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# Violence Beyond the Proximal Subjective: Theorizing an Addendum of Distal Causality

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## ABSTRACT

Not a day passes over society where the immediate expressions of violence are not widely propagated and subsequently witnessed through cultural or political mediums. Such depictions, accounts, scenes, have been uniquely framed as a lexicon of 'subjective violence'; reactions or evident illustrations of descent in physical form. Amidst their over-representation is a lapse of measured attention given to the pretext(s) amounting to said outbursts. Seldom is the objective, if at all, contextualized as a catalytic toward the subjective (violence). The following work suggests that a violence exists amidst society that goes substantively under-analyzed thereby negating an ability to specifically address and, therefore, challenge its causality. While recognizing the importance of such research, a movement beyond affective approaches of theorizing violence is needed through a complementarily mapping of how distal relations of power influence, impact, and sustain enmity. What makes this discussion further dynamic is the ironic transparency of causation. Rather than a phenomenon of concealment, conventional dynamics of authority and influence exert control through, what could be argued to be, an invisibility of visibility. Supporting an addendum to theorizing violence may, then, enable a more holistic recognition that can assist an articulate response toward both subjective *and* objective expressions of violence.

**KEYWORDS:** Consciousness, Ideology, Power, Subjective and Objective Violence, Transparency

*The Usual Suspects* is an award-winning film directed by Bryan Singer that boasts a cast of considerable pedigree within Hollywood vis-à-vis Gabriel Byrne, Kevin Spacey, Benicio del Toro, among others. Released to theatres in 1995, the movie has been applauded for its celebration of the antihero alongside thematic undertones that challenge binaries of morality, authority, and justice in contemporary society. The geography of the picture weaves in-and-out of a narrative provided by a physically challenged and emotionally fragile common criminal. The delinquent, a figure of little status, is one Roger 'Verbal' Kint (played by Spacey) who is aggressively interrogated by State officials, specifically one Dave Kujan (played by Chazz Palminteri). One of two sole survivors scraped from a destructive marine firefight, of which some two dozen slaughtered bodies were found lying in rubble aboard a singular vessel, Kint is grilled by Kujan in the hopes of obtaining information related to the incident. The hostile questioning proves effective, as the film quickly becomes centred not around the immediate protagonist – or event – but rather a secondary externality of brilliant criminal stature; a felonious mastermind named Keyser Söze. Those connected to the State apparatus become increasingly disinterested in Kint, as their heightened eagerness to hunt and capture Söze intensifies; a criminal who has not only sustained the capacity to elude authorities but has dually maintained a hegemonic influence to terrorize and control various sectors of the underworld across the United States for years. Apart from being an exceptional crime thriller, what is most worthy to this discussion is one particular scene or, to be more precise, a solitary quote. It is here where Kint (for which Spacey won an Oscar due to his performance) delivered not only one of the greatest lines in cinema but arguably within fictional discourse itself. While being pressed by Kujan, a well-respected and devoted officer of the law, Kint releases the soliloquy: “the greatest trick the Devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn’t exist”. The film apex comes to fruition when it is revealed that Kint has very much misdirected authorities. At this crux, the viewer recognizes Söze will not be captured based on the fact that Kint is he – so to speak. While Kujan and others conscientiously accumulated evidence from the perceived low-ranking criminal of Kint – mockingly in their company under immediate custody – they instinctively neglect the obvious. Rather than digging into the materiality facing them, the agents hastily abandon their acumen for greener pastures of justice and order under the perceived aspiration of apprehending a more important villain; albeit a fictitious figure created (by Kint) to deflect the most powerful criminality

from plain view. In the closing scene, the moviegoer is shown how officials were masterfully entwined throughout the (deceit-filled) interrogation, which refuted the very truth/Subject that laid before them (only to subsequently evade their clutches once again and, likely, for the last time). *The Usual Suspects* provides an interesting template when concerning the issue of violence. An ubiquitous derivative of actually-existing capitalism, rarely is the profound presence of violence thoroughly 'seen' nor given the proper attention or time to mindfully reflect upon. This rash absence of diligent observation veils the blatant realities immediately present thereby alienating a consequential capture and cessation of its continuity.

