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# ON PSYCHOANALYSIS AND VIOLENCE

Contemporary Lacanian  
Perspectives

*Edited by  
Vanessa Sinclair and Manya Steinkoler*

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## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

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## THE END(S) OF VIOLENCE<sup>1</sup>

Juliet Flower MacCannell

Freud's most elaborate discussion of violence came in response to Albert Einstein's urgent plea for an answer to *war*. Einstein begged Freud to find some means of refashioning human beings so they would no longer resort to violence: Einstein asked, "Is it possible to control man's mental evolution so as to make him proof against the psychoses of hate and destructiveness?" (*S.E.* XXII, p. 201).

In his answer, "Why War?" (1931), Freud resisted Einstein's eloquent entreaties. Instead, he insistently moved the question from the level of *individual psychology* to that of the *human social order*, with its ideals of law and justice that were transmutations of a foundational, originary violence.<sup>2</sup> While the "destructive instincts [drives] are at work in every living creature and *striving to bring it to ruin* and reduce life to its original condition of inanimate matter," (p. 211) Freud says that their only strong counter is the urge to *unite and preserve* – a sentiment which, he notes, is the elementary desire of any social body, any *community*. Indeed, it is in the *social order* where the primordial struggle between the two drives – destructive death drive and preservative or erotic drive – is continuously played out. Questions of *war* and *violence* can thus only really be addressed through the evolution of the ethics and aesthetics of the *social group*.<sup>3</sup>

The community is, according to Freud, a compromised form, whose desire to persist and unify its people depends on *laws* that themselves ultimately rest upon the threat (or actuality) of a "compelling use of violence" (p. 208) to make its members comply with them.<sup>4</sup> Law developed from violence and in fact, Freud argues, the law represents the "*might of the community*." The law's *symbolic* authority rests on the potentially *real* power to implement it by violent means.

Freud explains that human "hordes" were initiated through brute force, by virtue of the "muscular superiority" of a single individual whose greater strength granted him power over those weaker than he. He ruled by means of the violent exercise of his power that made others submit to him. Eventually, however,

his weaker subjects came to the realization that they could overpower him if they were to join together and take collective action. The ability to overthrow even the strongest man by acting in concert against him thus sets up the dynamic or dialectic of ruler/subject that starts society down the path leading away from violence (*Macht*) and towards law (*Recht*). The regime of communal law seeks justice for all and peace among its members, but it yet relies upon a latent violence that can be exercised should the rulers need to enforce submission to them.

One might think this arrangement ought to guarantee a perpetually peaceful order. However, the persistence of an inequality as troubling as the primordial disparity in strength between the Ruler and the Ruled in the original horde jeopardizes this peace. The very idea that there is actually a "law of the community" remains just that, an unrealized *idea*, since no human community is composed of equally powerful individuals (i.e., old and young, women and the subjugated all co-exist within any given social order). Rather than the prehistoric physical disparities in strength between Ruler and Ruled, we now have disparities in equal access to protection under the law and its purported aim of justice for all. Freud continues: "The justice of the community becomes the unequal degrees of power obtaining within it; the laws are made for and by the ruling members and find little room for the rights of those in subjection" (p. 206).

Power, especially symbolic power, is rarely if ever distributed evenly throughout any social order, and thus overturning that order always remains a distinct threat. Freud points out that if a seriously inequitable situation persists for too long, a violent overthrow of the rulers will eventually occur.

Conflicts inherent in any and all social orders thus seem to preordain the eventuality, at some point, of violent confrontation, revolution or even civil war. Societies should therefore strive to meet the perennial challenges posed to the rule of law by their iniquities with an ever more equitable distribution of justice. After all, concentrating power in the hands of the few is only a covert return of the rule of *Macht* (superior power) over *Recht* (justice for all), a figurative version of (or a reversion to) the physical inequality that established the primal horde.

The alternative? In Freud's view, the only potential path forward lies in the "cultural transformations of the members of the community" (p. 206). He looks towards an evolutionary forceful reshaping not of each individual's mentality, à la Einstein, but towards a progress in redefining civilization's "ethical and aesthetic standards" to the point where violence and war would be "organically" reviled. It is *cultural revolution* that Freud calls for, and its transformations must apply to all members of the community, not just to an enlightened few.

Let us now consider the recent unrest in Charlottesville, Virginia, in the USA, where white supremacists, neo-Nazis and Ku Klux Klan members marched to prevent the removal of one of the icons of the American Civil War – the statue of the losing general for the South, Robert E. Lee. Such statues were not, in reality, erected in remembrance of the Civil War; most were created much later (mainly in the first two decades of the 20th century) to signify white people's return to dominance in the South and to mark the re-establishment of virtually

complete control over the lives and that are familiarly called "Jim Crow" of law Freud saw as the pathway to inequalities of access to justice and point where only one class of person very top of the social order: white people.

After one neo-Nazi in Charlottesville counter-protestor by running her car into a crowd, injuring another 35 people as he did the majority of Americans (and their aesthetic sense) in the direction Freud would have taken, a murderer and his fellow would-be killer shouting, "Jews cannot replace us!" relief to most Americans that significant industry and other prominent men and people unequivocally, as did thousands of other cities to make clear their disdain for supremacists who had boasted of their hostility towards anyone antipathetic to them.

