



Sovereign Agents of Mythical and (Pseudo-)Divine Violence: Walter Benjamin and Global Biopolitical Cinema

Seung-hoon Jeong

Seoul National University, South Korea

Abstract: *Drawing on Walter Benjamin's "Critique of Violence," this paper illuminates the complexity of law and violence in global biopolitical cinema. Benjamin's key notions ("lawmaking" and "law-preserving," "mythical" and "divine" violence) are revisited through diverse films such as The Dark Knight series, Dogville, The Act of Killing, and Waltz with Bashir. The paper explores how the sovereign agents of killing here embody 'pseudo-divine violence,' posing ethical dilemmas about justice and life's value. This analysis leads to the quest for 'true divine violence' without sovereign power and the sanctity of humanity believed only as potential to retain and relay.*

Keywords: *Walter Benjamin; law; violence; sovereignty; bare life; abjection; global cinema; The Dark Knight; The Act of Killing; Waltz with Bashir*

DOI: 10.22618/TP.PJCv.20204.2.1763005

The PJCv Journal is published by Trivent Publishing



Sovereign Agents of Mythical and (Pseudo-)Divine Violence: Walter Benjamin and Global Biopolitical Cinema

Seung-hoon Jeong

Seoul National University, South Korea

Abstract: *Drawing on Walter Benjamin's "Critique of Violence," this paper illuminates the complexity of law and violence in global biopolitical cinema. Benjamin's key notions ("lawmaking" and "law-preserving," "mythical" and "divine" violence) are revisited through diverse films such as The Dark Knight series, Dogville, The Act of Killing, and Waltz with Bashir. The paper explores how the sovereign agents of killing here embody 'pseudo-divine violence,' posing ethical dilemmas about justice and life's value. This analysis leads to the quest for 'true divine violence' without sovereign power and the sanctity of humanity believed only as potential to retain and relay.*

Keywords: *Walter Benjamin; law; violence; sovereignty; bare life; abjection; global cinema; The Dark Knight; The Act of Killing; Waltz with Bashir*

I. Violence as Power: Benjamin, Derrida, and Batman

Walter Benjamin's 1921 essay "Critique of Violence" ["*Zur Kritik der Gewalt*"]¹ is now considered essential to the biopolitical theory of law, violence, and sovereignty.² This seminal if obscure and even controversial text has attracted much attention among critical thinkers especially since Jacques Derrida's deconstructive reading of it.³ Relatively, film scholars' favorite Benjamin picks have been limited to those famous texts on the work of art, photography, or history, although his insight on the violent nature of power to make or break the law seems ever timelier when it comes to the actual content of global cinema. My starting point is thus to take Benjamin's critique of violence as the guiding text to read carefully and to reinterpret creatively through contemporary films reflecting our world. Global cinema

¹ Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writing*, ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken Books, 1978), 277–300.

² Biopolitics basically concerns the biological fundament of politics, the administration of life and a political community's populations as its subject. Biopower, in Michel Foucault's view among others, works through political apparatuses that subjugate people's bodies to the modern nation-state. I will however draw more attention to the Agambenian sovereignty that can even throw these bodies out into a lawless state of nature. That is, all nations transcend their normal law for the sake of security in a state of emergency that allows killing with impunity. Biopolitics in this sense has existed since long before the political utilization of modern biotechnology which Foucault highlights.

³ Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority,'" in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, ed. Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld, and David Gray Carlson (New York: Routledge, 1992), 3–67. Also, see Brendan Moran and Carlo Salzani (eds.), *Towards the Critique of Violence: Walter Benjamin and Giorgio Agamben* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

urges us to tackle today's most entangled biopolitical issues beyond aesthetic, media-specific aspects, and here, we even have to struggle with the question about where or not life is indeed sacred.⁴ In this direction, I will illuminate the complexity of law and violence in global biopolitical cinema through Benjamin's significant notions and renew them face-to-face with thought-provoking films such as *The Dark Knight* series, *Dogville*, *The Act of Killing*, and *Waltz with Bashir*.



Fig. 1. Jacques Louis-David, *Apollo and Diana Attacking the Children of Niobe* (1772). Public Domain.

From his historico-philosophical viewpoint, Benjamin proposes two pairs of concepts regarding violence, or *Gewalt*, which term implies not only physical unauthorized force but also public or legitimate power, domination, authority, i.e., non-physical or symbolic violence concerning law and justice. The first pair of concepts involves violence as a means of “lawmaking” (founding) and “law-preserving” (conserving). The lawmaking function of violence is to achieve natural, unsanctioned ends as in the case of war, in which a state violently ignores historically acknowledged laws like borders in order to create new laws/borders. In this way, violence founds law and institutes a system of power. Lawmaking is thus power-making. Then, once a new order of law has been established, power confirms and conserves it with the law-preserving function of violence directed toward legal, sanctioned ends. Compulsory conscription, for instance, is a legally forceful imposition of state power on citizens in order to protect the state as well as the law itself. If lawmaking violence goes beyond the legal/illegal boundary, law-preserving violence enforces legal acts and punishes illegal acts.

Secondly, lawmaking violence is also called “mythical violence” with reference to Greek mythology. For example, when Niobe boasts of her fourteen children to the goddess Leto, who only has two children, Leto kills all of Niobe's children and turns her into stone (a statue), which Benjamin says is not a punishment so much as a manifestation of law (a statute), or the

⁴ For my framing of global cinema, see Seung-hoon Jeong, “Introduction - Global East Asian Cinema: Abjection and Agency,” *Studies in the Humanities* 44 & 45, no. 1–2 (2019): ii–xxii.

making of a boundary between gods and humans (Fig. 1). That is, the law is proclaimed to constitute gods' power over the human hubris that challenged them. But, more significant than mythical violence based on power is "divine violence" based on justice. For Benjamin, justice is the unreachable, unknowable end whose justness only God can decide, as often seen in the Old Testament. The angry Jewish God punishes, for example, the company of Korah, who revolted against Moses by causing an earthquake; the ground suddenly splits open, swallows them, and quickly closes (Fig. 2). This clean annihilation, a divine judgment, occurs without warning or threat and leaves no mark or trace. Divine violence founds no legal regime for domination. It instead explodes beyond any boundaries (between rulers and subjects, dominant and resistant groups, etc.) in the way of boundlessly destroying law itself, including the law set by mythical violence. It performs divine justice only to purify the world. Benjamin says: "if mythical violence brings at once guilt and retribution, divine power only expiates; if the former threatens, the latter strikes; if the former is bloody, the latter is lethal without spilling blood."⁵



Fig. 2. Gustave Doré, *The Death of Korah, Dathan and Abiram* (1865), public domain.
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Dore_Death_of_Korah,_Dathan_and_Abiram.jpg.