A first would be a day to pass with the exhibition of violence failing to show itself in both tangible and intangible ways. Examples of such scenarios are plentiful: reports depicted through popular communication outlets of a military bombardment targeting radicals under the tout of development and/or democracy, the dramatic spectacle of someone being slapped during a staged-wrestling program or current 'reality' series, enacted aggressions displayed on a playground where one (or a group) exerts dominance over another thereby fashioning a relationship of bully and bullied, witnessing a family member physically assault a loved-one (or oneself) after staggering into the house after a stress-filled week capped-off by a binge of *happy-hour* drinking to take 'the edge off'. That violence pervades a multiplicity of societal surroundings be they cultural, economic, or political is not a foreign truth. In acknowledgment of such actualities, one is able to proficiently situate the performance of an immediate or given violence. It is not difficult to recognize – or even communicate – by what means a hostility is facilitated, where the event takes place, or toward whom said transgressions befall. The following work is interested in such directly evident violence(s) with the purpose of deconstructing how a more complex reality underscores the obvious. Framing violence as networked through a centrality enables a more concrete sociological (and political-economic) appreciation of how enmity is not simply a singular effect but rather a consequence of a rooted pretext. Distinguishing a common denominator may, then, offer a cognitive map that identifies a shared linkage beyond the shallowness of egregious dynamics, which then holds an emancipatory potential through both plausible recognition and directed overhaul. It will be argued in the pages to come that a violence exists amidst society that goes largely under-analyzed thereby negating an ability to specifically address and, therefore, challenge its causality. What makes this discussion further dynamic is not that this phenomenon is concealed from detection. Rather it remains very much accessible and obvious to the general public when filtered through an attentive sociopolitical lens by which to 'see' it. What can be (ironically) taken

from this work is that one of the most effective ways to hide the dynamics of authority and influence is to conserve their transparency.

### **Framing the Visible-Invisibility of Violence**

“The contemporary world,” suggests Brad Evans and Henry A. Giroux (2015: 3), “creates the most monstrous of illusions, one that functions by hiding things in plain sight”. Not wishing to trivialize the thematic, a reflexive examination can shape this line of thought by allegorically likening violence to electricity. In many ways, a broad understanding exists that a charged-power buzzes across a plethora of communities; entering each inhabitation giving life to a variety of devices and technologies. It may even be acknowledged how this power is pre-generated through ecological duress, the displacement of animals and people via the construction of dams, power-stations or plants, and wind-turbines far from one’s personal existence. Amid this mindfulness, however, lays a failure to distinguish in what way these realities remain constituted through a constant conveyance of gridded landlines, electrical towers, and power-stations. It is precisely this overt expression of tangible mediators, and, most important, the over-familiarity with such expansive surfeit, which facilitate(s) a visible-invisibility toward electricity’s all-encompassing purposed existence. It is this ever-present observable network of modernity, as expressed through the powerlines that penetrate each home, the web of cables draped alongside every roadway, street, backcountry lane, and highway, transmitters that project toward the sky’s edge along elevated pitches, or monstrous industrial pillars that cut across entire tracks of forested-land and river systems. It is the simultaneous breadth of such aesthetic articulations that underlay the tenants of electricity while distancing a consciousness to the fact. Concealment is, therefore, not done through a lack of transparency but rather through-and-by an over-expression of it. While it is arguably known how and why electricity exists, seldom do those in society envisage its perpetual source(s) as directly before and around them at all times. A reality that exists in broad daylight yet becomes so entirely normalized that a collective failure to even recognize from what, where, and which it exists. In kind, violence can be viewed as a mirrored example. So, too, has contemporary society become so bombarded by expressions of hostility that those therein become increasingly immunized to its condition. Not by absence but rather continuous manifest presentation has society become numb to an idiom of violence.

What becomes most problematic about the exhibition of violent transgressions within contemporary society is the lagging identification of why they endure at both individual and

institutional levels of consciousness. Is it simply an argument based on the premise of gluttony; that a permeating overabundance of savagery organically leads to society's failure to acknowledge (or consider) its impact? Not dismissing the collective influence of excess, the subsequent work suggests an addendum. In addition to critiquing how an immoderation of violence conditions a society to perversely make cruelty indistinguishable, the following places emphasis on how an absence of recognition toward the immediate exhibitions of violence profoundly incarcerates an ability to deduce—and thereby deconstruct—why such violence is carried out to begin with. The pages to follow hope to address said phenomena by theoretically bringing to light a way to underline causality so as to conclude what can be done to circumvent its continuity.

### **Theorizing Violence Through Relations of Power**

A critical reading of violence from a localized and broad perspective is of vital importance. Whether cognizant or not, the issue impacts all peoples in both direct and indirect ways. The manner in which the subject is extricated is difficult, however. While easily identifiable depictions or indicators of aggression are often available – be they a 'terrorist' attack, interpersonal abuse, police-brutality, workplace suicides, and so forth – there are complex subtexts to each making such acts arduous to fully appreciate. As noted, an absenteeism of engaged critical thought toward identifying objective practice assists a perpetuation of how and why violence remains unresolved. To counter this vacuous attendance, an approach is offered that puts into focus how the matter has been, and is increasingly, theorized through a specific expression of power which can be built upon to facilitate a more expansive method to better understand violence in a holistically grounded context.