But a counter-narrative made it clear that it illustrated the degree to which Freud's theory through "the cultural transformation" means been universally or uniformly applied. The president of the United States himself and neo-Nazi groups, lending aid and comfort to that there were "very fine people on both sides" aesthetic dimension as well, calling them "people of no particular artistic merit, "so beautiful" might soon be destroyed.

Our society's long-standing non-violent movements well outside the mainstream. His remarks drew shocked reactions, he said, and tweets he reverted to wording that would recruit people into their movement. A white nationalist website *Stormfront* discusses these recruitment tactics: "They are to associate American history with the efforts to turn away from our white American culture."<sup>6</sup>

The president's words caused white people to see them in their aim of forcing our society within it deserves to be endowed with a new meaning. enough, it is this group that is already at odds against the "establishment" is as false as

complete control over the lives and well-being of black people via a set of "laws" that are familiarly called "Jim Crow." These laws are far from the evolved kind of law Freud saw as the pathway to quelling violence; indeed, they aggravated inequalities of access to justice and actually formalized those inequalities to the point where only one class of persons would ever find itself permanently at the very top of the social order: white people.

After one neo-Nazi in Charlottesville deliberately murdered a non-violent counter-protestor by running her down with his aptly labeled "muscle" car, injuring another 35 people as he did so, we learned that by and large the vast majority of Americans (and their culture) had indeed evolved ethically and aesthetically in the direction Freud had hoped. They turned their backs on the murderer and his fellow would-be killers, who had marched, armed to the teeth, shouting, "Jews cannot replace us!" and "Blood and Soil!" It came as a distinct relief to most Americans that significant numbers of political leaders, captains of industry and other prominent members of the community condemned these people unequivocally, as did thousands of peaceful demonstrators showing up in other cities to make clear their disdain for the neo-Confederates, Nazis and white supremacists who had boasted of their power to dominate by means of violence towards anyone antipathetic to them.

But a counter-narrative made its presence known, too, and unfortunately illustrated the degree to which Freud's hopes for progress in contesting violence through "the cultural transformation of members of the community" had by no means been universally or uniformly installed in citizens across the nation. Indeed, the president of the United States himself virtually endorsed the white supremacist and neo-Nazi groups, lending aid and comfort to their movement by declaring that there were "very fine people on both sides." He later weighed in on the aesthetic dimension as well, calling the contested statues, mostly traditional bronzes of no particular artistic merit, "so beautiful" while lamenting that so much "beauty" might soon be destroyed.

Our society's long-standing norms that delegitimized and placed these movements well outside the mainstream began to tremble. When the president's remarks drew shocked reactions, he retreated a bit, but in subsequent comments and tweets he reverted to wording generally deployed by white nationalists to recruit people into their movement.<sup>5</sup> Derek Black, whose father founded the white nationalist website *Stormfront* and who has since disavowed the group, discusses these recruitment tactics: "The most effective tactics for white nationalists are to associate American history with themselves and to suggest that the collective efforts to turn away from our white supremacist past are the same as abandoning American culture."<sup>6</sup>

The president's words caused white supremacists to assume that he supported them in their aim of forcing our society to recognize that only a single group within it deserves to be endowed with its inalienable rights: white people. Ironically enough, it is this group that is already in power, and the supposed "revolution" against the "establishment" is as false as possible, a pseudo uprising of the oppressed.

White power and neo-Nazi groups dress up their movements as engagement in a revolution of the kind designed to redress social inequalities: they portray themselves as the "victims" of the least powerful members of our society (women and people of color).<sup>7</sup>

Of course, the goal of these rallies is the precise reverse of a revolution calling for the rectification of serious imbalances and uneven access to justice in the social order. Instead, by calling up the imagery and slogans of the most violent time in recent history (Nazism) they are in effect declaring that no one should even try to challenge those who currently occupy the positions of supreme power in our country, and that they will stop at nothing to support and maintain those who hold political and economic dominance in the United States: white men. Theirs is a *demonstration*, then, in the literal sense: a *showing off* of their "muscular superiority" (albeit prosthetic) by parading massive firepower (for example, AK-47s) and making plainly visible their willingness to defend the supremacy of white power. Even if their rallies have inspired a minuscule opposition willing to use violence against them (the so-called "*antifa*"), what remains striking about the white supremacists is that for all their strutting demonstrations of potency and proto-violence, birthed in internet websites, they remain largely confined to the level of images, images they apparently count on to shield them from potential real violence against them. When one *antifa* walked up to white supremacist leader Richard Spencer and sucker-punched him in the nose, Spencer could hardly get over the shock.<sup>8</sup> He was all about flexing muscles and displaying his group's barely suppressed inclination to violence; but he was singularly unprepared for getting whacked for real.

The question must now be: Why is the framing and promoting of *images* of potential violence key for these groups? One might think it relates in a remote way to the originary violence that undergirds the law in Freud's genealogy of society, yet these neo-Nazis clearly reject the spirit of the laws in Montesquieu's sense – i.e., of *law* being what displaces and transforms rule by brute force into the pursuit of justice. Rather, it seems clear they believe that merely making a *show* of, or simply *demonstrating* a potential for violence will guarantee their success – without their actually having to go through the hard work of real revolution or commit to a long-term violent struggle.

