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***Horrorshow* - Violence in Politics**

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Abstract: This article is a cross-disciplinary investigation into the role of political violence, in the present era, from a progressive's viewpoint. Starting from the view that explanations of the rapidly changing politics in the West must take account of an often unconscious, emotional landscape, it invokes Lacanian concepts and artistic representations, including references to Anthony Burgess's classic novel of dystopian ultra-violence, *A Clockwork Orange*. Here, I review a long history of the enjoyment of violent performance in politics, from the arenas of Ancient Rome to extremist right-wing websites. Along the way, we hear from neo-Nazis, political activists, stand-up comedians, satirists and philosophers. My aim to prevent an increasingly polarised society descending further into authoritarianism and eventually outright warfare, provokes a surprising final reversal: resistance, sometimes violent (both to self and others) must be protected, in order to lead progressives to those "excluded" from our *demos* and towards what Connolly (2017) refers to as "multifaceted democracy".

Keywords: political violence, *jouissance*, comedy, multifaceted democracy

This is an essay about violence in politics and political behaviour. The adjective *horrorshow* references Anthony Burgess' 1962 novel, *A Clockwork Orange* (adapted, in 1971, in a film by Stanley Kubrick). In the language¹ of the principal character Alex, *horrorshow* means "good" within his world of "ultra-violence". The idea of "good" violence in politics then serves two meanings here: first, "good" in the sense of enjoyment or more precisely, in the Lacanian concept of *jouissance*; second, and perhaps in a surprising way, it represents a window to reconsidering the place of "resistance" in a healthy politic.

I claim that the West has, in recent times, moved to new fantasies, fragmenting its Symbolic Order and making society more vulnerable to existential threats of climate change, pandemics and the like. This move provides a putative explanation for both the resurgence of authoritarianism and the asymmetry of the political contest between progressives and the conservative right. How are we to explain rising anti-science, climate denialism, post-truth, conspiracy theories, outrage peddlers, anti-vaxxers and the expanding polarisation of the *demos* towards a violent post-political era?

Here, I aim to go further: to understand more deeply the emotional payoff of violence as an action against, rather than a feeling about, the "Other", and to recognise the role of structural or objective violence, in Žižek's terminology (2009: 8), in relation to violence between subjects. Additionally, I explore the idea that by dismissing irrational political behaviour as simply an unfortunate move towards collective psychosis, progressives fail to recognise such *passage à l'acte*² behaviour as an expression of resistance.

If politics is a process of establishing ways of coexistence between groups of people sharing time, place and resources, it would seem to require some recognition of the Other and at least a minimal willingness to communicate as a necessary condition for the political process to function; whether it be from the position of "multifaceted pluralism that William Connolly calls for (2017: 73-113) or Latour's *Dingpolitik*, requiring politics to be "extended to the many other assemblages in search of a rightful assembly" (2005: 41). As Stengers (2005: 1001) writes:

[p]olitics is an art, and an art has no ground to demand compliance from what it deals with. It has to create the manners that will enable it to become able to deal with what it has to deal with.

Violence represents a foreclosure of that necessary symbolic communication and, in Lacanian terms, a psychotic shift to remove uncertainty. Here, I claim that the "polarised"

thinking and behaviour we see today in the US, UK, Australia and elsewhere is a repudiation of the art of politics and a descent into violence: truly it is “post-politics”.

Before positing explanations for this descent into violence (which I normatively consider a bad thing), it is important to heed Žižek’s admonition that we need:

to disentangle ourselves from the fascinating lure of ... directly visible ‘subjective’ violence, violence performed by a clearly identifiable agent... [and]... to perceive the contours of the background which generates such outbursts (2009: 8).

Subjective or agential violence, he maintains, is only the most visible form of violence. The other forms, which he calls “objective violence” fall into two categories: “symbolic violence embodied in language and its forms”; and “‘systemic’ violence, or the often catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems.” Violence performed either as an actor or spectator, individually or collectively, thus occurs within a structure of language and social logics. The source notwithstanding, violence brings an affective “payoff”, or in Lacanian terms *jouissance*³.

The remainder of this article consists of four sections and a conclusion, each sub-titled with an appropriate quotation from Burgess’ novel. The first investigates the historic “enjoyment” of ritual violence in politicised “sport”. The next investigates how individuals are inculcated in extremist ideologies in pursuit of this *jouissance* of the Other. The third section looks at the potential of art, satire and parody to counter the failure of evidence and rational deliberation to change entrenched beliefs and behaviour. The fourth section stresses the importance of resistance in a democracy and how by simply dismissing extremist behaviour as “psychotic”, progressives can be led to engage in the very behaviour they wish to change. The conclusion calls on progressives not to ignore the affective political landscape and fight for a pluralist politics.

A real kick and good for smecks and lashings of the ultra-violent⁴

An affective relationship between politics and violence has existed for millennia and no more so than in Ancient Rome. What might be learnt from that time to help explain the contemporary situation? The Romans have been held in high esteem as a civilising society, bringing roads, plumbing, art and *pax romana* to an enormous empire, while, at the same time, enjoying and celebrating the public slaughter of human and animal lives on a massive scale:

... Rome dealt daily with normal and natural death, but Rome also killed on an enormous scale, with efficiency, ingenuity, and delectation. ... in amphitheaters, circuses, and other sites, blood shows (munera) included gladiatorial combats ...and animal hunts ... Death became a spectator sport at Rome ... In its many forms, death in the arena was public, official, and communicative; and, when properly conducted comforting and entertaining for Romans of all classes (Kyle, 1998, p. 2).