The issue of violence brings into immediate question the subject of power. Referencing Max Weber as a starting point, the topic can be conceptualized when one (or a group) sustains a capacity to compel their interests and ideas onto or over another even when resisted (Weber 1969: 152; 1968: 180). Upon reflection of this definition, one is quickly familiarized with the clout coercive measures hold in the fulfilment of such objectives (see Runciman 1978: 5-6).<sup>1</sup> From here, power can be indexed through models of proximal and distal relations. As the description would elude, the former deals with power, and its expressions, as they exist in close proximity to a Subject. The latter highlights structural mediums of dominion that seemingly appear removed from the self yet exert influence over society as an entirety. Where proximal power is recognized and displayed through personal relationships such as the family, friendships, colleagues,

employer, etcetera, distal power is conveyed through paradigmatic forms of the State and economic organization. Employing this approach toward power is of worth from both sociological and psychological perspectives. Take the example of distal power. This is, by far, the most extensive and all-encompassing depiction of power in that it highlights long-standing structures as fortified fields of considerable effect on a population's function, sustainability, and permanence. The State's influence, as mediated over its legitimate use and distribution of force, facilitation of law and execution of a judiciary, not to mention the formation of government and conventional representational authority, highlight its sociopolitical significance. It is dually within the distal relations of power that an economic engine demonstrates a totalizing influence; be it through the facilitation of trade, accessibility to employment, the distribution of income and wages, and so on. Distal power, then, represents a couplet of control of the utmost importance to the functioning of each capitalist society. What is paradoxical about such actualities, is that as demonstrably powerful as distal power is, in so many ways, it is proximal power, albeit elementary in scale and fleetingly rationed, which surfaces as the paramount sphere of impact or dominance. Due, in part, to its intimate immediacy and affecting prevalence this may not be difficult to comprehend, as one's parent(s) will likely have a more profound bearing on them than any economic advisor within the International Monetary Fund. It is through such shifts of emphasis and power recognition that distal relations can be easily shrugged-off, as they are thought of or perceived to be addressing "generalities and abstractions" far-removed from a person's everyday life and thus lack influence or direct pertinence to them as individuals. In contrast, the resonance of proximal power is recognized for its adjacent instantaneous significance and remain constant through easily identifiable "specifics and feelings" (Smail 1993: 40). By interpreting the prevailing emphasis on the individual, in both political-economic practice and intellectual discourse, it becomes less difficult to concede how focused attention and subsequent interest on the singular identity, self, or individualized actor has emerged.<sup>2</sup>

This is not to suggest proximal approaches toward the analysis of violence are invalid, to the contrary. There is a richness found in reviewing violence through such a lens for it enables an acknowledgment of the role and impression of aggression at the locus of the person; a condition to which many can relate. Analytically approaching violence through this lens – situating select demonstrations within a context of adjacency – enables a deconstruction otherwise lost. This work does not, then, seek to neglect the important scholarly work done from a proximal methodology. Over the past half-century an ever-growing body of literature has grown around the subject of violence that centres on investigating the issue from a personal

standpoint; that is, a lens which interrogates violence at a level of the local, intimate, emotive, and shape on the immediate self (Hanssen 2000; Daniel 1996; Scarry 1985). Such work is of vital importance in that it empowers figures outside the purview of first-hand experience or direct relations of violence to gain a perception of aggression and its outcomes toward a victim/survivor (Riaño-Alcalá 2006; Molano 2005). Proximal representations of violence also provide a sense of recognition; an innermost capacity for interested parties outside a specificity of abuse to better understand the subtext without having the direct sensory proficiency to empathize.<sup>3</sup> With this notable shift toward proximally researching violence, scholars, activists, and (non)governmental officials, have assisted a voice to be given to the intimacy and emotional impacts brutality suffered by a given Subject (i.e., research related to testimonials, the sway of violence on specific populations, the post-structural importance of how violence changes one's perspective of security, and so forth). This can enhance the plausibility for one to better identify with a horror through a subjective personable relativism (similar to how one may relate to a film or piece of literature). While its value must be credited, it is not suggested that the proximal review is exempt from flaw. Concerns most assuredly arise. The primary being the probability of latency through the persistence of an isolated singular approach. The principal dilemma lay in whether the *observer* moves beyond the proximal.