Their job is done once they have succeeded in promoting and glorifying images of the destructive drives that Freud says inhere in all living creatures (including societies) and that strive to bring them to ruin. But their aim is not real destruction or actual ruin: they simply want to demonstrate that violence and destruction are always superior to the preservative and unifying drives by staging imaginarily the triumph of violence over law and justice. (Indeed, the lone psychotic man who took destructive drive all too literally, James Alex Fields, Jr., was already prone to vicious violence as a ninth-grader when he repeatedly attacked his own wheelchair-bound mother, long before becoming a committed neo-Nazi.)<sup>9</sup>

In other words, what the groups who are emerging into the light right now are engaged in is something more akin to Hegel's imaginary "struggle to the death

for prestige" than an actual physical struggle. They are concerned with cultural prestige, and they are laying out winners and losers in our culture's winners and losers in our culture's winners and losers in our culture's who endorse, not revile, violence. In that there is no "point," no meaningful goal, these are not preservative ones: since it is all image, they are more to embellish and glorify violence than to challenge it, the aim of ensuring that that image be preserved, not destroying the whole society.

One misinterprets what is at stake in the so-called "culture wars" between the forces of civilization. This new moment is actually more death-like in its stillness: that is, in its cultural productions, cultural ethics are reduced to a single plane, with a single figure. This figure may be animated, as in cartoons and movies, but its original meaning of *anima* – soul or spirit – is lost. Their mission to eliminate the very essence of human life in common to mere images, they seek to deny that the unconscious and the body are and our lives.

This would explain why the current moment is in his own image. We might indeed see the potential of reducing complexity down to being a question of which image is best for an audience prepared to receive it, not for what it might mean. While the scale of massive destruction wrought in Hollywood (and global climate change), the only thing that matters in his part was not the incredible humbling of an adoring crowd he drew to watch him. . . . What a crowd. What a triumph.

We can be and are as sceptical as ever in favor of justice for all and in his own image. "organically" revile violence.<sup>15</sup> What is at stake in our order has been reduced to being simple. How can our society be trapped inside the mirror of images and the rich complexity of language and the body ever contest this?

Perhaps we might take a measure of the current moment and 1970s were a period when the rule of law and its institutions were widely and openly challenged against them. There was a great deal of talk at the time to categorize as either progressive or



for prestige" than an actual physical slaughter of their opponents.<sup>10</sup> They want cultural prestige, and they are laying claim to the right to shape and designate the winners and losers in our culture's ethics and aesthetics, the winners being those who endorse, not revile, violence. In fact, we are now at the point of demonstrating that there is no "point," no meaning to the triumph of destructive forces over preservative ones: since it is all imaginary, it behoves the makers of images simply to embellish and glorify violence and enthrone it as the cultural dominant, with the aim of ensuring that that image is never culturally dethroned, without actually destroying the whole society.

One misinterprets what is at stake here if one believes it is still just a question of the so-called "culture wars" between competing ethics and aesthetics in our civilization. This new moment is actually *issue-less* and something far more sinister, more death-like in its stillness: that of a complete reduction of all dimensions of cultural productions, cultural ethics and cultural aesthetics to a flat imaginary, on a single plane, with a single figure dominating the entire picture.<sup>11</sup> Such images may be animated, as in cartoons and video games, but they obviously lack the original meaning of *anima* – soul or what the Greeks called *psyche*.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, it is their mission to eliminate the very idea of a psyche.<sup>13</sup> Reducing the complexity of human life in common to mere images is yet one more of the myriad ways we seek to deny that the unconscious and its drives has any purchase on our choices and our lives.

This would explain why the current president of the United States is so invested in his own image. We might indeed say that he is the first to have truly grasped the potential of reducing complexity to 2-D with all actual serious conflicts boiled down to being a question of which (or whose) image gets the widest distribution for an audience prepared to receive the concocted image and to seek no further for what it might mean. While the US president was recently visiting the scene of massive destruction wrought in Houston, Texas, by Hurricane Harvey (and by global climate change), the only thing that animated an emotional response on his part was not the incredible human suffering taking place, but the size of the adoring crowd he drew to watch him: "I just want to say: We love you. You are special . . . What a crowd. What a turnout."<sup>14</sup>

We can be and are as sceptical as Freud as far as an enduring global progress in favor of justice for all and in humanity's communal embrace of values that "organically" revile violence.<sup>15</sup> What progress could ever be made once our social order has been reduced to being simply the site of imaginary domination? Can our society be trapped inside the mirror-stage forever and forgo the symbolization and the rich complexity of language that modulates its antagonisms?<sup>16</sup> What could ever contest this?

