swimming: dogs know how to swim, but they do not need to. It is only if their masters throw a stick into the water that they go swimming. Similarly, as Bond argues, violence is inscribed within humans, but they do not necessarily have to use it. It is the social situation that elicits the use of violence, or not.

Notes

1 The play *The Pimpson* was created at Q-Teatteri, Helsinki, in February 2023, directed and written by Lauri Maijala. I have seen the show performed at Tampere Workers Theatre, during the Summer Theatre Festival, at Tampere on 8 August 2023.
2 At the moment of writing this text, the play was not yet published. I have seen the show on 16 January 2019 at the city theatre of Ghent. Therefore, my citation is based on the memory of the show I have seen and the notes I have taken after watching the performance.
3 Even though the play does not explicitly reference the mother's native country, it is clear from various allusions that it is Lebanon, the native country of the author.
4 This is a slippery argument that unfortunately in the past it has been used for atrocious doctrinal means. One example is the Italian Futurist movement, very close to the Fascist regime, who considered violence and war as a purifying measure.
5 For further reading on this Hasidic tale see also: Cooper, Levi, 2014, "'But I Will Tell of Their Deeds': Retelling a Hasadic Tale about the Power of Storytelling", *Journal of Jewish Thought & Philosophy* (2014): 127–163.
6 Probably, it was the spirit of the time. Similar ideas were being expressed simultaneously by Meyerhold in Russia and by the Futurists in Italy.
7 This censorship episode could perhaps offer a different approach to the notion of staged violence. Often the debate about staged violence examines its efficacity from a dramaturgical point of view. But for sure, it would also be interesting to examine the question of violence and censorship. For instance, was violence during the ancient Greek tragedies placed offstage because of dramaturgical and aesthetical choices or because the representation of violence was censored? Implying that the state wanted to determine the degree of visibility of violence in the society?

3 Images and Violence

This chapter describes three practical explorations developed during the postdoctoral artistic research with the students of the Theatre Academy of Helsinki.

The structure of this chapter reflects the chronological sequence of three practical explorations: the first one was organized in the fall of 2017, the second in the spring of 2018, and the third in the spring of 2019. The first exploration, Re-staging Violent Images, aimed to yield to the notion of violence and trauma. The second exploration, Fun Violence, aimed to provoke the idea of violence and approach it from a reversed standpoint by marrying the ideas of violence and pleasure. The third exploration, Playing the Victim, explored a nuanced idea of violence.

In the first exploration, Re-staging Violent Images, the purpose was to examine aspects of narrative emerging from violent images, with a special focus on the corollaries of trauma. After discussing the process of re-staging violent images, the study focuses particularly on one image that links the advertisement industry with violence. It aims to explain this link by discussing the notion of the body as symbolic sacrifice. Eventually, this chapter examines whether the advertisement industry, and especially perfume advertisements, through the display of violent images, attempts to commodify a kind of longing for the body.

Prolonging the thoughts developed in the first exploration, the second exploration, Fun Violence, brings forwards the notion of body and pleasure, interrogating what happens when violence is performed on stage devoid of any moralistic or contextual discourse.

The last exploration, Playing the Victim, considers violence as a form of manipulation, which, dramaturgically and acting-wise, offers more nuanced facets. The notions of narratives, trauma, sacrifice, and pleasure, which have been discussed in the previous chapters mainly from a theoretical point of view, are now reconsidered from a practical perspective through these three practical works.

Compared to the previous chapters, this chapter reverses the research process: starting from practical work, it develops a theoretical framework to

DOI: 10.4324/9781003519881-4
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further analyse the representation of violence. In doing so, this chapter also aims to demonstrate the very nature of artistic research, which, in my understanding, is a continuous intertwining of academic enquiry and practical work. The theoretical enquiry examines the practical work, and the practical work tests the results of the academic enquiry.

1 Performing Trauma: The Re-staging of Violent Images

In 2012, the documentary film *The Act of Killing*, directed by Joshua Oppenheimer and co-directed by Christine Cynn, was released. The film investigates the Indonesian mass killings of 1965–1966, during which nearly a million people were killed in a communist purge. The movie follows Anwar Congo, who led one of the deadly killing squads. In the documentary, Anwar and his friends recall the killings they carried out, boasting that they were inspired by Hollywood mafia movies. Not only were they inspired by the movies, but, as they claim, they were even better than the movies. Forty years later, they want to re-stage the killings to show filmmaker Joshua Oppenheimer how good they were. However, during one of these re-stagings, Anwar, who for fun plays one of the victims, starts feeling uneasy. The re-staging of his dreadful actions hits him, and he begins to question what he has done.

What seems disturbing in the documentary is the constant reference made by the torturers to movies, especially Hollywood movies, war movies, and above all gangster movies. These killings in 1965 were part of a desire to imitate fictional movies (or even to surpass them, as one of the perpetrators boasts). What was significant was not so much the killing itself, but the mise-en-scène of the killing. The person killed was dehumanized and became an object, even less, an image that participated in the scene staged by the killers. The killers, too, did not see themselves as humans anymore but as characters, as movie stars acting in a film. They saw themselves as images.

Inspired by this exceptional movie, I considered with students the possibility of exploring the performative power of images, especially violent images, by re-staging violent images found in the media. In this investigation, we aimed to explore what we could call a limit experience. Theatre director Milo Rau describes his hypnotic fascination with images he considers violent. He can stare for hours at such images, as if staring would help him enter that world and understand why this violence exists. In many of his performances, he re-stages either images, movies, or real-life events. He believes that imitating an event or an image can help understand reality (Milo Rau, 35–36).

Michel Foucault wrote extensively on how violence, and, by extension, a power system, expresses itself mainly on the body. The structural repression of a power system imposes its violence on bodies and displays this violence as theatrical images (i.e. public executions, decapitations, or hangings), which are part of a precise staging of fear (Foucault, 1977). In this sense, violent images could be examined as a theatrical communication of a power system.

But this has already been widely discussed. Here, we will examine violence not as the communication of a power system but rather exploring the effect of seeing (or, as we will see later, performing) violent images. This is a shift from conceiving violent images as instruments used by a power structure (for terror and control) to considering violent images as phenomena of closeness, trauma, and consciousness.

My initial question was why some images are considered violent? And especially, what kind of knowledge can we acquire by watching violent images? As a theatre director, I was curious to examine an aspect of human behaviour that we could consider 'extreme.' I wondered how actors can understand a violent situation and how they can 'embody' such extreme situations. The first association with violence is to perform aggressive behaviour: someone attacking someone else, someone forcing themselves onto someone else. However, I wondered if it would be possible to examine alternative ways to explore performing violence, especially a situation far from everyday life experience, a situation that could be considered a limit experience, something unfamiliar.

With photographer Keme Pellicer, we researched many violent images seen in the media. Pellicer proposed ten different violent images and let the students[1] choose according to their spontaneous gut-feeling reaction. Four images were selected. These images were iconic violent images, very far from our reality and, at the same time, almost familiar because we have seen them over and over. They were extreme: the moment when a Vietcong insurgent is shot in the street by a general (a lapidary execution by General Loan), a woman held as a trophy by a group of male French resistance fighters (the infamous shaved women of Chartres), an American soldier pulling an Iraqi prisoner naked with a dog leash (at the Abu Ghraib camp), and a woman being buried alive (stoned to death). These images are common for their ubiquitous replication in media, and at the same time, they are tremendous.

The most problematic aspect is that these images haunt us because we don't know what to do with the emotions they create. We know them, and the vision of them is unsustainable; we want to stop them, for them not to exist. The difficulty lies in what to do with the emotions generated by these images. Notorious was the instrumentalization of shocking images for propaganda during the Yugoslav Wars (1991–2001). For instance, images of the Markale massacre in 1994 or the Vukovar hospital massacre in 1991 were used by opposite armies to instigate patriotic sentiment and blame the enemy for the massacre.

Philosopher Max Ryynänen examines at length the bodily response to watching violent movies. He develops a discourse of somatic vision that involves notions of body response and distance. In line with Susan Sontag, who wrote that images do not produce knowledge but simply haunt us (Sontag, 2003, 126), Ryynänen claims that somatic movies appeal not so much to raise pathos among spectators but rather to elicit a physical response. In his proposal, somatic movies do not rely on a make-believe situation or narrative but just trigger gut responses to the seen images (Ryynänen, 2022). In

opposition to this, he discusses the notion of distance developed by Kant. The distance, as Kant claims, allows viewers to enjoy any image, even dreadful catastrophes, from afar—they can become pleasurable. Although Ryynänen limits the notion to the geographical distance of the viewer (Ryynänen, 2016), I would like to extend this notion of distance, of being safe, to something more intangible, related to the ethics or emotions of the watcher: a theoretical framework placing the watcher in a safe position permitting them to cope with the violence present in the world. This distance could then be understood not only as a concrete geographical distance between the viewer and the event but also as an abstract plane that creates an emotional distance between the viewer and the event. This abstract plane could be defined as a theoretical frame that rationalizes these emotions.

In this sense, it could explain some surprising reactions people have towards violent images: some people simply deny them, some prefer to release the tension through jokes or actions, and others watch these images as a test to prove personal resistance to frightening pictures. I believe that most of us need to create a distance from these images; we cannot simply watch them. They do not just haunt us; they also affect us, and this affect is what transforms the body.

With the students, we re-staged these iconic violent images and re-photographed them. After re-staging and re-photographing them, we conducted theatre improvisations based on these images. The idea was to animate and explicate these traumatic events through re-staging and improvisations, as an attempt to reformulate a possible narrative for events that exceed the possibility of understanding. Inspired by psychiatrist Sandra Bloom, Patrick Duggan's research on trauma, and Nicholas Ridout's discourse on ethics, we considered that witnessing other traumas through these images might help fill the gap of our own psychic trauma of disconnectedness from the world. Bloom points out that survivors of traumatic events need to transform the traumatic event into some form of narrative to heal from it. Transforming the experience into a narrative allows the person to share the traumatic experience with others and consider it as something belonging to the past, rather than existing in the ever-present now (Bloom, 1999, 6). Additionally, Ridout suggests the possibility of awakening empathy and ethical concerns among spectators by re-situating the same images of suffering or trauma circulating in the media in theatrical situations (Ridout, 2009, 58). However, in transforming trauma into narrative, and especially in appropriating someone else's trauma, there is an element of ethical responsibility, particularly when it comes to the production of cultural objects. This does not imply that traumatic events shaping individual or collective imaginaries and determining a community's structure of feelings cannot be addressed in theatre. These attempts are necessary but need to be respectful to avoid trivializing the trauma (Duggan, 2015, 179).

The work then consisted of projecting the re-photographed images on a screen. In front of the projected image, students re-staged these images live

and improvised what the characters in the image could have felt, thought, and seen. These improvisations pushed the students to explore these images from different angles: from the perspective of the perpetrators, the victims, and the photographer. During these improvisations, the students developed monologues of what the characters they embodied might have said, thought, or felt in that particular situation. Our aim was not to be documentary in the sense of being as accurate as possible; the work was purely fictional. The actors were encouraged to invent what they felt. The goal was not to determine what happened that the picture does not tell, but rather to explore possibilities of occurrences, episodes, and events that might have led to that situation or were generated by it. We were not attempting to be factual but used the image to explore possibilities for developing narratives.

Two main points were under scrutiny during these improvisations:

1 Could the students make such an effort of imagination to portray themselves in such extreme situations?
2 Can we understand something more that the picture does not say? And if so, what?

The association of the picture projected on the background screen and the students improvising in front of the image creates a clash of temporality that is not without interest. Zoja, reflecting on the temporality of images, compares the stillness of an image with the movement of narrative (in movies or theatre). For him, movies or theatre plays bring the spectators into a present time, allowing for the make-believe (the suspension of disbelief, as Coleridge defines) to happen. In a movie or theatre situation, characters are evolving in front of the spectators, and the action is happening right now; there is the illusion that spectators and performers share the same temporality. In contrast, the pictures, and Zoja adds also documentaries, have already happened. The image that the viewers are watching is not happening now; it comes from the past (Zoja, 2018, 19). The photographic image throws the spectators into the past. In this sense, the juxtaposition of projected images and the same situation embodied by the students in front of the image creates a tension of time and narratives. It is happening in the past and right now. The spectators are participating in both the documentation (image) and the process of developing narratives (improvisations) about the image. This dynamic oscillation between the two temporalities stimulates the spectators' perception and compels them to actively participate in the search for understanding what might remain unsaid in this violent image.

1.1 Art and Destruction

I remember in 2010 Jean-Luc Nancy gave a lecture at the contemporary art museum of Helsinki, Kiasma, titled *Body as Theatre* (Elo and Luoto, 2018). Nancy started by examining the moment of waking up, especially the instant

of becoming conscious of seeing. He wondered where the seen image finds its location in the body: "Where do I perceive this image in me?" He noted that the image is strangely located not in front of him, not in his eyes or the centre of his head, but somewhere at the back of his skull, almost behind him. "The encounter with the world happens behind me," he said. Later in the lecture, referring to his book *Corpus*, he stated, "the body always forces us to think further" (Nancy, 2008). I could add, not only further, but even outside the body. When you think about what your own body has experienced, you must place yourself both inside and outside yourself. This idea, or better to say, this image appearing at the back of the skull, finding its location in the body, almost outside the body, haunted me since I attended Jean-Luc Nancy's lecture. This concept likely inspired the exercise of re-staging pictures discussed in this chapter. I was interested not only in finding where an image (the image of the world) finds its location in the body but also in how images affect and modify the body.

When we look at an image, it seems that, as viewers, we understand what is happening: we see an armed person shooting a defenceless person. We immediately label who is the perpetrator and who is the victim. However, the reality surrounding the image is far more complex. The re-staging of these violent images, especially the improvisation linked to re-staging, as explained previously in the exercise with the students, opened up complexities that the image alone could not convey. It was what Nancy explained in his lecture: we place bodies in the images, and their presence forces us to think and see further. The improvisation and the presence of bodies introduced a narrative that helped us understand the situation rather than be haunted by it (as Sontag claimed). After this experience, with the photographer Keme Pellicer and the students, we explored how to re-shoot these re-staged images with a twist so that they could relieve us instead of haunting us.

Something about distance is at stake in these images: they disturb us because they come too close on an emotional level. We need to create a mental or emotional screen to push them a bit further so that we are not disturbed and can look at them. At the same time, for something to be productive and trigger knowledge (and not just haunt), it needs to come even closer to us—not closer to our skin, but closer to our reality, making it familiar so that, as viewers, we can decipher what is not in the frame. The idea was to introduce everyday objects or elements from our lives to bring these violent situations closer to our reality and make them less haunting (less dangerous or traumatizing) while retaining the image's importance (brutality, violence). This twist is a bizarre turn we aimed to apply to the images.

Before continuing with the process description, I need to share a peculiar and revealing experience that brings us back to Susan Sontag's statement. I was invited to an MA seminar on visual culture and contemporary art to discuss the research process done with the Theatre Academy acting students. When I presented the images, which were only a step in a larger process, some MA students reacted aggressively. These students, without knowing

the whole process, stated that the method was wrong, ethically questionable, and wondered why we wanted to produce more violent images when there are already enough. I was surprised because the criticisms echoed the very reasons that initiated this work. I wanted to offer an alternative discourse to the presence of violent images in our everyday life. I tried to develop a process of thinking through practice and shared the practical research to foster a discussion on violence. However, the reaction was unexpected and confirmed Sontag's statement: the images triggered an explosive reaction, and the debate closed. Students entrenched in their opinions, and their judgements were sealed. No discussion ensued. The images simply haunted the viewers. The discussion polarized: some students argued that violent images create more violence, while others argued that violent images help understand violence. This polarization simplified the complexity of violence: it is good or bad. Violence is a multi-layered and indistinct experience, making it difficult to accept. The students seemed to need an answer for what they were seeing and feeling.

This incident exemplifies the problem related to the representation of violence and the need to provide a reason for it. The key to this problem is to understand what happened, deconstruct the reaction progression, and analyse when the debate became polarized, nullifying any attempt to contextualize or integrate a broader dialogue about these images. This situation reminded me of the intense debate about the video *My Way, a Work in Progress* by the Finnish artist Teemu Mäki made in 1995. In this video, we see Teemu Mäki killing a cat. The video lasts 30 minutes, and the scene where the cat is killed lasts 6 seconds. The video contains footage of wars, sadomasochistic sex, battery chickens, famine in Africa, views from slaughterhouses, ecological catastrophes, and dumps. The video tried to examine forms of structural and mental violence. The artist intended to instigate empathy towards people suffering from wars, give voice to those economically exploited, and make the Western audience more conscious of their implication in global violence. However, the cat scene provoked a vehement reaction. Teemu Mäki received many threatening emails, saying he deserved to die like the cat in the video. The video was censored in Finland (Mäki, 2005, 74–76). All other 29 minutes and 54 seconds of the video were obliterated by the cat scene. The art piece, meant to spark a debate about Western attitudes towards violence, generated only violent reactions.

I don't want to defend Teemu Mäki's work here, but I wonder if Damien Hirst received similar emails when he displayed the installation *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* at Saatchi Gallery in 1992. The installation consists of a tiger shark submerged in formaldehyde and displayed in a glass panel. Hirst commissioned a fisherman to catch and kill a shark. In 2006, due to deterioration, the original shark was replaced by another specimen. This art piece is now considered an iconic work of British art from the 1990s. Can we compare the violence of killing a cat to killing a shark? What interests me more is examining the reactions to Teemu Mäki's

video. Some colleagues mentioned that there is a long tradition, going back to the Renaissance, where artists like Michelangelo considered their artwork a form of creation and destruction. Michelangelo saw sculpting as a form of violence, where the artist hammers, removes, and eliminates the stone. For him, this act of destruction supports the art. Art historian Scott Nethersole points out that a medieval exegetical tradition compares the violence suffered by martyrs to the art of sculpting, especially sculpting ivory (Nethersole, 2018, 209).

Rather than examining how artists viewed their work (destructive or cathartic), I am more interested in the reactions and how the concept of violence creates new consciousness or knowledge. In the case of Teemu Mäki or the MA course incident, the debate remained confrontational. One could argue that violence, because it is about violence, can lead only to confrontation. But this argument leads to a dead end. I suggest that, maybe in these discussions, the wrong questions about violence were asked.

1.2 Triggering Imagination

Let us return to the process of twisting the images and the results of this second step. The image of the woman held by the French resistance fighters was reversed by depicting a group of women (dressed in period clothing) holding a man. This gender reversal produced controversial effects. Some students felt satisfaction seeing this reversal of power, especially the fact that the victim was now a man and those in power were women. Others perceived the twist merely as a role reversal without transforming the power structure itself. For them, it was still about using power to dominate another person.

The characters in the image of the buried woman were replaced by Moomins characters[2]: Moomin was buried by Little My, Snufkin, and Too-Ticky. This clash between familiar childhood imagery and a brutal action managed to disrupt the initial image. The image with the American soldier holding the Iraqi prisoner was replaced by a woman wearing a niqab holding a naked European man with a lash. Reversing the races opened up the often-condescending attitude of the West towards other cultures. Finally, in the image of the shooting, the gun was replaced by a perfume bottle. A perfume was sprayed, and the woman, the victim, with her hands fastened behind her back, received the shot of perfume as if it were a bullet. Initially, this twist seemed a failure as the image looked like a typical perfume advertisement. But upon further reflection, this process revealed how the perfume advertisement industry relies on violence to sell products.

This revelation led to questioning the ethics of such advertisements. How is it possible that images portraying male domination, sexual domination, rape, and even gang rape are used to sell perfume or clothes? For instance, the Dolce & Gabbana 2007 advertisement displayed a woman pinned to the floor by a man while three other men looked on. The contortions of the woman's body suggested she was fighting to escape. Later, Calvin Klein produced

a similar advertisement, portraying a woman being assaulted by a man while two others watched complacently. These images seem to glamorize gang rape. Similarly, Gucci's 2015 advertisement portrayed an adult woman lying on a man's lap while he slapped her as if she were a child. Sisley's 2016 advertisement showed a woman sitting on the floor of a bullfighting arena with her legs spread and a bull looking at her, implying imminent danger. Relish's 2009 advertisement displayed two young women being arrested by Rio de Janeiro police officers, with the officers abusing their authority and sexually assaulting the women. One of them is blocking one of the women on the car while grabbing her ass, and the other one is tightening her hands behinds her back and pulling her. The woman's face expression could be read either as discomfort for being pulled or as pleasure for being dominated. Alexander Wang's 2016 advertisement depicted two young girls (who appear to be minors) with cadaveric faces (as if they are sick or drug users) in a trunk car.

