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**Heroic Realism**

*Rhetoric and Violence in Narratives of Justice and Discourses of Decision*

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**Submitted for the degree of Ph.D. in Fine Art, 2003**

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## **Abstract**

After the evacuation of a transcendental ethic as a universal yardstick or law for action, notions of justice, morality and the law nevertheless remain policed, and are still invested in by strong systems of belief and prejudice. This thesis sets out to analyse the tradition and prevalence of “idealising” moments of consequence, judgement and decision and their specific relation to a transcendental-style aesthetics of violence.

In this written thesis and in my studio-based work I examine the themes of “naturalised justice” and “decision” as means to achieve autonomy, hinged as they are upon critical, theoretical and cultural representations of, and responses to, the problem of the ubiquity of violence. As such, my thesis also asks how the rhetoric of this apparently mutual or shared conviction of autonomy as aggression, violence or force, produces judgement within culture in general, upon and within the condition of absolute finitude.

It is through the empirical examination of my studio practice that I consider the universalising forces of individual authorities using the “worn out metaphors” of the post-tragic hero genre. Here, I create movie poster type images and pop-music style videos in which my appropriation of the powerful propaganda of Hollywood movies lives out the impossibility of exteriority, that is, the difficulty of separating this use of the medium from my being caught up within it. These apparently abstract and generic narratives of agency are the focus of my practice throughout. Through them, I investigate (i) the rhetoric of “violence as decision” as something which undermines its own determinism; (ii) the political force of such rhetoric in relation to the naturalisation of belief, (such as traditional, conventional and assumed agreements in the social); and (iii) the procedures and consequences of performances of the rhetoric of violence practiced in the judgements and convictions of individual subjects.

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# Introduction

## 1. Post-tragic Subjectivity

There is war only after the opening of discourse, and war dies out only at the end of discourse. Peace, like silence, is the strange vocation of a language called itself by itself. But since finite silence is also the medium of violence, language can only indefinitely tend toward justice by acknowledging and practicing the violence within it. Violence against violence. Economy of violence.<sup>1</sup>

Jacques Derrida  
“Violence and Metaphysics”

In the epic adventures of Hollywood action movies, television network dramas, and the “dead air” territory of cheap late-night weekly television slots, death-defying stunts, scenes of violation, “criminality”, and “immorality” are dutifully combined with the themes of “law and order”, “justice”, and “truth”. Whether these narratives are made for the cinematic “fantasy genre” or as “real-life” documentary television, both are framed by the use of similar generic conventions that accept violence as an intrinsic feature of agency. The central figure of this agency is successful because he/she can associate decision with acting violently and because he/she does not even consider the practices of transgressive or unlawful actions *as actually being against the law*. In “real-life” TV shows such as *World’s Wildest Police Videos*, we are entertained by a sophisticated gung-ho narrative of justice, where felons are chased down through city streets, made ever more epic by the keen voice-over of a voyeuristic narrator. Such scenes of “everyday police-justice” remind us that violence and autonomy are ubiquitously hinged upon both *the upholding and the surpassing* of the law, in which acts of *breaking and enforcing the law* are situated in the spectacular, heroic and sensational performances of power and desire. This “pluralist” understanding of law and freedom risks not only cynicism or nihilism, because we are not able to categorically separate these terms, but also problematically, the immanence of violence to decision risks a mechanistic comprehension of violence as a *necessary* ingredient to getting power.

Fundamental to the institution of this “postmodern” hero-genre is that the production and repetition of “violence as decision” articulates our philosophical, cultural, socio-political, and

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics,” in *Writing and Difference*, Routledge, 1978, 117

historical understanding and identification of violence as hinged upon our autonomy. This thesis takes up the problem of this contemporary figure of knowledge and power in order to assess the tenability of a politics of subjective agency and the status of the subject and the law within pluralism. Consequently, to begin, I will briefly sketch out some of the guiding characteristics of the figure that organises this critique.

Action films such as Steven Segal's *Out For Justice* (dir. John Flynn 1991), *Marked for Death* (dir. Dwight H Little 1990), and Arnold Schwarzenegger's *Commando* (dir. Mark L Lester 1985), deliver an action hero who does not experience autonomy through a recognition of his limits, or by tragically failing to live up to some criteria for heroic status. Instead the protagonist has an innate sense of right and wrong which is absolutely his own. The hero is "light", energised, and pro-active, and does not second-guess the "rightness" or "wrongness" of his/her actions, nor suffer guilt or anxiety about action already done, or choices already made. These are stories of heroes who have no overt moral conscience as to the harm they may inflict upon their "victims", for this is all in the course of justice and indeed, anyone who should become a victim, deserves what's coming to them. In such narratives, there is neither an identification with a Big Other, nor with a concept of fate, or destiny. Crucial to this is that such subjects do not have any consciousness of a physical or mental limit capacity.

In fact, the actions of these heroic subjects are *not* without knowledge of a judicial law; it is simply that the law has no direct bearing upon, neither does it impel his or her actions. However, despite their apparent self-interest, these narratives occupy a world of habits and norms that we can associate with, and one that we are included within.<sup>2</sup> Even though we can never say "I am like that" or even think that we would behave the same way in any given situation; in that we know that these are un-lived narratives; we can't ignore the fact that when we watch them we emotive an idealising sense of autonomy. This "complicity" could be variably construed as an identification with, an agreement with, and an anticipation of violence, so much so that watching

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<sup>2</sup> In film narratives the script and the camera work invariably foreground an intimacy with the lead characters. Not only are we able to empathise with the character through such intimacies but these narratives also feature the everyday back-drop to the narrative as a homely or even banal location. Crucially the scenes of action are set in places that we occupy everyday, from shopping malls to bars. The same goes for the TV documentaries of law-breakers, who manage to commit the most brazen of stunts in the most average of vehicles, in places that we have been to, or at least recognise. It is also significant that the value placed on these heroics are situated in the subject's ingenuity in limited circumstance. In other words, the subject occupies the same territories as the rest of us, and has the same limited means or tools available for action, but is always inventive with them. In this way realism is a requirement for narratives of such fantastic agency, because it is through this that they are not only believable but also special.



these films, we can even sense ourselves “egging on” the protagonist, in expectation and demand for more.

The action-hero characters often played by Arnold Schwarzenegger are typical of this conception of agency. Narratives are re-played in sequel after sequel, where the vigilante-style brutal individualism of the character does not act with a sense of “the social” in mind, even if the ends or outcomes of this action always benefit society by ridding the world of evil. Because of this lack of social interest a postmodern or post-tragic heroic is problematic in a number of ways. Firstly, by understanding the heroic subject as “above the law”, or even a law unto him/herself, we could say that this figure institutionalises immorality or at least threatens our values of right and wrong. In this case, the post-tragic hero glamorises or aestheticises transgression as a means to an end, which is autonomy. Secondly, and resulting from this is the problem that the institutionalisation of a heroic anti/modern agency banalises judgment because now this subject is not able to recognise power by dissenting from the norm, rather, the subject *is* the norm. By embodying the law, the post-tragic (postmodern) heroic evacuates and disables the modernist notion of freedom as being “free from” the constraints of the law.

Russell A. Berman remarks precisely on the aestheticisation of the modern character in postmodern aesthetics in his essay “The Routinisation of Charismatic Modernity.” Here, he claims that the postmodern heroic subject produces “neo-conservative values, beginning with [a] shared hostility to the revolutionary experimentalism of historical modernism.”<sup>3</sup> For Berman, this subject characterises a postmodernity in which “discussions of emancipation are prohibited as vestiges of an anachronistic Western metaphysics.”<sup>4</sup> Significantly, Berman’s delineation of the postmodern subject’s limited potential is based on an understanding that this violent post-tragic hero *represents* a politics of subjective agency under pluralism. As such, my inquiry takes up the various relationships between the practice and the representation of the subject and the law. This includes representationalist demands such as Berman’s, that the subject can, and should, *recognise the law*, notions of an embodied *practice of the law* familiar to non-emancipatory political theories, and between these two; theories of the law as being paradoxically both *inside and outside politics*. This problem of identification is more relevant when we know that the institutionalisation of heroic agency may render the anti/modern attack on tradition and normativity obsolete, yet nevertheless, its iconoclastic and heroic language remains invigorated in

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<sup>3</sup> Russell A. Berman, “The Routinisation of Charismatic Modernity” in *Modern Culture and Critical Theory, Art, Politics, and the Legacy of the Frankfurt School*, University of Wisconsin Press, 1989, 134

the postmodern. It is this problem, of *the normativity and legitimacy* of heroic agency, that motivates this thesis.

Written through the “postmodern heroic” is the problem that the immanence of violence to decision could be predicated upon any figuring of a “desiring agency.” Here, we can see that in the act of acknowledging or identifying violence in decision, or, *the aestheticising of action that is premised upon decision as violence*, we are enticed towards the problematic and dangerous assumption that by behaving violently we will achieve power, autonomy or some sort of self-knowledge. This also can be conceived as violence as fate-object, the absolute identification of autonomy, or, a Nietzschean-style “will to power”. It is this *absolute relation* between autonomy, violence and power, also drawn out in my introductory quote from Derrida, where we can acknowledge that this contemporary identification of subjective agency (laid down in this description of the postmodern heroic) has a direct involvement with both *a rhetoric and a theory of violence*.

As I have already shown, the “postmodern heroic” has a non-tragic relationship to violence, however it also can be seen to comply with the classical schema of associating autonomy with an expression of finitude. The necessity (and we could also say; the banality) of violence in these narratives of agency evacuates the use of violence as a metaphor for remorse, guilt, or for the good or bad. Furthermore, the concept of a suffering humanity is relinquished for an altogether more robust or “light” version of the self. This “unselfconscious” subjectivity accordingly upsets the status of demarcations such as “irrationality” or “rationality”. In other words, the naturalisation of decision as violence produces the impossibility to separately identify the finite and the infinite, the concrete from the abstract, or the immortal from the mortal. This is because the task of discriminating between self-aestheticisation as a rational thinking state of self-empowerment on the one hand, and, on the other, violence as an unreasonable unthinking force of desire, are shown to inextricably rely upon an identification with the (in)finite as violence. Intrinsically, the condition of identifying violence as decision is significantly underscored as a problem when we look to postmodern versions of agency, because these narratives tend to incorporate a concept of suffering as something that the subject agrees to.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 131

<sup>5</sup> I will describe such instances in greater detail later, particularly with the Hollywood action movie.

On these accounts, this thesis considers related and varying responses to the immanence of violence to decision specifically within the territory of the post-tragic subject under a pluralist condition. This includes a study of the strategies and consequences of critiques and condemnations of violence and also an examination of the structure, organisation and application of foundational tropes within the social. By employing the term “violence”, I hope to stay within the realms of debating the aesthetico-political aspects of knowledge and power, where violence is indicative of a poetic and vivid passion of desire, aggression and physical force. For Jean Luc Nancy violence is an unlawful move *against* the normative that tears apart the established order - it is “figure without figure” - having an inherent ambiguity and is also something that “shows itself as image.”<sup>6</sup> Violence, for Nancy, is the fundamental character of an image, in that the image is an exercise of force, and a product of violence’s manifestation. However, what is most significant to this thesis is that the project of truth, in its many forms, is inherently linked and often reduced to the role of violence.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, the post-tragic subject underscores the problem of identification and the problem of condemnation, in that the terms of our agreement and disagreement seem to be always already structured by an aesthetics of violence. This simultaneous concretisation and ubiquity of violence in relation to linguistic practices determines a critique of conscious manipulations of an aesthetics of violence as power (whether this is conceived of as passive or aggressive) and also a study of a cultural and political conception of “decision and violence” that takes in rhetorical, idealistic, mechanistic and teleological theories of subjective agency.

## 2. Violence and Justice

As I have written, the post-tragic subject calls into question many problems of theories of subjective agency under pluralism, and with those problems we also see the increasingly foundational aspect of violence as relational to subjective autonomy. However, even after the evacuation of a transcendental ethic or Categorical Imperative, as a universal yardstick or law for action, this contemporary heroic subject shows us that notions of justice, morality and the law are not left un-policed, and are still invested in with strong systems of belief and prejudice. It is with

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<sup>6</sup> I am quoting from Jean Luc Nancy’s lecture on “Violence and Image” at Tate Modern, London. March, 2002

<sup>7</sup> By this I mean that “truth” can be conceived of socio-politically as justice and the law, but also theologically and philosophically as relative to a project of Enlightenment and knowledge as a (Hegelian) task of self-recognition, which of course impacts upon the political.

the politics of these agreements in mind that the following chapters set out to analyse the tradition and prevalence of “idealising” moments of consequence, judgement and decision and their specific relation to a transcendental-style aesthetics of violence. It is here where I can begin to consider the problems of making choices under and as the law, when the systems by which we police and identify justice are subject to the same forces and powers by which we would classify and understand *injustice*. The post-tragic subject displays the law as a violent justice. In this sense the logic of this argument would be that to avoid violence or to lead the “quiet life”, we must conform to the violence of the law. Contradictorily, what is implied with this “postmodern” subjectivity is that to act, we act as the law, where our alignment with it is not conformity or complicity but an unnegotiated, uncontracted mutual contingency. In this we are bound to violence and justice and only able to recognise them as our own.

Consequently, within this text, and what I will return to frequently, is a concept of violence as a banal or normalised territory and the notion that this post-tragic heroic subject retains an idealising moment within this. This duality describes a notion of ubiquity, normativity, tradition and *exteriority*. It describes a culture of violence, underscores a tradition of metaphysics, but also highlights the problem of the relation between the practice of justice (the demonstration of our beliefs) and what we believe (the place of our convictions).

For that reason, a theme that recurs throughout this text is a question between aesthetics and politics. This critique hinges upon a discussion regarding the relationship between philosophy and literature and influences a methodology which transfers from inquiries into, and examples of, literature and film to those of critical theory, philosophy and pragmatism, where throughout I underline the contingency of thinking and language upon each other. In each chapter this takes the form of my making readings of narratives of decision from various “heroic” texts, such as Sophocles’ *Oedipus The King*, Shakespearean tragedy, the “fascistic” literature of Ernst Jünger’s 1930’s *heroic realism*, and also contemporary narratives of decision such as action adventure movies and war films. This is interspersed with comparative readings from philosophical and critical texts that centre upon studies of agency and aesthetics, such as the work of Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Michel Foucault, Stanley Cavell, Thomas Hobbes and Stanley Fish. It is from this Nietzschean-style subject that I make links between the work of Ernst Jünger and a post-tragic subject under pluralism. Jünger’s description of the subject and power influenced by both Heidegger and Nietzsche proves to be an important model for this discussion because what is proposed in Jünger’s literature is a subject that has a rationalising power over violence, knows

no limits, is not self-conscious, and fulfills the role of the protagonist. Intrinsically, Jünger's "anti-modernism" invites further discussion around the equation between autonomy and violence and, of course, a central question between the subject of *heroic realism* (the post-tragic subject as a totalitarian subject) and the post-tragic subject in pluralism. By associating or even predicating decisive action on violence and risk this subject at all costs seems to institutionalise violence and at the same time underscores its immanence in any choice.

Here, in Jünger's politicised metaphysics, the identification of ideals is situated around a ubiquitous violence that seems to be both within language, in that we identify with it constantly, and *simultaneously outside of our consideration*, in that due to its encroaching character our actions are guaranteed a relationship with it and are subject to it. In identifying this figure of a Jüngerian-style worker and warrior - the *heroic realist* - as proximate to the "postmodern heroic", we can see that this ideologically driven subject raises problems regarding the aesthetic and political identification of our autonomy in contemporary culture. With this problem of proximity in mind, I examine the relationship between the totalitarian and the postmodern when it would seem that this unselfconscious post-tragic subject becomes the identification of our autonomy. And, following from this, I ask what this non-tragic subjectivity tells us about the consequences of our productions and identifications of the normativity of violence and decision under a pluralist condition. In other words, can a critique of the *rhetoric of heroic realism* at work in contemporary culture (which I am asserting as the postmodern heroic) assist in an understanding of the violence-metaphysical relation?

The difficulty of understanding the normativity and ubiquity of violence as a condition to and for agency is a problem inherent to postmodern subjectivity. Because we are no longer able to identify the ethical law of justice as informing the subject (for instance telling the subject if his/her actions are right or wrong) we are faced with a refreshed coincidence between violence and the individual practices of law or "truth" in general. As a result we can see that this subject troubles modernist conditions for agency and critical theories of agency. This is in terms of both criticism (as a move away from an institutional law or an action of separation) and the act of "behavioural complicity" as a means to criticism (as a conformity with the normative), because we can no longer provide clear and stable recognitions of normativity.

As such, this inability to recognise what could be seen to be the "normative" or the "institutional" could in many senses be linked to a crisis of critique or autonomy. This problem of understanding

subjective autonomy under pluralism is then made more perceptible by the “postmodern heroic”, as I have called it, in that it demonstrates the difficulty for understanding the status of the subject and the law as separate. Most crucially perhaps, the subject’s blatant unselfconsciousness presents an ambivalence towards emancipatory politics, and any task of self-recognition; this subject does not consider him/herself to be “in crisis”, but instead just keeps on going.

Since the status of this subject problematises any attempt to organise choice making, and even underscores judgment as a brutal exercise of knowledge and power, we are left with the problem of how we understand the difference between a critique of violence, or an *understanding of violence* (something that already determines a consensus within this structure), to actually *behaving violently* in an “acting out” of this identification. When thought and language come together, or, when we can’t tell the difference between meaning and image, and when we could say that when dealing with this subject that we in turn are subject to an aesthetic and political totality, why then are we not involved with or politicised by a theory of the totalitarian? The establishing of and acting upon “universals” and “foundations” is hinged upon the workings of law and power and here we are once again faced with the awful possibility that by being identified as immanent to all action, the trans-historical and “foundational” “universal” of force, power and aggression are now free to operate as grounds for it.

### 3. Chapter Outline

The first question that I address in this thesis is of how the rhetoric of decision in both tragic and post-tragic narratives relates to theories of autonomy. Terry Eagleton argues in his book *Sweet Violence, The Idea of the Tragic* that the tragic is essential to the political, and it has a trans-historical aspect that should be celebrated rather than attempted to be changed. This is because it is in these moments that we identify ourselves as victims, and therefore are provided the equipment to empathise with others. He writes:

Tragedy deals with the cut and thrust of historical junctures, but since there are aspects of our suffering which are also rooted in our species-being, it also has an eye to these more natural, material facts of human existence...The contrast between the weakness of humanity and the apparent infinity of the cosmos: these are the recurrent features of human cultures, however variously they may be represented.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence, The Idea of the Tragic*, Blackwell Publishing, 2003, xiii

In his text he attempts to underline a concept of the tragic as a means to re-define an emancipatory political strategy. Eagleton wants to look at the universalised, naturalised and globalised facets of representations of humanity as tragic. In this way, by accruing a biological theory of the “material body of suffering” upon a theory of the tragic as a necessity to cultural knowledge, Eagleton dodges the poststructuralist “dynamic theory of self-fashioning” where he argues that the “light body” (or even the unselfconscious body) that is proposed in poststructuralism is somehow *unnatural* to the workings of community. For Eagleton a discourse of the post-tragic is therefore absolutely related to poststructuralism; it is a single-minded entrepreneurial project, viewed as something that not only evacuates subjectivity as self-recognition but also social culpability. Conversely, Eagleton looks to a politics of self-recognition as being structured around the tragic in order to understand contingency. At this point, however, it is significant to mention what Eagleton does not consider. First he does not discuss the possibility that a notion of the post-tragic does not necessarily mean that we are post-ideological and second, that a discourse of the post-tragic subject does not in any way distanciate what we could call an inter-subjective empathy. Without a concept of the tragic, or in other words, the ability to identify limits, is “autonomy” only established as an identification and a production of the suffering of others? Does the unavailability of the tragic in contemporary “postmodern” narratives of agency really spell disaster for critical autonomy and inter-subjectivity?

Eagleton, also moves rather too quickly through an inscription of the relationship between the *tragic as discourse* and the natural and universal recognition of the suffering of others as a *bad thing*. This proves to be important, especially because the difference between the tragic as a writing of human suffering as something that is negative, and our ability to recognise this in our everyday lives are often at odds.

In light of this call for the tragic and its apparent importance to the task of both philosophy and politics,<sup>9</sup> my first chapter will draw upon traditional notions of the tragic-heroic and will look to how the tragic narrative in both philosophy and culture intends to overcome and demonstrate the problems of making choices after the evacuation of an identifiable ethical order. Certainly, it would seem that a theory of the tragic subject offers redemption for both philosophy and politics, in the manufacturing of a space where the “human” is understood in relation to the bigger picture

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<sup>9</sup> And perhaps even in that as it has been called the highest expression of art!

and as an aim to recoup the task of philosophical knowledge, precisely by identifying the tragedy of its demise.

Focussing on this redemptive aspect of the tragic narrative, and drawing particularly from the play *Oedipus the King*, I examine how the recognition of limits is understood as a moment of subjective autonomy. Here, I take up the character of Oedipus as the figure for a Hegelian dialectics, and at the same time identify a Nietzschean-style figure of Oedipus that is left behind or even identified as a product of the limits of Hegel's symbolism. By drawing upon these two figures for knowledge, I introduce the problem of choosing either the tragic or the non-tragic Oedipus to be the figure for a particular autonomy, in that both are subject to rhetoric. From *Oedipus the King* I turn to examine how these tragic and the non-tragic figures impact upon the work of Stanley Cavell. Cavell's work on both philosophy and literature is important to this as he sits at a crucial juncture between Hegel and Nietzsche, in that he attempts to identify a rhetoric of metaphysics in what appears to be an anti-Hegelian stance only to recover it. Cavell argues that the Nietzschean trope of "eternal return" rescues a concept of the tragic in postmodernism, because it implicitly acknowledges the death of philosophy. This inquiry into the relationship between an image of violence as decision in the tragic and post-tragic is important because what we could perhaps call "post-tragic" violence could still be seen to underscore a question of finitude much associated with definitions of the tragic, in that it articulates a nearness to and the impossibility of death. This provokes a questioning of if the images or narratives of the post-tragic (as the rhetoric of active nihilism) are essentially tragic in themselves? *Is the post-tragic tragic?*

Central to this staging argument is an initial drawing together of cultural and philosophical narratives that attest to aesthetic identifications of horror or violence as autonomy (even if, such as in the case of Stanley Cavell's Romantic philosophy, they attempt to overcome this problem of identification). Continuing from this, I consider how and under what conditions the tradition of decision as violence (and something that I have claimed as perpetually relevant to the post-tragic condition in pluralism) is best subjected to scrutiny. This is in order to assess the possibilities of the relationship between subjectivity and the rhetoric of the heroic agent and to ask the motivating question for this thesis: *whether a study of the rhetoric of active nihilism, the post-tragic, or even the sensationalised theatricalisation of heroic realism evidenced within contemporary cultural genres, can assist in putting violence into question, and to do this without*



*repeating a Nietzschean-style nihilism already familiar in the orthodoxy of antifoundationalist discourses.*

Chapter Two continues to focus on the above questions, and specifically around the trans-historical ubiquity of violence. In concentrating upon the normativity *and* exteriority of “decision as violence” I look to the ways in which theories attempt to deal with the post-tragic subject as something that threatens morality and politics. From here I re-consider the mutual contamination and incompatibility of ethics and politics. Whereas Chapter One discusses the tragic characteristics of a Nietzschean figure of agency via Cavell, Chapter Two resumes this critique by assessing the relations between a Nietzschean-style metaphysics and aesthetic and political practices. The political problem of this aestheticised Nietzschean subject is sketched out in Axel Honneth’s text “Pluralisation and Recognition: On the Self-Misunderstanding of Postmodern Social Theorists” where he prefers a Hegelian critique of acknowledgment over and above a Nietzschean-style politics of identification. First, I will briefly sketch out some of the issues in Honneth’s argument as it is important for my text before the argument proper to situate the relevance and indeed the importance to pursue a Nietzschean-style subjectivity and its consequences over and above a Hegelian dialectical critique. This is not merely because the post-tragic subject smacks of a Nietzschean-style violence but also because it is my intention to demonstrate a non-dialectical aesthetico-political contingency.

Honneth critiques Nietzschean politics as requiring a polemical or “divisionary” move, which is described as; “where the standard for freedom, which the individual can reach in experimental self-creation, is measured according to the distance he can establish between himself and the cultural value sphere of his time.”<sup>10</sup> It is in this requirement of Nietzschean politics that Honneth identifies his main problematic: “As soon as the idea that subjects can solipsistically achieve self-realisation independent of normative bonds is contested, it is also invalidated which makes it permissible to see in the dissolution of the social a chance for the unfolding of individual peculiarities.”<sup>11</sup> Honneth identifies both the *ease* of invalidating the subject’s aestheticised self-realisation and the *danger* that the dissolution of the social is identified as a positive cultural and political effect, used by such theories as the identification of self-invention or power.

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<sup>10</sup> Axel Honneth, “Pluralisation and Recognition: On the Self-Misunderstanding of Postmodern Social Theorists” in *Between Totalitarianism and Postmodernity*, Ed. Peter Beilharz, Gillian Robinson and John Rundell. MIT press, 1992, 167

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*,168

In brief, Honneth's objection is situated in the claim that the Nietzschean concept of freedom demands the requirement to make recognitions in or against "normative bonds". This inevitably leads to the indifference and self-absorption of the individual in opposition to it. Honneth's assertion, that that social is at risk through the subject's inability to make recognitions or even, that identifications cease to carry meaning is at issue here in the sense that we can initially deliberate what is being described as "the social" and secondly how or what exactly are the politics of such recognitions? In other words on what basis does Honneth find a Nietzschean-style politics of identification so troubling?

Honneth's critique is based on an interpretation of an external power structure such as the "culture industry" that acts as the producer of the experience of a superficial freedom. The politics of the recognition of ones own freedom clearly has a distinct relation to what Honneth calls the "lifeworld." The subject does not, or possibly cannot identify itself in opposition to it, but occupies an ambiguous relationship through it, with it and as it. It is in this location that Honneth identifies the central problematic of subjective freedom as a problem of intersubjective recognitions. Honneth identifies this primarily in the "pluralisation of individual life forms and that everyday cultural praxis is freed step by step from its received value commitments and traditions without them having been replaced by encompassing orientation patterns, within which the individual subjects' attempts at self-realisation could find intersubjective recognition." He continues: "It is this recognition vacuum which first brings about the growing willingness to accept life-styles prefabricated by the culture industry as aesthetic substitutes for socially depleting biographies."<sup>12</sup> Crucially, Honneth's complaint recognises the inability to make any recognitions which would facilitate self-knowledge and intersubjectivity. However, he also moves to produce a clear distinction between the individual biography and the culture industry, wherein he insists that the one aestheticises and thereby assimilates and artificialises the other. Already, what Honneth is identifying is, firstly a strict demarcation between a mediated cultural experience and a direct communicative speech act, or moral value in a labour process, and secondly, a differentiation between power structures, notions of responsibility, and experiences of power; as there are those who have power and those who are subject to it.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 171

Following the logic of Honneth's claim against (Nietzschean) postmodernists such as Richard Rorty - that the individual is at the cost of the dissolution of the social<sup>13</sup> - we are presented with the exposure of society as the truth of relative power differentials and a hierarchical and even brutal social system. Thus, if we are to identify the social as the masking of the hegemonical structure of power, then the dissolution of the social in this instance is surely the concretisation of such demarcations, where powers are unmasked?

For Honneth, the Nietzschean concept of freedom exposes the social as the place where individuals play out political power games, and therefore could be seen to be akin to a conservative Thatcherite society of individuals where everybody is theoretically enabled or even institutionally prompted to get power. What this risks for Honneth is not only that the truth of the social is a Nietzschean natural genealogy of power, but also and perhaps more realistically, that this concept of the social, revealed as truth, abstains from communicative or inter-subjective relations.

However, this social is only a fearful brutal space if power itself is maintained as the property of anonymous forces. In this sense, the "truth of the social" exposes powers such as the "culture industry", not so much as a dominant powerful force having maintained its power through it being unnameable, but as a system of productions that exist socially and publicly, and in which we participate. The critique of the Nietzschean "divisionary move" advanced by Honneth as the impossibility of intersubjectivity is read as such through the self-definition of the subject as a transgressive character. What Honneth does not take into account, therefore, are the politics of aestheticised transgression where transgression itself is an affirmative, communicable and public assertion and that is moreover inscribed as a cultural tradition, namely, the rhetoric of critique. Consequently it is apparent that Honneth overlooks the experience of cultural and social acknowledgment within such aesthetic identifications. Honneth's consternation at the violence in the social, identified as being concretised by postmodernism's Nietzschean parlance, is preserved through his maintenance of the anonymity of power structures such as the culture industry, where the place for such unprincipled acts of violence is kept hidden and is therefore kept powerful through his assumption that the aesthetic experience has no bearing upon real-life experiences.

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<sup>13</sup> Honneth claims that an aesthetic model of human freedom indebted to a Nietzschean theory of self-creation underlies all "postmodern" theory, 167

In light of this, Honneth's identification of the "culture industry" as an externalised manufacturer of our experiences of critical choice becomes questionable when we assess the problem of identification, which Honneth claims to be the root of our being fooled by it. In other words, if we are to follow the logic of the vacuum of identification then we would be unable to identify and determine the false aesthetic substitutes provided by the culture industry from what Honneth values as the "real-life" experience of labour.

The various problems that I have drawn out in this critique motivate my interest in analysing the experiences of autonomy produced within, as Honneth calls it, the "culture industry" – or, more generally, something which I would take to be the sites where we encounter the meaning and the process of these identifications within and through the media, politics and entertainment. And it is here that I can recall my description of the post-tragic subjectivity as something that is not only relegated to the "culture industry" but that it also has a political use within general practices of power in society. What Honneth's question of the social interestingly poses is the problem of the relationship between a culturally inscribed mediated biography and that of our sense of autobiography. This includes the problem of the politics of our experiences of autonomy that I will continue to situate, as Honneth does, in a critique of the orthodoxy of a postmodern antifoundationalism.

Chapter Two will review theories similar to Honneth's in their identification of the rhetoric of a Nietzschean-style active nihilism as a problem for inter-subjective politics. This includes the critical theory of Roger Shattuck and Jennifer L. Geddes in the text *Evil After Postmodernism*, which attempts to construct a vigilant political strategy vis-a-vis Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Departing from this I will critique responses to Michel Foucault's poststructural politics of self-aestheticisation, which can be seen to reclaim and figure the post-tragic, self-legislating and self-aestheticised subject as the archetype of a Californian-style liberalism. Both Chapters One and Two assert a problematic of politics and aesthetics when considering the status of this Nietzschean influenced subjectivity. In defining a territory of absolute finitude in language in the first chapter, this second, then moves to define the problems of the political aspects of this type of subjectivity by describing violence as contingent upon any critical theory - even those which demand a vigilance over it. Accordingly, these chapters stage the problem of the ubiquity of force and power in the political in that they show that the performances of decisions have a universalising force which are also predicated and contingent upon aesthetics identifications. It is here, once more, where we are face to face with the post-tragic heroic.

After having made a case for this discussion to be situated around a concept of absolute finitude and a confirmed aesthetic and political relation in Chapter One, and by establishing the immanence of violence to theories of subjective autonomy (whether it is their intention to control or resist violence) in Chapter Two, it is in the following chapters that I address the conditions of an aesthetico-political subjectivity in relation to the immanence of violence. From this position I discuss how this “doing and thinking” subject not only forces a political practice by rooting transcendentals as elements in language, but how in doing so this paradoxically destabilises and undermines a theory of the political. In this, the impossibility of exteriority can be read as undoing *the political* and only leaving the state of *politics* open. To consider this problem, Chapters Three and Four concern themselves with two strands of this argument around the immanence of violence as decision, weighted respectively towards both politics and aesthetics. Chapter Three looks to the problems of representing power in the social from Thomas Hobbes’ abstinence from figuring *individual power* to Stanley Fish’s avoidance of figuring a central *ethical power*, whilst Chapter Four considers the legitimacy and consequence of ethical rhetoric within the political centrally through Ernst Jünger’s *heroic realism*. Intrinsic to this is that both chapters contemplate a comparable quasi-transcendental identification of violence; from Hobbes’s recognition and fear of rhetoric as inevitably exposing the natural violent disposition of human nature, to Jünger’s inscription of metaphysical and violent rhetoric as the target for autonomy.

First, in Chapter Three, I deal more centrally with the structure of a non-emancipatory politics in relation to social and hegemonical systems. This is done by examining Hobbes’s concept of the political, the social, subjectivity, law and consensus from his texts *The Elements*, *On The Citizen* and *The Leviathan*. Here, I make a closer examination of the rhetoric of individual authorities of power in terms of Hobbes’s sovereign who speaks the word of God, and the universal or truth of violence as immanent to language through rhetoric. This introduces the question of how we begin to organise a critique of what appears to be an established consensus of violence as decision (where violence is at once a necessary dominion over the social and understood as the truth at the root of the social), when any attempt to think through or rationalise violence produces its double, in that we are bound to a contingency within the same political rhetoric.

I continue to analyse Hobbes’s work on the problem of the use of rhetoric, where the natural violence of the pre-political, pre-social contract is immanent to the art of rhetorical re-description. Here I take up Hobbes’s identification of pluralism as producing a political state of “Perpetual

War”, and his solution - that of the overriding authority of the sovereign. Significant to this is that Hobbes acknowledges dominion as a necessity. However, it is also important that although Hobbes’s theory has no emancipatory model in mind, he can be seen to situate a humanism where we see an admittance of the necessity of rhetoric and the mastery of language as central to the demonstration of truth and the practice of law.

Following this, I look to Stanley Fish’s ideology based pragmatism upon which I construct a critique of inter-subjectivity, consensus and power as and within representation. Here I examine the way the nightmare of perpetual war for Hobbes is the moment of a democratic success for Fish. This also includes another comparative study of interpretative and hegemonical practices in relation to abstract forms of language bringing the question of politics back to a question of aesthetics. This takes the form of a reading between Ernesto Laclau’s theory of “unrepresentability”, Fish’s theory of “general iterability” (from Derrida) and this also prompts a critique of Fish’s identification of an original and unprincipled law as metaphor without object as reproducing similar quasi-transcendental questions of immanence as shown by Hobbes.

Chapter Four is concerned finally with the relationship between aesthetics and agency. This chapter takes up my ongoing concerns of philosophy’s relation to a language of violence by looking to how the aesthetics of violence as an everyday or neutral territory is written as the locus for freedom. As such, crucial to this chapter is an analysis of the political legitimacy of the rhetoric of realism and also an inquiry as to the tenability of philosophical theories to political practices. The narratives in this chapter understand violence as an empty space, but clearly we can see that it is a space that is filled with symbolic figures which are predicated upon political practices. In Martin Heidegger’s philosophy, Ernst Jünger’s literature and Terence Malick’s film-making, the territory of the natural or the everyday as the aestheticised notion of neutrality, is collapsed with an aestheticised conception of violence, that in turn acts as grounds for the autonomous experience. This also picks up on Cavell’s “everyday romanticism” from Chapter One and levels Romantic philosophy once more as a linguistic genre.

Consequently, in this final chapter I question the status of violence demonstrated by different modes of realism to be the foundation for subjective decision. First, in Jünger’s political literature, where violence features as the technology of war, and secondly, in Malick’s war film, where nature’s ubiquitous power takes on the properties of the ethical experience. Here, I take up the question of the hierarchical relation of force and rhetoric formulated in Chapter Three, by

means of a practical criticism of the uses of language in narratives that mingle philosophy, politics and literature. In looking to Jünger and Malick's manipulation of an aesthetics of violence as an ambiguous and ubiquitous terrain, I analyse the politics of the production and authorship of these narratives and think through how the rhetoric of freedom is relative to political practices. From this I consider the consequences of the forces of such demonstrations in order to discuss the differences between an aesthetics of violence as foundational to experience and an experience of an aesthetics of violence under the conditions of total representability. In other words, does an identification of violence as decision under total representability concretise power as a procedural and mechanistic practice? Do the idealising forces inherent in the rhetoric of violence as decision, seen here in the post-tragic subject, insinuate a categorical force that antagonises any possibility for a local and temporal critique of violence? Such questions are underscored when as my previous arguments move away from a theory of subjectivity that seeks freedom as being free from representation it is here in the final chapter that I look to the productions of autonomy within language *without strategic fissures between form and content or the real and the representational*. It is through this analysis that I ask if these narratives of violence re-invite the essential transcendental problem around violence and language that Heidegger originally poses.

This dual analysis covered in the final two chapters repeats the problem that this post-tragic subject entertains for politics, philosophy and critical theory. In conclusion I return to examine this subject contingently, in narratives of epic action and subjective violence as power, considering violence as contingent to rhetorical practices and how these practices are understood intersubjectively. From here I take up Fish's *practice of theory as ideology* once more by returning to the problems of the violent force of rationalism identified in the act of theorising, taking up criticisms leveled at relativism as either producing the brutality of "perpetual war" or settling for the banality of the status quo of a non-emancipatory politics.

This final comparative analysis tests the rhetoric of theorising as something that retains and produces emancipatory ideals without transcendental identifications or guarantees. This leads me to further critique the political differences between a *philosophy* of finitude and a *pragmatics* of absolute finitude. Here, I analyse how language and justice are understood within the production of the post-tragic subject. This re-establishes a final ethical and political question in relation to processes of power and negotiations of language where, having agreed upon the convergence of aesthetics and politics, or thought and language, we are left finally with questions of their separation and, duly, the shadow of metaphysics, always written as a problem of power.

# 1 The Heroic: *Narratives of tragic and non-tragic contingency, Hegel, Nietzsche and Cavell*

Late Romantics still thought that one must tell the story of global decline in terms of larger than life heroic narrative, while modernism asserted the metaphysical potential of the most common and vulgar bits of our daily experience - and perhaps, postmodernism inverts modernism: one returns to big mythical themes, but they are deprived of their cosmic resonance and treated like common fragments to be manipulated; in short, in modernism we have fragments of common daily life expressing global metaphysical vision, while in postmodernism we have larger-than-life figures treated as fragments of common life.<sup>14</sup>

Slavoj Zizek  
*Did Someone Say Totalitarianism?*

## 1. *Oedipus the King*: Two Figures for Knowledge

The theme of subjective autonomy as being defined by and in relation to an ethical order can be seen to be consistent within the tragic genre. This relationship is most particularly put into question in Sophocles' play, *Oedipus the King* where we can clearly see that Oedipus doesn't fulfill the criteria for the classical tragic-heroic - he doesn't die. Oedipus, therefore, doesn't take on the heroic responsibility of his actions, neither does he accept the death fate of the hero, the absolute alignment with the order of the gods. Despite and because of this impossibility of a heroic death Oedipus's plight can be seen to definitively underscore the tragic experience, and we could even say that the character of Oedipus characterises tragedy as we know it; autonomy expressed as the recognition of our own limits; the "double tragedy" of modern man.

However, what is also crucial to Oedipus's immortality and also to this chapter is to pay attention to the form that this autonomy takes. Oedipus's moment of refusing a classical tragic-heroic status and becoming "Oedipus" is lived out in the act and image of the violence of his self-blinding, a defiantly self-motivated self-perpetuated act against the gods.<sup>15</sup> Considering this it

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<sup>14</sup> Slavoj Zizek, *Did Someone Say Totalitarianism?* Verso, 2001, 29.

<sup>15</sup> The classical heroic subject achieves absolute autonomy by means of a "self-recognition" that is lived out in the initial process of "tasks" and a final acceptance to willingly meet his/her own death, in order to become "as one with the higher order of the law. The classical heroic narrative describes the heroic as a



would seem that the elevated status of a *tragic Oedipus* is contradicted somewhat by the violent and self-asserted means of his perpetual existence. In other words, a theory of Oedipus as tragic differs from an understanding of his life as a lived experience. This calls into question first, the means by which we identify something or someone as tragic, and second, how this identification of the tragic is linked to an experience and expression of autonomy. Because of this, the tragedy of Oedipus introduces two lines of related questions, one centred on Oedipus's immortality and the other upon his moment of self-mutilation. I ask later how these two understandings and expressions of autonomy are hinged upon each other.

### ***Tragic recognition***

A result of Oedipus's decision to live, or more accurately his refusal to die, is that we are faced with a theory of tragedy of the *impossibility* of the tragic death. Here, Oedipus's tragic state is not so much described within the text, but results from his story never ending. *His immortality equals tragedy*. Oedipus fails to live up to the tragic-heroic narrative and as such is confined to Earth and to the realms of a "lack" of knowledge, never knowing the absolute knowledge of the gods. His autonomy read as self-recognition is only performed through the experience of a momentary glimpse of self-knowledge. Oedipus's immortality performs a tragic relationship with the ethical order, and is equated with an understanding of his "true self", something that he will always be divorced from. Oedipus is only able to act when he is "blind" - when he is unable to differentiate between subjective action and the will of the gods. In his violent moment Oedipus recognises himself as a tool of the gods and objectivises himself within the narrative realising that *that* particular destiny was his alone and that he *is* that destiny. This is the recognition of himself as the other becoming the self, culminated in the cry, "I am Oedipus!"

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symbol of power and proactive force, and this invariably occupies a typical structure, wherein the hero is ultimately guided by the supreme other. More often than not the story consists of a man being set a task by a King, whereupon there is a monster that he must vanquish. The gods or a wise man/woman would assist. Ultimately, the hero would come close to losing his life and then, of course, wins, to return to said kingdom to marry the daughter of the King.

Significantly, the classical hero, in the stories of Hercules or Agamemnon for example, takes on the responsibility of his actions, bearing the weight of all the obstacles the gods put upon him whilst also bearing the responsibility of the consequences of his actions. However, the hero does not necessarily live his own life, moreover he is set on the path by the gods and then in circumstances which are offered to him, has the potential to act heroically. Importantly, the heroes are not made heroic by wavering from this set path, they are made heroic by accepting it as their own. In *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, London, 1902, Hegel identifies the force of the great tragic characters in history in their having "no choice"; they are what they will accomplish from their birth on. In other words, their life accomplishes their destiny. The classical heroic narrative concerns itself more with the proceedings of the events of the heroic quest and it

In this way we can see that Oedipus models for the philosophical subject, in a Hegelian sense and this crucially demarcates *Oedipus the King* as *the* philosophical-metaphysical narrative. It is the work of subjective knowledge as a tragic enterprise. However, such a dislocating move that is intrinsic to the experience of self-knowledge is not only played out within the text but ultimately and most significantly is expressed *about the text*. The play operates from a position of knowledge where the audience is always aware of Oedipus's condition of "not-knowing". Oedipus's tragedy is doubled or even made actual or consequential from our distanced space (a theatre audience sitting in "the gods" if you like) where we can personally draw upon, and identify with Oedipus as *the tragic figure*, the figure of desire coupled with the awful reality of the impossibility of finitude. Hegel describes this anterior position of knowledge as a position that is articulated by and as "world history":

World History occupies a higher ground than that on which morality has properly its position, which is personal character and the conscience of individuals. [...] Moral claims which are irrelevant must not be brought into collision with the world historical deeds and their accomplishment. The litany of private virtues - modesty, humility, philanthropy, and forbearance - must not be raised against them.<sup>16</sup>

Hegel distinctly separates moral practices of knowledge from the writing of history as the ethical task of a path to absolute knowledge, where self-recognition or subjective autonomy is absolutely relative to a transcendental conception of history. Theorising the condition of Man as the writing of history (or even Man's autobiography), for Hegel, is a tragic account of knowledge as both a failed and a desiring task. This is conceived as such in that Man's pre-destination to language is always expressed as a desire for an "essential" knowledge, but paradoxically it is the very thing that keeps it at bay due to the inherently superficial quality of writing. In this, the "will to knowledge" - Man's essential task - is a tragic narrative because it demands the understanding of a split self-consciousness; first a recognition of the *superficial* nature of language, whilst another consciousness of the *necessity* of language as a practice of knowledge, in that we live out a concrete investment in the application of it.

Crucial to this tragic account of knowledge is that the application of language as the "will to knowledge" is understood as a meta-discourse, a thematised and elevated space of autonomy power and authority from which history is written. More to the point, we can see that this meta-

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is the passage of the action that offers up the tragic collision of the known world (what the hero does) and that of the unknown world (what is demanded of him).

<sup>16</sup> GWF. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, London 1902, 34

discourse operates as *discourse*, most significantly because Hegel's theory of history characterises a rhetoric of self-recognition and goes on to write itself as its own tragic genre. Autonomy after Oedipus therefore no longer operates mechanistically towards death, but more on its contingency to violence. As a result, the identification of decision is made resolutely violent because the transcendental and foundational character of decision is not in opposition to its aesthetic, thematic and discursive dimension. Bearing this in mind, it is important to understand how autonomy is understood and experienced in relation to a tragic recognition of (in)finity. Consequently, I consider the tenability of this contingency in philosophical discourse, where it would seem that the tragedy of knowledge is the basic and underlying condition for knowledge.

Oedipus's "doubly tragic" moment (in that he doesn't die) is seen in the sequel *Oedipus at Colonus*. What we see instead of a tragic subject is a move to farce, and we can see clearly that Oedipus's character confounds the audience by "refusing" to fulfill the prophecy itself written in the tradition of the classical heroic. What *type* of hero is produced is one that stands outside of a typical classical tragic-heroism. The hero lives, is alienated, stupid, and even comic. Consequently, in the sequel, where the story catches up with Oedipus later, he has become unable to move, quite literally through his blindness, and is also stunted in terms of action as the gods have forsaken him.

Oedipus is therefore sustained as "immortal human"; a tragic figure who articulates *the* philosophical experience in that *he is humanity in general* - a universal figure who demonstrates on the one hand our precarious existence and on the other hand the facticity of our immortality. In this sense, Oedipus draws attention to our fragility in the face of our own self-knowledge as the "ubiquitous other" and in terms of this we see that the problem of knowledge is understood as not exactly a question of the identification of limits that we recognise say *between* the ethical order and the subject, but instead as self-recognition. Consequently, in *Oedipus the King* tragic autonomy is lived out as recognition; a knowledge of "not knowing". Here, autonomy is written as doubt and expressed as violence, where one lives to experience the terrible consequences of decision, and death is situated in a territory of *impossible exteriority*. However, it is only from this vantage-point, from this "death-space", that we are privy to the *tragedy par excellence*; the tragic impossibility of the tragic. In allowing ourselves this "impossible" position outside the text we are able to view the work of knowledge as an infinitely tragic condition.

### *Recognising the tragic*

The unavailability of the tragic-heroic or the heroic death means that to define the tragic moment of Oedipus we are asked to define ourselves as tragic. We are compelled to not only establish a bird's-eye view of Oedipus's tragedy but also to narrate our task of self-knowledge as conditioned upon the same plight, in as much as "we are Oedipus". Consequently, we can identify ourselves as the writers of humanity's task of knowledge, as philosophical autobiographers who can recognise this "tragedy of tragedy".

However, as I have argued, and as we shall see further, what is clearly problematised is the possibility of granting this meta-discourse, or, the privileged position of self-recognition as exteriority. Crucially, tragic self-recognition demands the figuring of Oedipus as representative of the practice and the consequence of knowledge. This demand for self-knowledge and a predilection for a discourse of exteriority clarifies the Hegelian identification of the tragic as a rhetoric of metaphysics. What's more, the impossibility of a critical space over and above the text equally describes another practice and application of knowledge; another discourse of exteriority. From this we could ask why it is necessary or even helpful to make the "task of knowledge" such a tragic labour around the demand for this god-like position of exteriority. I ask this because what remains after recognising Oedipus as a tragic figure is *another Oedipus*. This is the figure of Oedipus as an actor, and as a speaker; essentially someone who applies his own knowledge. As such, although I have argued that Oedipus's transcendental claim is evacuated, in actuality what is recovered is the legitimacy and consequence of his earthly autonomy, no matter how banal or ridiculous it may be.

Oedipus's refusal to die binds him very much to the world and that in his moment of self-recognition Oedipus is the perpetrator of justice, not a god-like justice of death, but an earthly justice of violence. What this opens up is an examination of a non-tragic conception of immortality based around the facticity of his existence and the success of meaning without a conception of the tragic. This is current throughout the play and is seen not only in Oedipus's defiant refusal of the gods' gift of self-knowledge but also in that he already has the use of his knowledge - he solves the riddle of the Sphinx and manages to successfully rule a kingdom.

Oedipus's ultimate decision to act "with knowledge" can be seen in the final scene of the play where Oedipus blinds himself. A palace messenger recounts the scene:

He rips off her brooches, the long gold pins holding her robes - and lifting them, looking straight up into the points, he digs them down the sockets of his eyes, crying, "You, you'll see no more the pain I suffered, all the pain I caused! Too long you looked on the ones you never should have seen, blind to the ones you longed to see, to know! Blind from this hour on! Blind in the darkness- Blind!"<sup>17</sup>

The momentous act, as portrayed by the messenger, seems to concern itself with the tragedy of Oedipus's circumstance. However, this tragedy is distinctly *human*. It does not deal with the world of the gods, but describes a griping bitterness and complaining mingled with a selfish feeling of being forsaken and, of course, the absolute horror of the act itself. Instead of following the orthodoxy of the classical maxim of the heroic, whereby it is "better to die than to lose one's honour" Oedipus says that he has no wish for suicide, as he would see his mother and father again in Hades.<sup>18</sup>

#### *Autonomy without suicide*

Oedipus actively rejects the possibility of heroic death out of selfishness. Even in life he looks upon his "destiny" with a sense of selfish injustice. Oedipus does not shoulder the responsibility for his actions as he now begrudgingly acknowledges himself as "fused" with destiny, always within the order of the gods' whims. He is alienated from the gods, as he is no longer the tool for their amusement; alienated from the order of the (classical) heroic genre in his defiant act against the gods, and alienated from society as a stumbling blind freak.

So, already it is clear that Oedipus's violent action of self-mutilation and the general banalities of his personality are not the typical characteristics of the tragic-heroic subject. In addition to this Oedipus's actions never move beyond the narrative space. By this I mean that although we see evidence of the gods on earth, as it were, we are never privy to Oedipus's journey to the underworld of Hades and his redemption is played out in his *self-mutilation*. As such, in the end Hades is a place where Oedipus can still freely choose *not* to go. This territory of death in *Oedipus the King* is an awful place, but it hasn't the mark of inevitability. Oedipus already knows what is waiting for him in Hades, and it is this knowledge that determines his actions.

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<sup>17</sup>Sophocles, "Oedipus the King", in *Three Theban Plays*, trans. Robert Eagles. Harmondsworth, Penguin Classics, 1984, 237, verses 1402-09.

<sup>18</sup>For an account of Oedipus's self-interest; from tragedy to farce, see Alenka Zupanic's *Ethics of the Real, Kant, Lacan*, Verso, 2000, 175-181

Oedipus is as “real” as the will of the gods and the gods are as much in “existence” as Oedipus. It is only in his momentary violent refusal where we see Oedipus make differentiations - a violent separation between himself and the ethical order - only to demarcate his own actions as *another system of justice*. Here, Oedipus’s self-blinding could be likened to the extreme action and defiance only a god could muster - that in violence his acts are *paralleled with a transcendental authority, but are absolutely motivated by earthly and selfish concerns*. Consequently, in light of this relationship between the gods and Oedipus, the presence of an objective justice is undermined. In this we can see that his final cry – “I am Oedipus”, is a mark of subjectivity, born out of self-pity and constitutive of his self-determination. In his violent moment of autonomy Oedipus separates himself from the gods, whilst simultaneously duplicating their actions on earth by showing the upper reaches of autonomy not as a death that aims beyond the narrative, but as violence expressed within it. In other words, death is the productive autonomous moment for the tragic-heroic, whereas, in the anti-heroic narrative of Oedipus, violence is autonomy without suicide.

Oedipus, as these two figures of knowledge, is discussed in Phillipe Lacoue-Labarthe’s text “Oedipus as Figure” where he draws upon Oedipus as both a subject who *desires* and *uses* knowledge. By looking to Hegel’s dialectics and Ernst Jünger’s thematising of the worker,<sup>19</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe asserts that the identification of Oedipus as figure “reveals the truth of the mythico-political use of the figure of Oedipus.”<sup>20</sup> Crucially, this is understood regarding a diversity of applications, moving through Schlegel to Hegel, Freud, Nietzsche and Heidegger. However, I will concentrate first on Lacoue-Labarthe’s response to Hegel’s tragic conception of *Oedipus as figure*, where, citing the *Philosophy of History*, Lacoue-Labarthe writes:

Hegel sets out to demonstrate how the subject or Spirit gradually emerges, moment by moment, from its non-knowledge (ignorance, superstition, magic, confused religions and all the forms of the non-knowledge of the self), wrests itself away from or escapes the materiality that submerges it, gradually wins its own essence (which is to be knowledge, intellection - and self knowledge) by freeing itself from its sensory and corporeal servitude, and succeeds in accomplishing and realizing itself as such.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ernst Jünger will be discussed at greater length in Chapter Four. For now, it is sufficient to note that Jünger’s notion of the subject translates the philosophical pre-occupation with self-knowledge to the facility to use one’s knowledge.

<sup>20</sup> Phillipe Lacoue-Labarthe, “Oedipus as Figure,” *Radical Philosophy*, No.118, March April, 2003, 17

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*,15

Lacoue-Labarthe describes how Oedipus is, for Hegel, the figure of the philosopher and that essentially this practice of knowledge is tragic. It is a path to essence, the realisation of absolute knowledge and as such self-consciousness. As we have seen in *Oedipus the King*, it is the self-conscious recognition of the impossibility of absolute knowledge that characterises thinking as tragic. However, as I have written above and still following Lacoue-Labarthe we can also see a non-tragic Oedipus written through the work of both Heidegger and Nietzsche. This is the *Promethean Oedipus*, the subject whose central task is the forgetting of self-consciousness and the move to mastery. Lacoue-Labarthe writes regarding Nietzsche: “Perhaps it is this that allows Oedipus to go on representing - beyond or beneath the way consciousness relates to itself through self presence, or beyond self identity - a desire to know of which consciousness knows nothing, and of which it can know nothing.”<sup>22</sup> This is Oedipus as the figure of a very different form of knowledge - a *practice* that does not organise itself around the immanence of self-consciousness as death, but significantly, however, *it is a practice that is characterised by an immanent violence*.

In a response to Heidegger’s work on Oedipus (in *The Introduction to Metaphysics*), Lacoue-Labarthe describes how the figure of Oedipus is based around a passion for knowledge:

The story of Oedipus does not simply symbolise or (re)present the destiny of *aletheia*, or the unveiling of being (in which case, the West is more Oedipal than ever); because his determination is so savage, Oedipus is the figure of the Greek *Dasein* to the extent that it embodies the basic and inaugural “passion” of the West; the passion for knowledge.<sup>23</sup>

He continues:

Oedipus has nothing to do with the subject (self-consciousness), or in other words with knowledge (theory) as subject; but it has everything to do with knowledge as *techne*, and that is the starting point for the whole of Western metaphysics. And that is why modern technology is the Oedipal realisation of the metaphysical.<sup>24</sup>

Crucially, this describes something almost like a Nietzschean-style rule of self-preservation, a *Promethean refusal* of anything outside of the self or even that there is only the self and that this is only made up of *desire and self-sustained knowledge*. This is a question of how Oedipus’s

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.,15

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 17

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. For Jünger, the use of knowledge is ideologically aimed towards encountering the “facelessness” of knowledge: concretised as a modern, violent and ambivalent technology. The aesthetics of technology take centre stage in Jünger’s political literature as *the* metaphysical substitute

immortality is related to his earthly and self-interested concerns - *a man without God*. And if, and how, this Nietzschean-style subject *after the tragic*, or without self-recognition, re-invites the tragic limits that Oedipus represents as “last philosopher.”

Crucial to this chapter and returning to the path set down by Lacoue-Labarthe, it is the use, *techné* and application of the figures of knowledge that I will continue to focus upon. Here I turn to the problem of how and upon what terms political activity begins after the exhaustion of tragic theory. Having traced the figure of Oedipus as moving through Hegel and Nietzsche and thus figuring both a tragic and a non-tragic identification of knowledge, I would like to rehearse this argument by looking at theories that attempt to overcome the philosophical demand for self-consciousness as an absolute demarcation of autonomy, in particular the work of Stanley Cavell. Here I discuss the following issues: first, I examine Cavell’s attempts to overcome the demand for a metaphysical identification as a symptom of self-consciousness whilst persisting with a notion of self-consciousness as autonomy. The means by which a recognition of “no-knowledge” or “undecidability” is made available to us is pertinent to this, especially when thinking through the act of philosophising, for which a notion of subjective knowledge and finitude is crucial. In the following argument I ask, through a reading of Cavell’s concept of self-consciousness without philosophical scepticism, if these apparently mutual figures of self-consciousness and metaphysics can be pulled apart.

After examining the case between philosophy and self-consciousness, as an aesthetics of ambiguity, the third part of this chapter “Undoing the Tragic” looks to the identification of “philosophy as genre” or the “end of philosophy” as *the tragic philosophical narrative*. In this critique of a discourse about and upon language I again look to Cavell’s self-conscious narrative of the death of philosophy, where it would seem that we still are asked to believe in a differentiation between what we do know and what we don’t. Contra Cavell I argue that the means by which to access what we don’t know are constantly made available to us and by us and, as such, require a procedure of interpretative analysis.