Perhaps we might take a measure of hope from our recent past. The late 1960s and 1970s were a period when the rule of Law, the structure of Western democracy and its institutions were widely and deeply challenged by multiple movements against them. There was a great deal of agitation in those years, not all of it easy to categorize as either progressive or reactionary. Jan Werner-Mueller, Professor

of Politics at Princeton University, finds that in that era "there was widespread loss of belief in the capacity of societies for self-transformation through mass political actions, whether inside or outside political institutions like parliaments. Individual, rather than collective transformations mattered."<sup>17</sup>

The foundational assumptions of the many and varied contestatory groups or, as Daniel Cohn-Bendit called them, "*groupuscules*" (prompted largely by opposition to the Vietnam War), were the contrary of Freud's belief that the cultural transformation of members of the community must be the only real means for non-violence to ultimately prevail over our death drives. Where Freud thought that individual mental alterations were hardly the solution to war and other forms of violence, most groups agitating against the Vietnam War eschewed attempts to revolutionize the sociopolitical order and instead developed intensive techniques for persuading people, one by one, against war.<sup>18</sup> A popular song by the Beatles even mocked the notion of revolution, saying that you had to "change your head" instead. Protesters held tea and sympathy rallies where they subsisted on the same small portions of rice and tea a Vietnamese citizen had access to and held "die-ins" where they lay in public streets in the positions of war victims pictured in photographs. The thinking was that imaginary identification with the Asian people at war with the US would help to end that war.<sup>19</sup> Thus, it was back to Einstein's hope for the transformation of individuals' mentality to advance humanity's cause against man's violence towards man.

What eventually brought an end to that war were most assuredly not the individual mental transformations of many Americans into opponents of the war, since their political leaders claimed they, too, wanted the same while prosecuting it for four years longer than they promised. What ended the Vietnam War was the clear victory by one side over the other: victory by the side that had been universally deemed the less powerful, lacking the advanced weaponry and virtually unlimited financial resources of its opponent – a new kind of war, perhaps? One in which destructive, brute force did *not* dislodge a smaller community's desire to persist and preserve its unity. What decided the contest, ultimately, was not the "muscular superiority" of one over weaker others; it was the degree of communal solidarity by the Vietnamese and their willingness to band together to overthrow the stronger entity.

Sadly, moreover, the considerable energies devoted to "turning people's heads around" did not succeed in perfecting communal equality at home, either. Instead, we find the reverse – the installation of more autocratic policies and fewer protections for the less powerful members of our own society. The new right-wing mantra of "No New Taxes" was intended to be read as "no more money going to poor black and brown people."<sup>20</sup> Our major democratic institutions survived, though now they seemed to feel even less inclined than ever to improve the lot of the majority of their weaker constituents, although such efforts surfaced from time to time in the corridors of political power.

There was one major cultural advance in a positive direction from that time, however. Werner Mueller names it, explaining that for all the largely imaginary

revolutionary fervor of the 1960s and 1970s revolution – not in individual psychology, no informal "laws" that preside over our everyday life, he said, a transformation in our *mores* [*mœurs*],

States and even constitutions survived however, were *mœurs*, not least because of the form of social-cultural criticism, or in the theorist Stuart Hall, "cultural rebellion."

His chief example is the undeniable success where one, at least, of those unequal communities towards equality in terms of our cultural values. The cultural transformation was in our standards of interpersonal speech and dialogue, even the "soft" power of those who continue

Now for the counter-revolution. Freud did resistance to and reaction against any cultural change. There are now proliferating movements *against* made brute violence repulsive to most of us, a measure of greater power and equality gained hostility to women's increase in social stature, in the Civil Rights struggles, has now reached of the current president of the United States. had been the pre-eminent example of the delay in providing justice for all. In fact, the US did women, but there are currently movements *pro* against punishing rapists, for example. The legal hardly quashed destructive fantasies of communi

While a change in mores does not and widespread pretence on the reactionary right norms are so oppressive they have to be fought through actual revolution, but by undercutting any influence they have in our culture by "political correctness" – rather than as "ethic" portray these informal norms as cruel laws of their inherent right to the lion's share of posture and threaten violence in hopes of intimidating them. One white supremacist preacher in Florida violence against counter-protesters – "There is as a fail-safe, "God's going to wipe them out"

What the marchers in Charlottesville commitment to and desire to indulge in viol

revolutionary fervor of the 1960s and 1970s it did produce a truly successful revolution – not in individual psychology, nor in our legal system, but in those informal “laws” that preside over our everyday quotidian conduct. It produced, he said, a transformation in our *mores* [*mœurs*],

States and even constitutions survived all this. What changed for good, however, were *mœurs*, not least because '68 succeeded spectacularly as a form of social-cultural criticism, or in the words of the British New Left theorist Stuart Hall, “cultural rebellion.”

(Werner Mueller, p. 200)

His chief example is the undeniable success of *feminism* in altering our sense of where one, at least, of those unequal community members made a major move towards equality in terms of our cultural values, and not exclusively in formal legal terms. The cultural transformation was in our *mores* – our norms of behavior, our standards of interpersonal speech and dialogue – and these new norms undermined even the “soft” power of those who continued to try to oppress.

Now for the counter-revolution. Freud did not seem to anticipate the strength of resistance to and reaction against any cultural movement towards rejecting violence. There are now proliferating movements *against* the very ethical transformations that made brute violence repulsive to most of us, and *against* the cultural attainment of a measure of greater power and equality gained by society's weaker members. Open hostility to women's increase in social stature, as well as earlier gains for black people in the Civil Rights struggles, has now reached a crescendo; it boosted the election of the current president of the United States, the very nation that for a long time had been the pre-eminent example of the democratic rule of law and its advances in providing justice for all. In fact, the US did pass laws punishing violence against women, but there are currently movements pushing back against them and agitating against punishing rapists, for example. The legal reining in of violence against women hardly quashed destructive fantasies of committing it.