Certain scholars and cultural critiques have posed caution toward a proximal purview for, in solitude, the scenario holds the potential to facilitate representations of limited understanding as equating to objective praxis (see Žižek 2016; 2008). The importance of this apprehension is demonstrated through the following example. Of late, a select body of individuals and institutions, with considerable power, made the decision to work together and address the calamity of forced displacement impacting millions of the world's citizens through a mediated mission of instantaneous 'awareness'. Implemented through the United Nation's Millennium Campaign and the Sustainable Development Goals Action Campaign, the UN (and Samsung) engineered the launch of a project with the expressed purpose of addressing conflict zones and the subsequent human fall-out of refugees therein; both byproducts of international war(s). The campaign provided individuals, from the comfort of their luxury hotel conference rooms, to strap on Samsung VR SM-R322 Headsets and visually observe a powerful 360° documentary film of a refugee camp through the eyes of a young woman in full V4D (United Nations, 2016; Fast Company 2015). The presented purpose of the technologically advanced and politically-astute effort was "to bring the experience of vulnerable communities straight to decision makers, thereby creating deeper empathy and understanding" (United Nations 2016). In short, without

having to *objectively* experience the material realities (and explicit or long-term consequences) of surviving in and around war, a member of the dominant class and allied advocates<sup>4</sup> can vicariously *feel* the angst and anguish of what life is like within a community rocked by violence and forced to vacate familiar hamlets of shared kinship. What could be critically bracketed as infotainment, the above highlights how remaining solely within a realm of reflexive engagement not only holds the prospect to dislodge the association of systemic distal relations of power to an immediate consequence (i.e., the purposed introduction of conflict in fulfillment of political-economic interests foreshadowing civil populations seeking refuge from the fallout) but dually obfuscate specific objective structures and actors from causation (including some who may, in fact, be engaged in the proximal exercise itself).

Capital systems, and the socioeconomic ramifications therefrom (i.e., imperialist or colonial expansion, declines in wage-labour, lean production and lay-offs, factory closures in one locus of the world for another, and so on), have been shown to hold great influence on feelings of powerlessness that translate into violent outbursts (Badiou 2016; Collins 2008). While valuable, approaching the subject of violence through a singular lens of secondary experiential affect may, if not concretely, dilute the foundational grounds of how and why violence occurs – something that can be effectively framed by a distal approach. Through a preliminary contextual examination and followed deconstruction, a distal scope of analysis toward violence underscores the structural remainders of what authentically generates conflict amongst varying peoples, parties, groups and assists its endurance. This involves an emphasis on the synergy of politics and economics that situate violence as an expression of a systemic construct (Marx 1996; Gramsci 1971; Tucker 1969). While not as grand-scale as global conflict, a closer-to-home example can be employed to underscore the argument of how distal relations of power have a correlating impression on the proximal. When referencing the subject of immediate influxes in domestic violence rates amidst a specific geography, a direct causal association was found to be linked with periodic instances of economic instability. Not confined to any distinct location, these outcomes were shown through escalations of interpersonal abuse in pockets of Alberta during 2015-2016. With heightened stints of job-precarity throughout the oil sector, resulting from international market fluctuations in commodity pricing, the industry witnessed restructuring marked by lay-offs. As one would assume, such impacts had a subsequent effect on local and regional economies. Within months of the streamlining measures considerable spikes in domestic violence were evidenced. Various women's shelters and organizations acknowledged an unprecedented growth in their request for the State to increase

governmental support toward said agencies due to an inability to respond to the accelerated swelling in assistance for women under duress across the province (CBC 2016b). This was compounded by regional police reports that, too, voiced concern toward the incline in violence aimed at women in personal relationships; suggesting a record high compared to the previous decade. Calgary, in particular, documented a 36 percent increase over the five-year average and that the city experienced its highest rate of domestic violence since 2004 (CBC 2016a).

While a distal lens toward the subject of violence may appear glaringly obvious it remains decisively arduous to identify. One argument is that this difficulty is due to the foreignness of power itself; a reality or condition perceived to be outside that which is familiar and of immediate importance to the Subject. Such a condition is not hard to grasp amidst a decline in mutual recognition and an emergent narcissism or mass of autonomous identities promoted through the contemporaneous culture of existing capitalist society, which celebrate “pathological varieties of individualism” (Giroux 2014: 17; see also Eagleton 2016; Fromm 1994; Deleuze 1990). Nevertheless, when one deliberately looks upon capitalism through an informed lens of its contemporary expression of meritocratic ideology, it becomes less difficult to deduce why little precedence is given to the thematic of violence. A proximal emphasis, which accents subjective individual reflections or outcomes upon the person(able) as Subject, provides an affect to which the reader comes to subjectively relate and emote attachment – albeit based on a sympathetic intuition rather than empathetic.<sup>5</sup> Amidst sociocultural and political climes of the present, the distal, in contrast, has the potential to weigh lighter on the reader in that they cannot correlate the injustice consumed (via book, article, documentary, etcetera), as it is perceived well-beyond their realm of familiarity and, thus, location of influence.<sup>6</sup> This makes the sphere of the distal, unlike the proximal, more easily dismissible.