Women's organizations against the objectification of women constantly attack this industry (*The Guardian,* 2016), and brands regularly apologize, yet new images with the same violence are produced. These images are obviously blameworthy. We might wonder if the key to attracting potential buyers is the strategy of relying on the shock value of violent images. Or do these violent images reveal something else?

This work with the students was presented at a conference of the Society for Artistic Research (SAR) in 2019. During the presentation, curator Till Ansgar Baumhauer decided to include this work in his exhibition "disCONNECTED" at the Dresden Motorenhalle in 2021. Baumhauer commented on the work:

> Images, generally speaking, press photography in particular, can become iconically burned into the collective memory. At this moment, an image loses its historical and social context and part of its pictorial narrative, but also becomes charged with meaning. In this process, and even afterwards, there are often distortions of the originally depicted reality, which can extend to configurations in which the image is 'hijacked' and ideologically adopted or reinterpreted.
>
> Davide Giovanzana […] approaches the selected images through in-depth factual research and then re-enacts them with acting students. In a second step, the students reinterpret the image. Although central aspects of the picture's composition and the constellation of figures are retained, the content of the depiction of violence is transformed into a less violent action. A new image is created, which, however, still triggers the collective memory and thus the collective visual memory of violence. The viewer finds himself in a dichotomy between his own internalized image and the actual photo and becomes aware of his visual conditioning.
>
> (Baumhauer, 2021, 39)

Till Baumhauer clearly articulated the essence of this research project: how to trigger the violent imagination of the audience. The work is not so much about performing violence on stage, but about understanding the mechanisms that trigger the imagination connected to violence in the spectator's mind and making the spectator aware of these mechanisms.

1.3 Lost Animality

The Italian psychologist Massimo Recalcati, following the analyses of Freud and Lacan, points out that humans are the only animals able to think and discuss their own death (Recalcati, 2017). This consciousness is made possible through the acquisition of language. However, this acquisition of language also brings a loss: it banishes humans from the sphere of nature. A series of symbolic barriers, cultural limitations, and prohibitions imposed by civilization's programme demand the removal of animality in humans (Recalcati, 27). Becoming human requires a separation, a cut from a form of excess. According to Recalcati, the animal cannot experience nakedness, because the animal is never really naked in the sense that it does not wear clothes. To get naked and dress up are actions possible for an existence that stands on the screen of language (Recalcati, 28). What differentiates human existence from that of the animal is that the life and death of the animal can only be present and immediate; they cannot become objects of interrogation or examination. In the animal, everything is fully present, regulated by the law of instinct. In other words, for the human being to become human, they need to sacrifice the animal part within them, detach themselves from nature, and place themselves on the screen of language.

I am well aware that the terminology employed by Recalcati stands on a slippery field. It is easy to accuse Recalcati of having an anthropocentric, condescending attitude towards animals. Post-human thinking has already transcended this animal-human dichotomy (Faber and Shraer, 2020, 175–187). However, even if it seems outdated, I find his notion of language as a body regulator interesting.

The sacrifice that language operates is a symbolic sacrifice of the excess (the animal) allowing access to the realm of humanity. Whoever does not accept the symbolic sacrifice imposed by language becomes a creature embodying the monstrous excess of life, life that scares life, life that is uncontrolled. This is the terrifying, unknown, dangerous beast that scares children: the black wolf, the venomous snake, the shark, the crocodile (Recalcati, 2017, 31). These figures, which populate folktale imagery, are symbolic transpositions of the danger of falling back into animality. What threatens humans is the possibility of losing their humanity, forgetting their symbolic sacrifice, and letting the beast rule, in other words, falling into barbarism. The notion of symbolic sacrifice here replaces the body-mind division and proposes a dialectic mediation between humans and nature. The excess embodied by the

body needs to be regulated, to be cut, and language operates this regulation. It is possible to infer that humans, in order to access the status of humans, have to cut away what connects them to the realm of animals, to nature.

The excess that is sacrificed, the animal inside, the nature, resides in the body. The body represents the reminiscence of the animal, of nature, that language has to control. To some extent, a similar idea can already be found in Dante. In the *Divine Comedy*, Canto XI depicts the sinners punished for using violence. In the *Divine Comedy*, sinners who use violence are divided into three categories: those who use force against others (homicide, tyrants, thieves), those who use violence against themselves (suicide and spendthrifts), and those who use force against God. The Canto also explains that there are three types of violent nature: those who cannot contain themselves (cannot stop their impulse), those who use malice (wrongly use intellect), and those who are mad beasts (not following virtue). Dante's division is taken directly from Aristotle's Ethics, which also considers bestiality the worst condition for a human being (Aristotle, 1934).

Scott Nethersole, studying violent imagery in early Renaissance Florence, pointed out a distinction between sacred violent images and secular violent images (Nethersole, 2018). Sacred art, such as the flagellation of Christ, is meant to evoke empathy in the viewer, while secular art portraying violence perpetrated by brutes or beasts is meant to repel the viewer (Nethersole, 92). This observation is interesting because it suggests that violent images have two specific statuses: one is supposed to touch the spectator emotionally, while the other stimulates consciousness in the spectator's mind. Nethersole describes at length the tradition in Florence of painting the flagellation of Christ, where the perpetrators are in full action, but the skin of Christ remains intact. Such a clash between the text of the story (the narrative of Christ being flagellated) and the image (Christ not being wounded) leads Nethersole to suggest that the flagellation, the violence, was imagined by the viewers. By doing so, the spectators actively participated in Christ's Passion (Nethersole, 91), becoming flagellators wounding Christ. The intention is to bring the viewer closer to the suffering of the scene. The viewer is summoned to feel, to respond emotionally to the implicit violence in the image. Secular images of violence, instead, did not intend to make the spectators feel the violence. Nethersole, among the various terrible secular images he analyses, discusses widely the extensive stucco decoration (48 metres long) that surrounds the entrance of Palazzo Scala from Borgo Pinti in Florence. The stucco presents numerous violent scenes between humans and beasts, beasts against beasts, centaurs being drunk, and various killings.

What struck the author is why someone would place such scenes of violence in their house. These are not sacred images meant to arouse empathy; they are a long list of brutalities. The author suggests that, to understand these images, we must not forget Dante's text. When humans progressed away from animality, they progressed away from violence (Nethersole, 123).

These violent images were not there to impress or create an emotional response to violence but were fables instigating the spectator's perception. The viewers took pleasure in watching these violent scenes because they considered themselves civilized and thus far from being animal (or brutal). They considered themselves distant and could enjoy these violent depictions. These images, according to Nethersole, were placed in such a central place in the house because they were a social definition of the owner (Nethersole, 141). The sacred images, in which the violence was invisible, invited the viewer to meditate on Christ's pain and their own sinfulness. While secular violent images, in which violence was visible, summoned viewers to reject this violence as alien to them (Nethersole, 237). Even though Nethersole's research deals with Renaissance paintings (another time period and another medium than the pictures discussed in the exercise), I find his arguments convincing and applicable to the present context. However, his final conclusion is disputable, and I will discuss it here because it reconnects with the incident at the university.

Nethersole discusses Giorgio Vasari's[3] jubilatory description of *The Massacre of the Innocents* (1485–1490) by the Italian painter Domenico Ghirlandaio (1448–1494). The description outlines the beauty of the lines and the skilful composition of this massacre: "con giudizio, con ingegno et arte grande" – made with judgement, intelligence, and great skill (Nethersole, 238). Vasari's extensive praise, and the pleasure such an art piece provokes in him, is challenging. This strong connection of violence with pleasure seems to compromise the discourse about sacred or secular that Nethersole developed. In his interpretation, there was moral learning from these violent images (either empathy or consciousness) but never an aspect of joy or pleasure. This leads Nethersole to wonder why violent images are displayed in homes. Nethersole seems to find the answer to this question in Aristotle's *Poetics*, when he discusses mimesis and especially the definition of the catharsis effect, which claims that empathizing with the horrific deeds of the protagonists and imagining them creates the sense of wonder and pity that helps to purge the watcher from doing similar actions. This statement directly responds to Plato's criticism of mimesis, which, according to Plato, prompted problematic and ethically dubious emotions in the spectators. We can perceive in the opposition of these two Greek philosophers a similar opposition in the arguments in the university incident. However, in both cases, and here is my reservation with Nethersole's conclusion, the arguments are based on a theory for theatre, meaning for something that develops a narrative. The problem with images, as we have seen, is that they do not create any narrative. This leads me to wonder again if the wrong questions about violence were asked. It seems that the debate about violence is concerned with moral issues: good or bad. This moralistic approach to violence might impede a broader perception of its implications.

To return to the topic of perfume advertisements using violence: into which category would they fall? What is the purpose of the violence in these

images? Is it to summon empathy, like the sacred art described by Nethersole? Or is it to stimulate consciousness among the buyers, like secular art? I doubt the first option, and the second one seems unlikely. So, what is it then?

The symbolic sacrifice, as described by Recalcati, implies a constant negotiation within the subject between their human and animalistic nature: outbursts of vitality and the desire to let the animal emerge are continuous temptations humans face. This desire to connect with the animal inside is probably, as Recalcati suggests, a frustration arising from living a lesser life: a life regulated by the screen of language. According to him, a life constantly under scrutiny (by language) cannot be fully lived (Recalcati, 2017, 27–29). "The animal, unlike the human, can live fully." Is it then possible to understand this ambivalent attitude of the human wanting to become human while simultaneously longing for the primeval state that has been sacrificed? A search for the body, the animal, the fully lived life? If this is the case, it would be understandable that there are situations in which civilization is suspended, and humans are allowed to let the beast, nature, the body speak—such as in the act of making love. In this moment of intimacy, language is dispossessed, and humans can regain the primeval status of being fully present, or in its opposite, during a ritualized conflict, like a sports game, or the Olympic games. The ritualized conflict is limited in time, and when the game is over, the players regain their humanity.[4] Similarly, when the war is over, soldiers should regain their civil life and return to their humanity. Games and wars, where civilization is suspended, are exceptional moments; they are not supposed to be the norm.[5]

The subject that has agreed to the symbolic sacrifice is nevertheless in tension within oneself: the body is present and demands attention. It is possible to understand here the longing for the body, the fully lived life. The body makes itself present, palpable, in various ways. The subject is thus in constant tension and needs to negotiate the emergence of the body while remaining civilized, remaining in the symbolic sacrifice. The sublimation of such tension and desire is therefore captured by the advertisement industry, which seems to offer a release for it. The excess of the body, the desire to live fully, is packaged in a bottle or clothes that are accepted by the civilization programme. The subject can purchase this accepted part of themself. What the advertisement offers is the promise to reconnect with the lost body, the beast, with nature. It is a perfume, a sense that does not create knowledge but stimulates memories and arousals. In this view, the longing for the body is commodified.

In such cases, the violence depicted in advertisements is not necessarily an incitement to implement violence but a way to touch the soft spot of humans: what they had to give away to become human. In this situation, violence is instrumentalized and used to sell products. The potential buyers hope that by buying clothes, they can reconnect with their lost body. I suggest that these ads should be condemned not only for objectifying women or portraying violence but also for instrumentalizing violence itself. The symbolic sacrifice

defined by Recalcati is then a psycho-anthropological proposal for understanding the paradoxical relationship humans have towards their own body (Recalcati, 2017).

During the 20th century, Western thinking saw an attempt to overcome the so-called mind-body division, often epitomized by the Christian concept of the soul as pure and the body as corruptible. In this sense, the phenomenological school, which focuses on body experience to develop rational thinking, is a clear example of this attempt. This school proved that the body is an important area of philosophical investigation. By referring to the notion of symbolic sacrifice, I suggest another approach to this division between the body and mind, proposing that humans must sacrifice their body to become human. Humans, unlike animals, can reflect on their death. Language takes part in this process of consciousness, but this consciousness demands a symbolic sacrifice (Recalcati, 25). Humans sacrifice their part of nature to access humanity (animals-conscious-of-death). And this element of nature that is sacrificed is inscribed in the body. However, the sacrificed body is not simply something removed or denied; it is a constant negotiation between language and nature (the body, the beast, or the dark side). This constant negotiation is not easy and can be explosive. It also constitutes a great source of desire that the advertisement industry tries to exploit.

In fact, the violence present in the images of the advertisement industry is not supposed to repulse the viewer but to arouse desire. In this sense, by buying a perfume, it is the promise of recuperating the body that has been sacrificed. The advertisement therefore tries to commodify the beast, nature, the dark side that humans symbolically killed (or removed) within themselves.

1.4 We Will Do the Pigs Ourselves

With the students, we examined the play *Adieu aux Bêtes* (*Goodbye to the Beasts*) by Swiss author Antoine Jaccoud, which explores this longing to be like animals. The play is written as a monologue and is a nostalgic and ironic reminiscence of the relationship between humans and animals, examining all kinds of relationships—from domestic animals to farm animals. The play is set in an unknown future where animals have decided not to live with human beings anymore. At some point in the text, the division between animal and human becomes unclear, and there is a pleasure in being free like animals, without the obligation to submit to social pressure to control one's body:

> And to smell the lynx rather than the hair salon, to fart rather than hold it in. (…) Sometimes you would like to wallow in this mire, to forget in it what you are. (…) These impurities finally remind you that there was a nature all around you, with birds and droppings, droppings and birds, and that it was sometimes good to live there, and even often maybe. They tell you that you are an animal too, neither more nor less.[6]
>
> (Jaccoud, 2017, 51–55)

The monologue addresses the desire and pleasure of behaving like an animal, of smelling like an animal, of covering your body with filth, and not caring about being clean. These secretions of the body are reminiscences of nature. The play ends with the surprising claim that, if the animals do not return, we, humans, will start doing the animals ourselves: "Here we are, alone. And if it is really necessary, we will do the pigs ourselves"[7] (Jaccoud, 2017, 71). This reflects the longing for the body and the fully lived life, making the body present and palpable in various ways.

Stimulated by this reading, two students wanted to examine how this aspect of "longing for animality" is dealt with in acting, especially in Hollywood movies. They decided to watch six Hollywood movies: *Ocean's 11* (2001), *Ocean's 8* (2018), *The Hangover* (2009), *Bridesmaids* (2011), and *Ghostbusters* (1984 and 2016), which were based on similar scenarios but presented either a male-dominant or a female-dominant cast. They wanted to examine gender differences in the expression of violence, animality, and excess. After watching and comparing these movies, they concluded that, while animalistic or excessive behaviour is socially reprehensible, there is a difference if it is performed by a man or a woman. They noticed that animalistic behaviour for a man can be considered cool, even desirable, in some situations, while for a female character, animalistic or excessive behaviour is associated with an emotional breakdown, a loss of control of her persona.

According to their research, in *Ocean's 11*, directed by Steven Soderbergh, Brad Pitt, playing Rusty Ryan, lets his animality surface in several scenes, either by throwing objects or eating wildly, and his persona remains unaffected; he stays cool. In *Ocean's 8* directed by Gary Ross, Helena Bonham Carter, playing Rose, when her animality surfaces, it signifies a meltdown; the character she embodies literally collapses. Similarly, to the perfume or clothing industry advertisements, it seems that men are allowed to connect with their lost animality, while women must refrain from it and are instead relegated to the backdrop for the men's longing.

Similar to the students' research, it is possible to mention another movie that exemplifies this tension between the social persona and the animal: *Fight Club*, directed by David Fincher. Here, animality is not a trait that surfaces from time to time; it is something actively sought. The protagonist, known as the narrator, suffers from various anxieties and insomnia. But when he joins a special club, called Fight Club, led by Tyler Durden (played by Brad Pitt, coincidentally), he can let his aggressiveness explode, embrace his animality, and finally feel better in his life. The Fight Club is presented as something more effective than any therapy. This club is depicted not simply as a typical underground fighting club for men, but rather as a forum where men of all different social standings and professions can strip off their labels and love each other as equals. They fight (letting their animality roar) and then feel better, enabling them to love each other.

2 Fun Violence

Professor Seppo Kumpulainen, who has been teaching fencing, staged fighting, and physical training at the Theatre Academy of Helsinki for more than 25 years and has choreographed countless fight scenes during his career, recalls the excitement and thrill that he and his students experienced during fencing and staged fight classes. According to him, students usually loved this specific training; as he claims, it awakens their bodily energy. The skill in theatrical fencing or stage fighting is not to hurt the partner. However, for the fight to appear genuine, it must look as if the person is really hurting the other. Therefore, there is a constant oscillation between explosive energy, aggressiveness, and control. The student must be able to burst into a high emotional state and find the aggressiveness that would dramaturgically legitimize physical violence, yet still be able to control their body to avoid harming their partner. The interest in such work, Kumpulainen claims, lies in the double consciousness: "I play hard, but my weapon stops just before hitting." Probably one reason for the enjoyment among students, as it was for me when I also did fencing and stage combat during my theatre training, is this strange combination of creating a safe space for aggressiveness—or, as Kumpulainen claims, transforming aggressive energy into something creative.

However, Kumpulainen acknowledges that he had to stop some students during training. He noticed that sometimes this type of training brings them to a state of excitement that is close to trance. He was afraid that, in such cases, they would not be able to control their bodies, unable to separate their personal aggressive energy from the fictional moment. Here as well, I must admit that during the stage fight course, I had a bizarre competition with my peers to be the one who broke the most weapon sticks during practice. The teacher was puzzled by our strange competition, but I enjoyed it when it happened. A colleague actor once told me that, when he was younger, he often had to perform in shows where he was scared that his partner would hit him for real. He was not entirely sure that his partners were still in control during the fight scenes.

Kumpulainen claims that performed violence must be staged, in the sense of being controlled, not real. For him, there is no point in performing real violence. He recalls the period when, at the Theatre Academy of Helsinki, Professor Jouko Turkka obliged the students to slap each other for real, making things real. For Kumpulainen, such practice did not benefit the students. It was a demonstration of power. He saw actors trying to prove their bravery but in reality about to burst into tears. For Kumpulainen, if there is no technique, it just looks very bad. And for him, choreographed violence must be applied to every form of staged violence. Also, rape scenes must be choreographed; otherwise, the bigger actor harms the smaller one. The problem with such scenes as rape is that they are not considered fights but merely expressions of the character's passions. They are not thoroughly considered

and examined as staged fights. And so actors are left alone to cope with the violence present in the scene.

From a dramaturgical point of view, Kumpulainen claims that staged violence can express something more than just violence. Sure, a choreographed combat can render violence concrete, even palpable. But violence is a much wider experience. The problem, as Kumpulainen explains from his own experience, is that most theatre directors do not have a clear idea of what they want to do with violence. They want a sword scene because it is in the script, or they want a fight scene because they saw it in movies, but their understanding of violence is shallow. It can be compared to a mere firework sparking the spectator's attention. Usually, the fight scene is relegated to an auxiliary dramaturgical prosthesis that is supposed to thrill the audience. Only in rare cases does the fight scene become the expression of something else.

For him, the most problematic experience with staged violence was a research project he did on Shakespeare: *Kosto elää* (*Revenge Is Alive*), directed by Seppo Kumpulainen at Näty, the theatre acting department at Tampere University, in 1995. In this project, he wanted to combine Shakespeare's dialogues with fight scenes. The aim was to expose the dark and ugly side of Shakespeare's plays. He mainly chose parts praising the act of killing. Surprisingly, the audience loved it. The project was successful, but not in the way Kumpulainen hoped. The audience simply loved the violence. After this experience, Kumpulainen hypothesized that perhaps the historical costumes, swords, and daggers, combined with the actors' skilful performances, distanced the scenes from reality no matter how cruel the actions were.

What comes out from this report by Kumpulainen is that, apparently, there is a strong correlation between performing violence and enjoyment, either as a performer (especially young) or as a spectator, as long as there is a form of distance. The distance, from the performer's side, is the technique of being able to control the body when performing stage fights, and from the spectator's point of view, the distance is something in the dramaturgy that projects the violence away from the reality of the spectators.

2.1 A Lot of Blood

Puzzled by this conversation with Professor Seppo Kumpulainen and reconsidering the findings from the first exercise, I suggested to the students that we change our approach. As mentioned previously, photographic images, especially war reportage, not only aim to raise awareness but also foster morbid voyeurism. Zoja, commenting on the renowned image by Robert Capa, *The Falling Soldier* (1936), where we see a Republican fighter being hit by a bullet and caught in the suspension of falling, asserts that this image is the first instantaneous capture of "immediate death" (Zoja, 2018, 24). Robert Capa intended to denounce the brutality of violence with this image but inadvertently fuelled a lineage of morbid voyeurism prevalent in today's media (Zoja, 28).