These two dichotomies of violence—lawmaking/law-preserving, and mythical/divine—are, however, unstable. For example, capital punishment is not merely a law-preserving penalty for certain crimes but "the highest violence" over life and death that "manifestly and fearsomely" reaffirms the original foundation of law, in which Benjamin sees "something rotten."⁶ What is rotten? Here, we could imaginatively flesh out Benjamin's idea of "violence crowned by fate" as the origin of law. Put differently, the question is about the birth of the king, or the inception of sovereignty. Let's assume that a person commits an unforgivably threatening or condemnable act in a primitive community and the most natural reaction to it would be to kill this person like an animal unworthy of humane treatment, just as animals kill each other instinctively for their survival. But nobody would dare dirty one's hands with blood, because people's underlying ethical sensibility would tell them that killing is horrible, bestial, and inhuman even if naturally needed. Then, if someone bravely stands up and

⁵ Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," 297.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 286.

performs the killing, this animalistic act would not only save the community but also cause fear among others that they might also be killed if they do not follow the very savior. Violence over life and death would thus bring biopolitical power through the internalization of animality, which paradoxically would bestow some awe-inspiring divinity upon the killer. He would be both below and above humans, descending from humanity to animality and ascending even to divinity. This bestial-divine killer would then become the sovereign ruler by positing the law under which killing is a crime to punish, but which he could suspend by reaffirming his original lawmaking power in the exceptional case of killing someone as what Giorgio Agamben calls *homo sacer*.⁷ Capital punishment, though legal, may still evoke this origin of sovereignty as divinity-taken-through-animality, which I propose to see as the “rotten” core of the law. (This divinity concerns the mythical lawmaking violence and not the “divine” law-destroying violence, though I will address their overlap.)

By extension, Benjamin argues that the police also use lawmaking as well as law-preserving violence. They “intervene ‘for security reasons’ in countless cases where no clear legal situation exists,”⁸ just as numerous American superheroes have done the same on screen. Christopher Nolan’s *The Dark Knight* (2008), for example, memorably stages the internal split of Gotham City’s public power into two agents: Harvey Dent, the “White Knight” who represents the law-preserving authorities, including elected officials like him, and Bruce Wayne as Batman, the “Dark Knight” who acts as the unofficial vigilante beyond the law. Notable is the White Knight’s approval of the Dark Knight. Dent talks about Batman: “Gotham’s proud of an ordinary man standing up for what’s right” when “all of us...stood by and let scum take control of our city.” He continues: “When their enemies were at the gates, the Romans would suspend democracy and appoint one man to protect the city. It wasn’t considered an honor; it was considered a public service.” However, “the last man who they appointed to protect the Republic was named Caesar, and he never gave up his power.”⁹ This sums up the emergence of sovereignty described above: Batman saved Gotham by standing up to kill the enemies and took a tacitly appointed sovereign position without a democratic election. The point is that the animality of killing, however justifiable, underlies this superhero’s sovereignty (and ‘Bat-Man’ literally incarnates animality at that). Caesar became the Roman emperor, a divine sovereign, not because he inherently had divinity but because his animalistic performance of killing *homines sacri* like animals reaffirmed the ancient Roman law allowing suprallegal operation, i.e., reaffirmed the lawmaking violence of drawing the boundary between law and its outside. The immanence of the exception to the law in law, of lawmaking violence in law-preserving violence is not anachronistic but indeed eternal. So now, sovereign agents from James Bond to Batman actively fulfill their public service “in the shadows” at the cost of democracy, as if our modern republic still needs a potential emperor.

Derrida rephrases Benjamin in his characteristic deconstructive logic. Lawmaking violence founds “what ought to be conserved, conservable, promised to heritage and tradition,” and therefore, “[p]osition [to posit the law through violence] is already iterability, a call for self-conserving repetition. Conservation in its turn refounds so that it can conserve what it claims to found. Thus, there can be no rigorous opposition between positioning and

⁷ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).

⁸ Benjamin, “Critique of Violence,” 287.

⁹ To this last line uttered by his love, Dent replies with his famous adage: “Well, I guess you either die a hero or you live long enough to see yourself become the villain.” And he adds that Batman wants someone to take up his mantle, which implies the perpetual need of the suprallegal vigilante in the legal community. What matters less than Batman himself is his structurally demanded exceptional role.

conservation,” that is, between lawmaking and law-preserving violence.¹⁰ Likewise, deconstruction applies to two kinds of strike that Benjamin, drawing on Georges Sorel, takes as a more significant example of violence. The “political general strike” interrupts the state violently but causes “only an external modification of labor conditions.” It actualizes lawmaking violence that can at best change the masters of the workers from one privileged group to another privileged group. Meanwhile, the “proletarian general strike” has the sole task of destroying state power as such. It is law-destroying violence that demands the anarchistic withdrawal of labor, “a wholly transformed work, no longer enforced by the state.” The first kind of strike is reformist but still bourgeois; the second is proletarian and revolutionary.¹¹ Nonetheless, given that destroying the state always ends up making a new state or a new regime of law, Derrida argues that all revolutions, on the left or right, allege the founding of future law. And “[a]s this law to come will in return legitimate, retrospectively, the violence that may offend the scene of justice, its future anterior already justifies it.”¹² The notion of pure destructive violence is thus no other than the lost origin of its deferred and differentiated actual forms, historical incidents of political violence that only reductively (re)present it while positing another state/law. It is this “*différentielle contamination*”¹³ between mythical and divine violence that smells “rotten” to Derrida, as even divine violence cannot but smell bloody. But what truly embarrasses him is not *différance* itself—his keyword underlying all phenomena—so much as its teleological revision that Benjamin proposes, a theological vision that pure divine violence would return through an ultimate revolution like the Last Judgment. Derrida finds this “final solution” to be “too messianico-Marxist or archeo-eschatological” and complicit with crypto-metaphysical thinkers such as Martin Heidegger and Carl Schmitt, who were both involved in Nazism. Here comes the dangerous temptation to regard the Holocaust of the Jews, the Nazi’s Final Solution, as a paradoxical manifestation of Judaic divine violence. Did the gas chambers not realize the divine violence of “bloodless” annihilation?¹⁴

Of course, Benjamin as a Marxist, however mystic, is far from fascism. Some critics criticize Derrida’s critique of Benjamin. Robert Sinnerbrink (2006) argues, for example, that Derrida offers a sort of “interpretative violence” by unjustly underplaying Benjamin’s anarchistic communist position. For the proletarian general strike does not represent Schmitt’s notion of exception to the rule of law but “the ‘exception’ of any system that can still operate with the political opposition of legal norm and state of emergency.”¹⁵ If Schmitt’s state of exception is still defined by, derived from, and dependent on law, Benjamin’s radical exception aims at removing the dual framework of the legal/supralegal states itself. In other words, divine violence is not opposed and then reduced to mythical violence on the level of normalcy and emergency, but rather remains ‘un-deconstructable’ on another level of pure exceptionality—the unconditioned horizon of anarcho-Marxist revolutions. In this context, Batman, whose exceptional status is endorsed by state power, is a sovereign agent of mythical violence and not divine violence. The latter’s ‘divine’ nature is beyond his animality-taking-on-divinity within the law-bound power hierarchy that consists of animality (the abject), humanity (the subject), and divinity (the sovereign), which are respectively positioned below,

¹⁰ Derrida, “Force of Law: The ‘Mystical Foundation of Authority,’” 38.

¹¹ Benjamin, “Critique of Violence,” 291.