Not trying to entirely bypass its importance, it is necessary to stress how a proximal approach is, by itself, complicit in diverting attention from the authentic distal relations of power that influence not simply a life but the lives of those within and beyond one’s immediate socio-geographical surroundings. Posing a (most critical) analysis of how violence is generally understood, Greg Grandin highlights the antidotal necessity of both theoretical and pragmatic phenomena to tease-out its use in history. Through so doing, Grandin attempts to provide an outline of what violence is (and is not) and how the academy, specifically, has molested the capacity to help offset such aggression(s). Rather than studying violence through an “analytical,” he suggests that many scholars have opted for the “metaphysical” (2010: 7; see also Workman 2011).

There has been a more explicit shift away from trying to understand the historical causes and social consequences of violence to an almost exclusive focus on how violence is experienced ... Gone are attempts to examine the relational formation of political subjectivity, the transformation of economic relations and state forms, and the evolution of competing ideologies vying for common-sense status (Grandin 2010: 6-7).

The critique is aimed toward a turn of estranging the 'why' of violence from the structural reality that gave it birth. Such diversions, be they conscious or not, approach "violence itself – not its effects or causes – as the subject of analysis," which paradoxically "void the possibility of analysis" (Grandon 2018: 8). Consequentially, this makes an(y) informed contestation toward the architect(s) ineffectual. Here the work of David Smail helps place light on the systemic dissuasion involved to purposely allude the locus of power from causality.

For most people, 'reality' is the proximal world of their immediate experience. They tend to be indifferent to, or even impatient with, analyses of their experience which refer to distal events or influences because these may seem – may indeed be – so uncertain and speculative. They therefore tend to attribute 'the cause' of how they feel to the proximal experience of events or the actions of people close to them which are in fact determined by distal influences well out of their sight (Smail 1993: 66).

Enabling the entrenchment of such ideology<sup>7</sup> defines any mediation of duress to be a solely individual event; "a problem caused and cured *within the immediate ambit of people's personal lives*" (Smail 1993: 19). An act that negates the role – or even influence – of the distal relations of power altogether, as blame is both reserved and (impossibly) resolved through the singular actor. When critiquing the confines that contemporary society erects, one can look at Smail's effort to identify that such measures are far from accidental but rather illustrate a structural creation responding to the barriers and discrepancies of liberal democracy and capitalist development.

A society which, even if inadvertently, creates distress in its members is highly likely to develop institutional systems for distracting attention from the more unfortunate consequences of its organization and absorbing their worst effects. It seems obvious

that preventing the level of critical analysis from extending beyond the individual to the nature of the society itself would be greatly to its advantage. In circumstances such as these, rational evidence is likely to be the last thing anyone takes any notice of (Smail 1993: 20).

### **Approaching a Broader Understanding (and Resolution)**

Now that context has been given to how violence has been operatively framed a broader approach must be realized. To ground a more profound understanding of violence the work of Slavoj Žižek is of vital importance due to its rich sequence toward the subject. Much like that fashioned in this paper, Žižek calls for a pause to discern and reflect upon a deeper reading of overt displays or expressions of violence that go beyond their most immediate representations. This is done through a weighty request: “[taking] a step back enables us to identify a violence that sustains our very efforts to fight violence and to promote tolerance” (Žižek 2008: 1). While appearing semantically ironic in its linguistic staging and passivity what is being said is truly insightful. Žižek is not suggesting that “a step back enables us to *identify violence*” but rather he promotes the step back “to identify *a violence* that sustains our very efforts to fight violence and to promote tolerance” [italics added].

At the forefront of our minds, the obvious signals of violence are acts of crime and terror, civil unrest, international conflict. But we should learn to step back, to disentangle ourselves from the fascinating lure of this directly visible “subjective” violence, violence performed by a clearly identifiable agent (Žižek 2008: 1).

What is fundamentally needed, decries Žižek, is for those concerned to more fully “perceive the contours of the background which generates such outbursts” (Ibid; see also Badiou 2016). In this regard, one may see a faint interpretive re-appraisal of a sociological tradition in Žižek’s work where one is encouraged to identify the linkages of the distal to the proximal (the objective to the subjective); “the capacity to range from the most impersonal and remote transformations to the most intimate features of the human self—and see the relations between the two” (Mills 1959: 7). In short, the need to examine, weigh, and gauge how persons are impacted by and, in turn, impress upon the society in which they exist.<sup>8</sup> Doing so posits a basis for a more complete recognition of violence in contemporary society. This is not to suggest that a solely centralized review of the distal relations of power is, in and of itself, the solitary answer of that which

regenerates a barbarist universality but rather that it remains the epicentre of its realization which, thus, gives rise to its many expressions (see Badiou 2016; Balibar 2015). Hence, enabling a recognition upon which power authentically resides enables a front onto which a trajectory of efforts can be targeted so as to begin some form of sociopolitical reckoning.