Instead of moralizing the voyeurism associated with watching violent images, and inspired by the proliferation of violent video games and observing the joy with which teenagers play these games, I suggested working on the notion of violence as fun. The students collected a series of violent images and situations from pop culture, drawing material from movies, video games, music videos, and magazines. With this material, we created a choreography called *Fun Violence*, combining these violent situations.

Fun Violence was structured around two main scenes: one was a parody of wrestling, and the other was a rave party set to a techno song made from Goebbels' *Total Krieg* speech. Within these two main scenes, smaller actions based on the violent images were performed realistically. When the violent action was re-enacted, it was fully embodied and acted out, but as soon as the action finished, the performers dropped the heartbreaking dimension and joined the fun mood of the main actions. Additionally, the students uttered fragments of manifestos written by various school shooters: the Finnish Pekka Eric Auvinen, the German Sebastian Bosse, and the American Eric Harris.

To make the choreography gorier and funnier (according to the students' opinion), we decided to use fake blood, and to use a lot of it. It was surprising to see how much the students enjoyed performing this piece: they enjoyed rehearsing it and performing it for the audience. One student pointed out that it was very easy to perform a violent action taken from a movie. A similar violent action from real life, like in the first exploration with the photographs, was much more difficult to perform. When she performed violence referencing a movie, she could place a screen (a distance) between herself and the violence, while with the photographs, she couldn't. During rehearsals, one of the students began to feel guilty for enjoying the performance of violence. She wondered about the ethical aspect of it.

This is likely what the audience felt as well when watching the scene. They did not know how to interpret the piece. The combination of fun and realistic violent actions put the spectators in discomfort, as they couldn't understand how to receive the piece; the message was not obvious. It was not about cruelty, as often depicted in movies—a very evil character enjoying making others suffer for their own pleasure. It was not about morally condemning violence or denouncing structural violence, and it was not about celebrating violence. When the violent action was performed, both the perpetrators and the victims performed realistically, but afterwards, both dropped the tragic dimension and joined the others in enjoyment. The piece reached its apex of grotesque when the students literally showered themselves with blood, pouring it everywhere.

In short, the piece was a collection of evident or less evident references to violent images from pop culture, packaged as fun. With this exercise, I wanted to examine how it is possible to represent the commodification of violence, how violence is used by the entertainment industry, and how violence is abstracted, detached, and trivialized. But then something else emerged from the

work. In this piece, the very nature of violence, as described at the beginning of this article, was emptied. Violence seemed to have no collateral effects. It was simply perceived as an expression of identity, a way to communicate, but not the expression of cultural and structural violence.

This piece did not address violence itself or even the representation of violence but rather the traditional modes of producing, interpreting, and employing images (and violent images) in the attempt to make sense of reality through images. Margaret Bruder, in her article *Aestheticizing Violence, or How to Do Things with Style*, describes a new generation in the film industry, called the New Hollywood, which favours "horizontal integration" (Bruder, 2003). By this term, she means that movies nowadays favour multiple readings and multimedia reiteration. Narratives, in this sense, serve as a space for generating various signs that are put into circulation or are already in circulation. In this case, the fun results not so much from the images themselves but from a playful recombination that has little respect for either the seriousness of rationality or the fascination of the other.

What she means is that the new trend in the movie industry, instead of questioning violence or the filmic use of violence like in *Taxi Driver* by Scorsese, focuses rather on the surface, letting the spectators establish their own connections and interpretation of violence. Margaret Bruder concludes her article by stating that film critics are "unable to come to terms with these very profound changes in the nature of entertainment because this hyperconscious eclecticism is measured against Nineteenth-Century notions of classical narrative and realistic representation." Probably the spectators of our piece, *Fun Violence*, felt this same dislocation described by Margaret Bruder; they were not able to measure what they were watching.

The anthropologist Anton Blok argues that violence in the West has been monopolized by the state, creating a sense of pacified societies. However, such a condition makes us consider violence (and its so-called unauthorized forms) as something anomalous, disruptive, irrational, and senseless, the reverse of social order. Violence is considered the antithesis of civilization, something that needs to be brought under control. The danger, concludes Blok, is that we might fail to ask what and how violence signifies (Blok, 2000, 23–24). We are inclined to look only at the expression of it and judge it from a moralistic standpoint. Bringing the discussion of violence under the moralistic point of view is an attempt to come to terms with a complicated phenomenon, providing a simplified answer to an ambiguous issue. By considering it as either good or bad, we reduce the mystery of violence and consider it through the lens of utilitarianism.

2.2 Family Games

The project *Fun Violence* can be paralleled with the play *Family Games* by Serbian playwright Biljana Srbljanovic. Written in 1998, *Family Games* directly comments on the Balkan War. Unlike *Blasted* by Sarah Kane, Srbljanovic

took a completely different approach to representing war on stage. The play is composed of 11 scenes, depicting a family: a father, a mother, a son, and a dog in various situations at home. Intriguingly, the performers are supposed to be children playing adults, a teenager, and an animal. *Family Games* is a game that children play in which they imitate adults. By taking this initial situation of the imitation game, the author frees herself from any Aristotelian narrative. In each scene, there is a new game of imitation, as if the children are repeating in a playground what they have witnessed at home. Through this repetition, the children explore different modalities of abuse, power domination, violence, and the repercussions of war in a family context.

The first scene starts with a typical patriarchal situation where the father dominates and insults everyone, including politicians, about the misery of his life. The violence of his speech permeates all dialogues, turning every interaction violent. At the end of the scene, the son burns down the house with his parents inside. The second scene shows the son insulting and beating the dog. The third scene features a despotic mother who terrorizes her son with learning English, ending with the son killing the mother. The fourth scene revisits the son and the dog, with the son playing a cruel game by eating chocolate in front of the starving dog. The fifth scene depicts the parents as greedy and suspicious of everyone, even their own son, ending with the son killing them.

In the sixth scene, only the son and the dog are present. In a grotesque reference to Pasolini, the son asks the dog to sing fascist songs while he masturbates. The seventh scene shows the parents under heavy medication, indifferent to their son, who tells them about a dream in which he was killed during a war. They remain unresponsive until he informs them that their medication supply has stopped, leading to their deaths. Scene eight depicts the son returning from a street protest, with the parents accusing him of being anti-patriotic and destabilizing society. The son strangles them. In the ninth scene, the son says goodbye to the dog, planning to emigrate, and they hug passionately. Scene ten has the son sitting with his parents at the kitchen table, preparing to leave the country. The parents are afraid of his departure. Scene 11 sees the son returning to find his parents dead. He asks the dog what happened, seeks forgiveness from his parents, and then wonders where his father's bomb is. The dog shows it and throws it, ending the play with an explosion.

In its delirium of repetitive killings performed by the son, the play oscillates between the horror of war and the grotesque nature of children imitating violence without understanding it. This dramaturgical solution allows the author to find a language that balances playfulness and tragedy. The play is funny because it is amusing to see these children trying to behave like adults, and the repetitive killings are absurd. Yet, it is also tragic because these children are inheriting their parents' traumas and will likely perpetuate the same violence when they grow up. The play is both a humorous and implacable scream for an exit, for a stop. But there are no exits, no stops; the violence continues, repeating the same violent dynamics.

2.3 Grotesque Violence

A special category should be added to this discussion related to fun violence and pleasure. Let us call this extra category grotesque violence.

Grotesque refers to something that is strange, ugly, and monstrous. The English version of this word appeared in the 15th century, referring to an extravagant style of ancient Roman decorative art rediscovered in Rome at the end of the 15th century. The etymology of grotesque comes from the Italian word "grotto" or "grottesca," which means cave. The word was first used to refer to the paintings found on the walls of basements of ruins in Rome that were called "grotte." These paintings depicted monstrous beasts, half-human, half-animal creatures, deformations of birds, or fantastic creatures.

In this perspective of hybridization and deformation, grotesque violence is transformed violence; it is a mockery of violence. Therefore, grotesque violence couples graphic violence with comedy. It is a special feature that does not necessarily aim to heal traumatic events or contextualize violence but uses violence almost as a comic relief. Comedy is often understood as a social regulator. The French philosopher Henri Bergson, in his book *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, studied the mechanism of laughter and suggested that comedy is a social regulator: we laugh at vices, ridiculous or eccentric behaviour. For Bergson, life is about fluidity, elasticity, and movement. Anything that prevents this fluidity, anything that is rigid or mechanical and thus threatening to life, is derided. Bergson infers that, in condemning imperfections, laughter becomes a unifying force: anything that seems strange is ridiculed. Laughter, as described by Bergson, becomes like an invisible cloak that covers and regulates society.

This argument may be surprising since we instinctively think of laughter as an act of liberation, a release of tensions and internal conflicts, or an act of irreverence. However, if we pay closer attention, we realize that many comedies incorporate this regulatory element. Without going into too much detail, we note that most of Molière's comedies ridicule behaviours that are egocentric (*The Would-Be Gentleman*), exaggerated (*The Misanthrope*), or hypocritical (*Tartuffe*), and therefore align with Bergson's notion of laughter as a social regulator (Giovanzana, 2022).

However, there are also forms of laughter that do not have any social regulatory function as claimed by Bergson and deal with other unpleasant aspects of human behaviour. One example is the medieval fool. Next to the king was the fool, a character whose role was not to entertain the king but, on the contrary, to tell him what he refused to hear. In Shakespearean tragedy, the fool is the only one who tells the king what everyone sees but nobody says:

King Lear: Who is it that can tell me who I am?
Fool: Lear's shadow
(Act 1, Scene 4)

The fool's answer is enigmatic: who is the shadow? Is it King Lear's own shadow, meaning that King Lear can find the answer only in himself, or is it

the fool, following King Lear like a shadow? Either way, it is the shadow that will reveal the truth (Giovanzana, 2022), and the function of the fool is not necessarily to make the king laugh but to reveal unpleasant truths.

Where does the fool come from? What is this character that sits next to power and ridicules it? One possibility is that the ancestors of the fool are the satires of ancient Greece; during the Dionysian festivities, after presenting three tragedies, the cycle concluded with a satire based on those tragedies, in which the sacred tragedy was mocked by a satire intertwining the sacred and profane. Here, we can understand the idea of a character oscillating between the sacred and the profane, deriding everything (Giovanzana, 2022).

It is in this perspective that grotesque violence functions: presenting something terrible—violence—and simultaneously deriding it. As Imren Yelmis points out in studies on McDonagh's plays:

> The grotesque, indicating "the ridiculous, bizarre, extravagant, freakish and unnatural; in short, aberrations from the desirable norms of harmony, balance and proportion" (Cuddon, 1991, 393), is not a tool that reflects a funny style only for comedy's sake. On the contrary, it has a significant role in terms of presenting serious satire, and is used "for comic, sardonic and satirical effects" (Cuddon 394). The grotesque, since the medieval times, has served as a means of commentary for the "ideals and imperfections of the society of the day."
>
> (O'Neill, 2013, 67)

The play *A Skull in Connemara* by the Anglo-Irish playwright Martin McDonagh, written in 1996, is a clear example of the use of grotesque violence. The play has often been criticized for lacking intellectual value and portraying gratuitous brutality. However, as the author claims, besides satirizing the violence individuals inflict on each other, it also depicts the violence applied by institutions such as the police, the Church, and the family. Mostly, it satirizes those who are indifferent to such violence (Yelmis, 2014, 51). The play, composed of four scenes, presents four characters: Mick Dowd, Mairtin Hanlon, Maryjohnny Rafferty, and Thomas Hanlon.

Two common threads pull the play together: the first is Mick's peculiar occupation of digging up old graves once a year to make room for the newly deceased. The next grave he has to dig is that of his wife, Oona, who died seven years ago. The second thread of the play is the continuous insinuation by all that Mick's wife did not die in a car accident but was already dead in the car before the accident.

The first scene is set in Mick's modest cottage. In the initial dialogue between Mick and Mary (Maryjohnny), who has invited herself over to drink free booze, Mary relentlessly hints that Mick killed his wife. When Mairtin enters, he also makes several jokes about Mick's wife being killed before the car accident. Annoyed by Mairtin, Mick throws alcohol in his eyes. Although the dialogues seem lively and playful, the relationships are tense, and it is palpable that something bad will happen between Mick and Mairtin. Mairtin

has been designated as Mick's new assistant and constantly challenges Mick, who cannot stand him.

The second scene takes place in the cemetery, where Mick and Mairtin are digging up graves. Mairtin scorns Mick for procrastinating in digging his wife's grave. The police officer, Thomas, arrives to check if Mick and Mairtin have started digging. Initially, Thomas seems to side with Mick in deriding Mairtin, but the dynamic changes, and both Thomas and Mairtin hint that Mick might have killed his wife, Oona. The scene ends with the discovery that Oona's skeleton has been removed from the coffin.

The third scene occurs in a cabin where Mick and Mairtin break down skulls and bones into smaller pieces. They have three skulls and bones lying on the table. Mairtin is disgusted and cannot join Mick in smashing the bones. They both knew the people whose skeletons they are shattering. This scene parodies Hamlet's nostalgic monologue when he discovers the skull of Yorick. However, in McDonagh's version, the scene becomes a carnivalistic game where Mick and Mairtin take great pleasure in smashing the bones, even enjoying music while doing so. Nevertheless, during this scene, Mick suspects that Mairtin has stolen his wife's skeleton. The grotesque situation is heightened by their absurd dialogue comparing if it is worse to die in your own pee or to be suffocated by vomit. Despite the bright dialogues, the tension between Mick and Mairtin rises, with Mairtin constantly challenging Mick. At the end of the scene, Mick instructs Mairtin to load the van with the bags of bones. As Mairtin goes off stage, Mick takes a hammer with him.

The final scene returns to Mick's cabin. Mick's shirt has red stains. Mary enters and again hints that Mick killed his wife. Mick replies that he did kill Mairtin but not his wife. Thomas enters with Oona's skull, which has a crack on the forehead that Thomas claims is evidence that Mick killed his wife with a hammer. Thomas orders Mick to write a confession that he killed his wife, which Mick accepts. Thomas brags that this confession will guarantee his promotion. At this point, Mairtin enters, covered in blood with a concussion on his forehead. Here, the play reaches its grotesque climax. Mairtin defends Mick, revealing that it was Thomas who took Oona's skeleton and made the crack in the skull. Thomas, shocked, asks why Mairtin is defending Mick, who tried to kill him. Mick claims it was only a car accident and that he likes Mairtin, who then accuses Thomas of being a terrible policeman. Despite being family, Thomas jumps at Mairtin's throat, and Mick separates them. The play ends with Mick embracing his wife's skull and swearing he didn't kill her.

In *A Skull in Connemara*, McDonagh is not trying to elucidate interpersonal violence or the reasons behind it, nor why there was an increase in violence in Ireland during the 90s. His approach is caricatural. He suggests that individuals internalize structural or societal violence, which then re-emerges in interpersonal relationships. Therefore, the violence between Mick and Mairtin should not be examined in terms of who is right or wrong but considered as symbols of a larger societal problem (Yelmis, 91). They represent

the ongoing violence present in society. The inefficacy of the police officer, who simultaneously handles a cigarette and an asthma inhaler, and is incapable of tackling societal issues, represents McDonagh's pessimistic view of institutions.

The play seems constructed as a detective story, leading spectators to discover if Mick killed his wife, but the final scene transforms the entire play. The main intrigue is wiped away, and the violence simply continues. There is no resolution, no change. The scorn goes on. One day, Mick is the target; another day, it is Mairtin or Thomas.

The theatre critic Aleks Sierz defends McDonagh's writing by claiming that writers who use shock tactics have something urgent to say. If they deal with disturbing subjects or want to explore difficult feelings, shock is one way to wake up the audience. For Sierz, McDonagh, in his attempt to provoke audiences, is actually trying to push the boundaries of what is acceptable, what is normal, what it means to be human, what is natural, and ultimately what is real (Sierz, 2001, 5). Additionally, Yelmis claims that the massive presence of aggressive and subversive language in McDonagh's plays functions as a dangerous weapon and a form of rebellion against institutions or society at large. Verbal violence in the play reflects how human beings have lost respect and love for each other in a society (Ireland) that does not guarantee any security (Yelmis, 83). In this sense, the grotesque functions as a comic relief for the audience within the seriousness of violence. Otherwise, in an atmosphere dominated merely by horrible violent scenes, the audience would experience nothing more than a nightmarish ordeal (Yelmis, 95).

Grotesque violence should not be confined only to adult performances. The combination of laughter with violence can also be considered for children's performances. In fact, during the fall of 2022, with the second-year acting students at Tampere University (Näty), we created a performance that explored children's fears and relied on grotesque violence. The show was called *Horror and Ketchup*, and it was defined as a commedia dell'arte horror musical performance meant for children aged ten to twelve years old.[8] Following the tradition of commedia dell'arte, a scenario loosely based on a Brother's Grimm folktale, *The Fitcher's Bird*, was written in collaboration with the acting students. The students invented the dialogues through improvisation during the rehearsal process, which nourished the scenes of the scenario.

Based on the notion that one of the main fears of children is being mistreated by adults, evident in many folktales where evil characters kidnap children, parents want to get rid of their own children, or a mother-in-law kills and cooks the children of her new husband, the story presented a magician who regularly needed to kidnap children for his ketchup factory. Besides the magician, the characters of the play were: Arlecchino (the magician's servant), a kid, Pantalone (the kid's father), Capitano, and his servant Pulcinella. The magician's secret is that the ketchup is made from children's blood, and therefore, in the magician's house, there is a room filled with dead

children. One day, the magician kidnaps a child, but the child's father, with the help of Pulcinella and Capitano, manages to bring the child back to life and fight back against the magician.

The highly theatrical and funny style of the commedia was contrasted with scenes that were extremely realistic and gory. This created a disturbing oscillation between something particularly comical and something genuinely threatening. For instance, in the initial scene, the magician cuts Arlecchino's tongue for threatening to reveal his secret. The cutting of the tongue was made very realistic by using fake blood, employed on film sets. Arlecchino's mouth suddenly filled with blood, surprising the audience. The constant combination of crude and realistic effects made the audience very alert, while the hilarious scenes provided strong comic relief for these moments of tension. Throughout the scenes, the characters are always debating whether what is on stage (from the initial tongue-cutting scene) is blood or ketchup. The confusion reaches its apex during the final scene, a battle between the magician and the characters trying to save the child. In this scene, ketchup is used as a symbol of blood; when the magician hits one of the characters, ketchup is spread on the victim's body. Using ketchup as blood is something that kids enjoy watching.

The final twist comes when Arlecchino throws French fries, which were really cooked during the show, onto the battle scene. Everyone, instead of fighting, starts eating the French fries with the ketchup spread on the stage. The usual final fight scene of all action movies is turned into a parody. In this moment, where all the protagonists, instead of fearing the magician, enjoy the moment, the magician loses all his power. The show ends with the characters and the magician sharing their fears with the audience. The resolution of the show lies in the ability to express one's own fears and to share them with others. In this ability to articulate fears, it is already a step towards overcoming them.

If in the previous example the interpersonal violence reflected the structural and societal violence, in this show the violence reflected more the archetypical fear of children that their own world (family structure) would collapse. The combination of this fear with the constant oscillation between ketchup and blood creating comic relief allowed the audience to face this violent anxiety.

3 Playing the Victim

The Oxford Dictionary defines a victim as a person who has been attacked, injured, or killed as the result of a crime, disease, or accident, or as a person who has been tricked. In these two cases, the victim is an object of violence; the violence is something external to the victim. However, there is a third definition of the term, which includes an animal or person that is killed and offered as a sacrifice. This latter definition is surprising because, unlike the first two definitions where the victim is debased as the recipient of someone

else's agency, the third one elevates the status to something sacred. This aligns with Agamben's study on sacrifice, where the sacrificed one could not be a random person but had to be sacred. It seems, then, that the victim can assume a double status.

The etymology of the word also bears an ambivalent root. It is not clear if victory and victim share a similar prefix or root, *vic-*. According to the Online Etymology Dictionary, victim is related to *vicis*, which means turn, occasion, or exchange, and leads to vicarious. This definition comes closer to the idea of the victim as a sacrifice. Other linguists believe that victim is related to the Latin verb *vinco* (*vincere vici victus*), meaning to overcome, win, or conquer. In this sense, victim would mean one who has been conquered. In all the discussed examples, there is a close link between the victim and the agency of power. The victim is not a distant object, a recipient of violence, but part of the violence.

This last consideration means that the reverse action—not being a victim but the active agency of playing the victim—is actually a way to exert power and even to legitimize the use of violence. The idea of considering oneself a victim might seem strange, but presenting oneself as a victim is a strategy often used consciously or unconsciously in relationships, politics, and social circumstances. As we will examine, it is a strategy to revert the power dynamic: instead of being the passive recipient of violence (power struggle), the victim plays (or instrumentalizes) violence.