What strikes one first about this observation is the fact that a civilised society could exist at all without a common appreciation of human rights⁵ and, moreover, openly celebrate the fact. The absence of what we today understand as compassion from the crowd towards those slaughtered in the arena and where a father held the power of life and death over his children and slaves seems almost inconceivable. The idea that a citizen would take their children to the Games for a day's entertainment to enjoy a spectacle of death signals an ontology where the lives of othered groups of humanity, such as criminals, slaves and prisoners of war, were expendable. The mindset is in some ways reminiscent of the Nazi men who could return from a day's work of murdering Jews to spend quality time with their family⁶.

Beyond the realization that such ontological mindsets are possible, perhaps even commonplace, is a need to understand the *jouissance* that violence toward an Other can bring both to the perpetrators and spectators. Going deeper into the literature on the ancient Roman passion for "ultra-violence", the reader finds first a range of contextual explanations, which, while arguably true, do not explain the affective payoff of violence. Of the various contextual explanations, Kyle (1998: 7) notes:

[m]odels of the origins, nature and function of the spectacles have ranged without consensus from pagan piety to human sacrifice and from sadism to imperial politics.

Two models have a resonance with the emotions of contemporary politics, as seen, for example, at the Trump Presidential rallies. First, spectacle as a political device was used to demonstrate and share the power, confidence and munificence of a leader and skilfully targeted at the commoners in ancient Rome who did "not simply sit back to be entertained by displays of aristocratic largesse and power ... [but] ... actively intervened to determine the course of the events" (Kyle, 1998: 9). Here, think of the passionate adulation of the crowd at a Trump rally and their taunting of the "fake press" at Trump's direction.

Second, and not unrelated, are the social resemblances between gladiatorial spectacles and contemporary sports, professional wrestling in particular. As Plass argues:

social meaning of games and of public events in general lies in the sense of reality each creates. ... Among violent spectator sports, professional wrestling as it is conducted in the United States is perhaps the most remote from a legitimate game and for that reason closest to bloodshed in the arena. The elaborately choreographed outcome turns competition into a melodrama of good against evil violence, whose manifest artificiality calls for a special kind of involvement through self-deception on the part of the spectators. It is true that the violence here is not authentic as it was in the arena. But the messages it carries are no less socially real, since while genuine danger is absent, at the level of public performance it persists in the form of ceremonial violence, largely replacing what is done with what is thought (Plass 1995: 27).

Significantly, the political behaviour of Donald Trump has been likened to that of a WWE (World Wrestling Entertainment Inc) performer. As Taibbi (2019, *The Ten Rules of Hate*) wrote:

This is one reason we have a WWE performer in the White House. It's the ultimate synthesis of politics and entertainment, and the core of it all is the ritual of conflict. Without conflict, there's no product.

Kyle offers further analysis of the Games which has relevance to the contemporary situation. First, that the *jouissance* experienced by the spectators was not fundamentally based on cruelty (*crudelitas*) in some sort of mass sadism, although undoubtedly there were sadists in the crowd. The callousness or indifference to the sufferings before them was motivated by an extreme liberal value system, whereby the ego of the spectators was bolstered by watching victims receiving just desserts for their manifest lack of honour and status. In that sense, the death of the victims removed a threat to their own honour, values and safety. The idea that the performance⁷ of violence towards the othered; refugees, ethnic groups, and women as a reaction to a perceived threat to values and honour, accords well with Hochschild's sociological observation that right-wing support for the Louisiana Tea Party⁸ was a response to perceived attacks on their access to the American Dream by liberals, refugees, atheists, feminists, gays, Democrats and the Federal Government:

You⁹ see people *cutting in line ahead of you!* You're following the rules. They aren't. ... Through affirmative action plans, pushed by the federal government, they are being given preference for places in colleges and universities,

apprenticeships, jobs, welfare payments, and free lunches ... Women, immigrants, refugees, public sector workers — where will it end?... It's not fair (Hochschild, 2016: 137).

Social anthropology provides some further insights into political violence through ideas of performance, ritual and “rites of passage”. Spectators of the violence at the Roman Games received, in a sense, immunisation against the anxieties of external dangers or internal State political conflicts, in a society that had plenty of both. Indeed, Plass sees the Games as having some characteristics of a “liminoid institution” (Turner 1979: 491) by:

confirming order through disorder, controlling violence by means of violence, injecting fear into entertainment, and transforming ritual into reality through actual death (Plass 1995: 25).

The liminal aspect of the experience relates to the fact that spectators can cross and cross-back over some powerful affective threshold in a three-step process of “separation, transition (ordeal) and reintegration, through which individuals or society at large recognise, deal with and dispose of threats” (Plass 1995: 25). Spectators gather at a special place, the arena, separated from their everyday lives, participate in a blood-soaked slaughter, and then return to their normal mode of living. The experience of temporarily moving into a place of extreme emotions and actions where the current dangerous and worthless enemies can be identified, taunted and symbolically slaughtered, sounds a lot like the average WWE event, a Donald Trump rally or many works of fiction¹⁰.