Following this logic I argue that the tragic philosophical narrative remains in the territory of genre because the tragic recognition of its death is not only available to us as a self-conscious moment of recognition of it as a universal fact, but only as a theory. What follows in the fourth and final section of this chapter entitled, “Practices of Return” is an inquiry into the nature of



practices which seem to forget the philosophical task which proposes a further examination of practices of the post-tragic subject under a pluralist condition.

By concentrating upon the non-tragic genre such as it is laid out above, it does not simply follow that this critique seeks redemption in violence. Indeed, this thesis as a whole is not looking for redemption per se, but, more to the point, this chapter in particular tries to demonstrate the limitations of theories that substantiate a complaint about “bad Nietzscheanism” (which I am reading as the rhetoric of active nihilism) at work in contemporary culture and which then go on to ignore it in favour of an aesthetics of the tragic. As I have argued, both *heroic realism* and the tragic operate around violence and, I could write an experience of one onto or within the other in many areas. However, a self-conscious theory of active nihilism brings violence into a pragmatic area that manages to articulate its “metaphysical” aspect as a common or everyday experience, without invoking this common, or traditional aspect of violence back into a metaphysical question.

## **2. Claiming the Tragic**

### ***Knowledge as tragic circumstance***

Stanley Cavell’s philosophy witnesses the act of philosophising as a tragic genre in that he is predominantly concerned with the unavailability of being able to “philosophise”, since the identification of anything concretely defined as being *either* reality *or* existence that is central to the philosophical task is no longer a possibility. It is in this de-realisation that he recognises the history of scepticism to be a romantic history of the subject and violence. Crucial to Cavell’s theory (which attempts to move past the problems of violence as decision and vice-versa in scepticism) is that this very *crisis of decision* or aporia is translated and concretised in Cavell’s work as *the* identification *for* subjective decision.

Cavell makes no apparent difference between the writing of philosophy and the writing of narratives, where the work of philosophy is identified as “autobiography”. In *The Claim of Reason* he describes the experience of choice making through Shakespearean tragedies such as *Othello* and *King Lear* and also in autobiographical-style fictions that are interwoven through, and as, his philosophical arguments. It is in the genre of tragedy that Cavell identifies a public and social contingency through philosophical allegories, believing that “tragedy is the story and

study of the failure of acknowledgement”, and, “the form of tragedy is the public form of the life of scepticism with respect to other minds.”<sup>25</sup> In this we can see clearly that Cavell delineates a collapse between the tragic narrative content of the genre and understands the work of philosophy to be a self-consciously tragic pursuit. Hence, the practice of knowledge is essentially a tragic affair and tragedy as a genre gives life and consequence to the work of scepticism.

Cavell’s romantic philosophy identifies a “suffering” of the human in the face of the horror as the success of scepticism’s inscription of the other. It is by understanding that we suffer in aporia that Cavell inscribes philosophy and tragedy as a universal condition, in as much as we see Cavell’s attempt to recognise tragedy as “an epistemological problem, or the outcome of the problem of knowledge - of the dominance of modern philosophical thought by it.”<sup>26</sup> For Cavell, the act of writing or inscribing the other in an aesthetics of horror, in culture in general, attests to the true (metaphysical) horror of not being able to choose, or not being able to explain or understand adequately the specifics or “reason” of a situation. By identifying the history of scepticism as a tragic narrative Cavell looks to the opening up or even the closing down between the public and private performance of this “philosophical” genre as means by which one experiences self-recognition and where philosophy as a self-conscious allegory of itself can constantly test its limitations in a social forum. Tragedy for Cavell, therefore urges individual responsibility and individual culpability without inscribing the universal subject, or requiring a foundational ethic.

Already there can be seen to be a problem of identification within Cavell’s theory, which in turn can be seen to re-invite a typically philosophical line of questioning. This is available in Cavell’s genre distinction of philosophy identified as a “fragmentary narrative” dislocated from its central “philosophical” task of self-immanence. Cavell asserts this by replacing an aesthetics of death and finitude with an aesthetics of ambiguity - a plane between meaning and meaninglessness - as an indicator of a subjective recognition of self-doubt. What arises from this is the problem that the “philosophical”, sceptical or metaphysical character that Cavell attempts to overcome is retained in Cavell’s theory, first through the very process of this identification or aestheticisation and, second, through his loyalty and investment to the task of self-knowledge.

Cavell transports his philosophical theory to the realm of the everyday, and it is in this realm of “mediocrity” that we are to experience self-recognition in and as moments of ambiguity, namely,

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<sup>25</sup> Cavell, *The Claim of Reason, Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality and Tragedy*, Clarendon Press, 1979 478

in instances when we think we are right but then we discover we are in fact wrong. By looking to daily or even mundane situations he writes of instances of how we experience “crisis” in doubt as a moment of self-consciousness within the uses of language. This could take the form of misunderstandings, or when someone is late for a meeting or such like. In this moment of anxiety Cavell articulates an existential philosophical reflection on the subject who is faced with a recognisable void of recognitions, understandings, communications and agreements. Instead of maybe being frustrated or just merely bored, Cavell organises moments like this as instances of self-consciousness that approach us from a mystical mix of circumstances. In these banal “flashes” that are beyond our control, Cavell allows us a moment in which to experience autonomy.

Following this it is then important to ask if a theory of the tragic based in an aesthetics of aporetics solves the problem of thinking within an absolute finitude of language, or without the knowledge of transcendental guarantees, and puts into question subjective identifications of freedom, judgment or autonomy with and as violence.

### *Everyday philosophising as a tragic genre*

Cavell recognises the history of scepticism understood in terms of idealistic investments in the face of ones limits as a romantic allegory:

To speak of our subjectivity as the route back to our convictions in reality is to speak of romanticism. Perhaps romanticism can be understood as the natural struggle between the representation and the acknowledgment of our subjectivity (between the acting out and the facing off of ourselves, as psychoanalysts would more or less say). Hence Kant, and Hegel; hence Blake secreting the world he believes in; hence Wordsworth competing with the history of poetry by writing himself back into the world. A century later Heidegger is investigating Being. By investigating Dasein (because it is in Dasein that Being shows up best, namely as questionable), and Wittgenstein investigates the world (“the possibilities of phenomena”) by investigating what we say, what we are inclined to say, that pictures of phenomena are, in order to invest the world from our possessions so that we may possess it again.<sup>27</sup>

Cavell’s philosophy attempts to look to the behavioural, interpretative and linguistic aspects of understanding and is developed through his work on Austin and Wittgenstein, shown in where he recognises a problem with philosophy to be that it asks questions about “whether we know things

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 482

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 22

can exist, are real, are actually there, not to ask if we know what they are.”<sup>28</sup> He associates this traditional philosophical question of the “real” and of “essence” as being specific to violence. Cavell uses an example of a bird sitting in a tree at the end of a garden, where, in order to establish the bird’s true existence, i.e., that it is a *real* bird, not a dead bird and not a stuffed bird, the philosopher is compelled, at some point, to pierce the bird’s flesh in order to discover the truth. Here, the violence of scepticism is deliberated as a necessity to pro-active action as the moment of this discovery rests upon a violent act. Cavell’s description of this violence of the desire for knowledge (specifically around essence) can be seen to be absolutely contingent upon an “everyday experience.” Cavell’s brand of philosophy is not undertaken in some “dusty library”; instead, the site for this question of “essence” is situated in a place that we all know, the normalised territories of our everyday lives. Importantly, Cavell identifies scepticism’s tragic position in relation to this, that philosophy’s idealism is always identified in terror, and this terror approaches us in the most banal of circumstances - in fact whenever we choose to think of essentialising philosophical questions. It is here that Cavell recognises the danger of such a scepticism, that is, a scepticism that associates finitude or transcendence with knowledge. Instead, as we have seen, Cavell acknowledges a quasi-transcendental uncertainty as contingent upon the autonomous experience, wherein the experience of this crisis of knowledge is in itself knowledge. Quite clearly we can see that although Cavell evacuates the mechanistic problems of scepticism the same procedural thinking lies in his conception of “crisis as autonomy”. In this we are left wondering about the availability of knowing or identifying crisis upon the same terms as we would know death – as a rhetorical and concrete theme of freedom.

### ***The aesthetics of ambiguity***

In dealing with the problem of scepticism, Cavell attempts to incorporate the (philosophical) limits of knowledge into an everyday experience of the effects of “criteria”; the information we have ready from which to assert judgments where “learning when it is and is not competent to say “I (we) just don’t know”, is every bit as much of a condition of my competence as a knower as learning to say and when to retract “I am certain.””<sup>29</sup> In this Cavell attempts to avoid the requirements for absolute autonomy inherent in philosophical idealism and instead hopes to understand the recognition of not knowing as a moment of recognition offered by language within a daily experience. In this way, Cavell attempts to surpass the problems of passive or active

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 53

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 60

identifications with the other by incorporating the other within decision making. However, this “knowing and not knowing” turns out to be identified as a fluctuation between concepts of passivity and activity where, in the experiential plane in between these two, we experience the angst of possible impossibilities (the freedom to think) and impossible possibilities (the thinking of freedom).

Rehearsing this argument it can be seen that Cavell’s theory, which attempts to assert an understanding of the ambiguity of decision without the fixity or assurance of a Categorical Imperative, produces images that deal precisely in an aesthetics of ambiguity. As a result Cavell does not analyse the system of these identifications, but produces other identifications of “meaning”. Thus, “ambiguity” as meaningfulness is seeded in one’s identification as being between, or; the combination of antithesis: between passive and active tropes of action; in a combination of reason and unreason; rationality and idealism; scepticism and desire, and, perhaps more specific to Cavell, the positive aspects of knowledge (logic or rationale), evidenced through criteria, and the limits of the knowledge (doubt) exhibited in the lack of appropriate criteria.

To examine the way in which Cavell grounds such antithesis, I will look to one of Cavell’s many examples: In *The Claim of Reason*, Cavell tells a story of a robot that is constructed by a scientist-friend.<sup>30</sup> Upon his first visit Cavell is surprised to acknowledge that the robot is indeed a robot as it is dressed in clothes which obscure its image from direct view and it has been programmed with basic human characteristics such as the ability to sit, walk and to hold a cigarette. Cavell’s scientist - craftsperson friend is delighted to open up the crude machine twisting a small pen-knife into its side to demonstrate the robots true mechanical workings, thus proving its status. (*Already here, Cavell has a sneaking desire not just to look into the robot’s body but into its head.*) After a number of visits the robot becomes increasingly life-like, now with an altogether more relaxed manner and smoking cigarettes. Upon subsequent visits the scientist uses the penknife to open up the robot to display more abundantly human features, such as fleshly organs, skin, and bone. However, the scientist has yet to allow the robot to experience pain. Again Cavell returns and the scientist is even more enraptured by his project, and, upon reintroducing Cavell to the robot he moves towards the robot with the penknife. With this the robot recoils in fear, saying, “No more. It hurts. It hurts too much. I’m sick of being a human guinea pig, I mean a guinea pig human.”<sup>31</sup> Cavell is shocked into inaction. He cannot decide what to do. The moment of indecision is forced

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 403- 408

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 405

upon him. He is being asked to intervene in a situation he should (apparently) know full well to be only a scientific experiment. However, Cavell is challenged directly by his own doubt and uncertainty, where logic tells him that the subject is a robot, and belief tells him that in this display of pain and suffering that this robot is a subject.

Although Cavell attempts to make both “knowing” and “not knowing” synonymous with *any* everyday judgment where we access these apparatuses, “not knowing” still has the philosophical charge of the other. Perhaps too quickly, “no appropriate criteria” becomes *no criteria at all*, almost as if one cannot settle for second best despite the knowledge that one is not aware of the “best case”. This “best case” scenario for judgement acts as the “beyond” or the limits of language, despite being premised upon methods of interpretation, identification and assessment. It goes beyond such contingencies because it also champions a subjective rationale.

With respect to other minds we might say that we have to “remember” the possibility of scepticism, e.g., that we have not permitted ourselves a best case, that we do not know but that we may at any place, be singled out; hence that, so far as we know, we are not. Our position is not, as far as we know, the best. - But mightn’t it be? Mightn’t it be that just this haphazard, unsponsored state of the world, just this radiation of relationships of my cares and commitments, provides the milieu in which my knowledge of others can best be expressed?<sup>32</sup>

Despite Cavell’s premise that we may be living the “best case”, it is clear that he would take some convincing. Scepticism is to be actively remembered as a disappointment, and yet its maxim or promise of the best case still has durability. This disappointment over knowledge, and the history of scepticism as disappointment that grounds our knowledge of others drives Cavell’s call: “Live your scepticism!”<sup>33</sup>

Although on the one hand Cavell’s notion of criteria has the ability to describe all aspects of identification within the world, including the availability of all number of possible types within those identifications, it can also, on the other hand, be seen to exhaust itself, where at the domain of the limits of criteria, we find *horror*. In this sense the call to “Live your scepticism” is ambiguous to say the least, most of all because the circumstances for critique are situated in a particular and circumstantial experience of doubt whilst at the same time this experience totalises language as object through the representation of specific identifications. In other words, self-consciousness is always demonstrated as the genre of horror or paranoia. Here we are drawn back

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 440

into the problem of “essence”, where we can see that the “absolute violence” argued against in Cavell’s critique of philosophy is translated into an equally ubiquitous territory, a thing that approaches us from a dark space, the space where language runs out of effectivity and meaning, and a place that although promised in the concrete world of argument is enabled only through an acknowledgment that such discursive practices are limited.

Where there is “no appropriate criteria” for decision making, Cavell’s subject doesn’t merely make a bad decision, or some other stupid, embarrassing or even banal error of judgement. At the level of “no appropriate criteria” the subject is divorced from language and offered a view of it from a traumatic distance. This, for Cavell, is the comprehension of non-comprehension. It is autonomy as an existential experience produced out of language. Certainly, in Cavell’s narratives of the everyday, the criteria and context is laid out for us, the reader, to assert that the “mistakes” or problems of knowledge that are described can and do happen to us all. In this they *are* everyday. However, in theorising a significance for these moments of self-recognition Cavell necessitates an insistence that we *aestheticise* or even *dramatise* these events, or that we know them as not banal or “everyday” but as *meaningful interfaces with the “unknown”*. Consequently, Cavell’s notion of self-reflexivity, or social culpability is rooted in the aesthetics of horror where the subject’s critical redemption is sited in a negatively charged domain of “not knowing”, overshadowed by the aesthetics of trauma. Consequently, we are faced with the problem that in order to experience these “internal limits” of language, which by all accounts “happen to us”, we are paradoxically invited to write this experience *after the fact* in a space that is dislocated or mediated away from the very site of this experience.

The ambiguity between matters of existence and reality or between the identity and the existence of things is delineated in this question:

It depends on whether the question I am asked is one of identification or of something else (something I waver between calling existence and reality). The problem, or something I am trying to make the problem, is: How do I know whether I am asked the one or whether the other?<sup>34</sup>

Therefore, although Cavell recognises and issues the intrinsic problem of the question of existence, *he maintains the relationship between existence and reality as separate and relational entities*. This separation is evidenced in his strategy of thinking through the politics of his own

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 441

identifications where, as I have already written, Cavell's theory relies very much on an aesthetics which he considers to be without meaning, or in other words the aesthetics of "the knowledge of no knowledge".

As such, Cavell refrains from an in depth investigation into the applications of speech, contingency and language. In spite of his affirmation that the question of reality is unhelpful to understanding, his work is characterised by a scepticism that sustains a traditional philosophical problem *within* his project. Intrinsically, Cavell conceives an experiential domain wherein which the subject can experience an ontological-critical moment of self-knowledge through an aestheticised, theatricised de-centering; the moment of being pulled in two ways within a romantic-tragic experience that appears or is effected within the everyday and perverse situation of a forced choice. This forced choice is constituted in a two-fold experience, in that one experiences the force of oneself demanding the exercise of choice (an internalised demand upon the self - intentionality) in the context of exteriorised contingencies (the unavailability of language which makes that choice impossible).

Cavell's epistemological concerns are not only limited but also delineate his own philosophical narrative. In particular, the trope of violence that seems to be stipulated upon the subjective experience of self-reflexivity, as seen in Cavell's metaphor of traditional scepticism (the bird), right through to his metaphoric-philosophy (the robot) remains within the tradition of metaphysics. This is despite attempts to overcome this sceptical problem through the self-conscious narration of such theories as allegorical fictions. Upon these terms it would seem that by clinging to the demand for self-consciousness as indicative of autonomy, Cavell is compelled to inscribe *another metaphysics*.

What emerges from this is the question of whether a non-tragic inscription of the act of writing does away with the philosophical question altogether? - Or, whether it turns the philosophical question into a political question, a question of how we organise our future - and even then - this becomes an interpretative, linguistic issue, of how we understand principles and how we construct and make interpretations of the "universal", "objective" or "foundational" characters of justice, truth and law. However, first I will look once more to an understanding of autonomy without a conception of finitude.

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 51



### *Zupancic's aesthetics of the Real*

The aesthetics of ambiguity as indicative of a subjective choice is also highlighted in Alenka Zupancic's *Ethics of the Real*. Zupancic and Cavell both produce narratives of decision, which attempt to explain or hinge action on an experience of doubt, whether this is developed in the description of unfathomable actions (Zupancic) or the subjective response to the unfathomable (Cavell's robot story).

Zupancic identifies the character, Sygne de Coûfontaine, from Claudel's "The Hostage" as an example of the subject in action or "who chooses". Her choice was the shielding of a bullet which was meant for her loathed husband Turelure, whom she was convinced to marry against her wishes to protect her beloved Georges and the Pope. The act of shielding Turelure has increasingly significant consequence as it is Georges who fires the gun when he is enraged to see that the two are married. Turelure cannot understand why Sygne saved his life and desperately asks her why she chose this suicidal gesture, whether it was for him or the family name. However, "Sygne utters not a sound: she merely signals her rejection of a final reconciliation with her husband by means of a compulsive tic, a kind of convulsed twitching which repeatedly distorts her face, as if she were shaking her head: "No.""<sup>35</sup>

In Sygne de Coûfontaine's nervous tic, Zupancic sees the "small palpitating corpse", "the piece of meat". It is described as an image of an unsightly creeping manifestation, a subversive corruption and a disturbing, even tormenting contamination: "the palpitating corpse...the small piece of meat...the nervous twitch."<sup>36</sup> It can be seen that in maintaining the character of the "impossible" the image of the grotesque is perpetuated. Zupancic looks to an image which returns to the trope of that impossibility, "otherness", or "freakishness", and although, this image is in itself particularly unsensational in its "smallness" or "averageness", and in that we could say "*it is only that,*" its aspect of pure materiality, its baseness, is in itself a redeeming feature. It is stupid (it does nothing) and is also weak.

A problem can be recognised within Zupancic's description of this tic as an image of decision, which in many cases can be seen in Cavell's robot story, which cited the paranoiac induced, impending horror of making a decision. However, more specifically in Zupancic's text it is the

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<sup>35</sup> Alenka Zupancic, *Ethics of the Real*, Kant, Lacan, Verso, 2000, 212

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 258

expression of “pure materiality” that is seen to transcend and inhabit earthly concerns. This horror of the flesh that is allowed through the description of its putrid “everydayness” seems to desire an area that evades representation and speaks of something that is “other”. However, in order to describe this Lacanian notion of the Real as being both within *and* without representational limits Zupancic employs the most typical language of the “other” whereby it confirms the constellation of identities that we know.<sup>37</sup> This illustration therefore, makes and confirms the “other” as a homely image that seems to dwell in this area between the comic, the tragic and the horrific.

The problem with the definition of agency being an experience between two conflicting laws, such as reason and idealism is that first it is figured as an aesthetic identification i.e., there is a prescribed territory for this experience, which leads to the question - why tragedy? And secondly the politics of this aesthetic identification are not put into question. The experience of “self”, advanced through the combination and contradiction of idealism and scepticism, persists in a metaphysical philosophical tradition of *identifying* writing as fictional examples which define a philosophical experience, instead of investing in a *critique* of the territories of that experience. That is, Zupancic and Cavell use “everyday” poetics of a perverse realism in order to create a concept of decision that is empirically located in our weakness for example, or perhaps a moment of being subject to (or of) a crude and banal violence. Images of average reality or mundanity are now in correspondence with the Real. This averageness does not resist celebrity, however, it becomes a *great* averageness, the *special* banality. Boredom and the insignificant are equally as enthralling as the most ultimate terror, because they have been written through it. Crucially, it is such theories that inscribe the “everyday” boredom and mundanity as the site for “ultimates” because it is in the everyday where we identify the repetitive existence of Cavell’s tragic narrative of knowledge.

Reading both Cavell and Zupancic our conception of “meaning” is perceived romantically as the impossibility of realism. The assertion of our own weaknesses becomes heroic to the extent that we can sensationalise this beyond a notion of some “stuff” of miniscule reality. Cavell and Zupancic create a split between two aesthetic modes of representation where one’s experience of decision hinges upon their political and interpretative differences, say, between the everyday-

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<sup>37</sup> Zupancic takes up Lacan’s notion of “realisation” from *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, in which he speaks of an “abyssal realisation” figured by Sygne de Coûfontaine. Zupancic goes on to claim that “after sacrificing everything for her cause, Sygne has to sacrifice this very Cause itself. This brings about a new figure of the infinite, as well as a new figure of the “*ne pas céder sur son désir.*” (256)

known or rational space for articulation and the other-unknown space of fantasy and desire, or even, *between meaningfulness and meaninglessness*.

As we have seen, Zupancic and Cavell move towards such images/experiences of “contamination” in order to overcome the problem of the sacrifice of the subject. Zupancic reinterprets Kant’s theory of agency as the suicide of the subject towards a conception of a split subject, who subjectivises the self. Cavell makes reference to the “cost of knowing” through Heidegger and Wittgenstein’s reinterpretation of Kant’s concept of the limitations of knowledge as representative not of the failure of knowledge but of its realisation. “In *Being and Time* the cost is an absorption in the public world, “mass” or “average man”. In *Investigations*, the cost is arrived at in terms of not knowing what we are saying, of emptiness in our assertions, of the allusion of meaning something, of claims to impossible privacies.”<sup>38</sup> Clearly both Zupancic and Cavell take these “costs” into consideration and their theories show an attempt to formulate a conception of self-reflexivity within choice that does not realise the finite to evoke the infinite, but yet retains a conception of constraints and therefore consequence - and, it so goes – “meaning” or value regarding human action. In order to formulate a subjectivity that can make moral value judgements within pluralism Zupancic and Cavell contaminate the aesthetics of the finite with the infinite, or, the earthly and particular with the transcendental and universal, whilst contradictorily and simultaneously relying upon the subject to invest in the loss of the rational distinction between the two.

Cavell’s theory offers an understanding or meaning in the face of the universal, through “the recognition of no recognition at all,” or, the recognition of “no reason.” This conceptual notion of the unavailability of self-recognition can be seen to trouble a social-political theory of inter-subjectivity, since, it seems that such a politics of recognition becomes unworkable precisely at the point of practice where self-recognition is required. To explain this in more detail, we can return to Cavell’s story of the robot, where Cavell develops a concept of autonomy through a scepticism of the “human”; i.e., his theory is based upon whether we all have the same experiences, thoughts, sense of responsibility, guilt, pain, or feelings of love, etc. and whether we can recognise our own humanity and that of others. Duly, this leaves the problem hanging, when if we cannot acknowledge the impossibility of doubting oneself as human as contingent to autonomy, then we are left with the remaining and troubling consequences of a theory of autonomy that is premised upon the experience of doubting the humanity of others.

This demand or requirement for reason (is Cavell's robot human or not?), or the recognition of conflicting laws (Zupancic's audience recognises Sygne de Coûfontaine as subject of and to the law), quickly slips back into a (anti) humanism through the requirement for the subject to know or to recognise the point at which s/he doesn't know or believe, in opposition to what s/he is sure of. For example, in Cavell's story, he is sure that the robot experiences human emotions, such as pain and discomfort, but he is not sure if this makes the robot human.

Accordingly, the doubts about moral certitude in Cavell resist a socially responsible subject and create an *aesthetically* defined individual as one writes oneself into the tragic experience, where we become our own philosophical examples. The evacuation of recognition in Cavell may be induced by an everyday situation, but it ends up in philosophical abstraction. Also, as we see in Zupancic, Sygne de Coûfontaine allows the "infinite to parasitise the finite", a status of semi-passivity, where her actions are inexplicable, where her choice is rooted in an ambiguous intention, and, where in order to realise the "absolute condition" she lives in a moment of autonomous indecision.<sup>39</sup> The uncertainty of our ability to recognise such differences regarding decision could be seen to threaten Cavell's conception of tragedy. If we understand a basic reading of the tragic to be one that insists upon the subject being caught between two things or the downfall of the protagonist,<sup>40</sup> then the contamination of the infinite and the finite as a wholly aesthetic experience challenges such epic oppositions.

In both Cavell and Zupancic the trope of ambiguity, of repetition and of trauma can easily be read as an allegory of how knowledge is undone. In other words, we know ambiguity, its construction and its invention and as a symbol or metaphor; we know it represents the problem of infinite possibilities, or even the impossibility of death. *Both theories aim for the Real, where "meaning" is still concerned with a politics of recognition whilst refusing the politics of its own status of identification. Within their preservation of the "unrepresentable" they effect the same stylisation of agency that is demarcated from and unarticulated within traditional philosophy, specifically a theory of the politics of violence as the "unpolitical".* Consequently, we are offered an image of

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<sup>38</sup> Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 241

<sup>39</sup> Zupancic, *Ethics of the Real*, 259

<sup>40</sup> Similarly, this aspect of tragedy was articulated in the first section of this chapter, which looked to Oedipus as representative of the impossibility of tragedy, in that Oedipus was for the most part blind in order to make the required distinctions between his own actions and the will of the Gods. Unlike Sygne de Coûfontaine or Cavell's autobiographical accounts of decision, Oedipus is never able to make such

contamination that highlights the collision of finitude and the infinite in one quite distinctive, or even perhaps clichéd image. As such, we are left with the problem of an absolute finitude of language, although already we can determine the re-writing of the tragic as exteriority upon this conception of finitude as another essentially tragic moment.

In making philosophy a genre it would seem that Cavell opens the way to understand also a non-tragic conception of knowledge. However, this is not only undermined by his universalising of the tragic as an everyday experience, i.e., *it happens to us all*, but also in as much as Cavell insists upon the idea that in order to sustain a practice of knowledge we must recognise any attempt to do this has the tragedy of disappointment snapping at its heels. *Perhaps paradoxically, philosophy, may for Cavell, be a genre but tragedy is a condition of all techniques of knowledge.*

### 3. Undoing the Tragic

#### *Self-recognition as the tragic success of language*

Returning to Lacoue-Labarthe's text we can see that the figure of Oedipus is identified in both the legacy of Hegel and the work of Nietzsche, as the mark of the end of philosophy:

And it is, perhaps, here that the Hegelian symbolic reaches its limits. That is why Oedipus, who is the figure of a dawning Greek knowledge, is also the figure of a truly Western knowledge: the last knowledge. It is therefore not his hostility towards Hegel that explains why Nietzsche, that "latecomer", should choose to call Oedipus the "last philosopher" - who is, as it happens, also the last man.<sup>41</sup>

Here, the re-figuring of Oedipus as distinctly Nietzschean does little to spare Oedipus from his historical and philosophical role. In which case, it is not so much that we are invited to choose between these two figures of knowledge - *between a tragic Hegelian Oedipus and the passionate Heideggerian or even Nietzschean Oedipus* - but rather that we are asked to acknowledge that each is stained historically and determinably with the task of philosophy, or as I have shown, an aesthetic and political violence. In the face of this irrevocable knowledge are we to renounce our choice between the two? And, as such, is decision itself therefore afflicted with and determined by the transcendental character of the difficulty, or even the crisis of choosing? On the other hand, and this is something I want to consider in more detail, perhaps it is possible to think

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distinctions between contradictory laws or duties. His actions are continually, and even within his self-mutilation, are proportionately self-objective and egoistic.

through our undecidability without such a determinate relationship to our decisions. I take this up in the final section of this chapter by considering the parodic and ironic aspects of “return” as cultural practices before turning finally to contemplate non-ironic portrayals of tragic and non-tragic narratives, especially those that predicate violence on choice-making. However, first I consider how Cavell responds to and figures the crisis of “philosophical return”, and I critique the limitations of representing knowledge therein.

Cavell identifies the claim of metaphysics by taking up the Nietzschean concept of “eternal return”:

For Nietzsche there is no key to ones identity. Hence after his first book, there is for him no tragedy. One might feel that just this is our (new) tragedy. For it means that there is no ending, only return eternally.<sup>42</sup>

Here we can see that Cavell’s theory of philosophy’s self-consciousness as tragedy is perhaps too easily construed as the impossibility of difference, or the possibility of the repeat. Consequently, not only does Cavell aestheticise undecidability as a recognisable (or possible) impossibility found in our daily experiences, but here again possibility is also defined (usefully) as impossibility. In this way self-reflexivity is sustained in the romantic tradition of “split faith” where the limits of knowledge describe one’s political potential and at once the disappointment of our ideals. As such, the Nietzschean convention of “return” in Cavell is determined moreover as a philosophical problem or even, the root by which to access the other. Here, Cavell reclaims the tragic status of subject philosophy that Nietzsche had exorcised. By reflecting on Cavell’s assertion that the quasi-transcendental is best at home with the genre of tragedy, and specifically tragic literature, we can ask what happens when the tragic aspect of thinking is recouped through practice in the figure of return - the figure without figure? – And, how does this assertion of return now relate to aesthetic, literary and cultural productions and identifications?

The answer lies in the way Cavell figures philosophy’s (new) tragic narrative through the trope of repeat. Here, the historical tradition of theorising freedom is immanent to all our actions and the success of language is zeroed in on as a symbol of constraint. In such a case language transcends contingency, *the universal use of language is tragedy par excellence*. Theorising the tragic nature of such practices is made more impenetrable because we are asked to distinguish between the

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<sup>41</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe, “Oedipus as Figure”, 14

<sup>42</sup> Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 393

infinite task of writing and the stuff that is written (the finitude of the text), when one is without object. Or, as exemplified in Zupancic, we continue philosophising despite and because of a notion of the Real as an affect of language. Significantly here, both philosophising and the Real are aestheticised via the themes of tragedy and repetition. In each case, we have two contradictory technologies: the use of language as a continual application and re-invention of knowledge, and the knowledge of language as infinite object. Crucially, this metaphysical aspect of writing is sustained if we read Cavell's writing as a transgressive move against the real, an affirmation of the freedom to invent and an underscoring of our sentence of confinement within language. In this way Cavell's work persists in writing "the other" whilst asserting the "other" of writing, or, that writing is a fiction. Gerald L. Bruns comments on Cavell's understanding of writing's metaphysical aspects. This is writing's resistant character, a refusal of the real, as read through Socrates and Gadamer; "poetry retains its ancient character as the dark saying or *ainigma*, that which withholds its saying, refuses itself, resists exegesis, forces us into the allegorical posture of speaking on its behalf."<sup>43</sup> However, as we have seen through Cavell, such tropes of violence establish a persuasive rhetoric very much the same as those of scepticism.

### *Tragic and non-tragic narratives*

Unlike Cavell's theory, in the post-tragic narrative, doubt is not universalised under the aporia of transcendental or substantial value despite the fact that narratives are reproduced over and over again. Instead, doubt is performed discursively where the subject is able to reason conditionally and circumstantially, whether this is verbally or physically, and "the repeat" does not so much reproduce the same narrative, but re-interprets and re-creates *another narrative* that by all accounts does not point us towards the meta-discursive themes of tragic freedom or tragic confinement. Significantly, the way in which Cavell describes tragedy, either through "repeat" or the "availability" and "success" of language renders the same paradoxical position as his recognition of tragedy as the crisis of the lack of "appropriate" linguistic criteria. Cavell cites this act of the writing and repeating of the "universal themes" of "violence as decision" as indicative of the tragic state of human knowledge. However, as we have seen, the very basis of recognising the tragic aspects of language is unavailable to Cavell. Instead, we are left with the need to take a closer look at these worn out metaphors of autonomy in the post-tragic narrative.

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<sup>43</sup> Gerald L. Bruns, *Tragic Thoughts at the End of Philosophy, Language, Literature, and Ethical Theory*, Northwestern University Press, 1997, 197

To explain this further, I will once more turn to an example in film. *Timecop* (dir. Peter Hyams, 1994) features Jean Claude Van Damme as (you guessed it) time-travelling cop Max Fletcher, whose job is to prevent crimes before they happen. A corrupt senator in the present is using a time machine to commit crimes in the past (thus changing the future for their betterment and, of course others' loss). Fletcher's job is to stop him. Here, Fletcher's private/family life and his professional/public life are aligned. His private tragedy is the murder of his wife, something he should have been able to prevent, after all he is a cop *and* he can travel through time. Throughout the film Fletcher blames himself for her death, but in no way does this deprive the narrative of action. Instead, it introduces the question of a potential redemption. This narrative of private justice does not take centre stage, rather it is inter-textually combined with Fletcher job as a time-cop. However, he is not the upholder of an agreed upon centralised or absolute law, rather, the pluralised law of the future - a now familiar cinematic image of a privatised corporate law enforcement.<sup>44</sup> Here, his public job as a cop shows him battling between his own beliefs shown to be a more true and universal concept of justice against the particular interests of a privatised corporate law. Crucially, our hero is able to make the "wrong decision"- the mistake of not being there to protect his wife. However, these decisions are not characterised by the immanence of tragedy as an absolute condition to action but as potentiality. As we see, Van Damme is always in action, and manages ultimately to use his role as a time-cop to bring his wife back from the dead.

Another example of the post-tragic heroic is Arnold Schwarzenegger's spoof action movie *The Last Action Hero* (dir. John Mc Tiernan, 1993). The opening scene features Schwarzenegger's heroic character, Jack Slater, playing the role of Hamlet. On approaching the infamous lines that characterise Hamlet's procrastination in the soliloquy "To be or not to be," Jack Slater lights up a cigar, and, riding a rearing horse bluntly affirms, "Not to be", before riding away, leaving a spectacular explosion in the mock medieval castle behind him. Here, in the most crude and deliberate way, the orthodoxy of the suffering hero is confirmed as historical fiction by the power of the post-tragic subject. In these words, Slater asserts not only his power over death, but also his ability to make his justice over others their death sentence.

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<sup>44</sup> This image of the future of law enforcement is perhaps best seen in Paul Verhoven's 1987 film *Robocop*, where we see crime prevention to be consumer product in the form of the company OCP (Omni Consumer Products). Here we have a "Philip K. Dick-style" future, where machines are given the role of law enforcement. The police, whilst remaining as the central symbol of law enforcement, are in fact being controlled by corporate enterprise run by power hungry megalomaniacs. More often than not, this pluralised and privatised notion of the law is shown to be an apocalyptic scenario for ethics; *even the police*



In the post-tragic narrative the idea that we have concern for others' suffering is outdone by marveling at the sensational aspect of such suffering, or more crudely perhaps, the *quality of suffering*. This evacuation of the tragic content in the post-tragic narratives (read not as a lack, as Cavell would prefer) forces home the problem with Cavell's theory: that it may be OK to theorise a conception of literature as philosophy, but only to the point that one identifies the act of philosophising as the singular "critical" path; that this path is in itself tragic and finally that the only literature that is "philosophical" or capable of philosophy is the tragic genre. *Philosophy may be a form of literature, but all literature is not philosophy*. As such, Cavell's theory is problematically reduced to the artistic and poetic taste of the philosopher.

As I have demonstrated, Cavell's theory becomes unworkable when the genres don't fit and as a result, the nature of theorising is problematised in general. This is because firstly, the identification of localised experience of autonomy marginalises the practice of theorising, because *the practice of theorising is relegated to the tragic*. Secondly, and more generally, a theory of the tragic in practice can be seen to formally replicate itself as a "tragic" problem - the problem that the theory of the tragic is based upon a theory of its own insubstantiality. *It is a theory of half a theory*.

Cavell's theory of the tragic narrative, as recourse to social self-recognition, relies on a notion of the individual as tragic author with enough knowledge of the unknown to produce an experience of it. At the same time it invests in the belief that *this* experience raises an inside/outside paradox. A self-reflexive knowledge of the tragic (as producer and the indicator of self-recognition) both demand a dedicated and particularised notion of authorship expertise *and*, in contradiction require that the author always be an expert in defining his/her limits to it. In this we can understand that the "tragic", as a theory or a formalised genre, utilised as recourse to self-recognition, only produces a self-recognition that evacuates itself as concept, *for one cannot organise the split faith that the tragic requires*. As such, looking at the tragic as a prescribed and understood territory of experience, we can see that this evacuates the central concern of the tragic, or, the philosophical question of essence and truth, as things that are qualified by a character of exteriority. Attempting to define a politics or a theory of self-recognition in or through the tragic therefore obligates a theory of the tragic that the tragic cannot offer, or else give itself up altogether.

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*have to be policed*. This relationship between the subject and the law will be discussed in more detail in my conclusion.

#### 4. Practices of Return

Contemporary narratives of decision or choice which represent an understanding of violence as a means to produce autonomy problematise conceptions of the tragic as it is through such representations that the redemptive facility of the other is evacuated. This happens in two ways in cinema: Firstly and generally, cinema writes for itself. In other words, cinema remains within, is defined by and does not transgress the medium of its self-definition – celluloid.<sup>45</sup> Secondly, and more particularly, what is represented as “action” in contemporary cinematic genres does not identify an absolute other, or a tragic subject upon which that action is understood. Significantly, it is in the postmodern narrative of decision that I will attempt to identify the structure of, or the experience of meaning within the genres of violent agency. Crucially, this is not in order to replace the Cavellian (tragic) figure for knowledge with that of the post-tragic, but more to understand the relationship between what I have identified as a Nietzschean character of postmodern agency with this figuring of agency in culture.

Initially, I am thinking here of the many *James Bond* films where the token torture scene is perfected as means by which we don't ever think of *if* our hero will escape, but *how*? Certainly, violence happens to the hero, and the hero can go through all manner of torture, both emotionally and physically and their suffering is always outweighed by a complacent defiance. The hero's suffering is not frail and weak, neither is it an ordeal to prove and assert strength in the sense of some religious rites of passage, as for example, in John Webster's Jacobean tragedy, *The Duchess of Malfi*. Here, the Duchess' suffering is a means to her eventual and absolute freedom in death. The court malcontent Bosola is given the task of torturing the Duchess by her evil brothers Ferdinand and the Cardinal. Dressed in disguise Bosola subjects her to all manner of torture including making her believe that her children have been butchered, when in reality he has shown her wax replicas. Bosola soon takes on the role of priest touched by the Duchess' humility. The Duchess ultimately identifies redemption through suffering, saying:

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<sup>45</sup> In many ways the cinematic tradition could be seen as something that occupies a rather different notion of critique than that of a typical avant-gardist art's critical position. Certainly, film can, and does ask the same philosophical questions as art. For example, there are many films that critique the inherent nature of film, as narrative content, as celluloid medium, and in terms of size, and context. However, this practice is lived out through and accepted normatively as the “film medium” of a two-dimensional projection, whereas art's critical faculty, particularly relative to a modern and avant-gardist practice, sought to destabilise the very medium, aesthetic, and locale of what society understood and accepted to behave as and look like art.

“There’s no deep valley but near some great hill.” (Act 3, sc. 5)<sup>46</sup>

Through this acceptance of her inevitable death, and her identification of it as an earthy purgatory, the Duchess prepares herself for heaven. In this, her torturer becomes not only her priest but also the perpetrator of a perverse God-like justice. He represents the choice to redeem herself of her more unscrupulous affairs and to meet death as a prince. As such, the strength or power in the tragic narrative is hinged upon the hero/heroine’s recognition of a higher law, and a redemption that is characterised through the acceptance of one’s situation as “guilty mortal.” The Duchess faces the inevitability of finitude, almost perceiving its materiality:

“- tell my brothers  
That I perceive death, now I am well awake,  
Best gift is they can give, or I can take.” (Act Four, scene 2)<sup>47</sup>

In sharp contrast, in the post-tragic narrative, the subject under the violence of torture doesn’t undergo some moralistic change or learn anything from violence; violence is not a redemptive tool, it is part of the action in the sense that the torture of our hero is a means by which he can, a) demonstrate his strength in the face of his captors and, b) make an extravagant escape. Strength in this instance is violent agency. Also, the subject’s decisions are not relative to any concept of absolute autonomy or transcendental freedom, nor a self-consciousness of ethical responsibilities. In *The Duchess of Malfi*, we see the Duchess giving up her identity as an earthly woman, (she is both physically and morally weak) in order to achieve the status of transcendent prince. Comparatively, the post-tragic hero shows strength by self-construction not self-destruction: On the one hand, we see the tragic hero apply the negative to achieve the positive, whilst on the other, the post-tragic hero is totally mobilised. Importantly, and relative to this mobilisation is that the apparent necessity of violence seen in the post-tragic narrative does not emphasise its banality. Instead, the hero redeems her/himself often through a revenge that always outclasses the violence of the “evil” perpetrator.

The increasing cultural consciousness of the ambiguity of agency and violence can be seen in a number of film productions, where the hero’s actions increasingly opt for the execution of the bad guy. Instead of “bringing him in” to face the penalties of State justice, the bad guy suffers an execution style killing under the jurisprudence of the hero. This can be seen in many styles of

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<sup>46</sup> John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. John Russell Brown, The Revels Plays, Manchester University Press, 1984, 106

action narrative, from the “schmaltz-style” action of Arnold Schwarzenegger’s *Commando* and Brad Pitt in the serial killer thriller *Se7en* (dir. David Fincher, 1995), to Kiefer Sutherland’s (playing Jack Bauer) shooting of Dennis Hopper’s (Victor Drezin) in the TV series *24* (June-August 2002, BBC 2.) In these narratives justice is taken as a personal responsibility, however, the action is universal, not in the sense that Jack Bauer, or Arnold Schwarzenegger in any of those various roles, or indeed, any other heroic lead represents *us*, in the sense that we could say, “yes I am like that,” but in that its abstract fulfillment of the criteria of our expectation of action is played out within a hierarchical schema of violence.

### ***Knowledge and expectation***

Such a fulfillment of the criteria of expectation replays a problem of the empty metaphors of idealisation and how we go about understanding apparently universal aspects of language. In Jacques Derrida’s text “White Mythology”, a conversation between Aristos and Polyphilos is recounted from Anatole France’s *The Garden of Epicurus*:

“I think I have at last made you realise one thing, Aristos, that any expression of an abstract idea can only be an analogy. By an odd fate, the very metaphysicians who think to escape the world of appearances are constrained to live perpetually in allegory. A sorry lot of poets, they dim the colours of the ancient fables, and are themselves the gatherers of fables. They produce white mythology.”<sup>48</sup>

This quote re-traces Cavell’s concerns with the metaphoric element of metaphysics, that abstract ideas are essentially correlative to an empty or even (it would seem for Cavell) a meaningless language indicative of the realm of “no appropriate criteria”. Derrida continues to write upon this poetry of metaphysics as the employment of “worn out metaphors”, where metaphysics is both accessed and devalued by its own rhetoric. Here, the “atemporal and non-spatial” quality of such metaphors, present a transcendental, mythological narrative representative of the refusal of meaning.<sup>49</sup> As such, Derrida defines the writing of philosophy as an assertion of empty inactive or dead metaphors that are thus inherently authoritarian, where any value of meaning is based only in their political employment. Agreeing with Derrida’s citation of the “idealising metaphor” as something that is situated around a philosophical theme of “empty rhetoric”, it is interesting to identify the politics of what we could call “empty rhetoric” in the generic Hollywood narrative.

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 128

<sup>48</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Margins of Philosophy*, Harvester Press, 1982, 213-4

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 225

Here, one can identify that the language of “choice” in general smacks of an apparently “lazy” or non-intellectual relationship with spoken language. Catchphrases and profanities intersect each other and are used again and again to denote “action”. Scripts are increasingly speech-free, and also free from complex accounts of social relations. In most cases of action-adventure narratives the Hollywood formula is in place; (Usually a) man loses a loved one (wife, partner, child, friend); comes close to losing his colleagues’ respect (his allegiances with the good are questioned); man avenges death(s) and emerges triumphant.

A number of examples of this tendency in Hollywood narratives can be drawn upon. The 1993 movie *The Fugitive* (dir. Andrew Davis) starring Harrison Ford as the central character, Richard Kimble, adapted from the 1960’s TV series of the same name starring David Janssen, is an obvious example. Kimble is a doctor who comes home to find his wife brutally murdered only too late to catch the one armed man, the perpetrator of the crime who fled the scene. Kimble is duly arrested for murdering his wife, and then manages to accidentally escape from prison due to his prison transportation being caught up in a horrendous and lucky accident. From then on Richard Kimble is “The Fugitive”, simultaneously fleeing from the law, whilst always on the task towards avenging his wife’s murder. This is all done whilst constantly winning over respect from his acquaintances as he moves from town to town, where each time he jeopardises his freedom with acts of kindness to others. In the series and the film, Kimble has lost all his dignity, in that he is accused of the most heinous crime against his wife, whom he obviously loved dearly. Deemed as a murderer, Kimble fights for his freedom in each episode of the series, whilst simultaneously striking up a comradeship and a respect with and from the police that hunt him. Ultimately Kimble is a man that has lost everything, but it is the means by which he maintains his identity that drive the narrative. These characteristics turn out to be his practices of kindness, and unerring respect for himself and the law, despite his unlawful status as “fugitive”. These are manifest centrally within his role as a doctor, something that clearly demonstrates his caring for others not to be a career for which he wishes recognition, but moreover it is his natural disposition. In the movie, *The Fugitive*, Kimble’s ongoing task of revenge against the one-armed man is finally achieved, where his vengeance is in correspondence with not only the respect of the police but also the exoneration from his own guilt.

Both Derrida and Cavell’s theory of language points to the problem of how and upon what terms the language of universals, or of metaphysics is put to use within narrative. Also relevant, is to

consider more closely the nature of these apparently atemporal, non-spatial tropes of ultimates, especially regarding the political condition of aesthetics (and vice versa). This is significant when recalling Cavell's inscription of the rhetoric of metaphysics in as much as the tragic ambiguity in everyday actions such as doing philosophy, thinking, or walking, etc. are indicative of an ever present violent "other" that suffers and bears the weight of God.<sup>50</sup> Here, in Cavell's theory of subjective critique, the singular experience of the subject is not reducible to a universal absorption or an absolute surrendering to the narrative, but as Bruns points out "the universal is historicised, or (better) localised." However, as I have written the problem regarding Cavell's understanding of a localised or historicised universal is that this does little to articulate the problem of language as a "thing", which we see cropping up constantly in Cavell's project. Therefore, I will attempt to look to a notion of critique that understands what Cavell would call the "success and horror" of meaning whilst not falling into either category.

Cultural investments in the rhetoric of agency as violence and the cinematic ambivalence towards death further illuminate the paradoxical nature of a theory of the tragic; whether this is a theory of tragic "excess" or return, or tragedy based on "lack". This is evidenced most particularly in cinema (even when the actor plays a character that dies) when the "celebrity" of the actor outside the script can be seen to be as much a part of the script itself. By this I mean that when Arnold Schwarzenegger as "The Terminator" (from the film *Terminator*, dir. James Cameron 1984) dies in the first film, we are ready for his return in the second movie, not merely through the script's explanation that he is a manufactured robot, i.e., there are many of him, and that he can return over and over again, but also that the "celebrity" of Arnold Schwarzenegger himself projects an immortality onto the character that confuses the two identities. Similarly, despite Oliver Reed's death occurring in the middle of filming *Gladiator*, (dir. Ridley Scott 2001) we are still able to see his character's actions throughout, either from computer generated images, or by disguised actors taking his place. On all counts the cinematic genre defies death both as a fiction, as a reality and as a celebration.

This phenomenon is to be had in many movie genres, where actors refer to other movie characters that they play, take up characters they have played in completely different movies and use them again. This dialectical operation between the exposure of real life and the staging of it becomes more complicated with the advent of the super-star celebrity as we are aware from the recent

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<sup>50</sup> Bruns writes more on this in *Tragic Thoughts at the End of Philosophy*, 209-211 regarding Cavell's philosophy of the everyday, the enigma of being human and the phenomenology of the monstrous.

plethora of “real-life”/“real-time” documentary style programmes, such as *The Osbournes* (2002 MTV), where real-life provides the realm of celebrity drama.

***A post-tragic condition: force and farce***

Violence in contemporary narratives does not distinguish between good violence and bad violence but constitutes an ethics of the *style* of violence. The hero’s violence always has to be more tantalising, more inventive, more daring, more witty than the villain’s, and in this sense it alludes to a more creative aspect to “good violence” where the artfulness of the good guy is always more flamboyant than the often crude and megalomaniacal inventions of the bad guy. In many film productions this requirement for “natural” artfulness from the good guy often counters the over-refined “plotting” of the villain, and it is here where reason/unreason, manifest as plotting, is countered by the natural, unthinking, “reacting” and “acting” actions of the hero. The hero doesn’t have to reason his violence; it is part of him; whereas the bad guy is always asserting his status in relation to it. This is nicely parodied in the *Austin Powers* movies where Dr. Evil constantly assesses his evil status with his circus-like entourage, sharing in our knowledge of the formula of heroic narratives.<sup>51</sup> Such critiques identify critical autonomy in the excessive repetition of the theme of ultimates. In parody, comedy asserts a criticism by demanding the return or the repeat. It identifies the repeat as a means to redemption forcing its presence as a perverse excess embodied in examples such as Dr. Evil’s side kick “Mini-Me” (a clone, a friend and a pet) and other characters such as the grotesque and aptly named “Fat Bastard”. Here, humour exhausts the romantic concerns of Cavell.

However, in forcing the repeat, or by making it our own, parody as a critical tool still doesn’t deal with the many representations of non-ironic violence, interest in justice and the notion of individuated laws of decision that are constantly affirmed in contemporary narratives. Indeed, parodic criticism expects, requires and needs such serious investments in themes of agency to continue in culture. This type of comedy laughs at such conventions but its critical and redemptive power lies in making such beliefs ineffectual by acting as if they do not effect us, or that we have a critical distance over them. Of course, the *Austin Powers* films rely upon the fact that we enjoy and get caught up in the story-line of the various *James Bond* movies, but this repeat does not raise the problem of, nor disputes how we understand justice as rhetoric, the repeat just rhetoricises justice (again). Consequently, the critique asserted in the *Austin Powers*

movies is a critique made by the intellectual or aesthete, where the comedy skills of Mike Myers's "fronting" or packaging of the film and, is shown for example in his playing more than a few of the characters, and co-writing and producing the film, induces another experience of excess and farce empowered from a position outside of the script. Parody, in this instance, is effective in the ability of the subject/author to extradite himself from the narrative and to at once position him/herself artfully within it. The author's critical capacity is here based in the ability to occupy two places at once. In this sense films such as the *James Bond* franchise and those of *Austin Powers* exist side by side, where the "transgressive" elements of *Austin Powers* films do not really effect how we watch *James Bond* as they become *another literary fragment* in describing our relationship to choice and identifications of choice.

### ***Return to the tragic heroic character in contemporary film narratives***

The refusal of death in representations of the powerful subject, specifically within American action movies, commits narrative to the necessity of violence as a repetitive metaphor for the success of meaning or agency within the text. Regarding this it is relevant to review a final example of the tragic-heroic. For this I will look to Steven Spielberg's 1998 film, *Saving Private Ryan* starring Tom Hanks.

*Saving Private Ryan's* central thematic of the individual - Private Ryan (Matt Damon) - could for one part be seen as Spielberg's critique of the political value of one life, and also the political/institutional or governmental construction of "meaning" within war. However, as we shall see this issue is merely a backdrop for the action and the means to invoke abstract "truths".

To recount the story in brief, Captain John Miller (Tom Hanks) and his platoon are sent to rescue/find a Private Ryan and to bring him home as his six brothers have all been killed in battle. As his mother's last son, his safe return will represent hope, justice redemption and also the success of the American campaign. The narrative of the film unfolds with this aspiration first proposed and then followed. Spielberg features the "thinking moralising" intellectual within the army unit, in the form of the interpreter, Corporal Upham (Jeremy Davis). He is present throughout the film as part of the platoon, but always dislocated from them because of his social/intellectual differences. Spielberg employs this distancing device to create an "objective

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<sup>51</sup> I'm specifically referring here to *Austin Powers II: The Spy Who Shagged Me*, dir. Jay Roach, 1997



response” and an emotional juxtaposition to the other soldiers’ confrontations with war. War is horrible because we see it through the eyes of an outsider.

Clearly, this “thinking” man is poetically written to demonstrate a facet of Miller’s psychological make up. Each member of his crew is representative of his “body politic;” the thinking man, the joker, the headstrong righteous bulldog and the innocent teenager. As such, *Saving Private Ryan* is a narrative of one man, Capt. Miller, because the narrative of the film - the one for the many - is turned upside down, since Miller now represents the many as one. In this sense Spielberg’s narrative repeats the proposition of *Saving Private Ryan*, with its inverse and equal - the killing of Capt. Miller. This character, for Spielberg, represents the “unknown soldier” and Spielberg allows us to get to know him *from a formal distance*, i.e. as made up of formally constituted parts and us, the audience, like the rest of the platoon, do not know anything about his personal life outside the army. For the American government Private Ryan is the “unknown soldier”, but for Spielberg, the true “unknown soldier” is the tragic (dead) hero, not the one who gets saved, but the one who sacrifices his own life.

What is important to Spielberg’s tragic narrative is the specific experience of its delivery. *Saving Private Ryan* is a sensational story of individualism, where war is given a documentary feel. To perfect this realism as a horror of war, Spielberg uses subjective viewpoints, and awkward shaky camera angles. This is demonstrated in garish representations of people’s faces being ripped off, legs and arms being thrown all over the place and tragic, even farcical occurrence. In one scene a bullet hits a man’s helmet, he reflects upon the good fortune of his saved life, distractedly looking at his helmet to see where the bullet hit, to receive another fatal bullet in the head, sending a shower of pulsating blood into the mud and over his fellow soldiers. The dramatic irony in such instances can only be read as black comedy. Attempted as documentary-style realism, Spielberg’s moralizing directorship doesn’t fit well with such comedic identifications, because Spielberg’s narrative attempts to perform a conscious knowledge of tragic circumstance without being aware that tragedy is so close to farce. The awkwardness in watching or experiencing a director’s “critical” voice prompts the question of how can one understand this representation of reality, as a reality where we feel Spielberg’s force or manipulation of it in order to construct a didactic morality tale? This film perfectly entertains that problem, where Spielberg’s voice is always in conflict with a reality he attests to and allegedly describes. The central problem here is that “reality” is a sensational horror. Truth is violence. Spielberg’s film-making underscores the desire to retrieve an earthly or realistic quality to war, yet this is not the earth of nature, of dirt. This is

soil as absolute metaphor. Spielberg's film works on the theme of how we should live our lives, not as a discussion of the politics of the values created upon life. As I have already described, both Private Ryan and Capt. Miller are shown as the suffering face of humanity under the unquestionable (and what seems to be the irrational) duty of the State, which requests that Ryan's life should be spared, and therefore worth more than Capt. Miller's life and those of his unit.

This "tragic" moment in *Saving Private Ryan* reaches its highest pitch in the penultimate scene of the film, where we see Capt. Miller's death. His death is a public theatre, falling neatly into a tragic space between the heroic and the banal. For this, Miller gets a literal centre stage within the shot, surrounded by supporting cast. Leaning awkwardly against the wheel of a jeep, shooting a pathetic handgun at a great tank, he keeps on "fighting" to the bitter end, despite his fatal wounds. Spielberg desperately tries to create tragedy in the moment of this "awful" juxtaposition, showing the "small" average man; who teaches kids "back home", and who kept his crew together, immovable in the face of the tank, a large powerful faceless machine. This tragic moment is inspired through Spielberg's heavy-handed invocation of "ambiguity", inscribed between Capt. Miller's incapacity to move, as he is fatally wounded and the possibility that he would also choose not to move. In other words, tragedy is obtusely scripted in Spielberg as the space when forced choice collides with, or becomes, subjective choice. The problem with this collision (for Spielberg, I would imagine anyway) is that this is not tragic. We are not saddened by Capt. Miller's plight and we do not experience others' suffering as an indication that we must be always aware of our social responsibilities concerning violence. *Saving Private Ryan* uses the trope of the futility of war, to remind us that war is not futile. We are reminded in the final scene of the film that the memory of Capt. Miller makes Private Ryan as, now an old man, think about how he has lived his life, and whether or not he has earned the right to live.

Reminded constantly of the value of (his) life, through the guilt of others, Private Ryan stands for a world free from tyranny, or even a world free from terror. He is a reminder that violence is both terrible and that we can only use violence for the force of good, thus according to the same paradoxical logic that Cavell mobilises around tragedy. Apparently, then, futile death saves the world from tyranny just as it saved Private Ryan, as long as we realise that death was futile. Here, we can take Spielberg's lesson, that value is not attributed to life in particular, but to the moral "rightness" of our actions represented in contradiction, in the lone man played by Tom Hanks.