While a change in *mores* does not and cannot have “the force of law,” the widespread pretence on the reactionary right is that indeed the new *mores* and norms are so oppressive they have to be forcefully overthrown. Not, of course, through actual revolution, but by undercutting their dominance and undermining any influence they have in our culture by labelling them as unfairly coercive “political correctness” – rather than as “ethical advancement.” The effort is to portray these informal norms as cruel laws unjustly intended to rob (white) men of their inherent right to the lion's share of social and political power. They posture and threaten violence in hopes of intimidating those who would oppose them. One white supremacist preacher in Portland is now voicing the dream of violence against counter-protesters – “There will be bloodshed,” he says, but adds as a fail-safe, “God's going to wipe them out one day anyway.”<sup>21</sup>

What the marchers in Charlottesville want us to feel is the intensity of commitment to and desire to indulge in violence for its own sake. They deployed

the vilest imagery of violence not for purposes of overturning the current hierarchy but to support and sustain its status quo: white people's sociopolitical dominance. Their aim is meta-conservative: to prevent any real change from that condition.

The wave that elected a president (with only a minority of votes) who is like them hostile to law, justice and democratic institutions, touted itself as a revolt against the very *mores* that urged upon us a greater social unity and rejection of the destructive drives. The revolt, they said, was against any further progress in equalizing the apportionment of power within our social order. The president's continuous emphasis on brute force (he dropped the largest non-nuclear bomb ever made – for no particular reason – on a remote region in Afghanistan just to show off its awesome power) is his made-for-TV imagery. Recall his ferocious claim that should North Korea bomb Guam he would “rain fire and fury” on it, while at the same time telling the governor of Guam that all this was good publicity for tourism to his island. The bombastic imagery resulted in no apparent military action or even military preparation for responding to North Korea's threats.

What we have now is all we need to know about the new and absolute faith in the *meaningless image* that dominates in politics today. This president clearly knows absolutely nothing about the shape of our laws and our social cohesion – though he claims we should all love each other by loving him – and his outlook on real events and potential dangers is as superficial and as flat as the stand-up life-size cardboard picture of him awarded to graduates of his (largely imaginary) university.<sup>22</sup>

These reactionary movements ironically turn the very thing Freud thought would end war – “cultural transformation” – into a new rationale for endless war, for promoting violence against women and minorities, and now even against “liberals.” One website asks, “Can we start shooting liberals yet?” Notwithstanding such pronouncements, the “violence” of these groups is operative neither symbolically nor really: they remain firmly fixed in the realm of the imaginary. Indeed, we might call the current president of the United States the first “2-D” president, as his only concern is with the flat screen and his image on it. His hostility to books, print media, “dying magazines” and the “dying *New York Times*” is a purely function of his rejection of the dimensionality and depth required for an actual symbolic order rooted in language and in contested but shared meanings.

Let us ask why must the return to an *imaginary of violence* typify the reaction against what has been a purely cultural transformation? Our contemporary culture, with its endless stagings of violence and terror, seems rather to be moving in the opposite direction from that of ethical improvement and revulsion against violence. After all, Freud believed that aesthetic representations of violence were “sublimations” that afforded their audience a kind of catharsis for their destructive drives without consequences in reality since they partially satisfy our destructive drives. Today's intensely graphic depictions of violence, blood and maniacal serial killers, even the dull “dreamscapes” of V-R et al., point to an effort in the opposed

sense – making the virtual *feel really real*, the mere image to affect *you* and make *you*. But, at the same time, they assuage your no power to harm you directly. I can only of the real that motivates these imaginaries they indicate a refusal to accept the fact that affects us in the *real* – it is never anything can only be belied by unconscious disavowal.

The seeming harmlessness of the imaginary unconscious destructive drives that seek imaginary is no safe haven from the real. We know that the depictions of violent acts on the internet, have been the greatest recruitment and for lethal converts to the cause like M. We have long felt the forbidden urge to kill the social order that made murder permissible causes as “the caliphate” and “white supremacy” individual to offer obedience to a “greater” its dominant position – dominance, thereby duped into accruing more power the magnitude of their potential for violence.

The pictured violence in our media, may be completely fictional, but it is real: a human susceptibility to domination and hegemony over our sociopolitical order and imagery. For example, we now tend to “go to the death” for prestige – a Hegelian staging of pseudo-combat among ruling powers of the ruling powers' solidarity with way:

Even the most despotic domination of slaves, who always outnumbered their masters, coercion as such, but on a superhuman organized solidarity of the masters.

These showcased conflicts are large matches; they exist to illustrate that the power on their powerless subjects by deploying is to give their subjects the sense that they are to its seamless totality of forced choices and solidarities with other powerless subjects to identify with the powers that be.

sense – making the virtual *feel really real*, exulting in the power of the imaginary, the mere image to affect *you* and make *you* feel greater *fear* than Aristotelian *pity*. But, at the same time, they assuage your fear because the imaginary has, in itself, no power to harm you directly. I can only conclude that it is a profound horror of the real that motivates these imaginaries of violence and destruction, and that they indicate a refusal to accept the fact that an act of violence committed always affects us in the *real* – it is never anything but a traumatic encounter whose reality can only be belied by unconscious disavowal.