Likewise, I argue that many Far-Right websites are designed to provide a very similar experience whereby the inquisitive and profiled online visitor is provided with affective triggers and the identification of “guilty others” in an extreme, and mostly totally fictitious, way. The experience provides *jouissance*, both in realising identity and solidarity, and by providing the opportunity to feel outrage. On the website, the visitor is separated from everyday life into a special online place and immersed in fabricated emotional violence from which they emerge back to the everyday, emotionally stimulated and potentially hooked.

Nothing to fight against really ... Still, the night was still very young¹¹

The analysis so far has been at a collective anthropological and sociological level. However we also need to consider the experience of the individuals initiated into Right-Wing Extremist (RWE) organisations. Empirical evidence about the recruitment of individuals to such institutions, and the role of rhetorical, if not physical, violence in this process, mostly focuses

upon the experiences of ex-Right-Wing extremists and analysis of RWE websites and social media. Both quotations below refer to the recruiting narratives used by RWE institutions and highlight the multiplicity of paths by which individuals come to embrace their ideologies.

First, Jeff Schoep, ex-Commander and member of the neo-Nazi, American National Socialist Movement (NSM) for 25 years discusses his recruitment strategy:

As a recruiter, I tailored tactics to the individual. ... ANYONE is susceptible. ... If someone came to us and had a bad experience with a person of another race, the recruiting narrative would focus on race. For others it was more about history and politics. For others, it was religion. If the potential recruit was Christian for example, then the recruiting narrative would be steeped in Christian Identity. If the person was Catholic, we would point out Hitler was Catholic as well. If the individual was pagan, we would draw upon the folkish aspects of Odinism. ... Offering a total counterculture, a network, an answer for every inquisition; we provided a solution to every need. We utilized every means at our disposal to communicate our message of national socialism (Schoep 2019).

The Macquarie University report on online extremism in New South Wales also highlights the use by ERW organisations of adaptable recruiting narratives:

Mobilising narratives are often used by groups and individuals for purposes of recruitment and engagement. These narratives are rarely static and provide endless opportunities for reframing and reshaping by diverse users (MUDDS, 2020: 37).

This empirical evidence points to a process of identification, affective gratification and the adoption of ideological beliefs at both an interpersonal and a structural level. Importantly, the ideological aspects of the process are often not the initial, or even main, source of attraction, but, rather, emerge subsequently. To go deeper into the affective process that occurs, I draw on the Lacanian infused work of Žižek and the role of the Superego (Žižek, 1994). The Superego is a concept first named by Freud and later developed by Lacan, which could be described as an entwined shadow to “public law”, its “obscene” underbelly, complementing the law, but at the same time, promoting the “enjoyment” of its transgression. A clarifying everyday example is the commonly held view, in my home city, that, although a road sign indicates a legal speed of say 60km/hr, motorists can travel 10% over the limit without being booked. The superego, in this case, is the “voice” in the driver’s head that says that driving above the legal speed limit is condoned. Žižek explains that the Superego comes from:

the incomplete, 'non-all' character of the public Law: explicit, public rules do not suffice, so they have to be supplemented by a clandestine 'unwritten' code (Žižek 1994: 55).

Such transgressions, repeated periodically, sediment the social logic and, in fact, help to stabilise the community's social order.

What 'holds together' a community most deeply is not so much identification with the Law that regulates the community's 'normal' everyday circuit, but rather *identification with a specific form of transgression of the Law, of the Law's suspension* (in psychoanalytic terms, with a specific form of *enjoyment*) (Žižek 1994: 55).

As a corollary to this, relating to the part that "the big Lie" plays in the behaviour of populist leaders such as Trump, Žižek references Jean-Claude Milner's suggestion that:

perhaps the principal function of the Master is to set down the lie that can sustain group solidarity: to surprise the subjects with statements that manifestly contradict facts, to claim again and again that 'black is white' (Žižek 1994: 58).

At this stage, we can begin to see how a Superego imperative, "to enjoy", might assist a subject along the road to violent institutional ideology.

Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser, developed the concept of "interpellation" as the process by which a subject is drawn towards identification with an ideology. When, for example, an individual is "hailed" by someone walking behind them on the street with "Hey you there", they invariably respond to the call as being directed to themselves. Althusser suggests this induces a feeling akin to guilt in the individual who asks themselves "why am I being called out? What have I done wrong?", and, at that moment, the hailed (or interpellated individual) becomes a subject to the hailer (Althusser 1971: 174-175). Žižek references Althusser's position that four modes of discourse, ideological, scientific, aesthetic (through third parties) and unconscious lead to four respective "subject effects", while later constraining subject creation to ideological discourse only. Žižek, however, maintains a Lacanian perspective, with the unconscious process as predominant and the other modes as derivative (Žižek, 1994: 61). This is significant here because it supports the idea of a split-subject being called (interpellated) separately to the injunctions of "public law" and Superego (Žižek (1994, pp. 59ff). To understand the powerful grip of RWE institutions from a Lacanian

perspective we must consider the way “the superego designates the intrusion of enjoyment into the field of ideology” (Žižek 1994: 56).