In such cases, we know what will happen, and this awareness of how meaning is incorporated prevents the ambiguity that the tragic requires. Namely, self-conscious romanticism, or a *theory of the tragic* evacuates its own possibility. Because of this - and what this example proves - is that an investment in the tragic not only exposes itself as *post* tragic, in that it exposes itself as genre, but also crucially that we know we are faced with questions of action as a parody or farce, and/or action as a problem for individual moralising powers.<sup>52</sup>

### ***Authorities of decision***

Postmodern versions of agency or power offer an alternative to this embarrassment of action in farce. They focus our attention on theories of power and authority, in as much as the characters are not aggrandised through failure, and have both a stupidity and power that falls short of any sentimental inclinations about our human state. Here the success of scepticism is not tragic, but a space for invention, in that unlike Cavell and Zupancic's narratives, the violence that the subject inflicts and endures is a violence that is implied within every action. Inter-subjectivity is not approached through a pathos that demands we all experience the trauma of life's impossibilities, but instead is accessed around a re-affirming, or an agreement in what is known - including the other.

In conclusion, and at worst, we can see that Cavell's tragic scepticism highlights his theory's truly tragic potential as being an un-reflexive or even naive romanticism, because it sketches concepts of power and knowledge as idealistic futures (best cases) that are rooted in an undefined territory of unprincipled desire (the cost of our will to knowledge). However, interestingly, Cavell's theory does implicate the tradition and convention of philosophy, and also the literary fragment as the political and public articulation of private theoretical projects. It is with this in mind, working from Cavell's account of the rhetoric of metaphysics, that I will organise a basis for a critique of the politics of the violent history of scepticism, which can also take into account Cavell's own work.

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<sup>52</sup> The hierarchy of the post-tragic overriding the tragic needs some clarification: Tragedy, in this case (and many others) shows itself to be a formally constructed experience. However, crucially, this does not prevent our feeling empathy with the suffering of others in their tragic situation. Most significant to this argument is that the formal identification of tragedy evacuates a tragic identification as being the universal locus for knowing others' humanity. As a result this prompts a further analysis of the politics of authorship with respect to non-tragic and post-tragic narratives.

Television/cinema's forays into the everyday are now no longer tinged with the inverse of dramatic irony, and more importantly knowledge has become a communal and social/cultural experience. Our ability to know what happens in certain narratives, and to know what *has* happened, including the histories of the actors and characters involved *and* just exactly how much they know about us (the audience), has become something that we expect.<sup>53</sup> In many cases the evacuation of the tragic understands itself as farce, particularly if we continue to look at comedy as a critical tool. Consequently the self-understanding of the tragic is raised in comedy, in as much as comedy still takes on the same task of writing this understanding both within and outside of the script.

As I have already demonstrated, comedies such as the *Austin Powers* series rely upon genre, tropes and action to which they explicitly refer. These narratives (i.e. *James Bond* films) are not transgressed, but are utilised for the creation of other narratives. The *Austin Powers* films are however, *transgressive in character* in the sense that they test our limits of taste, and morality, through their deliberate and rhetorical excesses, not in the sense that they site an absolute object from which to transgress. To underscore this point, *Austin Powers* is demonstrative of a Marxian conception of "return" lived out as farce without tragedy where the play of the non-tragic subject throws the subject as celebrity into light. Similarly, films such as *Commando* represent a Nietzschean conception of the "will to power" after the tragic as a *rhetoric of power* where the heroic character still retains its autonomy without the same degrees of satire, irony or parody. In this way, film as a non-transgressive genre offers concepts of agency that persist in extremes without recovering the tragic necessarily as a narrative thematic or as a notion of the tragic quality of writing itself.

This postmodern heroic subject does not separate "knowing" or "thinking" from "doing" and the actions of the subject are absolutely contingent on his/her language. A lack of knowledge in no way effects this subject's ability to act. As such, knowledge as essence is not something the subject needs to seek out. Rather, the "nature" of this subject is made up of a practice of a convergent notion of knowing and doing, expressed more often than not as a natural skill or a in-built sensibility towards what happens next. This is clearly demonstrated in the film *Out for Justice*, (dir. John Flynn, 1991) starring Steven Segal. Segal plays a character who although being a cop, and therefore someone who should be all the more aware to the difference between right

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<sup>53</sup> This relationship between the audience and the filmmaker will be discussed later, specifically on David Arnold's composing of the *James Bond* soundtracks. For this, see my concluding chapter.

and wrong, still undertakes a personal task of (a mostly brutal) revenge over a friend's cruel and unwarranted murder. Segal's character has to use all means available to him to get justice, but this exception is lived out in Mafioso-style training coinciding with his devout spiritualism, both expressed as a natural ability to artfully defend himself on the one hand and to "get justice" on the other. Crucially, these actions are clearly outside of what we consider to be the "everyday" law.

His expression of autonomy is most pertinent in a scene that depicts a spectacular and violent confrontation between Segal and the bad-guy gang members, plus other general low-lives. This scene, set in a sleazy bar is made even more significant because it is where Segal looks for his only possible lead to the killers. Here, he not only uses expert Aikido moves with broken snooker cues, but also smashes a goon's teeth out with a pool ball in a napkin, where we see blood and teeth splurge out onto the green baize of the pool table. In this ten minute relentless violent vignette, Segal's fighting techniques cover the gamut of what we could expect to see in such a movie, a hybrid between the spiritual calm of physical and mental agility demanded in the orthodox of martial arts; the brutality of a personal vengeance, and crude and unrelentingly brutal language coupled with the expert moves of a bar room brawler. This happy contradiction between mysticism, spirituality, the Mafia - which operates as the character's shady back ground - and the law as, say, the judiciary and the police, together with the character's personal vendettas all add to the fact of his ultimate autonomy, in that he can deal out all manner of rhetorics in a brutal sophistry.

Today we watch and produce renditions of the sequel or the repeat, over and over again, and the fact that the protagonist doesn't die is not a concern or sadness; it is moreover economically productive and "super-star" orientated. *We know that there will be a sequel*, and if there isn't there must be a possible re-make further down the line, or even, if not that, there will be a tendency to produce another film of that ilk during the same season.<sup>54</sup> Regarding such films as those made by Steven Segal we know that they all follow the same or at least similar narrative

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<sup>54</sup> I am referring to the fashion of film genres, where genres are produced in timely correspondence. It could of course be argued that this is mostly down to economics, but this is clearly not the only factor. The Tom Hanks film from 1989, *Turner and Hooch*, was a smash hit comedy, closely followed by James Belushi's *K9*, and then of course these films had sequels such as *K9000*. Similarly, Tom Hanks again, was the star of the film *Big*, a comic tale of "body changing", the comedic rendition of missing out the process of puberty where the character changes from child to adult overnight. This was promptly followed by Dudley Moore's *Like Father Like Son* of the same year, a tale of body swapping, again from a boy to a man. In the past few years, the monster or alien "family" movies have been the exclusive genre, with films such as *Independence Day*, *Men in Black*, *Godzilla*, *Jurassic Park*, and *Jurassic Park II* and *III*. Still, more recently

structures. What is crucial to this phenomena is not only the idea of what happens *within the narrative*, but also the character and motivations of the authors of these narratives themselves and the cultural tradition of their writing. The advent or promise of the sequel then, and the exploits and motivations for making the movie is equally as engrossing as what actually happens in the narrative, for example, we both wonder and expect which characters will appear again, and will the same people play them. And, say through Steven Segal's movies, we can also acknowledge, (however strange his motivations may be) that these movies are indeed the culmination of belief in his personal eastern style mystical spirituality coupled with an American-style conservative and even, a naive belief in social harmony and justice for all.<sup>55</sup>

Concentrating upon such non-comedic uses of the aesthetics of violence as the space in which the problem of critical autonomy is both problematised and brought into focus, I will continue to look at the metaphoric and foundational aspect of this rhetoric of agency, the writing of narratives of decision and the question of how violence is represented. What is increasingly significant to this is what I have explored in this chapter, namely, the similarities between an account of violence characterised by stereotypical cliches and those cliches as abstract indicators of a philosophical tradition and also the various technologies of power. *Therefore, what is particular to this text as a whole is the question of how agency is perceived and represented within these narratives, and also how the politics of this representation is contingent upon the repetition of certain linguistic tropes.* I now intend to move through Cavell's philosophical romanticism towards a study of how agency is understood under the condition of absolute finitude in language. Returning to the example of Oedipus, the problem can be drawn out further regarding the choosing and the figuring, or, the representing of ideological and philosophical theories. If we prefer a non-tragic or *Promethean* Oedipus, will we automatically backslide into the archetypal Nietzschean problematic of the "will to power"? Does the identifying of politics as a system of dominating forces necessarily invite *absolute domination*? In light of this I consider the locus and consequence of the philosophical project of freedom in the matrix of a complex hegemony. This includes the problem of philosophy's apparent displacement from political practices, when in such cases, the work of theorising is responsible for understanding the finitude of political freedoms in the role as "guardian" over them.

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we can see the fashion for superhero movies such as *Dare-Devil*, *Spider Man*, *The Hulk*, and the *X-Men* now up to its second sequel. Of course this list is inexhaustible.

<sup>55</sup> For more information of Steven Segal and for a filmography visit his web-site, <http://www.stevenseagal.com>

To pursue these questions further in Chapter Two I concentrate upon the relationship between a Nietzschean-style aesthetics of violence and what I have called the postmodern heroic which, as I have already described, could be construed as the rhetoric of active nihilism. Following this, I critique the social problems leveled at poststructuralist conceptions of agency, specifically that of Michel Foucault, where I analyse in more detail the relative and historical condition of aesthetics, violence and autonomy.

## **2** Aesthetics, Transgression and Power: *Kant, Nietzsche, and Foucault's antihumanism*

### **1. Pluralism and the Aesthetics of Evil**

As I have shown in Chapter One, contemporary representations of post-tragic subjectivities feature and concretize violence, brutality and power as traditional characteristics for the practice of *any* decision. Here, the subject acts without any transcendental guarantees; his/her life is organised for self-interest and identity is unequivocally defined by the use of power.

In this chapter I take up the many arguments which understand this antifoundationalist-style subject as inherently antihumanist and also Nietzschean. On these accounts poststructuralism is equated specifically with the antimodern, in that an unchecked and irrational nihilism prevails and leads decision making, and also in that an identification with evil is equated with the good. Accordingly, and in keeping with this orthodoxy, when decisions are made they are made with the problematic identification of “nothingness” - the negatively defined territory of immorality and evil - pursued with all the fervour of a Nietzschean caricature acting out a “means to an end” power hungry irrationalism.

First, I consider claims made against the contemporary tendency towards an aesthetics of evil in Jennifer L Geddes's introduction to the book *Evil After Postmodernism*, then going on to look at a specific critique of the post-tragic agent in Roger Shattuck's text, “Narrating Evil: Great Faults and Splendidly Wicked People.” Both Geddes and Shattuck understand the depiction of an aesthetics of violence to be socially and morally dangerous when understood to be intrinsic to action. They argue that the depiction and even fascination with evil or horror as a traditional and “necessary” violence is construed as a symptom of our disregard and disrespect for actually dealing with “evil”, both culturally and politically. The first problem that arises from this assertion is exactly how a post-tragic aesthetics of violence produces a problem for a critique and an understanding of evil. Here, evil is related to this violence mainly because the post-tragic narrative depicts the subject as being rationally in control of his/her actions, whether the subject is the victim of such action, or is conducting the torture of others. As such, the task of condemning post-tragic subjectivities because they are symptomatic of a power hungry nihilism on the one



hand, and paradoxically on the other, a bland tolerance at the heart of culture, is firmly rooted in a rationalising theoretical argumentation. As such, the post-tragic narrative (as representative of a problematic postmodernism) both banalises the decision making process and concretises identifications of “decision as violence”.

Here I draw out a number of themes for discussion dealing with the aestheticising and theorising of decision as transgression within theories of subjectivity. These include: i) The tradition of an aesthetico-ethical relation to evil; ii) The act of transgression towards evil, or away from the good, as relative to a political project of emancipation, and also; iii) The complex relationship between the proximity of the postmodern conception of agency to the antimodern.

Significant to these problems are the claims made against the inherent and mechanistic violence in poststructuralist and antifoundationalist discourses. To critique the problems of aesthetics and power in pluralism I concentrate upon the work of Michel Foucault. Crucially, Foucault figures the central problem above: first; in his attempt to construct a nonhumanist non-emancipatory politics as a solution to the evacuation of a Kantian Categorical Imperative; and, second, in his allegiance to a Nietzschean-style politics of self-aestheticisation. Consequently, my analysis not only includes a response to Foucault as the archetype of a Nietzschean-style poststructuralism, but also reflexes back upon the relationship between Kant and Nietzsche in as much as I read Nietzsche as Kant upside-down.

It is not my intention to consider Foucault’s work specifically, or in any great detail. More importantly, what is of interest to me is the controversy and argument around his work and Foucault himself. Most significant to this is that the various criticisms against Foucault’s project problematise his theory by producing undesirable representations of a “Foucauldian subject”. As a result, after Foucault, we can say that *any* theory of freedom models a problematic subject in that theorising always risks being prescriptive, legislative, and dominant. However, intrinsic to my argument is not just that this Foucauldian subject is undesirable socially and politically but that the very agreement that it is, established through these criticisms, points us to the complex co-relation of ethics, politics and aesthetics.

In response to this relationship between ethics politics and aesthetics, in the final part of this chapter, “The Narrative Turn”, I examine the legacy and consequence of Foucault’s project. Significant to this is that interpretations of Foucault’s project can be seen to “figure” this violent

post-tragic agent in a number of ways. Here, we see the literal embodiment of Foucault's *ethos* as a narrative genre produced equally by Foucault and his critics. Crucial to this representation of Foucault, and reflected in my interest in his critics' formulation and interpretation of his project, is both his and my own attempt to think through the problems of decision in pluralism with language. Foucault's project sustains the legitimacy of aesthetics in the political terrain where aesthetics or even the understanding of "critique as attitude" does not undermine the effectivity of critique. Rather, language is central to the political, to community and to agency. By foregrounding this correspondence of aesthetics and politics, in both Foucault's project and the post-tragic narrative, I finally return to the complex relationship between philosophy and narrative, or even, what could be seen to be the contradictory task of thinking *for the political* and the work of *practicing politics*. Once more, it is the specific identification and tradition of violence as decision (and vice versa) that sets the scene.

### ***Evil: inside and out***

In the editor's introduction to *Evil After Postmodernism* Jennifer L. Geddes writes:

Concomitant with the diminution of moral vocabularies, and perhaps because of it, evil has become an object of aesthetic fascination, rather than moral concern. Evil has taken on a glamorous sheen. The increasing popularity of horror and sci-fi movies, media attention on serial criminals, interest in the Gothic, the theatricalisation of war as it is occurring, to name a few examples, suggest that our culture has a growing obsession with evil. These popular representations of evil tend to relegate it to the realm of the mysterious, the other, and at times, the non-human – in each case, to a realm beyond rational consideration. By being aestheticised, evil has become at once domesticated and removed from the arena of thoughtful concern, and we the viewers of such evil become anaesthetised such that our questions take the form of curiosity rather than concern<sup>56</sup>.

In the above quote we can see that Geddes identifies the contemporary investment in the narrating of evil as a product of our inability to describe or understand it. With this in mind, she also quotes Andrew Delbanco's text, *The Death of Satan: How Americans Have Lost the Sense of Evil*, where he writes: "evil remains an inescapable experience for all of us, while we no longer have the symbolic language for describing it."<sup>57</sup> Following Delbanco, Geddes recognises the narration of evil as something which signifies and is the product of a "lack" of understanding in that it cannot be articulated in language, only experienced. Crucially, it is *because* of the perpetual use of the narration of evil in culture that Geddes argues that evil becomes something which problematises

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<sup>56</sup> *Evil After Postmodernism*, ed. Jennifer L. Geddes, Routledge, 2001, 8

its possible understanding. In this, subjective agency is identified and equated with “aestheticised transgression” based upon an unthinking application and acceptance of “evil as agency”.

As a result, we can confirm that for Geddes “evil”, as something that exists outside of language, and action as “aestheticised transgression”, are seen to be intangibly combined. The aesthetics of evil, as something which is “narrated”, then resists our *understanding* in that it is said to incite “curiosity over concern”, or possibly, “irrational desire” over “reason”. Geddes is therefore clearly concerned with the problem of the inability to differentiate between “evil”, as something which happens *to us* in the world and evil as a force that we cannot contextualise or comprehend. As such, the “aesthetics of transgression” in Geddes’ view creates an experience of “evil” that disables rational judgements. By placing aesthetics outside of a political space she blames the aestheticisation of evil for the banalisation of the term and at once identifies aesthetics as having the responsibility for maintaining evil’s mystical “otherness”. In relying upon an idea of “evil” as something that is both *unpoliticisable and mainstream* Geddes conceives evil as something not only relative to the aesthetics of transgression but also as something that is hinged upon a understanding of and an identification with autonomy. For example, evil has been used as a term to justify cruelty and violence to others. However, despite Geddes’ attempt to avoid such fundamentalisms, her preference for a critical rationale as the legitimising authority over the language of evil reflexes problematically around the question of a censoring authority. This is because in associating the *narration* of evil as something that is inextricably bound to evil itself, one could argue that by ridding the world of the narration of evil, or in other words its image, one would also get rid of evil itself. This proves to be a theologically motivated theory inherited from and recalling biblical commandments whereby the manufacturing of graven images was censored on account of them having the power to incite what they represent in the world at large. Consequently, we can see that Geddes’ theory seems to miss the point about attempting to make a rational study of evil as it moves so quickly over to a reactionary and dogmatic position of first identifying it as a bad thing and then moving to control it.

### ***Transcendental evil***

As I previously mentioned, Geddes explores the concerns of the narrating of evil as an introduction to a text featured later in the book, Roger Shattuck’s “Narrating Evil: Great Faults

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

and Splendidly Wicked People.”<sup>58</sup> Central to his assertion of the dangers of thought, Shattuck identifies the institution and postmodern theorists for the creation of evil as the object of subjective autonomy:

Our culture, and in particular the institution of the University, has contrived over the past few decades to transform sin and evil into a positive term: *transgression*. As used by postmodern critics today, transgression refers to conduct that aspires to...an implied form of greatness in evil.<sup>59</sup>

Significantly, it is in “metaphysical evil” that Shattuck identifies his central problematic wherein he defines two subject theories. The first is that of a critical subjective agency, where he prefers a subject that can self-reflexively doubt self-knowledge in the face of a ubiquitous and at once banal evil. The second, he identifies as a Nietzschean-style subject who condones evil or transgression as autonomy through the complicit act of narrating evil. He writes:

Metaphysical evil designates an assenting and approving attitude toward moral and radical evil, as evidence of superior will and power in human beings. Thus, forms of evil arriving from human agency are given a status as inevitable, effectively a reversion to natural evil in the first category. And thus, the cruelest monsters and tyrants become normalised in the perspective of history and of the “survival of the fittest” in evolution. Metaphysical evil nullifies all attempts to establish constraints of social law or compact [...] The twentieth century has conferred astonishingly widespread respect on the attitude of metaphysical evil by honouring the thought of Nietzsche.<sup>60</sup>

Shattuck’s apparent criticism of the twentieth century’s attraction for a “Nietzschean metaphysical evil” is directed towards the recognition that the attempt to effect a non-transcendental critique requires the domination of a subjective investment in the power of reason to an irrational extent. This “irresponsibile” investment, or, misguided self-confidence in the power of our reason, is claimed by Shattuck through his idea of our *inability* to control and differentiate an image of evil from acting upon those images and behaving “evilly”. In other words, our ability to be reasonable is shown to be limited precisely through the fact that we cannot differentiate between aesthetics and action. As such, curiosity is understood as something that is ungoverned by reason but also, wrongly, sanctioned by it

Sustaining his critique of theories that advocate an unselfconscious agency, Shattuck identifies such concepts as conditioned upon an understanding of belligerence, aggression and transgression

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., “Narrating Evil” 45-55

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., “Narrating Evil” 55

as autonomy. In this he looks to Ralph Waldo Emerson's subject centred theory; "We believe in ourselves, as we do not believe in others. We permit all things to ourselves, and that which we call sin in others, is experiment for us."<sup>61</sup> This correlation between acting evilly and having a lack of care for others is negotiated in his taking up of Emerson's "controversial" phrase, "there is no crime in intellect."<sup>62</sup> Here Shattuck holds this "experimental" attitude responsible for the subject who applies intellect to condoning evil. From this position Shattuck identifies this intellectual subject as indicative of a Nietzschean-style hegemony whereby the subject asserts and defines one's authority over others.

Shattuck attempts to deal with the problem of the subject's "unreasoned" curiosity, brought on by an Enlightenment-style self-confidence, not by asking us "not to reason", but to be careful about how we do. This is because Shattuck believes that through intellectualising evil, we historicise it and therefore condone it. Implicating the "barbaric" element of Enlightenment thinking as specific to a postmodern investment in an antimodern Nietzschean stance, Shattuck constructs his own mythology around such theories through a rather superficial critique of the dialectics of Enlightenment self-confidence, which he construes as dogmatic belief. From this, one could pose the question of the advocacy of "silence". After all, "being careful" or understanding the limitations of reason could easily fall into the possibility that we attempt to become "passive" subjects. Unfortunately, for Shattuck, this potentially would move rather too quickly into the moral relativism and bland tolerance that his critique is clearly trying to avoid. However, this argument around a potentially "vigilant reason" can be paralleled and contested in Jean Luc Nancy's statement in the chapter "Evil: Decision" in the book, *The Experience of Freedom*:

If every thought of freedom must be renounced in order to make room for the hastily acquired consensus of a moral and political liberalism, then thinking as such must be renounced. This would not be a serious matter if thinking were only "some thought"; on the contrary, it would be to renounce that which can be evil and do evil in thought: illusion facility, irresponsibility, and intellectuality, which only considers itself free and easily affirms freedom as long as freedom does not put it to the test.<sup>63</sup>

Nancy continues to analyse the impossibility and implausibility of "silence" voiced through Adorno: "Not even silence gets us out of the circle. In silence we simply use the state of objective

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., "Narrating Evil", 50

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., "Narrating Evil", 55

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. "Narrating Evil"

<sup>63</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy *The Experience of Freedom* Stanford University Press, 1988, 122

truth to rationalise our subjective incapacity, once more degrading truth into a lie.”<sup>64</sup> Adorno’s statement clearly problematises Shattuck’s conception of action as an ambiguous strategy for thinking intellectually. Consequentially Shattuck’s quick acceptance of “crime in intellect” does not attempt to describe what reasoned or “good” thinking could possibly be. In other words, despite loosely condemning “thinking” in itself Shattuck still calls upon the task of thinking as a means to condemn evil.

The project of understanding evil for both Geddes and Shattuck is a necessary task for politics. However, what is crucial to this call to understand evil is that it is raised from and within its concretised aesthetic configuration through the production of narratives as the *rhetoric of evil*. As such it is “the diminution of moral vocabularies” and the spectacular nature of death, murder and violence, that invites this moral questioning of evil, not a call from beyond the structures of language systems. Here, evil is bound to its rhetoric. However, it is also conceptualised as a transcendental object. In this way for both Geddes and Shattuck, the spectacle of “aestheticised transgression” is inherently linked to a project of a Nietzschean-style evil or aggression as transgression, due to the fact that this aesthetics of transgression is understood as having a transcendental relation.

The identification of subjective autonomy as “evil” action is taken up in Nancy’s commentary on Kant:

It is in diabolical wickedness that Kant will recognise [...] the biblical representation of an incomprehensible origin of evil in human beings. In other words, for there to be relative evil (which is called “radical evil” and for which there is always hope for a “return to the good”), there must be in the origin the absolute evil of the determination toward evil [...] The wickedness of Lucifer/Satan figures an incomprehensible, absolute evil at the root of the root of human evil.<sup>65</sup>

This proposes evil as a sustained correlative to action and even an imperative, whereby the subject can associate “freedom” with a transgressive move away from a concept of the good.

Nancy continues by quoting Heidegger:

For evil *is* truly in man’s essence as the most extreme opposition and revolt of the spirit against the Absolute (tearing oneself away from the universal will, being against it, the will replacing it in this “against”) Evil “*is*” as freedom, the most extreme freedom *against*

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 121, cited from *Negative Dialectics*

<sup>65</sup> Nancy, *The Experience of Freedom*, 124

the Absolute within the whole of beings. For freedom “is” the capacity for good and evil. The good “is” the evil and the evil “is” the good.<sup>66</sup>

It is precisely this contingency - that evil, it seems, is always already associated with a concept of freedom and that the subject as the agent of action makes this identification – that situates the problem for aesthetics, or the imaging or identification with one’s action. These claims to a transhistorical conception of agency as hinged upon transgression, violence and evil sustains a problem when regarding Nietzsche’s central influence upon postmodern theory because we can no longer identify “bad Nietzscheanism” as the lone carrier of this predication of evil as autonomy, and also, that “bad Nietzscheanism” is not a theory as such, but a historically inscribed writing of the identification of evil’s immanence as object in the material world.

### **Pulp Fiction and “cool”**

Shattuck details his concerns with a Nietzschean-style postmodernism most fully, and also comes closest to a position by which to respond to this as a problem, in his example of the film *Pulp Fiction* (dir. Quentin Tarrantino 1994). Here, the problem of narrating evil is raised where Shattuck identifies the act of narrating as hinged upon a passive un-thoughtful complicity with evil actions:

*Pulp Fiction* mitigates the behaviour it represents, [it] carries us further away from responsibility and guilt. In the idea of “cool” complicity in criminal violence lurks the suggestion of greatness in evil and of evil... The “cool” of *Pulp Fiction*, transports us first into the pervasiveness of radical evil and then back to metaphysical evil - Evil is not overcome; evil is accepted and admired.<sup>67</sup>

What is initially significant to this passage is that by requiring or demanding redemption in and from such texts, it is evident that Shattuck relies heavily on the narrative function in general to have a didactic capacity and a literal effect upon the audience. In this, it seems that as “scholars” we are to guard against our fascination and unbridled curiosity with the story and instead read them as cultural parables that can warn us against the concept of pleasure in violence or evil. Shattuck’s preference for narrating evil then, seems to take the form of some kind of intellectual chastisement, where we are to accept the inherent “immorality” of not only the image but our participation as an audience within it.

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 130 cited from Martin Heidegger, *Schelling’s Treatise on the Essence of Human Freedom*

For Shattuck, *Pulp Fiction* epitomises the “postmodern” problem in its celebration of evil in the “coolness” and attraction of purposeless violence and the film’s non-satirical, non-ironic production. This “coolness”, creates for Shattuck, the problem of the disappearance of the tension between the audience and the narrative, where he identifies the film as something that mitigates or supports the violence it represents through its “cool” or desirable aesthetic. It is interesting to note that Shattuck redeems Tarrantino’s critical position as being against violence in the scene where Bruce Willis’s character (the boxer, Butch Coolidge) cannot decide which weapon to choose when being chased by the gangster boss. Here, Coolidge goes from one gruesome weapon to the next, in a “vaudevillian” comedy style, to finally settle for a samurai sword. Shattuck identifies a redemptive factor situated within the excess of the performance, through its overly dramatised staging of a comic book violent fantasy in a “lawless” state.<sup>68</sup> However, in the rest of the film’s more “realistic” quality he doesn’t identify such a critical mediation. Instead, Shattuck proposes that in the rest of the film “reason” or “critical distance” disappears, brought on through the audience’s complicity; the desire to be associated with the violence of the characters and to enjoy violence. Shattuck claims therefore, that the only way to situate a critical position within violent imagery is to make a comedic violence. Excessive violence written as an improbable comedy thus serves Shattuck’s purpose of ordering and delimiting violence. This comedy is clearly negotiated through a simplistic performance of rational actions where the irrational power of violence is undermined in the series of “rational” choices, which appear comically absurd under the urgent circumstances. However, Shattuck is still left with the problem of the remainder of the film. As such, Shattuck’s identification of critique as something that is effective through its image of obvious “excess” or comedy, is problematised by narratives that display complicity in violence through “coolness”. These narratives are outside of and delimit Shattuck’s method of critique. Unfortunately, in this sense Shattuck can only complain that such films exist, surrendering to the impossible, delivering the sentiment of “what is the world coming to?” instead of actually addressing this phenomena.

Shattuck does not recognise the more subtle “fantasy” elements of this genre, and specifically those within this film, where the action takes place in strange “other-worldly” places, dark bars and themed restaurants; where American icons from history are alive and well, in the form of waiters and waitresses ready to serve up oversized burgers and milk shakes; where the central

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid.,54

<sup>68</sup> By this I mean that Coolidge is free to choose his weapon, time stands still, despite the urgency of the situation. The fact that both time and the law are “put off” or suspended guarantees a free space within the narrative that seems particularly “unreal”.



characters all operate around the swift, banal and cool vernacular of a language which is communicated as style. The film itself is produced in over-saturated colour and is edited within a circular narrative. Being groundless and particularly uneventful, there are no conclusions, evil as an object is not sought to be attained, or in other words the characters do not especially delight in evil, or aim for evil as a metaphysical end, they just *are* “bad mother-fuckers”. Certainly violence *is* associated with “action” but violence here is demonstrated as the constant acceptable “excess” of the everyday-underworld. Shattuck’s complaint that this violence is mainstream and represented as something that is not shocking does not necessarily equate with the experience of the audience as being wholly complicit with it in the sense that now we can act just like the characters in the movie. Shattuck sees the “coolness” delivered in *Pulp Fiction* to express not just a complicity within the image, but also the *desire for complicity*.

To make some early conclusions: in both Shattuck and Geddes’ description of the aestheticising of violence, crime, or evil, aesthetics and evil can be seen as inseparable, whereupon the narrating or aestheticisation of evil demonstrates a fascination, curiosity and a “lack of law” around subjective judgements which moreover seem delegated to the area of *taste*. As such, Shattuck considers satire as rationality the (or one) answer to the problem of representing evil, for this satirical space is where the subject deliberately distances him/herself from the action. In opposition, the coolness of *Pulp Fiction*, for Shattuck, acts as a non-satirical distanciation from the “real dangers” of evil, violence and force. “Cool” is not critical for Shattuck; it is passively complicit with evil, acting as a weak and even immoral concession to its image and practice. Accordingly, evil is associated with the audience’s desire to assimilate, or be assimilated by, the image of “cool” violence. Shattuck does not entertain this desire as having a rational possibility, or the possibility for understanding and also disagreeing with it. Moreover, Shattuck’s explanation of the desire involved around a notion of “coolness” in violence is understood as a perverse pleasure in evil, a pathological enjoyment, or an apparently “unreasoned” curiosity around and towards evil. This confirms aesthetics as ultimately correlative to evil, and conditionally, this evil as the “beyond”.

### ***The limits of a rationalising self-government***

To briefly conclude, the problems of situating a rational criticality in the face of post-structuralism’s proclivity for “bad Nietzscheanism” (or the identification of an aesthetics of transgression as autonomy) is further problematised by the means Shattuck undertakes to avoid or

even challenge it. His theory is underpinned by something that is not unlike the character of metaphysical evil. This can be initially recognised in his de-politicising of the aesthetics of evil. Here, he (problematically) maintains the concepts of fascination, taste and curiosity as irrational and pathological instances *outside of understanding* and also, strangely, conditions a space for evil's transcendental nature to be a product of it being aestheticised. This prompts the question of how action as "aestheticised evil", "joy in violence" or the "popularity of the criminal", as inevitable and associated objects of action, can be usefully articulated when taste itself is designated outside of the political.

Further to this, Shattuck's theory is problematised because he maintains the subject at the heart of the decision making process whilst simultaneously disabling the subject's potentiality or mobility. In other words, Shattuck separates rationality from belief, since it is not rationality that is responsible for our lack of moral certitude, but our belief in it. As such, Shattuck does not contest rationality as the basis for judgement. Rather, this is relied upon to the extent that now our own ability to judge is very subject of our scepticism. Consequently, we are faced with a guilty subject who is forced to find at fault the very locus of self-assertion.

Significantly, Shattuck's attempt to overcome what he calls the postmodern attraction for a Nietzschean-style metaphysics of evil is manifest either in creating an authoritarian power structure to govern the production and consumption of what he chooses to designate as "evil narratives", or through making a "blockbuster" (what could be construed as an infantile and didactic) morality tale of how the dangers that a desire for a Nietzschean-style, non-transcendental critique has an inevitable anti-humanist tendency when effected as a "postmodern" narrative. The problem of "violence" for Shattuck's theory is therefore focussed initially in the demand for power and moreover expressed in the attempt to sever, or, to make distinct separations between what is deemed "good" and "bad" or "right" and "wrong".

As such, Shattuck forgets and therefore leaves the problem open for discussion, of the relationships between the forces of knowledge that he seeks to undermine and his own "rationalising forces" he seeks to champion. Further to this, his critique highlights the complex relation between the dialectic central to Enlightenment thinking, namely the paradox of organising self-government, and a conception of violent postmodern subjectivities. This problem of the structure of knowledge and power within language defines the central and recurring argument throughout this and the following chapters.

What is central to Shattuck's analysis is his reliance upon postmodernism as a diseased, corrupt or flawed version of modernity. However, evidently his aims to avoid the problems raised in a pluralist conception of agency by institutionalising a "healthy modernity" (evidenced in his attempt to re-think the "postmodern" Nietzschean avowal through Enlightenment theory) prove unworkable. This leaves open a "postmodern" space for a further discussion of particular authorities of agency and how these are definitively related to an aesthetic identification of self-invention. This is usefully described by Zygmunt Bauman as "where the pluralism of authority and the centrality of *choice* in the self-constitution of postmodern agents is central to an ethical problematic."<sup>69</sup>

## 2. Foucault's "Totalitarian Liberalism"

The question Shattuck's analysis leaves us with is the problem of Nietzschean-style aesthetics as correlative to a postmodern identification of action. Following from the problematic of being and appearing discussed above, the problem for judgement as taste and the problem of understanding the alignment between politics and aesthetics can be seen to be foregrounded in the work of Michel Foucault. In *Critique of Violence, Between Poststructuralism and Critical Theory*, Beatrice Hanssen attempts to recover Foucault's ethico-aesthetics from claims that his work on ethics embodied conservative, anti-democratic and totalitarian ideologies. Hanssen recalls such condemnations from Foucault's detractors,

Whether coming from critical theorists, poststructuralists, Marxists, or liberal pragmatists, the charges have ranged from "neoconservatism" (Habermas), "pan-aestheticism" (Wolin), a fascination with marginal lifestyles (Zizek), a perverse defence of "public school virtues" (Eagleton), and neo-Romanticism (Rorty), the larger implication being that Foucault's anti-universalist ethics opened the door to decisionism, voluntarism, authoritarianism, particularism, individualism, or the romantic quest for authenticity.<sup>70</sup>

Such identifications are predominantly situated around Foucault's relation to Nietzschean-style aesthetics that demarcate what seems to be an unnegotiable pit-fall to his project. In this sense

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<sup>69</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, "A Sociological Theory of Postmodernism," in *Between Totalitarianism and Postmodernism*, ed. Peter Beilharz, Gillian Robinson and John Rundell. MIT Press, 1993, 150

Foucault's "totalitarian" aspect is seen to be re-issued in his privileging of the aesthetics of politics. This understanding of the legacy of Foucault's theory therefore presents a problem for action based on an inextricable aesthetico-political dynamic. Foucault can be seen to promote an aestheticised notion of subjectivity that suggests a dangerous tenor around critical choice or judgement. Hanssen writes that "behind apparently universal normative claims (lay) hidden the subjective power claims of value appraisals. To aestheticise politics in effect meant to relinquish the discriminatory capacity of reason and to enthrone the faculty of taste as the supreme critical instance."<sup>71</sup> And:

At its worst the fear was that this sliding into Nietzsche's direction might give rise to the frightful prospect that violence and terror would force their entry into the realm of the ethical, as subjects sought to foist their fickle "will to power" upon others.<sup>72</sup>

By interrogating the structure of the Nietzschean politico-aesthetic at work within Foucault's theory I intend to establish first, an understanding of the politics of a "postmodern" subject. This study is not based upon the intent to redeem Foucault's work from the above claims, but to invest in and further my analysis of a subjectivity that inhabits a position between, or even confuses, the anti/modern and poststructural theories. Following from this Nietzsche's influence on Foucault's work can be seen to make subjective action directly correlative to an act of transgression, thereby providing a particularly individuated self that raises the problem of a potential lack of concern for others. What this reading also throws up is the maintenance of the act of transgression and that is both fascinating, dangerous *and* something that always aims towards an idea of autonomy as power, essentially the Nietzschean ontology of the "will to power".

Central to Foucault's unstable postmodernism and his Nietzschean influence is the way in which the Foucauldian subject is modeled upon historical and foundational grounds. With this in mind I look to the problems of understanding Foucault's ethics as a temporal and self-asserting practice of law, an *ethos*, since Foucault's inscription of a central system of "law" not only invites metaphysics but is also conditioned upon and bears forth the representation of the "Foucauldian" figure for knowledge described by his many critics. As such, because this critique focuses upon the representations and critical interpretations of Foucault's theory, I ask if this figuring of

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<sup>70</sup> Beatrice Hanssen, *Critique of Violence, Between Poststructuralism and Critical Theory*, Routledge, 2000, 88-89 Here, also, we can see Foucault's opposition to the rationalising demands inherent in Shattuck's theory of vigilance.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 34

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 90

Foucault's ethical paradigm as rhetoric can shed light upon the complex relationship between the subjective practices of the freedom to choose and the theorising of that freedom.

### *Foucault with Kant and Nietzsche*

Hanssen identifies the theme of the will to power in Foucault's work as the incentive for Richard Rorty's suspicion of Foucault's relationship with Nietzschean philosophy. Quoting Rorty's *Moral Identity, Private Autonomy*:

Apart from the perils of solipsism that might afflict the individual overemphasizing the relation to self, the real danger was that such a search for one's autonomy might turn Nietzschean, if one tried to act upon it no longer in the privacy of one's own home but in the public sphere.<sup>73</sup>

The Nietzschean aspect of Foucault's theory as something that is responsible for the ethical suspicions around his thesis is further examined by Hanssen when she asks: "To what extent was Foucault's ethical project not Nietzschean, to what extent was it less than Kantian?"<sup>74</sup> Foucault's use of Kant and Nietzsche can be seen to draw upon the fusing of subject philosophy with the preference for a non-transcendental critique. The latter designating the Nietzschean aspect and the former, the Kantian, wherein we see Foucault's reliance upon a primordial concept of ethical values and the operation of such values exercised within language. These aspects are combined by Foucault in the form of what Habermas describes in his text "Taking Aim at the Heart of the Present" as "the philosophy of Kant and the politics of Nietzsche."<sup>75</sup>

Whereas Kant and Nietzsche could easily be identified as the odd couple at the centre of this project, under Foucault's historicised reading, their relative influences are at times hard to discriminate. Hanssen describes Foucault's route between Kant and Nietzsche to be comprised of a Kantian "technologies of the self" and a Nietzschean tribute to Baudelaire, where Foucault looks to Nietzsche's "self fashioning" of the subject to understand identity formation mediated through Baudelaire's aestheticism.<sup>76</sup> This foregrounding of the self can initially be seen in Foucault's recognition of the Kantian notion of criticality as a stylised transcendental thematic. By attempting to move past and reject modernist critique Foucault sought to overcome the

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<sup>73</sup> Richard Rorty. *Moral Identity Private Autonomy*, cited in Hanssen *Ibid.*, 91

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 87

<sup>75</sup> Jürgen Habermas, "Taking Aim at the Heart of the Present", *Critique and Power, Recasting the Foucault/Habermas Debate*, Ed. Michael Kelly, MIT Press, 1998, 149

<sup>76</sup> Hanssen *Critique of Violence*, 75

problems of Enlightenment thinking expressed in Adorno & Horkheimer's dialectic, whilst accounting for a morally contingent notion of subjective autonomy within a non-hierarchical society.

Kant identified critique as the act of testing the limits of reason evident in the Enlightenment (epic or even, heroic) slogan "Dare to Know", outlining a methodology of the "conscious practice of freedom" as the tools by which to lead the ethical life. This prefers ethics as "self government" and the practice of philosophy as "self-interrogation" resulting in a "permanent critique of ourselves".<sup>77</sup> Foucault was to combine this culture of self-critique inspired by Kant with the Greek term "*ethos*"<sup>78</sup> which advocated an aesthetics of existence where one would practice the arts of living in all aspects of life.

Foucault's historicising of the term "critique" developed through the Kantian recognition of the Enlightenment as "the age of critique"<sup>79</sup> allowed him to establish critique as the "attitude" of modernity. Habermas describes Foucault's use of Kant's "What is Enlightenment?" commenting on Foucault's translation of Kant:

Instead we encounter a *different* Kant - the precursor of the Young Hegelians, the Kant who was the first to make a serious break with the metaphysical heritage, who turned philosophy away from the Eternal Verities and concentrated upon what philosophers had until they considered to be without concept and non-existent, merely contingent and transitory. In Kant's answer to the question "What is Enlightenment?" Foucault sees the origin of an "ontology of contemporary reality."<sup>80</sup>

In this sense, Kant's *Critique of Judgement* could be read as the "critique of taste", for which judgment is effected through empirical rules and criteria and where there can be only critique. Here, one's will is inextricably related to knowledge and is a particularly individuating force, being defined by "the resolution of one's reason without relying upon the external guidance of others."<sup>81</sup> In addition, desire as correlative to will, is also expressed as something close to the quest for knowledge and also closely related to freedom, determined in the phrase "the desire not to be governed so much."<sup>82</sup> Hanssen describes how Foucault was to glean the "will to revolution" from Kant despite Kant's later "conservative republicanism" expressed in the move towards the

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 69

<sup>78</sup> Ibid. This is inherited from Plato, Seneca and Pliny.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 58

<sup>80</sup> Habermas, "Taking Aim at the Heart of the Present," in Kelly, *Critique and Power*, 150

<sup>81</sup> Hanssen, *Critique of Violence*, 64

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 58. From Foucault's *What is Critique?* 384

“will to evolution.”<sup>83</sup> In doing so, Foucault took up Kant’s experimental attitude and revolutionising understanding of freedom in order to create an “enthusiasm for the will to revolution,”<sup>84</sup> an “ontology of ourselves,” and “a radical critique of the now.”<sup>85</sup>

### *Between modernism and postmodernism*

It is within Foucault’s move towards “an ethico-poetic cultivation of the self” that Hanssen identifies a shift from Kantian territory since such an ethics could no longer be seen to operate around “a Kantian-infused conception of an individual will that answered to a universal moral law.”<sup>86</sup> Instead Foucault opted for an ethics which was governed by the primordial sensibility of the “desiring subject”. Here, as previously mentioned, ethics were not situated around a general law of the “other”, but through the construction or even the evolution of an autonomous self-governing subject who would not require authoritarian State powers. Nancy Fraser describes the ideological object of Foucault’s work. Here, she picks up on the protracted legacy of Foucault’s project, where power is transparent and universally contingent. However, despite, and perhaps even because of this, power is also an operation of *normative and invisible* hegemonical dominance:

One can imagine a perfected disciplinary society in which normalising power has become so omnipresent, so finely attuned, so penetrating, interiorised, and subjectified, and therefore so invisible, that there is no longer any need for confessors, psychoanalysts, wardens, and the like. In this fully “panopticised” society, hierarchical, asymmetrical domination of some persons by others would have become superfluous; all would surveil and police themselves. The disciplinary norms would have become so thoroughly internalised that they would not be experienced as coming from without. The members of this society would, therefore, be autonomous. They would have appropriated the other as their own and made substance subject.<sup>87</sup>

Clearly demonstrated here are problems with Foucault’s project, in as much as if power is recognised as subject to all, then power underscores its own ubiquity. Foucault can’t theorise a universal conception of power without replacing power outside of, or, problematically, as a

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 67 Hanssen comments that “Kant had placed more stress on how to gain liberty through acknowledging the limits of our knowledge than through brazen acts of courage.”

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 67. Foucault’s reading is taken from Kant’s text of 1798, *The Contest of Faculties*, where crowds are described as watching the activities of the French Revolution as having, “a sympathy of aspiration bordering on enthusiasm.” Hanssen goes on to identify Foucault’s use of this “enthusiasm” as the “enthusiasm for the “will to revolution””.

<sup>85</sup> Michel Foucault, “The Art of Telling the Truth”, in Kelly, *Critique and Power*, 148

<sup>86</sup> Hanssen, *Critique of Violence*, 87

<sup>87</sup> Nancy Fraser, “Michel Foucault: A “Young Conservative?”” in *Critique and Power*, ed. Kelly, 203

mechanistic foundation for politics. Accordingly, what we are left with in Foucault's identification of power's ubiquity is the force of Foucault's argument and the memory of his prejudices between good and bad governmental conduct. Consequently, it is the problem of acknowledging power as universally relative that proves problematic for politics.

To briefly summarise, we can agree that Foucault sought a non-transcendental critique founded within the act of speech, context, contingency, and event, thus moving away from a Kantian metaphysical critique to one which worked within a preference for the analysis of historical singularities.<sup>88</sup> Through this move however, he sustains an awkward reliance upon an unexplained and idealistic trust in, as Hanssen puts it, "a rarefied primordial ethic at work through age old petrified moral codes" in order to realise the ideological dream of a society of individuals that were free to control the various structures of dominance.<sup>89</sup> This raises the issue that both an ethical "origin" and a notion of the "ideal" as factors that were not really dealt with in Foucault's work and which also implicitly signify the distinctly "modern" character within his critique previously described by Habermas. Consequently, Foucault's project amply demonstrates the problems of thinking through the relationship between a performing poststructuralist subjectivity that sustains the rhetoric of a classical hierarchy on the one hand, and on the other shows up the demand inherent to modernism: the problem of understanding a democratic and inter-subjective politics of emancipation.

For Foucault, this "primordial ethic" would sustain one's cultural work upon the self, and is evident in his turn to Nietzsche, and move through Baudelaire, where one's "self fashioning" endowed the subject with the Kantian potency of the subversive practice of the art of "not being governed so much." Foucault was careful not to identify this aspect of invention as an appraisal of irrationalism. Instead, his turn to Nietzsche translates the understanding of transgression as a wholly negative phenomena and redefines a concept of critique, moving away from something which seeks to make radical breaks with continuity towards a concept of invention to structure "a way of being that is still improbable."<sup>90</sup> It is this use of Baudelaire through Nietzsche that prompts many of Foucault's detractors to identify the questionable moral and political ground of his theory.

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., This takes up Habermas's "ideal speech act" wherein the society of autonomous subjects would always be in the situation of such communicative action. This is more fully discussed in Fraser's text.

<sup>89</sup> Hanssen, *Critique of Violence*, 84

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 85



Since Foucault's conception of "critique as attitude" or convention fails to move critique away from its oppositional character, the problem of the transgressive character in Foucault's project withstands: Either the democratisation of agency as self-fashioning is seen to fall off into a relativistic and private reliance upon his *a priori*, or, it produces a subject whose self-invention is a public exercise the "will to power" over and against others. Consequently, despite Foucault's descriptions of a universalised power apparatus, a core attitude of transgression remains. This transgressive attitude and function of critique, highlights the fixed conditions of social dominance remaining at the heart of Foucault's politics, and alerts us to his project's emancipatory foundations and motivations. Here, Foucault combines, and to some extent, confuses a general and temporal labour upon the self with a goal that is over and above daily self-betterment, namely the desire to be free from the practices of dominant hegemonies.

At this point it is also relevant to comment further upon the consequences of Foucault's ethical ground. It is argued by many of Foucault's critics and supporters, including Hanssen, that Foucault's founding ethical law gives way to an under-developed set of moral codes which identify the "will to power" as the object of transgression to any authority, generated by the alignment of self-critique and self-invention. Since the alignment of self-critique and self-invention are unified in daily performances of self-fashioning, the uses of power/knowledge now feature as key factors to sustaining and identifying ones autonomy. In this instance it is the "blind" investment in an internal ethical law that can be seen to act as fragile grounds upon which Foucault builds his politics of action as self-fashioning. It is also significant that Foucault's roughly sketched internal (primordial) ethic as the ideal charge for the subject creates the combined tension between this, the (un)located ethic as the internalised "other" within the subject, and, the exteriorised or public action carried out by the self-fashioning subject.<sup>91</sup>

Therefore, Foucault can be seen to inadvertently create a rather troubling account of power politics, despite his attempt to take on this issue as a central problematic. The dangers of the "will to power" are recounted in Fraser's criticism:

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<sup>91</sup> This account of different knowledges: the former understood as an inherent knowledge naturalised through history and convention, and the latter as a temporal practice upon such codes, underscores the problem of Foucault's comprehension of an ethic as both primordial and at the same time linguistic and temporal. As such, although Foucault formulates knowledge as a practice, he still formulates a foundational knowledge. Here, he naturalises his conception of "good truth" delivering an ethics that although constituted by the subject's understanding and knowledge of age-old historical codes, exempts itself from any practical interrogation that the ethic instigates.

Such a society seems objectionable only because Foucault has described it in a way that invites the genetic fallacy, that is, because he has made it the outcome of a historical process of hierarchical, asymmetrical coercion wherein people have been in Nietzschean parlance, “bred” to autonomy.<sup>92</sup>

Here, Foucault’s Nietzschean politico-aesthetics generates the simultaneous potential of both the violence *and* the banality of subjective action as transgression. This is where criticality, formulated as an inventive strategy, seeks and maintains the character of both a subversive Kantian moment *and* where the product of self-fashioning is *always* transgressive. The self-inventive aspect of the “will to revolution” (action) becomes indistinct from the “desire” for knowledge (thinking) when materialised in a positively charged force characterised by the aesthetics of self as a mode of (transgressive) critique. In this Foucault moves past Habermas’s concept of Kant as the purely philosophical agent in his project, introducing a moral and political element, effected by that same Kantian modernist sensibility. This could go some way to confirming Fraser’s recognition that “without a nonhumanist ethical paradigm, Foucault cannot make good his normative case against humanism.”<sup>93</sup>

In this sense Foucault’s recognition of the crisis of modernist critique, manifested in its rejection, also sustained its character. His project redeems the character of “critique” precisely through its historicisation. The “political” therefore is seen to be at risk within Foucault’s work, through the sustained Kantian character of an ethical subject *plus* the evacuation of the grounds which enabled the subject to determine or assess action. This problem of the modern character at work in Foucault’s project is indicated in criticisms such as Habermas’s: that although Foucault’s critique of contemporary culture and society purports to be postmodern, it is at best modern and at worst antimodern.<sup>94</sup>

### 3. Kant and Nietzsche

What this assertion of modernism calls into question is exactly *how* this Kantian character provides the basis of this political risk for Foucault’s project, especially when taking into consideration that these criticisms of Foucault are identified particularly through his Nietzschean

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<sup>92</sup> Fraser, “Michel Foucault: “A Young Conservative?””, 204

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 208

<sup>94</sup> Jürgen Habermas, “Modernity versus Postmodernity” and “The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment: Rereading *Dialectic of Enlightenment*,” cited in Fraser, 185

influence. The Nietzschean connection to Foucault's proposition for a postmodern theory of subjectivity is initially evidenced in a mutual strategy of moving against modernist, transcendental critique. This inability to overcome metaphysics, despite turning it against itself can be seen to be the hallmark of Nietzsche's philosophy, manifest precisely through the significant lack or the evacuated space of the categorical imperative. However, it is important to re-state the complex dynamic at work within the modern and anti-modern relations, especially as here we are dealing specifically with an accusation being leveled at Foucault's postmodern Nietzschean influence. In order to construe how the problem of modernist critique can be identified as a Nietzschean problem it is important to identify a common point between Nietzsche and Foucault, significantly the problem of aesthetic judgements.

Kant's dedication to the issue of aesthetic judgment proves to be pivotal for the text *Critique of Judgement*, where, with his assertion regarding the synthetic faculty of taste, that "this problem of the *Critique of Judgement* belongs to the general problem of transcendental philosophy: how are synthetical *a priori* judgements possible"<sup>95</sup> is grounded in the problem of judgement within a concept of aesthetic "disinterestedness". His formulation of the antinomy of taste goes: "The judgment of taste is not based upon determinate concepts", whose antithesis is; "the judgment of taste is based upon a concept but an indeterminate one."<sup>96</sup> It is in this unavailability of a concretised understanding of aesthetic judgements that Kant situates the pleasure in the beautiful as without enjoyment, without concepts and with only the spontaneity of reflection. As such, Kant de-centres reason from aesthetic judgments, and likewise, the demand to make aesthetic judgments de-centres the power of reasoning. Nietzsche takes this up in *On the Genealogy of Morals*:

"That which pleases without interest", Kant had said "is beautiful". Without interest! Compare this definition by that offered by a genuine "spectator" and artist Stendhal - who once described the beautiful as *une promesse de bonheur*. Here in any case the very aspect of the aesthetic condition which Kant emphasised at the expense of all others - *le desinteressement* - is rejected and crossed out.<sup>97</sup>

Siding with Stendhal, Nietzsche moves through the Kantian problematic by refusing to situate or rescue an *a priori* upon which to base judgments of taste. Instead he understands the interest and pleasure one associates with Stendhal's "*une promesse de bonheur*" as the thing which motivates will as an *absolute interest*, something that is *always* based in conception. In championing

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<sup>95</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. J H Bernard, Hafner Publishing, 1951, 131

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 38,

subjective interest Nietzsche conflates the judgement of beauty with reason. This adds further to the Kantian problem of reason as transcendental to understanding because Nietzsche's dedication to passion, interest and natural desire is arguably as divorced from aesthetic judgment as the Kantian *a priori* that he seeks to avoid.

Further to this, the demonstration of Nietzsche's vitriolic opposition to notions of Kantian subjectivity paradoxically underscore the proximity of their critique, or indeed the specific reliance that the antimodern has upon the modern, where Kant's Categorical Imperative so ruthlessly evacuated by Nietzsche retains its radical and immanent character to action precisely through the visible lack of law. In this sense I do not wish to map a clear distinction between Kant and Nietzsche but to acknowledge their mutual "contamination".

Central to this are the issues of subjectivity, power and freedom. Nietzsche writes:

If out of the vindictive cunning of impotence, the oppressed, downtrodden and violated tell themselves... "...The good man is the one who refrains from violation, who harms no one, who attacks no one, who fails to retaliate, who leaves revenge to God...who avoids all evil and above all asks little of life, as we do, the patient, the humble, the just." When listened to coldly and without prejudice this actually means nothing more than: "We weak men are, after all, weak; it would be good if we refrained from doing anything *for which we lack sufficient strength.*" [It is] as if the weakness of the weak man itself - that is, his *essence*, his action, his whole single, unavoidable, irredeemable reality - were a free achievement, something willed, chosen, a *deed*, a merit. [...] The subject has therefore, been perhaps, the best article of faith on earth so far, since it enables the majority of mortals, the weak and the downtrodden of all sorts, to practice that sublime self-deception - the interpretation of weakness itself as freedom, of the way they simply are as *merit*.<sup>98</sup>

In the above quote Nietzsche takes this Kantian premise of the "good" subject as the weak, or non-transgressive subject, overturning Kant's rationale. What is crucial to this is that Nietzsche stays firmly within the same hierarchy of values that Kant prescribes. Also, stepping back to my earlier quotation by Nancy on Kant, one can identify Kant's structuring of diabolical evil as an absolute and, perhaps inadvertently, an imperative. This conception of autonomy as transgression is especially relevant when under conditions of "lawlessness" such as the French Revolution, it is clear that Man takes the violence of transgression against the general law of State to be an autonomous experience. In this, freedom is construed as being against the law, a self-defining act that demands the recognition of difference, but also a place where the subject can recognise his

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<sup>97</sup> F. W. Nietzsche *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 1887, Oxford University Press 1996, 83

own alienation from the law and accordingly from community, State and God. As such, freedom, for Kant is conditioned upon transgression, but the good subject refrains from these “natural” urges in order to lead the “good life”. Further to this, although Nietzsche allows evil as an imperative to action, he does not identify it as an absolute:

I gave God the honour, as is fitting, and made him the father of evil. Was *this* the very thing which my “A priori” required of me? That new immoral, or at least amoral, “A priori” and the alas! So anti-Kantian, so enigmatic “categorical imperative” which spoke through it and to which I have since been increasingly attentive and more than just attentive? Fortunately, I have since learnt to separate theology from morality and ceased looking for the origin of evil behind the world.<sup>99</sup>

By navigating a terrain beyond good and evil Nietzsche problematises Kant’s Categorical Imperative. Although Nietzsche can be seen to move beyond the absolute imperative of evil evidenced in Kant, he situates and motivates the *difficulty* of knowing whether we are being evil or not. In this sense although Nietzsche side-steps the problem of absolutes within theological grounds and attempts to move past any reliance upon an a priori, he does not escape the good/evil polemic but falls into it all the more. This can be seen to be indicated in the ethos of the “will to power” where the subject perceives power as domination over others because now power is a “natural right” and one should act according to one’s nature. This again raises the problem that Nietzsche’s disruption of the Kantian Categorical Imperative in his aim to move past or beyond good and evil moves quickly back and even deepens such polemics through the subjective requirement with a definition of power that is recognised through the assertion of one’s individuated power over others. Nietzsche’s *Genealogy of Morals*, also acts as a radical assertion of both the violence of ethics and as a concretised history of conflict and cruelty.