¹² Derrida, “Force of Law: The ‘Mystical Foundation of Authority,’” 35.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 38.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹⁵ Werner Hamacher, “Afformative, Strike: Benjamin’s Critique of Violence,” in *Walter Benjamin’s Philosophy: Destruction and Experience*, ed. Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne (London: Routledge, 1993), 134.

inside, and above the law. Instead, it is Bane in *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012) who appears like a revolutionary agent of divine violence at three stages. First, his terrorist bombing of a stadium, streets, and bridges—shot in New York City instead of Chicago, the location of Nolan’s earlier Batman films—undoubtedly evokes 9/11, not least because he is a former member of the villainous League of Shadows coming from Central Asia (close to the Middle East). Second, his initial target is the Stock Exchange (on Wall Street), and he provokes a revolt of citizens against the corrupt elite who monopolize politico-economic power. The terrorist then turns into the leader of a leftist revolution subverting global capitalism; the 1% top class is tried in the people’s court of the 99%. The film thus allegorically shifts from 9/11 to the Occupy movement. Third, this revolution does not lead to building a better state, but is designed to facilitate Bane’s ultimate aim, which is the demolition of the entire city (the global world) by a neutron bomb. Like the Joker in *The Dark Knight*, Bane carries profound disillusionment with humanity and carries out its anarchic annihilating explosion. In sum, Bane is the abject of the global system who also becomes a triple agent: a global terrorist, a communist, and a nihilist.¹⁶

Things get complicated as, interestingly, Batman also undergoes some sort of abjection. *Batman Begins* (2005) shows that abjection penetrates Bruce’s childhood traumas of falling into a well full of fierce bats and of watching a mugger murder his parents. Leading an orphaned bare life, he wanders around the world until learning to overcome his fear of bats and violence, which are linked to the world’s dread of darkness/apocalypse, in this way incarnating fear itself: first, by mastering ninja methods under the League of Shadows, and then, by becoming Batman after rejecting both the League’s cause of destroying Gotham and the League’s justification of lethal violence. That is, Bruce as an abject is trained as a terrorist agent but turns into a sovereign agent fighting against the very terrorist agency that trained him. But more importantly, the sovereign position is practically condoned yet intrinsically questionable in the legal state, so the Joker in *The Dark Knight* tells Batman: “You’re a freak like me. They need you now but they will cast you out like a leper.” Gotham indeed discards Batman, blaming him for a killing spree that was in fact carried out by Harvey “Two-Face” Dent as an act of revenge for the death of his love. Nonetheless, Batman takes responsibility for the murders in order to preserve Dent’s positive image as the public White Knight. This self-abjection of Bruce from being the sovereign Dark Knight also overlaps with his retirement as CEO of Wayne Enterprises following his investment in a fusion reactor that is exposed as being weaponizable in *The Dark Knight Rises*. However, Bruce’s financial wrongdoing—which recalls the hazardous practices of Wall Street investors and which led to the 2008 financial crisis—is never questioned but rather replaced by Bane’s violent

¹⁶ Let me repeat my introduction to “the abject” I somewhere else put as follows: “As widely known by Julia Kristeva, abjection means one’s act of casting off something disgusting or threatening from oneself for self-protection or ego-formation. While it is essential to establish a stable identity with the self/other boundary, the abject is not reduced to a mere thing but lingers in the limbo state between subject and object, self and other, life and death. By extension, an individual subject becomes an abject by being cast out of its community. Imogen Tyler (2013) addresses such social abjection in the system of neoliberal globalization and sovereignty. If global citizens are normal subjects granted sociopolitical rights and subjectivity, the abject are global ‘non-citizens’ bereft of them. They are often debased and stigmatized as repulsive or harmful, easily targeted by all sorts of sovereign violence. They are near-neocolonial others of the global system, economically included in and legally excluded from it like illegal immigrant workers. This ‘internal exclusion’ of the abject resonates with the status of *homo sacer* who is ‘included in the juridical order solely in the form of exclusion (that is, of its capacity to be killed)’ (Agamben 1998, 8).” See Seung-hoon Jeong, “A Thin Line between Sovereign and Abject Agents: Global Action Thrillers with the Sci-Fi Mind-Game War on Terror,” *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 21/7 (2019): 2.

Occupation of the city. Batman subdues this more visible evil with the sovereign violence he reclaims, just as retired abject heroes in the action genre take up one final mission to dirty their hands with blood. Batman thus turns from a 'bad' man to a 'good' man.¹⁷ Toward the end of the film, he hauls the bomb that Bane has constructed from his own fusion reactor far over the bay, where it safely explodes at the apparent sacrifice of his life. Though the last shot shows him appearing in Florence, Batman/Bruce is presumed dead in Gotham, honored as its savior and respected for having donated Wayne Manor to be used as an orphanage.¹⁸

Within the framework of the trilogy, one may feel reluctant to accept Bane as a Marxist messiah for at least three reasons, each related to his triple abject agency. First, Bane's 'divine' violence on the entire world is actually reduced to the anti-Western terror that attempts to counter-balance Western civilization on the plane of 'mythically' violent power struggles. Indeed, the view of Gotham by the League of Shadows echoes Islamic jihadists' view of America: a corrupt, decadent, hypocritical, and irredeemable empire. The anti-imperialist terrorism, then, does not lead to bloodless annihilation but instead provokes an all-the-bloodier reaction of the sovereign empire to preserve itself even by suspending its law. Violence is justified not only for Bane's end of fundamentalist justice but also, too quickly, for Gotham's end of self-defense and its aggressive extension to 'infinite justice against the axis of evil.' The result is the defeat of terrorism, but in the real world, as we have seen, it would most likely trigger the terror-counterterror cycle. Even worse, the relationship between ends and means is nearly reversed in this vicious cycle, as though violence as a means becomes an end itself that justifies the continuation of jihad, the politics of fear, the military industry, and the state of emergency, while justice becomes a mere pretext for achieving this end.

Second, Bane's Occupy riot does not bring utopian anarchy but only a dystopian regime. Gotham is depicted as destructive, frantic, brutal, and chaotic under the People's proletarian dictatorship. The ideological effect is evident: communism is worse than capitalism; revolution is nothing but catastrophe. Compared to this anti-capitalist upheaval, Bruce's mismanagement of money involved in an illegal business is a negligible glitch of capitalism. Bruce/Batman thus returns as a superhero who eradicates the 'Reds' to 'make Gotham great again' and is remembered in the end both as a self-sacrificing savior like Christ *and* as a capitalist philanthropist like his parents. In other words, Wayne Enterprises, founded in the glorious age of industrial capitalism, covers up the risks of financial capitalism in the global age by updating the family legacy of *noblesse oblige* (fighting terror, donating property). Heroic individualism, here implied along with right-wing Christianity, is a typically American solution to social problems. It protects and justifies the wealth of Wayne Enterprises (America), whose primary sources are the manufacture of arms and stock-market speculation. Furthermore, the seamless integration of the sovereign agent and the superrich CEO into Batman/Bruce allegorically renders acceptable and even admirable the supralegal-neoliberal power of America's global hegemony.

Third, although Gotham might deserve a total system reboot to restart from ground zero, as Bane believes, how could we justify this divine justice that inevitably costs a number of innocent people? Do most of them not belong to the very oppressed and exploited 99% to be saved? Rather than a sublime *deus ex machina*, Bane appears as a nihilistic angry god wielding bloody misanthropic power. His defeat by Batman, a Christ figure, thus seems right and

¹⁷ For more on capitalist superheroes in the neoliberal age, see Dan Hassler-Forest, *Capitalist Superheroes: Caped Crusaders in the Neoliberal Age* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2012).

¹⁸ This ending does not 'undo' sacrifice but suggests a step toward it. While Batman is not really sacrificed, his act achieves the full effect of sacrifice: getting social recognition as a heroic sacrifice and individual compensation in the form of the new life that he seems to start with cat burglar Selina Kyle outside Gotham—but now no longer as Batman/Catwoman but as man and woman.

proper. However, such poetic justice reduces their positions to a Manichean dichotomy of good and evil, even though Bane is in theory a divine agent and Batman a sovereign agent, and even though both in reality embody 'hard-ethical' justice, whether it is against the global system or its abject. Moreover, on the side of good in this moralistic battle, Batman/Bruce manifests 'soft-ethical' Christian qualities: love and sacrifice, charity and social altruism. The sovereign vigilante and the benevolent capitalist thus personifies the double ethics of the global system in the manner of combining Christian fundamentalism and liberalism, performing powerful justice and social harmony at once. Without such a 'soft' facet, Bane's justice is handed down only for the sake of balance (and not harmony) in the world, which can be translated as no different from "the clash of civilizations." Or at least the film depicts his violence in this manner. That is, it cannot but victimize numerous civilians and make them bleed for his eschatological anti-humanism, leaving no room for future potentialities of humanity.