If a “public law” can be seen as reflecting some universal ethical principle to which an extremist institution promotes an immoral¹² transgressive contrary position (what might be called “evil”), then a successful initiate to that institution absorbs superego directives that provide *jouissance*. The superego directs the initiate to “enjoy the transgression!”. After Freud, Žižek describes the common type of evil as “Ego-*Evil*: behaviour motivated by selfish calculation and greed - that is, by disregard for universal ethical principles” (1994: 70). He then names “*Superego-Evil*” as the evil resulting from fanatical identification with an ideology and “*Id-evil*” as the most elemental enjoyment through direct violence to the Other. Each form can deliver *jouissance* to the individual who receives ideological license from the institution. For the right-wing nationalist who beats up refugees, his behaviour is “*id-evil*”, not motivated primarily by personal gain or ideology, but, rather, because, as Žižek argues, “it makes him feel good to beat up foreigners...[whose]...presence disturbs him” (1994: 70-71). In Lacanian terms, the foreigners have become what Žižek calls the “thief of enjoyment” (1990). The induction of the novice into the extremist institution is a limonoid ritual that, one way or another, delivers *jouissance*.

Once this thinking and behaviour is entrenched, it is very difficult to change or stop, which accounts for the intransigence of extremist belief systems and is similar to the cohesion within cults. The existence of the enemy Other becomes a powerful fantasy “resistant to any rational or any rhetorical argumentation” which Habermasian ethics in the form of deliberative democracy will fail to penetrate. In the “post-truth” fantasy world, scientific evidence is just more “fake-news”, whether it be in relation to a global pandemic or the results of a US Presidential Election. The Superego is a relentless creditor, such that:

our debt to the superego is unredeemable: the more we pay it off, the more we owe. Superego is like the extortioner slowly bleeding us to death - the more he gets, the stronger his hold on us (Žižek 1994: 68).

In clinical psychoanalysis a successful outcome is achieved if the analysand becomes more aware of their “desire¹³” and realises that the analyst, to whom in therapy they have transferred the role of the “knowing Other”, does not have all the answers. They leave therapy with this awareness and therefore the choice to disengage with the “fantasy of the Other”. While Lacanian psychoanalysis suggests that everyone, all the time, is radically invested in some fantasy of the Other, the analysand seeks therapy when their particular fantasy is causing anxiety, distress or harm which they wish to alleviate. This process, much

reflected on since Lacan's first reference (Lacan 1998: 273), is referred to as "traversing the fantasy" and corresponds to asking what sort of response might be possible to the proliferation, this century, of antisocial and harmful extremist institutions promoting the enjoyment of violence towards a fantasmatic enemy Other¹⁴.

Can I live like a normal jeezny again?¹⁵

Having examined some explanations for the growing influence of RWE beliefs and behaviour, we arrive at the central question of "how might the associated violence be reversed or at least mitigated"? In order to bring about the traversing of the RWE fantasy of enjoyment stolen by the Other¹⁶, Žižek (1994: 71) suggests:

a different political strategy is needed, a strategy that is able to incorporate what Lacan called 'la traversee du fantasme', a strategy of overidentification, which takes into account the fact that the obscene superego qua basis and support of the public Law is operative only in so far as it remains unacknowledged, hidden from the public eye.

What Žižek is saying here relates to the duality of the "public law" and the superego in the sense that each needs the other to function. By removing opposition to the RWE ideology and "identifying publicly with the obscene superego" (Žižek, 1994: 71), the transgressive opportunity and support is removed. This strategy invokes an "over-orthodoxy", involving overidentification, which Pfaller (2005: 119) writes:

fully maintain[s] the appearance and thus depriv[es] it [RWE ideology] of its fantasmatic support. Since it is precisely our "subversive," "cynical" distance towards a certain ideology which subjects us to this ideology and allows it to exert its social efficiency, we can only destroy this ideology by giving up this distance.

At first glance this tactic "of appearing more Nazi, than the Nazis", seems to be an extraordinary and extremely risky approach. What if the rest of the population do not see the subversive irony and the strategy reinforces what it seeks to destroy? To succeed, such a program requires an acute sense of timing and deft affective manipulation of public attitudes. Žižek links this type of approach to a philosophical tradition of "ideological anamorphosis", in which distortions of ideological principles appear when viewed from a different viewpoint.

In 1969, at the height of the Vietnam War, two young Flinders University students, Peter Hicks and his colleague, announced, through the media, their plan to publicly "napalm" a dog

named Plato. While not supporters of the war, their plan was consistent with the military's apparent view that napalming Vietnamese civilians was a legitimate practice, with which the students' planned action was consistent. As expected, the public outrage was widespread (Fig. 1). Up until the time of the canine's planned execution, the strategy's overidentification with the military's acts of cruelty gave the public cause to reflect on their legitimacy. The impact of the protest was made potent by the question of whether they would really go through with it; where did they really stand; were they really evil enough to murder an innocent dog? In the words of Žižek (1994: 72) the act *function[s] not as an answer but as a question*. The dog was spared¹⁷.



Fig 1. Front page of the Adelaide News of July 1, 1969, then owned by a 38yr old Rupert Murdoch.