Crucially, Nietzsche’s conception of power is not benign, which raises the problem upon what axis is action directed and what does it look like? This problem recalls Nancy’s identification of the political problem of modernist critique *in general*, where action as transgression is motivated in relation to a concept of evil. It is the consistent and awkward relation of this version of action as aestheticised transgression, identified through Kant, coupled dangerously with the Nietzschean project of “the will to power” that can be identified in Hanssen’s critique of Foucault’s project. This coupling generates the problem that a politicised and historicised reading of Kant’s “critique as transgression” can be recognised as the prevailing attitude and the problem for Nietzsche’s

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<sup>98</sup>Ibid., 30

<sup>99</sup>Ibid., 5

philosophy. Significantly, this identification complicates the ability to define specific differences between the aesthetics of transgression as being particularly related to either the antimodern or the modern. Therefore, it is now important to think through the consequences of the evacuation of Kant's Categorical Imperative - identifiable as "lack" in the work of Nietzsche - to how this problem is understood in Foucault's postmodern project. In other words, *we are left with the question of how Foucault goes about understanding the immanence of power, violence or transgression to action (as we see already established by both a Kantian and a Nietzschean identification of transgression as relative to an experience of autonomy), without conditioning action upon it.*

### ***Figuring Foucault***

Returning to the *Critique of Violence*, Hanssen ultimately describes Foucault's moves between Kant and Nietzsche and his drawing upon other influences with the intention to highlighting his "un-Nietzschean" aspect:

It is not necessary to graft Foucault's aesthetics onto the threatening program of a Nietzschean aestheticism, if this means the anti-democratic, aggressive imposition of transvalued values upon one's unsuspecting neighbours, as laid out in Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*, *Genealogy of Morals* or *The Will to Power*. For all his explicit advances to Nietzsche, Foucault's endeavour to reanimate the aesthetic seemed to have more affinities with the Frankfurt School's project to invent a post-Schillerian "aesthetics of reconciliation" (Habermas).<sup>100</sup>

And:

Foucault did not wish to furnish a "moral genealogy" in the Nietzschean sense [and] if he did enlist the tools of etymology to pierce beneath the surface of conventional, historically encrusted moral codes, it was really to hark back to the "conservative" Greek sense of terms such as *askesis* or *ethos*. Basically, rather than emulating Nietzsche's critique of morality, Foucault really historicised it, ascribing to it a set place in the philosophical canon.<sup>101</sup>

This infers that although taking up a similar strategy to Nietzsche's genealogical study, Foucault ultimately prefers a genealogy of ethics. This quest to dislodge critique leaves an undeveloped moral field since what was considered "moral" by Foucault - a set of values and rules of actions that are recommended to individuals through the intermediary of various prescriptive agencies such as the family (in one of its roles), educational institutions, churches and so forth - was left

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<sup>100</sup> Hanssen, *Critique of Violence*, 93

uncharted in favour of the formation of oneself as an *ethical* subject through a system of codes.<sup>102</sup> Hanssen writes: “[Foucault] distinguished between rules of conduct (codes), actual conduct (askesis) and, third, ideal conduct or “the manner in which one ought to form oneself as an ethical subject acting in reference to the prescriptive element that makes up the code.””<sup>103</sup> Following Hanssen’s distinctions we can see that Foucault’s ethico-aesthetic mapping of self-invention upon the subject’s knowledge of various conventional codes of law, practice, or ideology, conventionalises transgression as *one aspect* of performative possibilities in a plurality of self-styling. However, it is also evident that the practice of self-invention in accordance with these codes is privileged such that individual *difference* is zeroed in on as *the expression* of autonomy in the social sphere.

This political and moral problematic does go some way to account for the claims made against Foucault’s work such as the decadent aestheticising of the private domain in the move away from universalist ethics to a concentrated and auto-biographical particularism demonstrated in his interest in S&M. In the latter, his concept of self-invention could be seen to have undergone a translation effected through his adoption of the California lifestyle. It is here that one could see Foucault’s attempt at “self-fashioning” through the play of a multiplicity of realities which intended to radically translate the negatively defined Kantian subject towards a notion of a “positive critique” of invention resulting in a “transvaluation of the present”<sup>104</sup> prompted the criticisms that perhaps it was *too* inventive. This “danger” is evidenced in charges such as Alexander Nehamas’ in *The Art of Living*, where he suggests that Foucault’s work brought about an “abandonment of politics.”<sup>105</sup> Such a condemnation sought to confirm Foucault’s style of ethico-aesthetics could not escape the claims that it potentialised an irrationalism, irresponsibility and created at once both an ineffectual, fickle and troubling notion of subjectivity. In this sense the danger was that this aspect of “radical invention” became the illusive object of such a politics. Nehamas makes this possible by conceptualising a credible risk to invention without law, even if this invention does not seek an identification with a transgressive move away from it. This portrays a notion of a subject who is *too free*, and ultimately introduces Nehamas’ call for the requirement of an ethic upon which to govern the invention of oneself.

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 88

<sup>102</sup> Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 25 cited in Hanssen, *Critique of Violence*, 84

<sup>103</sup> Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 26 cited in Hanssen, *Critique of Violence*, 84

<sup>104</sup> Hanssen, *Critique of Violence*, 75

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 91

Although highlighting Foucault's Kantian/Nietzschean marriage as wholly correlative to this project and offering distinctly un-Nietzschean aspects to his work (in the sense of arguing against a "bad-Nietzscheanism" anyway), the assertion of Foucault's critics that "his proposal for an antiuniversalist ethics backslided into an irredeemable, not to say opprobrious, Nietzschean-style aestheticism"<sup>106</sup> is ultimately mitigated in Hanssen's text by pointing to Foucault's "liberal" intent, exemplified in the concept of the "historical reinvention of self". In other words, Hanssen describes Foucault's "*attempt*" at the task of dealing with the absence of "normatively negotiated directives or an unambiguous adherence to a common vocabulary" as the redeeming feature of Foucault's project. On the contrary, and as I have argued, it is precisely this *ideological* aspect of Foucault's work that allows many of his critics to define his work as allowing the subject to make power claims over others.

Hanssen also describes the redemptive faculty in Foucault's theory as broadening "the spectrum of non-coercive identity positions that subjects can occupy beyond those listed in conventional, normative handbooks." Aesthetics, for Foucault were intended "to rouse the benign meaning he once invoked in an interview, when he noted that "aestheticism" really meant the transformation of oneself through knowledge."<sup>107</sup>

Hanssen continues to administer Foucault's "bad press" by emphasising his "historical reinvention of the self" where she resists monolithic narratives by choosing to analyse Foucault both locally and historically. In other words, Hanssen adopts a pragmatic style of critique and highlights a contextually and historically driven analysis to re-motivate and possibly recover his project. Hanssen does not take Shattuck's redemptive route, warning us to be careful about the power we endow to reason. She instead prefers to singularise and compartmentalise Foucault's efforts preferring some aspects more than others. However, this tends towards a wish to give Foucault the "benefit of the doubt" over "totalitarian" or "antimodern" accusations without attempting to negotiate the root of such condemnations such as Rorty's: that an aesthetics of the self worked through Nietzsche is either unpoliticisable - as a "bedroom philosophy" - or as a politics motivated around violence, terror and evil. Here, with Rorty, we are once again given the problem of the "unpolitical" aspects of Foucault's ethical language, and, whether this is inherited from Nietzsche or from Kant, the intrinsic relation between a metaphysical-style power and an unpoliticisable language remain. As such, although the analysis that Hanssen carries out in

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 88

<sup>107</sup> Foucault, "Ethics of Pleasure", in *Foucault Live*, 379 cited in Hanssen, 96



*Critique of Violence*, contemplates the Nietzschean dynamic at work within Foucault's project, it does not attempt to interrogate the problematic that theorising autonomy creates, namely, the consequences of the aestheticisation of the political. What is left over for Hanssen's detailing of Foucault's historical project, and what I now take up, is a contemplation of the specific legacies and manifestations of a non-emancipatory politics including the ways in which the historical and conventional stain of power in agency is contextualised.

By showing how the redemptive feature of Foucault's politics is situated within his humanist sensibility, and thus turning Foucault's problematic politics away from Nietzsche in Hanssen, I wish to re-invite Fraser's request for a non-humanist ethical paradigm to Foucault's project. Contrary to the attempt to drag Foucault back into an acceptable "liberal" arena or by identifying his "good intentions", Fraser attempts to take up the logic of Foucault's argument allowing the question of the articulation of this unknown ethical space as means to escape Habermas "modernist" accusations. It is my intention to take up the "postmodern" problem of Foucault's work issued here by Fraser, through the recognition and investigation of a notion of Foucauldian subjectivity as evident in contemporary culture.

In the various characterisations of Foucault's project (led by various accusations of his entertaining an anti-democratic, or conservative sensibility and that the Foucauldian subject is the subject of, or between, totalitarianism and (postmodern) neo-liberalism), we can see that Foucault's project describes what could be seen as an accurate description of the subject of a conservative American liberalism. Here, an individualised concept of agency as self-empowerment is believed to be either privately, and therefore unsubstantially subversive, or on the other hand, read as a public type of self-righteous vigilantism formed from ones belief in an internal primordial ethic - that we trust in ourselves as right - where we are free to practice these rights without restraint from institutionalised apparatuses of the (State or judicial) law.

In returning to the character of an anti-humanist protagonist, we can see that because we can so literally identify this Foucauldian/Nietzschean-style subject in culture at large we are faced with both the historicisation of a Nietzschean inspired subjectivity and also the daily re-writing of it as an identification and an exercise of subjective freedom (in films, narratives, partisan politics, etc). In Foucault's attempt not to *overcome metaphysics* in a Nietzschean sense, but instead, to *witness its passing* (lived out in his stylisation of a Kantian Enlightenment term of critique), his project still retains a transcendental basis for the subjective practices of freedom. Although Foucault manages to divorce critique as an absolute imperative to autonomy, the "negating" move of

critique still holds as an intrinsic value to action. This is because, despite Foucault's historical and temporal critique he retains concepts of "good" and "bad" uses of power through the universal of his founding or primordial ethic. In other words, Foucault's temporal project contradicts itself through the fact that Foucault normatively upholds certain values and normatively condemns others.<sup>108</sup>

When seen as a historicised and formalised rhetoric of power - a vigilante style subject with a primordial sense of right and wrong – Foucault's powerful self-aestheticising subject invites further questioning regarding the formulation of subjective identities through rhetorical practices. Understanding Foucault's transcendental and ideological theories as rhetoric invites an inquiry into the relationship between a non-transcendental and non-emancipatory politics and a "violent subject". Crucially, we are faced with the problem of how a violence that is described and understood as a *natural disposition to all action* hinges upon and effects the conception of political practices - and how this ubiquitous violence is both undermined and underscored through narrative and rhetorical practices.

#### **4. The Narrative Turn**

The notion that the realm of the political is a "necessary risk" upon which action is predicated remains significant in as much as the processes within which we perform political decisions are subjected to the possibility of an ineradicable violent dimension if we do, or even don't, demand an organised politics of recognition. The transcendental or metaphysical character, demonstrated here in Foucault's work, is important to this study as it re-positions the question of how we understand and conceive of "agency" or "critique" when any possibilities for action on a non-foundationalist stage are challenged if we are to sustain this subject-centred version of agency. In

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<sup>108</sup> In the "Ethics of the Concern for Self" [in *Foucault Live (Interviews 1961-1984)* ed. Sylvère Lotringer, trans. Lysa Hochroth and John Johnston, Semiotext(e) 1996, 446] Foucault writes of the practices of the self as means to acquiring "the rules of law, the management of techniques, and also the morality, the ethos, the practice of the self, that will allow us to play these games with as little domination as possible." Although Foucault's desire was to resist creating a "utopia of completely transparent communication" and instead to centralise a discursive plurality of power systems, his understanding of negative and positive

other words, subject philosophy (Kant) demands that the subject “act” through the application of knowledge and yet the availability of this knowledge is always at risk in the non-identification of a Categorical Imperative.

In light of this, what can be seen to be most at risk in Foucault is not the impossibility of an ethical law, but the problems of how Foucault *sustains* his conception of it. This “ethic” therefore enhances the poetics of a transcendental critique, in that it is written out in Foucault’s conception of human government. Regarding the *rhetoric of power* at work in the Foucauldian subject described above, it is my intention to examine the possibilities for the rhetoric of metaphysics specifically through Nietzsche and Foucault in order to identify an experience of critique within a relativist/narrative structure.

This also raises the question of how thinking through a narrativised conception of subjectivity responds to a conception of the contingency of the philosophical in relation to our aesthetic identifications of judgments. In order to explore these issues in the following chapter it is important first to conclude this chapter with a brief description of the rhetorical or “narrative turn”, at work here - from the metaphysics at work in Foucault’s Nietzscheanism - to a narrative philosophical relation which continues the characteristics of the Foucauldian subject. This includes the question of philosophy’s formal relation to language, and also raises limit questions around both.

The difficulties presented by such a “narrative turn” are described by Gerald L Bruns in the chapter, “Along the Fatal Narrative Turn” from the book *Tragic Thoughts at the End of Philosophy*. Bruns’s critique is useful to consider at this point not only for the sake of brevity, but also for a comprehensive view of some of the key problems within the philosophical-narrative discourse. Bruns’s critique points us to the problems of philosophical theory and an antifoundationalist politics, on the one hand showing their irreducibility and incompatibility, since they construct *two distinctive types* of linguistic codes, and on the other hand, establishing the facticity of their linguistic framework and political employment. After thinking through the aestheticisation of ethics in Chapter One’s work on philosophy, and the aestheticisation of politics in Foucault, Bruns’s critique now directs us to the central problems of understanding the rhetorical force of the law as subject to both encoded structures.

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uses of power reinforce a normative move away from domination. For a commentary on this see Barry Hindess *Discourses on Power, From Hobbes to Foucault*, Blackwells, 2001, 156

Richard Rorty's investment in literature as the realm for critique is the incentive for Bruns's examination. Here, Bruns describes the narrative turn as moral philosophy under antifoundationalism where "things have histories rather than natures or essences."<sup>109</sup> Bruns continues to describe how the function of narrative is to give examples of action, decision and moral choice, "to show"; "Richard Rorty speaks of a turn from theory to narrative, meaning that like narrative poets we can alter a thing (anything e.g., ourselves) by describing it differently, to which he adds that philosophy ought in fact to get into the business of redescription."<sup>110</sup> Bruns then takes up the Platonic project of understanding a distinction between theory and literature in order to situate and navigate this difference. Here, stories differ from a general philosophical motivation in that stories don't identify or motivate themselves around a philosophical interest in "truth":

The difference between theories and stories is that theories are in competition with one another for the role of "best theory so far"; that is, they logically organise themselves hierarchically, whereas stories or examples multiply horizontally much the way human history moves in its production of unprecedented situations whose moral complexities cannot be organised from above.<sup>111</sup>

Reflecting upon this difference between theories and stories we can already draw out some problems. Firstly, this distinction forgets the sustained value structure of stories within culture in as much as stories rely upon hierarchical categorisations.<sup>112</sup> Secondly, this division also problematically understands theory to be something that cuts through world history on a sharp linear trajectory devoid of specific context. More accurately then, we could say that stories compete for "best story so far," within their own genre categories and theories compete for "best theory so far," on equally contingent circumstances.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Gerald. L Bruns. *Tragic Thoughts at the End of Philosophy, Language, Literature and Ethical Theory*. Northwestern University Press. 1999, 94

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 96

<sup>112</sup> For example, stories are subject to genres, and sub-genres, wherein we are able to identify a story with consequence, such as that which deals with important and relevant socio-political issues "of the day" over that of pulp-fiction "chick-literature". What is significant to my distinction is that these genres base themselves within and upon these differences. Similarly, in film narratives we are able to identify "A" movies from "B" movies relatively easily due to a number of facets, such as who is the lead role, who is the supporting cast, how many special effects, or, how much the film has cost to make, and the aesthetic style of the film's promotional material. This also includes journalistic reviews of the story, all of which accompany the "packaged" experience of the narrative.

<sup>113</sup> By this I mean that commendations of awards for literary prowess are attributed to genres such as romantic fiction, science fiction, historical fiction, autobiography, historical biography and so on. The fashion for judging these categories against each other is increasingly popular, seen in television

Bruns also tries to move past this conception of a theoretical hierarchy taking up the problem of Habermas's communicative action theory in its opposition to Rorty's "narrative turn". Bruns shows that for Habermas's philosophy, an antiformalist theory that levels the genre distinction between literature and philosophy problematises judgement because reason is no longer privileged as central to decision making. Bruns writes:

Let a thousand vocabularies bloom and then see which survive, says Rorty. Habermas, by contrast is the horticulturalist who says, Let a thousand vocabularies bloom, but only within our Enlightenment garden, where it is the business of philosophy to organise and police these vocabularies so that they don't interfere with communicative praxis.<sup>114</sup>

For Habermas, antiformalism reduces philosophy to nihilism or cynicism which could threaten any sense of "subjective positivity" or invention, or, it provides an "uncritical" grounding of something like philosophy as a romance novel. Crucially, it is this problem that I intend to move past when identifying a philosophical-rhetorical relation.

The difficulty of rationalising in the face of competing narratives outlined in Habermas's theory is reclaimed as a problem in Bruns's critique of Rorty. In Rorty's "non-reductive physicalism" Bruns reclaims and translates the Platonic discrepancy between theories and stories by distinguishing between Rorty's conception of the "physiological" (scientific) narratives and his "phenomenological" (literary) narratives.<sup>115</sup> Here, Bruns argues that for Rorty, poetry becomes the work of rationalisation:

Ironically, when Rorty speaks of a poetised culture replacing a scientific one, what he finally means is that poetry will now do what heretofore, before the narrative turn, had been thought to be the job of reason, namely to bring our culture more completely in line

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programmes and other media that aim to poll the nation for the top ten best books ever and such like. Here, people's votes go towards a universal top ten of all time. However, this is something that we know will be replaced and is only fixed in time to the point that it marks current opinion, and it does not go beyond this currency.

<sup>114</sup> Bruns, *Tragic Thoughts at the End of Philosophy*, 97

<sup>115</sup> Rorty's self-description as being a "non-reductive physicalist" is interpreted by Bruns as a theory that "looks like an attempt to replace the mind body problem with a two-language theory, which is the theory that the same event can be described equally well in physiological as well as intentional or phenomenological terms, where these two sorts of terms are not synonymous or inter-translatable but rather form a portion of a cultural heteroglossia – a multi-language or multi-cultural culture." For more on Rorty's science-culture distinction see Bruns, 97-99 For Rorty's own critique of the problems of theorising science, and its relation to art, politics and religion see "Pragmatism Without Method" in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, University of California Press, 1994, 63-77 Here, through Dewey and Hook, Rorty discusses the avoidance of slipping back into the "old Platonic dream."

with physical science, appropriating its language for our self-description, of the stories we tell.<sup>116</sup>

Bruns goes on to describe the limits and possibilities of narrative in response to Peter Winch's argument: "All we can do is look at particular examples (of human conduct) and see what we do or say about them; there are no general rules which can determine in advance what we must say about them."<sup>117</sup> Bruns confirms that "moral philosophy can only take place at the level of narratives of human judgments," and consequently, philosophy either becomes "literary criticism" or is not required at all. He continues: "so long as these narratives are seen to have application to our everyday experience, justice remains a living concept, a concept we know how to use or live with."<sup>118</sup> This promotes the political relation of narrative as a performative cultural production within which we all participate, as narrators and audience, where notions of justice demonstrate an inclusive parity within the identification of decision in language and morality critique is a retro-active politics. However, Bruns's critique also reflexes back upon inherent differences between contemplative (philosophical and/or scientific) agency and the products of culture in terms of stories. Here, although we don't return to the Platonic distinction between the "real" and the "ideal", we are given another problem: in understanding transcendental thinking not as a metaphysics but as a politics, Bruns's critique of both Rorty and Habermas still takes us to the philosophical problem of making sense of the world as having a rational view over it. Now, comprehending the meanings of objects is how we exercise knowledge and control over language.<sup>119</sup> As such, narratives of justice are sustained as aesthetic and political questions, wherein we are left to consider how these narratives are enforced and how they are identified. This return us nicely to the knowledge/power problem and to the complex dynamics between propositional theories and the performances of judgement such as those sketched out above.

This prevalence of law and themes of justice at work in culture in general situates my persistent interest in an idealised moment of action seen through representations such as the dramatic rendering of drama within "real life" situations (for example representations of "decision" as an epic-everyday occurrence). Now Nehamas' earlier worry regarding Foucault's concept of self-invention as anarchic excess without law falters since we can clearly see that *although Foucault does not consider the conceptualising of governing self-invention within the political sphere as*

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 99

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., Bruns citing Winch from, *Moral Integrity, Ethics and Action* London; Routledge and Paul Kegan, 1972, 182

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 100

<sup>119</sup> I discuss Bruns's solution to the problem of the ubiquity of abstract language systems later in Chapter Three, 126, where we encounter Bruns's call to "out rhetoric rhetoric."

*intrinsic to his project, we can nonetheless identify laws which still occupy these “representational practices” and demand further examination.* This commits us to the totalised or contained spaces of the performances of such narratives as renditions of antihumanist philosophy.

Understanding the allegorical and representational power of narrative relates moral philosophy as “narrative critique” to philosophy in general - as a concretised cause and effect of the theme of freedom. In doing so a direct connection is opened up between the rhetorical and formal demands of philosophy and the question of the limits that such demands create for the philosophical process. In “Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism”,<sup>120</sup> Derrida comments that although he acknowledges literature as “the complete opposite of the expression of private life” he nevertheless is “not able to separate the invention of literature, the history of literature, from the history of democracy.” Consequently, for Derrida the public and performative aspects of literature helpfully constitute an unstable and open political field. Here, public and private distinctions are dissolved but not reconciled and, as Derrida identifies, literature is something “on the basis of which the public realm and the realm of the political can be and always remains open.”<sup>121</sup>

### ***The theme of freedom in literature and philosophy***

Having identified a relationship between the propositional (philosophical), physiological (scientific), political (moral), and phenomenological (literary) languages through Bruns (Rorty) and Derrida we are provided a fairly abstract confirmation of the mutually historical and unstable relationship between literature and democracy. Taking up Bruns’s concerns regarding the hierarchical ratiocination of narrative, the question remains as to whether this *performative political* relation to the *narrative* theme of freedom undermines philosophical (or rational) critique, decision and choice. In other words, are these languages of rationality and poetry merely incompatible, or does one over-determine or even *unaccomplish* the other? Rehearsing this

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<sup>120</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism”, in *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, Simon Critchley et al., ed. Chantal Mouffe, London and New York, Routledge, 1996, 77-88

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 80 Derrida argues that without the motifs of emancipation inherent to the singular practices of our individual beliefs in freedom one cannot pose the question of ethics. (82) This assertion is entirely significant to Chapter Three where I take up Stanley Fish’s neo-pragmatist theory, clearly influenced by both Derrida (and Levinas). This is because, for Fish, like Derrida, subjective autonomy is intrinsically linked and is constitutive of democracy as a destabilising practice of belief. As such, it is this problem of the locus and the legitimacy of both ethics and emancipatory discourses that I move through in the following chapters.

question via Derrida we can ask how and in what way does this relationship between democracy and literature problematise the “foundational” tropes of subjective autonomy and the law? Are such critical and destabilising practices made possible purely because of the *absolute indeterminacy* and as such, the *intrinsic compatibility* of the systems of politics and literature?

This leaves the problem open of how the philosophical theme of freedom is evidenced within narrative as a critical, social and political factor. Or, how and in what way the multiplicity of reproducing narratives that situates freedom as a theme contradicts the universalising ideological thinking of freedom as a theory. This leads in turn to the problem of how an understanding of a postmodern and rhetorical conception of the subject/power relation can be subjected to scrutiny without creating its “philosophical double.” This is particularly relevant when considering as we did in the previous chapter Stanley Cavell’s reading of philosophy as narrative, where *despite and because* of a desire to disengage from a metaphysical philosophical structure, theory ultimately grounds and reproduces a similar foundational and universalising moral voice.

Just as narrative can be seen to open up the political (Derrida), in that it is open for all possibilities within language, we can also see that narrative’s “foundational” and consistent investment in autonomy as relative to violence articulates or is indicative of an experience of the limitations of such narrating. In this way, we could say that these traditions or foundational moves expressed within narrative open up a problem for the legitimation of philosophical, transcendental and metaphysical discourses. This is because the ambiguous, traditional or, conventional and repetitive character of violence within language could indicate limitations to the structures of communication precisely through its representations and performances in language. In turn, this identification of limits or constraints becomes an ironic description of language as totality, because in this literary version of the finitude of language we are shown an aesthetics of violence, a localised *philosophical language* of origins and ends.

Paradoxically, the philosophical is required or is called into question precisely at its limit, where the circumstantial and contingent multiplicity of possibilities in narrative is forced as a universally recognised or naturalised phenomenon over and above such temporalities. In this sense the *will to image* persists in the poetising and rhetoricising of the philosophical and concretises the essential problem for philosophy; that it cannot stand outside of its own rhetoric. The *will to image* can therefore simultaneously be seen to limit the philosophical and demand that philosophy confront its own limits. As Peter Winch points out, there are “features of morality that



we find philosophically puzzling.”<sup>122</sup> And this brings about the question of what it means to do philosophy as and within narrative?

In order to examine this question it is clear that an investment in the rhetoric of metaphysics is linked to the politics of authority and consensus within language. Narratives or performances of decision as a spectacular “risk” in the “postmodern” are also crucial to this study, especially if we are to consider the tradition of decision as violence in Nietzschean philosophy as relative to a socio-political identification in the genre of the “postmodern heroic”. This non-ironic, powerful, and unselfconscious postmodern subject described in the previous chapter offers up the potential of creating an understanding of the problem of the Foucauldian subject as something that can be examined locally within the *everyday* uses of language. As such, the various figurings of Foucault’s philosophical, metaphysical and ethical problem as a political problem of domination in the end produces a subject who characterises a particular, albeit dramatic, philosophical/narrative genre.

In light of this I now ask how do our experiences of an investment in such narratives articulate an “ethical experience”? Crucial to this question is that decision making in non-emancipatory or post-tragic narratives does not rely on a traditional Kantian (rational) conception of action through the applications of knowledge (organised vis-a-vis a Big Other), whereby we have the necessary equipment to avoid violence, or, suffer the guilt of behaving badly, nor, on the other hand do they rehearse a Nietzschean-style irrationalism where decision is violence.

Faced with the prevailing themes of autonomy in language, politics, and philosophy, in the following chapters I critique their correspondence from both a socio-political and an aesthetico-political perspective. Both chapters Three and Four concern themselves with the relationship between language and autonomy and operate as mutual strands that stem from these previous arguments. In light of this they rehearse similar arguments regarding the use, efficacy of language and also the transcendental and foundational character of specific language codes. In this way they continue with the theme that is central to this thesis; that narratives of justice, freedom, and autonomy, are understood in terms of their legitimacy, consequence and operative values, both in reflexive and “representational” cultural spaces, such as the media, film, art, literature, and television, *and* in the social and communal spaces of partisan politics.

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<sup>122</sup> Bruns, *Tragic Thoughts at the End of Philosophy*, 107

In the next chapter I consider the consequences of the differentiation and the unification of aesthetics and ethics, demonstration and representation, or thought and language, as, and in, hegemonical practices and understood as the prevailing issue throughout is the problem of articulating the relation between rhetoric and force. Here I continue to analyse the immanence of violence in decision initially as it is theorised in terms of transcendental, metaphysical and yet nonetheless contingent linguistic phenomena. This leads on to the question of how and under what conditions autonomy is experienced when an aesthetics of transgression is no longer understood as being relative to an evil act. In other words, because we do not have the facility to recognise evil as *a priori* to language, we cannot condition freedom upon it and, so it goes, we also do not collectively identify what evil actions are with the kind of universal agreement one may presume. Taking up these themes of rhetoric and relativism, I now contemplate the productions of autonomy under our ever-complex understandings between disagreement and critique, together with notions of complicity and consensus within the social.

### 3 Force and Rhetoric: *Practices of authority in Hobbes and Fish.*

Good and Evill, are names that signify our Appetites and Aversions; which in different tempers, customes, and doctrines of men are different: And divers men, differ not onely in their judgement, on the senses of what is pleasant, and unpleasant to the tast, Smell, hearing, touch, and sight; but also of what is comfortable, or disagreeable to Reason, in the actions of common life. Nay, the same man, in divers times, differs from himselfe; and one time priaseth, that is, calleth Good, what another time he dispraiseth, and calleth Evil: From whence come Disputes, Controversies, and at last War.<sup>123</sup>

Thomas Hobbes  
*Leviathan*

#### 1. Authority, Power and Consensus

In the previous chapters I have drawn out a number of arguments regarding subjective decision as violence. In this chapter I wish to take up some of the lingering and problematic implications already raised in my inquiries. This necessitates a further critique of a naturalised or ubiquitous conception of violence and the immanence of this violence to subjective autonomy. Having made a case for the tragic notion of autonomy as a rhetorical genre in my first chapter, and inscribing the rhetorical character of an anti-humanist and metaphysical subjectivity in the second, I will now go on to identify how a non-emancipatory politics of justice and decision produces and implicates the *rhetoric and force* of authority within hegemonical practices.

#### *Individual authorities*

In the Nietzschean idea of qualifying value or “meaning” with “struggle”, an unchecked irrational-style violence is not only underscored as a seeking out of violence but can also be seen to be a product of discourses which attempt to face up to this problem. I’m recalling here the logic of Enlightenment rationalism in my critique of Shattuck and Geddes’ effectively “censorial” arguments mentioned earlier in Chapter Two. Judith Butler further comments on this preference for rationalism or mastery of reason in her essay, “Restaging the Universal” in the text, *Contingency Hegemony, Universality*:

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<sup>123</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck, Cambridge University Press, 1997, 111

The fear, of course, is that what is named as universal is the parochial property of the dominant culture [...] The proceduralist view seeks to sidestep this problem by insisting that it makes no substantive claims about human nature, but its exclusive reliance on rationality to make its claim belies this very assertion.<sup>124</sup>

I now turn to Stanley Fish who critiques this double move in his essay “Mission Impossible” wherein he attempts to structure a response to the problem of violence. He writes that to organise this procedure one follows this orthodoxy:

First announce that there exists no mechanism capable of adjudicating between competing systems of belief, and then install in a position of privilege, just such a mechanism; declare something to be unavailable and then almost in the same breath, discover it.<sup>125</sup>

This problem introduces the question of how we begin to organise a critique of this established consensus of violence as decision, when any attempt to think through or rationalise violence produces its double.

The notion of subjectivity described in theories that centralise self-reflexivity can be seen to cling on to (what could be construed as) an irreconcilable difference between the force or the authority of representing violence as a *universal* and, on the other hand, the (natural and unrepresentable) universality of force that is implied through the procedure by which this authority is performed. In other words, for the subject to know self, he/she is compelled to acknowledge and understand the alterity of the other. However, as we see above, knowing nothingness, or recognising the impossible always appears to be outside of or in excess of the universal it seeks to produce. Any notion of an irreconcilable difference between the universal authority of the “particular” author and the text as an abstraction forgets perhaps too quickly that such a formal aesthetics of power by which it is constituted allows for a simple deconstruction of that power. Here, the individual author does not wholly stand outside of the narrative in question, because the social, cultural and political fiction that produces that narrative relies upon exactly the same rhetoric of aesthetics of power that characterises that system.

In terms of the relationship between ethics and formalism, or representationalism, I now deal with how authority is construed within the rhetoric of force, taking up the relative “foundational”

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<sup>124</sup>Judith Butler “Re-staging the Universal” in *Contingency, Hegemony Universality, Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, Slavoj Zizek, Verso 2000, 15

<sup>125</sup> Stanley Fish, “Mission Impossible” in *The Trouble With Principle*, Harvard University Press, 2001, 186

tropes of law which are, the ethical, the normative and the “natural”. This relationship has already been raised in my description of Stanley Cavell’s “everyday ethics”, and also in the description of the problem of a normativity of violence identified as the impact of Nietzsche’s naturalised genealogical political practice upon postmodernity in Chapter Two. To supplement this and to further examine the political consequences and possibilities for analysing the rhetoric of the subject and power, I first look to the work of Thomas Hobbes. In particular I consider his abhorrence for the art of rhetorical redescription, which in many senses can be a preference for the rationale shared with the theory discussed above. This interest in Hobbes’s reason and rhetoric is particularly useful in looking to a non-humanist politics of contract and consent, what could be seen to be a traditional philosophical interest in the humanism of the mastery of the art of rhetoric and also truth as an ultimate end that rhetoric discovers or bears forth. I then look to the political and hegemonical implications of Hobbes’s “*science civilis*” and specifically to his notions of Commonwealth, consensus and contract within the realm of a quantitative power of the “state of nature”.

Taking up Hobbes’s articulation of rhetoric and reason, consent and power, and demonstration and representation, and leaning on Quentin Skinner’s work on Hobbes’s rhetoric and reason I argue that the understanding of the legacy of Hobbes’s work (and what he articulates most fully in *Leviathan*) is that it points out its *own* investment in the rhetorical arts. As such, this legacy challenges the basis for making distinctions between reason and rhetoric, and also introduces ways to understand the problem of what Hobbes demarcates as “Perpetual Warre” where the authority of persuasion used in the art of rhetoric (based in artifice and fiction) can no longer be seen to conflict with the exercising of rational authorities (based in fact and science). Accordingly, this supports my following analysis of identifications of quantitative power, where I look to Hobbes’s attempt to organise a non-idealistic, or non-emancipatory political theory based on practice.

Following this, I examine Stanley Fish’s anti-formalist “theory of no theory” where all theory goes to practice. It is here, and specifically in his essays “Rhetoric” and “Force” in the text *Doing What Comes Naturally*, that I examine more closely how the continued preference for a self-legislating non-transcendental subject participates in the production of hegemony. Fish takes the same notion of society as Hobbes: a community that is based upon, “a defensive contract based

on mutual distrust.”<sup>126</sup> This is made more pertinent to my thesis considering that I have been continually interested in instances when we do agree, and particularly when there is an agreement that the violence of transgression, immorality and aggression is characteristic of autonomy. This formulates my study of the politics of individualism, which does not necessarily indicate a dangerously pluralised society of perpetual conflict but rather considers how the identification of this individualism advertises agreements in the social. As such, the status of agreements and radical individualism (the idea of disagreement or transgression) are discussed under the condition sketched out above - *the impossibility of non-contingency*. This is particularly relevant to Hobbes and Fish for whom the problem is that the precarious basis for agreement is essentially based on the universally unstable and perhaps even volatile fact that *we don't agree*, or, on a *natural and political conflict*.

### ***Quantitative Power***

In this chapter I wish then to more fully examine processes of consensus and agreement in identifications of “violence as decision”. Here I discuss practices of quantitative power that show how the use and availability of resources, skills, and mastery of rhetoric by an individual authority can convince others to consent to his/her power. Significant to this is that the agreement, identification and understanding of violence as decision can be seen on the one hand to be generic, normative and accepted, but on the other hand, and more to the point, this power is conceptualised as being un-deliberated and natural. This effect is confirmed when we look at the genre of heroic narratives. It is only when our hero has a passive or “cool” relationship with violence that he/she can experience autonomy. Similarly, this autonomy is based on a quantitative mechanistic notion of power where the will of the hero is more powerful because he/she is naturally more strong or powerful than others.

This notion of individualised, or “heroic style”, action is not merely relevant to the heroic genre in literature or culture, but also to politics in general, since to great extents a theory of rhetoric and power in the social relies equally upon mechanistic and quantitative identifications of authority. Key to this, is that rhetorical practices in language immediately introduce problems such as “knowing knowledge”, and the uses of knowledge as power. Such fears of quantitative power are based upon the assertion that an aesthetico-political unity concretises the equation

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<sup>126</sup> Fish, *The Trouble With Principle*, 100

between violence over others and absolute autonomy.<sup>127</sup> This introduces a question of the difference between a consolidated aesthetic and political unity and its practice in as much as although I have argued that images always mean *something*, we could also agree that they are subject to interpretation. Crucially, this invites the question of whether the product of understanding the difference between *practice having meaning* and the specific *meanings of practice* results in underscoring an aesthetic (representational) and political (practicable) difference. It is this problem that drives another strand of my investigation.

With regard to the immanence of violence to decision and its impact upon political practices, the question still remains of how we understand the identification of “decision as violence” as trivialising the practice of moral judgements, where violence is celebrated fatalistically. Also involved in this is the problem of an identification of the contingency of “violence as decision” as principled or ideologically motivated, because the abstract, naturalised, or generic language of violence as judgement sustains difficulties for interpretation and critiquing the powers that produce them.

### *Consensus*

In this chapter, I concentrate on particularised tropes of the subject as “powerful” and go on to deliberate the consequences of theories which are both subject centred and that also write the impossibility of self-reflexivity. Regarding the ubiquity of power Barry Hindess writes in *Discourse of Power, From Hobbes to Foucault* that “power is a ubiquitous feature of human interaction, it is everywhere and available to anyone. This suggests that there is little value to be said about power in general.”<sup>128</sup> Concerning this he quotes Giddens: “Power in itself is not a resource. Resources are media through which power is exercised.”<sup>129</sup> With this in mind, Hindess goes on to articulate a critique of power:

Power refers to a heterogeneous collection of attributes and possessions that need have little in common - except for the fact that they might be useful in the pursuit of some human purpose or other. Rather than investigate the properties of power as such, my serious inquiry would have to concern itself separately with the discrete powers associated with extraordinary strength, or eloquence, or with riches, the secret workings

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<sup>127</sup> An example here could easily be propaganda and the facilitation of one’s belief over another.

<sup>128</sup> Barry Hindess, *Discourses of Power, From Hobbes to Foucault*, Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1996, 100

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 91

of God and other such attributes, as well as with the diverse uses to which those powers can be put.<sup>130</sup>

Taking a cue from Hindess's investigation, my analysis concentrates upon a political and aesthetic study of the production, locations and contingencies of our consent and identification of the universal of agency as violence. This returns us to an argument around the force of rhetoric in particular subjectivities and, simultaneously, the rhetoric of force employed in the universal and abstracted narratives that these subjectivities produce. The inability to pull apart this formulation of rhetoric and force definitively, when both are so heavily conditioned upon each other, provokes a problem for an understanding of our inclusion within the production of universals.

In light of this I can ask *if and how the practice of rhetorical re-description*, of what to all extents *reflects a mutual cultural agreement on power as quantitative* (often brutal and mechanistic) within culture and politics, can allow *this abstract and generic "foundational ground" to be interpreted as principled or interested*.

This question is especially important regarding the politics of contract and agreement. Here we return to questions of the ubiquity of power and force in that, for example, Hobbes's state of perpetual war is situated not only as a procedure of continual disagreements inherited from rhetorical debate, but is also implicitly within the conditions of the agreements and laws by which communities govern themselves. And these agreements implicate a contractual use of power, a submission to dominant authorities and the use of rhetoric as a persuasive force in the public realm.

## **2. Hobbes and Rhetoric**

### ***The problems of rhetorical redescription***

In *Rhetoric and Reason in the Philosophy of Hobbes*, Quentin Skinner defines three centrally connected arguments in Hobbes's political project: i) the universal theory of self preservation, ii) a theory of the state of nature as war: "Since we are all more or less equal, the state in which we attempt to exercise this fundamental right of self-preservation will prove to be a state of war - a

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 24



war against all a *bellum omnium in omnes*;" and, iii) That as soon as this danger becomes apparent, we will want to seek peace and avoid death.<sup>131</sup>

For Hobbes, it is the art of rhetorical redescription<sup>132</sup> that threatens man's ability to seek peace, for; "the problems posed by the technique of rhetorical redescription are mainly in connection with the names of such things that affect us, that is, which please and displease us," and as such, are connected to "the names of Vertues and Vices." Hobbes writes that "such names can never be the true grounds of any ratiocination"<sup>133</sup> and that we can't name things according to our passions and our interests, because we'll find ourselves "in the condition of meer Nature," which is "a condition of War."<sup>134</sup> This scepticism of rhetoric and its distance from the art of reason is more vehemently laid out in Hobbes's *On the Citizen*:

The art of the one is Logic, and the other Rhetoric. The end of one is truth, of the other victory. [...] But their ability to render their hearers insane (who were merely stupid before); to make men believe that a bad situation is worse than it is, and that a good situation is bad; to exaggerate hope and to minimise risks beyond reason is due to eloquence; not the eloquence which expounds things as they are, but the other eloquence, which by communicating the excitement of the speaker to the minds of others makes everything appear as if he had seen it in his own excited mind.<sup>135</sup>

Rhetoric, for Hobbes then, is a distinct choice, and it is moreover an involvement with determining ambiguities that confuse the basis upon which "reasoned" judgements can be made. Hobbes's identification of rhetoric as a moral problem is also explained in *Leviathan*:

All our affections are but conceptions; when we conceive the same things differently, we can hardly avoid different naming of them [...] For one man calleth Wisdome, what

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<sup>131</sup> Quentin Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes*, Cambridge University Press, 1996, 163

<sup>132</sup> This phrasing of "redescription" over "description" is crucial to Hobbes and points us directly to his conception that essential truths are both immanent to society as a threat (perpetual war) or can aid in the government of society in the form of religious or historical ethical codes (the word of God). Therefore, for Hobbes, "redescription" or the use of the rhetorical arts, has always truth in its sights, either as a move away from it, as we see in his contempt for rhetoric in *The Elements and De Cive*, or as a means towards truth as seen in his later espousal of the Quintilian *Ars Rhetorica* in *Leviathan*.

<sup>133</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 31

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 111 Hobbes also writes on this "natural" state of war in *On the Citizen*, [ed. Richard Tuck, Cambridge University Press, 1998], "It cannot be denied that men's natural state, before they came together into society, was War; and not simply war, but a war of every man against every man. For what else is WAR but that time in which the will to contend by force is made sufficiently known by words or actions? All other time is called PEACE." 29-30

<sup>135</sup> Hobbes, *On the Citizen*, 139-40

another calleth feare; and one cruelty what another justice, one prodigality, what another magnanimity; and one gravity what another stupidity.<sup>136</sup>

The art of rhetorical persuasion demands attention to one's audience, where the good rhetorician will employ several of the many rhetorical arts to win over the agreement of the audience and defeat the opposition's arguments. Accordingly, rhetoric seeks to establish agreement, by using language that already has some agreeable aspect. It is here that we can note the complexity of the art of rhetorical persuasion. On the one hand rhetoric is the work of reason, finding (scientific) proof as a means to win over one audience, and on the other we can see that the art of rhetoric is based in the art of "moving" one's audience. By all accounts, this ability to emotionally move the audience relies very much on both traditional "tried and tested" methods of poetic speaking, and inventive and creative speaking. Duly, this type of "moving speech" has, for Hobbes, an unscientific, poetic approach based in various irrational and dangerously fickle self-interested whims. For Hobbes, poetic speaking harbours and inscribes a forum of contestable and therefore false universals, because such "universals" are seen to be dangerously situated around self-interest, unconcerned with any absolute truth - only the truth by which to assert power over one's enemies and to win particular arguments.

As a consequence, Hobbes structures a theory that responds to the problems of rhetorical redescription, relying upon two central motifs. The first is the arbitration of decisions from a higher authority in the role of the sovereign. Here, the sovereign is the ultimate law enforcer, all subjects relinquish the right to private judgements consenting to this centralised authority, who has a direct link to God. Secondly, and simultaneously, Hobbes constructs a project of authentic scientific demonstration in order to evacuate the requirement and use of the rhetorical arts. With these two theories Hobbes seeks to exorcise the art of rhetoric from the realm of the political through the central acknowledgement that virtue is not to be understood as a formal concept. Hobbes writes in *On the Citizen* that philosophers "have taken the view that the nature of the virtues lies in a certain mean between two extremes, and vices in the extremes themselves, and this is patently false."<sup>137</sup> Hobbes decrees that virtue is in no way related to this ground of mediocrity and that indeed he cannot find *any such* mediocrity.<sup>138</sup> Therefore, "common ground" - the foundational territory of agreement and therefore the "truth" that the good rhetorician asserts in his rights to "move" the audience - is considered to be equally a rhetorical ground.

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<sup>136</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 31

<sup>137</sup> Hobbes, *On the Citizen*, 56

Significantly then, Hobbes articulates clear differences between the practice of self-interest and the practice of reasoning, initially identifying the art of rhetoric to be the corrupter of truths and the inscriber of false truths because it relies upon false universals in manufactured social consent vis-a-vis the commonplace or traditional qualities of emotional speech. Because Hobbes is critical of accepting these agreements in language as the truth or foundation for social and political technologies, he conscripts a “science of reason” in order to practice essential truths and facts: “Men are therefore in a state of war so long as they judge *good* and *evil* by the different measures which their changing desires from time to time dictate.”<sup>139</sup> As such, as long as good and evil are measured by the diversity of desires, those who utilise the art of rhetoric will find themselves still living in a state of war.

Hobbes demonstrative science evacuates the formal problems of virtue as mediocrity, because it prefers a practice of facts. Here, following the more forceful explanation of his point in *On the Citizen* and *The Elements*, Hobbes believes that by demonstrating the facts, as in a scientific experiment, one does not have to convince the audience of one’s correctness. Rather, the practice or demonstration of this fact will in itself prove its own innate truth. This is speech making as a science, in that the speaker need make no central gesture to the audience to convince them of truth. Instead the facts will do this in themselves. There is then no “winning assent” or inventiveness with fantasy in language, neither is the speaker required to win consent by establishing an already conceived “common ground.” Hobbes writes: “I reckon, I do not merely debate.”<sup>140</sup> In response, Skinner confirms that “the rigorous search for Truth can therefore be equated with the quest for demonstrations.”<sup>141</sup> Quite clearly, demonstration is understood by Hobbes at this point, as specifically unrelated to the art of rhetoric and the social performances of agreement. Accordingly, the practice of reason evacuates the problems of rhetoric and solves the dangers and risks of moral re-description by producing “Immutable laws” and “Eternal truth.”<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *The Elements of the Law. Natural and Politic: Part I, Human Nature, part II De Corpore politico; with Three lives*, ed. JCA Gaskin, Oxford University Press, 1994, Chapter 17, 98

<sup>139</sup> Hobbes, *On the Citizen*, 55

<sup>140</sup> Skinner, *Rhetoric and Reason*, 318 citing *De Cive* in Praefatio, 82.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 336

### 3. Hobbes and Original Covenant

Hobbes's response to the essential inability to agree on "wants" finds a route to agreement through political hegemony. In this, we see power placed in the hands of "The Leviathan" the mythological beast made up of the Commonwealth, where the sovereign acts as its (literal) head of State. Under this rule, diverse opinions still exist; moral judgements are seen as a matter of feeling as well as of perception; and something virtuous or good is aligned with something broadly the same as the description of the pleasurable.<sup>143</sup>

However, Hobbes interprets the radical instability of the state of nature caused by the innate desire of self-preservation not as a fundamental law or duty but as a right or liberty. One stays true to one's natural desire to seek peace, manifest as the logic of self-preservation in the act of protecting one's self from conflict by giving up individual choice, by entering into a contract with a greater protector - the sovereign. This move quells the human predisposition towards a violent state of nature. The paradox that Hobbes sets up is this: In endowing one's "natural" behaviour with matters of choice and reason, one is now free to give up this choice (inspired through reason) but only in order to retain it. Consequently, Hobbes's solution to the relativist problem of a natural and universal right of self-defense as an all out social war is for men to renounce their judgement by entering into a contract with the State. He writes: "So - we must divest ourselves of liberty - as an agreement has to be communal for laying down of ones Rights."<sup>144</sup> Hobbes recognises that such a Covenant requires a higher binding law by which to achieve consensus and rule, and it is here that the sovereign performs its role. Hobbes speaks of the limits of the Covenant in *Leviathan* arguing that it "is Artificiall: and therefore it is no wonder if there be somewhat else required to make their Agreement constant and lasting; which is a Common Power, to keep them in awe, and to direct their actions to the Common benefit".<sup>145</sup> Consequently, to prove the eternal rule of Covenant Hobbes situates an immutable and central power. This is the solution that keeps the Commonwealth free from the dangers of a natural irrationality:

To conferre all their power and strength upon one Man, or upon one Assembly of men, that may reduce all their wills by plurality of voices, unto one Will: which is as much as to say, to appoint one Man or Assembly of men; to beare their Person; and everyone to

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 336, citing *Leviathan* 458

<sup>143</sup> Richard Tuck, makes this comment in "Hobbes", in *Great Political Thinkers*, Oxford University Press 1992, 56

<sup>144</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 92

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 120

owne, and acknowledge himselfe to be Author of whatsoever he that so beareth their Person, shall Act, or Cause to be Acted.<sup>146</sup>

This central and absolutist covenant prevents the risk of “treasonous” activities which, in Hobbes view, would most easily be accomplished through the use of moral redescription. Also, this grounding a priori agreement of Covenant to the sovereign declines from interpreting justice as any identifiable norm, for the capacity of power is essentially placed in the hands of the sovereign. Hobbes suggests that even under a tyrannical rule it is the subject’s duty to remain under contract to the State. In this society of autonomous individuals subjectivity is given up to this central authority whilst the sovereign consists of a power that is greater than any individual subject or group of subjects.

This brings up two questions: the first is around the act of consent, or how the law is understood; the second is in relation to its enforcement. The notion of consensus could be read here (regarding Hobbes’s beast “The Leviathan”) as a negative phenomenon, in that we give over power to an other when we enter into a contract, retaining very little or no power after this contract. However, this reading forgets Hobbes’s essential notion of the “state of nature”, that of self-preservation. Under this state of self-love, it would seem that no one would enter into any contract with others if it was thought that they would not benefit in some way. In this sense, the act of consent acknowledges the act of contract as a choice but it is also the *only* choice. For Hobbes, the act of Covenant is based in pre-moral origins, seen in his demand for the subject to identify with this “original decision” to give away one’s freedom which is in turn duly made possible by thinking the fact that we are born free. Consequently this is a contract with no performance, no paper and no signatories. It is *Original Covenant*. This Covenant then is an impossible a priori and understood as an *institutionalised rhetoric of power*.

Despite Hobbes’s humanism - the continuing predilection towards a “free will” seen in the ability to master the rhetorical arts - this “mastery”, or possibly self-empowering skill, available to the Commonwealth is sublimated by its essentialising the political contract in the sovereign, and to the project of truth, where all power goes to the One. Accordingly, this underscores subjective power as something that comes prior to the political, or even initiates it.

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

Claude Lefort's text "The Permanence of the Theologico-Political?" further problematises Hobbes's conception of a pre-linguistic Original Covenant by understanding the productions of collective identity as a politics of representation. Significantly, his understanding of agreement as material discourse is inherently linked to the re-engagement of social actors within political argumentation:

The idea of the nation does not refer to a text which exists prior to the commentary; it is of course supported by an accretion of materials and representations, but it can never be separated from a discourse of the nation. [...] Whilst the nation bestows a collective identity, it is at the same time implicated in that identity. It remains a floating representation, and the vectors of its destiny are always subject to the decrees of social actors - or those who speak for them - who want to establish themselves within a duration and a time which allows them to name themselves.<sup>147</sup>

Lefort's conception of "nation as discourse" understands the political nature of Covenant or the public performance of one's agreement to the State as requiring already existing hierarchies from which to enact consensus. However, these hierarchies are not outside of the political, moreover, they are the practice of politics. Consequently, Hobbes's notion of choice as pre-political can be read as a manufactured fiction of choice, and *an exercise of domination*, something to assure the smooth running of State and the docility of its citizens.

In Hobbes's theory of Covenant then, there is no room to imagine a space of "free choice" that acts prior to the political, because the subject is never in a *rational* position to give itself up to a contract, in that the space Hobbes conceives for contract perversely *exceeds* the law defined by a Hobbesian rationality. Instead, we have a situation of a naturally "free willed" sovereign rule where, at best, the authority of sovereign power, government, and hopefully Commonwealth, participate and benefit from the invention of Commonwealth's consent and agreement to give up "choice" in order to rule State and country smoothly and effectively.

### ***Conscience and the law***

Leaving Hobbes's a priori of an absolute free-will behind, we can now open up a critique regarding the consistency of both decision/choice and identification, and also that of the structure of coincidence between the subject and the law. Regarding the subject's place within the law Hobbes writes in *On the Citizen* that "the natural law is the moral law [and], though [men] cannot

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<sup>147</sup> Claude Lefort, "The Permanence of the Theologico-Political?" in *Democracy and Political Theory*, University of Minnesota Press, 1988, 231

agree on a present good, they can agree on a future good. And that is the work of reason.”<sup>148</sup> For Hobbes, the subject’s coincidence with the law made up of a natural and rational desire for peace prevents the questioning of rights. As Skinner remarks: “No subject can ever lawfully put his conscience against the law” and, “any claim to judge the justice of a law will involve an absurdity, that of claiming the right to question the standard of justice itself.”<sup>149</sup> Consequently, for Hobbes, “A man’s Conscience, and his Judgement are the same thing” and “the Law is the publique Conscience” such that every subject “hath already undertaken to be guided.”<sup>150</sup>

Skinner’s point here is crucial: “no subject can ever *lawfully* put his conscience against the law” for Hobbes, because it demonstrates that the subject’s “natural” unpoliticised state is still intact, and furthermore that this is in danger of rising to the surface through criminal acts. Significantly for Hobbes, these moments of illegality serve no particular purpose and can be seen in acts of stupidity such as getting drunk. As such, for Hobbes, the subject who breaks the law is an irrational “unthinking” subject, a subject who has momentarily lost his/her reason. Certainly, the subject can break the law, but he/she can never *reason against the law* and is never divorced from its rule. However, it is crucial to point out that in these “irrational” moments Hobbes identifies a subject who remains under a delicate and unstable balance between Nature and State. Here we have a precarious distinction between *being within* the confines of law as rational subject, and *being against* the law because the subject is without reason. Consequently, rational behaviour is distinctly aligned with acting according to a “good truth”, so as long as the subject thinks rationally then, through the knowledge of Original Covenant the subject acknowledges the absurdity of putting the law into question.

### ***The politics of religion***

Returning to my second question, regarding the enforcement of the act of consent, I now look to the difference between Hobbes’s *science of demonstrating truth*, which could be seen to rely upon a transcendental notion of “truth” and “fact”, in relation to the will or capacity of the sovereign: the ultimate link to God’s truth. This turns out to be a question of a naturalised justice, where the will of God is understood through a science of political law, or vice-versa. On all accounts it is hard to distinguish the difference between the two modes of Hobbes’s project, because both chart a seemingly uncontestable path to fact and God. However, what is significant

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<sup>148</sup> Hobbes, *On the Citizen*, 55

<sup>149</sup> Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric*, 338

here is the contradiction of Hobbes's atheism against his simultaneous determination to the bible as a useful political guide as well as the sovereign as *the symbol of God's power*. Regarding the institutionalisation of Gods and Catholic laws in Rome; Hobbes writes in *Leviathan*:

The first Founders, and Legislators of Commonwealths amongst the Gentiles, whose ends were only to keep the people in obedience, and peace, have in all places taken care; First, to imprint in their minds a beliefe, that those precepts which they gave concerning Religion, might not be thought to proceed from their own device, but from the dictates of some God... So *Numa Pompilius* pretended to receive the Ceremonies he instituted amongst the Romans, from the Nymph *Egeria*: and the first King and founder of the Kingdom of *Peru*, pretended himselfe and his wife to be the children of the Sunne: and Mahomet, to set up his new Religion, pretended to have conferences with the Holy Ghost, in the forme of a Dove.<sup>151</sup>

This is clearly a description of *all religion as government*. However, Hobbes's view of the Commonwealth differs: "God is King of all the Earth by his Power: but of his chosen people, he is King by Covenant."<sup>152</sup> Hobbes is sceptical of the political inscription of religion as mystical, as is seen particularly in his diatribe against the Catholic church in Rome later in *Leviathan*. However, this does not affect his assertion that belief in the supernatural or transcendental power of the Divine is the basis for any political law. As such, what can be detected in Hobbes's political science is a conflict between the use of God's power (the truth) and the power of the sovereign in the political realm, when we see that the sovereign can essentially be free to conduct himself according to his own self-interest and the word of the law is reducible to God-like commandments.<sup>153</sup> This under-theorised role of the sovereign's power in the political realm is significant when looking at Hobbes's basic political assertions, which take the form of rather flimsy biblical-style injunctions such as to treat others as one would wish to be treated and such like.

What is important here is that there is a conflict in the identification of "God's truth" and the power of the sovereign in the political realm, since to all extents it is unclear as to whether the sovereign acts upon both self-interested whim or conducts him/herself according to the benign passivity of a figurehead. This is the word of God as simultaneously impartial *and* interested. As such, and problematically so, no laws of government are articulated by Hobbes for sovereign rule.