This idea of studying the notion of playing the victim came to mind the first time I was reading Masha Gessen's book *The Future Is History: How Totalitarianism Reclaimed Russia*. In her book, Gessen describes how Putin presented the Russian identity as being under threat. According to him, Russians are victims of some unclear malevolent forces, and so Russia needs to rescue Russians from this menace (Gessen, 388). What was obvious is that this rhetoric of being threatened, of being a victim, was a way to legitimize the use of coercive methods inside the country (against political opposition and ethnic minorities and enforcing gender discrimination) and towards neighbouring countries (Gessen, 2017, 432). I recalled similar rhetoric from another politician: Berlusconi, who declared that he had to become a politician to save Italy from the threats of communists (Messagero, 2018), when in reality he entered politics to seek financial protection (Giangrande, 2016, 276).

During a previous workshop (the second of my postdoctoral research, titled *Violent Discourses*), one of the students examined one of Trump's speeches. In her work, she pointed out how Trump's speech is built on a similar idea of victimhood: according to Trump, America or at least a part of the American people are victims of all kinds of threats—Mexicans, journalists, Democrats, Chinese, and the Black community (Szilágyi, 2017). It seems odd when people like Trump, Berlusconi, and Putin, who are clearly in positions of power, present themselves as victims. In these examples, the rhetoric of victimhood turns out to be a strategy to hide other political purposes or even to legitimize the use of violent or anti-democratic means (Agamben, 2016, 196).

With the students, we realized that this strategy of victimhood is rather current in politics.[9] We found that, closer to our reality, a politician of the True Finns party and member of the Finnish parliament used this rhetoric of victimhood to defend his sexual assault on another member of parliament (Yle, 2017). He claimed that it was because he drank beer that he sexually assaulted another parliament member; he essentially presented himself as a victim of beer. With the students, we wondered if this strategy of playing the victim is not only a privilege of politicians but could also be noticed in other spheres of life. So, the examination covered three domains that the students could directly relate to: personal relationships, the lives of pop-culture celebrities, and the work of actors.

In the workshop, there were six students. Four students examined the notion of playing the victim in interpersonal relationships, one in the actor's work, and one among celebrities. The celebrity case was Britney Spears' breakdown in 2007, when after publicly shaving her head, she claimed she was a victim of the media industry (Dimaggio, 2012, 278). The student, in her artistic work, transposed the whole dichotomy of being a victim versus playing the victim in the domain of pleasure. She presented herself naked (possibly embodying Britney Spears) but hidden from the spectators' view. A camera connected to a screen revealed parts of her naked body to the audience while she delivered a monologue she had written. The text questioned the notion of deriving pleasure from watching and being watched. In her reading, it was unclear who held power in that situation and, especially, the status of the video as an apparatus transforming an object (as a potential victim) into an image that creates aesthetic pleasure.

3.1 Abusive Relationship

Among the students who examined interpersonal relationships, it is worth mentioning the work of Antonia Henn, who examined inherited victimhood. Henn explored how the dynamics of someone playing the victim are passed from one generation to the next. The text is freely inspired by various situations and experiences that the student compiled into a coherent theatrical story. The story displays a woman, who is the protagonist, trying to explain to her partner the conflictual relationship of her parents. Although there are two characters on stage, only the protagonist speaks. The partner is busy dressing up for a party and seems not to pay attention to what the protagonist is saying.

> My mother mentally and physically torturing my father, night after night for years.
>
> My father hits back.
>
> My mother is an abused wife.
>
> She tells her children their father hits her.[10]
>
> (Henn, 2019)

More than a dialogue, it is a kind of monologue where the partner responds by not responding. Initially, the monologue examines the abusive relationship the protagonist's parents exert on each other. The protagonist describes how the mother, who presents herself as a victim, is abusive towards the father. The monologue details the strategies implemented by the mother (the victim) to exert power over the father.

> "My mother is drunk and abusive.
>
> She's got all these bruises on her arms.
>
> My father cries when I speak to him, he tells me about the abuse he has to live with.
>
> My brother who still lives there, in that house, cries. He tells me about that hopelessness, very familiar to me. About the feeling of not being able to save your loved ones.
>
> (Henn, 2019)

As the protagonist speaks about her parents, the partner continues getting ready for the party. At one point, the protagonist starts accusing the partner for not caring about her. The turning point is that, despite despising her mother for being abusive towards her father, the protagonist unconsciously uses similar strategies to attack her partner. She violently insults the partner and threatens to commit suicide if he goes to the party. She accuses him of not caring about her and being abusive towards her.

> I'm so sorry, I'm just so tired, you shouldn't have to listen to this shit.
>
> I'm a grown up. I'm sorry. I just need to calm down, I'm fine.
>
> How long do you think you'll be away? I just mean like… should I stay up?
>
> Or you know I'll probably stay up anyway, I won't be able to sleep.
>
> But you should go, it's gonna be fun, good for you to meet some people, get away from this for a bit
>
> […]
>
> Sorry, I really get it, it would be so toxic for you to stay, I can't be this dependent on you I'm not a fucking child.
>
> I'm so tired of being dependent on you, I'm tired of loving you.
>
> None of this matters. You don't really matter, you know, I'm not made for this kind of life, you don't need me…
>
> […]
>
> Go, Leave me the fuck alone.
>
> You know I shouldn't even have to ask you for this, you know exactly what is happening and what's happened to me, why are you making me beg? How can you even THINK of leaving me alone tonight?
>
> […]
>
> you're fucking disgusting I don't want to look at you, I don't need shit from you as well, you will never fucking love me, you have no idea

> what it is to really REALLY, love, so fucking spoiled, you're weak. Weak people can't love because love takes power, love is unconditional, staying, making sacrifices. And you are leaving me. You know I'm gonna cut myself when you go.
>
> (Henn, 2019)

Suddenly, as spectators, we feel distressed for this silent partner. At first, we are surprised by his silence and apparent carelessness regarding what the protagonist (his girlfriend) is saying about her parents. Then, we understand that he suffers from the abusive emotional coercion that the woman exerts towards him. The protagonist reproduces the same dynamics that she experienced in her parents' home. The logic of *playing the victim* is passed from one generation to the next; violence is transmitted as the normal way to establish a relationship. The transition from describing the parents' abusive relationship to re-enacting the same abusive relationship with the partner is smooth and surprising. The scene is astonishing for its remarkable turn, dissecting how abusive behaviour is inherited by the daughter.

This monologue is interesting from several perspectives: dramatically, it creates situations where the spectators must continuously reassess their perception of the characters. The ambivalent situation of someone presenting themselves as a victim creates continuous, smooth, and rapid changes in power dynamics, where domination, suffering, and manipulation are intertwined. There is no clear distinction between one being the bad person and the other suffering. This ambiguity made the work challenging for the students as well. They had to explore nuanced ways of acting, embodying almost contrasting emotions simultaneously.

This work can be paralleled by the play *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* (1996) by Martin McDonagh, which similarly explores the notion of *playing the victim*. McDonagh's play focuses on a wicked and vicious relationship between a mother and daughter. The play deals with abandonment, immigration, and societal violence reflected within family relationships. Four characters are present: Maureen Folan, a woman in her 40s; her mother, Mag Folan, 70 years old; Pato Dooley, also in his 40s; and his brother, Ray Dooley, 20 years old.

The first scene is set in the cottage of the two women, who live together, with Maureen apparently taking care of her senile mother. They talk about the weather while Maureen makes porridge for Mag. They wonder if the sink smells or not. Mag seems absentminded, and the slight irritation in Maureen's responses could be due to the burden of caring for her mother. The initial scene depicts a familiar rural setting. Then, suddenly, the tone of the dialogue changes and becomes crude: the two women wish the other would die as soon as possible.

Yelmis points out that McDonagh's play seduces the audience with a naturalistic mood and then hits them with intense emotional material. The sudden change in the atmosphere of the play helps McDonagh create a shock

for the spectators, enabling them to reconsider their assumptions about family relationships and, by extension, the contemporary condition of society at large (Yelmis, 2014, 70). After that initial clash between the mother and daughter, the intrigue of the play seems driven by the hate between the two women.

The second scene introduces Ray, who comes to deliver a message to Maureen. However, only Mag is home, as Maureen is out. Ray asks Mag to inform Maureen that she is invited by Pato to a farewell party for his uncle. The scene is funny, with Mag seeming utterly incapable of remembering anything. Ray has to write the invitation on a piece of paper. However, as soon as he leaves, Mag burns the piece of paper. When Maureen comes home and asks if someone has been there, Mag pretends that no one came over. Maureen becomes angry at her mother's lies because, on her way home, she met Ray, who informed her about the party and the note he left. In this second scene, Maureen accuses her mother of controlling her life. Maureen presents herself as a victim of her mother:

Maureen: Arsing me around, eh? Interfering with my life again? Isn't it enough I've had to be on beck and call for you every day for the past 20 year? Is it one evening out you begrudge me?
Mag: Young girls should not be out gallivanting with fellas…!
Maureen: Young girls! I'm 40 years old, for feck's sake!

(McDonagh, 1999, 29)

As a form of revenge for her mother's intrusion, Maureen forces her mother to eat the porridge, turning the act into a scene of torture. The mother confesses that she hates porridge, but the daughter forces her to eat it. In scene three, Pato and Maureen return home late, the mother is asleep, and Maureen invites Pato to enter her room. Scene four takes place the next morning. Mag wakes up and pours a potty full of urine into the kitchen sink. Pato emerges from Maureen's room, surprising Mag. Then Maureen enters and keeps kissing Pato and sitting on his lap, making a display of her intimacy with Pato in front of her mother. Pato feels embarrassed, but Maureen insists. Mag is disgusted and tries to divert the scene by accusing Maureen, in front of Pato, of torturing her, claiming that Maureen poured hot oil on her arm, causing a burn. Maureen sniffs the sink and realizes that her mother has again poured the potty full of urine in the sink. Maureen becomes enraged. Nonetheless, Mag continues to attack by informing Pato that Maureen was once in a mental hospital and that she, Mag, signed a paper to release her daughter and take care of her at home. Pato does not know what to believe. Maureen is furious. Pato, uncomfortable between the two women, exits, arguing that he has to leave for England and promises to write to Maureen as soon as he arrives. Maureen is mad at Mag, and Mag disdainfully asserts that he will never write. The scene reaches its grotesque culmination when both women claim that they are victims of each other.

In the following scene, Pato, now in England, sends Maureen a letter proposing marriage and inviting her to the USA to live together. He suggests leaving Mag in a nursing home so that Maureen can start a new life. Ray, Pato's brother, does not give the letter directly to Maureen and instead hands it to Mag. Mag, once again, burns the letter after reading it. Mag, out of fear of being abandoned, prevents Maureen's future happiness. However, by accidentally uttering some words from the letter to Maureen, Mag reveals herself. This time, Maureen feels her mother has gone too far and, infuriated, pours boiling oil on Mag's hand. Eventually, the torture leads to Mag's death. The relationship between the two women is based on continuous hostility: psychological (Mag towards Maureen) and physical (Maureen towards Mag) (Yelmis, 46). The final image is Maureen sitting in the rocking chair, exactly like her mother.

In this play, the impression of being a victim legitimizes the use of violence. Maureen feels entitled to torture her mother because her mother prevents her from being happy. Similarly, Mag feels entitled to destroy her daughter's life because she is convinced her daughter wants to abandon her. In scene seven, after Maureen has poured boiling oil on Mag's hands and still hopes to leave with Pato, Mag implores Maureen:

Mag: But how could you go with him? You do still have me to look after.
(McDonagh, 1999, 65)

Mag is certain that her daughter wants to abandon her and does everything to prevent this, psychologically destroying her daughter. Likewise, Maureen feels justified in torturing her mother because she doesn't let her live her own life. When her mother eventually dies, Maureen doesn't seem to feel any remorse for what she has done. It isn't even her own fault if Mag has died:

> *The rocking chair has stopped its motions.* **Mag** *starts to slowly lean forward at the waist until she finally topples over and falls heavily to the floor, dead. A red chunk of skull hangs from a string of skin at the side of her head.* **Maureen** *looks down at her, somewhat bored, taps her on the side with the toe of her shoe, then steps onto her back and stands there in thoughtful contemplation.*

Maureen: 'Twas over the stile she did trip. Aye. And down the hill she did fall. Aye. (Pause.) Aye.
(McDonagh, 1999, 66)

In the cottage, where the traces of violence are dominant in every step, McDonagh's play raises the question of whether there is any possibility for change in a life filled with violence. McDonagh seems to suggest a pessimistic answer. Maureen does not transcend her situation; she does not find a

solution that fulfils her desire to escape her condition. She simply becomes like her mother, becoming what she wanted to break from.

4 Capitalizing on Excess

The last student examined the notion of victimhood in the actor's work, approaching it from the idea of sacrifice. The link between playing the victim and the actor's self-sacrifice is manipulation. The act of self-sacrifice can be perceived as an extreme form of victimhood, where the victim does not present themselves as the object of someone else's violence but is compelled to apply violence upon themselves due to external pressure. In the monologue entitled *Playing Me*, the student reconsiders his journey during the three-year education: his motivations, his relationships with fellow students, his commitment to the work, his fears, and his breaking points.

> I would like to start by telling you a personal story. I'm sure all of you can relate to it in some way. It is almost three years to this day when I, like so many of you, applied to this school. Although it was an arduous, difficult, and very stressful time, I was chosen. […] One of the select few, privileged to learn the craft of acting at one of the most prestigious theatre educations in the world.[11]
>
> (Salminen, 2019)

At first, he examines the course of his studies, the ups and downs, and particularly the breaking moments that have appeared in the journey of becoming an actor.

> Throughout my studies, I never seemed to have a problem. I had the confidence, the ability to throw myself into the acting whole-heartedly. I learned from my fellow students, and together we built ourselves up. I never took too much stress, for I knew that with enough talent, hard work, and inspiration, I could always achieve what I wanted. But there was something missing. It felt like I was copying true artistry but not truly expressing it. As if I knew only the first part of the answer.
>
> (Salminen, 2019)

The strength of the text lies in recontextualizing the romantic narrative of the artist sacrificing themselves for the sake of art into the artist capitalizing on their sacrifice.

> And it was then I had a revelation, an epiphany. I understood the secret lesson that my teachers were trying to convey. The pathway to true artistry. And today, I will share these secrets with you. Most people think that artistry is based on talent, inspiration, and motivation. That is just the mask of the truth. What is a true artist? Here we have a prime

> example. Let me introduce you to what makes an artist: three steps. Yes, three steps constitute the path to becoming an artist: self-loathing, self-sacrifice, and self-capitalization.
>
> (Salminen, 2019)

The realization that the pathway to becoming an artist, according to him, is not necessarily based on talent and creativity but on hatred (self-loathing), misery (self-sacrifice), and entrepreneurship (self-capitalization) pushes the author to use caustic irony as a gateway to cope with this shocking awareness. In his monologue, he examines what self-loathing, self-sacrifice, and self-capitalization mean.

> A typical self-loathing thought is 'I am not enough. I suck. I'm pointless. Worthless. You suffer, you suffer. That's who you are. You can never change. I can never change. I will always be this. This right now. This will make you a good artist.'
>
> (Salminen, 2019)

And then about self-sacrifice:

> Take, for instance, this actor. […] he needs to think all the time about his character, yes, all the time, even in bed. He thinks about the motivation, the subtext of his character, the nuances. His social life suffers from this constant thinking about the characters. His romantic relationship is jeopardized. His girlfriend said that she had the feeling that she was sleeping with a fictional character, not with a real person. He sacrificed love for theatre.
>
> (Salminen, 2019)

Eventually, this self-loathing and self-sacrifice generate a form of capital that can be sold:

> Go to the extreme, even beyond that, break taboos, break the bourgeois moralistic super structure, break yourself. Make yourself miserable so you can sell that: the obscene, the extreme, the excess of society, the excess of yourself. The misery will be transformed into a capital. An artistic capital. Turn your pain into art, like: Knausgård, Fassbinder, von Trier, Marina Abramovitch. Think of Sarah Kane. Only at that moment, you will realize that people will love your shame, people will love your pain, people will love your disgusting self, the humiliation you went through. People love it. And then you can sell it.
>
> (Salminen, 2019)

The student, in his monologue, asserts that the actor, through their sacrifice, generates an excess, and this excess becomes the actor's capital. The student's

monologue was inspired by Roland Barthes's book *Mythologies*, which clearly articulated this economy of excess. In the chapter "Deux mythes du jeune théâtre" ("Two Myths on Young Theatre"), Barthes delves into the ardent passion of the actors, their combustion, and their total physical sacrifice on the altar of theatre. Barthes, by examining a theatre contest for young theatre groups, observes not only the passion devouring the two main protagonists who won the prize but also the literal exhaustion and liquefaction of their bodies on stage. According to Barthes, all sorts of liquids were leaking out of the actors. He wonders, in this extreme performance, what lies behind the actors' exhaustion of their bodies on stage. Barthes suggests that what lies behind this total devotion of the actor is a quantitative measurement of the psychological work of the actor (Barthes, 1957, 101). The physical effort is visible, even tangible. The spectators, who have paid to see the performance, can measure the strenuous effort that the actors provide for the money they have spent. The spectators give money to the theatre and, in exchange, want to see a clearly visible passion. But, as Barthes stresses, this economy is masked by the discourse of sacrifice. The actors sacrifice themselves for the sake of theatre, of art, of a spiritual transcendence through the exhaustion of their body.

At first glance, Barthes seems to condemn any form of excess on stage. However, the aspect of excess should not be dismissed quickly. Excess must be considered not simply as a perverted form of the actor's work but actually as one of its essences. Brian Kulick, in his essay *The Secret Life of Theatre*, describes a Borges' short story focusing on theatre. In the story, Averroes, the famous Muslim Andalusian jurist and author of more than 100 books covering many subjects, is tormented by the translation of Aristotle's *Poetics* into Arabic. In the story, he has difficulty grasping the notions of comedy and tragedy. Averroes' difficulties are interrupted by some children's screams as they play under his window. Averroes looks at them and wonders about their game. The three children are playing the call of the prayer: one is the muezzin, one is the worshipper, and the third one is playing the tower from which the muezzin calls for prayer. The three children playfully interchange roles. What is striking in the story is the intensity connected to the joy of playing the different roles. Kulick connects this story with Huizinga's and Caillois' studies on games and play. For both, play is a waste—a pure waste of time, energy, and skills. Kulick concludes that play seems to address the excess or surplus energy bound up in human condition, as well as its desire for release (Kulick, 2019). Going back to Aristotle's text that Averroes is translating, the mimetic behaviour of children is paralleled with the mimesis at work in theatre. The notion of excess, or surplus, is then the spark that ignites the actor's work. The actor starts imitating because there is an excess of energy, time, and skills.

What Barthes then points out is not the playful excess that sustains the actor's work but its perverse transformation into a commerce of exchange. The joyful excess is transformed into a self-imposed strenuous effort meant

to secure remuneration. Barthes insists that the violence applied to the actor's body, the extreme experience of the actor's sacrifice, prevents the audience from seeing what stands behind this act. Everyone, as Barthes explains, admires such actor's devotion. However, behind this apparent violent sacrifice, there is another form of violence more pernicious because it remains invisible: the logic of economy and success.

This student's monologue not only reconsidered the actor's work under the lens of capitalistic investment but also highlighted another element: how a discourse can mask violence. In this case, the discourse of the actor's sacrifice (meaning the romantic narrative of the actor giving everything for the sake of art) was a mask covering the capitalistic logic of success. This last research touched me because it obliged me to reflect on my own practice. I remember when I was 20 years old, inspired by various theatre texts such as Antonin Artaud's *Le théâtre et son double* and Eugenio Barba and Nicola Savarese's *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology*. I was in ecstasy with the idea of working very hard. I spent hours in the studio, trying to reach my limits and go further. I was convinced that only systemic exhaustion of myself in the rehearsal process and on stage would allow me to reach the impalpable aura of art. I understood Artaud's and Barba's texts as a discourse of the sacrifice of physical limitation to reach a higher, spiritual artistic dimension.

What I did not understand at that time was that I exchanged the notion of devotion with an aberrant notion of sacrifice. What I was doing was an economic exchange: I gave a lot of my time, I sacrificed my body, so in exchange, I received the recognition of being an artist and thus social admiration. What happened to me was that I was capitalizing violence. The capitalization of violence is the instrumentalization of excess to get something else: the violent exhaustion, the cruelty perceived in Artaud's text, the passionate sacrifice of the actor—all these serve the economy of exchange. As some students from the course pointed out, an extreme action on stage (a kind of sacrifice, like getting naked) is also a strategy from the actor to divert the audience's attention. According to the students, the spectators' focus shifts from the acting quality to the boldness of the action. Sacrifice then becomes, according to them, a form of a mask.