The anamorphic strategy of “over-orthodoxy” can also be found in Brecht’s theatre. His *verfremdungseffekt* or defamiliarization techniques, “while allowing the object to be recognized, at the same time, make it appear unfamiliar” Rouse (1984: 32). The scene in Kubrick’s film in which Alex brutally attacks Frank and Mary Alexander while performing “Singing in the Rain” similarly creates an indelible impression on the viewer through the juxtaposition of violence and joyful song. The theatrical nature of Peter Hicks anti-war

strategy, which he later described as “street theatre” (2007: 20), and Brecht’s performance techniques, point to the performative character of “over-orthodoxy”.

The process of overidentification leads directly to consideration of the important role that observational stand-up comedy, parody and satire plays in politics. The knowledge that comedy is an effective and possibly less risky way of making political comment goes back millennia. The Fool’s relationship to his master in King Lear is one that, albeit under the threat of the whip, allows him alone, to tell Lear the truth:

Lear: Does any here know me"? Who is it that can tell me who I am?

Fool: Lear’s shadow¹⁸

In more recent times, again during the Vietnam War, the American comedian and satirist, Lenny Bruce (1969), when performing a stand-up routine on the behaviour of anti-war demonstrators towards the police said:

So what happens? Now comes the riot, or the marches - everybody’s wailing, screaming. And you got a guy there, who’s standing with a short-sleeved shirt on and a stick in his hand, and the people are yelling, ‘Gestapo, Gestapo!’ at him:

Gestapo! You ***, I’m the mailman!

When the Berkeley University audience, many of whom had participated in violent confrontations with law enforcement, laughed at this reversal, they were being asked to look at their enemy Other, from a different perspective.

A recent example of over-orthodoxy is in the work of Sacha Baron-Cohen whose overblown personae of racists, antisemites, homophobes and misogynists are filmed interacting with people who really exhibit such views and who mostly do not realise that his characters are a parody. Saunders (2008: 57) highlights the political potential of the ambiguity Baron-Cohen performs:

Rather than simply relying on traditional ethnic humor made at the expense of minorities, Baron Cohen's style is based on satire and ridicule of the stereotypes themselves. ... The blurred lines between information and entertainment make his comedic jaunts not only possible, but valuable—even necessary—in a world where youth have been almost totally depoliticized¹⁹.

Research into humour is complex and ongoing. While stand-up comedians and writers learn heuristics to lead audiences to experience humour with smiling and physical laughter, even the most seasoned practitioner can experience an audience with whom they “bomb”; i.e. fail to connect with and on occasion completely antagonise. The business of comedy is thus both contingent and “edgy”. When it works however, the effects can be powerful, cathartic and sometimes life changing.

While explanations for the way humour works are by no means comprehensive, a consistent theme in research points to the part that “incongruity” and “superiority” play, both independently and conjointly. The importance of the interaction of these two “explanatory subdomains” is highlighted by Vandaele (2002: 225) who writes that “it is impossible to offer a satisfactory explanation of the field of humor by means of one of the two main principles alone”. Incongruity is at play in the examples above, where the expectations of the audience are surprised by something that appears out of place in the usual “cognitive scheme” (Vandaele 2002: 225).

Superiority is more socially defined and appears in multiple ways. First, there is the superiority experienced when one understands or “is in on the joke”, generally at the expense of those who “don’t get it”. This feeling is differentiated from the more aggressive superiority felt through “laughing at” a targeted victim. Undoubtedly, RWE organisations themselves are accomplished and enthusiastic exponents of the latter type of aggressive superiority in their taunting and name-calling of progressives and minorities. Comedy, nevertheless, has the possibility of bringing non-aggressive superiority to all those who are able to see the incongruities of the RWE position laid before them, through enjoyment rather than attack. Such comedy is one way to realise Žižek’s call for “over-orthodoxy” on the path to traversing the RWE fantasy.

One common counterargument to this view, found particularly in journalism, is that the preponderance of “fake news” and misinformation, on the Internet and elsewhere, has led to the “death” of satire and parody, particularly online (Mahdawi, 2014; Giola, 2017; Drehle, 2020). The provenance of these claims seems to generally be found in what has become known as Poe’s Law, which was first posited in 2005, by an individual calling himself Nathan Poe, arguing against Christian fundamentalists in an online forum. Poe’s law²⁰, in a generic form, can be rendered as:

without a clear indicator of the author’s intent, it is impossible to create a parody of extreme views so obviously exaggerated that it cannot be mistaken

by some readers for a sincere expression of the parodied views (de Zeeuw & Tuters, 2020).

Clearly, many authors of online content have no intention of providing “a clear indicator” as to whether their “factual” claims are “satirical”, made “in good faith” or “propaganda”. A self-regulated system of disclosure would lead to meaningless recursive layers of “truth” metadata. Similarly, the insertion by Facebook of “informational tags”, such as [Satire], simply leaves the decision to armies of Facebook “fact checkers”, who, if they are not already, will be replaced by AI ethical bots. The AI problem however is similar to the problem of computerised natural language analysis of poetry. Imagine if William Wordsworth wrote online today:

I wandered lonely as a cloud
that floats on high o'er vales and hills,
when all at once I saw a crowd,
a host, of golden daffodils

Would it be captured as a text about the weather, human feelings, horticulture or all three? How would Facebook deal with the ambiguous irony in Lenny Bruce's routine on John Graham who blew up a plane, on which his mother was a passenger, to collect insurance:

For this the state sent him to the gas chamber, proving actually that the American people are losing a sense of humor. You just think about it, anybody who blows up a plane with forty people can't be all bad?²¹.