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<sup>150</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 22

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 82

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, 83



However, despite this lack in the political structure and despite Hobbes's reliance upon a quasi-transcendental hegemony, Hobbes's subject of the Commonwealth does not suffer the trauma of transcendental angst.<sup>154</sup> More to the point, Hobbes avoids theorising the transcendental, yet his acknowledging of religion as political proposes firstly that belief is both rhetorical and political and, secondly, that consensus (the rhetoric of belief) made in Covenant to the sovereign's "natural" power produces an abstract and powerful hegemony - that of the beast, Leviathan. The Leviathan decontextualises any particularised politics of belief towards an abstract "fullness" of belief, which in turn, and in its grasp upon a metaphoric and abstract power, brings into question the apparatuses of both political dominance and critique, especially if we are to identify our ability to understand meanings within power as being contingent upon our moral and political responsibility.

However, despite Hobbes's religious parlance, he refrains from philosophising, acknowledging that scepticism or doubt is not directed towards affirming one's limits. When we doubt "we don't go mad."<sup>155</sup> In other words, because the subject is never without reason, and duly, never without the law, a transcendent moment of self-consciousness designated at the limits of knowledge is unavailable. Instead Hobbes looks to the political construction of society, where his interest focuses upon the scientific understanding of social life through Man's cultural and social identifications, communications and agreements. What is raised here is the question of the uses of the rhetorical arts in Hobbes's work and his theory of the act of demonstration in science, and this returns us to the art of rhetorical redescription. Such a redescription is to "read thyself" and this is identified in Hobbes as work for the poet/artist. Here, it is the painter and the poet who is best suited to "reading thyself": "The characters of man's heart, blotted and confounded as they are with dissembling, lying counterfeiting and erroneous doctrines, are legible to him that searcheth hearts."<sup>156</sup> Reading oneself in this way constructs Hobbes's basis of a civil science, where the artist - poet acts as its foundations, and its workings. Skinner points out that this artistic desire to "search the truth of hearts" paralleled with a rationalised examination of them, provides a "scientific analysis of the emotions and the heart" that enables us to read each other.<sup>157</sup> "Knowing self" is not designated as a task, or an object, but moreover, as a practice and a skill. Here, the

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<sup>153</sup> Barry Hindess draws the conclusion that Hobbes's theory of power is most suspect in its inability to substantiate a political conception of the sovereign. This is the site where authorities go unchecked and the Commonwealth, once under contract to the sovereign are given no rights from which to revolt.

<sup>154</sup> In this we can see Hobbes's evacuation of the demand to theorise the subject's tragic self-consciousness as autonomy within the political.

<sup>155</sup> Tuck, "Hobbes", in *Great Political Thinkers*, 192

<sup>156</sup> Hobbes *Leviathan*, 10

work of the artist has no transcendental function in its navigation and production of an experience of the limits of language. Instead, the work of the artist and poet for Hobbes, is valued precisely through the assertion that language is readable and that the poet has the facility over and above the average citizen to take up the work of community by *first* “reading thyself.” This firmly politicises the work of the poet, translating the peripheral function of artistic creativity as central to the socio-political stage. What we also see is a move from a conception of the poet as mediated commentator to political mediator, fully equipped with an arsenal of rhetoric by which to win assent and is as such, a crucial social player.

### ***Hobbes’s rhetoric and reason; the mastery of eloquence***

Despite Hobbes’s abhorrence for the arts of rhetoric, particularly in *The Elements* and *On the Citizen*, it is evident that in *Leviathan* he makes certain acknowledgements of its place within his scientific discourse, often approving of a dynamic between reason and eloquence. He turns to the humanism of Quintilian rhetoric when he asserts that the rhetorical device of establishing interests and grounds for understanding is required for an argument from reason. This argument takes up Aristotle’s premise that rhetoric helps those making legal judgements to arrive at verdicts congruent with justice and truth.<sup>158</sup> Hobbes also acknowledges the pervasive dominance of rhetoric particularly in reference to the role of sovereign, since although a ruler may be “Carefull in his politique Person to procure the common interest,” he will nevertheless be “more or no less carefull to procure the private good of himselfe, his family, kindred and friends: and for the most part, if the publique interest chance to cross the private, he prefers the private: for the Passions of men are commonly more potent than their Reason.”<sup>159</sup> Following this, Hobbes situates a more complex account of the subject and the law, and seems to be moving closer to the problem of pluralism that is, for Hobbes, the state of perpetual war mentioned earlier. Here, Hobbes is still keen to separate reason and self-interest but now establishes that politicians cannot tell the difference and neither can the Commonwealth.<sup>160</sup>

Hobbes’s assertion of the commonwealth as a man-made contrivance helpfully acknowledges the persuasive elements of reason and law. However, in admitting the problem for *anyone* to distinguish between self-interest and reason, Hobbes’s locus for the contract of a singular choice

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<sup>157</sup> Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric*, 384

<sup>158</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 421

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, 131

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*

is also troubled. As I have already indicated, this is firstly because the subject needs to be able to master the arts of science and rhetoric enough to first organise his/her contractual “choice” to the State and, secondly, in the fact that it is impossible to think reasonably when this is construed as thinking outside of or before self interest, putting the subject in an *already* contingent situation with respect to language and politics. Here, Hobbes combines the impossible pre-moral, passive or a priori aspect of contract, that is motivated by the subjects natural desire for self preservation, with the demand that the subject give up the practice of self-preservation in the political arena. As such we give up our “natural” subjectivity, the power to dissent or to wage war, in order to consent to an artificial social contract. However, what is particularly interesting about this conception of citizenship is that *subjectivity is performed as consent* through rational practices. And what grounds these performances of consensus, or, the workings of community, is *the universal and contingent notion of self-interest*. Here, the subject’s natural predisposition to bellicosity is fought against with Hobbes’s rhetoric of reason. This is laid down in Hobbes’s steadfast insistence that “Judgement does all”, thereby still insisting upon his preference for reason.<sup>161</sup> Hobbes agrees that this “reason” is linked to mastery, and specifically a mastery of the practices of knowledge. He writes:

Time and education begets experience; Experience begets memory; memory begets Judgement, and Fancy; Judgement and Fancy begets the strength and structure; and Fancy begets the ornaments of a Poeme. The Ancients therefore fabled not absurdly in making memory the mother of the Muses.<sup>162</sup>

This is a relatively complex account of inherited knowledge as memory, the application of knowledge, education, and the invention of knowledge, cited here as strength and structure. The more attention that is paid to Hobbes’s detailing of their reciprocal relations, the more contingent upon each other they become, and equally difficult to separate. Hobbes writes: “The Sciences are small Power” but “Eloquence is Power and is indeed to be numbered among the most eminent faculties of the human mind.”<sup>163</sup>

Accordingly Skinner identifies Hobbes’s recognition of the value of the art of rhetoric and that *oratio* and *ratio* can work together, pointing out that Hobbes moves back into the project of a

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 52

<sup>162</sup> Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric*, 370, this quote is from *The Answer of Mr. Hobbes to Sir Will. D’Avenant’s Preface Before Gondibert*, in Sir William Davenant’s *Gondibert*, ed. David F. Gladish, Oxford, pp.45-55

<sup>163</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 62

classical rhetorical ideal.<sup>164</sup> Hobbes acknowledges a practice of rhetoric *and* reason, since although he still believes in an essential truth this belief is put to one side and *ideas of truth and opinion are related through and as practice*. Hobbes thus evades the emancipatory ideal associated with humanist philosophy. Instead, the art of rhetoric is associated with an individual assertion of power that is not around achieving peace, but rather the task of preventing or guarding oneself against war. As such Hobbes retrieves a notion of free will based in the use of the rhetorical arts where mastery is the pursuit of a consensus to one's power, motivated from fear of this "natural" autonomy.

Skinner sums up the differing approaches to rhetoric and reason through Hobbes project by drawing upon Hobbes changing alliances towards the art of rhetoric. First, in *The Elements*, Hobbes writes that "so long as his readers bring attention," it ought to be sufficient for him "to show my reasons" to win assent.<sup>165</sup> In *Leviathan*, he declares that the only way to win "attention and consent is to write with eloquence."<sup>166</sup> Contrary to the such views expressed for example in the work of Richard Tuck who sides with an identification of Hobbes's work as an epistemological critique of the political problems of philosophy, Skinner looks to Hobbes as investing in a humanist project. What is important about Hobbes, for me, is to understand his theory of reason and rhetoric through or *between* these readings, in that Hobbes's work can be identified both as humanist in the way that he cites, albeit reluctantly, an individual mastery of the rhetorical arts and reason, *and* as nonhumanist when regarding his theory of political practice and his reluctance to institutionalise an ideological conception of social emancipation. The legacy of Hobbes's humanism thus can be seen to make available the grounds for an epistemological critique of philosophy. It is here in Hobbes's failed (humanist) mastery of reason over rhetoric and the crucial move laid down in *Leviathan* towards rhetoric as means to inscribe reason, that the study of the politics of language becomes a central concern.

This mastery of the art of rhetoric is visibly demonstrated by the metaphor of the Leviathan itself as the symbolic figurehead of the text. Hobbes identifies eloquence to be situated in use (power and mastery), a tool with which to convince the Commonwealth of the truths that civil science finds out. Furthermore, "fancy" and "judgement" do not contradict each other so easily if we are to take up the classical Quintilian method for cultivating discretion within the art of rhetoric. However, to ascertain how and by what means rhetoric establishes "facts" is a more complex

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<sup>164</sup> Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric*, 353

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 353 from *The Elements of the Law*, 1-2

task, especially when it would seem that, for the subject to identify oneself as conceding to contract, one is subject to rhetoric. Although Hobbes acknowledges the relationship between the two, reason still has the dominant position, in as much as reason utilises rhetoric to win assent towards the establishing of facts. Consequently, the possibility that our reason may be subject to rhetoric upsets the status quo of the power balance and we return to the potentiality of Hobbes's worst nightmare. This is the nightmare that rhetorical function has more than just a role in the establishing and arguing of facts, but that it is also implicated within the identification and understanding of them too. This pluralism returns us to the matter of our natural rights coinciding with the State law - a state of nature as perpetual war.

### ***Rhetoric and power - preliminary questions***

The legacy of Hobbes's rhetoric and reason is the difficulty of separating subjective choice as a disagreement (conceptualised as perpetual war), and agreement as a passive moment in the social. Hobbes conceives the State and God as being in alignment with a combination of the subject's natural and reasoned self-interest. As I have written earlier, the subject is not free to rationalise Hobbes's Covenant; rather, this power is handed over to the "great protector", the sovereign head of State. However, in Hobbes's fusing of the theological and the political (in that Man's self-interest is unified with a theological concept of law), what we are then faced with is a foundational difference between the (pre-linguistic) natural state of man and a political/theological state of man.

In Lefort's critique of the relation between the theological and the political he writes that the exercise of power becomes politically dangerous when these terms are understood separately and/or when they are forced together in an impossible unity.<sup>167</sup> It is here where we articulate Hobbes's project as indicative of a *forced unity*, conceived under the symbol of State and God in

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 354, from *Leviathan*, 483

<sup>167</sup> Lefort characterizes this forced unity with the example of Nazism. Here, the symbolic unity of the theological is utilised and centralised as a concrete political practice. Lefort writes: "In these extreme situations, representations which can apply an index of social unity and identity become invested with a fantastic power, and the totalitarian adventure is underway." (233). As such, Lefort conceptualizes a difference between the political [*du politique*] and politics [*la politique*], as if the sub-conscious of a non-emancipatory political practice is the essence and ideology of the political. In other words, Lefort identifies "disunity" or "difference" as the foundation for and the unclaimed object of democratic politics. This is an expression of an ephemeral and yet material unity of an ideological contract, perhaps best understood in democracy as the paradoxical project that preaches mutual tolerance and compatibility on the one hand, whilst at the same time guarantees the "foundational" right to exercise one's power individually on the other.

order to quell the natural material plane of interest from the masses. Significantly, Hobbes doesn't propose an emancipatory politics through religious practices, he promises instead a war free zone through *the politicisation of religious rhetoric*. Lefort writes that the logic of quasi-transcendental power demands the conception of an original contract which, understood as a myth, invites further problems around a conception of the political as hinged upon *both a spiritual-style "means to an end" task of enlightenment and a pragmatic practice of politics*:

It is true, as social science asserts, that power no longer makes any gesture towards an *outside*, that is it is no longer articulated with any *other* force which can be represented, and that, in that sense, it is disentangled from the religious. It is indeed true that power no longer refers to any point of origin which coincides with the origin of Law and knowledge and that, in that sense, the type of actions and relations which cluster around its pole can be distinguished from other types of actions and relations which might be termed judicial, economic and cultural; and it is therefore true that something can be circumscribed as being politics [*la politique*]. The one thing that remains hidden from the gaze of the scientific observer is the symbolic forms which, as a result of the mutation of power, makes this new distinction possible: the essence of *the political* [du politique]. The illusion that the political can be localised within society is therefore not without a certain consistency, and to dismiss it as a mistaken opinion would mean surrendering to one more illusion.<sup>168</sup>

This rather lengthy quote from Lefort introduces two main problems regarding aesthetics and politics. The first problem is situated in a theory of quantitative power or authority, in which the more one is able to master the rhetorical arts, the more power one achieves. The second is the status of consensus within this theory of domination. The Quintilian art of rhetoric requires, at bottom, the establishing of an *ethos*, and there are two ways to establish this: i) "To speak of things of consequence - or things that delight". Things that are novel and important, or something that concerns the good of the community. ii) To seek to ingratiate oneself with the audience whilst giving an impression of complete impartiality.<sup>169</sup> Essentially the goal of the rhetorician is to persuade the audience as to matters of great importance, but it crucially remains unclear *who* decides what is of value when this is an ambiguous mix of persuading and crowd pleasing.

Significantly, the use of rhetoric to gain power demands the establishing of consensus and as such it requires an inter-subjective identification, not only by an audience but also by the orator in choosing the most appropriate methods and style of communication. In other words, the orator has, to some extent, give the audience what they want. Skinner writes of a traditional way to gain the audience attention: "it is because of the nearness between evil and good that the rhetorician

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<sup>168</sup> Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*, 227-8

can arouse the deepest emotions.”<sup>170</sup> In light of this assertion - that rhetoric makes use of, and is subject to, pre-established categories - we are still faced with the problem of the Hobbesian experience of the immanence of truth. And this is a problem if we take up *both* of Hobbes’s conceptions of it - *either as an immanent and natural violence - made available through the self-interested disagreements performed through rhetoric - or how the project of rhetoric as a reasoned practice could be employed as a means towards scientific truth*. However, since there are no pre-established possibilities for a contract without a rhetoric of the social, we can also see that Hobbes’s desire for scientific “fact” and “truth” under the art of rhetoric make truth an *interested* notion. Essentially, representation - the rhetoric of force, or the means by which we understand images of power and demonstration - and the force of rhetoric - or the means by which we are moved to agreement - are intrinsically conflated in a practice of language that is compelled to constantly assert definitions of value through its own shifting technologies.

Consequently, we can ask a number of questions regarding the mutual affirmations of power within language. If we agree that rhetoric uses pre-established modes of consensus and also seeks to persuade towards consensus, then *how can we account for the rhetoric of truth as power over others?* This referent to power as using the rhetoric of truth or “empty” or “indeterminate” places leads to further problems in understanding the relationship between the subject, community and the law. This is because the normative language of power as having “no place” or as being ubiquitous endows the speaker with a dominating power in as much as the speaker claims knowledge of truths or facts. We then return to the problem of how consensus is perceived intersubjectively without reviving domination and normativity as pre-requisites for consensus or “community”. Underlying this question between the *rhetoric of force* and the *force of rhetoric* is what Lefort terms the fear that:

The distinction between symbolic agency and power as a real organ disappears [and] the reference to an empty place gives way to the unbearable image of a real vacuum. The authority of those who make public decisions or who are trying to do so vanishes, leaving only the spectacle of individuals or clans whose one concern is to satisfy their appetite for power.<sup>171</sup>

The normativity of violence as decision leads to the problem of whether or not there is any *cultural* value in the writing of violence as a universal, since agreeing to this accepts violence as a

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<sup>169</sup> Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric*, 354, from *Leviathan* 30

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, 155

<sup>171</sup> Lefort “The Permanence of the Theological Political?” in *Democracy and Political Theory*, 233

*naturalised* phenomena, including the status of our own domination, and our possible domination of others. What follows from this is the question of how to respond to a normative or generic language that appears to obfuscate meaning and as such emphasises the limits of interpretation? I deal with these two problems next.

#### **4. Fish and Hobbes**

##### ***Natural violence, natural reason***

This line of questioning could lead to the Hobbesian assumption that rhetoric undermines the possibility for moral argument. However, in Hobbes's insistence on practice, which moves against a formalised understanding of rhetorical signification, there is perhaps something to affirm. As we have seen, rhetoric seeks agreement, but it does not argue for absolute truths in *the revealing of the facts* that Hobbes desires. This prompts an inquiry of the circumstances of rhetorical argument and how it is reliant on particular audiences. This also brings into question the relationship between the use and the manipulation of languages that argue for certain truths and how such contestation relies upon already agreed ideas and conventional structures. As such, it is *the practice of producing universals* that we can now bring into focus. Can a definition of power as both *quantitative and consensual* assist in an understanding of dominant practices?

Stanley Fish takes this up in two essays; *On Rhetoric* and *On Force* in his book *Doing What Comes Naturally*. In this text he writes upon the contingency of force and rhetoric and also on the root relation of belief and reason. On the plural condition of rhetorical debate he argues: "Not only [is] rhetoric - the art of analysing and presenting local exigencies - a form of discourse none can afford to ignore, it renders the opposing discourse - formal philosophy beside the point."<sup>172</sup>

Taking the stipulation of rhetoric and force as, at bottom, a condition of absolute finitude, we are then faced with the problem of the naturalisation of violence in its aesthetic mode and in our consensual identifications of it. Like Hobbes, Fish forgoes a theory of self-reflexivity in relation to social conditions and hegemonical powers. Also similar to Hobbes, Fish dismisses the "mediocre" as a theoretical "natural" state for the imposition or the discovery of justice: Following Derrida, Fish writes:

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<sup>172</sup> Stanley Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally, Change, Rhetoric, and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1989, 481



The “obvious” cannot be opposed to the “staged” [...] because it is simply the achievement of a staging that has been particularly successful. One does not escape the rhetorical by fleeing to the protected area of basic common sense because common sense in whatever form is always a rhetorical, partial, partisan, interested construction.<sup>173</sup>

So, like Hobbes, Fish acknowledges a *rhetorical condition*. However, the contracts that they propose for the subject and the notion of law are orientated differently. In Hobbes, the central problems that alerts us to both the ubiquity and facticity of violence are, firstly, subjective choice as pre-political; secondly, in the acceptance that “truth” will be discovered through a reasoned and mastered rhetoric; and thirdly, the enforcement of the law of sovereign to solve the problem of plurality of opinions. What we have here is violence as something that is a conventional and political necessity, in that Hobbes knows that dominion regulates violence. Hobbes simultaneously underscores violence as irrational in that this primal violence - the nature of one’s will - needs policing.

Fish notes that for Hobbes, reason is still acted upon as some “essential” or natural capacity, “guiding us to the facts”, such that the application of reason seems to be based in an opposition to decision being violent. However, this is not the case: the establishing of universals, or the argumentation of one’s belief under the name of “justice”, “truth” or “objective adjudication”, is interested all the way through and this is clearly demonstrated in Hobbes’s essential fear of the power of men’s passions. Instead in Fish’s relativism, we can see that conflict and violence have a *foundational and unstable* aspect, but the illusion of it as foundation (and thus also immanent to decision) where, “if we behave like that we will get that,” is acknowledged as rhetoric. The foundational character of violence, for Fish, “is established by persuasion, that is, in the course of argument and counter argument on the basis of examples and evidence that are themselves cultural and contextual.”<sup>174</sup> From this we can formulate that Fish’s identification of rhetoric as “freeing up” or enabling democratic practices is the exact thing which Hobbes feared most – rhetorical persuasion as “perpetual war.”

This persuasion or, violence by principle, introduces once more the question of the subject and violence, namely the authority by which the subject achieves power, or the social and cultural conditions of the force of rhetoric. Because, there is still room to deliberate the normative aspects of the aesthetics of violence as decision in relation to power, the ability to contest normative

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 491-2

grounds, could still be seen to risk social freedom, whether this is totalitarianism or the Hobbesian extreme of “perpetual war.” These circumstances are made more complex since through critics such as Fish after Hobbes the determinations between such things as the aesthetic and the political, form and content, rhetoric and force, theory and practice, and belief and reason, through their apparent unity, *problematise theoretical strategy or the externality of the “reasoned” subject.*

### ***The power of rhetoric***

The coarse and mechanistic subject which features as the subject of Hobbes’s political thinking and in frequent contemporary cultural representations of power agrees that more strength or artistry equals more power. Hobbes writes for example, “What I found pleasing about Thucydides beyond all other historians was the fact that he demonstrated how inept democracy is, and how much wiser is the rule of a single man than that of a multitude.”<sup>175</sup> Here, rhetoric not only suggests a skillful use of language but also entertains the particular (and possibly irrational) intentions of the persuader. This notion of skill in Hobbes, fuses the idea of rhetoric as an authority exercising a dangerous and manipulative self-interest with the idea of skill over rhetoric as being a useful linguistic strategy that can endow the subject with the responsibility and the power to govern others successfully. Hobbes writes in *Leviathan*:

Naturall Power, is the eminence of the Faculties of Body or Mind: as extraordinary Strength, Forme, Prudence, Arts, Eloquence, Liberality, Nobility. Instrumentall are those Powers, which acquired by these, or by fortune, are means and Instruments to acquire more: as Riches, Reputation, Friends, and the secret working of God, which men call Good Luck. For the nature of Power, is in this point, like to Fame, increasing as it proceeds; or like the motion of heavy bodies, which the further they go, make still the more hast.<sup>176</sup>

Hobbes goes on to write: “To have servants, is Power; To have friends, is Power: for they are strengths united” and “Reputation of Power, is Power” and for Hobbes this is intrinsically linked to “Wisdom.”<sup>177</sup> So here power is distinctly linked to “uses” and “practices” and also capacity - the capacity of a “Naturall Power.” Significantly, Hobbes does not discriminate between power over others as mastery and what would appear to be power in agreement, say, that of friends. In

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<sup>174</sup> Ibid., 30

<sup>175</sup> Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric*, 230 cited from *Thomae Hobbes Malmesburiensis Vita Carmine Expressa* in *Opera Philosophica*, ed. Sir William Molesworth. London, vol I, pp.1xxxix-xxi

<sup>176</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 62

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

this sense power appears to be almost Machiavellian, in that, the will to self-empowerment at all times is being pursued. This use or mastery of the rhetoric of reputation as power underscores the assertion that Hobbes's theory is particularly individualistic. This encourages the question of how power is effected through communities, and as we have seen, Hobbes leaves this open to religious style maxim or the potentially fickle dominance of the sovereign.

To take up this question of community and individual dominance I'll return to Hindess's examination of Foucault. Hindess considers the contradictions in judging power quantitatively by looking at Foucault's local critique of power. Although Foucault avoids deliberating power as capacity and right, and demonstrates that judgements over quantitative power are not universally correct as each judgement is effected by its temporal conditions Hindess recognises the historical stain of power in theory and practice: "domination [...] is an indispensable condition of liberty - or at least of the kinds of liberty that we (and Nietzsche) have learned to desire."<sup>178</sup> Hindess continues to say that writers such as Foucault, Hobbes and Nietzsche make it hard for us to condemn domination because it is naturalised.<sup>179</sup> However, as we have seen, attempts to normatively condemn domination - for example, if we think the less domination, the better - maintain violence, power and domination as universal territories.<sup>180</sup> Significantly, what is suggested by Hindess and is also implied in the quotes from Hobbes above, is an analysis of the fictions, representations and the aesthetics of power as a political and contingent practice. Such a thinking through the politics of power, force, and domination through its defining constitutive fiction attempts to acknowledge that power cannot be condemned upon the terms of "good" and "bad", and that a naturalised discourse of an ethos of liberty problematically sustains the emancipatory ideal of freedom as fate.

### ***Fish and contract***

Fish responds to the problems of self-reflexivity and of theorising violence by looking to the problems of principled action. He writes: "the political consequences of theory - do not belong by right or nature to theory, but are contingent upon the (rhetorical) role theory plays in the

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<sup>178</sup> Hindess, *Discourses on Power*, 155

<sup>179</sup> As I have written, this can be seen in a number of instances: Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Power*, Foucault's primordial ethic, and Hobbes's Covenant that precedes the political.

<sup>180</sup> Foucault's position on power was discussed in Chapter Two. Hindess notes that although Foucault is willing to avoid a discourse of emancipation, he still organizes a system of "the less domination the better." As such, this creates a problem of understanding the practices of power because we are still being asked to understand power positively or negatively. Accordingly, despite Foucault's temporal and local analysis of power, domination is condemned normatively, which in turn problematises this local critique. For more on this see Hindess, *Op cit.*, 153-157.

particular circumstances of a historical moment.”<sup>181</sup> Fish goes on to construct a notion of contract that adheres to Hobbes’s universal instability of the state of nature, in that Fish collapses the definitions of reason and belief such that each is confirmed upon the other. For Hobbes, to rid oneself of the problems of perpetual war one has to submit to the centralised and enforced authority of the sovereign. For Fish, this submission is a contract situated solely within the individual. That is, Fish determinedly articulates that “we victimize ourselves” in a pre-given historically based set of social, cultural and psychological operations. This inability to rid oneself of one’s beliefs, challenges the possibility of a basis for a theory of self-reflexivity that requires practice, since thinking through either a use of or mastery of rhetoric bears out a paradoxical notion of being both inside and outside of language. Here, the difficulty of theorising the use of language draws attention to language’s limits. Such problems produce a particular territory of/for rhetoric, as I have argued earlier contra Cavell in Chapter One.<sup>182</sup>

Regarding this conflation of rhetoric and reason, Fish writes:

It is often claimed that reason itself is what is left when belief, preconception, and prejudice have been set aside or discounted, but reason cannot operate independently of some content - of some proposition or propositions made up of definitions, distinctions and criteria already assumed - and that content will reflect some belief or attitude that will inform whatever reason dictates.<sup>183</sup>

Accordingly, Fish takes from Hobbes not the universality of “self-love”<sup>184</sup> but the universality of self-constraint. For Fish, contractual consent is not built upon Hobbes’s pre-moral origins, nor requires a signature. Instead the basis of consent is moral, social, historical and individualistic:

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<sup>181</sup> Fish, *The Trouble With Principle*, 28

<sup>182</sup> This examination of the rhetorician (author) and literature also retrieves some points from the previous chapter, where I wrote upon Derrida’s notion of literature as opening up the territory of “the political.” Upon these terms, the work of literature could be invariably understood as being “more free” for interpretation than other forms of socio-cultural productions, such as the direct speech act. Thus, what we have seen so far, in Hobbes’s “mastery of eloquence” is that the labours of the aesthete have a greater facility to approach “truth” through a rhetorical art of scientific rationale. Whereas the aesthete asserts his own agency, the actual performances of that agency in literature are outside of our control and are marked by a historical and mimetic discourse of emancipation. Because the artist or poet is seen to be exemplary of someone who “uses” language, they also figure the ontological experience. From this assertion, we are led to inquire about the processes of identification of such a hierarchy. Although this question is introduced at this point in my text as a question of the hierarchies developed between antiformalist and formalist theories in language, in the next chapter I will deal more specifically with the status and locus of the aesthete and literature in terms of ontological experience.

<sup>183</sup> Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally*, In the section “Rhetoric,” Chapter 21, under the sub-section, “Force,” 518

The gun at your head is your head; the interests that seek to compel you are appealing and therefore pressing only to the extent they already live within you, and indeed are you. In the end we are always self compelled, co-erced by forces - beliefs, convictions, reasons, desires - from which we cannot move one inch away<sup>185</sup>

This is a clear description of a predisposition to an ideological prejudice. It is however, something that is unstable, precarious and in itself, unprincipled. Fish writes that this knowledge of constraints is only retroactive and therefore is destined to a metaphoric or theoretical manifestation. However, he writes, “You may know in general that the structure of your conviction is an historical artifact, but that knowledge does not transport you to a place where those convictions are no longer in force.”<sup>186</sup> This proves force not only to be linked to particular practices of knowledge, but to be implicated within *all technologies*, and the work of historicising or conceptualising force does not find it a place where we are free from this relation.

Clearly, for Fish the question of force is not a matter of origins, but a matter of practice and use. He concludes that “Force is not unconnected, it is not blind.”<sup>187</sup> Fish doesn’t make such distinctions between a principled or non-principled force; here force is *always* principled because we cannot divorce belief from reason. However, crucial to this is that we cannot conceive of a strategy to hold force in check, because *rhetoric becomes just another word for force*. As such, Fish lays down a temporal and local critique of force, where the use of force implies skill and power but this is not based in a purely quantitative understanding of power, because any mastery of the rhetoric of force is always subject to the force of rhetoric.

Fish goes on to argue for an ideological principle from which we cannot escape and writes further on the feared premise of a Hobbesian state of war as the logic of pluralism. Here, Fish contends that the figuring of violence is an impossible object by which to identify autonomy. This is not because violence is outside of language but because *violence as a universal is linguistic*:

I may confirm [a] fear of [a] world without order or principle, wholly given over to force in the form either of gunmen or of judges unconstrained in their actions or of wills unchecked by any core of rationality. But in fact the implication of my argument is that this fear is unrealizable and is based on an incorrect understanding of what force is and is not.<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> Fish, *The Trouble With Principle*, 180

<sup>185</sup> Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally*, 520

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, 524

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, 522

For Fish, we should never fear the potentiality of a wholly unconstrained law because the law is never free from subjective action. In other words, the law is not bigger than its practice or enforcement. By aligning the subject and the law, *absolutely*, Fish theorises an understanding of our mutual and universally shared “natural fear” as the basis for our individual practices of universal difference. This “bottom line”, unrepresentable, and non-negotiable fear, for Fish, constitutes a society free from the realisation of absolute violence and terror. These “forceful practices” never risk the absolute violence of unconstrained power, because Fish guarantees a fundamentally shifting hierarchy and also naturalises self-constraint.

Subsequently, after following Fish’s argument, we are left to critique his own prejudices. This means an inquiry into the relationship between what Fish would describe as those theories that hold “an incorrect understanding of what force is and is not,” and *his “correct” understanding*; that force is always subject to the constraint of certain circumstances. Fish holds that thinking transcendently does no good in enabling us to deal with current socio-political problems. With this we can see that although Fish co-opts transcendental idealism into pragmatism, such idealism forms incorrect narratives that are simply wrong.

Significant to this call to marginalise theories is Fish’s own argumentative force. Here, Fish’s adversarial stance has a self-conscious and willfully prioritised attitude of self-belief (there are no “ifs” and “buts” about his claims for and against certain practices) and he lives his premise of the impossibility of self-doubt through his arguments. For Fish, this free assertion of force both for and against whatever one believes is acceptable, but happens to be *more acceptable* when we’re not doing philosophy. As such, the problem is that on the one hand Fish naturalises relativism and on the other he understands it as method since Fish’s critique seeks to marginalise transcendental theories yet nevertheless relies upon the standard and established language by which such judgements are made. In the “Routinisation of Charismatic Modernity” Russell A Berman argues that because “every interpretation must respond to established norms” Fish’s adversarial stance is implausible. He continues: “Fish’s antitraditionalism turns into a cynical defense of established criticism as *established*. The authority that once adhered to innovative modernism is transferred to the critical guardians of culture within the academic literary institutions.”<sup>189</sup> [*My emphasis*]

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<sup>189</sup> Russell A Berman, “The Routinisation of Charismatic Modernity” in *Modern Culture and Critical Theory, Art, Politics and the Legacy of the Frankfurt School*, University of Wisconsin Press, 1989, 130 For Berman, Fish’s notion of “interpretative communities” is understood as a radical critique on foundationalism. Fish’s interpretative authority is quickly translated by Berman to be a military authority.

Although Berman's critique rather misses Fish's point about relativism's ability to judge and take up adversarial positions<sup>190</sup> (in that Berman argues that Fish's interpretative practice to re-produce and even underscore a militaristic and normative authority), it is also clear that Fish's (circumstantial) distinction between a naturalised ideology evidenced in *cultural interpretative practices* and authoritative performances in *ideological theories of emancipation* underscores a problematic conception of *two types of force*.

To understand these exercises of force more fully I take a closer look at the problem of the self-knowing and self-determining subject. Here I reconsider the structure of private and non-private practices of interpretation and how an anti-representationalist account of subjectivity reflects upon formal or procedural schemas.

### *Self-consciousness*

Similarly to Hobbes, Derrida and Bruns identify the philosopher/aesthete as the person responsible for the moral use of language. By witnessing and mastering the rhetorical arts there is the possibility, as Bruns puts it, to "out rhetoric rhetoric." Commenting on the *Phaedrus*, he writes:

My way of reading the *Phaedrus* situates it within the history of rhetoric as Plato's effort to out rhetoric rhetoric, to beat rhetoric at its own game by showing us what real power looks like, to produce the most powerful rhetoric of all, a philosophical rhetoric in which we learn to use words as Socrates does, stopping even the great Protagoras in his tracks: a philosophical *techne* of language where language brings not only the interlocutors and the audience to silence but also stabilizes its subject matter, unpacking it according to the law of division, bringing it to order, bringing it under conceptual control, laying it bear for our inspection.<sup>191</sup>

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Because for Berman, Fish's theory is "not concerned with knowledge as an approximation of truth" it then "becomes a matter of performative capacity designed to persuade the intra-institutional interlocutors in the interpretative game."

<sup>190</sup> For Fish's argument supporting the ability to make judgements in relativism, see the article "Can Postmodernists Condemn Terrorism? Don't Blame Relativism" in *The Responsive Community*, Summer, 2002, 27-31. Also a counter to criticism such as Berman's is provided in Fish's Introduction in *Doing What Comes Naturally*. In Fish's antiformalism *all our judgements* have the same force as that exercised in a normative belief system. For Fish, this universality produces an overarching and naturalised relativism contingent to such judgments. However, as I have shown, there still remains the question of Fish's own prejudice, in that methods of judgments are distinguished hierarchically under relativism. This is especially pertinent, when under Fish's theory transcendental-style judgments are judged to be the least helpful type to make.

In order to situate a self-reflexive or inter-subjective experience with language, Bruns speaks of a powerful and creative subject who can take language a step further than other people. However, the writing of a self-understanding of our relationship to and within violence demands a more careful appraisal of the formulation of the mastery or skill of particular individuals as power. This comes back to the question of writing and specifically the writing *of* rhetoric and writing *as* rhetoric. This is because critical discourses, such as Bruns's, fall once more into the paradox of doubling the critique they intend to exceed. In maintaining the use of a style of that language as an axis or locus they are subject to that system, making Bruns's desire to "out rhetoric rhetoric" a critique demarcated as excess, or in other words a critical farce. Consequently, such a rhetoric of authority immediately returns us to the problems sketched out at the beginning of this chapter from Butler and Hindess, where once again we call into question the polemical and hegemonical problems brought on by the authoritative force by which that writing is inscribed as control

Significantly, Bruns's idea seems to re-create something akin to Hobbes's rationale, in that it acts upon rhetoric as a problem to be dealt with and that it has certain limits. In this sense Bruns's position cannot work because it asserts itself both as a problem and a solution, and in doing so it underscores the quest for self-consciousness to end up reinforcing a formalised rhetoric of subjective power. In turn, and returning to Hobbes's theory of practice, the problems we confront once more are questions of the practice of the rhetoric of subjective authorities as violent, and how this impacts on a condition of the political.

Still within Fish's rhetoric, the process of and locus for our mutual identifications of violence as decision is not something based on an emancipatory move or a striking out for or against freedom as violence, because any move towards such "ends" demands this impossible split between reason and belief in order to act upon our desires. Fish writes: "Just how does one distance oneself from oneself? With what part of oneself can one be tentative about oneself?"<sup>192</sup> Fish's ideological prejudice here sounds very similar to that of Foucault, suggesting an almost primordial basis upon which we make decisions. In this it would seem that Fish's universalising notions of belief and reason's contingency acts as the imperative and guard to our actions. With Foucault *we hold ourselves* in check, we master the arts of the self, we conduct a work upon the self. However, with Fish *we victimise ourselves*, where we prey upon our consciences with our own kind of ideological sedition, a force that can never be disjointed from our practices. As such, Fish's

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<sup>191</sup> Gerald. L Bruns. *Tragic Thoughts at the End of Philosophy, Language, Literature and Ethical Theory*, Northwestern University Press, 1999, 116



ideological state is based ambiguously as both the boundary of the political and as being firmly within the political. We could say that Fish's subject is constrained to the political, knows it retroactively, but is prevented from knowing it "ultimately" or "absolutely". And because this knowledge is not available it is not useful. Self-consciousness, then, for Fish, is a retroactive metaphor, and it has no predilection for the ultimate or tragic moment of (traumatic) knowledge that the orthodoxy of philosophy produces either as essence or metaphor. Fish's slippery metaphor – "the gun at your head is your head"- illustrates what seems to be an absolute violence, and also a metaphor that has no allegorical meaning *per se*. This is because the gun does not entertain an "effect" upon us, and as such it has no particular demand upon us. Fish employs the cliché of violent metaphors - a gun as a potential murder weapon in a hostage situation - and denies the gun the power to kill. All it has is its threat of potential and essential violence, with no reason in mind. Fish uses the metaphor of violence to demonstrate the complex "non-identificatory" aspect of this situation - the metaphor of the gun as our head is a metaphor for the impossibility of self-consciousness and the constraint of ideological thinking. It is something that de-centres any attempt to construct difference between internality and externality. Fish constructs a critique where violence is always principled, but here the principle of violence as a metaphor is to demonstrate its "possibility". As such we are left, in Fish's abstraction or generic characterisation of violence with a reminder, not of its contingency, but its ubiquity.

Perhaps ironically, Fish's intentionally insubstantial metaphor, leaves us with something we can only trust or believe in - an imposing and messianic history of accumulated and irrevocable knowledge effected as a universal and highly abstracted notion of force - something which forces home the linguistic aspect of our ideological prejudice but also relies upon a normative use of a violent metaphor to produce an understanding of non-identification. On the one hand Fish is not interested in theorising the impossible. However, it would seem that here that the image of violence acts as a metaphor for both possibility and impossibility. The inherent violence of the gun, where we cannot separate ourselves from the force of our own rationality and belief, is "impossibility", written as self-consciousness, and "possibility" as ideology. However, Fish does not present a metaphor of contamination, or ambiguity through oppositional contradictions. Here we have instead confusion, something that we don't really want to think about and as the metaphor suggests, where our head and a gun are the same. It is an image that manufactures the refusal of thinking privately. The metaphor is unprincipled in its abstraction because it is not categorised as an originally "motivational" or grounding ethic, or the locus for emancipation.

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<sup>192</sup>Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally*, 517

Fish's subject does not suffer doubt, or any self-conscious experience of failure. Fish describes a subject that is always distanced from knowing violence, despite being constantly implied within it. Crucially, this distance is not tragic, because Fish allows no space for neutrality which tragic knowledge requires.<sup>193</sup> This leaves the question of how we can think through the apparent universal of force - or in other words, our shared assumptions regarding the identification of power, within this situation - without a rational basis for self-reflexivity. Also, if the generic/abstract image of power produced in the aesthetics of violence as decision is principled, what is it principled for or against? And how can a local analysis of constraints hope to deal with something that appears to be a much wider issue? This line of questioning can help us to get closer to analysing the politics and consequences of the agreement (the production of a generic image) that is our identification of judgement as violence.

## 5. Force and the Unrepresentable

What then can we say of violence's "universal" aspect? Looking back to Chapter One, Oedipus makes his violent move (his self-mutilation) in the context of being given knowledge. However, Fish's subject is never capable of such a transcendental experience as talking to the gods, yet at the same time, his/her actions are all in accordance with the implied force of an unidentifiable, non-recognisable universal truth:<sup>194</sup> that at the heart of the individual's belief s/he is right and that this truth is historically and conditionally derivative. Fish's subject, as previously demonstrated,

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<sup>193</sup> For more on "neutrality" and the tragic, see Chapter One, where I looked to Stanley Cavell's Romantic philosophy, in which the tragic self-consciousness of knowledge is inflected around doubts in everyday experiences. Here, Fish can be seen to reconfigure this conception of doubt as something that evacuates Cavell's privatised sense of self-consciousness. Instead in Fish, doubt is another responsive interpretation of events. However, a notion of subjective neutrality or even objectivity is also relevant to Jünger's literature and Malick's film making. Here, violence is given a status of "unprincipled neutrality" in order to substantiate a transcendental ethical law of violence, and the subject is asked to somehow correlate with this in an agency structured on an aesthetics of passivity. This will be discussed in Chapter Four where, for the most part, Ernst Jünger writes a non-tragic experience of metaphysical violence as the basis for this passive relationship to violence. This is described in varying forms, but most clearly in the novel *The Lost Outpost*. This story tells of a soldier who guards an outpost, alone, without any knowledge of whether a war is still being waged, when in fact the war is over. The soldier maintains his task of guarding the outpost as if he believes the act of war to be a constant phenomenon - the war will never end. The soldier is ambivalent to the facts of everyday life, suspended and dislocated in a (horrific) fantasy where an ignorant vigilance is eclipsed with individuated freedom.

<sup>194</sup> This universal is not substantiated by the subject either self-consciously or identified universally as the political. Clearly, there are instances when we agree and when we don't, all of which are subject to force, but not the totalising force situated in metaphysical critiques.

believes s/he has knowledge because of the impossibility of self-consciousness. The subject Fish perceives and his/her relation to knowledge does not differ dramatically to the (Heideggerian) figure of Oedipus who is very much alone with his knowledge. Although his knowledge is without precedent and he is aware that somewhere someone knows more than him it is important to remember that Oedipus does not live a life of suffering or absolute anxiety because of this. As I have already said, Oedipus is aware that the gods exist but the knowledge that somewhere there are universals does not challenge his everyday practices, nor does he seek out a transcendental self-knowledge as his lifetime's task. For the most part, he gets on with his life without a transcendental trauma or anguish, for as we see in part two, Oedipus is moreover the subject of comedy.

However, as we have seen Oedipus's "autonomous moment", is based in violence, a rupture of horror within the text. Fish's subject is not open to the same degrees of irrationality as we see in such tales of decision and horror, because self-consciousness is not linked to rationality. Instead, the force of knowing has lost the horrific content of the absolute unknown and yet still is inherently violent. So here, it would seem that we return to an old problem, the idea that consequences, decisions, or regard to a situation's import requires a formal hierarchy of value, where we need an aesthetic of violence to represent the horror, force, and power we associate with 'free' action. What we see being proposed in Fish's version of "perpetual war" or the everyday conflicts of vocabularies is the evacuation of the notion of radical or absolute risk, which is usually found in the gap between "knowing" and "not knowing".

However, although Fish evacuates the absolute risk of decision making, he describes the logic of a democratic society as a territory of conflict. Because of this, it is necessary to rehearse some of the problems that link Fish's antiformalism, which eradicates transcendentals to a formalism that relies upon language as foundational to and for experience. This returns us to an inquiry into exactly how Fish conceptualises his non-foundational metaphor, why it takes on an aesthetics of violence and how this describes the hierarchy of values that Fish proposes, including an analysis of the differences between the violence that characterises Fish's immanentism and a more formal conception of hegemony.

***Power in the abstract...***

This “gap” between the representable and the unrepresentable is aptly demonstrated in Ernesto Laclau’s essay *Identity and Hegemony*, where rhetoric is seen to establish the terms of an aporia which in turn situates hegemony as the place between the impossible and the necessary. This empty place within language is for Laclau the catalyst for hegemony and brings us nicely back to the problems I fleshed out in the introduction to this chapter regarding the hegemonical problems raised when thinking through aesthetic and political identifications:

The representation of the unrepresentable constitutes the terms of the paradox within which hegemony is constructed - or, in the terms we used earlier, we are dealing with an object which is at the same time, both impossible and necessary. This is not far from the terrain of the Lacanian notion of the “real”, which resists symbolisation.<sup>195</sup>

This quote also takes us back to the critique of the aesthetics of aporia I laid out in Chapter One, and similarly to both Cavell and Zupancic, as Laclau does not produce a theory of the “real” as an absolute externality, but instead the nameless - the *innomable*. Here, he draws up a system of order, where the real takes its place as indicative of something that is constantly filled but remains empty. Taking up Paul De Man’s theory from his text, “Pascal’s Allegory of Persuasion,”<sup>196</sup> Laclau looks to the difference between 0 and 1. In this he writes that 0 always designates *something* and as such it is similar to and also remains different from 1. Therefore, it is neither something nor nothing, its status within the order of numbers is *nothing at all*, the *un-nameable*. Laclau adopts this principle to the real, where the real is bound by a tropos. For Laclau, rhetoric establishes the real, not by the nature of the real’s externality, but of its essential abstraction or ambiguity between the identifications of inclusion and exclusion. Here, we have a split between form; the form of the means by which we represent 0 - an abstract representative form - and the content which is situated primarily in the use of 0 - the fact of its essential difference to 1.

Nevertheless, I would like to acknowledge that these are both interpretations. That is, to conceive of something abstractly is a precise interpretation of it, not something that in-itself challenges our perception of the limits of representational possibilities within language. Moreover, the use of such abstracts, “universals” or norms provokes problems of interpretation and identification if we think that they have some origin from which they are abstracted, or in other words if we conceive of representation as something that is essentially empty or content free. The 0 is only un-

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<sup>195</sup> Ernesto Laclau, “Identity and Hegemony,” in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality. Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, Verso, 2000, 65

nameable if we choose or are asked to think in terms of “essence”, and as Laclau points out, this doesn’t prevent any application of it in a system. However, more pointedly the application of it in a system is only incongruous with the thinking of it as an essential other-ness, not its representative faculty as other-ness. When Laclau asks us to think of the value of 0, we automatically are invited to give it value - a value in a system where it follows the laws of that system. Its representational value is inscribed within its use. The numbers 0, 1, 2 are as full and as empty as each-other, each having no essential value outside that system. Only in their use is meaning understood, and perhaps Laclau forgets that representing 0 is a use of it. Despite Laclau’s acknowledgment that the zero is part of a system he still looks to its exclusivity. Its significance as 0 inflects a notion of other-ness, despite and because of its apparent exclusion within a system. However for Laclau, following Lacan, there is the insistence that, “the presence of that name [“real”] within that system has a suturing *tropos*.”<sup>197</sup> It is the name of an empty place, and the attempt to fill it through the very naming of what is nameless. This points to the idea that the representational force of naming the real, or the success of meaning, results in a disintegration of it. In identifying the real as a “suturing tropos” we are also witnessing the fact of its absolute representability. Here language works, and because it works, we are given the notion of language as a fragile system. Once again this theory falls into contradiction, in the exposition of language’s suicidal ability we end in the prose of critical melodrama.

*...And interpretations of the normative*

Laclau understands abstract language to be indicative of a substantive political lack and also therefore to be the catalyst for ideological notions of emancipation and, with it power and violence. With this he dismisses Butler’s assertion that “to claim that the real resists symbolisation is still to symbolise the real as a kind of resistance.”<sup>198</sup> In objection to Butler, Laclau writes; “This would lead to an assertion of total representability, and in that case unrepresentability could be conceived only as radical unawareness - but to admit even the possibility of existence of something of which we are essentially unaware (that is, not even potentially mediated by thought) would break the link between representability and actuality.” This is a problem that Laclau should perhaps take up, because, as I demonstrated above, Laclau

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<sup>196</sup> See pages 67-8 for Laclau’s argument in detail. The Paul de Man text is from *Aesthetic Ideology*, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996, 51-69, where he responds to Pascal’s theory of “infinite smallness.”

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*, 68

relies upon the *total representability of the real as unrepresentable* in order to show that language is limited.

Following his central point; if we consider the “abstract” as irreducible, as a fact in itself, we are then faced with a question as to whether this abstract undermines or unaccomplishes language, exposing linguistic limits. In these terms, for Laclau, the “representational success” of the abstract always reinforces its superficiality, in as much it constantly exists in the negative - as lack. It is here that Laclau neatly returns the problem to that of the real where, once more, the problems in interpretation display the abstract as reducible to a fact, the fact of the real. However, Laclau’s differentiation between representability and actuality as the means by which to save us from the horrors of totalitarianism and quantitative power, deny the very axis and efficacy of power that is situated within rhetorical practices. The premise for such a separation is challenged in that the territory of total representability allows us to experience a difference between *total representability*, in that we make interpretations, and *total agreement*, in that we don’t always agree on what these interpretations are. Similarly, and staying with Laclau, hegemony is construed as the space enacted *between aporia and knowledge* wherein which they both subvert each other. Hegemony is absolutely related to a lack in language, and this lack is given a prioritised space within a linguistic system, where it motivates and highlights the radical impossibility of representation and of course its ultimate necessity. By placing the problem of hegemony in a quasi-transcendental system where, “Hegemony is the unstable relation between the ethical and the normative”<sup>199</sup> Laclau situates dominance as an unstable abstraction that continues to obscure both critique and interpretation. Laclau therefore ignores the condition, contingency and performance of language and that our acknowledgment and understanding of this “lack” or that facing this insubstantial limit is expressed in genre; i.e., that it needs a bystander, author and audience, the likes of which translate radical unawareness straight back into the interpretative field. As such, this theory cannot make available the self-consciousness experience of these limits in order to organise the possibility of the fact of the real lurking in the shadows of the abstract. It is here where we can return to Fish’s solution to the problem of representational determinacy understood as, *social indeterminacy as freedom - a figure without figure*.

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<sup>198</sup> Ibid., 65. Laclau quotes from Butler’s *Bodies That Matter*, 1993, 207 Incidentally, Butler argument here, reinforces my argument regarding the real and aesthetics in Chapter One.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid., 81

Without re-tracing the steps of Chapter One too fully, what I wish to extract from this return to the “real” configured in terms of absolute finitude is not only a confirmation of its linguistic aspect, but also to demonstrate the complexity of the universalising appearance of the genre of the heroic, whereby a system of representation in no way articulates a “success” for meaning or knowledge against the other of “not knowing”, or even the “tragic” knowledge of knowing knowledge’s limits. Rather, *not understanding* is not a mark of the unrepresentable, but perhaps disagreement or the unavailability of knowledge in that particular instance. In this I can repeat only the sentiment of Fish and the words of Hobbes: that under such conditions, “we don’t go mad.”

### *Interpretative prejudices*

This claim regarding radical unawareness becomes pertinent when read through Fish as the impossibility of self-consciousness. For Fish, “impossibility” is not the subject of critique, but it is something he finds necessary to conceptualize. Fish’s image of possibility and impossibility doesn’t acknowledge itself as something which is in a process of “fullness” and “emptiness” brought on by an identification of difference between the real and the representational, say the zero as void and the zero as image. Instead it is a deliberate cohesion of both of these at the same time. As such it is a metaphor that obfuscates the difference between concrete representation and abstraction. Each is the other, and this without calling upon a “radical unawareness” or the “unrepresentable” as means by which to make decisions. Simply put, Fish doesn’t so much break the link between representability and actuality, in the sense that these two things would be pulled apart, such that the unawareness exposed in “impossibility” would be the status of an exteriorised real. Instead, this “link” is evacuated altogether by bringing the two closer together, and where impossibility and possibility are coherent to the basic ideological principle to which we subject ourselves and in which we convince ourselves that there is something to be free with and for. Consequently, Fish’s theory of the impossibility of self-knowledge refuses to separate “true” from “false” knowledges because, firstly, the theme of self-consciousness has a legitimate historical and traditional rhetorical force and secondly, this notion of “absolute impossibility” is figured to be unreal and antirepresentational.<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> Although Fish adopts a fairly schematic metaphoric manipulation of language in order to achieve his non-objective interpretative politics, what he figures undoes any representational claims that aim to differ between the real and the representational. In other words, it’s not so much that Fish avoids forming proceduralist-style interpretations. Rather, he avoids *representing* his interpretations procedurally.

Fish's refusal of metaphor goes hand in hand with his thought of a universal and original difference. However, his preference for a metaphor that works as an identification of no identification is suitably identified as a literary and rhetorical phenomena in Fish's "self-interested" critical argument. Because his pragmatism employs a metaphor without object, Fish therefore associates the work of theory with the formalism of immanentism and objectivity. Fish's impossibility of "knowing self" is understood as *absolute impossibility*, and it is this that allows for his theory of practicing the jointly *rational and ideological* faculties of the subject within absolute finitude. Consequently, a question of "absolute finitude" turns towards the question of the "absolute other". In "Violence and Metaphysics," Derrida asks; "What is this encounter with the absolutely other? Neither representation, nor limitation, not conceptual *relation to the same*. The ego and the other do not permit themselves to be dominated or made into totalities by a concept or relationship."<sup>201</sup> The phenomenon of the other, for Fish, is a *non-phenomena*, based in the principles and forces of our self-assertions. In this Fish translates Derrida's metaphysics in order to situate a pragmatic and physical politics as an encounter with the other is not the task or the premise for the subject in Fish's thinking.

However, the practice of Fish's own principles, and crucially their coherence with formalism still needs work because Fish's accreditation of an "absolute other" with an antiformalist metaphor conforms to the mechanics of a philosophical hierarchy of values. Here, an encounter with the other may not be the locus of Fish's antiformalism, rather, the subject is absolutely *is* the other to the point of its non-recognition. As we have seen, although Fish manages to expose his own thinking and that of a philosophical hierarchy as contingent and interested, by taking the "*antiformalist* road" he also acknowledges the overarching power and difference between his thinking and that of a theological/philosophical-style formalism, which by all accounts is a power which threatens or at least is unhelpful to "good" (read here as useful) political practices. How such a hierarchical schema appears in Fish's thinking is crucial because on the one hand it rescues a contemplative and rational formalism and on the other it prefers a subject who has the ability and *savoir faire* to use language effectively. For Fish, these kinds of powers are made "risk free" in the absolutist sense but are nevertheless politically consequential because we are free to exercise power. As a result, Fish's theory invites a comparative analysis between the rhetorical problems of a transcendental-style theory, and the rhetorical forces that are at work within all judgments. The rhetoric and politics of transcendental-style theorising is considered in the

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<sup>201</sup>Jaques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics", in *Writing and Difference*, Routledge, 1978, 95 Derrida writes regarding a conceptualization of the other through antiformalism, specifically on Emmanuel



following chapter. However, to conclude here, I'll take up Fish's defense of a nonhierarchical, mutually contestable understanding of interpretation.

### ***Knowledge and power***

Regarding the problem of organised hierarchies within interpretative processes, Fish writes in his section on "Meaning and Constraint" in the essay "With the Compliments of the Author":

There is no epistemological difference between direct and mediated communications because, in a fundamental sense, all communications are mediated. That is, communications of every kind are characterised by exactly the same conditions - the necessity of interpretative work, the unavoidability of perspective, and the construction by acts of interpretation of that which supposedly grounds interpretation, intentions, characters and pieces of the world.<sup>202</sup>

For Fish, we are always removed from and enclosed within language, nothing makes us any closer to it or any more distanced from it. However, Fish does go on to construct different modes of interpretative analysis and these are organised between "direct interpretations" and "more mediated interpretations". This is lived out in classifying of performed "utterances" as more consequential because they are more spontaneous than other more mediated forms of representations, such as writing etc. In this I could ask if, despite getting rid of a radical unrepresentability - of a direct difference between fiction and the real - does Fish still rely upon the same process of hierarchical recognitions as any other universalising theory? - *We may operate within absolute finitude but the criteria for judgment still seems to occupy a formal sliding scale of value which goes from the "less mediated" to the "more mediated", re-inviting Laclau's claim that our use of language points out its essential lack.* However, Fish does not propose such a scale of values. There is a hierarchy of values but this is by no means a naturalised hierarchy that we see in Laclau. Instead, as Fish quotes from Derrida's *Signature Event Context*; "this relative purity" say, of the performance of less mediated interpretations, "does not emerge in opposition to citationality or iterability, but in opposition to other kinds of iteration within a general iterability."<sup>203</sup> It is on this basis that Fish makes his interpretative strategy explicit:

It is true that these varieties [of interpretation] can be ordered with respect to their distance from an ideal or normative case, the case of ordinary circumstances, but that

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Levinas's *Totality and Infinity*.

<sup>202</sup> Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally*, 43-44

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*, 56, quoting from Jacques Derrida's *Signature, Event, Context*, 192

case as we have seen [*and which I have also hoped to demonstrate above. AB*] is nothing more than a set of interpretative practices...that produce what supposedly underlies the practices.<sup>204</sup>

Fish's understanding of "essential difference" situates interpretative work as a naturalised process whereby we unselfconsciously contest existing hierarchies. This non-recognisable "constraint to interpret" is simultaneously coupled with a conception of the subject as a public social actor whose power is rooted in the retroactive process of interpretation. For Fish, the linguistically constituted individual is intrinsically linked to community in as much as the language of personal beliefs is secularised but *always public*. It is through this contingency that Fish's relativism could be read as a task of interpretation as dominance in that whoever has the ability to demonstrate the best knowledge of knowledge wins power. This recalls two themes: one, of the mastery of rhetoric discussed earlier in relation to Hobbes's advocacy of the knowing subject (most likely to be the artist or poet) and, the other; Lefort's problematisation of aesthetico-political unity and disunity, in that Fish's subject is now free to designate the conditions of language and politics (albeit temporally) that Lefort identifies to be constitutive of domination.