It could be argued that an increasingly inarticulate understanding and approach toward the substance of violence has taken shape, which enables its very protraction. “This inability of ours,” suggests Étienne Balibar (2015: 2) “is becoming a condition and form of the reproduction and extension of violence. War or racism, aggression or repression, domination or insecurity, sudden explosion or latent threat, violence and *all* the different kinds of violence may today be at least in part, precisely the consequence of this nonknowledge”. Compounding this individual and collective lack of enunciation are various powers that seek to proliferate their might through the affectual pawn of an hesitant and anguish-ridden subaltern. Clear in his assertion that the State is “ultimately just the local manager” of global capitalism, Alain Badiou puts forth the argument that under the immediacy of distress, a public is manipulated to authorize “the state to take futile and unacceptable measures, measures that in reality function only for its own profit” (2016: 23, 2).<sup>9</sup> Under these strategies “all reason will be lost, including political reason, affect will take the upper hand, and in this way one will spread everywhere the couplet of dejected depression (‘I’m stunned,’ ‘I’m shocked’) and the spirit of vengeance, a couplet that will leave the state and official avengers free to do anything whatsoever” (Ibid., p.8).<sup>10</sup> A furthering layering of such sentiments is offered by Žižek’s articulation of how power exploits easily accessible presentations of subjective violence to over-score the structural undertones of a deeper underlying objective violence.

As referenced earlier in the paper, society is all too familiar with the constant borage of violent images – be they of youth throwing stones at police or armed guards; screaming women and men (usually of some hue) burning a life-like effigy of a politician or governing official (be they domestic or foreign); armed insurgents in either parade or fire-fight; and the list goes on. Such depictions, accounts, scenes, insists Žižek, are a lexis of ‘subjective violence’; reactions or evident expressions of descent in physical form. Yet amidst this over-representation of the Subject(ive) expression, seldom is the objective, if at all, provided to contextualize the climate of the subjective [violence]. It is here where he writes, “at the forefront of our minds, the obvious signals of violence are acts of crime and terror, civil unrest, international conflict” (Žižek 2008: 1). Going on, he compels a societal shift away from the dismissive consumption of said images; a pedagogical “step back, to disentangle ourselves from the fascinating lure of this directly

visible 'subjective' violence, violence performed by a clearly identifiable agent". All too often, and all too easily, a spontaneous reaction follows this propaganda that is without consideration, insight, or (sadly) thought. Some may chastise, blame, maybe shake their head at a given perpetrator(s) of such maliciousness. Yet, the muscular-nervous efforts are simply a result of a sociality's lagging consideration of objective violence, which makes subjective violence appear so dramatic, irrational; a disturbance to the natural order.

The catch is that subjective and objective violence cannot be perceived from the same standpoint: subjective violence is experienced as such against the background of a non-violent zero level. It is seen as a perturbation of the "normal," peaceful state of things. However, objective violence is precisely the violence inherent to this "normal" state of things. Objective violence is invisible since it sustains the very zero-level standard against which we perceive something as subjectively violent. Systemic violence is thus something like the "dark matter" of physics, the counterpart to an all-too-visible subjective violence. It may be invisible, but it has to be taken into account if one is to make sense of what otherwise seem to be "irrational" explosions of subjective violence (Žižek 2008: 2).

From here, Žižek offers a deeper argument which exposes that a purposed overt, constant, and consistent message of subjective violence is projected to defer critical examination. The inundation of repeated images, with little subtext, displaces the critique of *why*. The reason for this never-ending affirmation? "The overpowering horror of violent acts and empathy with the victims inexorably function as a lure which prevents us from thinking" (2008: 3). When one is repeatedly exposed to a filtered view of violence they become estranged from identifying the circumstance and thus from the immediacy of the act in-itself. The immediate visible and attentive violence becomes the subject rather its response.

... not a description which locates its content in a historical space and time, but a description which creates, as the background of the phenomena it describes, an inexistent (virtual) space of its own, so that what appears in it is not an appearance sustained by the depth of reality behind it, but a decontextualized appearance, an appearance which fully coincides with real being (Žižek 2008: 5).

Pointing, then, to the necessity of substantive social change, Žižek earmarks his final criticism toward both social democratic and affectual liberal analyses, proximal approaches, and knee-jerk responses to contemporary violence. This is done by highlighting how this crisis is ‘addressed’ without sound sociopolitical-economic clarity or contemplative consideration. While there are constructive ways of responding to the urgency of such matters, he reveals how simplistic and repetitive impulses are purposely deployed, resulting in the failure to address, deconstruct, and target the actual cause of said crisis. Doing so allows perpetual renewed crises to (re)emerge from the seedlings of the last. While complex, the issue becomes less so. As such intentions, possibly even well-meaning, surface to assist the deplorable outcomes caused by violence, they, in fact, neglect the principal cause of its root. With biting clarity, he explains that “it is the self-propelling metaphysical dance of capital that runs the show, that provides the key to real-life developments and catastrophes. Therein resides the fundamental systemic violence of capitalism” (Žižek 2008: 12). Henceforth, a climate of familiar temps once again arrives to envelop the body.