Poe's law is arguably applicable to parodic text that is indistinguishable from lying; but it does not preclude, either online or offline, parody that manifests in a more artistic form other than something purporting to be factual. The very ambition and inherent political potential of much art is not to make a factual claim, but to communicate what the artist sees and how they feel about what they are creating. This may, or may not, evoke an emotional response in the observer, but it cannot be held to be misleading. One contemporary example is with the work of American comedian and writer, Sarah Cooper, who came to fame with her online “lip-syncing” videos of Donald Trump's public statements. Packer (2020), writing in the *New York Times*, wrote of her:

She looks nothing like Trump and suffers no pains to make herself physically Trumpian. He's white, she's black; he's orange, she's tan; she's easily half his Taftian size. What she portrays is not his persona but his affect: the glib overconfidence, the lip curl of dismissiveness, the slow nods of fake understanding. ... But Cooper doesn't seem interested in embodying or mimicking Trump. She's all about exposing him, in the most literal sense —

and exposing, along with him, all the props, bluster and stagecraft he has cultivated for years. What would it be like, her videos ask, if you could take away everything else — all the trappings of authority, the partisan resentments, the sorcery of the performance — and leave only what Trump is literally saying?

Parody and satire, as art forms, are far from dead and in the absence of critical rational thinking and the valuing of scientific evidence, remain powerful tools in traversing the RWE fantasy.

***I shut my glazzies and felt the cold wind on my litso, then I jumped*²²**

Next, we take a step back and consider an alternative positive reading of *horrorshow* violence as an "irrational" response to political exclusion. For a progressive, if authoritarian responses are anathema and both rational Habermasian deliberation and Art (or what Spivak (2012) calls "an aesthetic education") are unable to defuse growing RWE hate and violence, what will happen? History suggests that Politics is radically contingent; profound change will happen, but sometimes over a very long timeframe. What is the understanding of how totalitarian and authoritarian regimes recede? Sadly, it is often after prolonged war and bloodshed: World War II and the defeat of Pol Pot in Cambodia offering just two among many examples. At the outset of war, there appears to be a "tipping" point at which the existence of the Other becomes intolerable and its psychotic elimination, rather than suppression, becomes the strategy. Sometimes, outright war is avoided through leadership; think of Mandela and Tutu at the fall of the Apartheid in South Africa or ideological supporting fantasy collapsing against economic and social realities, as was the case in the passing of the USSR.

As Rogers (2016 : 184) points out, Lacanian psychoanalysis has some fundamental normative assumptions associated with the signifier of health: "cures are desirable, living is good, living 'naturally' is best ... bodily integrity is to be protected". For an analysand, trying to alleviate limiting and painful feelings and behaviours, this would seem a reasonable foundation for therapy. In the political context however, these normative assumptions warrant some further consideration with respect to the meaning and value of "resistance". The significance here is that by labelling RWE violence, which forecloses multifaceted pluralist behaviour towards the "othered", as moving towards psychosis, we may miss the value that resistance plays in a functioning democracy.

As with the aphorism that “one person’s terrorist is another’s freedom fighter”, who is resisting and what is being resisted is dependent on what is, in Laclau’s terminology²³, the hegemonic ideology at the time. If RWE ideology becomes globally hegemonic, then progressives will be the resisting others and their beliefs and actions labelled “psychotic”. While I do not claim this to be universally the current situation, it does appear increasingly possible and arguably some countries, such as Hungary have adopted RWE ideology at a state level. Here, I am writing from a progressive perspective, seeing RWE belief and behaviour as “resisting” democratic and pluralist norms and asking how violence and even war, between these ideological camps might be avoided.

The Lacanian perspective is that the subject’s ongoing question to the Other is that of *che vuoi Autre* (what do you want from me)? From early childhood, subjectivity²⁴ will have developed, in a normal way (e.g., parents, friends, school), prior to any ideological interpellation. This subject would have found recognition:

within the signifiers ...biopolitical categories ... which broker little dissent – by others and even by the self ... we are ‘passionately attached’ to our gender, imaginations of health, rights, and, in Lacan’s terms, the ‘goods’ – as objects and as ideas – which offer us the imagination of recognition. ... the subject is occupied a priori with these categories and recognizes (and demands recognition) via these categories (Rogers 2016, :187).

A “resisting subject” is one that is drawn to seek recognition beyond these biopolitical categories (as mother, youth, class for example) towards “recognition by an alternative political party, a Cause ...[which] ... in Lacanian psychoanalysis, we would say ... attaches [the Subject] to (another) Master’s discourse” (Rogers 2016: 187).

Attachment to “another Master” leads to seeking that Master’s knowledge or asking the question “What does the Other see?”, which assumes that the Master has the answer. In Lacanian clinical practice this dynamic is referred to as “transference”²⁵.

Resistance, understood as a desire for a Master, becomes a performance of what the subject imagines is the answer. The answer as a closed course of action with a fixed teleological imagination, such that the resisting subject might say: ‘If I do this I will be this’, or ‘if I do this then the *final* result will be this’, or, in its psychotic form, ‘if I do this the world will be this’ (Rogers, 2016: 188).

