CINEMA VIOLENCE AND THE ONTOLOGY OF CAPITALISM

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Cinema is violent. That is not to claim that the medium has always been violent, nor is that to suggest that it must remain this way. However, for the majority of its history, cinema has been and continues to be violent. To be more precise, I refer to cinema as it has been in its most widely disseminated and most massively consumed format, namely mainstream commercial narrative cinema produced in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In other words, this essay understands cinema as hegemony. To approach cinema as hegemony is to see how overwhelmingly violent the history of cinema has been. From its infancy in *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) to its most grandiose iterations such as *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (2015); from the action of *The Mark of Zorro* (1940) to the horror of *Black Christmas* (1974) to the comedy of *There's Something about Mary* (1998) and even to the drama of *Gone Girl* (2014); from the British *Zulu* (1964) to the Iranian *Mashq-e Shab* (*Homework*, 1990) to the Chilean *Post Mortem* (2010); cinema is violent across history, genre, and national context.

Cinema is violent because it emerged, developed, and has continued to be practiced in capitalism. And capitalism at its core, is violent. The role of capitalism in regard to violence in cinema has yet to be fully explored, which is why a framework informed by the thinking of Karl Marx is of such critical use. Cinema cannot be extricated from the world that produced it and because the world in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is determined by capitalism, an analytical approach that focuses on that determination can reveal the key way in which cinema, capitalism, and violence are inextricably entwined. What I am also proposing in this essay then is that cinematic violence has a structural function in the broader context of capital, a function that affects those who inhabit capitalism.

Ultimately, I argue that one of the key functions of cinema is to legitimize the violence of capitalism which is in practice, a problematic of how its subjects orient themselves to one another. The violence of cinema, produced through narrative and spectacle, serves to valorize Western Cartesian subjectivity and its violent interpersonal ethics. To the credit of violent cinema, it itself lays bare its own ethics and politics. The understanding of how

cinematic violence is capitalist ideology can be akin to a realization, which can activate a network that perhaps lead to new possibilities — alternative modes of interpersonal relations, and most importantly, ways in which to recover the dignity of the worker. Cinema can and already has allowed for such moments. However, for now, hegemony remains. As such, it is our task to scrutinize it and challenge it — ruthlessly and responsibly — at every turn.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS VIOLENCE

Film Scholarship and Cinematic Violence, Violence in the Media

Despite its undeniable ubiquity, violence in the cinema has yet to be studied to a sufficient and satisfactory degree. Referring to the new interest in media violence in the US during the 1990s, J. David Slocum writes, "While 'quantitative' studies by social science researchers have accompanied such popular attention and concern, humanities and film scholars have undertaken the 'serious' study of film violence haltingly. Some scholars have provided sophisticated accounts of cinematic forms of violence while others have attempted to provide broad accounts of film violence."[1] But for the most part, fifteen years since Slocum's 2001 edited collection *Violence and American Cinema*, cinematic violence still remains a "secondary concern."[2] However, the caveat is that this is only the case for film scholars. The interest of violence in the media in the 1990s that Slocum mentions on the other hand is observable throughout the 2000s and 2010s. Violence continues to occupy both social science researchers and the general public.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the discourse surrounding a number of violent incidents across the US. Following the Columbine High School Massacre on April 20 of 1999, when Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold shot and killed thirteen people, news outlets attempted to make sense of the act by emphasizing how the two young men played first-person-shooter (FPS) video games, listened to certain genres of "aggressive" music, and espoused interest in Oliver Stone's 1994 film *Natural Born Killers*. On April 16, 2007, twenty-three-year-old Korean national Cho Seung-Hui killed thirty-two people at the Virginia Polytechnic Institute in what was at the time the largest mass killing in US history. The *Washington Post* and *Time* magazine suggested that the ultraviolent Korean film *Oldboy* (2003)[3] may have had some sort of relation to the massacre. On July 12, 2012,

James Holmes killed twelve people during a screening of Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012). Much was made of a possible connection between Holmes's motives and the *Batman* character, the Joker. The discourse surrounding the above incidents reveal a tacit assumption regarding media violence and the viewer — the fairly straightforward notion that the consumption of violent content leads directly to aggressive behavior. Much of the research in turn, proceeds with that idea in mind and either seeks to confirm or disprove the claim.[4]

The Question of Legitimacy

Part of that, I would argue, is related to the way in which violence is constantly compartmentalized. Consider for a moment the descriptor of "action." Action is merely an alternative term for violence. When considering the prevalence of action, as a requirement either narratively or in regard to spectacle, it becomes evident how universal violence is in cinema. What then separates action from violence? It is the respective statuses of the two categories: the former is tacitly legitimate while the latter is not. Along these lines, whether it is separating "ultraviolence" from "normal" violence, or the violence of the FPS *Doom* (1993) from other, more supposedly benign video games, the public discourse constantly produces a taxonomy, localizing illegitimate forms of violence until they become easily identifiable and subsequently manageable problems. According to these critics, such horrific events listed above can be avoided as long as violent media is no longer produced.