II. Divine Violence for the Sanctity of Life

These three aspects of Bane's violence may indicate that Derrida is right: pure divine violence for an anarchic revolution cannot but be deconstructed into bloody mythical violence for a power struggle. However, Benjamin paradoxically argues that, like diplomatic agreements, a rigorous conception of the revolutionary general strike as a pure means of violence can diminish the incidence of actual violence.¹⁹ How can there be 'non-violent' divine violence that does not shed blood when it is not humanly possible or allowable to cause a bloodless earthquake or holocaust? This question leads us to grapple with the most enigmatic yet crucial point in Benjamin's text, as we shall see presently.

Benjamin says that blood symbolizes "mere life" (*das bloße Leben*) and mythical violence is "bloody power over mere life for its own sake." Meanwhile, the lack of bloodshed in divine violence implies that it "'expiates' the guilt of mere life" and purifies "the guilty, not of guilt, however, but of law."²⁰ What does "mere life" mean, and why is it guilty? Of course, we are tempted to equate it with Agamben's bare life, the guilty *homo sacer* to be killed outside of the law. However, Benjamin calls it pure and simple "natural life" in humans, i.e., nature in human beings as such, rather than solely in the condemned abject. "Mere life" thus refers to what Agamben terms *zōē* instead of *nuda vita*.²¹ The "bloody power over mere life" thus concerns not the suprallegal banishment of the *homo sacer* but the primordial mythical violence of lawmaking. This violence is exercised at the cost of the mere life that it makes bleed in its own favor, i.e. for mighty dominion, "even as it remains precisely within the order of natural life."²² As per the aforementioned birth of the king, the initial act of killing as mythical violence is still naturally done to save the community while at the same time instituting law and starting to govern natural beings under the sovereign rule of "guilt and retribution."²³ Though not guilty, the natural performance of bloody violence thus introduces a sense of guilt to nature/natural life in that it exemplifies who/what is to be punished as guilty from the perspective of the law, which it simultaneously posits and transcends. This is the paradoxical performativity of lawmaking as law-transcending. The state of nature (*zōē*) inevitably, fatefully, turns into the legal state (*bios*), only from which *homines sacri* are excluded

¹⁹ Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," 292.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 297.

²¹ For more on these terms, see Carlo Salzani, "From Benjamin's *Bloßes Leben* to Agamben's *Nuda Vita*: A Genealogy," in *Towards the Critique of Violence: Walter Benjamin and Giorgio Agamben*, ed. Brendan Moran and Carlo Salzani (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 109–23.

²² Derrida, "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority,'" 52.

²³ Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," 297.

by a sovereign power that supralelegally reaffirms itself. But just as this exception to the law is an exclusion included in the sovereign operation of law, mere life is subject to (the natural order of) lawmaking violence that brings guilt, and consequently the law, as inescapable fate. Life is thus “the marked bearer of guilt,”²⁴ not only liable to do guilty acts but fundamentally guilty about its own bloody mythical “fate” of law that integrates nature.

Divine violence enables not the retribution but the ‘expiation’ of this guilt. More precisely, the guilty (mere life) are purified “not of guilt but of law,” i.e., liberated from the legal system of guilt and retribution as a whole. Divine violence is “pure power over all life for the sake of the living,” and not for its own sake as per mythical violence.²⁵ Here, “the living” (*der Lebendige*) is meant to be opposed to mere life, or that which is oppressed by law, and thus should be taken out of the natural-legal life system. The living may be something really *living* in itself, but only potentially living in mere life; the potential of life that should be *living* in order for life not to bleed under the power of legal violence. It can therefore be understood as the living potential of “supernatural life” (*übernatürliches Leben*), a life that goes beyond/over (*über*) the natural life fated in law.²⁶ If mythical violence demands sacrifice, divine violence accepts it in order to save this potential life, or “the soul of the living.”²⁷ In other words, even if divine violence involves killing, it does so not in the way that power founds law by sacrificing life, i.e. by making it bleed, but in the way that justice purifies that very blood by sacrificing law as such, and by accepting the unavoidably entailed sacrifice of life so as to expiate its guilt and redeem the living. Justice is not something that is just good, but something that has to be done even at the sacrifice of life insofar as it can revive the living, or the just value of life. This justness could be called the justice of life itself. Derrida puts it thus: “what makes for the worth of man, of his *Dasein* and his life, is that he contains the potential, the possibility of justice, the yet-to-come (*avenir*) of justice, the yet-to-come of his being-just, of his having-to-be-just. What is sacred in his life is not his life but the justice of his life.”²⁸ As the living is beyond life, justice is beyond law. Derrida’s deconstructionist insight highlights the significant difference between justice and the enforcement of the law, which might otherwise simply be reduced the one to the other. Law is the finite, relative product of sociopolitical dynamics grounded in history, whereas the infinite and absolute notion of justice is impossible yet indispensable for the sacredness of life and its utopian futurity/*avenir*. Justice for Derrida is thus ethical above all, much like his concepts of the pure gift and hospitality. In this way, he ‘ethicizes’ Benjamin, or rather sides with the ethical Benjamin against the political appropriation of him, alerting us to the dubious link between the Benjaminian messianic revolution and Schmittian political fascism.²⁹

Here is indeed the core of ethics regarding the sanctity of life. How can we accept that God, who often inflicts annihilating violence, is the same God who ordered “Thou shall not kill”? Referring to Judaism, which does not condemn killing in self-defense, Benjamin regards this commandment “not as a criterion of judgment” under the law of guilt and retribution, “but as a guideline for the actions of persons or communities who have to wrestle with it in solitude and, in exceptional cases, to take on themselves the responsibility of ignoring it.”³⁰ You may kill if you can defend your deed as ethically just and you take responsibility for it of

²⁴ Ibid., 299.

²⁵ Ibid., 297.

²⁶ Salzani, “From Benjamin’s *Bloßes Leben* to Agamben’s *Nuda Vita*: A Genealogy,” 111.

²⁷ Benjamin, “Critique of Violence,” 299.

²⁸ Derrida, “Force of Law: The ‘Mystical Foundation of Authority,’” 53–54.

²⁹ In comparison, Sinnerbrink radically politicizes Benjamin by emphasizing the leftist anarchism of divine violence over its theological messianism. I shall explore this position later via Slavoj Žižek.

³⁰ Benjamin, “Critique of Violence,” 298.

your own free will. However, Benjamin also introduces Jewish essayist Kurt Hiller's theorem on which to base the commandment: "higher even than the happiness and justice of existence stands existence itself." That is, no righteous cause for killing is more important than life as such. Though Benjamin rejects the sacralization of mere life, he finds this proposition to be truthful if "existence" implies "the irreducible, total condition that is 'man,'" which is more than the simple fact of natural life. By the "total condition that is 'man,'" he means the "not-yet-attained condition of the just man," the yet-to-come of the justice of life, the living as sacred beyond bloody life. Animal as it is, human existence with its potential sanctity of life is less terrible than "the nonexistence of man."³¹ Life for itself is not sacred, but sacredness is immanent in it as its potential to preserve. Therefore, you should not kill. However, man's sacredness is not here the sovereign's divinity taken through animalistic power, as mentioned earlier. Rather, sacredness is a certain potential divinity of human life that is yet to come *out of* the very bloody hierarchy rooted in the natural-legal state. Hence there are two kinds of divinity: one within the power system, and the other beyond it; one crowns man in the name of the law, while the other dethrones him in the name of justice. The second is easily co-opted by and into the former, as Derrida would say, but we must distinguish them.