Resistance to a dominant social logic can thus be seen as the seeking of the *jouissance* and knowledge of a new Master to provide a better answer to the question *che vuoi Autre?* When the resistance gets to the point where that answer is a single truth, moving totally away from the rationality of the Symbolic Order towards fantasy, the subject, from a Lacanian perspective, becomes psychotic. Violence, both physical and psychological, can be viewed as the perpetrator's attempt to impose "the answer" on the recipient and, in so doing, foreclose the radical contingency of the Real. The initiation process into the violence attendant with RWE belief systems, like the liminoid ritual of the arena, provides the *jouissance* of receiving "The Answer".

A number of caveats need to be highlighted in this argument. First, not all violence arising from resistance is directed externally. It can be directed to self; think for example of hunger strikers or of Gandhi's non-violent resistance. Second, and this is the argument developed by Rogers (2016), simply labelling all violent resistance as psychotic may actually destroy the critical importance of resistance in a democracy, and indeed lead a progressive ideology to take on the very totalitarian behaviour it wishes to eliminate. Here, Rogers references Douzinas (2013):

[s]omewhere between psychosis and an unquestioning acceptance of the imaginary knot of servitude to politico-legal subjection – somewhere between resistance as death and life as only biopolitical life – Douzinas finds another interpretation of resistance ... (Rogers 2016: 190).

Moving away from the negative normative view of resistance in Lacanian psychoanalysis, Rogers, again, referencing Douzinas, reveals a more contemporary and positive reading of political resistance (and violence) in which:

the subject attempts a refusal or an undermining of something or someone, whether this thing be an ideal or an identity. ... [where] ... something, as an ideology enacted through policy and/or force, which is being imposed, ... is being refused (Rogers 2016: 186).

This leads progressives, committed to pluralism, to look beyond the violence of RWE institutions and to ask whether the violence is driven by a perceived inability and lack of opportunity to be heard within a hegemonic, liberal state ideology. In simpler terms, we are returning to the question of "one person's terrorist ...", raised above. In the US, this view is certainly consistent with Hochschild's (2016) empirical sociological findings with respect to support for the Tea Party in Louisiana.

Violence which either physically or mentally harms a third-party, while arguably psychotic in the terms discussed here, should not be seen therefore in isolation from its context. Indeed, politically, it may well bring to the awareness of progressive pluralists, “excluded” parts of subjects which find no voice in the *demos*. In Lacanian terms, such violence is “an exit from the symbolic network, a dissolution of the social bond” Evans (1996: 140), in a fantasmatic attempt to engage the Real. Such an act Lacan refers to as a *passage à l’acte* (passage to the act). Violence of this type, either directed to self or externally, can be seen, as Rogers (2016: 192) notes, as an attempt, “not to exist as a subject”, that is total resistance to a dominant ideology.

“What’s it going to be then, eh?”²⁶

This concluding section challenges progressives to recognise the *jouissance* of RWE behaviour and move away from assuming that with enough evidence and logical argument the situation will change. In 1962, Anthony Burgess gave the world, Alex, the delinquent *nadsat*, addicted to a *malenky bit of ultra-violence* who, along with his *droogs*, terrorised the *starries* in his city²⁷. The novel, *A Clockwork Orange*, and certainly the Stanley Kubrick film of the same name, released nine years later, hit a societal nerve with its depiction of the unabashed enjoyment of violence towards others; so much so that the film was withdrawn in the United Kingdom for 27 years. The film was considered by many to encourage teenage violence perniciously and was, for example, cited in a murder trial in 1973 where a 16 year-old, Richard Palmer, was convicted of the murder of David McManus 60, whom he had beaten to death²⁸. The question as to whether film (or indeed any artistic product) can be guilty of causing anti-social behaviours is still highly contested to this day. The significance here is that the indisputable moral panic of authorities at the prospect of recognising the capacity for unalloyed enjoyment of violence led to the film’s removal from the public gaze. Burgess himself advised students not to read *A Clockwork Orange*, describing it, in verse, as a “foul farago / Of made-up words that bash and bleed” (Alberge, 2020).

Nevertheless, we have seen that, from ancient times, people have been drawn to displays of power, in violent arenas, where dishonourable and undeserving others are named and destroyed, either figuratively and/or literally. The participants undertake a liminoid ritual, moving to, and from, their everyday lives to the heightened emotions of the spectacle, whether at the rally or on their social media feed. They emerge with “the Answer ” and the comfort of bolstered identity and collective safety against a confusing, unfair and dangerous world. However, most of all the experience brings them *jouissance*, whether it be as outrage or enjoyment, and always excitement. Against this, all the Progressives’ scientific evidence, pleas for sympathy and empathy for the othered and even pleas for the RWEs’ own survival,

fall like woke stones to the ground in comparison. Ignoring this, like those who wished to silence the truth of *A Clockwork Orange*, will ensure progressives struggle to effect real change. So “what’s it going to be then”?

In broad terms, an approach that sees progressives simply othering the RWE as “psychotic”, and therefore irredeemable (as in traditional Freudian psychoanalysis), is likely to lead to “war” and authoritarianism. The deeply felt RWE belief that the Other is the “thief of their enjoyment” has become ontological and, as Marsh and Furlong (2002) note, an ontology is “a skin not a sweater”, i.e. ontological change is more like a skin graft than a quick change of apparel. While there are no easy answers, if war and the catastrophic results of authoritarianism are to be avoided, or at least mitigated, it is important to explore a number of approaches progressives could take.