### **Toward a Conclusion**

Beginning with an analysis on how *The Usual Suspects* cinematically provides a glimpse into the existence of a deeper reality that endures before the most obvious, the article argues how violence – and the relations of power to it – is not concealed from one’s consciousness. To the contrary, it is very much present albeit through the invisibility of transparency. (Not relinquishing the hegemonic mechanisms behind such measures of organization and sway) The viewer comes to the realization that they are “complicit” in the deception; “the truth was available – the film did not actively lie to us – but we failed to pick up on it” (McGinn 2008: 55). An empowering interpretation of the film, then, offers that the capacity to contest such disclosures remains in the hands of those deceived. What can be pulled from the example is the narrative’s applicability toward contemporary society and how that which surrounds everyday life, is, can, and must be subject to a fuller revision. Under these articulations so too can a re-viewed juxtaposition offer an alternative of how to better ‘see’ violence and the underlying causality of its perpetuation. Hence, the distal relations of power must be an emphasis if to authentically understand the realities of violence. Accenting the proximal leaves a door ajar that reacts to singular expressions while excusing their cause. Much like the script of dominant ideology reads, focus remains, at best, on a localized situation or, worst, an individualized Subject.<sup>11</sup> To compliment a sound understanding of violence, one must resist the weighted lean toward a solely proximal

approach and recognize (alongside favour) the importance of the distal relations of power and its role therein. Upon acknowledgment, one can garnish a full appreciation of violence and, thus, place said hostilities within a holistic sociological context that is not confined to affect or thought but can be authentically challenged. Rather than viewing the immediacy of a hostility as independent the obscurely-open ethos (underscoring the repetition) of violence is 'seen'. It is upon an attentive recognition and articulate address toward *this* reality that a plausibility can begin to fashion an alternative to its destructiveness. Only through a cognizant capturing and disintegration of the common denomination of capitalism; the kernel of aggression, may a potential exist for an emancipatory peace.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> It is vital that one not misinterpret this framing violence and power. In no way does such an approach suggest violence equates an absolute power. Far from it. Rather than a demonstrative account of power, the use of force – in and of itself – is, most clearly, an expressive indication of its absence in both pragmatic and symbolical forms if excessively stationed (see Gramsci 1971).

<sup>2</sup> The pragmatism of this development is not surprising, as critique of social organization and institutions have been reified, consciously or not, through an expression in both ideological fields and financial proportions (see Radice 2011; Workman 2011). Critics have highlighted as much; "we live in a society that teaches us to look inward to our own individual failings or to nearby proximal relations of power when

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we experience the negative consequences of distal relations of power, rather than outward to the broader social system” (Naiman 2012: 7).

<sup>3</sup> All one need do is sample the prose of *I, Rigoberta Menchú* to uncomfortably ‘observe’ the horrors carried out against campesinos by paramilitary death squads in rural Guatemala to come to a place of private sorrow and concern for those touched by violence even though they have not undergone said atrocities directly (see Menchú 1984).

<sup>4</sup> The term *advocate* is well-represented in the work of James Petras and Henry Veltmeyer as a mode of classification toward members of a political, ideological, and/or economic strata who are not directly owners of the means of production but secondary beneficiaries and thus promotes of conventional modalities of capitalist promotion and expansion (2001: Chapter 3).

<sup>5</sup> This is not to suggest that an avenue or possibility for *the moved* to intermittently respond to such consumed discrepancies; be they through dialogue with others via a book club, classroom, or socially mediated outlet. The point of juncture simply implies that if said response(s) do, in fact, occur they remain localized; a level of societal seclusion and intimacy to which the subject of discussion remains – or more accurately – confined.