5 Conclusion

This chapter had two main objectives. The first was to highlight the practical nature of this research project. Most of the insights developed during this postdoctoral research emerged from practical explorations, which were then discussed and articulated into theoretical hypotheses. This is why each section began with the description of an exercise that triggered several considerations about the representation of violence. The second objective was to analyse these considerations and assess how they contribute to our understanding of the representation of violence.

The exercises were not intended to improve actors' skills in representing violence or to develop specific dramaturgical tools for dealing with violence. Instead, they aimed to highlight and problematize various aspects encountered when staging violence. These problems primarily concern narratives about violence, trauma related to violence, and the spectator's violent imagination.

The first exercise, the re-staging of violent images, aimed to give bodies to the haunting dimension of iconic violent images. The intrusion of living bodies into these iconic moments, suspended in time, made the layers of narrative present in the images palpable, though often unnoticed. In the blind spot of the image, new voices were heard, disrupting the collective imagination by warping these images. These transformations, as Baumhauer describes, forced spectators to reflect on their imagination of violence. Early photographic images, particularly during the 19th century, involuntarily propagated old narratives of imperialistic expansion. Over time, the medium became aware of its own apparatus, documenting conflicts, domination, and wars. Through photographic images, new heroes emerged: the victims (Zoja, 2018, 71). This may have been what happened during the students' improvisations: the victim had the opportunity to speak.

If the first exercise was about giving voice to the victims and exposing narratives, screams, and abuses of power unseen in images but haunting us nonetheless, the third exercise reversed this approach. It considered the victim (specifically one who chooses to perform as a victim) not as a fragile entity to be protected, but as a potential manipulator and emotional abuser. The first exercise explored trauma, gave voice to victims, expanded visibility, and deconstructed structural violence. The third exercise offered a nuanced exploration of macro and micro power dynamics of invisible violence.

The second exercise, with its seemingly playful approach, sought to disrupt audience expectations about violence. Barthes, in his essay on viewing images, discusses two terms: *studium* and *punctum*. For him, the person viewing a photograph knows how to read an image. This person understands the process behind creating the picture. Similarly, a theatre-goer knows how theatre works. This is *studium*: the knowledge of what encompasses the phenomena of photographic pictures or theatre production. *Punctum* is something that emerges from the image and pierces the viewer. The spectators know the workings of theatre (*studium*), but each representation has the power to impress them (*punctum*). *Punctum* cannot be planned or decided beforehand; it is something that escapes the image or the show and independently impacts the viewer's subconscious, leaving a mark. This might have occurred during *Fun Violence*. My suspicion is that the *punctum* in this case was not the representation of violent actions but the fact that they were placed in a playful context. The juxtaposition of violence and pleasure (both playful and sensual), without any moralistic or contextual discourse, was the *punctum* because, as discussed in the previous chapter, we cannot accept that violence exists on its own. We need to give it meaning, a reason for its existence. Its presence is considered a threat to our survival; therefore, we need to control it.

In the *Dictionary of the Body* by philosopher Michela Marzano, under the entry *Violence*, there is a contrast between instinctual animal violence for survival and the cold, rational violence executed by humans. Marzano distinguishes two types of violence: aggression and cruelty (Marzano, 2007, 965). Aggression is related to animal survival. Neuroscientists explain aggressive behaviour as the suppression of the organ of control. Several factors can suppress this organ and let the subject express aggression (violence), such as wounds, alcohol, chemical products, stress, etc. Another form of violence, which Marzano qualifies as cruel, is not based on nervous system dysfunction but rather uses knowledge, culture, and imagination. Marzano questions whether it is possible to recognize animality in the making of the atomic bomb or the methodical planning of gas chambers. For her, there is nothing animal, nothing about survival or aggression in these forms of violence. What characterizes these forms of cold violence is their illimitation. The resources to invent ways to kill are infinite; they depend only on fantasy. For Marzano, such violence is strictly linked with fantasy, desire, and thus sexuality. For her, sexuality is not necessarily limited to love, seduction, tenderness, friendship, or forms of sublimation in art but encompasses other human activities, such as jealousy, megalomania, resentment, suspicion, hate, and more generally everything that can be described as passion (Marzano, 966).

Marzano suggests that instinctual violence (aggression) belongs to the realm of animals. Therefore, if humans are violent, they should behave aggressively, like animals fighting for survival. But there is another form of violence (cruelty) related to the notion of pleasure and sexuality. If Marzano initially tried to differentiate forms of violence (aggression and cruelty), it results that, under the category of cruelty, it is again indistinct. Somehow, with the notion of fantasy as a support for sexuality, almost all forms of violence are included. And obviously, it is possible to wonder if sexuality is also a form of animality. However, the point is that *being animalistic* should not necessarily be reduced to superficial aggressive behaviour. In the tension between the animal body and the sacrifice through language, as described earlier, there is something more subtle and profound.

What I suggest instead is that violence is a threshold for the taboo. It is a direct link to the sacrificed part within us. It does not mean that, to recover the sacrificed part, we must behave like animals. It is a sensation, a feeling, a state of being. The subject is thus in constant tension, negotiating the emergence of the body while remaining civilized, within the symbolic sacrifice. The screen for this negotiation is twofold: the body and the imagination.

Notes

1 This research was done in collaboration with the BA students of the Swedish acting department of the Theatre Academy of Helsinki, Finland.
2 The Moomins are the central characters of a comic strip for children created by the Finnish artist Tove Jansson. This comic strip is extremely famous, and almost all Finns know their adventures. The Moomins are a family of white, round

fairy-tale characters with large snouts that make them resemble cute and inoffensive hippopotamuses.

3 Giorgio Vasari (1511–1574) was an Italian painter, architect, writer, and historian, most famous for his "Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architects," considered the ideological foundation of Western art history.

4 An example of the ritualistic bath for the soldier coming back from war can be found in the Greek tragedy *Oresteia* by Euripides, when Clytemnestra prepares the bath for her husband, Agamemnon, coming back from the Trojan War.

5 Of course, this claim is debatable and Giorgio Agamben, in his work *Homo Sacer*, examined the ambiguity of Western societies proclaiming democratic values and at the same time promoting continuous states of emergency diminishing the state of law.

6 Translation is mine. The original text in French is: "Et sentir le lynx plutôt que le salon de coiffure, péter un coup plutôt que le retenir. (….). Tu voudrais parfois te vautrer dans cette fange, oublier en elle ce que tu es. (….) Ces impuretés te rappellent enfin qu'il y a eu une nature tout autour de toi, avec des oiseaux et des crottes, des crottes et des oiseaux et qu'il faisait bon y vivre parfois et même souvent peut-être bien. Elles te disent que tu es un animal toi aussi, ni plus ni moins" (Jaccoud, 51–55).

7 Translation is mine. The original text in French is: "Nous voilà seul. Entre nous, sommes toute. (…) Si ça ne va vraiment pas, on fera les cochons nous-mêmes."

8 The show premiered on 22 November 2022 at Monttu Theatre in Tampere University. It went on tour then performing in five different elementary schools in the area of Pirkanmaa, Finland.

9 For further reading on the matter see: Rosenberg, Sarah (2003) "*Victimhood*." *Beyond Intractability*. Eds. Guy Burgess and Heidi Burgess. Conflict Information Consortium, University of Colorado, Boulder. Casey Ryan Kelly (2018) 'The Wounded Man: Foxcatcher and the Incoherence of White Masculine Victimhood', *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 15(2), 161–178. Sarah Schulman (2016) *Conflict Is Not Abuse, Overstating Harm, Community Responsibility, and the Duty of Repair*, ARSENAL PULP PRESS, Vancouver.

10 I present here some excerpts from the monologue written and performed by Antonia Henn. For the full text, please refer to the link provided in the bibliography.

11 I present here some excerpts from the monologue written and performed by Tom Salminen. For the full text, please refer to the link provided in the bibliography.

4 Counter-Violence, the Poetics of Inadequate Performances

The title of this chapter, "counter-violence," should not be seen as an attempt to confront or move away from violence but rather as a movement reconsidering how violence is displayed, aiming for a proactive rather than a critical attitude. In this perspective, the subtitle "inadequate performances" suggests that the display of violence should not aim for a more satisfactory or successful performance but rather refrain from completing the narrative embedded with staged violence. The notion of *inadequate performances*, mentioned in the first chapter in relation to the display of trauma, will be expanded and applied to a wider array of performed violence. *Inadequate performances* should not be understood as clumsy performances but rather as an attempt to step beyond conventional strategies for displaying staged violence, as delineated in the first three chapters. These performances aim to remove violence from morbid voyeurism, or what could be defined as the spell of violence, which denies any agency to survivors, and instead offers possibilities to renegotiate within the experienced violence or even transform conflictual situations into empowering processes. These attempts may inevitably fail, but at least they can suggest strategies of resistance, diversion, and engaging forms of humanity when facing violence.

This chapter examines three different dramaturgical strategies and two alternative practices. The three dramaturgical strategies, called: (1) humanizing structural violence, (2) violence and absence, and (3) homoeopathic violence, reconsider notions of space, points of view, and magnitude. The first proposal, humanizing structural violence, focuses on the notion of "points of view" and suggests examining what part of humanity is left within structural violence. It explores the strategies of survival within a system dominated by structural violence. The second proposal, violence and absence, focuses on space and suggests approaching violence through its absence. It examines the violence (and its effects) and the void that violence creates. This proposal does not directly address the violence itself—explosions, brutal deaths, aggression—but rather the emptiness left in the aftermath. The third proposal, homeopathic violence, reconsiders the magnitude of violence. It examines strategies of resilience towards violence and explores how individuals can resist violence while maintaining their humanity.

DOI: 10.4324/9781003519881-5
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The two alternative practices examine a specific community-based theatre developed by Ilaria Tucci, a researcher in peace and conflict resolution, and finally, the last suggestion is a theatre installation called *Body as a Conflict Zone*.

1 Proposal One: Humanizing Structural Violence

The first proposal comes from the play *Je te regarde* (*I Watch You*), by the French-Romanian playwright Alexandra Badea. We are all familiar with Orwell's dystopian text 1984 where an omnipotent "Big Brother" monitors all citizens. In contemporary democracies, we can observe an increase in surveillance cameras and various means of monitoring, similar to those seen in dictatorial regimes. This play gives voice to the individuals behind these surveillance cameras, those who must watch and control others. The strength of this play lies in rendering these anonymous, menacing mechanical eyes into something alive and emotional. Rather than exacerbating the violence embedded in the apparatus of surveillance, the author examines the sensations that emerge in such situations. The play surprises by reversing structural violence, suggesting a near-future setting with sophisticated and omnipresent surveillance systems. Humans are pushed into relentless solitude, with screens as their only connection to others. While some might argue this is already our reality, the author condenses existing attributes to make her point.

The play consists of 24 monologues following the story of four characters, simply defined by numbers or user IDs: W-1972-0701-1840–1, Q-1978-1225-2174-2, Y-1980-0417-9405-2, and X-1983-0406-4965-1. For the rest of the article, they will be referred to as W, Q, Y, and X. It is inferred that they use a surveillance system. Despite all watching someone else, each character deals with a different type of surveillance.

W is obsessed with a perfect relationship. He observes a woman he loves but is unsure if they will be a perfect couple. They live on different continents and have never met physically. She has never seen his face. He is reluctant to show too much of himself, fearing an emotional breakdown that might affect his productivity at work. He knows he is also watched by his superior, and any decline in his work quality might affect future contracts. He prefers random sexual encounters via an app over compromising himself in a romantic relationship. However, inadvertently, he leaves his camera open, allowing her to see his face. They have virtual sex and decide to meet at the airport hotel.

Q is a guard in a jail who fantasizes about an inmate. She uses her position to get closer to him but struggles with the fact that he loves his wife. She uses her authority to confine him in a high-surveillance prison. During the inmate's transfer, Q follows him to the airport.

Y is obsessed with happiness, testing her happiness several times a day with an algorithm. Her relationship with her husband seems perfect; their Google calendars match perfectly. However, she starts suspecting her husband of having affairs. She purchases various devices and apps to track his

activities through his phone. By hacking his devices, she discovers he feels unfulfilled in their marriage. Instead of discussing this with him, she creates a fake Facebook profile, using it to seduce him. Despite tracking her happiness, her stalking leads her into depression. She receives a notification from work about her lowered productivity and the risk of being fired. Nevertheless, she continues to trick her husband and arranges to meet him at the airport using the fake profile.

X works in airport security but is informed that soon a machine will take over, allegedly securing better results in recognizing potential terrorists. He is enraged and joins a volunteer programme to watch online cameras at the US-Mexico border in his free time. His duty is to inform local authorities if he notices any suspect movements. He decides to let some Mexicans pass without informing the authorities. However, he realizes he is also watched when a notification appears, urging him to report suspect movements. One day, at the airport, he overrides the machine's judgement to thoroughly check a woman the machine cleared. Finding nothing, he is reprimanded by his superior. Returning home, he notices automatic systems like an app that checks his car's wheels and another that orders food when his fridge is empty, leaving him feeling more observed and less in control of his life. His monologues end with his work at the airport, where he notices the machine has a very low threat level. Sensing something is wrong, he decides to leave his workplace immediately.

The play is a series of monologues by each character. They speak in sequence, creating a cycle where each character speaks six times. Despite the seemingly fragmentary nature of juxtaposed monologues, a linear development leads to a climax with a bomb exploding at the airport, involving all four characters. It is unclear if they survive, as their monologues end with descriptions of the explosion.

The drama exacerbates the logic of surveillance. The final explosion is not the focal point of the play; rather, it serves as a negative deus ex machina that provides an ending to the spiral of vicious suspicion. It is a surprising event that closes the play. The real focus is the notion of surveillance and the anxiety it creates. All the new technologies described in the play are not used to ensure humans live a better life but to nourish a sense of distrust. If there are machines that are supposed to help humans live better lives and be more productive, then there are no more excuses to fail; humans are not allowed to fail anymore. Additionally, the logic of surveillance creates the fearful consciousness that, if one can use digital technology to control others, then someone else is likely monitoring them as well. All this is legitimized by the logic of security, prevention, productivity, and securing a better life. Rather than trusting human beings, the protagonists are compelled to trust algorithms. We are left to wonder if the author suggests that, if the human factor is removed and all relationships and interactions are regulated by algorithms, this might lead to an implosion of society.

This play, rather than focusing on the violence itself and its traumatic impact, explores how humans try to cope in a world defined by structural and

normalized violence and what kind of agency they still have. This proposal suggests investigating, not the visible emergence of violence (in this case the final bombing at the airport), but rather the slow transformation upon individuals that structural violence (in this case the principle of surveillance) generates.

2 Proposal Two: Violence and Absence

The second proposal is based on the play *Mio eroe* (*My Heroes*) by the Italian playwright Giuliana Musso, written in 2016. The author explains that, in her examination of the impact of patriarchal structures on history, she wanted to address what she calls the "taboo of the taboo": violence as a system, that is to say, war (Musso, 2021, 12). In 2016, when she wrote the play, Italy was at war in Afghanistan, but as she pointed out, the Italian press was forbidden from using the word 'war.' No media was allowed to call it war. According to the official discourse, Italy was not at war; it was on a mission. Italy was sending soldiers to Afghanistan on a mission. The play consists of three monologues by three women, all mothers whose sons have been sent to Afghanistan by the Italian army. All the events referred to in the play are real. The author interviewed several mothers whose sons had been sent on missions to Afghanistan. The final text is a collage of this documentation, making it a work of fiction based on real facts.

The first woman to speak is Anna. Anna seems caring, concerned, and sympathetic. She immediately announces that her son died in Afghanistan. She describes how the Italian state, the media, and the church publicized her son's death. She also points out how, after her son's death, she started realizing that we are surrounded by elements and signs indicating that our so-called peaceful society is also at war. Anna presents herself as a religious person, but now she cannot stand to see Christ crucified. Jesus was also a son with a mother who had to experience the loss of her child. She can no longer bear to see TV channels broadcasting movies where people shoot and die so easily. She also struggles with the sight of so many people walking in uniforms on the streets of Italy. Before, she was indifferent to it, but now, whenever she sees a uniform, her heart shrinks, and it happens often. She has found some understanding and support among other parents who lost their children on missions. She says it was helpful to meet them, and she even had fun with them, but she would have preferred that they never had to meet.

The second mother is Giordana. She is surly and, in her speech, the words "rock" and "stone" are recurrent. She is like that. Even though she says she is not upset, she is angry. Her speech is tense and full of rage. She refuses to accept that her son is dead. She wonders if the government is us, and if we don't want to send our children to die, then who is deciding this? Who decides to send our kids on a mission? She says she is not angry with the state because the state is us. But she adds that we don't want to send our children to die. She is in an obsessional loop. She repeats that she is not angry but asserts

that for sure there is also an Afghan mother who is outraged, just like she is. The author conveys the idea that the mother of a soldier can experience the same pain and loss as the mother of a soldier from the other army. In the agony of losing one's child, divisions fall away. There are no more enemies, no questions of who is right or wrong, who is on a mission of peace, or who is invading; there is only suffering. As the title of the play hints, the three monologues do not deal with the question of who is a hero, but what makes a person a hero. Why does a nation need to publicize the death of one of its citizens sent on a "mission of peace" in another country? What does this action or narrative reveal? Will this recognition from the state help the family cope with the pain? From the text, we can infer that it does not. We have already seen in Chapter 2 the instrumentalization of the notion of a hero. Even though the play does not address the question of the instrumentalization of heroes directly, it tries nevertheless to revert the very idea of what a hero is: a hero is not someone who sacrifices themselves for a greater good but every child is a hero because they bring life to the world; they are a source of love and constant amazement.

The third monologue is the story of Carla. She is a teacher. She explains that, in her family, all the male members (her father, her grandfather, her husband's father) have been sent to the front-line as soldiers. Nevertheless, she hoped that her son would not join the army. She was hoping he would be a musician. But at the age of 17, he dropped the cello and spoke only about entering the army. In her speech, she attacks the widespread discourse that Italian soldiers who go to Afghanistan receive a lot of money and that they accept this risky mission mainly for pecuniary reasons. Carla responds that this argument about money is used as an alibi for our conscience, as a way not to take our political responsibilities. She attacks the indifference of Italians towards this mission, which is not just a mission but a war. Her monologue ends with the horror of finding out the exact location of her son, Bala Murghab, and the consequent relentless checking on the web to see if Bala Murghab has been attacked. The horror peaks when an acquaintance, whose son is also sent to Afghanistan, calls her asking if the army has contacted her. She goes on the internet to search if Bala Murghab has been attacked. And yes, it has been. But the name of the killed soldier is not posted yet. The following hours are atrocious for her until she finds out that it is not her son who has been killed. And she cannot even be happy about it because she knows that, somewhere else, a mother like her is now crying out loud. Her monologue gives a bit of hope because Carla could actually re-embrace her son. She compares this moment when she could hold her son again to the moment of giving birth when they placed the newborn baby in her arms. They placed her son again in her arms.

Each monologue brings a variation on the theme of loss, violence, and the reverberation of war. The play could certainly be criticized for embracing a gendered narrative about war, where women's roles are confined to mourning the wounded male soldiers. While this gendered war narrative deserves

reconsideration, I want to focus on an interesting aspect of this play: violence is not experienced directly but through the absence it provokes. The three women share this absence, this void, and the emotions it creates in them and, by extension, in our society. It challenges the notion of a hero: what is a hero for a country and what is a hero for an individual? As the author explains, witnessing the sorrow of these mothers might impart to the audience the belief that love exists and that probably, in our lives, at some point, we have felt it (Musso 17).

If the previous proposal suggested examining the structural violence preceding a violent outburst, this proposal suggests investigating the aftermath of devastating events. The violence is examined not as a shocking phenomenon to be displayed on stage, but rather as a lacerating event piercing the structure of everyday life. And it is this crack, the emptiness made by the piercing, which becomes the object of investigation.