First, it is crucial to understand that the RWE belief system is remarkably resistant to evidence, well immunised by a societal move to new fantasies and “post-truth”. Political discourse is at an emotional level and progressive leaders must engage with the feelings of all sectors of the community with fortitude, humour and respect. Progressive leaders can no longer depend on rational appeals to the public. They have to be seen to fight, if for no other reason than many in the electorate are drawn to comforting and entertaining displays of violence, enjoyed at a distance where “good” eventually triumphs over “evil”, the “worthy” over the “worthless”. In other ways, art and particularly comedy, satire and parody can sometimes powerfully subvert sedimented beliefs to at least be open to different perspectives. Progressives must continue to insist on and drive the pluralistic education of children and encourage critical thinking for all young people. Finally, we must understand that resistance is at the foundation of democracy and *passage à l’acte* behaviour resulting in violence to the self and others often indicates the exclusion of the perpetrator from the *demos* and an opportunity, albeit a challenging one, for inclusion. A commitment to inclusivity requires, as Connolly (2017, 87) suggests, an enduring openness to “new rights and identities” performing “a messy mix of intense political pressure and appeals to subterranean strains of care in others”.

¹ Nadsat, a teenage slang language, invented by Burgess, with origins in Russian, Romany, Cockney and Shakespearean English. See Burgess (1986) for a glossary.

² Explained later in the text, but essentially action that addresses the real, outside the Symbolic order.

³ "Enjoyment" is the common but inadequate English translation of the French *jouissance* which, as well as pleasure can incorporate such emotions as pain, anger and outrage.

⁴ Nadsat expression. *Smecks* means "laughs".

⁵ A Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was first proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948 (General Assembly resolution 217 A).

⁶ See e.g. the account by Aleksandra Stawarczyk, a 14yr old Polish girl in the domestic service of SS-Hauptsturmführer Horst Fischer, a head physician at Auschwitz, whom she recalls "was a homebody. He came home for dinner every day at one o'clock. He even helped out in the kitchen" (Setkiewicz 2019: 97) and would hold receptions for colleagues, including Dr. Josef Mengele.

⁷ Which may or may not include actual physical harm.

⁸ The Tea Party was a populist far-right group within the US Republican party which existed during the period from 2009 to 2019.

⁹ Here, the "you" addressed is a Louisianan working-class voter, drawn to conservative Tea Party politics.

¹⁰ For example, the idea that the exposure to violence provides some comforting and stimulating affective benefit is a central theme of J.P. Ballard's 2000 novel *Super Cannes*.

¹¹ Burgess (1962: 18) - Alex is a little bored and disappointed at the lack of exciting action.

¹² Here universal does not necessarily imply absolute. As seen previously in ancient Rome, what is considered morally "good" for the public, is arguably relative. What is important here is the transgressive enjoyment.

¹³ Lacan's "desire" is unconscious desire. See (Evans 1996: 37).

¹⁴ In *A Clockwork Orange*, this is precisely the problem the State faces with respect to the societal damage that Alex and his *droogs* inflict through "ultra-violence". The authorities' experimentation, on Alex, with the fictional *Ludovico* aversion therapy, is exposed as an authoritarian infringement of Alex's human rights, exquisitely raising the State's ethical dilemma.

¹⁵ Burgess (1962: 160) Jeezny is Nadsat for "life". Alex addresses the question to F. Alexander, his previous victim and now a freedom activist.

¹⁶ Žižek writes this in relationship to entrenched racist fantasies. However it can equally be applied to misogynists (such as the Incel movement) and anti-immigration groups.

¹⁷ For further details see (COD 2020)

¹⁸ King Lear Act 1 Scene 4: 252

¹⁹ An alternative view is that youth political participation has changed not diminished. See (Li and Marsh 2008).

²⁰ The original can be seen at:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20160721195036/http://www.christianforums.com/threads/big-contradictions-in-the-evolution-theory.1962980/page-3>

²¹ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NGnnWImpzY0>

²² Burgess (1962: 167) - Alex "rehabilitated" and tortured by the sound of his beloved Beethoven 9th Symphony attempts suicide. *Glazzies* means eyes and *litso* means face.

²³ See e.g., Laclau and Mouffe (2001: 176)

²⁴ Žižek makes a similar observation (1994: 61), in his critique of Althusser, that "there is already an uncanny subject that precedes the gesture of subjectivization", that acts as a kind of 'vanishing mediator' if "the subject is...to accomplish the gesture of subjectivization".

²⁵ A successful therapy will lead the analysand to the view that "the analyst himself is nothing but a big question mark addressed to the analysand" (Žižek 1994: 72).

²⁶ This is the heading of the original final chapter (7) of *A clockwork orange* in which a mature Alex, now at the advanced age of 18, contemplates settling down and how his future son might engage in "ultra-violence".

²⁷ *Nadsat* = teen, *malenky* = little, *starry* = ancient and *droog* = friend

²⁸ See "Clockwork Orange's link with boy's crime. "Times (London, England) 4 July 1973: 2. The Times Digital Archive. Web. 2 May 2015.

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