Now, it is evident that divine violence is precisely an exceptional case, in that God himself ignores his commandment in order to redeem the potential divinity of man by destroying the legal state and realizing the potential sanctity of life by sacrificing mere life. The problem occurs when not God but man attempts to be the agent of divine violence. What if killing does not bring this justice of life but reaffirms the domination of law that deprives life of its potential sacredness? How can 'human' divine violence not be alloyed with mythical violence when no clear guideline for its purity seems available? Who can judge that this or that sacrifice of life is objectively oriented to the sacredness of life and not subjectively abused for the interest of bloody power? Benjamin admits that it is impossible "to decide when unalloyed violence has been realized in particular cases... because the expiatory power of violence is not visible to men." Violence performs a decision for justice without decidable knowledge or determinant certainty. It is not recognizable in itself but only in its "incomparable effects," which manifest themselves in "a true war" or in other forms that over the course of history myth has "bastardized" with law. This bastardization is none other than Benjamin's name for deconstruction, since the vicious cycle of law-destroying and/as lawmaking has "maintained mythical forms of law." Nevertheless, Benjamin believes in the possibility of pure revolutionary violence outside of the law, or "the highest manifestation of unalloyed violence by man" (300).³² In sum, human action can still be divine though human knowledge is never.

III. Divine violence without God: Žižek and *The Act of Killing*

Slavoj Žižek explores this dilemma in his typically provocative yet inspiring manner while reinterpreting divine violence.³³ When he says that "*homini sacer*" are guilty of "leading a mere (natural) life" under the law that is "limited to the living," he indeed mistakes *homo sacer*, mere life, and the living as all the same. This same life "cannot reach beyond life to touch what is in excess of life," whereas divine violence expresses the very excess of life and "strikes at 'bare life' regulated by law." He argues, then, that divine violence "does partly overlap with the biopolitical disposal of *Hominis sacer*,"³⁴ even though I would contend that they are the abject

³¹ Ibid., 299.

³² Ibid., 300. At the end of his text, Benjamin abruptly states that divine violence may be called "sovereign violence." But I consistently relate sovereignty to mythical violence and not to divine violence.

³³ Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (New York: Picador, 2008).

³⁴ Ibid., 198.

victims of the biopolitical system of law and power which is to be destroyed by divine violence. Indeed, Žižek casts no subtle look into the potential sanctity of mere or bare life to be saved. For him, what is potential in life is its own excess as “pure drive,” “the undeadness” of one’s “desire” that one should follow without compromise like one’s “duty.” Committing divine violence is thus no different from an ethical act in the Lacanian-Kantian sense of standing by desire as duty.³⁵ It is what man can and should do actually without God. This is why Žižek fearlessly identifies divine violence with existing phenomena in history, avoiding any obscurantist mystification imbued with theological messianism.³⁶ His violent misreading of Benjamin thus leads to the positive humanization of divine violence. Divine justice is to be desired ethically and delivered humanly even if violently.

As Žižek suggests, the dénouement of Lars von Trier’s *Dogville* (2003) exemplifies the revelation of such divine yet ‘all-too-human’ violence. The film tells a fable about Grace, the daughter of a gang leader, who runs away from his dirty work and hides in a small town, Dogville. Villagers kindly harbor her as long as she works for them, but they gradually exploit, abuse, and enslave her until her father appears. He then argues against her dedicated service to the villagers and her gracious understanding of their deeds as done under hard circumstances. In his view, she patronizingly exonerates them out of sympathy without “judgment,” from her condescending assumption that no one can attain her “high ethical standards.” Finding her arrogant, he says: “you forgive others with excuses that you would never in the world permit for yourself.” In Kantian ethical terms, Grace violates the categorical imperative that an action as permissible must be applied to all people. Conversely, it is with her final decision on total revenge that she abandons this superior position and achieves universal justice as one of them by exploding her resentment. Žižek sees authentic resentment not as part of the Nietzschean slave morality but as a refusal to normalize the crime—like the male villagers’ ordinary rapes of Grace—and claims that only a just punishment (revenge) enables one to move forward to true forgiveness and forgetting. In this sense, “[h]er act of killing is an act of true mercy.”³⁷ In other words, Grace was arrogant when offering mercy as if Christ would have done so, but the true love of Christ, at least its Žižekian version, incorporates cruelty: “love without cruelty is powerless; cruelty without love is blind.” This love-cruelty link exceeds the natural limitations of life and embodies an unconditional drive toward the yet-to-come domain of love.³⁸ The gangster father of Grace was initially deemed to be a terrible patriarchal sovereign, but turns out to be a divine messenger of humanly possible justice. He helps Grace to perform divine violence that combines the wrath of God with the grace of Christ, the Old and New Testaments doctrines. Interestingly, we see shooting but no blood in Grace’s massacre thanks to the theatrical direction of the film. The post-catastrophic last scene shows only the empty stage with nobody alive and nothing left except a dog named Moses, which Grace did not kill, and the chalk-written word “DOG,” which reads backwards as GOD. This dog-god may symbolize divinity in natural life, its potential sanctity to save and love.

The point is that divine violence results from a hard decision that one must make when no God exists: to kill others or to sacrifice oneself. It is not an almighty God that will intervene directly to solve problems like a *deus ex machina* or to punish man’s excesses as per the Last Judgment. Divine violence is instead the performance of man’s will to excess, to a divinely unknown yet desperately desired justice while God remains silently impotent. Put differently, when the big Other, religious or secular (including historical necessity, ideology, etc.) gives an

³⁵ Ibid., 195.

³⁶ Ibid., 197.

³⁷ Ibid., 189–94.

³⁸ Ibid., 204–5.

order of killing, it is not divine violence. The agents of a totalitarian massacre are no more than instruments of such a big Other that offers a sort of objective justification for their bloody mythical violence. Žižek puts it in Alain Badiou's terms: while mythical violence belongs to the order of Being, divine violence destroys it as Event. And "[i]t is only for the believer that an event is a miracle"; no objective criteria are available to identify an act of violence as divine.³⁹ One becomes the subject of divine violence through one's subjective belief in its justness of one's own free will. One must "wrestle with it in solitude," assuming full responsibility for it as Benjamin says. I claim that this subjective freedom is dreadful because one has to be responsible for its unknown result. In turn, one cannot help desiring dread for the unknown because upmost freedom is right there. Divine violence with this human freedom pursues neither sovereign power transcending yet founding law nor anarchic self-indulgence in chaos and disorder. It rather performs a Kierkegaardian yet atheist "leap of faith" regarding the potential sanctity of humanity, or, the divinity which is "in man more than himself" but belongs to no sovereign, no God—or what I might call divinity without divinity.