The seeming harmlessness of the image does not prevent its deployment by unconscious destructive drives that seek to dominate our cultural imaginary. The imaginary is no safe haven from the real of violence, and not simply because we know that the depictions of violent acts like beheadings, widely shared over the internet, have been the greatest recruiting tool for the actual murderers of ISIL and for lethal converts to the cause like Mr. Fields, Jr. These are recruits who may have long felt the forbidden urge to kill and could now attach it to an imagined social order that made murder permissible. What, after all, is the appeal of such causes as “the caliphate” and “white supremacy” except the chance for an isolated individual to offer obedience to a “greater power” that relies on violence to sustain its dominant position – dominance, that is, over the same individual who is thereby duped into accruing more power to its masters, into advertising the magnitude of their potential for violence?

The pictured violence in our media, our games, our television and film dramas may be completely fictional, but it is real in at least this one consequence: it shows a human susceptibility to domination by what Gramsci called the ruling class’s hegemony over our sociopolitical order through its strategic deployment of cultural imagery. For example, we now tend to view our politics as a (non-lethal) struggle “to the death” for prestige – a Hegelian struggle for power or mastery. The endless staging of pseudo-combat among ruling powers is always virtual and an advertisement of the ruling powers’ solidarity with each other. Hannah Arendt put it this way:

Even the most despotic domination we know of, the rule of master over slaves, who always outnumbered him, did not rest on a superior means of coercion as such, but on a superior organization of power – that is, on the organized solidarity of the masters.

(*On Violence*, p. 240)

These showcased conflicts are largely as pseudo as Roland Barthes’s wrestling matches; they exist to illustrate that those in power can and do have real effects on their powerless subjects by deploying these images of conflict. Their real effect is to give their subjects the sense that the social world offers no options, no “out” to its seamless totality of forced choices, and that all efforts to unite with or form solidarities with other powerless subjects is futile. All that is left to their lot is to identify with the powers that be.

Once our human emotions and psychological recoil from imaginary violence are overcome, as the widespread deployment of violent images throughout our cultural productions reveals they may already be, we should be wary of the next step: remote control, robotic violence. Arendt warns: "Only the development of robot soldiers, which [. . .] could eliminate the human factor completely and conceivably permit one man with a push button to destroy whomever he pleased, could change this fundamental ascendancy of power over violence" (p. 240). "The fundamental ascendancy of power over violence" means to Arendt the deployment of imaginary violence to keep the powers that be in power. But the dreaded reversal she decries has now occurred and may make power itself violent once more: after all, the "push button" is here already in our electronic game world, but also in the existence of killer drones in use on the battlefields of Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq.

We are now at the point of a nearly complete eradication of what Arendt calls "the human factor" and what Freud might call the erotic or preservative drives: both are rendered nil when they are reduced to the flat, depthless images that deny the real of the death drive.<sup>23</sup> The image is the ultimate tool for playing on your emotions. The sheer acceleration of depictions of violence in all forms of media belies any hope that they are a new form of sublimation. Instead, their dramatic rise and wide proliferation tell us that it is still in the realm of culture and its productions that we must continue to try to preserve our communities and our solidarity with the drive to preserve and to unify. We need better writers, better artists, better screenwriters, better filmmakers to take on the task of making the imaginary into a new dialectic that can be put in service of the preservative drives, while fully acknowledging the danger of the destructive ones.

## Notes

1. In this chapter I respond to some recent discussions in psychoanalytic discourse that link the trauma of violence to individual psychical responses to the violence of war – e.g., Michael Uebel's 2013 article in *American Imago* 69: 4, 473–505 attempts to examine "the trauma of violence" from a psychoanalytic viewpoint. He ties it to masochism as violence directed against oneself and shame. He demonstrates this in the way our culture and psychoanalytic establishment operated in the wake of World War II. In this chapter, I take up the reaction to the Vietnam War. I also respond to the recent events in Charlottesville, Virginia, and the US president's unseemly response to them.
2. Similar to Walter Benjamin's argument in "The critique of violence" (1921) where he writes of "law-creating violence and law-preserving violence."
3. I have written a great deal about the transition from a "symbolic" to an "imaginary" group in previous publications. What the symbolic order demands is an implied contract regarding meanings and the values that the social order comes to embrace. In the imaginary psychology of a group shaped around the individual ego, which has certainly come to dominate our discourse in virtually all domains (cultural, political and especially economic), the individual is indeed an integral part of a group that is simply a mirror for/of him. See my essays on "Group psychology aujourd'hui" on "Lacan's imaginary: a practical guide," and my early book *The Regime of the Brother* for my take on the insecurities of the post-Oedipal condition – insecurities that the imaginary claims to conquer.