3 Proposal Three: Homeopathic Violence

The third proposal comes from the play *Rose is a Rose is a Rose is a Rose*, written by Ivana Sajko in 2008, which focuses on the meeting of two young people. As the author affirms in the preliminary note, the text is a love story, or more precisely, as she claims, every love story deals with the lack of love. In her attempts to avoid kitsch or melodrama, which often permeates love stories, she decided to strip down the story, unveil the lovers' intimacy, and create a distance by commenting on how the story is told. The text becomes a double narrative, exploring the content of the story while simultaneously commenting on how the story is written. Sajko, by referring to Gertrude Stein, revendicates the performative nature of her text, creating an auto-referential prose that comments on its own writing. The form of the text resembles a long poem interrupted by short dialogues between a "him" and a "her." It is not clear how many performers are needed to stage this text. It is up to the director or artistic group to decide how to distribute the lines and deliver the text. In this sense, it is similar to Falk Richter's *Seven Seconds* discussed in Chapter 1. However, even if both texts share a similar feature, the treatment of violence in Sajko's text is rather unconventional.

The text refers to a man and a woman, remaining vague in their descriptions. We can infer from the text that they are probably a couple who met the previous night in a bar, are of humble economic conditions, one living in social housing, and possibly working in a factory. The narration of their encounter is non-linear, jumping in time. These jumps are reinforced by the text drifting to the description of other events. The play starts with the moment they made love. Their intercourse already permeates the violence that will haunt the text: "They made love as if they were fighting" (Sajko, 2021, 12). The text then examines the distance emerging between the two lovers, jumps back to the previous night when they met, and jumps again to the moment of departure, going back and forth in a frenzy acceleration. The turmoil of the

text is reinforced by the insertion of other events. Initially, the confusion of the two lovers is paralleled with the description of a couple who won a marathon dance in 1930, dancing for 5,152 hours without stopping. The two dancers needed money, they won, but their bodies were devastated: the woman no longer had her periods, and the man had his knees and body articulations damaged. The text continues with excerpts from the *Apocalypse*, the French philosopher Alain Badiou, and the description of Rembrandt's painting *The Night Watch*, pointing out the luring calmness of the image and the chaos about to burst. It moves to the narration of an unspecified riot, reminiscent of the suburban riots in many Western cities over the last decades, jumps back to ancient Rome, and debates whether the burning of Rome was an accident or orchestrated by Christians or Emperor Nero. It also details no-global demonstrations of 1999 in Seattle, 2001 in Genoa, 2002 in Brussels, and 2005 in Clichy-sous-Bois, all ending in conflict with the police. In relation to the burning of Rome and suburban outbursts, a recurrent question is: whose fault is it? Who should we blame for this violence? Like a surrealist collage, the text interweaves themes, writing forms, and points of view, but love is central. For her, love should not be melodramatic or kitschy, as it is often depicted in romantic comedies (Sajko, 5). Instead, it should be approached as a subversive subject, existing outside the system and beyond conventional logic. In this play, love comes up against the complexity of the world, destruction, and the tension modern life inflicts on our bodies. Even if the text echoes the wounds from the breakup of Yugoslavia or the impact of neoliberal economies on individuals' bodies, love remains a form of resistance and rebellion.

The struggles between despair and desire that a couple faces may be the last space for freedom and existence. The play ends by describing the couple's rush to enter his house, the entrance into the apartment, the undressing, and the kiss. By returning to the exciting moment when a couple meets and makes love for the first time, the play describes the intensity, joy, and amazement of two people meeting. Violence spreads through the whole text, and the love story keeps all these violent events together. The play does not attempt to explain why these violent events emerge. The violence exists as if it is an autonomous entity. However, it wonders who is responsible for these violent events, perhaps insinuating the terrible suspicion that no one can be accounted for the brutality of everyday life. Facing this suspicion that no one is responsible for the ferocity of everyday life, love and desire allow one to detach from this everyday aggressivity, giving back a sense of humanity. Through love and desire, even if the meeting is like a battle and ends in departure, one finds the strength to push away violence, destruction, and trauma and glimpse compassion. In this sense, the limited violence in the relationship becomes resilience against the wider violence surrounding the lovers. It functions as a homoeopathic medicine: a small dose of poison that reinforces the body.

This proposal suggests investigating forms of resilience helping to remain immune from the destructive impact of violence. As seen in the first chapter, violence transforms humans into objects. How to keep a sense of humanity

and not let violence transforms us into mere 'things,' or using Simon Weil's word: how to keep the soul in the material? This proposal suggests examining these strategies for resilience, which aim exactly to keep the soul within the material and prevent us from falling into the spell of violence.

4 Proposal Four: Conflict Resolution Through Community Theatre

The Italian theatre maker and peace researcher Ilaria Tucci developed a compelling community theatre practice aimed at transforming violence or potential conflict into a creative practice, allowing participants to reclaim their own agency. Her practice, informed by her doctoral research, *Community-Based Theatre as Conflict Transformation in Lampedusa: Co-Producing Knowledge about Life at the Militarized Border of Europe*, stands on three pillars: military geographies, slow violence, and moral imagination. She uses a feminist peace research approach as a framework for her practice. Additionally, Tucci's work acknowledges the concept of the dramaturgy of the unseen, although it is not explicitly stated as one of her sources.

4.1 Military Geographies

Military geographies, a term coined by geographer Rachel Woodward, considers how military activities, or militarism, create spaces or landscapes with distinct moral orders that might diverge from accepted social or community values. It examines the extent to which wider geographical areas are affected or moulded by the presence of militarism or military forces (Tucci, 2022, 96). In her practice-based research, Tucci explores how the island of Lampedusa has been profoundly impacted by the increased military presence over the last decades. The changes are noticeable not only in the visible presence of military personnel and infrastructure but also in the island's economy, where traditional fishing has been replaced by hotels and restaurants serving those connected to military activities. This shift has also impacted the health of the inhabitants, with a noticeable increase in cancerous diseases linked to special electromagnetic military radar installations. Furthermore, it has transformed the narratives about the island's inhabitants. For centuries, despite being conquered and re-conquered by various empires, the inhabitants had always maintained agency over their lives, particularly concerning those arriving on the island (Tucci, 179). The arrival of heavily militarized organizations has stripped the inhabitants of this agency, turning them into passive spectators. Paradoxically, research indicates that most illegal immigration occurs not through Mediterranean Sea crossings or other borders but by individuals overstaying their visas after arriving legally. The illegal immigration through the borders is actually a minor factor. But, because of the media coverage, it has become a battle used by politicians in front of their electors. The militarization of the borders seen as a means to fight illegal immigration is a clear example of slow violence.

4.2 Slow Violence

Slow violence, a term defined by Rob Nixon, accounts for slow, deferred, and invisible violence with long-term effects not initially considered as violence. Tucci points out that slow violence is critically connected to structural violence but adds the dimensions of time and space. While structural violence is fixed and established, slow violence is always shifting and gradually changing (Tucci, 97). The distinctiveness of slow violence lies in its lack of spectacle; it is not an outburst of a singular event but a phenomenon that acts over the long term, deeply infiltrating the social fabric. This makes it extremely difficult to measure its extent and individuate the casualties. Nixon highlights that:

> Casualties of slow violence—human and environmental—are the casualties most likely not to be seen, not to be counted. Casualties of slow violence become lightweight, disposable casualties, with dire consequences for the ways wars are remembered, which in turn has dire consequences for the projected casualties from future wars.
>
> (Nixon, 2011, 13)

This difficulty in balancing slow violence casualties with war casualties echoes researcher Cynthia Enloe's point about militarization as a socio-political process. She notes that most militarizing processes occur during what is misleadingly labelled peacetime (Enloe, 2004), which could instead be called *slow violence time*.

4.3 Moral Imagination

Moral imagination, the third pillar in Tucci's practice, enhances artistic and creative responses to military geographies and slow violence. Referring to Lederach, Tucci explains that moral imagination consists of four components: (1) the capacity to imagine ourselves in a web of relationships that includes our enemies, (2) the ability to sustain a paradoxical curiosity that embraces complexity without relying on dualistic polarity, (3) the fundamental belief in and pursuit of the creative act, and (4) the acceptance of the inherent risk of stepping into the mystery of the unknown that lies beyond the far too familiar landscape of violence (Tucci, 101–102).

Applying moral imagination means stepping out from polarized positions that exacerbate confrontations. Tucci claims that the ability to overcome resistance and imagine "ourselves in a dialogical scenario which includes our enemies, gives the needed motivation and 'fuel' to engage practically ourselves in its fulfilment" (Tucci, 106). The strength of this practice lies not necessarily in the relationship itself but in the ability to imagine change and place ourselves in the condition of change. Community-based theatre becomes the ideal platform where moral imagination can be bodily explored by participants through various improvisations and exercises. Referring to

Lederach, Tucci highlights the importance of paradoxical curiosity, which invites contradictory elements to coalesce and embraces a greater and more complex multitude of truths. This approach transforms simplistic dualistic polarizations between right and wrong, victim and perpetrator (Tucci, 103). Moral imagination is thus not a set of paradigms to be applied but an attitude, a constant process engaging with polyphonic and contradictory voices, allowing us to step beyond what has generated the conflict.

The main framework of Tucci's practice consists of adopting feminist peace research methods for her community-based theatre. Paralleling moral imagination, feminist peace research also emphasizes the unexpected results that such processes entail. As Tucci explains, neither the researchers nor the participants can fully control the process. This aspect, which seems to contradict traditional academic research where specific methodologies legitimize the research itself, can instead provide unexpected and innovative results. Moreover feminist peace research focuses on the significance of the everyday. This special attention to everyday life does not undermine the impact of larger forces but instead aims to examine macro-micro interlinks. It connects individual lives with the larger context in which a person lives. This focus on everyday life aligns with a desire for a more holistic approach to research. In the case of Tucci's practice, it reflects a desire for a more holistic understanding of peace and conflict, embracing complexities rather than being exclusionary (Tucci, 116).

In the context of community-based theatre, this approach entails allowing participants to express thoughts, feelings, and affects that shape their emotional reality. Through improvisations and theatrical exercises, they can explore and practise new forms of being as individuals or as a community. This art-based practice encourages a participatory creative process, with both researchers and participants as co-creators. It allows participants to push the boundaries of reality, enabling the emergence of paradoxical scenarios that unsettle usual stereotypes. It aligns with the feminist request to include marginalized views and overlooked positions (Tucci, 119).

However, as Tucci acknowledges, participatory research practices might face ethical challenges. Issues such as confidentiality, informed consent, representation, anonymity, and ownership of data can erode the trust or safe space that such work demands. Therefore, it is important that the different needs and expectations of participants are considered and respected. To overcome some of these challenges, feminist peace research proposes a dialectical engagement between reflexivity and intersectionality to contextualize the research. However, as Tucci points out, this does not guarantee complete ethical integrity. Community-based researchers need to maintain a vigilant attitude about ethical issues, as the power relations between the researcher and the participant do not disappear and can change during the research process (Tucci, 118). Only constant discussion and inclusion in decision-making can help prevent prejudicial practices.

The "dramaturgy of the unseen" aims to give voices to those who are 'unseen.' With the notion of the 'unseen,' Tucci intends to highlight those who usually remain in the background, whose stories are not considered worth telling. Tucci, with this dramaturgical practice of the unseen, refers to the work of José Sanchis Sinisterra, a Spanish theatre director and dramaturge, who developed his work in reference to the Spanish Civil War. In his research, *Prohibido escribir obras maestras* (*Forbidden to Write Masterpieces*), Sinisterra develops the concept of giving space to those who are not usually the central focus, which Tucci defines as the "dramaturgy of the unseen."

A famous example of this procedure is *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* by Tom Stoppard. In this play, Stoppard has chosen, as the protagonists, two characters from the famous play *Hamlet*. In *Hamlet,* Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are two minor characters who appear briefly. They are ridiculed by Hamlet and then die. In Stoppard's play, the original plot of *Hamlet* developed by Shakespeare remains, but instead of having Rosencrantz and Guildenstern appearing and leaving the stage as in the original, it is Hamlet who becomes a secondary character placed in the background, entering and leaving the stage continuously. In this way, Stoppard gives space for the emotions, thoughts, visions, dreams, fears, hopes, and inner conflicts of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Stoppard reverses the focus and informs the audience that the stories of the small people, of the *unseen*, are worth telling. "You don't need to be a prince so that your story is displayed on the stage," as Tucci claims.

In her practice, Tucci explains how in the community-based theatre project she led in Lampedusa she did not want to focus on the contrast between the military and immigrants but rather on those who usually are not in the spotlight of the media: the inhabitants of Lampedusa. The paradox of such a choice lies in the fact that it is the elements missing from the play (in this case the military, the immigrants, and European politics towards immigration) that make the play itself (Tucci, 167). For example, in the play written during this project, three scenes clearly dealt with these issues: the asparagus scene, the hotel scene, and the house scene. The asparagus scene displays a young woman who goes to pick wild asparagus, as has been done for centuries on the island. However, due to the military presence, this old tradition is banned. The hotel scene involves a hotel keeper explaining how his business has expanded thanks to the presence of the military but hindered the fishing tradition on the island. The house scene depicts the struggle of a father trying to build a home because the land he chose has been designated for military infrastructure. Without diminishing the gravity of the immigrant's tragedy, Tucci aims to highlight the political decision to militarize the borders of Europe and the consequences of such a decision. By focusing on the inhabitants' stories, she aims to make visible the slow violence that this process brings.

This proposal comprises several suggestions to approach violence from a different angle: the dramaturgy of the unseen, the notion of slow violence and community-based theatre. As a closing paragraph for this section, I would

like to point out mainly the notion of community-based theatre. This form of theatre has a strong focus on the process where the participants can re-engage with the reality in which they live and with the narratives upholding their reality (Haedicke and Nelhaus, 2001). This process of re-engagement allows them re-assessing their agency and therefore reverting the activity of objectivation that violence operates. The focus is perhaps not necessarily on the final artistic outcome, but chiefly on the process in which the participants use theatre as a platform to redefine their position as human being.

5 Proposal Five: Body as a Conflict Zone

On 14 May 2016, in collaboration with the theatre director David Kozma, we presented the theatre installation *Body as a Conflict Zone* at the Helsinki Cultural House CAISA.[1] The installation consisted of an immersive theatre experience where spectators were invited to wander through nine rooms. Each room displayed a specific theme that explored the notion of conflict inscribed in a body: virus, domestic violence, human geography, torture room, addiction, love as conflict, safe room, fear, and conflict in transition. The display in each room varied, ranging from actors sharing intimate actions with the audience, to lecture performances about domination and submission, to video installations, interactive sound and light systems, and displays of maps and paintings. There was also a cozy room where spectators could share personal impressions or thoughts. The full installation offered a kaleidoscopic approach to various manifestations of conflicts inscribed in a body.

The virus room consisted of a video installation showing how the body's red blood cells attack an alien virus. This room illustrated how this battle, happening on a molecular level, is constant in our bodies. The domestic violence room focused on violence against women within relationships. Three performers shared intimate, personal actions that helped women cope with or survive such traumatic situations. The display in this room was the result of a larger research and interview project conducted by the Finnish and Russian group Eve's Ribs during 2015–2018. The human geography room displayed the results of a workshop that explored the possibility of translating body pain or tensions into poetic imagery. The process involved drawing the participant's body silhouette on a map, observing the intersections between their silhouette and the map, and relating sore body parts to corresponding places on the map. This serendipitous intersection stimulated the participant's imagination. Through creative writing exercises, participants developed stories about their own bodies, creating a distance that allowed them to express personal difficulties using imagery that was both intimate and detached.

The torture room aimed to recreate one of the tortures implemented in the American jail at Guantanamo. Prisoners there were placed in closed rooms with extremely loud heavy metal music and powerful strobe lights (Masters, 2022). No physical pain was inflicted, but the prolonged exposure to this disturbing condition was torturous. Visitors could enter the room one by one,

which was totally dark except for a small light illuminating a pedal. Pressing the pedal activated the loud music and blinding strobe lights. As long as the pedal was pressed, the music and lights continued; releasing the pedal returned the room to darkness and silence.

The addiction room featured an edited video of a person drinking alcohol non-stop, recording the effects on his body. The video depicted a progression from initial thirst and yearning for alcohol, to euphoria, then vomiting, and finally collapsing in his own vomit.

The love as conflict room consisted of a lecture performance about BDSM, repeated several times during the installation. A couple practicing bondage domination and sadomasochism demonstrated their practices. One partner (the receiver), covered in latex with only the eyes and mouth visible, was placed on a table and restrained by the other partner (the giver), who explained the difficulty of fulfilling the receiver's request for pain. The giver loved the receiver and struggled with the request to inflict pain. Despite knowing that the receiver enjoyed it and the existence of explicit BDSM safety procedures, the giver found it emotionally challenging to cause pain. This lecture performance highlighted the conflict generated by the desire for pleasure within a loving relationship where both partners are equal.

The safe room provided a space for spectators to step out from the installation and reflect on their impressions or inner conflicts. They could write down their thoughts or record a video or audio message. The fear room resulted from a theatre research project examining how fear shapes identity. Combining personal stories with scientific examinations of how the brain constructs fear as an emotion, the room featured a human-sized puppet struck between green strings representing desire and red strings representing fear. These contradictory forces created stillness, while a recorded voice articulated various fears affecting the puppet.

The conflict zone in transition room consisted of a video from one of the theatre workshops my theatre company organized with refugees from Syria. The video featured four people standing and then sitting, all wearing expressive masks. Could spectators discern, without seeing their faces, that they were refugees? Could they detect if something in their body language betrayed their condition as people fleeing a conflict zone? Was the conflict zone they escaped still present in their bodies? These questions concluded the theatre installation. The aim was not to explain why these violent phenomena occur or to provide any narrative or judgement but to focus on their impact on the body. How are bodies affected by these experiences? How can we notice these effects?

When physical violence is inflicted on a person, they cease to exist as a human being and exist only through the pain occurring in their body. The pain takes over, emphasizing the physicality of the body. If a victim is tortured by starvation, all their thoughts and actions centre on the need for food. The belly, the part denied sustenance, becomes the focal point. The person's subjectivity, which supports their identity, withdraws, leaving only

a starved body. This brings us back to the first chapter, in which Simone Weil describes the consequences of violence as the soul leaving the body and the body existing only in the material. In this situation, the body becomes even more present, acting as the agent of the crisis that violence has generated, or what we called in this project: a conflict zone. Commonly, "conflict zones" are associated with places devastated by war, where the conflict is palpable, and civilians pay the highest price. In such cases, the term "conflict zone" is evident and needs no explanation. However, there are other places that seem spared by the overt destruction of a conflict zone but are nonetheless subjected to aggressive forces of domination equally as violent. This theatre installation suggests that these conflicts focus on the body.

If the previous proposal focused on the process empowering the participants, this last proposal shifts again the focus and suggests letting spectators decide how they want to experience what is displayed. In this specific theatre installation, the spectators could determine how long they wanted to remain in each room. In addition, each room allowed a different approach to violence: some rooms focused on traumatic situations while others approached violence through a symbolic display or through narrative. Eventually it is the spectators who can extract their own understanding or meaning from this experience.

6 Conclusion

Five proposals for approaching the notion of performing violence differently have been discussed in this chapter. Rather than presenting violence as something to be displayed on stage (either as instrumental, as an object, or as cathartic), the attempt here was to displace violence. Underlying this entire research are the narratives that violence reveals or hides. What is interesting about these five proposals is that the focus is not on the violent event itself but on the echoes or narratives surrounding the violence.

The first three proposals examined dramaturgical solutions for depicting the impact of violence. The first two, *Je te regarde* by Badea and *Mio eroe* by Musso, are built as a series of monologues, with all characters sharing personal feelings with the audience. In the first, violence culminates with a bomb detonating at the airport, while in the second, the violence has already erupted in the form of the war in Afghanistan. The third, *A Rose is a Rose is a Rose is a Rose* by Sajko, is an ongoing examination of how to be resilient and not let violence destroy us.

The last two proposals change perspective; they consider theatre as a platform where spectators are at the centre of the event. In one, they are co-creators of the performance, and in the other, they are active participants who decide how to experience the theatre installation. What these five proposals share is their attempt to mend the sense of humanity that violence might have shattered.

One recurrent word in this chapter is 'humanity.' There is the assumption that violence takes away our humanity and our task as theatre makers

is to bring back this lost humanity. However, we could question what this humanity is. The word humanity is associated to kindness, graciousness, consideration for others, and also to "the state or quality of being human" or of "human race, humans collectively." Would this mean that there are activities that humans do which do not belong to the human race? Would violence be one of them? If on the one hand this might seem obvious, on the other hand it is possible to argue that violence is not something outside the human sphere. Actually, as discussed in previous chapters, violence can also reinforce the sense of community or aliveness. Could we claim then that violence is part of humanity? Even though this seems a provocation, the ambiguity of violence impels us to search for other words to describe what violence takes away from us. Raymond Williams, in his exploration of modern tragedies, introduces a notion that could be useful for this study. Williams' notion of "structures of feeling" is an interlacing of social, political, cultural, and artistic conventions, creating a unique but influenced structure emerging from those that have gone before (Williams, 1987, 18). The meaning of structures of feeling is "bound to the importance of a continual re-evaluation of the socio-cultural-historic moment" (Duggan, 2012, 37).