However, what if leftist or rightist fascists, religious fundamentalists, or rioting youths also had a deep subjective belief in their violence as a free choice for justice? How can we judge which subjectivity is more objectively authentic than others? How is it possible to tell authentic divine violence from 'pseudo-divine violence' so to speak? To criticize the Nazis is easy because their violence was "a means of the state power" and thus not divine as Žižek notes.⁴⁰ I add that the Holocaust was not even an unsanctioned burst of lawmaking violence to found a new state but, despite its massive scale, a well-programmed operation of law-preserving violence to abject an 'impure' race from the already functioning state under its *Führer*, the sovereign big Other. Therefore, divine violence cannot be evidenced by the simple visual fact of bloodlessness in the gas chambers, despite Derrida's suspicion that this is the case. As the latter also states, the Holocaust exterminated not only millions of natural lives but, more crucially, "the witness of the other order, of a divine violence whose justice is irreducible to right."⁴¹ The Holocaust was indeed a pseudo-divine 'bloody' violence in nature that foreclosed a demand for justice.

True divine violence typically erupts when the abject strike as if from nowhere and demand justice with no cover in the big Other, as, according to Žižek, did many revolutionary Peoples, from the Jacobins in France to favela crowds in Brazil. Žižek highlights Robespierre's undefeatable "faith" in a "sublime and holy love for humanity," which constitutes the paradoxical core of cruel divine violence.⁴² By extension, reviewing *The Dark Knight Rises*, Žižek (2012) likens Bane to a modern-day Che Guevara whose violence is also driven, counter-intuitively, out of a sense of sacrificial love for humanity, against the structural injustice of the global system. Bane's 'reign of terror' is thus a Badiouan Event for the equal liberation of all humans. It could be what Robert Young (2009) calls "a violent healing," a practice of "an ethics of healing through revolutionary violence," which is found at the heart of the lives of Che and other revolutionary doctors such as Frantz Fanon and Agostino Neto. In this interpretation, the Christ figure is not Batman, as we saw earlier, but Bane. Nevertheless, even this Marxist-Christian idealization of Bane makes us doubt the nature of his violence. Žižek draws attention to the "People's Republic of Gotham City," which is negatively depicted in the film and yet which should be positively pursued. But to do so would mean that Bane's revolution is inherently lawmaking and state-founding—just like

³⁹ Ibid., 200.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 199.

⁴¹ Derrida, "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority,'" 60.

⁴² Žižek, *Violence*, 203.

Robespierre's "ambition to establish here on earth the world's first Republic."⁴³ Bafflingly, Bane's unconditional love for his partner Talia does not extend to all humanity, as Žižek notes; it instead disrupts emancipatory ideals and colludes in the plot to demolish Gotham.⁴⁴ Bane is above all a traumatized abject whose agency for vengeance as justice is channeled into the megalomaniacal apocalyptic project of Talia's father, the leader of the League of Shadows. The fundamental problem of terrorism is that all its violence opens onto "no future." It lacks "the interest in the perfectibility of the present," which Derrida identifies with "the inexhaustible demand of justice."⁴⁵ Let us rephrase it thus: terrorism pretends to demand justice but tends to exhaust its infinity by obliterating the unknown future of humanity and its potential sanctity. Bane ends up with an anarcho-leftist version of pseudo-divine violence.

Nonetheless, a more complicated case is found in *The Act of Killing* (2012), Joshua Oppenheimer's sensational documentary about the perpetrators of the 1965-66 Indonesian genocide, in which a million communists were killed. Leading this massacre, Suharto overthrew the then-pro-communist government through a military coup and commenced a three-decade dictatorial presidency. The purge thus typifies the bloody use of lawmaking violence to take over power and institute a 'New Order' at the cost of abject scapegoats. What is unique is that Suharto not only pushed his army beyond the law but also recruited gangsters into vigilante corps with a license to kill. These 'Dark Knight' mafias were called, appositely, "freemen": sovereign agents free from any legal procedure and responsibility for killing bare lives in the state of exception. Moreover, a few living "freemen" reenact various killings in the film while proudly justifying themselves as patriotic heroes and enjoying their performance with nostalgia. Here we see more than the "banality of evil" that Hannah Arendt saw in the Nazi operatives' thoughtless performance of evil deeds without evil intentions.⁴⁶ Arendt found the Nazis "neither perverted nor sadistic" but "terrifyingly normal"; they were not amoral monsters but ordinary bureaucrats who did their daily job mechanically, disengaging from its horrible effects. If this detachment of the Nazis from the Holocaust intimates their lack of faith in Nazism (hence, again, it is pseudo-divine violence at best), the Indonesian killers' ecstatic attachment to their slaughter shows a strong faith in its necessity.⁴⁷ They even developed techniques of bloodless murder as if to offer divine violence. Meanwhile, their projection or transference of evil onto the Reds was not rooted in any religious or racial fundamentalism but derived from secular capitalistic nationalism. Their primary motivations were money, power, and fame; they were paid for eliminating 'public enemies' and are revered by a right-wing organization that grew out of the death squads and which continues to have a huge influence on national politics today. The film shows their

⁴³ Ibid., 203.

⁴⁴ Mark Fisher and Rob White, "The Politics of 'The Dark Knight Rises': A Discussion," *Film Quarterly* (blog), September 2012, <https://filmquarterly.org/2012/09/04/the-politics-of-the-dark-knight-rises-a-discussion/>. Mark Fisher also notes that in reality "neoliberalism has survived the bank crisis," as "the hyper-rich do not fear the poor" and "the peaceable encampments of Occupy have done nothing to induce such fear."

⁴⁵ Giovanna Borradori, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2004), 167.

⁴⁶ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (London: Penguin Classics, 2006).

⁴⁷ Arendt's view, based only on the war crimes trial of Adolph Eichmann, has been controversial. Some critic finds him to be "a self-avowed, aggressive Nazi ideologue strongly committed to Nazi beliefs, who showed no remorse or guilt for his role in the Final Solution—a radically evil Third Reich operative living inside the deceptively normal shell of a bland bureaucrat." See Thomas White, "What Did Hannah Arendt Really Mean by the Banality of Evil?" *Aeon*, April 2018. <https://aeon.co/ideas/what-did-hannah-arendt-really-mean-by-the-banality-of-evil>

everyday life in their now-globalized country without demonizing them as inhuman psychopaths or ‘orientalizing’ Indonesia as a primitive hell.

It is in this sense important to look at the protagonists of *The Act of Killing* in a global context. Interestingly, Anwar Congo and his friends were cinephiles of sorts. Before becoming vigilantes, they often sold black-market film tickets (serving the extralegal economy) and learned from the cinema that history is always written by the winners (approving supralegal power), just as American films triumphantly depict the killing of native Americans without guilt. Anwar’s squad thus advocates their massacre from a hegemonic viewpoint, reconfirming that a successful coup is unpunishable as it is no longer an illegal revolt but a law-remaking revolution. For them, this is the case with the French, American, Soviet, Chinese and such other bloody revolutions that led to the foundation of new states or orders. They even adopt the style of their favorite Hollywood genres—Westerns, gangster films, and musicals—in order to make a docufiction about their killings, i.e., a film within the film. Crucially, Hollywood’s stylization of violence reduces it to an enjoyable spectacle, and the global circulation of Hollywood’s violent imagery in this case helps the local Indonesians to do the act of killing like ‘acting.’ That is, the commodified violence that they consumed in the dark theater served as a mental anodyne of the horror of actual violence. They jumped into the brutal reality of each killing—after a sort of trance-inducing ritual—as if it was an illusion, a simulation, a film in which they should act. In the present, they happily reenact the very past act(ing) of killing. This reenactment reveals their long-repressed desire to be openly acknowledged for their contribution to the nation because the genocide has been a social taboo, hardly told or taught under the Suharto regime. If they *saw* violence on the screen yesterday, they *show* violence on the screen today. The screen is both a shield against the traumatic Real of bloody violence and a stage of its inscription into the mnemonic Symbolic order.