The narratives that I have concentrated on in this text as a whole can be seen to use the rhetoric of such abstractions and are situated firmly within it. The normalisation of violence as decision in them works on a high level of shared assumptions. To focus this more clearly, "violence as decision" demonstrates a shared assumption that representations of moral and political values expressed as innate and quantitative notions of power are part of a natural hegemony. As such, the consistent nature of such mediated, poetic or dramatic representations of action as violence call upon the task of antifoundationalism to analyse the authorities which produce them. Consequently, my argument constantly fluctuates between the authorities that *write* the normative and their *vision* of it without constructing differences between theoretical intention and the products of that practice.

Finally returning to the problem of prejudice and force in Fish's antiformalism, we can see that Fish argues against emancipatory theories *because they have a socio-political legitimacy*. However, his move against theoretical formalism is not made because an emancipatory politics invites "absolute terror" and such like. Rather, Fish's belief is based on *his opinion* that such theories do not assist in good democratic practice. In this way, even in Fish's antiformalism, one is free to make judgements however normative sounding or condemning they may be, because it

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<sup>204</sup> Ibid. 56

is always the subject that contingently situates such claims. In brief, Fish co-opts emancipatory thinking into relativism and then gives it a back seat, preferring instead to frame his interpretative practices upon terms of temporal circumstance, rhetoric and force. Nevertheless, as I have written, it is clear that Fish's interpretative judgments hold onto a similar rhetorical force as those he seeks to avoid due to his apparently unavoidable reliance upon a classical schema. In light of this I now consider the problem of the social and political gravity and actual presence of transcendental codes read as dominant forces within the political. For this I return to a critique of the metaphysical character in narratives and theories of violence to consider *how the rhetoric of violence as decision, as a tacit structure of the political, is consequential to politics*. Taking this up further in my final chapter I subject the linguistic conceptions of autonomy, ontology and metaphysics to critique, in the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, the political literature of Ernst Jünger and the film, *The Thin Red Line* directed by Terence Malick.

## 4 Heroic Realism: *Jünger's political literature, Heidegger's language philosophy and Malick's The Thin Red Line*

What is most thought-provoking, then, could be something lofty, perhaps even the highest thing there is for man, provided man still is the being who is insofar as he thinks, thinks in that thought appeals to him because his essential nature consists in memory, the gathering of thought. And what is most thought-provoking - especially when it is Man's highest concern - may well be also what is most dangerous. Or do we imagine that a man could even in small ways encounter the essence of truth, the essence of beauty, the essence of grace - without danger?<sup>205</sup>

Martin Heidegger  
*What Is Called Thinking?*

In the first three chapters I have attempted to raise issues regarding the nature and consequences of the relation between subjective agency and violence within political and philosophical arguments. The first chapter proposes that our identifications with agency, critique or decision are inscribed within political, textual and philosophical narratives of the epic, the tragic and/or the heroic. Subjective "action" hovers over the image of violence as something which symbolically manifests itself as an "outside" yet is "inside" the narrative. Corresponding to this was the significance of the relation between political strategies for organising agency and those evidenced in narratives. Resulting from this was the concretisation of tragic romanticism as a genre, confirmed through the figures of both a Nietzschean and a Hegelian Oedipus. Here I organised the basis for an analysis of the nature of "philosophical themes" at work within narrative and political structures in order to ask how these themes condition a concept of subjective critique and are relative to the immanence of violence to decision.

This problem was taken up within my second chapter where I initially considered Roger Shattuck's "critical theory" in relation to the character of "metaphysical evil" at work within postmodern allegories of subjective agency. Here, I argued that a polemical critique, or a critique which demands or looks for serious and effective moral choices does little to redeem the problematic that these theories attempt to contest through critiquing anti-foundational discourses.

Following this, I looked to Foucault as the figure of a problematic poststructuralism. This was not only to understand how Foucault's varying detractors agreed in identifying problems with his project, but also because I wanted to consider the relationship and difference between a Foucauldian subject - who acknowledges the aestheticisation of the self as a political strategy for the conceptualising of agency - and the figure of the post-tragic subject: contemporary culture's mainstream aestheticisation of agency as violence.

This question of agency, metaphysics and violence motivated the return to the question of the relationship between philosophy and narrative, or even, philosophy as rhetoric, picking up on Rorty's claim of the "nuisance" of metaphysics in Chapter Two and Fish's antiformalism in Chapter Three. After having established the question of agency to be intrinsically tied to a political and ideological rhetoric in Chapter Three, through both Hobbes and Fish, I now consider the implications of thinking this through in both philosophy and politics.

Key to this and also a vital question for this fourth chapter is the "nature" of violence at work in philosophy and narrative. Such contingency establishes a question of the foundational aspect of this relation, where the traditional, historical and atemporal notion of violence and decision, in itself invites itself as a metaphysical problem for the task of philosophy, in that the transcendental character of violence as decision sustains problems for the work of a pragmatic political practice. This understanding of subjective decision as correlative to an "authentic moment" for the individual as being both beyond *and* within language will be developed in this chapter with reference to the work of Martin Heidegger. Here, I look at his attempt to overcome a theory of decision as a subjective application or power over knowledge. In brief, I am interested in how he acknowledges and deals with "the cost of our continuous temptation to knowledge"<sup>206</sup> or, in other

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<sup>205</sup> Martin Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?*, Harper and Row, 1972, 51

<sup>206</sup> Stanley Cavell uses this phrase in the text *The Claim of Reason*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1979, 241-2. He writes that "the moral of scepticism [...] that the human creature's basis in the world as a whole [...] is not that of knowing, anyway not what we think of as knowing." He continues; "Both Wittgenstein and Heidegger continue, by reinterpreting Kant's insight, that the limitations of knowledge are not failures of it. *Being and Time* goes further than the *Philosophical Investigations* in laying out how to think [...] but Wittgenstein goes further than Heidegger in laying out how to investigate the cost of our continuous temptation to knowledge [...] In *Being and Time* the cost is an absorption in the public world, the world of the mass or average man [...] In both the cost is the loss, or foregoing of identity or of selfhood. To be interested in such accounts of the cost of knowing to the knowing creature, I suppose one will have to take an interest in certain preoccupations of romanticism." Alternatively, the concept of a "temptation" to knowledge read through Heidegger (and also discussed initially in Chapter One, 41), is read as a "passion" for knowledge written through Oedipus's actions. From Heidegger's *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, Yale University Press, 1980, 102: "We cannot regard Oedipus only as the man who meets his downfall; we must

words, the claim that our passion for knowledge is an irrational pursuit that also costs the subject his/her identity. Therefore, not only is violence at issue as a foundational question but also its intrinsic relation to a conception of subjective agency and also the demand for identifications of action.

Crucially, this “foundation” of violence is always unstable on two counts; first, in its inherent ambiguity, in that violence is given the quality of an “externality” to the territory of our understanding, and secondly, the mark of violence seems omnipresent, in that the facticity of its persistence in relation to thinking always hints at its “real” or ineradicable character. Therefore, our relation to violence as judgement could be seen to be unstable *through* the very aspect of its consistency, meaning that we are able to premise and identify action within it and as it, and yet it is not fixed in our comprehension, for example, as a political tool in the world of things.

Consequently, we have a few underlying problems to deal with, initially regarding foundations, secondly, that of limits, and thirdly, a question of the formal - rhetorical and political relation to what could be construed as “realism” on the one hand, or normativity or habit on the other. Therefore, for a second set of investigations there is: i) the problem of the ethical relation within language (when language appropriates us and vice versa); ii) the requirement of a critique of the choices of different (poetic/epic) vernaculars which are deemed to “encourage” this experience, and; iii) how “universalising” apparatuses are structured in a formal relation to and within language and politics. Crucially this requires a critique of thinking as a universal experience, an analysis of how universal apparatuses of thinking are experienced contingently and also a study of the relationship between a philosophical “universalising” concept of thinking, theory expressed as narrative, and also the political legitimacy of theories and narratives of transcendence.

Also, and picking up on the claims set down in Chapter Three, since the use of language and a theory of knowledge are inseparable we can ask how it is possible to think through this relation without falling into the mechanistic and determinate Nietzschean-style politics as a character of autonomy? I respond to this by inscribing *from the start* the “nature” of transcendental language in that my analysis does not attempt to debilitate or historicise these already historical and “foundational” language as means by which we can complacently refer to them as “merely rhetoric”. In other words, instead of organising a theory which understands freedom as being *free*

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see him as the embodiment of Greek being-there, who most radically and wildly asserts his fundamental passion, the passion for the disclosure of being, i.e. the struggle for being itself.”

*from representation I look to the productions of autonomy within language without strategic fissures between form and content or the real and the representational.*

Consequently, this chapter deals specifically with the rhetoric of a violent language as foundational to decision by looking to its controlling factors and its consequences. For this I consider the political literature of Ernst Jünger and also the film *The Thin Red Line* (1997) directed by Terence Malick. *The Thin Red Line* works to recreate the image of violence as a ubiquitous and metaphysical territory, where nature takes on the properties of the ethical experience. Here, nature is an ambiguous and powerful locale, a constant and an unknown force. It is both the normative and the other, or, constitutive of a brutal earth and a heavenly glory. Alternatively, in Jünger we see (a violent) language introduced as grounds for decision, or a tool by which to achieve autonomy through the attempt to incorporate metaphysics as a linguistic phenomenon.

By considering the work of Heidegger, Jünger and Malick I assess the attempts to negate a priori or ontological ground for subjective decision, where problematically, we see that Jünger identifies and maintains metaphysics as violence, trauma, and death, which accordingly proposes the legacy of absolute finitude to be *active-nihilism* - the creation of language as “thing” - and a tool for “becoming”, specifically orientated around negative or violent performances.

By drawing upon these two Heideggerian influenced narratives I ask if their stabilising of Heidegger’s metaphysics, in producing a violent language and images of horror as the grounds upon which one can achieve or experience power, can entertain or produce any possibility for critical autonomy, *without a theoretical pragmatism or a transcendental philosophy.*<sup>207</sup> This problem prompts the following related questions. Do the practices of thinking or aestheticising transcendence block non-metaphysical avenues of language and thought?<sup>208</sup> If, as we have seen, literature is the key to democratic practices (Rorty, Fish and Derrida), then what is the democratic value of narratives that rhetoricise and naturalise freedom as and constrained to violence? And, when metaphysics is understood as political autonomy and power (based upon an aesthetics of

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<sup>207</sup> This was explored in my previous critique on Fish’s pragmatism and Hobbes’s politics where I argued that an attempt to deliver a non-transcendental and contingent politics invariably held onto transcendental, foundational and traditional hierarchical schemas. This, as I have written, prompts this reconsideration of the political consequence of such codes.

<sup>208</sup> This question is drawn from Joanna Hodge’s *Heidegger and Ethics*, Routledge, 1995, 68 Here, she refers to Heidegger’s scepticism of metaphysics declared in his response to Ernst Jünger’s essay “Über der

violence), are we then faced with the problem of power as a *philosophical* problem of knowledge? In response to these questions I concentrate upon a critique of the authority by which violence is inscribed as the aesthetic and ethical ground for the experience of freedom. With respect to this I interrogate the incorporation or production of a normative aesthetics of metaphysical violence, asking if this can provide a terrain in which we can understand violence as hinged upon various subjective practices and the law. This retrieves the problem of the difference between two languages, of politics and the political. Here I consider if the relationship between narratives of transcendence and democracy is moreover a problem of the relationship between narratives of transcendence and *politicisation*.

Consequently, I look to narratives of non-deterministic and deterministic violence. In both Jünger's rhetoric of active-nihilism and in Malick's manufacturing of a mutually "epic" and naturalised "human nature" and "nature" I analyse the politics of the production and authorship of these narratives, in that both manufacture a coincidence between a rhetoric of active and passive conceptions of agency. It is here that I question if they re-invite the essential transcendental problem around violence and language that Heidegger originally poses.

## 1. Heidegger: Being and Appearance

In *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, Heidegger contests the orthodoxy of a separation between being and appearance theorised in traditional metaphysics. He writes that "being" and "appearance" have "a hidden unity" and that this inner connection is grasped fully "only if we understand being in an equally primordial, i.e. Greek, sense," for which "authentic being" is rooted in the historical and as such, the "essential". For the Greeks "appearing is the very essence of being" and from this Heidegger forms a connection between history and authentic Dasein, where this "essential" experience is intrinsically tied to a specifically "noble" form of language. For Heidegger, "being is the fundamental attribute of the noble individual and of nobility" and Dasein is understood through its historical relation: "the supreme possibility of a human being, as fashioned by the Greeks, through glory and glorification."<sup>209</sup>

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Linie" (Over the Line). Heidegger's response, subtly re-phrased as "Über 'der Linie'" (On the Line) argues that such basic metaphysical concepts are unhelpful to non-metaphysical critique.

<sup>209</sup> Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, Yale University Press, 1980, 103



The work of becoming and the understanding of historical permanence are specific to a particular genre of the glorified, noble and heroic individual, in that the daily project of authentic Dasein is fraught with danger and demands the most skilled *techné*. Heidegger's conception of essence as both a glorified and naturalised discourse poses a problem regarding the understanding of the relationship between being and appearance and in turn summons an inquiry into the relationship between a specifically noble and lofty poetic language and the experience of being.

For the Greeks glory was not something additional which one might or might not obtain; it was the mode of highest being. For moderns glory has long been nothing more than celebrity and as such a highly dubious affair, an acquisition tossed about and distributed by the newspapers and the radio - almost the opposite of being. If for Pindar to glorify was the essence of poetry and the work of the poet was to place in the light, it was not because the notion of light played a special role for him but solely because he thought and composed poetry as a Greek, which is to say that he stood in the appointed essence of being.<sup>210</sup>

Consequently, for Heidegger, "appearing" is the work of a historical individual, an individual who experiences his/her own rootedness in history, as essential to his/her being in general. And, it is the motif of the hero that is intrinsically linked to Heidegger's definition of "authentic history."<sup>211</sup> Heidegger translates "Glory" through the Greek term *doxa* – "I show myself, appear, enter into the light" wherein the "essence of Being is unconcealment."<sup>212</sup> Through identifying this almost primordial connection between authenticity and language, Heidegger identifies a great age of Greek beginnings, a time before a superficial modernism forced a radical disunity between being and appearance. For Heidegger, the Greeks provide the alternative to the work of modernity, in that they lived out this "natural" unity between being and appearance, where "the gods and the State, the temples and the tragedy, the games and philosophy; all this in the midst of appearance, beset by appearance, but also taking it seriously, knowing its power."<sup>213</sup>

This Greek conception of appearance as essence underscores Heidegger's theory of historical permanence and endurance. This rootedness gives form to a *techné*, a practice of knowledge in that Dasein acknowledges and lives out his noble existence to "form world", or to practice the task of appearance. Crucially the work of "forming", "appearing" and "becoming" are subject to

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<sup>210</sup> Ibid.

<sup>211</sup> For further discussion of the (metaphysical) Nietzschean and Kantian influences regarding Heidegger's thought see Phillippe Lacoue-Labarthe, "Transcendence Ends in Politics," from, *Typography, Mimesis, Philosophy*. Harvard University Press, London, 1989, 298.

<sup>212</sup> *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, 105

<sup>213</sup> Ibid., 105-6

the *techné* of both writing history and being subject to it, in itself the task of “forming world”: “History as happening is an acting and being acted upon which pass through the present, which are determined from out of the future, and which take over the past.”<sup>214</sup> These two conceptions of appearance as language and being as thought are understood as under a precarious unity where, as I quoted above, we must “take appearance seriously” and “know its power,” for it has a legitimacy that exceeds itself as a “superficial” image.

Here we are faced with aesthetics as having a concrete effect in the political and as something that is produced within it. However, Heidegger is keen to remind us that the task of knowing appearance is still to be fulfilled. I think this point is crucial to Heidegger’s thinking and also to this chapter, since we are directly presented with the problem of how to know appearance and how to undertake the task of knowledge. It is here that we can ask if this is a philosophical and metaphysical problem, in that the thinking of appearance as a task or theory returns to a Hegelian-style philosophical conception of knowledge as a practice of language that is always distanced from actuality, or that our very attempt to think through the problems of appearance expose the fissure between appearance and reality. In light of this I will discuss the structures by which we understand being and appearance and how the problem, task or passion of/for knowledge is articulated by the various figures of thought produced by Heidegger’s thinking as a philosophico-political rhetoric.

### ***Heroic Dasein and violence***

In “Transcendence Ends in Politics” Phillipe Lacoue-Labarthe argues that Heidegger’s philosophical project is intrinsically linked to a political problem of identification. Dealing most specifically with the *Rectoral Address* (at the University of Freiberg in 1933), “The Self Assertion of the German University” he quotes Heidegger:

If there is to be a science, and if it is to be *for us* and *through us*, under what conditions can it then truly exist? Only if we again place ourselves under the power of the beginning of our spiritual historical being (Dasein). This beginning is the setting out (*Aufbruch*) of Greek philosophy. Here, for the first time, Western man raises himself up from a popular base and, *by virtue of his language*, [my emphasis] stands up to *the totality of what is*, which he questions and conceives (*begreift*) as the being that it is.<sup>215</sup>

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<sup>214</sup> Ibid., 44

<sup>215</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe, “Transcendence Ends in Politics,” 281, citing Heidegger’s *Rectoral Address* “The Self Assertion of the German University,” 471-2

This extract depicts an essentially Nietzschean inspired language of knowledge as the “will to power”, where crucially, it is “by virtue of his language” that Dasein achieves essence or power.<sup>216</sup> Heidegger’s solution to the problem of finite transcendence for Dasein is therefore based in an experience with language. Lacoue-Labarthe observes that, “This solution [...] is, as in Nietzsche, paradoxically of a Winkelmannian type: We must imitate the ancients to make ourselves inimitable.”<sup>217</sup> Further reflecting upon the political difficulties in Heidegger’s historical project, Lacoue-Labarthe concludes that this “invention” or *work as knowledge* required by Dasein to create a “future history” is:

The determination of (or an imitation of) what has taken place without taking place, of a past that is not past but still to come, of a beginning so great that it dominates every future and remains still to be effected: in short, of an irruption that must be wrenched out of its oblivion or its more-than-millennial reserve through the most extreme violence of combat.<sup>218</sup>

This describes violence both as a necessary and functioning tool, an object by which to achieve and identify autonomy, and as a (universal) violence that always already marks Dasein’s history and future.<sup>219</sup> Here, for Lacoue-Labarthe “the structure of transcendence is the very structure of

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<sup>216</sup> In Heidegger’s “Will as Will to Power” in *Nietzsche, Volume 1 The Will to Power As Art*, [trans. David Farrell Krell, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981, 37-43], he writes on Nietzsche’s understanding of the “will to power” as the “will to will”. Because Nietzsche opposes Schopenhauer’s notion of “pure willing” in that there is no “willing in general” will is placed firmly within the subject’s reach. Thus, for Heidegger, “willing” is problematised as soon as it is called upon to be identified. Consequently, Nietzsche’s “will to power” creates the problem of thinking through one’s specific purpose and direction: “For the will, as an affect of command, is the decisive distinguishing mark of self-mastery and force.” (Nietzsche’s *Gay Science*) Heidegger writes regarding Nietzsche: “If will is taken to be a faculty, than it is viewed as something that can do something, is in a position to do it, possessing the requisite power and might.” Here Heidegger critiques the problem of will as being both a faculty and an ungraspable and embodied essence, in that “will is power and power is will.” He continues: “But because for Nietzsche will as will to power designates the essence of Being, it remains forever the actual object of his search, the thing to be determined. What matters – once such an essence is discovered – is to locate it thoroughly, so that it can never be lost again.” Heidegger goes on to formulate that Nietzsche risks “abandoning the essence of will to the emotional.” Regarding this problem of a Nietzschean will, it is clear that Heidegger’s Rectoral Address recoups the same problems as those he has identified in Nietzsche’s work. This is because Heidegger’s nationalism takes up the cause of and for will, in the sense that when we “will”, we are set on a specific path to identify grasp and determine a (Germanic) object. For Heidegger’s “Rectoral Address”, “will as power” re-inscribes the practical problems of Nietzsche’s “will to power” determined specifically in Heidegger’s representation of will and power as constitutive of a heroic agency and a German national identity.

<sup>217</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe, “Transcendence Ends in Politics,” 299, quoting Heidegger’s “Self Assertion,” 471-472,

<sup>218</sup> Ibid.

<sup>219</sup> Like Lacoue-Labarthe’s “Transcendence Ends in Politics,” Hodge’s *Heidegger and Ethics*, also cites Heidegger’s essay “Vom Wesen Des Grundes,” 1929, in order to establish Heidegger’s problematic conditioning of ethical and moral practices upon metaphysical and ontological theories. Hodge writes: “In this essay Heidegger makes the claim: “freedom is the origin of the principle of sufficient reason”, and the

mimesis, of the relation between *phusis* and *techné* taken from Aristotle and Kant and reinterpreted.”<sup>220</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe writes that this becomes politically problematic for Heidegger towards the end of *Being and Time* whereupon the theme of tradition as repetition is introduced, which in itself mirrors a Nietzschean-style hegemony in the espousal of the necessity and “power of Greek beginning.”<sup>221</sup>

Crucially, Lacoue-Labarthe’s description of what appears to be both an active and a passive violence sets out the central thematic for this chapter in that I deliberate the writing of specific identifications of violence which both institutionalise violence as a universal *and* characterise subjective autonomy with violence. This local critique now situates my central question that is the one raised here by Lacoue-Labarthe, namely, a critique of the violence, force and/or authority by which the identification of violence as autonomy is both assumed and asserted.

Heidegger’s particularly violent and heroic motif of Dasein can be seen to delineate a metaphysical experience of or within language, retaining a refusal to give language an external ontological ground. However, as we see in this chapter’s opening quote, this experience of being to and for language can be seen to bind itself not to language in general, but to specific realms within language, particularly that of danger and risk. This unstable basis of language, read through Heidegger’s philosophy presents a politics that can be seen to determine a quasi-transcendental subject, where Dasein’s autonomy is related to a use of one’s power to think within language, but also in exposing oneself spiritually to the risk of the world, fate and history. Significantly, it is violence that characterises the power or essence of Dasein both in the use of language and in this exposure to it. Violence, therefore in Heidegger’s early philosophy and politics hovers in a dark space at the limits of identifications, *between* the practice of thinking and the representational space of poetry.

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essay concludes “For in transcendence, the essence of the finitude of Dasein discloses itself as freedom for reasons.” In this way Heidegger definitively rejects any separation between, on the one side, ethical and moral aspects of freedom and, on the other, ontological and metaphysical aspects.” (142) Hodge also remarks that: “Heidegger still uses the terminology of transcendence to capture an ontological capacity to detach oneself from the given and to set up a relation to oneself.” (141) This capacity to detach oneself from the normative and thus form self is especially pertinent to Jünger’s detached and cool *heroic realism*.

<sup>220</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe, “Transcendence Ends in Politics,” 299

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.*, 298

### *Poetry and thinking*

Moving from Heidegger's "Rectoral Address" to his later series of lectures collected in *On the Way to Language* Heidegger writes more specifically on what type of language is best identified with approaching essence and also the means by which this experience within language is organised. The motif of heroic Dasein no longer centralises Heidegger's thinking in this reconstituted ontology. However, again, the language of lofty poetry and ultimates is effective as a space in which links power to autonomy, not because heroic Dasein is "willed" into existence, but moreover because this language of poetry and power now comes close to a passive *ethos* of "letting entities be."<sup>222</sup> A quasi-conscious state is now Dasein's territory of Being. From *On the Way to Language*:

It must remain open whether we are capable properly of entering into this poetic experience. There is the danger that we will overstrain a poem [...] by thinking too much into it, and thereby debar ourselves from being moved by its poetry. Much greater of course - but who today would admit it? - is the danger that we will think too little, and reject the thought that the true experience with language can only be a thinking experience, all the more so because the lofty poetry of all great poetic work always vibrates within a realm of thinking.<sup>223</sup>

*If* we are to think within the poetic experience, how can we organise the difference that Heidegger seems to demand? - The difference between *enjoying poetry for poetry's sake* on the one hand and on the other hand, *thinking as an experience* of poetry? This relation between philosophy (theorising, thinking) as parallel to poetry (rhetoric, narrative) is examined more fully in Heidegger's formulation: "*The being of language - the language of being*" where Heidegger

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<sup>222</sup> Frederick A Olafson's *Heidegger and the Ground of Ethics, A Study of Mitsein*, [Cambridge University Press, 1998, 4, n.5] discusses Heidegger's moves through subjectivism. Olafson writes: "it is difficult to see [Heidegger] as unqualifiedly repudiating the concept of a subject." Olafson comments further on Heidegger's attempt to de-subjectivise decision moving through his "Letter on Humanism" as a highpoint on the attack on traditional humanism, to his attempts to avoid subjectivism and a pre-established ethics altogether. Here, Olafson queries Heidegger's formulation of ethics and ontology: "But then if "letting entities be" is the only way to avoid subjectivism, we would have to give up the active life altogether and adopt a wholly passive stance as satellites of being. If this were accepted, it would seem to obviate the need for anything like an ethic; but Heidegger also wants to claim that the kind of "thought that thinks the truth of being as the initial (*anfänglich*) elements in a human being as an ek-sistent is in itself the original ethic."" ("Letter on Humanism"187) As such we can see that Heidegger produces an ethical ontology that it remains as something the subject has to prepare for. However, we could also say that Heidegger's conception of "letting entities be" points to a naturalised and unstable ethic that does not undermine subjectivity in the way that Olafson imagines (i.e., the subject is not "passive" because, in this later work Heidegger does not provide clear grounds upon which to identify the subject as "active".) As such, by navigating an unstable and embodied law, Heidegger's theory could threaten and destabilise the locus of institutionalising powers. It is this path between the identification and non-identification of a realist ethic that I situate here.

<sup>223</sup> Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter D. Herz, Harper and Row, New York, 1971, 69

structures thought as the site upon which we endure undergo and experience language. He writes regarding thinking in relation to the poetic experience:

Language is the house of Being. By this procedure we would seem to have adduced from poetry the most handsome confirmation for a principle of thinking which we had stated at some time in the past- and in truth we would have thrown everything into utter confusion. We would have reduced poetry to the servant's role as documentary proof of our thinking and taken thinking too lightly; in fact we would already have forgotten the whole point, *to undergo an experience with language*. [Emphasis added].<sup>224</sup>

Poetry, here, is not an *example* of thinking, it *allows* for the philosophical experience and it seems that this experience is of a complicity, or even, when one is caught up in the thrust of a poetry of "ultimates". This characterises something like a giving up to language, an immersive encounter with language as the "other", in which we can, as mortals, recognise our infinite finitude as an ontological experience of "being with language". In this Dasein as the "hostage" of language and operates within a certain quietism, in that thinking is construed as listening, and specifically "listening to the grant"<sup>225</sup> that language gives to the subject. Importantly although this listening is understood as something that avoids Dasein's problematic and heroic self-confidence the motif for this experience of authenticity is again best activated through "extreme" or dramatic language and as we have seen, still calls upon reason. Again from *On the Way to Language*: "This is why we consider it available to prepare for a possibility of undergoing an experience with language. This is why we listen now more attentively where such experiences is put into lofty and noble language."<sup>226</sup>

In both of Heidegger's texts, language is dealt with circumstantially and historically, in that Dasein is open to language, *being for* language and also *being towards* language. This complex account of Dasein shows up the problems for taking language to be an object of knowledge, but simultaneously it describes certain circumstances for what that experience may be.

This problem of identification and its hegemonic relation aptly takes us back to Lacoue-Labarthe's text where through identifying an unacknowledged and fundamental mimetology at work in Heidegger's thought he asks: "Why would a problem of identification, not be, in general, the essential problem of the political?"<sup>227</sup> Following Lacoue-Labarthe's privileging of a political

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<sup>224</sup> Ibid., 62

<sup>225</sup> Ibid., 75

<sup>226</sup> Ibid., 62

<sup>227</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe, "Transcendence Ends in Politics," 300

problem of identification I consider the following problems: First; that the act of thinking is deeply associated with combative action, a result of Heidegger's mapping of Dasein's identification with an immanent history and fate. Second; that through Heidegger's mixture of a productive metaphysics and an onto-theological nihilism we are given a complex account of an ontology that problematises ethical ground on the one hand, and produces it on the other. Third; and resulting from the above points is that the task of Being, for Heidegger, foregrounds a problem of identification that situates the problem that knowing knowledge is quantitatively relative to power. Further, we face the problem that *because* transcendence ends in politics, such a politics is characterised as a totalitarian practice of domination.<sup>228</sup> As a result, a key question for this chapter is how the rhetoric of transcendence produces and problematises power.

## 2. Jünger's *Heroic Realism*

Ernst Jünger (most prolific in the years between 1930-40) produced writings of his war experiences; he wrote of dramatic dream-like fantasies, tales of science fiction and also bombastic renditions of what we could call "conventional" or "everyday" life experiences. The understanding of Jünger's work as *heroic realism* is taken up by a number of critics but significantly here I look to Jeffery Herf's articulation of the term in his text *Reactionary Modernism*, which concentrates upon Jünger's aestheticisation of technology as an irrational and redemptive "other". I then examine Marcus Paul Bullock's text *The Violent Eye*, which critiques the political implications of Jünger's metaphysical violence as literature. Herf describes Jünger's *heroic realism* as "a symbiosis of irrationalism and technics" in that Jünger's hero combines "a celebration of total calculation and functionality with its apparent opposite, adventure and dynamism."<sup>229</sup> He also comments that Jünger's various appeals to the will "compromise an ironic complement to his essentially passive and spectatorial stance towards the instrumentalisation of human beings." Duly, Jünger's identification of technology as linked to the "primordial forces of

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<sup>228</sup> Hodge refers to the problem of the distinction between metaphysics and politics in Heidegger's work as a problem of violence: "The moment of violence would be [...] the moment at which the conceptions holding in place the distinction between politics and metaphysics are disrupted. The results of this disruption are to be seen in globalisation, the actualisation of metaphysics and the de-restriction of ethics, and in the spread of technology throughout the world." 134. From a similar understanding of a distinction between metaphysics and politics in Heidegger's philosophy, I take up Jünger's actualisation of metaphysics in order to submit this violence to critique.

<sup>229</sup> Jeffery Herf, *Reactionary Modernism. Technology, Culture and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich*, Cambridge University Press, 1996, 78, Here Herf also comments on Christian Graf von Krockow's

the will” structures “authentic experience” to be conditioned upon the subject surrendering to the violent and anonymous territory of industrialisation and technological processes.<sup>230</sup> In *Feuer und Blut* Jünger writes:

We have to transfer what lies inside us onto the machine. That includes the distance and ice-cold mind that transforms the moving lightning stroke of blood into a conscious and logical performance. What would these iron weapons that were directed against the universe be if our nerves had not been intertwined with them and if our blood didn't flow around every axle.<sup>231</sup>

Bullock picks up on Jünger's work as an allegory of Heidegger's ontology noting that Jünger's literature is seen to rhetoricise Heidegger's ethics of “letting things be” in order “to disrupt the standard criteria of academic or professional philosophical language.”<sup>232</sup> From this we can see that Jünger perverts Heidegger's philosophy of language and being, and produces a violent political literature where “being towards death” is conceived of as a literal experience, a violent practice of *being towards an image of death*. He translates Heidegger's lofty poetry of heroes and ultimates to that of a concrete and identifiable authentic goal for being: *the violent and cold face of technology and war*. In Jünger's conceptualisation the technological process and industrialisation of the normative or the “everyday” as a heroic territory brings physics and metaphysics together. Here, autonomy is understood through one's ability to offer oneself up to violence with the aim to rationally rise above it and to control and use it without the encumbrances of a weak humanism. Consequently, we are presented with the problem, first, that the logic of aesthetic and political unity is a totalitarian practice, and second, that this product of the totalitarian is intrinsically linked to the politicising (theorising and practicing) of (a Heideggerian) metaphysics.

In its founding of violence and aesthetics as the motivating and grounding impulse for a “successful” existence, Jünger's *heroic realism* shares many fascist traits. However, it is not my intention to deconstruct or attempt to redeem Jünger's position in terms of his proximity to the politics of Nazi Germany<sup>233</sup> and I also avoid the same question on Heidegger's Nazism. Instead,

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description of Jünger's *heroic realism* as discovering “pure adventure in the heart of functionality” in, *Die Entscheidung: Eine Untersuchung über Ernst Jünger, Carl Schmitt, Martin Heidegger*, Stuttgart, 1960, 86

<sup>230</sup> Ibid.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid., 79, Herf quotes Jünger from *Feuer und Blut: Einer Kleiner Ausschnitt aus dem grossen Schlacht*, Berlin, 1929; reprint, Stuttgart, 1960, 81

<sup>232</sup> Marcus Paul Bullock, *The Violent Eye, Ernst Jünger's Visions and Revisions on the European Right*, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1992, 323

<sup>233</sup> Bullock provides a history of Jünger's work with the Nazi party, including Jünger's political critiques of the Nazi party and his invitation (and subsequent refusal) to collude with the attempted assassination of



this chapter concentrates on how Heidegger's ontology is easily translated through variable applications to be an aesthetic and political force. As such, it is relevant to this text to look to Jünger's theoretical and practical attempts to "unravel the logic of violence."<sup>234</sup>

Jünger organises a literature of "blood and soil" and "fire and steel" where one is caught up in a science-fiction style rhetoric of violence. In this exposure to language one is drawn into the experience of a heroic struggle where the subject is asked to recognise and facilitate his/her<sup>235</sup> own machine-like coolness in order to deal with the horror of the machines of technology and capitalism. As such, Jünger's literature not only offers the textual and political aspects of violence and aesthetics as symptomatic of an attempt to incorporate a Nietzschean-style non-transcendental critique; it also includes the Heideggerian question of cognition as an experience within language. What Jünger's *heroic realism* therefore offers is an attempt to organise a political and workable concept of a metaphysical experience of language which is inscribed within language. With this in mind I consider how Jünger's metaphysical literature navigates a relationship between the rhetoric of metaphysics as a totalitarian politics that unifies the transcendental and the political and as a fanatical political literature. This is a question of the whether or not the violence of transcendence as a linguistic and relativistic practice *in* the social produces a transcendental-style domination *of* the social. Do such practices of power invite another metaphysics?

### ***Passive politics***

Jünger's political position can be seen to be a version of the antimodern anti-enlightenment thinking espoused during the early twentieth century in Germany, made stronger by the crisis of the experience of WW1 seen to variable extents in the work of other writers and theorist such as Carl Schmitt, Oswald Spengler, Gottfried Benn and Thomas Mann. The politics of *heroic realism* in the work of Jünger is produced by the desire to construct a political position that could escape the threat of capitalism and by-pass communism. However Jünger did not look to the

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Hitler. This description details Jünger's hatred of politicians and his disinterest in being involved with any political activism. Bullock puts this down to Jünger's pre-disposition to and constant interest with only the work of metaphysics and "deeper" and timeless, historically understood values and his attempt to fix them onto everyday experiences.

<sup>234</sup> Ibid., 155 Jünger's desire to rationalise violence demands a self-cultivation and self-transformation that results in the positioning of himself outside of human communities. This is mentioned in Bullock's translation of Jünger's Paris Journals, III, 270

<sup>235</sup> Significantly, Jünger's *heroic realism* is dedicated to a "manliness" in as much as his romantic prose on the glories of war translate easily into orgiastic Homo-erotic fantasies.

revolutionizing of capitalist culture in order to achieve this. Instead he recognised that “it was not the labour process that robs it of its deeper meanings, but liberal and Marxist *interpretations* of that process.” [Emphasis added]<sup>236</sup>

This description of Jünger shows that he doesn't wish to make radical breaks with capitalism. Instead, Jünger recognises the value and power of interpretation in that his interpretation of capitalism and technology seeks to magnify and interpret the experience of it as an anonymous, irrational and powerful “other”. This is in order to imbue the subject with the status of the heroic individual, reinstating the deeper biological, historical, and scientific values of the labour process. Here, Jünger negates the conventional interpretations of the labour process to qualify his own deeper and more timeless meanings. Now we see a radically different interpretation of events.

By politicising Heidegger's metaphysics as metaphor Jünger takes the concept of the primordial truth of Being from Heidegger (set up in his desire to theorise a precarious unity between philosophy and narrative or thinking and poetry) and transforms the (lofty) poetic language of metaphysics into an instrument of agency through powers of political and aesthetic interpretation. In this a ubiquitous and tangible violence is now the universal territory for Being. Significantly, for Jünger, this is an experience that approaches us, or even, *it is us*. However, most crucial to this is exactly how Jünger practices this ontology and bases this ideological thought of transcendence upon the temporal practice of language. Politics, for Jünger is exposed as a superstitious belief, where “real” conviction and “real” beliefs are either naive or false. Upon such terms the only things worth considering are, for Jünger, the scientific facts of life and death. Here, Jünger invents his own naturalised mythology of a historical and reliable set of natural or scientific facts to make up for the deficit he recognises in the temporal practices of political conjecture and argumentation.<sup>237</sup>

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<sup>236</sup> Herf, *Reactionary Modernism*, 90

<sup>237</sup> Bullock, *The Violent Eye*, 174-6 Here Bullock notes Jünger's devotion to a “deeper” concept of living: “The collective domain, where the masses, the political parties that manipulate them, and the consciousness of a public controlled by propaganda hold sway, has nothing to do with these ultimate stakes. The collective motivation where propaganda rules corresponds to the cunning, the tricks, and the lies of superstition, as opposed to a real conviction and a real totality of life.” (174) Bullock also writes a comparative account of Jünger's desire to find a deeper meaning to politics in the “Song of the Machine,” against Walter Benjamin's endeavour to rationalise technological powers. In “Theories of German Fascism” Benjamin reviews Jünger's collection *Krieg und Krieger* (War and Warriors) arguing that without a rationalisation of its technology powers, society gives way to a hypnotic fascination with technology. Benjamin also claims that to master fear of technology through intoxication deprives society of rationalising powers over it.

Jünger does not seek to guard the parameters of thinking and poetry as parallel and separate entities, but utilises them as a condensed experience in order to organise agency. In this Jünger witnesses philosophy as a matter of language and persuasion, openly identifying the force of philosophy as driven by one's power to make interpretations. As such, he not only recognises the Marxist position as an "interpretation" of capitalism but motivates a Nietzschean style anti-Enlightenment assertion that one's own subjectivity exists as an interpretation and a manufacturing of oneself.

Jünger's theory springs from the recognition that in the advent of technology and capitalism there was a dissolution of recognisable polemics from which to perform a dialectics of political and revolutionary power. In his 1927 essay "Fortschritt, Freiheit und Notwendigkeit," Jünger writes: "In our technical era the individual appears to be evermore dependent, "unfree" and endangered."<sup>238</sup> He continues "but the nature of these bonds are less visible than those of the feudal era. Hence they are even more absolute than the absolute monarchies."<sup>239</sup> Jünger associates the ability to have power performed through the recognition of the other, by identifying the "other" as that which is the possessor of an omnipotent power. Instead of criticising this process, Jünger assimilates it into the rhetoric of heroic submission and sacrifice.<sup>240</sup> Here, submission is not related to a defect but as an *advantage*, a theatre in which to play out one's own power struggle:

The machines are not only directed against nature, but against us as well. We depend on these steel translations of our blood and our brains, just as the actor depends on his act. No power is in a position to offer the stars to us other than we, ourselves. If it is not our intention, so it certainly is our innermost will to sacrifice our freedom, to give up our existence as individuals and to melt into a large life-circle, in which the individual as has little self-sufficiency as a cell which must die when separate from the body.<sup>241</sup>

Jünger constructs a vision of technology quite distinct from the *Volkish*, pastoral aesthetics preferred by other philosophers and theorists including Heidegger, where countrified lifestyles and rustic technologies were preferred over the threat of these "anonymous" technologies of cities and steel. Consequently, by undertaking and assimilating the aesthetics of the high speed modern life, something more associated with an avant-gardist or specifically "modernist" vision,<sup>242</sup>

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<sup>238</sup> Herf, *Reactionary Modernism*, 87 "Fortschritt, Freiheit und Notwendigkeit," *Arminius* 8 1926, 8-10

<sup>239</sup> *Ibid.*, 88

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>242</sup> For more information regarding Jünger's conception of technology as being opposed to that of "traditional" antimodern thinkers, see Herf's theory of "reactionary modernism" as an alternative to the antimodern

Jünger creates a politics of “total mobilisation” through the manipulation of and surrender to “futuristic” technological forces which he identifies as being present in the subject’s “innermost will.” Here an unrestricted drive to one’s own sacrifice embodies not only an anonymous slavery and the romanticism of the loss of reason and feeling but also the possibility that one could be the avid spectator of one’s own death in a comprehension of one’s own subjectivity through an intimate relation with an aesthetics of violence.

As such, Jünger’s paranoia around technology, “reason” and “progress” as the ultimate encroaching power allows a freedom from itself that is activated through the surrendering of the subject to it, in the most poetic and spectacular way. This theory of power in “negative freedom” grounded the subject in a position that Jünger believed could overcome the “tragic consciousness” which haunted the (Marxist) theories of the dialectics of power. Jünger sought to overcome the antinomies of reason and unreason through the unification of blood and technology, where desire, identified as the desire for truth manifest as the desire for one’s own death produces a functioning moral law. This conditional construction of desire and destiny could be seen to act as the supplement for the evacuation of transcendental critique made available through Nietzsche. The subject of *heroic realism* is thus politicised through its ability to poetise itself as an actor and in action.

*Heroic realism* does not therefore, assert itself around tragic limits set by the subject’s “impossible” relation to the technology but instead assimilates the aesthetic of steel and the rationalistic processes of machines. Heidegger’s noble and glorious conception of authentic Dasein laid down in *The Introduction to Metaphysics* is now literally and mechanistically asserted as the agent of violence. In *The Violent Eye* Bullock writes: “Jünger’s heroic realism demands that one acknowledge the world of iron and steel and fire as having grown so potent as to demolish all other measures of reality.”<sup>243</sup> Upon the same terms we can conceive the violent images of iron, fire and steel as the *only* reality worth considering. This is Jünger’s historic subject: not the subject of appearance or language in general but instead a direct referent to - and an empirical work upon - Heidegger’s philosophical and literary identifications of autonomy; the subject of, and subject to a specifically *violent language*.

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<sup>243</sup> Bullock, *The Violent Eye*, 140

### *Jünger's war aesthetic*

Crucially, it is in the aestheticisation of war that Jünger identifies a collective moral experience. War was transformed into a “gigantic labour process.”<sup>244</sup> In Jünger's book, *The Storm of Steel*, a diary of his service on the battlefields of the Great War he writes regarding his expectations of war:

We had grown up in a material age, and in each one of us there was the yearning for great experience, such as we had never known. The war had entered us like wine. We had set out in a rain of flowers to seek the death of heroes. The war was our dream of greatness, power, and glory. It was a man's work, a duel on fields whose flowers would be stained with blood. There is no lovelier death in the world.<sup>245</sup>

However, war was not restricted to the battlefield. “Blood, tradition and race were seen as metaphysical rather than primarily biological ideas,”<sup>246</sup> and Jünger's radical aestheticisation of both the subject and the world at large construed a dramatic space for everyday activities. This aestheticisation of the symbolic forces of war and idealism at work in everyday life, whether it be the battlefield or the factories, was Jünger's attempt to rescue society from the overarching power of commodity relations. Herf recounts Jünger's aestheticisation of everyday life as a heroic experience from Jünger's *Arbenterliche Herz*:

A machine ship has a “heroic image.” The “whistling buzz of steel in the air” is “lulling and exciting.” Street noise has about it a “most threatening” quality. A street café can “arouse a devilish impression,” whereas the ringing of an alarm clock recalls “catastrophe”. Neon signs, a modern bar, an American film, are “all slices of a powerful devilish rebellion, whose spectacle fills the individual with raging lust as well as crushing anxiety.”<sup>247</sup>

This “universal reality” of violence is confirmed in the status of violence in Jünger's work as a means and ends. He writes on war: “It is the song of life devouring itself. To live is to kill.”<sup>248</sup> Jünger's heroic renditions of the war experience confirm violence as a foundational underpinning to his work and underscore the experience of autonomy in the ongoing struggle of war. In the novel *The Lost Outpost* Jünger describes a lone soldier who fights without any prospect of rescue and of no knowledge whether the war is continuing or not. A similar sentiment is evident in Jünger's reactions to the losing of the Great War, where he identifies the loss of life and war as

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<sup>244</sup> Herf, *Reactionary Modernism*, 90

<sup>245</sup> Ernst Jünger, *The Storm of Steel, From the Diary of a German Storm Trooper on the Western Front*, Chatto and Windus, London, 1929, 1

<sup>246</sup> Herf, *Reactionary Modernism*, 86

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*, 98 citing *Arbenerliche Herz*, Berlin, 1929, 86

<sup>248</sup> Bullock, *The Violent Eye*, 61, cited from *Der Kampf* VII 42.

equal to the “success” of winning, for it is in the violence of the combat itself that Jünger seeks and finds redemption. However, Jünger clings to a concept of an external agency. He writes:

The representative power of the individual can be enormous. There are processes in history whereby though millions remain silent, one good witness can turn the judgement about.<sup>249</sup>

Jünger’s appreciation of the individual certainly conflicts with the indifference proposed by Heidegger. However, this conception of agency demarcates the central contradiction in Jünger’s thinking, since although he represents his hero as the lone soldier, indifferent to the “reason” of war, or the imperative to fight, Jünger still manages to revere the individual agent, the one who makes decisions: the individual who recognises the violent state of affairs in which he is always complicit. Clearly the agent who is able to recognise this complicity, is forced beyond the parameters of violence, and is asked to look rationally upon it. This is the performance of a rhetoric of subjective power manifest in an aestheticisation of the self within the other of violence. The characters depicted in Jünger’s fictions perform a patient complicity, or a calm acceptance. However, the agent at work here is the aesthete, the reader, or the writer of such narratives whereupon there is a sense of “thrilled tranquility” in exposing oneself to the violent experience.<sup>250</sup>

### ***Realism as violence***

Herf identifies Jünger’s interest in aesthetics to be always correlative to the act of coolness or distancing from the horrors of “real-life” death and war. He describes how Jünger discovers power through the mastery of aesthetics (precisely through the admitted difference between the plastic artificial aesthetic image and the real thing), as is demonstrated in the book, *The Dangerous Moment*. Here images that enable the heroic realist are documentary photographs of disasters. Through the “mechanical eye” of the photograph Jünger identifies images such as plane crashes and other disasters as emblematic of and also acted as a piece of the real, the “moment of danger,” the capturing of “essence”. As Herf points out this produced a world that was “frozen at the level of conscious perception to avoid subconscious traumatic encounters.”<sup>251</sup>

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<sup>249</sup> Ibid., 71

<sup>250</sup> Ibid., 248

<sup>251</sup> Ibid., 99

Jünger asserts that despite having an experiential encounter upon looking at images of real life crashes and disasters in all their documentary evidence, or their evidence as documents, our power is exercised through a rigorous mental control. Here, Jünger demands the expert - and perhaps moreso the *daring* expert - someone who is a romanticised literary and aesthetic equivalent of the philosopher. Crucially this is also someone who accepts and recognises the very real consequence of aesthetic power as being something to heroically understand, to manipulate, and also to fear.<sup>252</sup> Now, in contradiction to Jünger's literal and factual understanding of a unified aesthetico-political ideology of violence, we can see that Jünger designates power for the individual heroic realist as enabled precisely through the knowledge that one can separate an *image* of violence from *real* violence, that these *images* of violence are *not real* despite their documentary-style or unmediated aesthetic proximity to it.

Consequently, Jünger crafts an "everyday violence", which is always reliant upon the mental control or "rationality" of the subject who can face this "moment of danger". By taking part in the poetising of the world around him/her as violent the subject accepts that this "world of violence" is in itself a fiction that ultimately is separate from the subject.

It is this separateness that Jünger asserts at the basis of his critique of violence:

I must reach a point from which I can observe things in the way I can fishes on a coral reef or insects in a meadow or even the way a doctor contemplates a sick man...There is still weakness in my disgust, still too much participation in the real world. One must unravel the logic of violence.<sup>253</sup>

Importantly, it is the subject's acknowledgement, identification and willed participation within this *ethos* that allows Jünger's project of *heroic realism* to be practiced. As such, for Jünger the "moment of danger" is also identified as a moment of freedom constructed through poetry and rationale, where the subject wills itself to be unstable, overtaken or caught up in violence in the hope of fulfilling Jünger's aim to close down the antinomies of reason and unreason. It is this strategy that highlights the problematic element to Jünger's dialectics, since at bottom, despite Jünger's interest to combine a rational *and* a self-representing subject, what Jünger ultimately demands is a subject who is a rational by-stander to his/her experience of violence. Accordingly,

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<sup>252</sup> It is here where we can return directly to Heidegger's description of a Greek conception of "being appearance, and power" in *An Introduction to Metaphysics* mentioned earlier in this chapter where he defines the work of Dasein to be situated between knowing and appearance, and that appearance is to be "taken seriously" within the political.

Jünger's central premise - to close down the antinomies of reason and unreason upholds and insists upon the same formal structure that separates them. Jünger's determination to manufacture a subject whose autonomy is situated in immersive linguistic experiences still relies upon a subject that can separate thinking from language. In this, a belief in the force of scientific reason as an *a priori* provides a radical doubling of violence, where the specific uses of a (generic) violent language by which the subject represents himself as rational, sharpen the character of violence as abstract and universal.

### ***The problem of authority***

The problem of "choice" that Jünger offers his "powerful" subject is reflected in Heidegger's *Being and Time*:

If Dasein, by anticipation, lets death become powerful in itself, then, as free for death, Dasein understands itself in its own *superior power*, the power of its finite freedom, so that in this freedom, which "is" only in its having chosen to make such a choice, it can take over the *powerlessness (Ohnmacht)* of abandonment to its having done so, and can thus come to have a clear vision for the accidents of the Situation that has been disclosed.<sup>254</sup>

What we can see here is precisely the difference between Jünger's literature and Heidegger's ontology. Jünger clearly takes up "anticipating Dasein", and in doing so demonstrates the problematic element of Heidegger's conception of "letting things be" in being open to the experience of language understood as the route to being, is also translated into a pro-active passivity, or a willed surrendering. In this, Jünger's project illustrates the consequences and the political impact of our desire to philosophise, wherein the will to *knowledge* as power that Heidegger demarcates is quickly interpreted as the will to the *image* of power as violence. Further, this image of violence is construed as a literal path to being and is acted upon as having such a power. As such, Heidegger's attempt to draw up a project where destiny can be kept free by communicating and struggling is perverted in Jünger's literature as a narrative of destiny as violence.

Consequently, the political problem of Heidegger's philosophy (in that destiny is thought - or even, the notion of a figure is presented, even if this is without actual figure) is clearly

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<sup>253</sup> Bullock, *The Violent Eye*, 155

<sup>254</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Trans John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, Blackwells, 1962, 436



demonstrated in Jünger's literature, and is again highlighted as a problem of identification, namely in the inability to identify the difference between the agency or thinking required in the forming of the world and the thinking of passivity required in letting world happen. In grounding Heidegger's philosophy as violent literature Jünger creates a space in which Heidegger's "lofty poetics" are not only something whereby we undergo an experience with language. This theory also aims towards language in order to have that experience. This is, perhaps, no longer the dark place of the Heideggerian real, the place *between* poetry and thinking. Rather, Jünger aestheticises the realm between philosophy and poetry as an "everyday epic", where he locates metaphysics in the excessive rhetoric of a perverse kind of realism. As such, borne out of Jünger's desire to collide reason and unreason and poetry and thinking is a subject who is distant from community and civilisation. Instead of forgetting the task of metaphysics, Jünger forgets the political altogether. Moreover, this subject cultivates self as the rational by-stander, who by merging with history and the cosmos grants itself a God's eye view. This subject is not exempt from death but can face it as an equal.

### *Metaphysics as politics*

As Heidegger's philosophy invites the problem of an a priori use of, or thinking of, knowledge to think the thought of experience, so Jünger's political poetics of *heroic realism*, acting precisely on this basis, takes up this a priori as the role of the aesthete as the superficial agent of experience.

Jünger does not propose that we give ourselves up to language and knowledge but that we *construct* the sacrifice of our identity as an experience. In order for us to think *inside of violence* we have to organise and involve ourselves with it as *external* agents. This commits Jünger to a subjective idealism and a subject centred rationality, which his *heroic realism* willfully places under threat since the subject is encouraged to stage a sacrificial move by leaving itself open and even willing the irrationalist or violent aesthetics of the "other" - technology and war. Jünger's literature offers the textual and political aspects of violence and aesthetics as symptomatic of an attempt to incorporate a Nietzschean style non-transcendental critique, where violence is the necessary and apparently only means by which to identify autonomy. However, as literary fragment, Jünger's work prompts a re-examination of the Heideggerian question, raised in *On the Way To Language*, and the problem described in my initial remarks from Lacoue-Labarthe. With this in mind, a reading of Jünger's *heroic realism* returns us to the question as to whether the

local and specific elements of identifying violence as grounds for freedom (such as that seen in Heidegger's philosophical, political and literary heroics of "lofty poetry" or mythological histories and futures) ultimately theorise an experience of autonomy that inevitably directs us towards the horrific political potential of a universally recognisable violence.

Jünger's insistence on the aesthete and his predilection for a Kantian rationalism and "duty" can be seen to marginalise agency to those who wish to identify that agency with violence. This underlines the difficulty of organising agency in Jünger's work as a socio-political, democratic, or, as Bullock suggests and I return to this later, a totalitarian politics. Jünger's structure of the "aesthete" and "violence" also confirms that Jünger cared little for a political or social theory attached to his work that could have identified "results". For example, first of all these terms are both difficult to identify exactly, and secondly, Jünger's violence was not a typically Benjaminian "modernist" violence.<sup>255</sup> He did not suggest the practice of revolution in order to institute new governments. His violence had no end in sight.

Herf comments that Jünger "never discusses anything on the social," he is "always poetic" where labour is equated with "the tempo of the fist, of thoughts of the heart, of life in day and night, science, love, art, belief, cult, war...the oscillation of atoms and the force that moves the stars and the solar system."<sup>256</sup> In this, Jünger's biological-metaphysical-philosophical poetry is criticised not for its lack of political motivation but because that political motivation in terms of a society makes no tools available to put its own predilection for violence into question. In other words, the subject is free for violence and death, but is still un-free to deliberate the question of why those ends are orchestrated as such around violence.

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<sup>255</sup>Walter Benjamin's essay "Critique of Violence" in *One Way Street and Other Writings* [trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorer, NLB, 1979], identifies a divine violence outside the law of government and institution. For Benjamin, law making is power making, which is violence as "the origin of every contract also points towards violence." 142 This "mythical violence is pernicious" and extinguishes revolutionary possibilities. However "this violence outside the law as pure immediate violence, is assured, this furnishes the proof that revolutionary violence, the highest manifestations of unalloyed violence by man, is possible, and by what means." 149 Crucially, regarding the work of Jünger, it is important to point out that despite Benjamin's bow to the sublime violence of the divine name and his acceptance of violence within politics, his motivations were essentially more politically driven and counter-revolutionary than Jünger's "linguistic", philosophical, historical and spiritual motivations. For instance, Benjamin regards Jünger's mystical fetishisation of technology as unhelpful to more "rational" or useful political processes. For a comparative reading of Benjamin's notion of "authentic experience" and political violence with Jünger's see Bullock's *The Violent Eye*. Benjamin's essay is also discussed at length in Beatrice Hanssen's text of the same name. *Critique of Violence*, Routledge, 2000, 3.

<sup>256</sup> Herf, *Reactionary Modernism*, 103

Jünger's image of others and the concept of the "agent" is brought more clearly into focus in his comments on biology and politics. Here Jünger's desire "not to discuss anything on the social" can be seen to take on a distinct and radical anti-social character. This confirms Herf's "metaphysical" description of the distracted romantic but also pulls Jünger's politics more ardently towards that of a negative concept of freedom – a romantic nihilism. Upon scientifically inspecting the biological workings of a squid, the *Loligo Media*, Jünger recollects another experience:

Strangely enough I sometimes had a similar feeling when I listened to some dull prattler going on in a political meeting somewhere. In spite of everything, I still had to admit that there was a supreme wisdom at work in his organs, that there were all kinds of glands feeding their secretions ceaselessly into his bloodstream, that the miracle of digestion taking place inside him, that every cell was carrying out its special function - in short, that he was governed by a wonderful life force. Was it then too bold a conclusion that perhaps the prattle also fulfilled a more secret end, a hidden task more profound than anything in the prattler's conscious intentions?<sup>257</sup>

Quite clearly there is a horror and a violence to Jünger's story in that the "dull prattler" is laid bare before Jünger's scientific eye as some biological manifestation that somehow deludes utter comprehension. Here, there is a mystical truth to the human form and its workings; the subject is not described sociologically, it is rather, biological/technical and mystical. Significantly, language is intrinsic to this metaphysics since Jünger asserts that it can possess the power of things beyond consciousness. However, by giving a social stage to his biological-mystical experience, the sociological potential of politics is evacuated from Jünger's concern. Jünger remains as the power or authority figure in this arrangement, where he is the grand inquisitor, poking humanity with a stick in order to scrutinise its workings. In this Jünger separates himself from the human community, realising that understanding has to be understood from above.