4. Hannah Arendt would later remark: "No violence has ever existed. Even the totalitarian torture, needs a power basis – the secret police" (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1970, p. 240).
5. Derek Black said that the president's words were a major turning point for recruiting me: "the fence about whether to get involved in the biggest thing that's ever happened." *The Daily* interview with former white nationalist Derek Black. <https://nyti.ms/2vWaess> (podcast).
6. A former FBI agent who worked on white supremacists expressed these feelings that a sizable segment of the white population has these feelings, because they know its not social [sic] expression, because they know its not social [sic] expression. "When you have someone like Donald Trump on that platform, that makes it okay to say them. To have them to full expression. And that expression that enforces the law." *Talking Points Memo*, interview with former FBI agent who worked on white supremacists. <http://talkingpointsmemo.com/muckraker/white-nationalists-use-recruit>
7. *The New York Times*, "The Daily" transcript with Derek Black, August 23, 2017; available at [www.nytimes.com/2017/08/23/us/politics/derek-black-interview.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/23/us/politics/derek-black-interview.html)
8. Available at: [www.cnn.com/2017/01/20/politics/donald-trump-liberal-books-hun/](http://www.cnn.com/2017/01/20/politics/donald-trump-liberal-books-hun/) Planned to burn all "liberal" books in Hun in Charlottesville it canceled the book burnings who might protest them.
9. Leaked chats by Charlottesville's white supremacists photographing themselves with semi-automatic weapons. The thickness of pipes for "thumping" counter-violence never quite materialized the way it was intended when the car murder of Heather Heyer began airing, Stephen King's *Mr. Mercedes* began airing, Stephen King's *Mr. Mercedes* began airing.
10. Stendhal's remarkable novel *The Red and the Black* key to the continuity in power of an aristocrat means was a Gramscian hegemony over the masses following the *Restauration* and the institution of the near-total power of the nobility was restituted. The inflation of its reputation as "men of power" they made their own culture and behavior emulated by the masses. But in Stendhal's words: "l'autre a la sottise d'en mourir de douleur quand un être puissant et noble rend l'emprisonne ou l'humilie tellement qu'il se meurt" (Stendhal, *Le Rouge et Le Noir*, p. 148).
11. Philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah's argument that one of the more alarming developments in the history of the world is the way in which we have sophisticated their artificial speech might be compared to a real conversation with a human being. The word *psukhe* (psyche) means both breath and soul.
13. Recall George H. W. Bush barring an American flag from the White House.
14. "Even in visiting hurricane-ravaged Texas, the president's behavior was a stark reminder of the Washington Post, August 29, 2017.

4. Hannah Arendt would later remark: "No government exclusively based on means of violence has ever existed. Even the totalitarian ruler, whose chief instrument of rule is torture, needs a power basis – the secret police and its net of informers" (*On Violence*. New York: Barnes & Noble, 1970, p. 240).
5. Derek Black said that the president's words of praise for "the fine people on both sides" was a major turning point for recruiting more white supremacists: "[I]f you were on the fence about whether to get involved in this stuff or not, the president's O.K. is the biggest thing that's ever happened." *The New York Times*, "The Daily" transcript: interview with former white nationalist Derek Black, August 23, 2017; available at: <https://nyti.ms/2vWaess> (podcast).
6. A former FBI agent who worked on white nationalism says: "I tend to believe that these are feelings that a sizable segment of the population holds and is reluctant to express, because they know its not social [sic] acceptable to say these things," he added. "When you have someone like Donald Trump say them from a campaign podium or platform, that makes it okay to say them. That has brought out a lot of this latent racism to full expression. And that expression then influences our policy and the way we enforce the law." *Talking Points Memo*, Allegra Kirkland, "Former skinheads hear echoes of the recruitment in Trump's 'Heritage' talk" August 27, 2017; available at: <http://talkingpointsmemo.com/muckraker/trump-charlottesville-heritage-same-rhetoric-white-nationalists-use-recruit>
7. *The New York Times*, "The Daily" transcript: interview with former white nationalist Derek Black, August 23, 2017; available at: <https://nyti.ms/2vWaess> (podcast)
8. Available at: [www.cnn.com/2017/01/20/politics](http://www.cnn.com/2017/01/20/politics). More recently, one neo-Nazi group planned to burn all "liberal" books in Huntington Beach, California, but after the events in Charlottesville it canceled the book burning, afraid of potential violence from those who might protest them.
9. Leaked chats by Charlottesville's white supremacists showed them before the event photographing themselves with semi-automatic weapons and discussing the right thickness of pipes for "thumping" counter-protestors, but serious engagement in virulent violence never quite materialized the way they fantasized. By a terrible coincidence when the car murder of Heather Heyer took place, a fictional story about a psychotic man who massacres a group of job-seekers by plowing into them with his stolen car began airing, Stephen King's *Mr. Mercedes*.
10. Stendhal's remarkable novel *The Red and the Black* foresaw the rise of the imaginary as key to the continuity in power of an aristocracy past its prime after the Revolution. Its means was a Gramscian hegemony over all cultural imagery. In 19th-century France, following the *Restauration* and the institution of a constitutional monarchy, the once near-total power of the nobility was restricted. It thus came to depend on the artificial inflation of its *reputation* as "men of power" to keep them in control. To maintain power they made their own culture and behavior as the model of prestige, to be admired and emulated by the masses. But in Stendhal's world, even the power of images can be lethal, as in the last clause in this quote from the book: "ou l'humilie tellement que l'autre a la sottise d'en mourir de douleur. La marche ordinaire du XIXe siècle est que, quand un être puissant et noble rencontre un homme de cœur, il le tue, l'exile, l'emprisonne ou l'humilie tellement que l'autre a la sottise d'en mourir de douleur." (Stendhal, *Le Rouge et Le Noir*, p. 148).
11. Philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah's complaisance in this new structure may be one of the more alarming developments in academia today.
12. Descartes long ago claimed that machines were like mere animals and that however sophisticated their artificial speech might become, it would never enable them to engage in a real conversation with a human being endowed with an actual soul. The Greek word *psukhe* (psyche) means both breath and soul.
13. Recall George H. W. Bush barring anyone from "putting me on the couch."
14. "Even in visiting hurricane-ravaged Texas, Trump keeps the focus on himself," in *The Washington Post*, August 29, 2017.