Their desire for recognition comes true on an absurd television talk show. Anwar’s squad boasts of their ‘patriotic’ homicidal exploits, identifying with action heroes commemorated in American cinema such as Shane and Samson, Al Pacino and John Wayne. The audience gives exuberant cheers to their saga, celebrating them like official White Knights; thus, they are no longer forgotten Dark Knights. They acted like movie stars and now became national stars. Acting is making believe, believing, and making the belief reality—this performativity underlies their sovereign agency. Most perplexingly, their private story is enjoyed in the public as if their dirty business was not an exceptional crime, horrible yet necessary for the public good, so much as a fun activity that is ordinarily acceptable and pleasurable. They entertain rather than enlighten the audience, sharing their pornographic memories of “wiping out communists” while satisfying the audience’s voyeuristic desire amid a moral vacuum. Here works the neoliberal trend of “privatizing the public space,” as Žižek notes.⁴⁸ It is not that private antisocial desires provoke the public in the exhibitionist fashion of transgressing taboos, but that today’s postmodern society permits such desires as if there were no solid taboos, no public control of private enjoyment, and no clear boundary between the id and the superego, the Real and the Symbolic. The TV studio thus appears less like a hearing room for Anwar than like his living room, where he, as the host, tells his ‘funny games’ of murder while guests laugh and applaud. That is, Anwar takes over the position of the big Other from the audience and orders: ‘Enjoy!’ Around this obscene superego who does not prohibit but who promotes pleasures is formed a fascistic bond between subjects who shamelessly circulate raw desires, including the desire to purge the abject. As we see globally, far-right

⁴⁸ Slavoj Žižek, “The Act of Killing and the Modern Trend of ‘Privatising Public Space,’” July 2013, <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2013/07/slavoj-zizek-act-killing-and-modern-trend-privatising-public-space>.

collective aggression is distributed in such a mode of daily entertainment, a cultural mode of consumer capitalism. It privatizes the public space while normalizing the act of exception like a comfortably consumable commodity.

Not the local audience of the TV show but global viewers of *The Act of Killing* may feel highly uncomfortable, as if stuck in an ethical deadlock. For the killers' retrospection on Indonesia's history and Hollywood's imagery brings no delayed judgment on the traumatic past. It instead justifies the lawmaking violence of all victors recurring in fiction and reality, in the past and the present, in the First and Third Worlds. There is no transcendent justice on the basis of which to judge whose violence is good or evil, not least because agents of violence may have a robust subjective conviction about its cause. In other words, there is no absolute divine violence but only the perpetual, universal mechanism of pseudo-divine violence. It runs on two axes of conviction, faith, or rather fantasy: the fantasy about the self as the savior of one's community and the fantasy about the other as the threat to eradicate, i.e., the fantasy of sovereignty and the fantasy of abjection. Cinema is a factory of this double fantasy, full of violent yet unpunishable sovereign agents, from cowboys and gangsters—Anwar's idols—to superheroes and secret agents. Moreover, various avengers in global cinema tend to enforce subjective justice by privatizing the public sphere of law in a self-created state of exception. In the real world, this sovereign mechanism is immanent in and between most nations, which are often entangled in each other's bloody violence. No wonder the CIA supported Suharto's communist purge as part of the global Cold War, and the gang-driven vigilantism was a colonial legacy rooted in the Dutch occupation of Indonesia.⁴⁹ Who could blame whom? The (re)birth of a nation, the USA or Indonesia, almost always reaffirms the mythical origin of power in the name of justice, thereby deconstructing divine justice. We may question pseudo-divine violence ethically, but we may not deny that our nations could not have existed without it. Oppenheimer is right when he says: "we are much closer to perpetrators than we like to think."⁵⁰

IV. (Pseudo-)Divine violence and *Waltz with Bashir*

How can we find our way out of this ethical dead end? Toward the end of *The Act of Killing*, Anwar plays a tortured and strangled communist and doubts whether or not he has sinned. He then retches as if "he himself were strangled and, at the same time, regurgitating, though alas only symbolically, the bodies of his victims."⁵¹ The real terribleness of his own violence hits him belatedly, making him its victim. Of course, this dramatic moment does not testify to his authentic atonement or purgation; he was aware of the camera, and a short awakening may not change him forever. Gagging is also an outward sign of rejection, an adverse reaction to what one is not able or willing to accept. Nonetheless, this physiological abjection indicates that the ghost of the past, like the abject, intrudes into the present and pushes Anwar into a state of limbo between his peaceful reality and the excluded Real, between his secured subjectivity and its concealed void. Put in Freudian terms, "acting out" the past in the way of 'countering' traumas turns into "working through" the past in the way of 'encountering'

⁴⁹ Benedict Anderson, "Impunity and Reenactment: Reflections on the 1965 Massacre in Indonesia and Its Legacy," *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* 11, no. 15–4 (April 2013), <https://apjff.org/2013/11/15/Benedict-Anderson/3929/article.html>.

⁵⁰ Blair McClendon and Joshua Oppenheimer, "Joshua Oppenheimer and *The Act of Killing*," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, August 2013, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/joshua-oppenheimer-and-the-act-of-killing/>.

⁵¹ Lúcia Nagib, "Regurgitated Bodies: Presenting and Representing Trauma in *The Act of Killing*," in *The Routledge Companion to Cinema and Politics*, ed. Yannis Tzioumakis and Claire Molloy (London: Routledge, 2016), 229.

traumas. This unexpected performativity brings back a “flash” of the past in its “now of recognizability,” as highlighted in Benjamin’s theses on history,⁵² a “fragment” of history to remember and to redeem which has been smothered by “the homogeneous course of universal history.”⁵³ A “deep memory” of unresolved traumas is reactivated in this process. Anwar, the sovereign agent, now faces a nameless *homo sacer* that he killed, and he perhaps feels the mere life’s vulnerability and potential sanctity as his own, embracing, even if subconsciously, its precarious yet precious abjecthood as immanent in everyone. This abject yet potentially sacred humanity has been denied by state power, but its vulnerability to sovereignty is the very basis of human desire for life’s sanctity as divinity beyond sovereignty. Even a natural or bare life is a being with this desire for self-transcendence. Anwar’s nausea betrays the ethical potential for the living to co-desire the unrealized sanctity of life with the dead.

Let me conclude by briefly noting another documentary about mass murder, and which has a similar but much more shocking ending. Ari Folman’s animated autobiography *Waltz with Bashir* (2008) traces the filmmaker’s lost memories of his experience as an Israeli soldier in the 1982 Lebanon War. This ‘mind-game’ odyssey unfolds in a series of talks with his comrades that constitute a collective memory of the war, but which is also punctuated by fragmented symptoms of an unclear yet undead trauma. Among them is the nightmarish visual leitmotif of the film: a repetitive and lethargic scene in which naked soldiers emerge from the sea, don uniforms, and walk like zombies on to the land. This repeated sequence eventually comes to represent how back in 1982 the soldiers headed toward two refugee camps, Sabra and Shatila, in order to back the massacre of innocent Palestinians by Lebanese Christian Phalangists, a massacre that took place in response to the assassination of Phalangist leader Bashir Gemayel, from whose name the film takes its title.