I must reach a point from which I can observe things in the way I can fishes on a coral reef or insects in a meadow or even the way a doctor contemplates a sick man... There is still weakness in my disgust, still too much participation in the real world. One must unravel the logic of violence.<sup>258</sup>

Jünger's diaristic angst explains his desire to cut himself off from a notion of community, where to "unravel the logic of violence" he has to be in a position to see the larger whole. In this Jünger confirms that violence is something which he can stand apart from, and it is only in this standing

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<sup>257</sup> Bullock, *The Violent Eye*, 57-8

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.*, 155

apart, or in having a dialectical experience with it that he can put violence into question. This not only reverts back to his innate rationalism but also markedly contradicts any similarity between his and Heidegger's conception of "thinking". However, when Jünger speaks of his relationship to others it is interesting that this should take on the attitude of disgust. Quite clearly it is through such emotion from which Jünger attempts to perfect a resistance from empathy in order to organise and sustain his utter indifference to humanity. For Jünger, *rationalism is antihumanism*, and through *heroic realism* Jünger defeats the "tragic" or finite aspect of the heroic tendency, replacing it with the impassioned rationalised subject who acts at the willful cost of community.

### *True and false languages*

Therefore, Jünger is determined to offer an ongoing relation with violence that has its basis in irrationalism. It is in its "infinite pointlessness" that Jünger offers violence up as a metaphysical experience, *through* its conventional or "everyday" character. In other words, under Jünger's theory our relationship with violence is generally available and yet the politics of our relationship with violence is not to overcome, revolutionise or to change anything in particular; it is solely to experience or identify one's power or agency in relation to the "other". Consequently, Jünger's violence occupies a "political terrain", the world of the social - and yet as "party politics" it is still maintained as a "higher force" written purely as relational to a *metaphysical* essence and truth. This problem of only "metaphysical intention" is particularly relevant. Bullock writes that violence in the work of Jünger being without rational justification remains almost impossible to hold in focus:

Though [Jünger's violence] should press cultural, national, racial or class interests into its service at crucial junctures, ultimately it does not have the capacity to represent any of them, for at no point can it transform itself into a true language.<sup>259</sup>

Bullock's notion of "true language" presses towards the idea that without any clear rationale attributed to violent action, violence itself threatens to become unfixed from the locus of the "world of things". This is significant considering Bullock's description of Jünger as "non-political", in that Jünger's violence is deemed ineffectual and inadequate for politics, first because this "non-political" or "false" language-realm of violence exists in narratives alone and second, because Jünger's universal, metaphysical and historical interests simply aren't able to secure

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<sup>259</sup> Ibid., 78

partisan interests. Looking at Bullock's theory more closely, the difference between a "true language" and Jünger's language of violence is in respect of the social use of language.

This raises questions as to whether it remains society's choice *not to put* Jünger's language into use, or whether it has an innate *uselessness* in being a language of universal violence. Reading Bullock one would assume the latter. Despite Bullock's somewhat awkward terminology of "true language", presumably indicative of social and political effectivity, Bullock's theory of Jünger's violence as narrative moves to highlight the difficulties of processing the language-violence relation. From Bullock's theory, one could surmise that the difficulty we have in navigating Jünger's violence is viewed in two ways, initially in that all the immoral potentialities of Jünger's violence resist an absolute identification to be able to be put to (political-fascist) use; and secondly, that Jünger's concept of subjective agency holds no political sway in that it is marginalised, and when put to use it is a very private notion of experience.

Ultimately, what we can identify when looking at Jünger's political metaphysics is that although he concretises metaphysics by writing of "violent forces" as evident within the normative, he still, romantically and consistently describes violence to be for the most part a ubiquitous metaphysical experience only to be experienced properly by the heroic realist. This again reflexes easily back upon Heidegger's notion of heroic Dasein in *The Introduction to Metaphysics*, as worked through the Greek notions of celebrity and glory, wherein authenticity is the experience of a discreet few. Realism coincides with reality in Jünger's violence and yet they remain separate through the infrastructure of tension and risk orchestrated around the subject as agent who acts as interlocutor. Through Jünger's assertion of the relationship between metaphysical authenticity and power in the social, made evident through the work of a literary fiction, it is clear that the work it takes to create a mutual identification as to this state of violence, or indeed a community of heroic realists in itself marginalises the ubiquitous and universalising essence of violence and metaphysics to the specifics of a literary genre, not dissimilar to Edgar Allen Poe or Charles Baudelaire, since Jünger's heroic realist is either the "rational" self-aestheticised aesthete, or the "irrational" cultic fanatic.<sup>260</sup>

From this, the politics of Jünger's narratives are viewed as not so much "political", but as philosophical narratives. However, crucial to this is that Jünger's narratives are stained with allegorical overtones. This underscores the problem of exactly how Jünger's narratives

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<sup>260</sup> Jünger's radical transformation of the everyday as a place for intoxication and horror is closely related to the perverse horrors in Poe's work, and also the "dandified" refinement of the imagination in Baudelaire.

incorporate our identification of the philosophical. In other words, the political problem of Jünger's work can be more clearly discerned in terms of how it is put to use in the social.

### *The aesthete*

The question of the performance of indifference, calm or coolness, which *heroic realism* requires, calls to mind many clichés of representations of “violent agency” within film narratives where alien-like or non-human perverse, cruel, and “unthinkable” decisions are thought and executed. It is in this *performance* of “coolness” that the construction of *heroic realism* is brought home, in that Heidegger's experience of thinking as a space in which we undergo, enjoy or endure an experience with language is made into a strategy for action where we are compelled to manufacture and identify with the experience, as an individual or as a society.

Before thinking through the relation between Jünger's literature as significant to the postmodern narrative, I'll take a brief look at Heidegger's expression of how the mortality of Dasein is specifically a “linguistic” experience is recounted in *On the Way To Language*:

In order to be who we are, we human beings remain committed to and within the being of language, and can never step out of it and look at it from somewhere else. Thus we always see the nature of language only to the extent to which language itself has us in view, has appropriated us to itself. That we cannot know the nature of language - know it according to the traditional concept of knowledge defined in terms of cognition as representation - is not a defect, however but rather an advantage by which we are favoured with a special realm, that realm we are, who are needed and used to speak language dwell as mortals.<sup>261</sup>

Heidegger's description of our being unable to step outside of language and yet to never “know” it according to traditional concepts of knowledge is identified here not only as without defect, but as an “advantage”, as a *favourable* experience. Here, Heidegger identifies the experience of being as the impossibility of an experience of our mortality and, moreover, the living out of Dasein's passionate existence for knowledge. However, exactly how this “advantage” is construed in Jünger's literature remains important. Clearly, for Jünger, this mortal realm is somewhat clumsily but also epically re-figured as the locus for philosophical questioning. Here, this “special realm” and the “advantage” of mortality is targeted and appropriated by Jünger as the natural territory to

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<sup>261</sup> Heidegger, *On The Way To Language*, 134

employ the technological means to use and speak language, because now language is imbued with transcendental powers.

In order to think through Jünger's identification of ethics and autonomy, although for the most part I have concentrated aspects of Jünger's literature in relation to (party) politics, it is also worth considering exactly how the aesthete is considered within Jünger's fiction, not only as the reader but also as the central character of his novels. Significant to this is that his protagonists could be seen to act as a standard of how to behave under Jünger's more "political" conceptions of agency. Here the characters do very little and yet they are exposed to all manner of horror. In Jünger's transcriptions of nightmarish visions, he translates Heidegger's absolute finitude in language, incorporating and confirming it as an exercise of the limits of mortality, as *being towards an image of death* in the exploits of a fictional hero:

The Black Knight:<sup>262</sup>  
Leipzig

I stand in a suit of black steel armour before a satanic castle. Its walls are black, its gigantic towers blood red. By the gates white flames shoot up in glowing columns. I stride through, cross the courtyard, and mount the stairs. Room after room, flight after flight, reveal themselves as I go. The sound of my footsteps echoes against the rough masonry, but otherwise it is as still as death. Finally, I enter a round tower room whose door a red helix has been carved into the stone. There are no windows, yet one can feel the massive thickness of the surrounding walls; no light is burning, yet a shadowless brilliance fills the chamber.

Two girls are sitting at a table, one a blonde and one dark haired, together with a woman. Although the three do not resemble one another, they must be mother and daughters. On the table in front of the dark-haired girl lies a pile of long, gleaming horse-shoe nails. Carefully she takes up one after the other, tests its sharpness, and sticks it into the blonde's face, limbs, and breast. But she does not move and utters no sound. At one point the dark one draws back the other's skirt, and I see that her thighs and lacerated body have been reduced to a single bloody wound. These silent movements have an extraordinary slowness about them, as though secret arrangements were holding back the course of time.

Even the woman sitting opposite these two remains mute and motionless. Like images of saints in the country, she has a large heart cut out of red paper covering her entire chest. In horror I notice that this heart turns snow white, like glowing iron, at every stab of a nail that the blonde receives. I rush from the room, looking for the way out, with the feeling I am not man enough to endure this test. Door after door flies past, each secured with steel bolts. Then I know: behind every door, from the deepest cellar up to the attic in the highest tower there are scenes of endless torture about which no person will ever hear.

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<sup>262</sup> Extracted from Bullock, *The Violent Eye*, 227

I have penetrated the secret castle of pain, but the first of its offerings was already too much for me.

(“Der schwarze Ritter,” *Das abenteuerliche Herz-zweite Fassung*, IX, pp. 195-96)

Already we can find ourselves recovering images of the aesthete as the one who is privileged with the knowledge and the realisation of horrors that no other man could stand or even get to know of their existence. The character, the Black Knight, is already equipped and prepared both physically and mentally for the horrors he witnesses, in as much as he is not surprised at what he sees. However, it is important that he still suffers shock, terror or trauma from the experience. This prepares the metaphysical aspect of horror within the text to be something that occupies the whole world of the Black Knight, something that faces him wherever he turns and therefore is something he must face. The aesthetics of metaphysics as a textualised narrative here become a pulp erotic fiction where Heidegger’s hero Dasein participates in sado-masochistic voyeurism. The “cool”, rational delivery of the traumatic images of initiation and penetration brings the realm of the dream-like narrative to a level of reality or document. This reality is founded upon violence that smacks of what we see to be the conventional images of death, or even the kitsch melodrama of pulp horror. However, it is important to Jünger that this rhetoric is difficult to contemplate and that through these images of horror we experience their intimidating consequence.<sup>263</sup> In the reader’s “thrilled tranquility”<sup>264</sup> there is an experience of jeopardy or danger where the image addresses the reader and the author as voyeurs, both complicit within the narrative experience.<sup>265</sup>

Jünger’s theory of shock without surprise has clear similarities to Baudelaire’s dandy. Baudelaire writes in *The Painter of Modern Life*:

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<sup>263</sup> This difficulty to contemplate the image of ethics returns us to the aesthetics of “contamination” in Chapter One and also to Fish’s “figure without figure” – or, “the gun at your head is your head” – in the previous chapter. Here, we can think through the accounts of aestheticising ethics and the way in which ethics are prepared as consequential by negating or problematising figuration. In terms of this, Jünger, Zupancic and Cavell’s aesthetics of paradox co-opt a more clichéd rhetoric than that of Fish’s more “difficult” metaphor. However, as I have already written, Fish’s theory still adopts the same schema by persisting in a metaphor that resists the symbolisation of an ethic, despite his arguing for the temporal and circumstantial nature of universal and transcendental codes. I return to this theme of aesthetics and law later in the conclusion.

<sup>264</sup> Bullock, *The Violent Eye*, 248

<sup>265</sup> The way Jünger understands the aesthete in his fantasy styled literature is similar to his description of the heroic realist at war. In the essay “Totalen Mobilmachung” Junger asserts that the precondition for “total mobilisation” is not “determination” (*entscheidende*), but rather a specific “readiness” (*Bereitschrift*) in order to respond best to the demands of total mobilisation. Jünger writes: “Die technische Seite der Totalen Mobilmachung ist indessen nicht die entscheidende. Ihre Voraussetzung liegt vielmehr, wie die Voraussetzung jeder Technik, tiefer: wir wollen sie hier als die Bereitschrift zur Mobilmaschung aussprechen.” *Ernst Jünger, Die Samtliche Werke*, Essays 1, Betrachtungen zur Zeit, Stuttgart, 1980, 129



What then is this passion which becoming doctrine, has produced such a school of tyrants? What this unofficial institution which has forced so haughty and exclusive a sect? [...] It is the joy of astonishing others, and the proud satisfaction of never oneself being astonished. A dandy may be blasé, he may even suffer; but in this case, he will smile like the Spartan boy under the fox's tooth. [...] The distinguishing characteristic of the dandy's beauty consists above all, in an air of coldness which comes from an unshakeable determination not to be moved; you might call it a latent fire which hints at itself, and which could, but chooses not to burst into flames.<sup>266</sup>

Jünger's narrative clearly deals within the same territory as the "dandy". Fusing a Nietzschean style self-aestheticisation through decadent "dandified" narratives Jünger provides a reader who exercises authority at his/her most private point of resistance vis-à-vis a public literary text, which eschews this experience of "choice" as a private, dangerous and erotic encounter.

Looking at *heroic realism* in general, we can see such descriptions of the subject as being somehow ambivalent, passive or indifferent to violence – a *modern* subject - correspond to many representations of the subject's indifference to violence and cruelty within the postmodern. As such, the expression of this association between agency and violence as a rhetorical contrivance (and not necessarily purely as a parodic satire) is particularly relevant when considering how we understand the implications of the totalitarian style violence of *heroic realism* today. For the most part, and as we have already seen, the work of condemning totalitarian style violence in contemporary culture announces a violence of its own. For instance, the film *AI* (2001 dir. Stanley Kubrick and Steven Spielberg) depicts a scene in which a totalitarian style state within which cyborgs representative of the "socially unwanted" (i.e., they are represented as having a Jewish physiognomy or dressed as gypsies or are prostitutes etc.) are exposed to savage public humiliation and spectacular and banal executions. This, from the director of *Schindler's List*, (1995, Steven Spielberg) is not a surprise, but the desire to re-tell the Holocaust or, even the calamity of the dialectic of enlightenment as a non-ironic drama still persists within narratives produced here as over-sentimentalised Hollywood schmaltz. This not only desires to tell the story of the "victim" but also of the oppressors, and to re-tell and re-tell. Here totalitarianism and specifically Nazism become the ubiquitous and impending other – *the absolute identification of the immanence of violence*.

What is significant to this notion of *heroic realism* is evidenced in allegories of the act of theorising or "thinking as violence" at work within the postmodern. Such allegories still invest in

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<sup>266</sup> Charles Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life", in *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. and ed. Jonathan Mayne, Phaidon, 1995, 27-29

a non-ironic belief in the relationship between violence and agency. In other words, these narratives still take seriously an immanence: *not the immanence of a particularised violence to decision*, but more often than not *the immanence of the political other – totalitarianism to the democratic narrative*.<sup>267</sup> This aspect of a “diabolical evil” rehearsed within postmodern “reproducible” and non-foundational narratives<sup>268</sup> retrieves the question of if re-producing “decision as violence” as an immanent force only historicises it. Here (similar to Jünger), Spielberg’s devotion to a meta-narrative shows up the very singular nature of his priorities. In comparison, the post-tragic heroic narrative literalises the stipulation of decision and violence where there are no forces greater than the subject’s own force. *The singular nature of force is the priority*. Here, the dynamic relation between Jünger’s *heroic realism* and the post-tragic heroic is brought into focus. In both, *a fear* of total domination is not written as being immanent to the subject’s actions.<sup>269</sup> Instead, the potential force of domination is written through action.

Ultimately, what Jünger’s *heroic realism* delivers is two-fold, first; a political concept of a metaphysical experience of language which is inscribed within language, as temporal and contingent narrative experiences; and secondly and conclusively, it stresses the problems of organising a theory of self-reflexivity within violence, when the rhetorics of authoring agency are left apparently unthought and we are left with the question of the transcendental subject. In this, Jünger’s translation and rhetoricisation of a Nietzschean-style active nihilism does not fully consider the rhetoric of subjective power as violence, only as a possible power over it and in relation to it. As I have written, the post-tragic subject does not recognise the law as something that is external to his/her actions, the law is tied up within them and duty is either unrecognisable or is naturalised within the subject’s actions. In comparison the antimodern subject of Jünger’s *heroic realism* identifies technology as the powerful other, the violent ground that inhabits the ultimate experience of authenticity. As such, although the two figures of agency *don’t fear* what could be termed the ethical other, they still show different relations to it. The former shows an

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<sup>267</sup> In *Did Someone Say Totalitarianism? Five Interventions in the (Mis)use of a Notion* Vero, 2001 Slavoj Žižek discusses how totalitarianism is understood as immanent in democratic practices. Here Žižek argues that this threat is misperceived: “The return to ethics in today’s political philosophy shamefully exploits the horrors of the Gulag or the Holocaust as the ultimate bogey for blackmailing us into renouncing all serious political engagement.”<sup>4</sup> Žižek also takes up a critique of the Holocaust narrative in cinema, to ask how the “serious” message of these films is communicated. This, for Žižek is played out in heroic and tragic narratives and non-comedic and pathetic speeches. 67-72

<sup>268</sup> The concept of narratives as having a postmodern character is raised in Chapter One, through Cavell’s *The World Viewed, Reflections On The Ontology of Film*, Harvard University Press 1979, 103-4. Cavell writes that film unlike art does not have an “emancipatory project” at its origin. In other words, film seeks to underscore itself as a tradition and a convention unlike art, the conventions of which (as an avant-gardist structure anyway) are to rebel against institutionalised norms.

embodiment of the law and, the latter a distancing, achieved through the subject's mechanistic appropriation of the law. However, the legacy of Jünger's rhetoric of metaphysics as (violent) language can be seen to clear the way for the possibility of thinking the transcendental subject within language as another formal and political question.

### ***Language as power***

Jünger's *heroic realism* attempts to assimilate the other (technology) as a subjective trait and vice-versa. The subject is stylised as a faceless "type" and "reality" is no longer approached by the high avenue of philosophical thought but is, as Bullock claims: "concealed beneath the heroic appropriation of the subjective sphere to create an unreal collective domain as the alternative and entirely sufficient true location of a worthy life."<sup>270</sup> This emphasises the power vacuum upon which Jünger's object of political "truth" is founded. By this I mean that Jünger's swift move to by-pass a dialectics of power (such as Marxism) takes up and even celebrates the Nietzschean critique of transcendental power as something that deepens the polemics of good and evil through the acknowledgment of the subject who "creates itself" in relation to "metaphysical evil". In this celebration of irrationality, the "will to power" is accessed and manifest through a paranoid relation to technology. This synthesised structure of aesthetics allows an experience of moral choice and works in as much as the object is (an image of) death.

This is evidenced in Jünger's identification of the heroic realist as a person who is sensitive to the "risks" in everyday life, underlining the idea that one either has to make oneself sensitive to such risks through some notion of practice upon the self, or that one is naturally pre-disposed to experiencing them. This recalls a hierarchical politics familiar with Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals*, where politics becomes a Darwinian-style theatre of brutal power relations.

With this in mind the Heideggerian concept of thinking as experience and vice versa would seem redundant, in that it merely repeats and emphasises the problems of "reason" and "unreason" and the problem of agency as persisting in a demand for the application of knowledge in a polemical framework. Jünger's thinking within experience is therefore marginalised under a hegemonical structure and the antimonies of reason that he sought to close down are emphasised almost ludicrously in the excesses of his rhetoric.

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<sup>270</sup> Bullock, *The Violent Eye*, 163

Consequently, Jünger's translation of Heidegger's theory restates the problem of identifying and experiencing the space between poetry and thinking as *violence*, and as such takes us to a question of the practices of particular authorities that theorise violence as a ubiquitous force, and/or manufacture of violence as success. This is because Jünger's theory demands a notion of the "artistic" or "sensitive" aesthete as the subject who can experience thinking as experience *within* language through the facility of representation. This language is violence, and the ubiquitous nature of forces that characterise agency are now represented in the manner of war, technology, speed, steel and capitalist energies. Crucially, it is the aesthete who is prepared and able to manufacture and undergo an experience with the violence and mysticism of technology and war to ultimately rise above it.

Accordingly, Jünger's theory can be seen to formally reproduce the logic of violence that it seeks to unravel, in the name of the aesthete. In this it requires a cultic investment in the rhetoric of one's own subjectivity. This demands a private sacrifice of one's subjectivity to violence as "image", which in turn dislodges any essential or totalising public or social affect. Jünger's territory of the modern everyday world as violent is mediated as a fictional literature, distanced from the social politics, but always ready to be put into use by them. Its direct political enterprise is instead situated in a cultic and marginalised readership induced to fictionalise power through a decadent fantasy in a made-up unpolitical world.

Consequently, Jünger's disinterest in partisan politics juxtaposed with his absolute engagement with producing a metaphysical experience as the normative emphasises the metaphysical as a fragmentary and contingent experience. In light of this, we can view Jünger's realism as something that fails to "represent", or even, that it shows the failure of representationalism for politics because realism shows reality to be a (linguistic) object. Thus, the stabilising of Heidegger's quasi-transcendental violence in Jünger's literature underscores a political question, this time situated within the very use of power.

### **3. *The Thin Red Line: Violence as the Universal***

Having understood the problem of identification, originally raised in this text by Lacoue-Labarthe, as a problem that situates the rhetoric of violence as a foundational tool for autonomy, I

now intend to make a closer examination of the uses of abstract metaphors in narratives of violence which move to support violence as a ubiquitous and naturalised phenomena.

*The Thin Red Line* (dir. Terence Malick 1997) seems the most suitable place to continue this critique. As a war film it has all the traits of a “traditional” representation from the action/war genre. Malick does not so much re-make the typical war narrative, but attests to its tradition by accepting certain rules of drama, such as the heroic (sacrificial) death, the fight against all odds (the suffering of humanity at its own hand), and a hierarchical and moral clash of personalities revolving around those in charge and those who are not. *The Thin Red Line* does not *write against* other war narratives but complies with that tradition in order to examine itself as a genre.

Nature as “the ethical” can be seen to act as the central motif of the film, and this can be read as one thread interwoven throughout the script. However, the points in the narrative that are starkly symbolic moments demand particular interest. By this I mean that images such as “redemptive rain”, used in too many films to mention here, as a moment of change, realisation, acknowledgment and also of course renewal, seem to be made yet more sophisticated or inventive in Malick’s script by the actors’ performances. However, and more to the point, it is in the inclusion of these tropes that we are offered the experience of a Heideggerian notion of “letting things be” and simultaneously, “forming world.”<sup>271</sup>

This double aspect is reinforced through the ambiguity of time and place that is played out throughout the film, despite being told what year the film is set and where - Guadalcanal, November 1942. Also, Malick’s use of multi-layered narratives and voice-over evacuates any possibility of making specific associations with any individual character. The film loses time, in that it presents us with the persistent space of being neither before nor after the event. We are unaware of the locations of these voice-overs and from what time they are being spoken. They float ephemerally above the film, hardly heard, and yet within and through the soundtrack, often taking the place of the voices of the characters that we see on the screen. They act as hypnotic and poetic lyricism, giving the action an unreal quality, equaled by the saturated colours of Malick’s cinematic “nature”, seen in expansive subject-perspectives of panoramas of the long grass and the

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<sup>271</sup> This is picked up by Stanley Cavell in *The World Viewed*, where he writes in the introduction regarding Malick’s Heideggerian influence by interpreting Malick’s previous film *Days of Heaven*, as a direct reference to the aesthetics of this “inbetweenness”; a timeless realm given up to nature, *between* heaven and earth. Also, Simon Critchley’s essay “Calm – On Terence Malick’s *The Thin Red Line*” in the on-line journal *Film-Philosophy*, Vol. 6, No. 38, December 2002, foregrounds Malick’s Heideggerian influence.

unceasing movement and sound of the wind through it. Here the documentary-style realism of recording action, in all its slowness, patience, and uneventful dialogue is eclipsed by the “other worldly” rendering. In this sense the voice-over can be seen to occupy the Heideggerian realm between thinking and poetry, offering a sensation where the voice is active, or present and yet it is also out of reach, inconsistent, unlocatable and apparently without any specific interest or direction.

When watching the film, we can say that we are *always already* aware of Malick’s presence, or that Malick has chosen to make the movie, not through the enterprise of film packaging or advertising, but through what I bluntly put as the “universal” of Malick’s directorial style.<sup>272</sup> We know it is a “Terence Malick film”, but we are also aware of its cinematic quality - its aesthetic content, and the effect Malick’s authorship as part of this equation. To underscore this point, the magazine *Vogue* produced a fashion shoot entitled “Badlands” wherein models were depicted wandering through lakeland, woods and dilapidated farmland absolutely reliant upon our recognition that this is symbolic of Malick’s filmic style.<sup>273</sup> Through this we can clearly see that Malick’s authorship is already in the cultural loop, a signature style of romantic realism of a dusty epic expanses of nature and wayward characters. This not only demonstrates that Malick’s personal signature style is available for *any* cultural use, but that in general Malick’s style has reached an iconographic point in the work of images.

### ***Malick’s “complicit” authorship***

The heightened aestheticisation of the territory of violence in *The Thin Red Line* is understood as a necessary and immersive space. It is where the natural (nature) is the given condition and as such the characters refrain from putting it into question. In this the violence of nature is either accepted as a timeless backdrop for action or an immersive space for it. Accordingly, the film qualifies violence with a notion of beauty that is suspended from politics, where the characters are always immersed within the landscape, either in the long grass, in the water or half-hidden in the tangled jungle. Malick re-deals the Heideggerian narrative where violence is not sensationalised by the characters (i.e. it is not deliberated). It is rather, slowed down, made mesmeric, and made poetic. Unlike Jünger’s nihilistic agency of “being towards an image of death”, Malick structures

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<sup>272</sup> By this I mean that the film resembles his other movies, *Days of Heaven* (1978) and *Badlands* (1973), not only through style and imagery but also in script and “philosophical” motivation.

<sup>273</sup> “Badlands” photographer Justine Kurland, narrative artist, John Kelsey, *Vogue*, Conde Nast Publication, August 2002, 148-159

a more ubiquitous account of decision, in that the characters in the film operate on a number of levels. They are not all heroes in the sense that they fulfill the traditional role of self-sacrifice and they constantly offer their differing opinions of death. However, overriding this plurality is a central thematic: the quasi-metaphysical understanding of human nature as being both subject of violence and subject to violence. Here, the violence of war is depicted as (human) nature. And again, in opposition to Jünger, violence is not played out as the means to an end, but instead as something that is naturally immanent to decision. As such it is important to begin to think through how we can articulate Malick's ubiquitous images of violence as natural, when to all extents such images propose violence as being a metaphysical force - without figure.

In light of my previous work on Jünger, the question that needs to be addressed here is to what extent a non-ironic, non parodic narrative that appropriates and centres the theme of decision as violence - by enforcing violence as a natural and therefore also necessary predicate to action - could perform any helpful analysis regarding the problematic and formal relationship between violence and decision? This question not only takes up the problem that Heidegger finds in the Greeks at the beginning of this chapter - the problem of taking the power of appearances seriously - but also reflects back upon the my previous chapters, particularly the last, wherein I discussed the problems of thinking through transcendental ethics as a foundational rhetoric.

To end this chapter then, I will concentrate upon how decisions are recognised, when in Malick's minimal critique of the generic war genre the territory of violence is protected as the best place to experience authenticity. In this film we are looking at an authorship that produces images of another passive complicity with violence as decision. But perhaps more important to this analysis is the way in which Heidegger's correlation between autonomy, authenticity and power - made available through the relationship between being and appearance, and glory and authenticity - is re-invited through an aesthetics of violence, presented as the locus for the authentic or universal experience where, once again, we find ourselves facing the question of force and rhetoric.

### ***Producing the transcendental***

Beauty and death collide in Malick's narrative. However, this violence as "natural", whether it is the actions of the soldiers at war or of the awesome power of nature, is heavily conditioned upon our cultural associations of "nature" as a category of the representable-unrepresentable paradox. By this I mean that *The Thin Red Line* on occasion reads like a wildlife documentary or simply an

advertisement for the beauty of nature. For instance, small moments are arrested within the soldiers' passage through the jungle where Malick shows us, the audience, "nature". These accounts of the ocean, forest and jungle act as deliberate, albeit attractive unwieldy metaphors of the natural and transcendental forces within life that we cannot control, namely, the force of the other.

Experiencing the aesthetics of the universal in these apparent moments of poetry and even sentimentality it is clear that despite Malick's knowledge and use of the trope of nature as emblematic of an earthly and yet unknown force, he invests in the rendering of this trope personally, with hand held camera angles of parrots sitting in trees, almost as if it were a personal record of the location during the filming of the movie. In other words, these scenes or shots are created with a degree of naiveté that seems to travel away from the central discourse on death foregrounded in the script's narrative drive. Such passages in the film depict a wonder and a proximity to nature, a particular use of nature as a trope of childlike innocence as the camera inspects its surroundings as if in a Jüngerian-style fascination; a wish to unravel its impossible logic.

This exposure of violence as something both near and far underscores a non-ironic investment in agency, where the politics of life are located within survival and ambivalence. Delivered as an rhetoric of freedom the violence of nature in Malick's film (demonstrated in the fact that however ambivalent the violence is, it is always beautiful) proves more interesting when we consider the particularity of the writing of this as a tradition and in turn, the notion of ideology as imagination or construction. Malick's apparently less-subtle/over-theorised camera shots exemplified in many of his nature images shows nature as it is, in a documentary-style real time effect. However, the images Malick's produces are the work of an auteur director, scenes are dramatically lit and the timing of the shots and camera angles are carefully chosen. Here, Malick shows nature in all its force, apparently *as it is*, but this document does not invalidate the Malick's deliberative and personal love affair with the aesthetic and the theme of nature. In these moments of realism Malick's film delivers *itself* as a performance of a belief in the philosophical theme of knowledge.

### ***The lonely coconut***

It is directly through the use of abstract metaphors that the film's allegorical aspects are brought sharply into focus. This upsets the balance of knowledge within the film (between audience anticipation and directorial intention), where Malick's over indulgent handling of nature as a traditional symbol of the quasi-transcendental is explicitly forced home. This imbalance is



produced by feeling that as the audience we understand only *too well* the director's intentions while at the same time being treated as if we need to be told them nevertheless. For me, this is most obviously depicted in the final image of the film, the contemplative image of a lone coconut on a long beach, half submerged in the gentle tide of an expansive ocean. The coconut has a tender fresh sprout of life emerging from it. What else could this coconut represent but humanity? What else could this mean but hope in the face of adversity? Here we feel the full weight of its representative and allegorical force, so much so that the coconut doesn't wish to represent humanity, it *is* humanity, buoyed up by an expansive contemplation upon death and the aesthetic and physical power of nature. To end the film on this "small thing" smacks of a far fetched aesthetics, or the bad rhetoric of a "little bit of the real" that we are privy to in this particular coconut, which appears, for Malick, so much *more real* than any generic contemplation of nature seen in other parts of the film.

More clearly, perhaps, the coconut image seems to be forced into taking on a metaphor it cannot hold, whilst at the same time, the use or choice of the coconut as the metaphor for nature, humanity and the rest of it, seems to be taken on as if it is in itself a natural vessel for that meaning. In this final poignant image the coconut represents abject life; it grows without regard. However, it is in this solemn poignancy that we are offered the point at which the coconut stops being nature and becomes Man. Malick's cinematic image escapes what we saw previously in his more ambiguous imaging of nature as both a metaphor for its own earthly and specific materiality and for its representative, universal possibilities. In previous images such as the strangling vines, sunlight, and the hills of long grass, the materiality of the image bore the weight of the metaphor's universal possibilities. The coconut as an object becomes impossible, ludicrous, trembling stupidly under the overbearing weight of this abstract philosophical metaphor.

### ***The rhetoric of authority***

After identifying Jünger's forced unity between politics (the practice of ideology) and the political (the theory of political practice) as the rhetoric of active nihilism, it is clear that his political literature is open to contestation and also does not mechanistically assume an *absolute* totalitarian violence. In considering Malick's and Jünger's work as a rhetorical practice of

philosophy, and philosophy as the identification of violence, what we are faced with is circumstances of the use and practice of force. Both Jünger and Malick visualise and interpret philosophical themes and, for the most part, stay clear of partisan politics in order to speak about a *deeper existence*. As we have seen, Jünger's aesthetics of violence falls into a marginalised literature or the prospect of totalitarianism because violence is always redemptive. Malick's violence, on the other hand, falls into a fateful relationship that reflexes moreover on a tolerant liberalism. For example, Malick's scenes of nature illustrate the point that death is a part of life. Here "this war in the heart of nature"<sup>274</sup> is reflected not only in the ensuing war, but conflict is also made natural and embodied shown in the fact that characters contest each other freely. With this, Malick's scenes of natural conflict provide us with a comforting sense of equilibrium and community - it's natural or even necessary to disagree in particular circumstances - because violence is a part of life. As such, this conflict is naturalised and universalised but not specifically identified by Malick in one image, that is, until we are faced with Malick's aesthetic of nature, an omnipresent conflict that overrides and frames these temporal arguments. Here violence and death are not so much a part of life but something that looms over it - the nature and necessity of death is universal- made tangible through Malick's use of metaphor.

Significant to this politics is that both Malick's and Jünger's authority is clearly written through these transcendental narratives. Jünger's conception of violence forces together the biological and the technological, creating a man as machine. This poetry of flesh and steel seems a much more crude, but nonetheless equally deliberate notion of understanding a relationship between the ethical and the normative as that produced in Malick's film. In *The Thin Red Line*, we see a conflation between the concepts of nature and human nature. Being both consistent and tumultuous these "natures" act as a more subtle version of an identification with the other. Here, Malick does not require any labour or particular agency from the subject in order to experience freedom or essence, as we are generally provided reflections of others' life-choices through the different approaches of the characters. For Malick, there is no guide-book and violence is not the means by which we experience freedom. Instead, it is articulated as the ubiquitous force that we practice and in which we live. This is close to Heidegger's conception of being with and for language where the metaphor of nature in Malick's film expresses language as a foundational tool and as a historic and ungraspable force. However, crucially, it is in the process of manufacturing this mutually active and passive moment that we are shown the *techné* of this rhetorical project. And despite the more subtle mastery of the rhetoric of violence as the normative that Malick

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<sup>274</sup> I'm quoting here from the character Private Witt, one of the central characters of the film.

employs over Jünger, in that he chooses the rhetoric of nature over the rhetoric of technology, we are still subject to the experience of a specific force of aesthetics.<sup>275</sup>

It is only when Malick appears to deliberately “write” or to “speak” or to “represent” where the coherent balance of the film is upset. These are not moments when Malick is freed from the generic narrative of war, but moreover, when Malick is seen to enforce his own addition to that narrative. It is in these few moments, in this process of recognition, in which the coconut is both an awkwardly abstract *and* a particular object, that the force of the author is brought into question. Our experience of dissension and disagreement in response to these “illustrative” points in the narrative alert us to the fact that a universal and unconditional truth cannot be manifest in such circumstances.<sup>276</sup> However, this unavailability is not recognised as impossibility but rather this recognition re-asserts an identification of the legitimacy and the facility of such codes.

In Malick’s sentimentality, seen in his personal investment in the narrative we can again identify the force of authorship as a formalised structure of force. In other words, we can see that in these various locations of the film, Malick’s discourse of the personal collides with a sustained and historical discourse of the generic identifications of meaning. Crucially these passages appear to function differently to the progressional movement of the central narrative, somehow being grafted together, but also absolutely significant to the emotional mood of the piece. Malick’s authorship more clearly here creates a *rhetorical double of force*, an abstracted notion of the force

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<sup>275</sup>In “Calm – Terence Malick and *The Thin Red Line*”, Simon Critchley remarks that “Malick’s art demands that we take seriously the idea that the film is less an illustration of philosophical ideas and theories [...] and more a form of philosophising, of reflection, reasoning, and argument.” 6. However, the notion of pinning down the act of philosophising calls into question how Critchley manages to construct such a hierarchy when both terms are identified through the medium of representation. For Critchley, Malick is “doing philosophy” because his film is seen to ponder upon the meaning of life and death. However, these ruminations on death are hinged upon the performative force of the interpretation of *philosophical* themes. My point here is that particular scenes of nature in *The Thin Red Line* are rhetorical and forceful displays of philosophical paradigms. With this we are left with a pure abstract symbolism and the singular force of Malick’s vision that consists of an aesthetic of paradox, disagreement and reflection. Certainly, Malick’s aesthetics of difference, played out through the characters, shows a more subtle representation of philosophical themes but crucially these are framed by a univocal inscription of nature as a universal force. In this case I won’t distinguish between philosophising and philosophical example, but rather, because we recognise philosophising as bound to certain rhetoric, we are faced in the end with the act of philosophising as politics.

<sup>276</sup> In the article “Private Irony and Public Decency: Richard Rorty’s New Pragmatism” [*Critical Inquiry*, Winter 1990, Vol. 16, No. 2, 355-370], Thomas McCarthy writes of the relevance of transcendental rhetoric: “Without that idealising moment, there would be no foothold in our accepted beliefs and practices for the critical shocks to consensus that force us to expand our horizons and learn to see things in different ways.” 370

of authorship and individuation, but certainly a knowledge that does not go unaccounted for, and something that is not outside of interpretation.

In Malick's representational (and more crude) visions of nature as ground, the Heideggerian space between poetry (the representational force of nature) and thinking (the force by which nature is represented) is not exposed - we do not seek nor are shown anything "more real" or "further beyond" these images, despite perhaps Malick's wish that we do so. Malick's poetry does not therefore produce a ubiquitous conception of reality as violence. Instead the poetry aims towards itself reproducing more interpretations that point us to "meaning" precisely through the facility of their communication. Violence, seen here as the quivering and yet constant ground produced in such overbearing clichés, eschews the rhetorical force of any such universality.

### *Naturalised dualities*

Both Jünger and Malick attempt to show and to understand the notion of the subject as immersed and participating within the territory of violence, where this stands for a universal (normative) and ethical (original) ground for action, *forcing* what they define as the universal aspects of violence into existence. In order to offer violence as a universal in these narratives, the subject is at some point required to stand outside of this universality, thus exposing its impossibility and yet also reproducing or doubling its character. Heidegger's dually "active" and "passive" Dasein, which combines a person-centred theory of combative action with an equal measure of violence, shown in the sacrificial move of a giving up or surrendering of one's power to language, is problematised as soon as it faces the necessity of practice – the practice of surrendering or of giving up one's reason. This impossibility of splitting the subject, foregrounded here through Heidegger, is underscored in the work of both Jünger and Malick in different ways although both utilise a realism that directly exposes the performative force of such abstract categories in that they show the contingency of being appropriated by knowledge whilst putting knowledge to use.

As I have shown, "use" is brought into question particularly with Jünger when considering of the relationship of his literature in relation to the political. Here, it became important as to how Jünger's literature is used by others. Significantly, this does not undermine Jünger's responsibility to his work, but emphasises that the political problem of Jünger's work is if, or how these metaphysical ideas could or would be taken seriously within the political. Also in Malick's film, "use" or application is once again brought into question when we are faced with the metaphor of

transcendence, and particularly how Malick foregrounds his complicity not only with the genre of war films but also in that tries to stay true to James Jones' novel from which the film was adapted. In response to both Jünger and Malick's narratives we can say that the literature of transcendence calls practice into question because the use of such rhetoric desires *representation*. Consequently, rather than the question of "use" being claimed a question for metaphysics we instead return to a political question in an antirepresentationalist sense, since there is nothing behind or beyond these rhetorical performances.

As such, despite offering what seems to be the worst case scenario – totalitarianism - in terms of a violent and antihumanist politics, Jünger's perversion of Heidegger's philosophy as a nihilistic political rhetoric, underlines philosophy as literature and by doing so brings to light the specifics of violence's immanence to decision, as opposed to an overarching paranoia regarding its ubiquity. Certainly, by acknowledging Jünger's politics as rhetoric, we may find ourselves no more able to condemn it normatively. However, what Jünger's practice points us to is that we are left with the opportunity to think through the processes of how we go about acknowledging rhetorical force within language and then to consider upon what grounds we can situate our agreements and disagreements. Turning once more to Malick's film, we can see that similar to both Jünger and Heidegger, we come face to face with the problem of understanding difference between the passive and the active subject. Crucially, what this demonstrates in both cases is that in the process of identifying Heidegger's philosophy as a theory for action (Jünger) or as a description of "world" (Malick), Dasein is re-delivered as intrinsically active and passive, where these two terms are no longer able to be judged discreetly. Accordingly, the rhetoric of violence - understood in terms of language having no relationship to the real as such, but rather a relationship to power and autonomy - unaccomplishes any existential fatalism and also undermines the thought of the immanence of totalitarian domination to political practice. As a result, what we can turn to finally in this thesis as a whole are the problems of power relations and their correspondence to their advertisements in rhetoric. Here the aesthetico-political subject defines a problem for identification and, as I have already stated, the ways and means by which these are orchestrated, acted upon and understood.

Crucial to the aesthetico-political subject, or, a dually active and passive notion of subjectivity within language, is that this notion of subjectivity does not identify an immanent and absolute violence. Ultimately, the language by which violence is interpreted and described through Heidegger, Jünger and Malick underlines violence as something that is constant, natural and

traditional *as a genre*. Following from this, the language of violence as grounds for decision, coupled with the impossibility of ultimately separating poetry and thinking or, of defining limits to those faculties (as we have seen most explicitly through Malick), in no way proposes the totalitarian violence vis-à-vis active-nihilism laid out at the beginning of this text. As demonstrated in Chapter Three and now here in this chapter, it is clear that the potential for linguistic interpretation does not demand any such recognition of finitude from which to act. Significantly, the rhetoric of transcendence does not aim towards the real or describe an implicit relation with it, despite its description of the real. Nor does such rhetoric aim towards an agreed upon notion of the consequence and use of powerful codes. As such, transcendence written as a violent power draws us towards a problem of performance, use, and the consensual legitimation of these codes. Although Bullock determines such transcendental rhetoric to be moreover a “false” language, rather than a feasible part of political practice, it is clear that the rhetoric of “realism” is a crucial part of political and cultural codes. With this we avoid a naive realism and a philosophical foundationalism, but the rhetoric of philosophical ontology is not postponed. And, reflecting back on Fish’s neo-pragmatic split between a de-politicised theory and a de-theorised politics we can see that these two languages are brought closely together.<sup>277</sup> Now, both the rhetoric of antirealism and the rhetoric of realism, seen here, reinforce a problem of hegemony, wherein we are left to deliberate the processes and consequences of identifying our agreement for meaning within the actions of ourselves and others.

Considering the writing of violence as a quasi-transcendental universal as I have done here, Malick and Jünger can be seen to demonstrate a political contingency in their narratives by virtue of their central theme of violence as the locus for decision, whether this is produced in Jünger’s transcendental subject - the aesthete, an identification of violence as the other - or Malick’s natural violence, which presupposes a different notion of affinity or immersion within violence. The desire to fathom human relationships in the context of struggle and suffering under the trans-historical text of violence is confirmed most prominently in Jünger through the act of writing as a

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<sup>277</sup> Here I’m picking up on Thomas McCarthy’s critique of Richard Rorty’s neo-pragmatism, a theory that to some extents mirrors the same prejudices as Fish’s interpretative practice. Commenting upon Rorty’s paper at the 1985 Congress of Philosophy in Guadalajara, Mexico which stated that “philosophy should be kept as separate from politics as should religion...the attempt to ground political theory in overarching theories of the nature of man or the goal of history has done more harm than good” (355), McCarthy writes that as a result of Rorty’s argument “critical thought is aestheticised and privatised, stripped of any socio-political implications. There can be no politically relevant critical theory and hence no theoretically informed critical practice.” “Private Irony and Public Decency: Richard Rorty’s New Pragmatism” 367. In light of such criticism, I have attempted to draw out above, the problem of how, and if, an embodied sense

univocal conscription of the rhetoric of force. However, in both of these narratives, the determination or the force by which rhetoric is brought into existence incites greater consideration as to the politics of the identification of that force which uses violence and invites, of course, its own “violent” question.

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of reason, justice, and truth retain a regulative and critical force and if transcendental codes can be subjected to critique without de-politicising them.

**Concluding Remarks: *Autonomy and Absolute Finitude, or,  
“Heroic Pragmatism”*: Out For Justice, Commando and “Bond”**

We are left then with the problem of the status of our consensus on autonomy as violence. This problem of identification is complicated, and more so when we can say that “violence as judgment” is a naturalised condition of belief. Consequently, I wish to return to the question of what agreements about the genre of the heroic - which prefers an individualistic, self asserted and often brutal subject - tell us about how we negotiate a history and tradition of decision as violence *without* the availability of a redemptive space beyond it. This means that we have to consider once more the relationship between being and appearance, theory and practice, and an image of violence as well as the ubiquitous category of the violence of images. This returns us in due course to an analysis of aesthetics and power, and specifically how the practice of rhetoric implicates itself constantly with the question of force, mastery, use, and also with mechanistic notions of power.

As I have argued in the preceding chapters, the rhetoric of active nihilism at work in the post-tragic genre does away with the existential and fatalistic concept of violence. We are instead left within language and its discreet performances. Situated in this dynamic the aesthetics of judgment turn upon a question of contingency where, through pragmatism, we are directed to interpret motivations and causes for actions with the embodied force of the law. These issues re-invite the problem of conflict as both normative and perpetual as well as being the basis or foundation for identifications of self-empowerment. In other words, we are faced with imagining the consequences of attributing “success” or “freedom” to *quantitative* notions of power. What we return to then is the problems of *identification and understanding*, first in the possible determinism that can come with this recognition and, second, in that understanding violence as principled may exonerate it.

Having put forward a critique of the application and circumstances for the aesthetico-political condition of violence I move finally through a number of narratives, some of which I have already mentioned earlier in this thesis, in order to readdress the problems I have been concerned with throughout. These include the question of how we negotiate and understand power in absolute finitude without the overarching immanence of violent domination (often read as totalitarianism). Indeed, as we have seen (particularly in Hobbes) this understanding of irrational power (exercised in perpetual war) is prevented by another domination (The Leviathan), which



consolidates decision as violence. In these terms the narrative of the foundational and irrational immanent violence is “useful” to all extents. It promises the assertion of our own individuated power and through the organisation of our self-protection. Consequently, when faced with such a foundational understanding of the violent act as comparable to moral evil (in terms of law) we are left with a fairly scant notion of society on the one hand and despotic rule on the other.

This problem of authority returns us to Stanley Fish’s argument in Chapter Three where I situated the difficult relationship between a pragmatic antiformalism and a philosophical formalism and how these theories impact upon politics and the political. Such questions bring us face to face with the political and moral implications of agreement and disagreement within the territory of absolute finitude. Most significant to this is that non-emancipatory theories are constrained within the rhetoric of emancipation written as a hegemonical system. In other words, we often find ourselves believing in and subscribing to the same grounds of violence implied within power and freedom, when thinking through our various identifications of domination and judgement. For example, “being” or as Fish would call it “doing what comes naturally” is on the one hand, constituted by practices of normative judgements, whilst on the other, it is offended by certain “ideological” practices. Here, prejudice in Fish calls into question the formulation and understanding of a naturalised ethic, in as much as we could say that Hobbes’s “Leviathan”, and Fish’s uncompromising metaphor bear a striking resemblance.

Alternatively, in Chapter Four, I considered the unavoidability of normative judgements. Following from this, the evacuation of violence or evil as reliable or foundational grounds for decision returned us to the problem of forming values contingently through narratives. Here, a rhetoric of emancipation, or narratives that identify an external law invigorate the performative aspects of language as force. In light of this, we can ask if, and how, the institutionalising of emancipatory theories as the discreet performances of subjects who embody the law alerts us to the universal and actual constraints of an externalised law. This question is made more significant if we figure Fish’s pragmatism on the post-tragic subject, since although the post-tragic subject is a law unto him/herself there is always the militaristic and conventional authority that the subject ultimately finds him/her self being in alignment with. Likewise, in Fish’s pragmatism we can draw out the central contradiction of theorising a subject who embodies law in that the subject judges passionately and convincingly on the one hand, whilst being cynical of emancipatory theories on the other. In this case, the post-tragic narrative and Fish’s pragmatism describe a

subject who is, in the end, a good conservative. To consider these problems further, I now return to the figure of the action hero and Stanley Fish's pragmatism.

### 1. *Out for Justice*

Quoting Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, Butler remarks that: "The individual in his individual work already unconsciously performs a universal work."<sup>278</sup> This corresponds in a formal way with what I have already established with Fish in Chapter Three: that the subject speaks with the authority that he/she believes is "right" and as such is compelled to universalising. In addition the subject is unaware or unconscious of this universalising. More directly: the force employed by the subject is situated in the *impossibility* of self-consciousness. The practice of universalising is then consistently associated for Fish, with the power and force of competing hegemonies and is also intrinsically related to freedom as an ideological imperative. Unlike a theory which seeks freedom as being free from representation we can look here to the productions of autonomy within language *without strategic fissures between form and content or the real and the representational*.

It is in these terms that I will finish with re-staging the problems that the films of/by Steven Segal present. As the subject who combines thinking (ideologically motivated actions) and doing (the means by which the subject carries them out) we can see that the immanence of violence in decision portrayed in these action adventure movies acknowledges and identifies their historical and traditional relationship. That is, *the character of the postmodern heroic articulates precisely the problem we have in negotiating ideologically driven action as a pragmatic subjectivism*.

The hero-genre provides us with both a consistent relation between agency and violence and also a changing relation in our agreements with it within aesthetic identifications, which is to say with what power looks like, its contextualisation within the narrative, and how we respond or interpret meaning from these violent instances. Looking at the typical "action adventure" heroics we can identify many similar characteristics. Here I'll take three. First: there is a consistent singularity of consequence for the central character. Thousands may die, but what is of concern to the character in question is made our concern as the audience. We care locally and by corresponding to the hero(ine). Second: this character operates on an internalised notion of duty, a duty to what is right

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<sup>278</sup> GWF Hegel *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, (para. 351) in Butler's "Re-staging the Universal" *Ibid.*, 20

and good for her/him self and what s/he cares about, whether this is for one's country or for one's family. Significantly, narratives such as this very rarely contradict these two imperatives. However, they often force home the fact that the hero acts out of his/her own interest first and foremost and this contingently coincides with that of the country or state's desires, not the other way around. Third, and finally, the hero performs a violence that is artful and natural, where the skill of the character is almost demonstrated without effort.

It would seem that we were back in the territory of the lone heroic individual, the man who stands outside any State law. However, he is not without laws. Rather, law often falls back on personal ideology that coincides with that of the State. It is this production of the subject as "naturally violent"- in as much as this exercise of decision seems to stand outside any jurisdiction and in itself is seen to be inevitably for the good and to be lawful *in the end* - that I now wish to return to.

In *Out For Justice* (dir. John Flynn 1991) (and also discussed in the Chapter One) Steven Segal plays a character who is torn between many conflicting authorities: his Mafia family, his job as a cop, and ultimately the thing that throws all these things into question – if he should risk his family life for the act of revenging his partner's death. This character is a complex constitution of many circumstances that conflict and accommodate the hero at various points.

It is important that any violent action Segal takes is deemed as part of his natural reactions, almost as if these responses were pre-ordained. However, what we are looking at here - and we know it - are the skillful articulations of martial arts, where self-defence is given the characteristics of a spiritual energy. As such, the violence of martial arts movies could be seen to be an essential example of the art of rhetorical violence, where this apparently abject approach to violence wins over the audience because we still can believe that the carefully learned, choreographed and orchestrated actions of the individual are utterly objective, even *passive*. Perhaps it is even more significant to note that these natural actions, whether they are Segal's character's own principles (and they are particularly forced home as his own during the movie) or his artful violence both ultimately coincide with the law. Segal can perform all kinds of acts that break the law throughout the movie, killing and maiming gratuitously. However, *it is the ends that count*; that the bad guys end up being "put away", Segal remains on the police force, his family are safe, and importantly, he avenges his partner's unwarranted murder. Accordingly, despite being the terrific loner Segal is always the cop, the upholder and representative of State

law that co-incides with a more general truth that reflexes upon notions of good and evil. In this the narrative exhibits a universalising allegory of justice, which does not act upon the rhetorical arts of deliberating and confusing the two (good and evil) in the sense of motivations or cause, for we are quite sure that Segal's violence is more "true" and good than his enemies. Instead the nearness between good and evil is expressed in their use of violence. As such the heroic character is essentially static, whilst actions are left open. What I mean by this is that although these "ends" to action matter, they are hardly put into question, and even if they were we would not conceive realistically of a tragic figure because we know that Segal will return again with another movie. What is the "stuff" of the action is the way in which Segal achieves his relative destiny and that the passion or "need" to *achieve* these already understood ends is what counts.

This film (and others like it) features a subject that does not separate "knowing" or "thinking" from "doing". This unity of appearance and thought is carefully choreographed as a violent and a natural phenomena. In regard of this, we run up against the question again, as to whether an aesthetico-political totality risks the same violence that is immanent to its performances. In other words, if we are faced with an aesthetico-political totality where is there room for disagreement with, or even an unequivocal recognition of, dominant authorities without creating strategic separations between appearance and thought or the real and the representational? This concept of "knowing-doing", expressed more often than not as a natural skill or an in-built sensibility is hinged upon what the subject desires and how the subject acts upon this. Although we see an alignment of aesthetics and politics performed within this subjectivity, we still find ourselves with a question of the nature of contesting discourses between the theorising of an emancipatory agency and its acting out.

It is also clear when we look to this notion of subjectivity and its production that the work of underscoring such traditions subjects them to interpretations. Significant here is that we clearly see that such movies do not require parody or irony to re-interpret these interpretations. These action adventure narratives are non-ironic and sincere. They offer what seem to be the force of a personal account of justice. What I mean by this is that Segal as an actor, producer, writer and sometimes director makes his motivations very clear regarding these films. In this, his beliefs and motivations are crucial to the script in the sense that he lives out his beliefs through fictional narratives on screen. Certainly Segal plays a character, but it is also clear that he has a personal and political interest in the narrative, whether this is for ecological and spiritual issues, or to act out his beliefs of a natural justice. These beliefs are crucial to the fluidity between Segal's on

screen and off screen presence and his beliefs are underscored even more when we know that Segal would rather break a studio contract incurring severe financial penalties than play a character that contradicts his personal beliefs.<sup>279</sup> However strange Segal's motivations may be these movies are the culmination of a strong belief in an Eastern-style mystical spirituality coupled with an American-style conservatism, and even a naive and idealistic belief in social harmony and justice for all. These narratives are not allegorical in the sense that they perform violence as a tool by which to achieve freedom. Instead, what we see here is the rhetoric of decision and violence, an aesthetics of violence as a transparent performance of the naturalised phenomenon of the law. Ultimately, this is the universalising work of an author and, although it of course seeks agreement upon fairly abstract notions of right and wrong, justice and the law, through the traditional means of a naturalised violent-decision stipulation, what we are left with is a force situated not *between* the real and the representational, but the force that *produce such images* and the circumstances of our agreement with them.

### ***Natural and unnatural ethics***

Similar to *Out for Justice*, *Commando* describes the central character, John Matrix (played by Arnold Schwarzenegger), as a man of action who is also the doting father yet, once again, the brilliant soldier. Matrix's central task does not release him from his everyday lifestyle, but is structured in defense of it and because of it, instigated as the narrative is by the kidnapping of his daughter by terrorists. With this, a political threat to his country is symbolised and targeted as a personal threat to his life and family. The action is not dislocated from the world, it is performed in shopping malls and in streets. Although Matrix makes it clear that he has left the army and plans to make a normal life for him and his daughter he is compelled to exercise his beliefs publicly in his dual role as a "soldier of the State" and a "family man". This knowledge acts as a buffer throughout the film offering the audience the knowledge that Matrix is always protected by the power of good that is larger than himself and the State, but acts as both. The State as a "higher authority" is undermined throughout the narrative as benign and inactive, incapable of upholding

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<sup>279</sup> In 2002 Segal famously tried to break out of his studio contract because his developing religious beliefs meant that he would not make the planned four movies of his contract. This was because Segal's spiritual adviser told him that he would be reincarnated as lesser being if he continued to make violent movies. Unfortunately, (?) Segal lost the case and is now working on the last films of the contract. Crucially, the distinction I make between Segal's life as an actor and his life as a character makes no claims to distinguish between the "actual" Segal and a representational notion of character. Pertinent to this is that in many films where we are encouraged to suspend our disbelief (forgetting that the characters are played by actors), in Segal's films we are asked only to *believe* (and to remember that this is Segal). For more information on Steven Segal see the official web-site, <http://www.stevenseagal.com>

any law without their “main man”. When the army turns up for the final scene they are too late, the action has already happened and Matrix’s choices are definitely his own. Again, similar to Segal’s character in *Out for Justice*, Matrix is constantly representative of the power of country and a bottom line patriotism that goes beyond the local jurisdictions of the army or the police, but consolidates itself as aligned with a purer notion of these same powers. Even when he acts according to his own wishes and against those of the state he finds himself doing the right thing under both the law and his personal principles. This is a subject as will, the renegade who always acts according to what is right: in both of the narratives, the heroes are men of the law, a soldier and a cop. This subject has identity, control and community and is rooted to community as country through such tropes as patriotism. As I have already written, their actions correspond exactly with a notion of a “higher good” - a general notion of what is right - yet ultimately these are not these characters’ concerns. The moral choices of each are made as natural choices. They are not considered self-consciously as motivations, duties, imperatives or even “rights”. What motivates the subject is his own needs and his own ideology, essentially what is right for him, or he responds to the circumstances he finds himself in.