What is the extent of a structure of feelings? I propose that there is not only one; every community, or clan, or family, or nation establishes its respective structure of feelings. A traumatic event, regardless of its magnitude, transforms a structure of feeling. Violence, in this perspective, is something that breaks a specific structure of feeling, and depending on the scale of the brutality, the type of structure of feelings which is affected varies. In the aftermath of a violent event, and until a new structure of feelings is re-established, the person, or the family, or the clan, or the community, or the nation, or the continent remains traumatized (Duggan, 38). The power of these five proposals lies in their attempts not necessarily to bring back the humanity but to find ways to re-establish a new structure of feelings. They don't necessarily provide explanations for the outburst of violence but seek to offer a sense of reconciliation with the destruction of the existing structure of feelings.

Note

1 *Body as a Conflict Zone* was facilitated by Anastazia Trizna, Anita Parri, David Kozma, Jamie MacDonald, Mark, and Petra Happio.

5 Mapping Violence

This chapter, "Mapping Violence," aims to chart the different manifestations of represented violence on stage discussed in the previous chapters. This chart, without pretending to be exhaustive, offers a succinct guide on staged violence that covers most of its possible declinations. In attempting to establish a map of the various uses of violence, there is a risk of flattening the density and intricacy of the argument. While Chapters 1–4 sought to examine all conceivable effects and implications of violence, this chapter aims to reduce these various aspects into labelled phenomena. I hope the reader can tolerate such a process and perhaps find in this practice of encapsulating events into a map the possibility of gaining new insights. The chart aims to easily spot the different mechanisms related to violence and offer a clear spectrum of phenomena connected with staged violence.

The chart places violence as a central singularity eliciting a myriad of effects. Like a stone thrown into a lake, it creates endless waves radiating through the surrounding water. Similarly, the map presents the ramifications of staged violence. The enquiry can be classified into four main subjects of examination: the consideration of violence as instrumental or not (dramaturgy), the consideration of violence as transformative (affect),[1] the consideration of violence as a carrier of meanings (content), and the consideration of resilience to violence (process). These four main areas allow for examining violence from the key aspects that characterize a theatre performance: dramaturgy, affects, content, and process. Dramaturgy involves the strategies to present, tell, or display a story on stage. Content pertains to the story itself. Affects concern the relationship between spectators and performers. Process refers to performances that are either inadequate or focus on transforming violence into an empowering experience. It is acknowledged that some phenomena could fall into several categories, but this is a proposal for structuring the intricate phenomena discussed in the previous chapters.

1 Violence as an Instrument

Under the category of dramaturgy, violence is examined whether as an instrument or as an object. Violence as an instrument is intended when violence

DOI: 10.4324/9781003519881-6
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is used to carry out actions that further the drama. For instance, in *Romeo and Juliet*, the sword fight between Mercutio and Tybalt, in which Mercutio is fatally wounded, is followed by Romeo killing Tybalt. In the following scene, Benvolio and the Prince debate if Romeo had the right to kill Tybalt. The Prince, following the masculine honour idealogy, banishes Romeo from Verona. In all these scenes, violence is used as an instrument to claim a personal right. Dramaturgically speaking, it is a solution to push apart the two lovers. Violence is not questioned as such; it is simply an instrument used to escalate the distance between Romeo and Juliet. In this sense, it is also an instrument implementing a specific power regime. As Walter Benjamin demonstrated in his research, the use of violence becomes a tool supporting a specific law system, or as he claimed: violence is law-making. When violence is applied by a ruling class, it becomes the implementation of a distinctive authoritarian government. Conversely, when violence is used by outlaws, it can be conceived as an attempt to oppose the established ruling system. The sympathy that certain types of bandits, such as pirates or mafia gangsters, might receive reveals the craving for asserting personal freedom.

Still in the category of violence as an instrument, a variation on the notion of violence as law-making is the idea of differentiating between justified and unjustified violence. According to Benjamin's discourse, this notion of justified versus unjustified violence is irrelevant, as any type of violence is law-making. Nonetheless, a strong narrative considers violence as necessary in opposition to unnecessary violence. This dichotomy, which seemingly distinguishes beneficial violence from damaging violence, hides a more violent regime permeating all kinds of human activity, such as the notion that humans are predators for each other or the survival-of-the-fittest. Consequently, narratives around the notion of violence, such as the idea that there is justified and unjustified violence, can mask other forms of more cruel or perverse violence. These more cruel or perverse forms of violence remain invisible or, even worse, become normalized. Normalized violence, or invisible violence, includes forms of violence present in society that operate as discrimination, abuse, or trauma but are not acknowledged as accountable for these damages.

2 Violence as an Object

Still in the realm of dramaturgy, violence assumes a completely different role when it is considered as the object. In this sense, violence is not used to carry out actions that further the dramatic action; rather, violence is the centre of the dramatic action. Theatre plays falling into this category investigate the reasons or effects of violence. Violence is thus considered for its traumatic impact. Two strategies have been pointed out in dealing with the representation of trauma. The first consists of recreating the trauma on stage to allow the spectators to experience the event bodily. The risk of such an operation is that it may remove any possibility of considering violence from a broader context. The second strategy, instead of re-living the traumatic experience on

stage, aims to approach it through discourse. The traumatic experience is put into perspective and considered through the lens of language. The intent is to transform the physical traumatic event into a narration that hopefully allows a distant and safe relation to it. Although this approach fosters safety and prevents re-living traumas, it creates a distance that jeopardizes a full bodily perception of the traumatic event.

3 Violence and Content

The next category, the content of violence, could also be considered dramaturgy. However, I wished to establish a distinction between the notion of dramaturgy, which I consider strategies to display a story, and the content of the story itself. Another way to define this category of violence could be meaning: does violence have meaning? At first, this examination seemed to reveal that violence has no meaning. Some anthropologists even warned against the temptation of trying to explain why humans exert violence, as it could make violence seem acceptable. Nevertheless, three lines of thought were indicated in the attempt to discern meanings in violence.

The first one, following Zizek's explanation of phatic communication, considers the expression of violence when language fails. For instance, the violent riots that have erupted in several European suburbs in recent decades did not revendicate anything specific but should be considered a desperate attempt to attract attention. Quite systematically, the inhabitants of these discriminated areas face the fact that all traditional channels of communication are withdrawn from them, and therefore violence is the only means left to them to prove that they exist. In this sense, violence became the medium through which they felt acknowledged.

The second, relying on Agamben's and Girard's anthropological and philosophical inquiries, considers violence as the primal event consolidating a community. The sacrifice of the scapegoat, the ritualized killing of someone, is an archaic act that functions as a catalyst reaffirming the bonds of the clan. Ritualized violence, such as sacrifice, converges all the different destructive behaviours of a society and transforms them into a sacred taboo that consolidates the community. In other words, through violent sacrifice, the group emerges reinforced.

The third, following the Italian psychologist Recalcati, approaches violence as an attempt to reintegrate a sense of animality that humans must depart from in the process of becoming civilized. Violence, or aggressive behaviour, under this lens, is perceived as an attempt to reappropriate the visceral dimension of life.

4 Violence and Affect

Here as well, it is difficult to isolate solely the affect of violence. It has already been noted in the dramaturgy category that, when violence is treated as an

object, the display of violence tends to transform the theatrical event into a potential traumatic event. The violent event, the trauma, is re-lived by the spectators and performers, which can have either positive or negative consequences. However, in this category, the focus went on trying to pinpoint from a spectator's position and from a performer's position the consequences of being exposed to violence. At first, the analysis followed Hanna Arendt's understanding of the affect of violence. For her, no matter the reason for implementing violence, violence transforms both, the one who receives the violence, the victim, and the one who imparts the violence, the perpetrator. Both the perpetrator and the victim are thus bound by the dehumanization that violence generates.

For Weil and Arendt, violence transforms people into things. They no longer relate to each other as humans but rather as things that are destroyable. Arendt contests Hobbes' vision of humanity: she disclaims that violence is a natural state of things, refutes the idea that humans are naturally wolves to each other, and rejects the logic that the fittest survive and that the strongest have the right to rule. Arendt proposes a completely reversed vision: for her, it is violence that transforms humans into wolves for each other. Departing from the broadly accepted idea that political action is a continuation of (armed) conflict through other means, Arendt claims that political action should not be about conflict but rather about care, aiming to reintegrate morality and ethics into politics.

Still in this category of affect, when the staged violence is clearly acknowledged as theatrical or spectacular, it might create the surprising element of pleasure. Pedagogue and fight choreographer Seppo Kumpulainen describes the pleasure his students felt in practicing stage combat. Relating to analyses on violence by German sociologist Wolfgang Sofsky and Finnish philosopher Max Ryynänen, the study examines what can generate pleasure in watching performed violence. Even if Ryynänen stresses the bodily experience and the gut feeling in being exposed to violence as spectators, both theorists, Ryynänen and Sofsky, and also the practitioner Kumpulainen, acknowledge that a form of distance needs to be present between the spectators and the staged violence in order to enjoy the spectacle.

5 Process

The section on process is split into two subcategories: inadequate performances and empowering experiences. The notion of inadequate performances examines staged violence not as a phenomenon to be fully disclosed but as an event to resist, postpone, and explore for the vacuity it creates after its manifestation, focusing on microscopic violent events rather than vast devastating episodes. The goal is not to aim for satisfactory staged violence or embodied violence from the actor's perspective but to observe fragments. The other category, empowering experiences, considers examples of staged violence that exit traditional venues or settings. It focuses on theatre installations or community-based theatre that transform violent events into

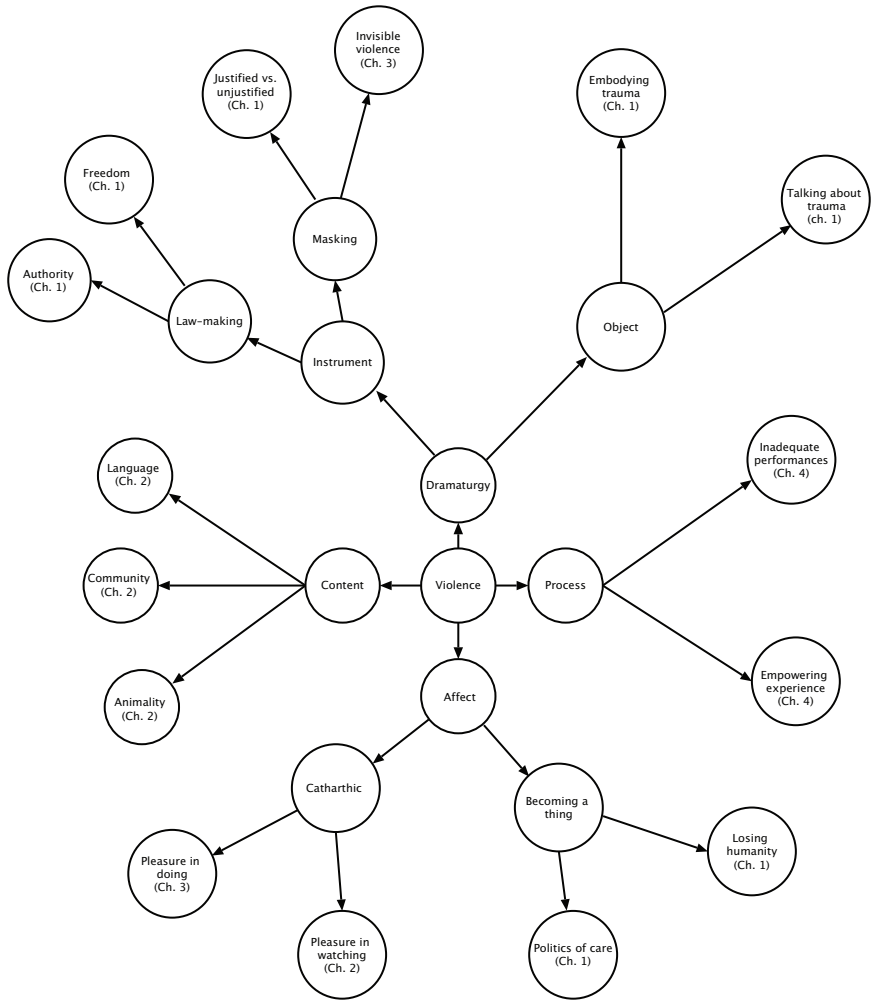

Figure 5.1 Violence's chart

empowering experiences. The position of the spectators becomes crucial as they become the central point of these theatrical practices (Figure 5.1).

6 Chart

As mentioned briefly in the introduction of this chapter, all the outcomes (the outer circles on the map) can be reduced to dichotomous oppositions: victim-oppressor (authority, freedom, politics of care, community), spell of violence (justified versus unjustified violence, invisible violence, losing humanity, language, animality), morbid voyeurism (showing trauma, talking about trauma,

pleasure in doing, pleasure in watching), and transformative empowering experience (inadequate performances, empowering experiences).

By victim-oppressor, I refer to phenomena focusing on the concrete physical application of violence. The exploration examines the effect not only on the person abused but also on the perpetrator. The act of applying violence has several implications, ranging from the desire to assert someone's freedom, to impose authority on someone else, or to consolidate a community. Understanding what violence does to a person exposed to it can lead to counteraction, such as developing a politics of care. Politics of care should not be understood simply as taking care of someone but as a broader political action that aims to surpass segregation and social cleavage. It is a procedure for relating to others, which in some ways announces what will be discussed in the concluding chapter as the lesser embodiment of violence.

By spell of violence, I mean that violence is a powerful event. It is a phenomenon that is difficult to understand: why humans are attracted to destructive forces. This power, this mystery, can function like a magnet and can crystallize the spectator's attention. This power can also be considered an instrument: the desire to shock the audience to sense power over the audience.

Morbid voyeurism refers to the fact that violence, being powerful and destructive, is banned. Nowadays, society promotes respect and values empathy. If someone goes into the street and threatens the community by beating up or randomly shooting people, this person will be stopped. In this sense, violence is considered taboo. And like a taboo, it creates a limit and a sense of mystery. I often wonder myself: am I a non-violent person because I believe in the power of non-violence or because I am afraid of punching and being punched by others? This is, for me, a limit, and naturally, I would like to know what kind of person I am. This is exactly the scenario of *Fight Club*, and probably in this question lies the fortune of this movie. As Ryynänen suggested, forcing myself to watch horrible violent scenes is also a way to test my own limits.

By the notion of empowering experiences through violence, I mean the possibility of considering violence as a starting point for developing processes where violence is imagined in a different way. Empowering experiences can focus either on the spectator or on the process of creation. If the focus is on the spectators, theatre installations provide the possibility to give total agency to the spectators. They can decide to what extent they want to experience the violence that is staged. By entering and wandering in a theatre installation dealing with embodied violence, spectators can decide how they want to experience this theme. If the focus is on the process, community-based theatre offers the possibility to negotiate among the participants how to reimagine a conflictual or violent situation. By showing, displaying, or telling spectators the process of negotiation that a community theatre developed while examining a specific violent event, spectators witness the transformation of a violent

experience into a creative and productive process. By doing this, the experience of violence is transformed into an empowering experience. Such types of experiences urge the audience to experience or imagine the conflictual or violent situation in a different way.

Note

1 Affect is here understood as something transforming a person, either on an emotional, physical, or psychological level. The difference between effect and affect is the degree of transformation. Effect is here seen more as a superficial result while affect operates on a deeper level in a person.

Conclusion

The Less Violent Embodiment of Violence

This should be the concluding part of our journey. We embarked on exploring the various manifestations of violence on stage, and here all the elements composing this research should be summed up. In my view, the previous chapter already aimed at this usual practice of conclusion. As a complement to this research, I propose a radical turn for the conclusion, which could open a window for future research. Instead of examining performed violence from an ethical, sociological, or anthropological standpoint, I would like to reassess what could be the ontological position of the actor and whether, in this re-examination, another approach to performed violence is possible.

The Worst Possible Violence

The philosopher Leonard Lawlor, in his essay *From Violence to Speaking Out*, identifies what he calls the worst violence possible. Surprisingly, for him, the worst possible violence is not the total annihilation of the world but the most reductive and irreconcilable single violent act that cannot be exempted from violence. According to Lawlor, this irreconcilable act resides in the iterability of someone else's experience. "The iterability opens up the possibility of generalizing, and the essential possibility of generalization necessarily violates the singularity of the others" (Lawlor, 2016, 6). Speech acts, and most notably hate speech, occupy a large area in this investigation of the worst violence possible; however, it should not be reduced only to these actualizations. For sure, the power that a speech act can have in actualizing violence on the person whose speech is addressed is evident, but according to Lawlor, the categorization of the experience of reality and the tendency to hierarchize differences in the name of unity is also a violent act, namely the worst possible violence.

As a response to the worst violence possible, Lawlor suggests that the encounter with the other needs to be reconsidered. According to Lawlor, globalization and global capitalism want to, and seem to be able to, measure everything and assign a value to everything. He defines this process of value assignment as "perceiving everything as means to an end" (Lawlor, 23), making everything potentially usable and a source of profit. He contests the

DOI: 10.4324/9781003519881-7
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widespread rhetoric that globalization brings peace (Lawlor, 37). On the contrary, the neoliberal system that sustains globalization and most accepted narratives, for instance, that this world is a safer world, fashion our reality into what he calls a peace without peace. Behind the veil of peace, there is a logic of violence crushing individuals by considering them as means. He sees the root of this hegemonic value-assignment economy already in Plato's metaphysics. Therefore, his project to fight back against the worst possible violence is to reverse Platonism. His project focuses on language and the encounter with the other. The other should never be considered a means, as imparted by the value-assignment economy, but always an end.

Language plays a major role in this attempt to reverse the worst possible violence into the least violence, into something that liberates differences and multiplicity (Lawlor, 64). His project aims to examine if it is possible to produce a speech act that is both an act and a potentiality. Even though Lawlor does not mention the question of subjectification of the individual, it is hard not to see a parallel with De Waal's argument on subject discussed in the introduction. De Waal, referring to Althusser, examines how ideology transforms free individuals into subjects (De Waal, 26). The interpellation, that can be seen by a police officer (Hey, you there!) or by advertisement (buy this!), by politics (vote against!) or whatever other form of seductive incentive (click here!), acts as conscious or unconscious subscription to specific ideologies. By responding to the call or accepting the invitation, the individual becomes a subject of a specific narrative.

In this perspective, communication made of interpellation becomes a continuous battle to subjectivize others or, on the opposite, to escape subjectivation. De Waal pushes further this notion and suggests that theatre can be perceived as the staging of interpellations. However, the stage is not only the place where interpellation (subjectivation of the other) can be displayed, examined, and deconstructed but also where another possibility to encounter the other could be explored. As Lawlor wonders, is it possible that the encounter is not about acting on the other (transforming the other into a subject through interpellation or the iteration of the other's experience) but rather opening up potentiality?

Similarly to Lawlor's examination, the radical turn suggested in this conclusion is not to examine all the different manifestations of violence on stage but rather to consider how the actor relates to the embodiment of violence.

Peter Brook, in his famous book *The Empty Space*, stated:

> I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A [person] walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching [them], and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged.
>
> (Brook, 1968, 7)

Even though his statement focused on the notion of space, what is noticeable is the fact that a person, the actor, is walking. The second person, the

spectator, is defined by observing what the first person is doing. This first person, the actor, is defined as accomplishing an action. This is how the actor's work has been mainly understood: the actor achieves actions. That is the basis of an actor's work. Then there is the question of what the *action* is. Here, it is worth adding Aristotle's considerations about drama. The etymology of drama is *dran*, which means action. Drama, in its traditional acceptation, is then a series of actions. What characterizes these actions is the *agon*: the conflict of characters (Aristotle, 1970). Or conversely, the *agon* organizes the sequence of actions, enhancing the conflict among characters. This means that the actor's work is characterized by the display of conflicts. From this perspective, it would mean that violence is at the core of the actor's work, and every theatre play is a display of violence.

This research has tried to investigate strategies to represent violence on stage. However, as a conclusion and as a suggestion for the continuation of this investigation, rather than exploring how the actor embodies violence, it would be noteworthy to follow Lawlor's suggestion and explore the less violent embodiment of violence. But to do so would require a radical examination of the actor's work; it would demand reconsidering what an action is. In addition, in this examination of the less violent embodiment of violence, as Lawlor noted, it would be worth examining the relationship that actors engage with other actors, or in other words: the encounter with the other. As Lawlor noted, the iterability of others' experience is what can lead to the worst violence possible. Therefore, in this reconsideration of the actor's work, it would also be important to examine, from an actor's work perspective, how the other is encountered or expressed.