This traumatic Real causes two effects on screen. First, war as spectacle: in animated memories, the past often appears like an aesthetic simulacrum of reality, a sort of virtual reality constructed in cultural forms (MTV, video game, LSD trip, porn). Its stimulating imagery substitutes atrocities and numbs soldiers, like Hollywood cinema in *The Act of Killing*. The screen thus ‘screens out’ the Real of the war. Second, war as specter: the Real still pierces the screen through spectral images of bare lives, animal or human, which are killed by the soldiers yet haunting them, neither alive nor dead. The sovereign agents of bloody violence cannot completely foreclose or forget the ghostly abject. Thus, the screen obliquely screens what cannot be screened out. This double screen, protective and projective at once, embodies Freud’s notion of “screen memory” and delivers what Benjamin calls “dialectical images” that evocatively awaken historical truths buried under the phantasmagoric surface of capitalist culture.⁵⁴ The screen shows the director trying psychotherapy as he gropes to recover from his post-traumatic amnesia. However, in the end his traumatic core is revealed like the last piece of a jigsaw puzzle when animation turns into real footage of the Palestinian refugees crying over their slaughtered families. The Real as disavowed reality, then, tears down the screen of fantasized reality, that is, the screen memory of the sovereign subject. Now in his retrieved memory, Folman faces the Levinasian faces of the *homines sacri* whose unspoken

⁵² Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 253–64.

⁵³ Carrie McAlinden, “True Surrealism: Walter Benjamin and The Act of Killing,” *BFI*, December 2013, <http://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/features/true-surrealism-walter-benjamin-act-killing>.

⁵⁴ For more on these concepts in relation to *Waltz with Bashir*, see Garrett Stewart, “Screen Memory in Waltz With Bashir,” *Film Quarterly* 63/ 3 (March 2010): 58–62; Ohad Landesman and Roy Bendor, “Animated Recollection and Spectatorial Experience in Waltz with Bashir,” *Animation* 6/3 (2011): 353–70.

demand to ‘not kill’ he dismissed. The deep trauma, we see, has been lying in his long-avoided guilt for not having recognized their potential sanctity of life as a universal humanity yet to come.

This self-critical ‘remembering as awakening’ *à la* Benjamin leads to the question of whether Israel has become such a sovereign state for Palestine as Nazi Germany was in its turn for the Jews. What would be possible to stop this eternal return of bloody violence? Perhaps nothing, although we must believe that the potential sanctity of life, the self-transcendent potential of life, is immanent in mere life. This is universal justice beyond the law. And we must desire the freedom of embracing that very potentiality as the divinity within humanity. Indeed, this is our ethical duty in our godless world. In other words, what we might do is to rearticulate Benjamin’s anarchism with Derrida’s ethics and Žižek’s atheism in order to redefine divine violence as redeeming humanity without God. The opposite would be to avoid freedom, dreading to face the unknown in a godless world, and to replace that dread with a fear of specific social others while reducing freedom to self-making and to the self-preservation of the right to exclude and eliminate these others. This is the right-wing fascist logic of abjection, the fundamentalist hard-ethical justification of pseudo-divine violence committed by the pseudo-divine sovereign power. Again, we must demand violence, if any, to let human divinity live without being crushed by any pseudo-god. When blood is shed locally—in Gaza, Syria, Ukraine, or wherever else—we must struggle globally to build universal solidarity with all bare lives suffering from pseudo-divine violence, as bare life is the base of life. Only from this bottom of life can we leap for the divinity of life. A revolution would end up with a catastrophe if it only attacks economic systems; in order to avoid this, it must also envision this ethical leap *beyond any systems*. Only then could divine violence be freed from the shadow of God and the smell of blood.

References

- Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998.
- Anderson, Benedict. “Impunity and Reenactment: Reflections on the 1965 Massacre in Indonesia and Its Legacy.” *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* 11, no. 15–4 (April 2013). <https://apjif.org/2013/11/15/Benedict-Anderson/3929/article.html>.
- Arendt, Hannah. *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. London: Penguin Classics, 2006.
- Benjamin, Walter. “Critique of Violence.” In *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writing*, edited by Peter Demetz, translated by Edmund Jephcott, 277–300. New York: Schocken Books, 1978.
- . “Theses on the Philosophy of History.” In *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn, 253–64. New York: Schocken Books, 1968.
- Borradori, Giovanna. *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2004.
- Derrida, Jacques. “Force of Law: The ‘Mystical Foundation of Authority.’” In *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, edited by Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld, and David Gray Carlson, 3–67. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Fisher, Mark, and Rob White. “The Politics of ‘The Dark Knight Rises’: A Discussion.” *Film Quarterly* (blog), September 2012. <https://filmquarterly.org/2012/09/04/the-politics-of-the-dark-knight-rises-a-discussion/>.
- Hamacher, Werner. “Afformative, Strike: Benjamin’s Critique of Violence.” In *Walter Benjamin’s Philosophy: Destruction and Experience*, edited by Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne. London: Routledge, 1993.

- Hassler-Forest, Dan. *Capitalist Superheroes: Caped Crusaders in the Neoliberal Age*. Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2012.
- Jeong, Seung-hoon. "A Thin Line between Sovereign and Abject Agents: Global Action Thrillers with the Sci-Fi Mind-Game War on Terror." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 21, no. 7 (2019): 1–13.
- . "Introduction - Global East Asian Cinema: Abjection and Agency." *Studies in the Humanities* 44 & 45, no. 1–2 (2019): ii–xxii.
- Landesman, Ohad, and Roy Bendor. "Animated Recollection and Spectatorial Experience in Waltz with Bashir." *Animation* 6, no. 3 (2011): 353–70.
- McAlinden, Carrie. "True Surrealism: Walter Benjamin and The Act of Killing." *BFI*, December 2013. <http://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/features/true-surrealism-walter-benjamin-act-killing>.
- McClendon, Blair, and Joshua Oppenheimer. "Joshua Oppenheimer and The Act of Killing." *Los Angeles Review of Books*, August 2013. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/joshua-oppenheimer-and-the-act-of-killing/>.
- Moran, Brendan, and Carlo Salzani, eds. *Towards the Critique of Violence: Walter Benjamin and Giorgio Agamben*. London: Bloomsbury, 2015.
- Nagib, Lúcia. "Regurgitated Bodies: Presenting and Representing Trauma in 'The Act of Killing.'" In *The Routledge Companion to Cinema and Politics*, edited by Yannis Tzioumakis and Claire Molloy, 218–30. London: Routledge, 2016.
- Salzani, Carlo. "From Benjamin's *Bloßes Leben* to Agamben's *Nuda Vita*: A Genealogy." In *Towards the Critique of Violence: Walter Benjamin and Giorgio Agamben*, edited by Brendan Moran and Carlo Salzani, 109–23. London: Bloomsbury, 2015.
- Sinnerbrink, Robert. "Deconstructive Justice and the 'Critique of Violence': On Derrida and Benjamin." *Social Semiotics* 16, no. 3 (2006): 485–97.
- Stewart, Garrett. "Screen Memory in Waltz With Bashir." *Film Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (March 2010): 58–62.
- Tyler, Imogen. *Revolting Subjects: Social Abjection and Resistance in Neoliberal Britain*. London: Zed Books, 2013.
- White, Thomas. "What Did Hannah Arendt Really Mean by the Banality of Evil?" *Aeon*, April 2018. <https://aeon.co/ideas/what-did-hannah-arendt-really-mean-by-the-banality-of-evil>.
- Young, Robert. "The Violent State," October 2009. <http://www.nakedpunch.com/articles/38>.
- Žižek, Slavoj. "The Act of Killing and the Modern Trend of 'Privatising Public Space,'" July 2013. <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2013/07/slavoj-zizek-act-killing-and-modern-trend-privatising-public-space>.
- . "The Politics of Batman," August 2012. <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/culture/2012/08/slavoj-%C5%BEi%C5%BEek-politics-batman>.
- . *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*. New York: Picador, 2008.