15. In his "Thoughts for the time on war and death," Freud argued that some infants are able to overcome their aggressive drives even before they become socialized – i.e., before the advent of the *Nom-du-père*, as Lacan would put it. Long before Melanie Klein began theorizing the issue, Freud contrasted two factors in the control of "bad" instincts – internal and external (p. 282). The infant learns to restrain its aggressivity "from within" (p. 282) by tempering egoistic and aggressive impulses with "erotism." This is seconded in most cases by an "external factor" which is "the force exercised by upbringing" – i.e., by the rules and regulations it encounters in the social order, and which are gradually internalized. The person whose "civilization" consists mainly of the latter, of conformity to rules, has little resistance to uncivilized behavior if the rules of the game appear to change as they do under conditions of war. Then the very State that seemed to demand his constraint now indulges itself in barbaric behaviors, killing, looting, creating chaos at will. For Melanie Klein's take on this, see my essay (1991) "Mothers of necessity psychoanalysis for feminism," in *American Literary History*, 3(3), pp. 623–647.
16. Here I recommend my recent chapter on Lacan's imaginary and the politics of coming to terms with its growing dominance in post-Oedipal culture. Juliet Flower MacCannell (2015), "Lacan's imaginary: a practical guide," in S. Tomsic and A. Zevnik (eds.), *Jacques Lacan: Between Psychoanalysis and Politics*. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 72–85.
17. Werner-Mueller, J. (2013) *Contesting Democracy*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, p. 197.
18. Leafing through the journal *Art in America* from the years of the Vietnam War, I found virtually no allusion to its existence in any of the artworks held up for critical praise. Instead of any major artistic or cultural enterprises to resist the war, there were one-by-one-by-one formations like "Vietnam Summer" when college students spread out across America each with the goal of convincing at least one neighbor to oppose the war's continuation.
19. In response to the editor's query about how this is different from the cry of "Je suis Charlie" that erupted all over the world after the brutal assault on the staff of the humor magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris, I would only say that these words expressed *solidarity* with those cultures that encourage a free press and freedom of expression – the desire to proclaim solidarity with societies that have specific laws protecting a free press and that do not acquiesce to the will of any "higher powers" or "higher authorities" such as those that the killers professed to be executing.
20. Lee Atwater, personal advisor to Presidents Reagan and George H. W. Bush, and former RNC chairman, infamously let slip not long before he died: "You start out in 1954 by saying, 'N\*\*\*\*\*, n\*\*\*\*\*, n\*\*\*\*\*'. By 1968 you can't say 'n\*\*\*\*\*' – that hurts you. Backfires. So you say stuff like forced busing, states' rights and all that stuff. You're getting so abstract now [that] you're talking about cutting taxes, and all these things you're talking about are totally economic things and a byproduct of them is [that] blacks get hurt worse than whites. And subconsciously maybe that is part of it. I'm not saying that. But I'm saying that if it is getting that abstract, and that coded, that we are doing away with the racial problem one way or the other. You follow me – because obviously sitting around saying, 'We want to cut this', is much more abstract than even the busing thing, and a hell of a lot more abstract than 'N\*\*\*\*\*, n\*\*\*\*\*'."
21. Noor Al-Sabai, "God will wipe them out: White supremacist preacher promises 'bloodshed' at future rallies," *The Raw Story*, August 31, 2017.
22. During the George W. Bush administration's adventures into Iraq, in 2003 the US Military began the "Flat Daddy" and "Flat Mommy" program, offering families of servicemen and women stationed in Iraq life-size cardboard photographs of the absent parent. Their families carried these figures with them in their daily routines, shopping, driving, going to church. Katie Zezima, "When soldiers go to war, flat daddies hold their place at home," *The New York Times*, September 30, 2006. These cardboard figures are supposed to stand in for the real loved one. These flat daddies being without depth pretend that any human being can be reduced to a handy, flat, compact, easily portable

thing, devoid of either life or death. And death – and life – exhibited by all the cu again" by pretending it should never change.

23. Recently, [Russian Premier Vladimir] "Put the way in AI research will come to dominate the future, not only for Russia, but for all hum with colossal opportunities, but also thro becomes the leader in this sphere will b Elon Musk tweeted: "China, Russia, soon Competition for AI superiority at nation opinion." 2:33 am – September 4, 2017.

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thing, devoid of either life or death. And they show the cowardice and fear of facing death – and life – exhibited by all the current movements to “make America great again” by pretending it should never change.

23. Recently, [Russian Premier Vladimir] “Putin predicted that whichever country leads the way in AI research will come to dominate global affairs. ‘Artificial intelligence is the future, not only for Russia, but for all humankind,’ said Putin, reports RT. ‘It comes with colossal opportunities, but also threats that are difficult to predict. Whoever becomes the leader in this sphere will become the ruler of the world.’” In response, Elon Musk tweeted: “China, Russia, soon all countries with strong computer science. Competition for AI superiority at national level most likely cause of WW3 in my opinion.” 2:33 am – September 4, 2017.

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