An Action

Dénis Guénoun, the French philosopher and theatre director, in his book *Actions et Acteurs* (*Action and Actors*), examined what actors do on stage. The stage is often understood as a place of potential, where humans can do anything and explore whatever social norms prevent them from doing. As mentioned above, Aristotle in his treatise on theatre explains that a drama is a sequence of actions. The term 'action' is usually associated with physicality. An action could be understood as achieving an aim, as doing something—for instance, jumping, running, dancing, fighting, or kissing. However, Guénoun points out that what actors do most on stage is talk. They do jump, run, dance, fight, and kiss, but most of the time, they speak. So, is there an incongruity, or does the notion of action carry another definition? Actors speak a lot. But what do they speak about? Maybe this is not the right question to examine the notion of performing. Maybe it would be more helpful to ask: what is happening when they talk?

Dénis Guénoun notes that, in the play *Bajazet* by Racine, in the fifth act, scene 4, the protagonist Bajazet, in the passage from line 1564 to 1565, operates a linguistic shift. From a descriptive act, it goes to an illocutionary act,

and this change is also accompanied by a change of tense. An illocutionary act means the call to make the other achieve something—for instance, "Give me some salt." This shift, in these lines, is a surprising jump, almost from a defensive position to an active strategy. Dénis Guénoun suggests that this change indicates that the protagonist has made a decision. The character, after a long deliberation, makes a decision, and this decision takes the form of this linguistic shift. In the previous line, he was still hesitating, and then in the following line, he made the decision, and the decision finds its shape in an assertive interjection. Dénis Guénoun concludes that actions on the stage should be understood as decisions. Actors make decisions, which can be expressed in various ways: through text, movement, or bodily presence. In other words, actors perform decisions. Another blatant example about action as decision-making is Hamlet's soliloquy about being or not being, which could also be understood as performing a role or refusing to perform a role.

This commentary by Guénoun resonated deeply with me, especially given my background in physical theatre. In my theatre education, there was a positivistic approach to the idea of actors being active, determined, and actively filling up the space with their bodies. In this sense, the actors, by conscious decisions, can fabricate a fictive world that is as real as reality, providing insight into reality.

Encountering the Other

Axel Honneth's research on the notion of *acknowledging* or *encountering*, which reconsiders Goffman's idea of the performance of the self (Honneth, 2019), can help further the examination of the actor's action. Honneth does not talk properly about the performativity of the self, but he examines what happens when a person is in relation to another. He examines what he calls in German 'anerkennnung', which can be translated as recognition or acknowledgement. He identifies three Western philosophical schools that discussed this phenomenon of "acknowledging the other." One he defines as moralistic, one as positivistic, and the last one as empirical.

The moralistic school is linked to French thinkers. Rousseau, La Rochefoucauld, and even Montaigne share the notion that a human being in the presence of others will try to show the best part of themselves. What has been defined as "l'amour propre" is the desire to shine among others. In order to shine, to be acknowledged, I might present only what I think is the most virtuous aspect of me, with the danger of presenting a deformed image of myself. In this sense, the act of acknowledging becomes perilous because it is uncertain whether the other person presents themselves authentically. It is unclear if, in the act of recognition, the other person or I are seeking to reach higher status symbols. This is especially present in Molière's plays, where he dramatizes the continuous necessity to show off, to impress others in order to maintain social superiority. The encounter with the other becomes a stage for making a performance of oneself, to show oneself in a

better light (Giovanzana, 2015). What counts is not the person's virtue but the ability to perform virtuous behaviour. The paroxysm of this negative theory of acknowledging finds its interlocutor in Rousseau, who claimed that society corrupts the soul, and humans can connect with their true identity only in nature.

Even though Sartre, compared to Rousseau, is concerned with other aspects of human nature, namely freedom instead of authenticity, there is still a similar idea that the presence of others limits a person's potential. Because of the others, the person is fixed, placed into a social construction. His famous quote "L'enfer c'est les autres," which can be translated as "hell is other people," manifests this negative or moralistic theory towards the act of acknowledging. (Honneth, 23–58).

The second line, the positivistic one, finds its defenders in Great Britain, especially in David Hume, Adam Smith, and John Stuart Mill, among others. The basic idea traversing these thinkers is the concern of what can prevent humans from behaving in an egoistic way, or more crudely said, like beasts. In other words, where can we find the roots of human morality? Should we search for them in egoistic personal interest or in the innate feeling of sympathy, or empathy, towards others?

If the French philosophers considered the presence of the other as a catalyst for exaggerating personal features, the English ones considered the presence of the other as a possibility to refrain from someone's egotistic desires. In order to please and to be accepted by others, a person has to control their impulses. Hume furthers this idea by asserting that, if someone had to assess their personal behaviour each time a new interlocutor is encountered, this would make communication impossible. A person interacting with different people might generate schizophrenic or even contradictory behaviour. Therefore, he claims that, to avoid multiple divergent controls, we level them and fix a general standpoint, a sort of ideal interlocutor. This ideal interlocutor can be understood as a spectator refraining our egoistic impulses. This ideal spectator operates a form of control. If the French considered the need to obtain a better social status as the incentive to deform someone's character, the English saw in it the possibility to orient and moderate someone's character.

Adam Smith furthers this thought by affirming that this ideal spectator is not located outside, for instance, in the eyes of our neighbours, but inside us: we all carry within us the ideal spectator. The normative self-regulatory observer located inside us transforms the person into a ceaseless actor-spectator evaluating their own public presentation. This regulatory function follows a model of praise and blame operated by the internal observer. For Smith, the individual accepts following these normative parameters defined by the inner observer to gain recognition from others. John Stuart Mill adds that the fear of displeasing others pushes us to follow the will of the community embodied by the internal observer. We do this even without obtaining any egoistic benefits.

With this new consideration of the internal spectator, my research on the play within the play and especially on the relationship between actors and actors performing spectators started to gain a completely new depth. In fact, my assumption of the actor's work as the expression of a conscious decision to act started to be challenged. The will or decision to perform cannot be asserted anymore. Rather than deciding to perform, the person is set into action: in spite of themselves, the person finds themselves performing. They are performed by something else. This something else is nothing other than the inner observer creating a show whose protagonist is the individual. This last note is manifest in some of Shakespeare's plays, where a character is moved by their inner observer, going either in the same line or against it. Most of the time, against it, like in Othello, Richard III, or Macbeth. The character wants to rebel and goes against what the inner observer would have tried to impede them from accomplishing (Honneth, 59–91).

The third school, defined as empirical by Honneth, mainly follows Immanuel Kant's study. Kant, in his *Critique of Practical Reason*, asserts that the foundation of knowledge does not derive from the sensory experience of the world and nor from a transcendental manifestation of reason. Instead, it is purely based on the activity of reason which brings together various experiences and extracts knowledge from them. He continues by affirming that this is why morality must also be determined by the law of reason. Morality is not subject to an ideal spectator but to reason, providing laws of conduct, which Kant defines as "categorical imperatives." For instance: Act only according to that maxim whereby you can, at the same time, will that it should become a universal law.

Kant does not define what the maxims are, like the Ten Commandments in Christianity, he only says that each individual defines for themselves the maxim. For instance: behave in a way you would like others to behave towards you. The individual becomes a universal subject capable of producing ethics without referring to any external law, power, or god. These maxims become the rules one follows to behave in a way that is morally correct towards others. This argument does not yet explain why someone would be predisposed to follow these maxims. Kant asserts that we are inclined to respect others because we cannot ignore in them the same image of the effort that reason requires. In other words, the use of reason guarantees autonomy to human beings. Thus, humans, as intelligible beings, are obliged to respect in other human beings the corresponding use of reason. As humans, we acknowledge the same autonomy in others.

With Kant, the idea that the encounter with the other is an encounter of freedom starts to take shape. It is not a form of relationship either negative or positive, as it was with the French or the British, but rather an encounter of spaces: my space of freedom encountering your space of freedom. Johann Gottlieb Fichte furthered this notion by asserting that the encounter is actually the moment when a person can experience their own freedom.

Only when an encounter happens in which both individuals are reciprocally recognized can the person experience themselves as an intelligible being because they see that same activity reflected in the other, like a mirror. And where does this recognition happen, asks Fichte? He replies by asserting that this recognition happens through language (Honneth, 93–125).

Experimenting Freedom

Fichte offers an example where subject A, through a linguistic act, invites or pushes subject B to accomplish a determined action. Fichte wants to examine the conditions that make this interaction comprehensible for both subjects. He is convinced that the call made by subject A to subject B, being reciprocal, induces a transformation within both subjects, generating an understanding of themselves. To make the call, subject A must suppress their self-centredness, or amour-propre, in front of the other subject because they are obliged to provide the freedom for subject B to react in any way they choose. Similarly, subject B must suppress their self-centredness, or amour-propre, to signal to subject A that they have understood the call, and, at the same time, offers subject A the freedom to respond to their reaction. This process continues reciprocally.

Fichte sees this reciprocal respect (suppression of self-centredness or amour-propre) as the necessary condition for mutual comprehension. Essentially, intersubjective communication and understanding require that both subjects recognize each other as free and equal humans. In Fichte's view, language becomes the medium that allows humans to experience and test their own freedom. This insight casts a new light on the initial question of this presentation: *what do actors talk about* on stage? The necessity to talk on stage is not merely about performing decisions, as defined by Guénoun, but also about creating a space where humans experiment and explore their own freedom. The act of talking becomes the performance of a space where freedom is explored.

The need to talk, as presented by Fichte, is not the iteration of someone else's experience, which Lawlor defines as the worst possible violence, but an act of encounter, an act of potentiality, and an attunement to freedom. It indicates a possibility to embody the less violent embodiment of violence.

Returning to Denis Guénoun's concept of action, which he crystallizes at the moment before and after a decision, there is an implication that a decision is like a line, with a condition before the line and a new condition after the line. This line is therefore a threshold. The decision is like stepping over this invisible line, a condition of conscious change. However, considering Kant's and Fichte's propositions, this line is actually a space. It is a space where no decisions are necessarily taken, where no drama is happening yet, and yet there is the experience of being—beings experiencing and testing their own freedom. The goal is not to trespass the threshold but to explore it, to perform this threshold.

The Fichtean actor, as opposed to the Guénounian actor, does not perform decisions but is more inclined to explore the threshold of freedom. But what does it mean concretely not to perform decisions? Let us call a decision, the trespassing of the threshold, a grand gesture asserting a will. In contrast, the exploration of freedom, the exploration of the threshold, could be defined as a minor gesture (in opposition to the grand gesture). I will return to this idea of the minor gesture later in this conclusion.

In the case of the less violent embodiment of violence, this would mean not trying to embody violent actions, but rather to observe the violence, to stay in the moment just before the violence emerges. I would then distinguish the two understandings of action (either as decision or as exploration of freedom) as trespassing the threshold (taking a decision) and performing the threshold (exploring freedom).

Violence Postponed

As an example of performing a threshold, I would like to discuss the play *100 Songs* by the German playwright Roland Schimmelpfennig, written in 2018. The play examines the impossible idea of postponing violence, focusing on the moment preceding the outburst of a violent explosion in a train—those infinitesimal moments where humans are still humans and not yet, as Weil claims, mere *things*.

The play does not specify the number of actors required—perhaps four, six, or more. The production I saw at the theatre school festival Encounter in Brno in 2021 featured 12 performers. It is up to the director or artistic team to decide how to assign the lines. The characters in the play are anonymous: a man, a woman, another man, another woman, and someone else. They could be considered storytellers or witnesses of a scene. It is unclear if the performers are talking as themselves or as characters they are supposed to embody or represent. Initially, they refer to the characters in the third person, then switch to the first person as the play unfolds and becomes more precise. Are they storytellers? Are they embodying characters? Are they investigators? Or are they all of these at once, trying to understand what happened, trying to relive the situation? The ambiguous position of the performers is extremely interesting and seems to resist the subjectivation of individuals, as discussed earlier. Who are they? They remain unclear, allowing the audience to glimpse their potentiality as human beings. To maintain this ambiguity, I will refer to them as characters/performers.

The characters/performers talk about themselves in the past, as if the action had already happened. The dramatic situation is clear and stated from the beginning: these people, who have nothing in common, will share a tragic destiny—they will take a train and die in a bomb explosion. The bomb will explode at 8:55, and the play examines the last four minutes of their lives. The text makes relentless references to songs heard on the radio, in a café, in

the background. These songs do not dominate the situation but are present. Recognizable melodies evoke emotions or memories attached to those songs, immediately soliciting a response when heard. Passersby hear the same songs, share them, but have different emotions or memories. Similarly, the characters in the story have their own thoughts, emotions, and questions about life, but all this inner turmoil will disappear in four minutes.

The play starts at 8:51, or rather, it continually returns to 8:51 because that is the dynamic of the play—endlessly going back to 8:51, not allowing the fatal 8:55 to be reached. The text goes through all the different micro-events that punctuate these last four minutes, minute by minute. The characters/performers repeatedly enquire, "What time is it? Is it already eight fifty-five?" When it reaches 8:55 and is about to explode, the text returns to 8:51, starting a new loop with new thoughts and insights about the people present.

As the scene repeats, new characters appear, saying the lines. Or maybe they didn't appear earlier, but now they become more defined: secret lovers, a policeman, Sally, a female student, a girl training to be a hairdresser, and a man who had sex in the morning. The discussions or thoughts that these characters have start to develop: a young couple talks about the rules of romantic comedies, a man rethinks the fight he had with his wife, and a woman prepares for a job interview. Whenever the hands are about to tick 8:55, the clock is brought back to two or four minutes earlier. Everyone knows that at 8:55, a bomb will kill all the passengers. The characters/performers repeat this to the audience, but as long as the clock does not reach 55, all these people are alive.

The text is an incessant repetition of actions, the same actions, where new details, new perspectives, and new fractions of seconds are added—a teacup falling, a match being lit, and an old man counting his growing wealth every minute. In one loop, when it seems impossible to turn back time, all the characters remember their childhoods, where they came from, and what they dreamed. As time is brought back continuously, with this constant oscillation of time, it becomes blurry where exactly we are in the action. This moment, this instant, seems to become eternal. Time expands, and the play becomes like a bubble of life, pushing further away the threshold where reality collapses into chaos and death.

In this fraction of a second, revisited constantly, all the humanity, dreams, fears, fragility, and sorrows of the present-becoming-to-die are disclosed: a woman wanting to write to her husband and apologize, another deciding to change his life, and a priest thinking about the apocalypse. We learn about a man going to the funeral of a child, two tourists with a backpack that is too heavy, a waitress named Sally, two students discussing the laws of romantic comedy (which, according to one of the students, are based on the idea that *people who don't fit together meet*), a female administrator listening to Iggy Pop, a young man from Kabul remembering his childhood, an old rich man, a girl in black listening to the Pixies, a man who argued with his wife the previous night, a policeman—while humming Deep Purple—nostalgically

looking out the window and thinking the woman he sees could be the woman of his life, a mysterious lonely man with a training bag, a stripper from Uppsala thinking about her five-year-old son, and a woman who has been cheating on her husband for seven months and does not know if she should leave her husband or her lover.

These stories intertwine, and the text fluctuates from one event to another, almost like a kaleidoscopic construction. Each repetition offers a new configuration of thoughts and perspectives using the same motifs. On the one hand, the explosion seems to nullify all these activities, thoughts, and dreams, making them seem irrelevant and futile. On the other hand, perhaps this is the only answer humans can offer in the face of brutality: the incessant flux of activities, desires, dreams, emotions, and the daily fight to make something of life.

The last scene is the explosion, which is not described because it cannot be described, as the characters/performers repeat. After the explosion, in the epilogue, the characters are still present, dancing. Did they become ghosts? Or did the bomb not explode after all? The teacup that Sally, the waitress, had dropped, which was repeatedly falling, is caught just before it hits the ground, just before it shatters into a thousand pieces. The play remains ambiguous about whether catching the falling teacup represents the possibility of imagining something different from violence. Can we imagine a reality where empathy and humanity are valued instead of fear and hostility?

Minor Gestures and the Threshold of Violence

The example discussed presents the possibility of transforming iteration into the disclosing of potentiality through language. Here, the actors/performers constantly evaluate their positions in relation to others, which Fichte described as the assessment of someone's freedom. This does not happen through grand gestures or decisions but through the assessment of language and allowing minor gestures to occur. Violence is perceived as a threshold, and the aim is not necessarily to cross it but to observe and navigate it. Erin Manning discusses the notion of minor gestures in her article *Weather Patterns*.

> Every weather pattern includes a minor gesture. A weather pattern, when it emerges, is the activating of a certain minor tendency that resonates across time. For instance: the smell of earth as the grass begins to dry out, the leaves falling, a shift in light, a different sense of warmth on skin. The minor gesture is the pulse of a differential that makes experience in its ecology felt. A minor gesture cannot be known as such. It is what the minor does within the field of experience that makes its gesture felt. The minor gesture is what activates the work under precise conditions, what makes the attunements of an emerging ecology felt, what makes the work work. It is what tunes the work to its processual

> force, to what Deleuze and Guattari call "material-forces" as opposed to "matter-form" referring to how material is already imbued with force. In the context of research-creation, the question is how a practice is capable of opening up the field such that minor gestures can emerge, this despite the value placed on the more recognizable and predictable grand gestures. Grand gestures carry with them a degree of the spectacular.
>
> (Mannin, 2016)

The minor gesture opposes itself to the embodiment of violence, to what could be described as the grand gesture. In this sense, the grand gesture can only be spectacular. The effort to avoid the spectacular and to explore the minor gesture is perhaps a possibility to escape iterability (the worst violence possible) and to let minor gestures express the potentiality of humanity.

The radical turn announced at the beginning of the conclusion lies in this shift of attitude: from the positivistic approach of actors "achieving actions" to an explorative posture where the actors do not move but are moved, where actions are not accomplished but are felt, where the world is not categorized but is multiple, and eventually where violence is not embodied but is considered a threshold. In this threshold, it might be possible to let the less violent embodiment of violence emerge. However, this is another research.

Epilogue

This book started with the scathing event that sparked this research: the terrorist attack in Paris on 15 November 2015. Seven years later, I am writing the concluding lines of this book. A couple of months ago, in June 2022, the long trial of the attack in Paris ended. It lasted ten months. Two hundred and fifty victims were heard, and the court had to judge 20 accused involved in these attacks. While writing these concluding lines, I am reading a book reporting week by week the different phases of this court case (Carrere, 2022). This coincidence creates an uncanny sensation. The trial's testimony describes the pain and trauma that the survivors of these attacks still suffer from. Some managed to transform these traumas into healing narratives, while others simply succumbed to the agony.

The trial examined the social and cultural backgrounds of the accused. Narratives of social discrimination, invisible violence, and fanatic violence masking other forms of structural violence were debated. The trial ended with the voices of the accused, who refused to be considered terrorists and instead claimed to be soldiers engaged in military activities. According to them, they simply responded to the frequent bombing of France in Syria, which also killed civilians. From their point of view, this changes the paradigm for this trial, which was concerned with not only the exact development of the events leading to the attacks but also the causes.

The report of the trial is anguishing, and the author, in each phase, attempts to unearth the humanity of the persons, whether they are victims or perpetrators. Three questions were recurrent in this chronicle: (1) can this trial provide some meaning and relief for this violence? (2) Is it possible to surpass the feeling of hatred and step out from the need for revenge? (3) Can we objectively get rid of narratives legitimizing violence, or are we always subject to some kind of narrative?

Similar questions have crossed this research, and as we have seen, they are not easy to answer. But this should not prevent us from trying to answer them. On a general level, I do believe that the more violence and its representations are understood, the more possible it is to understand how violence affects our imagination and how it is possible to deconstruct a culture of violence. Theatre has proven to be a suitable space to examine phenomena of reality, where even extreme situations can be examined in the safe environment of theatre training, providing productive knowledge applicable to reality.

Maybe the final question is not whether we need to represent violence but rather whether we can offer a space against violence where humanity (or a new structure of feelings) emerges. The ability to understand the other, no matter if the person is violent, psychopathic, anti-social, egotistical, or contradictory, is perhaps what theatre could offer as resistance—like the astonishing and breathtaking ending of the recent opera *Innocence*, written by Sofi Oksanen and composed by Kaija Saariaho, where the brother of a school shooter confesses that, even if for ten years he has publicly repudiated his brother for killing innocent kids in a school, deep inside he still considers his brother, the murderer, as his *important brother*—the one he has always admired, the one he loved, and the one he still loves.

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