Discussed earlier in Chapter One, *Timecop* (dir. Peter Hyams, 1994), and *Robocop* (dir. Paul Verhoven, 1987), shed more light upon representations of the subject and a naturalised law. Both of these films centralise the theme of law enforcement after the destabilisation of a central and trustworthy authority. Crucially, in these films, although the law is privatised, the police are not wholly corrupt, rather, it is the often a singular leading authority that acts as the site of the law’s corruption. With respect to this, the hero’s law is only truly enforced when the wo/man in control of the corporate (and often corrupt) law (the CEO or a politician) is confronted. However, apart from this apparently insurmountable or uncontestable institutionalised law there is a general moral plurality. *Robocop*’s tag-line is “Part Man, Part Machine, All Cop” also attesting to the presence of a higher governing law that is naturally beyond cyborgs or humans. This law that is “all cop” goes beyond Alex Murphy’s (Robocop) “prime directive” - a central ethic that has an unquestionable force over him, programmed into his system by the company who made him, OCP - and is a natural part of his cyborg/human psyche. Murphy’s “prime directive” prevents him from arresting any of OCP’s high-ranking officials. It is only in the final scene that Murphy’s directive is aborted and he is made free to contest corrupt individuals and uphold the “natural” law. Significant to this, once again, is that Murphy’s natural sense of justice and his life as a cop fit nicely with his personal task of a revenge as OCP’s corruption was responsible for Murphy’s original tragedy.

Comparatively, in *Timecop*, even the villains of the piece are shown to be potentially and even naturally, “good”. For example, both the evil crime-boss and Fletcher’s (Van Damme) double-crossing rookie sidekick are shown in other time periods to be good and innocent people. Here, the narrative draws attention to the fact that behaving immorally or evilly is something that happens through a mixture of choice *and circumstance*. Significantly, the law is put into question, not because it is universal, but because the beliefs of the individual character are ultimately stronger.

### ***Fish and formalism***

With this individual in mind I’d like to recall Fish’s description of the principled subject and return to how this subject acts in the social realm. As I have shown, Fish’s subject is subject to his/her own ideological constraints, an internal policing that seems to innately protect and prevent the subject. As such, it raises anxieties around consent and autonomy, such as the problem of the inevitability of one’s decision as an agreement with institutionalised authorities. This could problematically lead to understanding the “constraint of the political” as the object that defines our freedom. However, because the identification of this universal constraint is always impossible, the act of consent from the subject to higher authorities such as government is itself acted upon and identified as a choice. For Fish, the contingent constraints of law are recognised because they *are constraints*, they exist, even if they are fictionalised as normative conditions of everyday life. Unlike Hobbes’s pre-moral choice to social submission and general passivity, Fish presents the subject with the faculty of interpreting belief and choice because i) the truth of constraint is never made available to the subject and ii) because hegemonical constraints, no matter how natural or consistent they appear, are always interested.

As such, if we constrain ourselves this does not create a system of the social where our values are always held in check. Law is the product of our beliefs manifest upon others in the social and ourselves. In drawing a link between natural justice as our un-selfconscious belief system and the political processes of interpretation we return to the problem that the use of fictions as practices of manipulation and dominion mean that those with the best or most sincerely delivered narratives of justice are those with power. Crucially, this is not necessarily governmental power but also our specific experiences of power shown in the many narratives I have drawn attention to. This could be seen to be the legacy of Fish’s subject for whom the most convincing

interpretations are essentially linked to success. Fish's notion of society draws a picture of self-interested individuals equipped with their own (impassioned) principles of rationality, where the thing that prevents ruthless practices of domination is the multiplicities of interpretation, and the impossibility of an absolute or universal figure by whom we can assert our freedom.

This raises once more the issue of skill or mastery at the heart of Fish's pragmatism, which can in turn be seen to be a question of hierarchies - when knowledge as power can be interpreted as the circumstantial behaviour of "more knowledge more power". Quite clearly the question of antiformalism as an ideological task comes back into sight: can the practice of securing an antiformalist multiplicity feasibly be understood as "doing what comes naturally" as Fish puts it? If so, democracy must surely be working for Fish. It seems we can only answer with a vague - *nearly*. As we have seen, Fish's antiformalism openly confesses an ideology at its heart that describes how we act upon an unnegotiable and unavailable assertion of our own sense of integrity and belief. Here, as we have seen, the work of antifoundationalism is a *practice*, and also a precise critical tool. It is in this precision that an ideological formalism - *the task of achieving disparity* through the practices of cultural relativism - is swallowed whole by an overarching and immanent antiformalism, read as *the practice of cultural relativism* simply because we can only identify constraint contingently.

In light of this, we can assert that the figure of the post-tragic subject does not in any way "figure" pragmatism or antifoundationalism *essentially*, but neither does it avoid being figured. However, in this sense, to be clear, I am not identifying this Segal-style heroic figure as the logical figure of an antifoundationalist pragmatism. This is because the process of representing a naturalised ethic as moral action in the post-tragic genre problematically shows the subject to be always aligned, in the end, with a bureaucratic and conservative law. Comparatively, although antiformalism takes up the rhetoric of normative judgements as intrinsic to decision, it does not identify the language of normative judgments to be unequivocally tied to such institutionalised dominations. Instead what I have attempted to consider through an analysis of this subject is the way in which ideological and relativist discourses both work together and contest each other, and then to interrogate the particular problems of violence, force and power that are thrown up through this. Consequently, Jünger's heroic realist, as the figure of the rhetoric of violence within postmodern narratives is *not the hero* of pragmatism; the post-tragic hero does however perform a



heroic pragmatism - he/she is a pragmatic hero.<sup>280</sup> *Here, we can say that attempting to figure subjectivity in this way does not describe the implicit tragedy of pragmatism, but rather, the tragic aspects of representationalist theories.*

## **2. Critique and Theory**

In Fish, power never gets too out of hand because it can never operate outside of its system and also because we know what it looks like. Knowing what power looks like not only ensures that it works upon us, but it also holds the promise that we can recognise it and subject it to critique. As we have seen, however, a critique that moves against such power in the hope to minimise, evacuate, or even control it reproduces the same universalising problems of power, as a rhetorical double of force. Consequently we are invited to be sceptical of our normative agreements with others. To be sceptical about how interpretations are manifest as assumptions in the social is made more difficult because the language of naturalisation and objectivity is so convincing. In other words, the law does its best work as law, by distinguishing itself from principle and force; it works best as the law because it is naturalised.

The fact that we are subject to a power which is a product of our own identifications of it, and which therefore could be expressed as our consent to it, raises important questions regarding the organisation of critique. If we are to be sceptical of such normalising forces through theorising a circumstantial process of re-designating contexts and analysing interpretations we have to ask if this in itself either risks normalising antifoundationalism as a theory or if it risks antifoundationalism as the procedure of making “alternative” readings from the norm. Here we see, once again, the metaphysical character of theorising and the impossibility of ignoring or postponing the rhetoric of freedom. However, as I have shown, the theme of freedom and the work of philosophy are written through interpretative practices. Following my assertions in Chapter Four, the metaphysical aspects of judgement can now be considered as argumentation, made up of circumstantial disputes. Significantly, it is because we can identify constraints within the political as being interested rather than neutral, that refreshed interpretations of power result

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<sup>280</sup> This subject can be construed as a heroic pragmatist because as I have written, his/her actions are not directed towards or away from any absolute law. This subject believes in self. In this way we can say that the post-tragic subject is a pragmatist, and a hero, but this does not mean that pragmatism is identifiable by the method of these subjective traits, or the “path” set down by the heroic narrative.

and the processes and practices of power are allowed to be essentially fluid. Certainly this does not mean that we can all have power, but it does mean that to exercise power we need consent.

This returns us to a question running throughout this thesis, the question of how exactly consent is established and acted upon, and if the work of producing consent to and within power demarcates differences between the real and the representational.<sup>281</sup> Barry Hindess reflects upon the subject's consent to higher authorities as a fiction of consent: "While acknowledging the world as a fiction, Western political thought nevertheless continues to make use of that world; both as a surrogate for the present and as a model of what ought to but does not exist."<sup>282</sup> Here, such fictions work as practices of domination, but on the other hand, as we know, the work of not taking them seriously, in the sense that we judge them as merely fictions or superficially light practices that hide real agendas, only re-produces the same problems of domination. *To this end we can read fictionalised consent as naturalised justice. We are left duly with the problem of negotiating these very concrete repercussions of language. Consequently, the term fiction seems to misdirect the problem at hand.*

Both Fish and Hindess significantly understand dominion not as something to be vanquished or as something whose cause can be found but as something to analyse contextually. Of course, as Fish insists, while contexts are productive of interpretation, they are also the products of interpretation<sup>283</sup> and it is here that the multiplicities of force and the territories for social agreements gather. The question still lingers regarding particular aspects of the production of consent, however, and, as such, it remains a question of the individual, community and history. With this in mind I now return to a study of the processes and principles of the naturalisation of violence and decision and how these narratives negotiate subjective autonomy and consent.

### ***Criticism and complicity***

In the above narratives violence is given a rationality, it is accepted as the tool by which to get power, and the bigger the better. This can be the violence of a gun-shot or the plotting artfulness of a plan of action, where both have particularly bombastic and uplifting theme tunes. The cool

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<sup>281</sup> This was established centrally in Chapter Three in Laclau's argument against Butler.

<sup>282</sup> Barry Hindess, *Discourses of Power, From Hobbes to Foucault*, Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1996, 157

<sup>283</sup> Stanley Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally, Change, Rhetoric, and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1989, 53

and at once atmospheric tension in these images of violence does not create an implicitly rational distance from violence but instead acknowledges its necessity and at once its particularity.

This rhetoric and choreography of particular action sequences to the appropriate theme tune is essential. To demonstrate its importance most clearly, we can return to the “Bond Movie”. In one of the plethora of documentaries which advertised the most recent Bond film, *Die Another Day* (dir. Lee Tamahori, 2002) the experiences of writing the music score were commented upon by the composer David Arnold, who has worked on the last few movies in the series. His main comment regarding the scores was that he had inherited the sound track from the series of Bond films before that. This by no means refers to some original notion of the score but that certain arrangements and elements of the score had been used mimetically in every film to signify “Bondness”. As such there was no original to copy, but rather a tradition of mimesis, to live up to and to keep going. He then commented upon the value or height of meaning historically inscribed in the use of the central and most rousing aspect of the signature tune. He goes on to say that he always saves this for the most risky and artful moments in the film, the places where Bond has not only escaped the jaws of death but where he also “got one over” on the villain and has done so with great panache. Arnold’s particular example of this was the sequence in the film *Golden Eye* (dir. Martin Campbell, 1995) featuring a boat chase on the river Thames. Here, Bond (Pierce Brosnan) not only gets dragged under water whilst still driving his boat (taking this as an opportunity to fix his tie) but ultimately escapes by driving his boat around the narrow streets of London before making this final escape. Crucially, it is here where the big blast of Bond music kicks in triumphantly. This description is important because it attests to a notion of what we want and what we expect. Here the composer admits his status *as the audience* directing his skills to engineer a soundtrack that has already been written and yet of course hasn’t.

Arnold, in understanding the inheritance of the soundtrack, demonstrates the fact that he feels that he has already *collectively* written it. His experience of autonomy in composing the score does not come from making radical decisions regarding sound or timing, but rather seems to be rooted in a use of the tradition as it stands, where his work on how to keep an old tune engaging is eclipsed by his engagement with an old tune. This recalls both Fish and Hobbes in that demonstration and representation coincide and the subject, here the composer, defines the Bond theme tune as an almost religious experience. This is because we are absolutely assured of its meaning, so that we know what is happening - even if we hear the music and we are not looking at the TV *and even if we don’t hear the TV or watch the film and we read it in a text like this, we*

*have an understanding of and know what is supposed to be happening.* Even if it is as banal as that, it is something to believe in.

On the other hand these principles of violence, power and action reflected in both the theme score and the narrative are something that is not so assured. The cliched lines are drawn out every time, but still, each time we watch when the music starts up because we want to see what is different this time because we also know that it will be different. Crucially this awareness does not indicate an existential anxiety around “impossibility” and neither does it indicate a revitalised spilt between the real and the representational. The impossibility of the repeat is not identified as an impossibility in a sense of exteriority. Moreover, and recalling my point on *Austin Powers* in Chapter One, in examples such as “the Bond film” the repeat produces another filmic fragment, a constant affirmation of difference and an underscoring of the tradition of invention.

The brutal individualism demonstrated in Hollywood narratives is in this way open to contingency. And in this it is also open to the audience’s demand for invention and for risk, where the display of the “nearness between good and evil” still produces an inherent experience of consequences in the audience through the force and skill in using a rhetoric that belongs to a tradition. Accordingly, and finally to finish with Fish, we find ourselves with the relativism of interpretations where any decision has its basis in belief and that belief has the (universalising) force of principle. Fish’s antifoundationalism responds to this condition without a theory of emancipatory ideals and without an absolute condemnation of dominion. Consequently Fish is not the political idealist, nor the cynic, and antifoundationalism upon these terms of autonomy as consensus interestingly returns interpretation as a critical faculty for individual subjectivities to act upon and contemplate.

The identifications of violence and decision that I have looked at in this thesis are not purely procedural. They do not underscore the deterministic notion that complicity is criticism - by the way of “bad Nietzscheanism” - as if complicity with violence is a means to a “critical” end. This points us once more to the problem of understanding the difference between complicity and criticism when they are conditioned upon each other. The complexity of their relation rules out the fatalism of performing complicity as means to critical autonomy (where for example, as we see in the previous chapter, Jünger’s *heroic realism* sites violence as reflective of complicit passivity). Rather it at once demonstrates the problems of thinking through criticism as complicity. Ultimately we can say that the conventional nature of our thoughts does not equate

with a diminution of their value, meaning or effect, but points us to the politics of their use and the interpretations of our actions. How this space of authority is produced, manufactured and subjected to critique vis-a-vis pragmatism is my final line of inquiry.

### **3. Some Conclusions**

Recalling some of the theories I have looked at in this text which underscore the ubiquitous, metaphysical or quasi-transcendental element of violence, I have focussed on two beliefs; first that an emancipatory social model offers the tools by which to condemn violence, and second; that a non-emancipatory politics is required to sustain a good democratic practice. With this problem of autonomy, justice and subjectivity still lingering, I will briefly return to the moral implications of identifying violence as judgement raised in some of the issues in Chapter Two regarding the understanding of violence as aestheticised transgression. In previous chapters I have attempted to articulate a subject within language and more often than not, this has run up against problems such as the foundational nature of violent language, whether it is asserted or avoided, as for example in the writings of Jünger and the politics of Hobbes. Working through the rhetorical aspect of these strategies I have argued that they exclude an existential and absolute fatalism and instead open up a particular need to critique power. With this however, we are faced with the prevailing question of how one goes about making decisions, and if there are any such things as criteria or guidelines that are available for this: Does the inability to identify difference between agreement and disagreement or complicity and criticism devalue moral distinctions?

#### ***Exoneration***

Mary Midgely's argument in her book *Wickedness* returns the question above to some of my opening questions in this thesis, in that she looks to the limits and problems of identifying immorality and our social and political potential for agency, criticism, justice and decision with regard to others' actions. In *Wickedness* Midgely writes: "To say that evil actions are understandable means that we are falling for propaganda, another working of power where to understand evil is to excuse it."<sup>284</sup> I think Midgely is quite right to say that understanding violence has a question of power at its source, and also correct in her assumption that our understanding as a product of another's force upon us is also relevant. However, she seems to

forget that if it is read as a *practice* as opposed to an essential truth, understanding is not exoneration or a means by which to entertain absolute complicity with other's actions. In this sense it doesn't matter if we say "evil actions" are understandable. Rather it is in *how* we say that they are that we can begin to look at "understanding".

The process of understanding what we would wish to call immoral action relies upon consensus and agreement, but this in no way suggests or means that the agreement changes a "bad" action to one that is acceptable or even encourages a refreshed moral positivity around acts which we designate as immoral. "Understanding", when reflected as a multiplicity of interpretations does not produce one definable truth or a single explanation for what we would consider to be actions that are outside of our understanding such as the Holocaust, the Gulag, the genocide in Rwanda or Al Qu'ida's terrorism. However, as I have written, this also does not produce an "absolute plurality" of disagreements. As such, Midgely's argument, which equates understanding with excusing or normalising actions, forgets the fact that although there may be no *understandable truth* to base our absolute condemnations upon, we still argue for the condemnation of other people's actions that we see to be wrong.

Instead, Midgely prefers to put a case forward for the irreducibility of understanding. This is focussed sharply on the idea that some people will never understand others, and that some events will never be understood, not because of the conditions, and effects, but because of the cause; the impossibility of getting into someone else's head. This may be so, but as I have written earlier, the process of understanding the workings of someone's mind is a question that aims at another quasi-transcendental formulation and, as such, another interpretative faculty is at work. In conclusion we can ask exactly how helpful this is to answering social and political problems when it seems to go over so easily to re-producing the violent metaphors of philosophy which we saw earlier.

### *Naturalisation and fatalism*

The production, tradition and repetition of violence as decision demonstrated particularly in contemporary "heroic" narratives holds onto the agreement of identifying violence *as our autonomous moment*. As Midgely suggests, this problematises our ability to identify the

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<sup>284</sup> Mary Midgely, *Wickedness*, Routledge, 2001, 65

difference between agreement and disagreement. Here we are dealing specifically with the problem of violence as a domesticated norm and as fate.

In the last section I wrote on images of decision (*Commando*, etc) and the nature of the authoring or writing of decision (Bond) where both problematise an ability to discriminate between criticism and complicity, demonstration and representation and invention and tradition. What these examples demonstrate is that violence is not significant because it is merely “there”, it is significant only in its application that in turn reflects moral standards. This process of signification problematises the naturalisation of violence as decision since the *application* of violence strongly holds onto a symbolic moral code. This is an *interested* violence, where the image of violence in narratives of decision is skillfully invented within and as the law; the production of natural (undeliberated) physical and moral action.

To recap: it seems that the production of narratives of violence as justice reveal violence not as a blind and irrational end in itself but as a (ir)rational means. Accordingly, the means by which we make our agreements and disagreements do not stop because we think that our actions imply a force over others, nor do we stop associating violence with autonomy. However, because violence is identified as a means the question of a *choice* of means arises since violence as physical aggression and immoral plotting are not the only way to get what one wants.

### *Critique*

Returning to the main thrust of Midgely’s anxiety, based on the moral problem of understanding as exoneration (understanding evil makes it acceptable and domesticated), Midgely argues that we will never understand violence, and when we think we do, we are subject to a decoy or ploy from the enemy. This prompts my suspicion of the forced naturalisation of strategic action in the form of Cavell’s “Live your scepticism!” discussed in Chapter One. Midgely seems to be advocating something similar, in that we are told to cultivate a suspicion of other people’s rhetorical re-descriptions of evil.

This leads to a question of how to think through a scepticism of foundations and the normative without risking a paranoiac cynicism and without an available political strategy. How do we participate in the structure of reality? And can this only be construed historically? This anxiety, I feel, is warranted because such pessimism inherent in the phrase, “Live your scepticism” assumes

the worst case for pluralism, in the sense that this theory assumes that because evil is a pre-linguistic innate phenomena, language only corrupts or irrationalises “truth” in practices of domination. In this, Midgely explains that our processes of understanding are interested, but underneath this there exists a general right and wrong. This results in the theory that anyone who tries to understand evil risks also becoming evil or is at best morally dubious. Midgely’s critique ignores the politics of its own principles, in that it results in a refreshed demarcation and interpretation of justice as objective.

#### 4. Convincing Arguments

Finally, what we have in Fish’s pragmatism is the problem of interpreting authorities of normativity. What governs the changing status of what we accept and what are we sceptical of? Fish writes: “What authorises the assumption that everyday life is characterised by continuity and determinacy?”<sup>285</sup> Taking up this question, we can ask finally if the requirement for continuities and determinacies from which to organise a critique of, or against, particular authorities returns us straight back to the problems of a rather dismal and fatalist pre-destined notion of a submissive agreement. This assumption could be made if we identify these authorities from which to reflex our criticality as the natural and unquestionable boundaries of political constraint. However, in this, who are we agreeing with? Do we really identify a base of natural justice from which to agree? Or, is it more so the case, as Fish would argue, that we believe that the place from which we operate our critique is the *right* place? Consequently, if we cannot subject our own convictions to critique, as soon as our convictions are shared or expressed as beliefs in the social sphere they are not only open to interpretation but they also convince others to share the same assumptions. Central to this are the recognitions of the values of others, and through interpretations of these we produce shared assumptions, which situate themselves around the basic ideal of freedom. As such, *autonomy is read here as an inter-subjective experience*, not as a direct transgression from it.

This reading returns to and also evacuates the equally distressing interpretation of individual recognition in the social, described by Axel Honneth, as sketched out in my introduction. There, the possibility of autonomy is argued as a fatal blow to the social, if read through a Nietzschean-style politics of identification, for this inevitably reads as an aestheticised transgression against

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<sup>285</sup> Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally*, 85



the normative. This is understood as a general, personal and social belief in “success as violence” against the institution and each other. However, a critique of the authority which convinces us that everyday life is characterised by continuity and determinacy does not seek to identify freedom as being “free from” such constraints, as would a Jüngerian-style violent fantasy of the everyday or in a Hobbesian nightmare of freedom as the chaotic fate of un-policed communities. Instead, my critique looks to analyse the systems by which we understand authority and freedom. Autonomy in absolute finitude offers no concrete assurances of universal law by which to recognise freedom. However, this “lack” doesn’t so easily go over to an out and out violence or guarantee “evil” as a necessary culmination to our actions without transcendental guarantees. Instead, we live out the practices of our own authorities as relative to those of others. Certainly, a concept of our own freedom may be correlative to our identifications of our being “more powerful” than others, but first we have to consider that power is not a universally recognisable object in itself, and second, that to have power, at some point we need other people to recognise it as such. Finally, and I wish to underscore, these interpretations of authorities by no means result in a situation of understanding that frees us from their influences (towards an absolute plurality of natural violence), nor does it describe interpretative theory as a cumulative progression towards the eventual limits of language – or “truth” as the abstract violence of the ethical other.

Throughout these chapters I have made various criticisms of the legacy of formal theorising which centres upon the separation of representational meaning from use value and that describes an immanent and transcendental violence at the heart of any consideration of subjective autonomy. In light of this I can ask if a recognition of the problems of formalism is enough to take us down what Fish would call “the antiformalist road”? The logic of pragmatism points to the fact that we probably will get “fooled” or “duped” or, more realistically, persuaded, or even for a short time to agree with someone else’s convictions that may contradict our own, because the force of rhetoric is given equal status to the rhetoric of force, in as much as we will be convinced by other people’s convictions.

Fish describes such an irreducible individual for whom any agreement in the social is subject to the force of other people’s rhetoric and yet the individual recognises this shared assumption as his/her own. This again returns us to Honneth’s complaint regarding “depleting social autobiographies” and also his claims that the “culture industry” is responsible for duping citizens by manufacturing personal biographies as fictions; a strategy which enables the smoother running of business and State. Honneth’s critique demands a recognition of difference between State and

citizen, while Fish's critique problematises an identification of any particular notion of government as having such absolute dominion over citizens and, as such, creates problems for organising radical political change. Here, criticism for individuals is not what Honneth fears as an aestheticised transgression from the normative (behaving badly), nor is it a cultural performance of criticism as a "passive" complicity with dominant forces (behaving in the same way as the institutional norm in order to transgress the inherent notions of transgression).<sup>286</sup> This is because our shared convictions of the normative *are interested* and therefore cannot and do not provide the natural or foundational resource for agency. Accordingly, pursuing an oppositional or negative critique of authority does little to undermine that authority, it only either confirms its power as anonymous or ubiquitous, or reproduces it. For Fish, it is in the places that we share assumptions that interpretative practices set in. Consequently, interpretations of these assumptions inherently critique the authority that produces them and in turn demonstrate the rhetorical dimension of this power as capable of convincing others of its universal dominion.

Faced with this problem - of a failure to recognise the force of other people's assumptions as principled, *because of their rhetorical force* - we are left in a similar situation to the one that Honneth identifies as a society ignorant of its imprisonment. However, the possibilities of the aesthetic transcending its own contingency, is available only if we understand a clear difference between aesthetics and politics and that the grounds to make recognitions are not available to us. Moving past the problems of method in pragmatism it is evident that under the auspices of an aesthetico-political relation we certainly risk being convinced of universal truths, but we are also free to condemn such claims. Such judgments are not made on a theorised scepticism that tells us that normative judgements do not have the universal truth they may claim to have. Such a distinction between true and false is inconsequential *because our facility to judge is not based on what theories represent but how they are performed*. Rather our decisions are invested in because we are not sceptical of our beliefs, and circumstantially sceptical of others'. Such judgements are relative to being convinced by others, and whether this is ultimately for our own well being or not, is pivotal to our notion of community.

Although the uses and practices of power remain open to contingency and to interpretation, they are also subject to agreement; the practices of skill and the knowledge of techniques of power

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<sup>286</sup> For more on criticism as complicity in critical methods of cultural production, see "From Criticism to Complicity," a discussion moderated by Peter Nagy between Peter Halley, Philip Taffe, Sherrie Levine, Haim Steinbach, Ashley Bickerton and Jeff Koons. Ed David Robbins, *Flash Art*, no. 129, Milan, Summer, 1986, 46-9 The argument above is a simplified version of what is being discussed here.

count for a lot. This describes a brutal realism, a world of competing narratives, and a working Hobbesian-style “power as reputation”. This work of interpretation describes a condition of competing narratives, as Richard Rorty puts it: interpretation is an operation in which the agent - be he the judge or a literary critic - “simply beats the text into a shape which will serve his own purpose.”<sup>287</sup> This underscores the problems of pragmatic theory because it could either be seen to prefer mastery on the one hand or settle for the status quo on the other. In other words, ideological narratives are substituted for individualised and secularised practices of power. However, unlike, say, a Nietzschean theory of the aesthete as having a privileged path to authenticity or “becoming”, this “mastery of interpretation”, is *never beyond* interpretation and thus the contestation of others. *It is structured by it, and, is indebted to it.* As I have underscored in my critique of Midgely (and finally quoting Fish): “contingency acknowledged is not contingency transcended.”<sup>288</sup> Knowledge of structures (such as evil) does not relinquish their rhetorical force over us, but we are free to interpret the use of these forces.

Consequently, and I will repeat, this practical critique doesn’t leave our access to autonomy hinged upon the identification of our tragic state, paralysed in the belief that the world is a fiction, in which the only remaining option is to convince ourselves of a belief that we really don’t believe in. Instead, we supply a world of fact and conviction and with it the faculty to make distinctions in how these facts are interpreted. This means that our everyday identifications of criticality and autonomy don’t necessitate the philosophical drama of violent aesthetics. Accordingly, the rhetoric of *heroic realism*, and the genre of violence in culture as the normative, now underscores the impossibility of the tragic as a useful way to theorise knowledge universally, and instead points us to the availability of different rhetorics of knowledge and their political employment. In this way, the rhetoric of realism proceeds to demonstrate autonomy as an effective and rhetorical enterprise, thus leaving the strategic use of violent or forceful aesthetics as the product of an interested authority *open* to critical interpretation.

In closing, I would like to reaffirm this avenue of critical inquiry not as an attempt to move towards what Foucault called “the utopia of perfectly transparent communications” but to witness the techniques and forces of abstract and rhetorical terms of communication - such as violence as decision - in order to stay close to the forces of what appear to be our shared principles and prejudices. Certainly such a critique produces another question of force to reckon with. Crucially,

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<sup>287</sup> I’m quoting Fish’s use of Rorty’s *Consequences of Pragmatism*, in *Doing What Comes Naturally*, 516

<sup>288</sup> *Ibid.*, 524

this is not the immanence of violence that is identified and secured ideologically or mechanistically as a necessary and ubiquitous political “risk”. Neither is it a force that is to be analysed as a result of its inherent ambiguity - between appearance and being. Reflecting upon Derrida’s comment in the opening of this text, we have understood discourse as an “economy of violence”. However, in the discourse of absolute finitude we are left with the productions and interpretations of “radical evil” and the “normativity of violence” as things to be reckoned with, and to be reckoned for.

## Guide to Key Terms

This guide acts as a subsidiary to some of the arguments in the thesis whilst also clarifying some of the key terms used in it. The *problematization* of many of these terms is central to the methodology and these terms are taken up and debated through different critical lenses across the thesis. This index acts as a supplemental architecture and as a means to guide the reader through the various analyses.

The contention of certain phrases and terms is central to the critique. Crucial to this is that the thesis does not give nominal definitions of particular terms. Rather, it is interested in how particular definitions are established *through their use*. Consequently, the guide below concentrates upon the employment and circumstances of the qualification of these terms by re-tracing the sequence of particular arguments. Therefore, the terms below appear in non-alphabetical sequence that privileges a hierarchy of their use and relevance to the thesis as a whole.

The core argument of the thesis discusses the current socio-cultural legitimacy of what I term as “the worn out and violent metaphors of modernist and philosophical theoretical narratives.” The thesis therefore takes up terms that are related to emancipatory, (quasi) transcendental, idealistic, utopian, and also nihilistic subject centred theories. Persisting with such themes that are widely understood as a “nuisance” to “postmodern”, relativist, anti-formalist and anti-representationalist practices the thesis deliberately identifies and utilises these universalising theoretical terms as a means to; i) acknowledge them as persisting rhetorical codes; ii) ask how and upon what terms these codes continue to condition our agreements/disagreements; and, iii) consider how the language of representationalist theories can be understood in *practice*.

Accordingly, it is key for the thesis to consider the various consequences of these often abstract, paradigmatic and generic codes that manufacture “otherness” in action and belief. The main text points out the problems regarding various procedures and methodologies in the pursuit of comprehending realism (the belief that abstracts and universals have an objective existence) within a postmodern, relativist antiformalism. Consequently, this thesis tests terms such as “absolute finitude”, “autonomy”, and “violence”, in order to examine the rhetoric of transcendence, which, it claims is now part of the daily performances of normative values.

## **Pluralism:**

The term “pluralism” is the condition that incites the original questions for this thesis. Here, “pluralism” is understood simply as the condition under which we can no longer be assured nor certain of a central monolithic narrative founding the operations of law and our personal decision making. The thesis asks: if the task of decision making is understood to be so problematic, or is in crisis, what characterises and what are the consequences of the decisions we still make so confidently?

“Pluralism” is taken up in the thesis as something that carries the argument away from a Categorical Imperative and absolute transcendentals towards quasi-transcendental critique. This happens through: i) a study of the aesthetics of aporia vis-à-vis judgement (see the critique of Cavell in Chapter One) as a means to a self-understanding without any absolute metaphysical identification; ii) in Chapter Three, how “pluralism” is understood by Fish once more as a natural condition of difference, but nevertheless one that coincides with an anti-theoretical and ideological relativism. And, iii) an examination and criticism of how a theory of agency under a pluralist condition invites what I call at one point in the thesis “bad-Nietzschean” (Chapter Two 87). This is the “will to power”, self-transformation through self-aestheticisation and is taken up in the thesis in relation to problems with the orthodoxies of poststructuralism. (This Nietzschean parlance is also foregrounded in Eagleton’s criticism in the introduction (14), and further in Honneth’s argument which claims that a *natural and necessary* violence in the social is the product of a “Nietzschean politics of identification” (17-19))

Consequently, the argument that begins with “pluralism” and quasi-transcendentals originally turning away from a central monolithic narrative now actually turns back upon itself. Here, the thesis critiques the co-incidental character of Fish’s “impossible” and seditious ethic with messianism (135) and Berman’s claims regarding the problematic institutionalisation that is a consequence of Fish’s neo-pragmatism (189-191). By examining these different responses to “pluralism” the thesis ascertains the prevalence of idealising narratives and their political consequence, how they come about through the processes of decision making, argumentation and belief, how they are manifest through both agreement and disagreement, and how they are written through politics and culture.

### **Antifoundational/Foundational:**

The thesis refers to “foundational narratives” in relation to arguments and stories that claim trans-historical, universal, timeless and normative spaces and rights. In other words, “foundational” narratives refer to narratives that are convincing. They are naturalised to claim fact and truth.

The term “antifoundational” in this thesis is mostly used in reference to Stanley Fish’s neo-pragmatism. It is important that the circumstances of terms such as “antifoundational” are interrogated since this thesis works to examine thoughts that pursue a critique of dominant narratives, whilst accounting for the contingency of the implied forces at work within such contestations. In Chapter Three the thesis debates whether the implied methodology connoted in the phrase “antifoundational” in fact undoes its own non-methodological objectives by exposing a radical formalism and also foundationalism at its heart. The thesis argues that “antifoundationalism” does not contest foundational narratives either in a mechanistic way or in a strictly oppositional sense (see Chapter Three (125-6, including the footnote on Fish’s essay “Can Postmodernists Condemn Terrorism? Don’t Blame Relativism”), and the Concluding Chapter (189-191)).

### **Absolute Finitude:**

In the thesis “absolute finitude” is discussed in terms of how it is identified, utilised and comprehended. The identification of “absolute finitude” is tied to “autonomy” as self-consciousness (see “Autonomy” in this section) and the aesthetics of paradox (see “Tragedy and the Tragic” in this section). The critique of “absolute finitude” works in the thesis to expose the problems of *theorising knowledge* or *knowing knowledge* by asking whether or not the recognition of “limits” or an identification of “impossibility” is necessary and useful to politics. This prompts the thesis to consider how a *theory* of self-knowledge is *practiced rhetorically*.

This brings the thesis to understand the consequences of thinking “absolute finitude” as a fact within language, by understanding it as an aesthetico-political contingency of such argumentation. The thesis tests the path set down by Richard Rorty; that philosophising is unhelpful to political practice, but also asks what consequence such narratives have in the socio-cultural domain. Hence, the thesis looks to discourses of universals as forceful, persuasive and performative practices in order to understand their prevalence.

“Absolute finitude” is considered most fully in Chapter One. Here the section “Oedipus as Two Figures for Knowledge” (23-32), demonstrates the implicit contradiction that is available when considering this term. On the one hand Oedipus is shown to be the Hegelian, tragic philosophical figure for knowledge. Here, absolute finitude refers to its “absolute” character. Knowledge is written as a theory of Oedipus’s practice of “never knowing”. Here, Oedipus’s “lack of knowledge” organises his perseverance (his desire to know), and his perseverance itself, repetitively underlines and makes us aware of the tragic gap in his knowledge. *Oedipus keeps on going*, and this prompts the recognition of Oedipus as *tragic par excellence*.

On the other hand we see a Nietzschean-style Oedipus. Now Oedipus, as the figure who “keeps on going”, does so unselfconsciously. Here, knowledge is *practice* (31). Oedipus is not in a position to identify his knowledge as “limited” since this identification paradoxically recognises even a lack of knowledge in a positivist sense: A theory of “absolute finitude” disputes any (quasi) transcendental claims the term has, because “absolute finitude” becomes a “thing” in itself.

Chapter One asks if the impossibility to choose between the two figures for knowledge actually characterises the task of thinking as *another* tragic philosophical process of knowledge (“return” as “figure without figure” (45)). The answer is no (46-49). This is because the means of comprehending this absolute and contradictory factor of absolute finitude are always representable within language (“doubt is performed discursively” (46)). As such the first chapter conditions self-consciousness, tragedy, metaphysics and formalism upon each other and goes on to make a case for a study of *absolute finitude in language* thus grounding a linguistic and political territory for analysis for the rest of the thesis.

The thesis throughout looks at how “absolute finitude” is problematically written as an affect of language, in that language points us towards its own limits, and of course these limits are represented as and within familiar language codes. In Chapter One, see the aesthetics of paradox in Zupancic (40), the aesthetics of doubt in Cavell (“the robot story” (36-37), and “with language” (33-34)). In Chapter Three, see the representing of the unnameable in Laclau (131-4) and the understanding of a pre-linguistic violence in Hobbes (the sections “Hobbes Original Covenant”(107-9) and “The Politics of Religion” (110-113) where we see Leviathan as metaphor) and in Chapter Four, the aesthetics of natural and cultural violence as timelessly pervasive with Malick (the sections “The Lonely Coconut” and “The Rhetoric of Authority” (176-9)).



## **Autonomy:**

“Autonomy” is linked throughout this thesis to power, responsibility, will, (self) knowledge and freedom. The term “autonomy” is useful in that it characterises a subject who makes decisions individually and singularly. In this individuality “autonomy” describes a subject of “difference” who makes decisions based on his/her knowledge as a means to transcendence and/or power.

The thesis is led by the description of a violent heroic subject whose autonomy is not something to be attained, nor given up. “Autonomy” is both natural right and natural power and violence is neither avoided, nor mechanistically asserted as a means to an end. Because this thesis looks to the efficacy of transcendental theories as rhetorical forces, the term “autonomy” points the thesis to the problem of how our understanding and experience of “autonomy” is contingent upon language.

“Autonomy” is discussed specifically through quasi-transcendental theories such as: i) the tragic model, where “autonomy” is linked to the limits of language and self-knowledge and is a task to be worked upon vis-a-vis a duty or responsibility set down by belief in a central law-giver; ii) a Nietzschean-style nihilism based on sacrifice, evidenced in Jünger’s *heroic realism*. Here, freedom as “autonomy” is achieved through the confident practicing of knowledge and power in order to give up ones “autonomy” to a founding “history” that in turn maps a future, and; iii) Hobbes’s political science, where autonomy is a natural, violent, and pre-moral foundational condition – something to be given up through contract to the sovereign.

As an affiliate to quasi-transcendental theories (discussed through Cavell’s conception of aporia, (45) and also through Hobbes (112) “autonomy” usefully retrieves the violent rhetoric of nihilistic and/or emancipatory ideologies. Further, the thesis shows that on the one hand “autonomy” encompasses the humanitarian and social problems in the claims leveled against antimodernism as well as a Nietzschean influenced poststructuralism. Whilst, on the other hand, “autonomy” sustains the vitriol of utopianist determinism and a problematic notion of tolerance familiar to a self-righteous liberalism.

### **Tragedy and the Tragic:**

“Tragedy” and “the tragic” are taken up in the thesis as two discreet terms that are shown to be situated upon each other. Linked to the themes of “autonomy” (see “Autonomy” in the section above) and “absolute finitude” (see “Absolute Finitude” above) the terms “tragedy” and “the tragic” also correspond to a critique of the identification of “limits”, “paradox” and “doubt”.

Because the thesis identifies various problems when it comes to making strategic separations between aesthetics and politics or the real and the representational, the thesis examines how “tragedy” and “the tragic” claim “truth”. Initially, in Chapter One, the two terms are discussed separately. Here, the understanding of the term “tragic” assumes an essentialised and fragile state of aporia through Hegelian dialectics (30) or through a Nietzschean concept of return. (See the section on Cavell: “Self recognition as the Tragic Success of Language” (44-6)) This recognition of “the tragic” understands and describes the insufficiency of tragic discourse as *truly* “tragic”. In other words, this insufficiency produces *tragedy par excellence*. (See the critique of Oedipus in the section “Tragic Recognition” (24-6)) From this received doubling of “tragedy” and “the tragic” the thesis argues three points: i) that the tragic meta-narrative is another tragic discourse; ii) that self-consciousness is impossible and also not tragic in a universal sense; and, iii) that the naming of *any* event as tragic calls upon an identification of some standard of insufficiency or limitations present in that event, that paradoxically appeals to and therefore recognises normative criteria for defining this failure. (See the argument in Chapter One: “It is a theory of half a theory...”(48))

In other words, the thesis argues that the claim of “the tragic” is conditioned by an understanding of “tragedy” (as a narrativised and recognisable structure). This correlation is identified through the claim that the representation, the naming, or the identification of “the tragic” from the supposition of “insufficient criteria” actually acknowledges what “appropriate criteria” are, and this offers (albeit implicitly), the optimistic model of “tragedy”.

The thesis does not claim that a discourse or a citation of “the tragic” is unavailable in contemporary culture, nor does the identification of a situation as “tragic” prevent us from empathising with the suffering of others. (This is claimed to be the advantage of tragic theories (see Eagleton in the Introduction, (14)). However, the tragic is also not the only discourse that can claim such empathy. (For this see the argument on community, understanding and exoneration in

the concluding chapter, (201)) The thesis holds that naming an event as “tragic” is not helpful because this claim either reflects an acceptance of the status quo, i.e. “It’s tragic - and there’s nothing we can do about it...”, or, conversely this naming operates as a vitriolic call to action; a dutiful imperative to recognise the event as “tragic” and to therefore deal with the event as a problem to be transcended or taken into hand. Here we see a self-invited law that adjudicates the situation from a “knowledgeable distance”. In both cases, saying something is “tragic” does not deal with the circumstances of the event. Instead it merely makes a claim *about* these circumstances, and as such problematically delineates events formally. In presuming “limits”, in such a way, naming an event as “tragic” claims gaps in knowledge and then at the same time assumes the authority of filling them in. This kind of passive/active formalism thus re-invites the type of universalising authorities that the thesis seeks to critique.

The thesis contends that a *theory of “the tragic”* does not transcend “tragedy”. Instead “the tragic” understood as a claim *about* language and politics is considered to be unhelpful to political practice because it only articulates or considers its contingency upon language as built around a theory of transcendence (the acknowledgment of the limit of knowledge equals freedom). (See the argument that the claim of “the tragic” comes from an impossible “death-space”, 26). The thesis instead chooses to look to the performative and linguistic aspects of the naming of such events as rhetorical exercises in terms of an antifoundationalist critique (61). Here, notions of “freedom” and “knowledge” are concretised as questions of “power”. It is therefore the Nietzschean-style figure that the thesis continues to explore.

### **Post-Tragic:**

The term “post-tragic” is understood as a description of a type of subjectivity. It is a claim about certain narrative genres. This is the subject that makes tragedy an option but rejects it, and overcomes it, without the constructs of irony or parody. What is particularly interesting to the thesis is how this “post-tragic” subject shows what are considered to be the universal laws that govern decision-making to be political, secular and interested. This is in marked opposition to the tragic narratives discussed above that theorise agency as hinged upon something that is disinterested and beyond the confines of language.

The term “post-tragic” describes the hero that features in the violent action-adventure narratives that lead the thesis. The thesis claims that the “post-tragic” subject actually acknowledges the

tragic without a return to the same tragic discourses. (See Schwarzenegger's portrayal of Hamlet in *The Last Action Hero* in Chapter One, (47-8)) The "post-tragic" subject does not so much overcome the tragic (49) but dismisses it as unhelpful for the task in hand. It is in this spirit of unselfconscious choice-making that I take up in the narratives of the "post-tragic" subject. This subject can choose between behaving tragically or not, and the very notion of a choice between these two concepts is never tragic. It is simple and pragmatic. (See 30-32, where the figure of Oedipus and the discourse of unselfconsciousness is claimed as "non-tragic".)

From the outset, this character is linked to a problematic poststructuralism vis-à-vis a Nietzschean active nihilism, the immanence of violence to decision, and the aestheticisation of subjective agency. In such a problematic postmodernism, ideological and emancipatory narratives are banalised and reduced to the role of an aesthetics of violence, whilst at the same time, this subject naturalises violence as the condition for any decision.

The conception of the "post-tragic" does not determine the tragic as either culturally or politically non-existent or as not functioning. Rather the thesis asks what value *a theory of "the tragic"* has for politics and culture? As such, a theory of "the tragic" is dealt with here as one of the many examinations of the rhetorical force and aesthetico-political product of theories that claim certain truths above and beyond language. (For more analyses on the tragic in this index see "Tragedy and the Tragic" below.). The work on the "post-tragic" subject is chosen as the focus for the thesis as a means to examine the precarious situation of this particular subject, the subject who does not acknowledge an "outside" (see "Absolute Finitude"), who embodies the law, and whose violence is naturalised as unselfconscious decision (see "Autonomy").

By employing the term "post-tragic" the thesis focuses directly upon the relationship between a "tragic" subject and one who is not. From this position the thesis also considers whether the "post-tragic" subject accurately describes the figure of Fish's neo-pragmatism, something that Berman claims early in the introduction to the thesis (8). By designating the heroic figure of the text as "post-tragic" the thesis opens up an analysis of the various problems that critical theory has leveled at poststructuralism and neo-pragmatism, which claim different ethical conceptions to be at work within this "non-foundational" subject. Such criticisms are taken up in the thesis by asking the questions; "is the "post-tragic" essentially tragic?" (Chapter One, 31) and, does the "post-tragic" invite and entrench a foundational system of dominance? (See this problem of dominance in Nietzsche (61).) These questions also reflex upon the relationship between

postmodernism and modernism in as much as the post-tragic subject is seen to expose the (good) emancipatory ideals that characterise modernism as simply superficial and violent.

At times in the thesis the subject is referred to as the “postmodern heroic” because in many ways the narratives that portray this “post-tragic” subject are self-consciously “postmodern”. Here, as seen in the Schwarzenegger example above, narratives of agency pronounce *style* as *content*. Also, in the films of Steven Segal and Tarrantino’s *Pulp Fiction*, narratives are non-allegorical and there are no grander claims than that of the subjects themselves. (The characters portrayed are always self-interested.) The post-tragic subject is tied to postmodernism because it clings to and manipulates the varying characteristics of pre-modern, antimodern and modernist subjectivities. However, the “post-tragic” subject does not figure postmodernism in a linear or historical sense (in as much as postmodernism is understood to be the natural (right) and celebrated conclusion of previous “isms”). Rather, the thesis argues that the “post-tragic” subject brings us face to face with the problems of such a *telos*. This potential hierarchy is examined by looking at how the “post-tragic” subject naturalises the language of violence as decision on the one hand, inscribing violence as the mechanistic and deterministic conclusion of agency and history (16). Whilst, on the other hand, the “post-tragic” subject shows that there is room for disagreement because this naturalisation is rhetorical. (To see this argument in greater detail see Chapter Four, where the critique moves through Heidegger, Jünger and Malick.) The thesis goes on to think through the politics of this contradiction by examining the practical applications of language without inscribing another linguistic/performative hierarchy.

NOTE ON METHOD: Because the thesis seeks to critique the *usefulness* of (quasi) transcendental discourses within an antiformalist understanding of language, it persists with such rhetoric. “Post-tragic” is a concrete part of that rhetoric. The term “post-tragic” preserves the transcendental force that overcomes “the tragic”. By employing the term “post-tragic” a transcendental and idealistic character is implied that serves to focus the central issue: the critique of transcendence in terms of politics and language.

### **Violence/Decision:**

“Violence” is central to the thesis as it straddles an understanding of both theory and practice. “Violence” is understood in terms of how it is written - as a narrativised theme of its own

“ubiquity” - what Slavoj Žižek terms as the “postmodern” “local epic” (see the opening quote for Chapter One, (23)). Consequently, it is also linked to “rhetorical force” and is therefore integral to the practice of “decision”. Here, “violence” is the materiality of our decision-making. It is the force of our convictions over and against others. The thesis examines how a narrative that *represents* “violence” as aggression, decision, law and power, is relative to the *demonstrative* experience of violence understood as the force of one’s decisions and beliefs. (This question of representation and demonstration is the focus of Chapters Three and Four.)

In the opening quote from Derrida, “violence” is a character of *all language*, and as such “violence” quickly becomes necessary for a comprehension of justice (1). In its abstraction, “violence” retains an interesting and problematic moral objectivity as regards to what it actually *means or represents*. The thesis asserts that aesthetic identification is key to how we define specific practices: “violence” demands a (linguistic) context (10). From here, “violence” is *integral* to the procedures of decision-making, both in the sense that decision-making describes the act of theorising and that this behaviour is in itself a practical process.

Following the relationship between “violence” and language, the thesis argues that it is unhelpful to think violence in its immanent ubiquitous form (see Hindess in Chapter Three (102-3), and Foucault in Chapter Two (89)) and that “violence” is available in neither a “real” and horrific sense, nor in the form of an immanent totalitarianism. This is because in the thesis violence denotes the forces of contesting beliefs in the social and is not correlative to a foundational or metaphysical evil. (In Chapter Four, see the critique around *AI* directed by Spielberg (168-9), plus Fish’s quote about the “fear of a world without order or principle” in Chapter Three, (125))

The relationship between “violence”, “decision” and “ethics” is taken up in particular regard to how ethics as an imperative or locus of “decision” is written and argued. This is discussed, for example, in Chapter One, through the “identification of non-identification” in both Cavell’s sci-fi-nightmarish scepticism and Zupancic’s banal horror in the section “Aesthetics of the Real” (40-46).

Since the thesis acknowledges that language seeks to persuade from the basis of one’s beliefs – since then beliefs are not without their own reason and since we believe our convictions are in the right place (see Fish in Chapter Three, 124), it follows that our decisions are implicitly violent and forceful. In turn this force is integral to the social and community because it constitutes the

process of individuals exercising disagreement and agreement. Here, the question is introduced regarding the relationship between our daily decision-making in the social (a rhetorical and persuasive force over others), and how an ethic is formulated that acts as the abstract catalyst for decisions that exercise such beliefs. (For Fish this is the ethic that resists but also takes on a particular form: “the gun at you head is your head” (128).) The thesis claims that both an ethic that acts as the catalyst for decision and the circumstantial notion of decision can be mutually comprehended because the former makes itself available as a specific political argument.

Consequently, the thesis examines decision-making and violence in two key ways: i) the violence of the *political*, and ii) the violence of *politics*: the former, a theory of practice, the originary thought for political practice; the latter, a practice of theory. By privileging *theorising as a performative practice* the thesis positions violence as integral to the expression of one’s belief and reason and as being at work in circumstantial debate and argument.

Through Hobbes in Chapter Three, it is argued that the languages of representation or symbolisation and demonstration or practice are hinged upon each other in rhetorical and forceful performances. Here, the relationship between the violence of rhetoric and the rhetoric of violence is made inextricable. However, violence is always contingent to specific practices. Consequently, although different notions of a ubiquitous, transcendental, foundational, natural, timeless, and non-spatial violence are discussed at length in the thesis, it is important to recognise that these universals are discussed as rhetorical performances. This is focussed on throughout the thesis in as much as the “post-tragic” subject is discussed as a non-natural yet effective rhetorical tool. However, this argument is played particularly in Chapter Four, through the discussion of Heidegger’s metaphysics, Jünger’s *heroic realism* and Malick’s omnipresent violence. In all cases, the thesis drives the discussion towards the performative force of realism in a consideration of the political viability and function of this type of rhetoric, and how these symbolisations produce subjectivity.

### **Evil:**

The thesis claims throughout that “evil” is a rhetorical enterprise. It is also linked to various theoretical understandings of “critique”, “decision”, “power”, “autonomy”, “transgression” and “disagreement”. The thesis serves to undo various theories that either describe or end up re-

producing “metaphysical”, “foundational” or “natural” “evil” by arguing that naming and identifying a person or persons “evil” is an *interested* claim.

This is initially argued through a critique of Geddes’ and Shattuck’s theological comprehension of a “glamorised evil” in Chapter Two. Here, “evil” is described as arising from a spectacularised aesthetics of a “cool” relationship to violence (65) and as an affect of an unwarranted faith in reason, that becomes evil at the point where an uncritical faith takes over and disguises itself as “good” reason (67). This problematic overconfidence, for Shattuck, warrants a revitalised vigilance regarding thought and our production of stories that seem to naturalise (and so justify) violence against others (68). In response, the thesis argues that this vigilance is paradoxical and unworkable as it calls upon the same rationale that it seeks to be sceptical of. (see “The Limits of a Rationalising Self-government” (73-4))

Contra Shattuck, the thesis claims that just because violence is represented as “cool” this by no means reflects an “uncritical” or “blind” acceptance in the violent killing of others as a morally good thing, resulting in evil. At this point the thesis contends that “*coolness*” is not *passivity*, nor is *agreement* *unthoughtful* (72). By hinging the faculties of agreement and disagreement upon each other, the thesis establishes a critique of interpretative theory in order to think through the circumstances of contestation within relativism. (For this analysis, see Chapter Four, in particular, *Malick’s ‘complicit’ authorship* (173) and the section, *Criticism and complicity*, in the Concluding Chapter, (193).)

Chapter Three also discusses the politics of naming what is “evil” and what is “good” through Hobbes. Hobbes accurately captures the sentiment of the thesis and guides a discussion of claims that good and evil actions are generated by and correlative to rhetorical argument. “Good” and “evil” are, for Hobbes, the responsibility of the State and are developed in speaker/audience relations. (See the opening quote for Chapter Three: “Good and Evill, are names that signify our Appetities and Aversions...” (98))

Finally, these sentiments are re-introduced in the conclusion in order to critique Midgely’s problematic critique of the understanding of “evil” actions in her book *Wickedness*: “To say that evil actions are understandable means that we are falling for propaganda, another working of power where to understand evil is to excuse it.” (196). Midgely’s understanding is that the language by which “evil” is practiced is a superficial, yet opaque rhetoric. The language of evil is



persuasive and therefore a *violent* language in that it hides real personal agendas. In contrast, the thesis claims that the use of the language of “evil”, or attempts to understand “evil” as we see it do not exonerate it. Rather, the thesis acknowledges that these various attempts to move away from “evil” in the name of the “good” only deepen such polemics and re-problematise an understanding of the forces and agreements that produce such designations. (196-8)

### ***Antimodernism/Reactionary modernism/Postmodernism:***

#### **Antimodernism:**

“Antimodernism” is linked to the conservative politics nihilistic theories familiar to German theorists of the early twentieth century. “Anti-modernism” is discussed centrally in Chapter Four through Jünger’s political literature. Where it is understood as in active nihilism: a theory of a constructed submission and sacrifice to metaphysics that is technology. Jünger’s “anti-modernism” turns modernism on its head in that transcendence is understood as a theory of being “free with” rather than “free from” normative and “everlasting” codes such as spirit, history and nature. Of course this doesn’t evacuate the intrinsic notion of freedom in itself, and Jünger’s irrationalism likewise, does not forfeit any of the rational and mechanistic structures that augment his “heroic realism”. (158)

#### **Reactionary modernism:**

The term “reactionary modernism” (154 (see footnote)) makes reference to the text of the same name by Herf who describes “reactionary modernism” as a combination of the rejection of (modernist) revolutionary ideologies with an embracing of modern technology. Consequently, Jünger’s fascination with technology in general (and warfare in particular) differs from the “anti-modern” aesthetics of the *Volkish* and pastoral life that featured in Nazi rhetoric of community and liberty.

The thesis does not set out to critique Herf’s definition, rather, it serves to further the examination of the relationship between nihilism, metaphysics, power and an aesthetics of violence. Here, the thesis analyses the way in which Jünger uses language as a tool in order to experience “transcendence” and “freedom” in order to transcend the antinomies of reason and unreason and to incorporate a greater and deeper truth in the concrete world. This truth is written as violence (153). As such the argument in Chapter Four is concerned with the idea that a ubiquitous violence

in the form of modern technology is understood by Jünger as normative - it is available everyday in the form of alarm clocks and such like - and also metaphysical - technology offers the violence necessary for heroic ordeal (156). From this position the thesis tests the political consequences of the writing of metaphysics. (For how this leads to a question of domination see 152 and for the analysis of “true” and “false” languages 163-5.)

***Postmodernism:***

“Postmodernism” is also significant to the thesis as a corollary to the “antimodern”. Here, the violence of a non-metaphysical “antimodern” nihilism is key to the claims leveled against non-emancipatory postmodern theories. (See Chapter Two for this relation and also an account of various texts that discuss this parallel, through Michel Foucault, in particular, Habermas’s critique of Foucault as a “young conservative”: Here, Foucault is “at best modern and at worst antimodern” (81).) The thesis argues that the problem is not so much whether Foucault is “modern”, “antimodern”, or indeed “postmodern”. Rather, the problem the thesis takes up is that accusations such as “modern” and “antimodern” highlight the *problem of theorising ethics* within “circumstantial” and “temporal” practices. Namely, a theory that theorises (in some form) “foundational duty” also figures domination. This returns to the question of: what place does our conception of ethics have in relation to the practices of our convictions, beliefs and ideals? (See Chapter Three where the thesis discusses decision within non-emancipatory political theory and also the contract to Covenant.)

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