<sup>6</sup> Within the distal approach a paradoxical potential also exists for the reader to become overwhelmed, as the case may be, due to a perceived lack of capacity to organize a substantive response to grandiose objective structures that engineer and facilitate violence. Take, for example, the framing of violence from a structural functionalist interpretation of the ‘macro’. While the distal may appear to be similar to – if not the same as – the ‘macro,’ locating an explanation and understanding toward violence from such a perspective fails to explain the undertones of its distal expression. These macro explanations may review violence through analyses of conflict(s) waged in the majority world, gang-wars within a ghettoized urban-core, or guerrilla-based struggles. Doing so may then insulate the reader from making any linkage between themselves and these manifestations of violence, as they cannot, nor do not, directly identify with such studies in that they dramatically exist outside their social geography of familiarity; violence remains away from ‘us’ so as to create a perception—alongside its causes, purpose, and responses thereto—as being somehow indistinguishable and different from anything that is of ‘our’ experience. Providing both a critique and sociopolitical opening through which a greater shared recognition may emerge, Alain de Botton (2014: 84) offers an interesting sociological possibility of constructive empathy. Framing why apathy and indifference pervade conventional social (including cultural, economic, and political) relations, he notes; “in truth, we can’t much care ... unless we’ve first been introduced to behaviours and attitudes with which we can identify; until we have been acquainted with the ... details that belong to all of humanity”. Challenging the sociality of distance, a call is made of how a more inclusiveness mediates the decline of barriers to which linger structurally divided. Through a climate of increased recognition, a “bedrock” of plausible change may emerge based on fundamental shared realities rather than the over-projection of foreign difference. A method of linking the proximal to the distal is partially provided under the recommendation of findings “ways to make us all more human in one another’s eyes, so that the apparently insuperable barriers of geography, culture, race and class could be transcended and fellow feelings might develop across chasms” (de Botton 2014: 85-86).

Properly told, stories are able to operate on two levels. On the surface, they deal with *particulars* involving a range of facts related to a given time and place, a local culture and a social group – and it is these specifics that tend to bore us whenever they lie outside of our own experience. But then, a layer beneath the particulars, the universals are hidden: the psychological, social and political themes that transcend the stories’ temporal and geographical settings and are founded on unvarying fundamentals of human nature (de Botton 2014: 88-90).

While treading on complicated philosophical ground, what is being suggested is a link to how a recognition can and does emerge across differential bodies based on the common denominators of life in both objective and subjective realms. People love, experience anxiety and sadness as do they sell their labour power for some modicum of income so as to pay the bills, consume and share bread with others. It

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is this recognition on which a larger association to the world beyond our seemingly individuated screens highlights a larger solidarity amidst an overt diversity.

<sup>7</sup> While often narrowly farmed with or under the euphuism of 'neoliberal', the more holistic understanding and – arguably correct – application of ideology is employed. Referenced as “contestable,” the use of the neoliberal concept is purposely restricted so as to distance the increasingly shallow usage of the totalizing phrase; a tool to simplify, through a singular accessible term depicting a specific time and place, the complex density of capitalist ideology (Badiou 2016: 13; see also Dunn 2016). As suggested by Alain Badiou, a more apt definition may be one of unleashing the ‘primitive or rediscovered energy of capitalism’: “the return of an uncontested capacity to display, now quite overtly and, ... without any shame whatsoever, the general characteristics of this very specific type of organization of population, of exchange, and ultimately of entire societies; and also its claim to be the only reasonable path for the historical destiny of humanity” (2016: 14). Terry Eagleton’s works could then be conjoined to this claim; the contemporary comfort realized by political-economic power within the bosom of its geopolitical placement. It is offered by Eagleton how “those who are supposed to run the system begin for the first time to use the word ‘capitalism’, rather than to speak in more euphemistically of Western democracy or the Free World. They thus steal a march on some sectors of the cultural left, which in their zeal for a discourse of difference, diversity, identity and marginality ceased to use the word ‘capitalism’, let alone ‘exploitation’ or ‘revolution’, some decades ago”. Due to the breadth on which its net(s) have successfully engulfed their targets and more, “neo-liberal capitalism has no difficulty with terms like ‘diversity’ and ‘inclusiveness’, as it does with the language of class struggle” in that it, for the most part, has displaced the antagonisms from whence they emerged (2016: 156). It is from this modality of thought, that a more broad understanding of ideology must be invoked so as to situate not a moment within capitalist development but the structural reality of this system itself (see Eagleton 2016: 50-53).

<sup>8</sup> As succinctly put by Joanne Naiman (2012: 7) when referencing Mills’ *sociological imagination*; “the ability to go beyond the personal issues we all experience and connect them to broader social structures”.

<sup>9</sup> Faithful to his Marxian demeanour, Badiou (2016: 23) is clear in his assertion that the State is “ultimately just the local manager” of global capitalism, as “it is far from being the case that the norm of power is represented by states and by them alone”.

<sup>10</sup> Badiou’s insight is profoundly palpable in its situating the irony under which the State (and allied political-economic power) exploit such events: “The state is abruptly brought to the fore and for a moment rediscovers, or thinks it has rediscovered, its function of symbolic representation, as the guarantor of the unity of the nation, and other such postures” (2016: 2).

<sup>11</sup> While appearing extreme, such methodology imparts the continuity of violence of an ‘other’ to continue (or worse), as the *observer* is prevented from distinguishing how the violence ‘they’ experience is a by-product of the same violence impacted upon the ‘other’. While there most assuredly are to be differences in the magnitude or expression of these aggressions the common denominator of what equates to the causality is similar if not uniform.