Even film scholarship is not completely exempt from such an approach. The edited collection *Screening Violence* is another one of the few projects dedicated to the topic of film violence. And yet, the book maintains similar attitudes. *Screening Violence* consists of three sections titled, "The Historical Context of Ultraviolence," "The Aesthetics of Ultraviolence," and "The Effects of Ultraviolence." To begin, *Screening Violence* aligns with the dominant attitudes towards media violence mentioned above, where the effects on the spectator can be observed. Along these lines, what the sections immediately makes evident is the way in which the book separates "ultraviolence" from violence as such, cohering to the idea of the "new violence"[5] that was stronger, meaner, and thus, more problematic than its predecessor. Along these lines, the book makes an implicit value judgment in its differentiation between the valuable work of violent filmmaker Sam

Peckinpah from the frivolous violence of Quentin Tarantino.[6] Such distinctions maintain the notion that certain forms of violence are legitimate while others are not.

The study of cinema violence requires a more critical and broad understanding to what is without a doubt, a complex symbolic field. As J. David Slocum writes, "Violence is a notoriously expansive notion."[7] This is precisely why critics, pundits, and scholars are constantly debating the question of violence with specific attention to what constitutes an acceptable degree. To mention an example from outside of the cinema, the question of the application of excessive force by law enforcement amounts exactly to this issue. That the proper degree of violence used — or represented, as in the cinema — is constantly questioned suggests that the very character of violence is volatile. This is also to say that violence must constantly be mediated. The attitudes and corresponding terminology (whether it be force, action, or violence) must be continuously shifted. And the real function of this adjustment is to separate the legitimate forms of violence from the illegitimate ones, an act that keeps certain exercises of violence open while closing off other possibilities. In the end, violence is repeatedly being defined so that it may remain the exclusive claim of whomever is designated as the correct owners. The quandary of violence is the question of its legitimacy, and the question of legitimacy is ultimately one of access.

A seminal rumination on the character of violence, Walter Benjamin's "Critique of Violence" reveals these critical dimensions: violence is ultimately a question of legitimacy, inasmuch as it is a matter of means and ends,[8] which is also the goal-oriented logic of capital. Furthermore, Benjamin reveals how that legitimacy is tied to the state's ownership of violence, as he opens the piece by stating, "The task of a critique of violence can be summarized as that of expounding its relation to law and justice."[9] While the English translation of the essay uses "violence," Benjamin's term is *die Gewalt*, which in addition to violence, also includes power. In turn, the term cannot be extricated from law and justice. Hannah Arendt approaches violence with similar concerns, noting how violence is characterized by its instrumental character (as a means to an ends).[10] She goes further by differentiating violence from power, strength, force, and authority, although all are entirely imbricated within one another.[11] Michel Foucault's theorization of epistemic violence, an extension of the idea of knowledge-power, further expands the concept of violence, as does Gayarti Chakravorty Spivak's refinement.[12] Epistemic violence emphasizes both the non-coercive, disciplinary power in modernity, moving it beyond the

purely physical, while also expanding capitalist relations within a broader international context that emphasizes the specifically geopolitical power of capitalist hegemony.

Indebted to these foundational works on the character of violence, this essay conceptualizes violence in two ways. First is the more immediate idea of violence, of the direct physical harm inflicted on the Other. This perhaps is the form violence takes the most, or at least is the most visible, especially in regard to the representation of violence in cinema. More accurately then, we are discussing the *simulated* representation of violence. In addition, there is the broader movement of violence, a general dialectic of suffering and release, the subjugation and exploitation of the disenfranchised, the world over. In Benjamin, Arendt, Foucault, and Spivak's iterations, this is the biopolitical relationship of the state to its subjects, where entry into the political is ultimately the relinquishing of agency that becomes the power over life. Another way to say this is to say that the biopolitical subject tacitly submits his or her access to belligerency (except for certain situations such as the military, law enforcement, self-defense, or business) so that the state may have exclusive access to it. What both conceptions of violence have in common is that in the end, the Other is always diminished for the sake of capital.

A MARXIST FILM STUDIES APPROACH TO CINEMATIC VIOLENCE

It is in this concern for the Other that this study refers to Marx. More specifically, the essay draws on Marx's illustration of how the capitalist social organization requires the suffering of the Other. The primary philosophical and intellectual tenet that undergirds this study is Marx's assertion that the production of surplus value determines capitalism.[13] In turn, that determination creates a fundamentally exploitative society. Surplus value is the product of the general formula of capital, or M-C-M′ (money to commodity to money with surplus). In this form of circulation, money is used to purchase a commodity, which is in turn, sold for profit. The goal is thus money with surplus value.[14] For Marx, this is a crucial distinction from the circulation of commodities, or C-M-C (commodity to money to commodity). In this formula, commodities are sold for money, which is then used to purchase different commodities. While the general formula of capital is unlimited, commodity circulation has a concrete endpoint in the purchase of the

second commodity. As opposed to surplus value, exchange-value determines the circulation of commodities and emphasizes its horizontal character.[15]

In capitalist circulation, surplus value originates in the commodity, or more precisely, it begins in the production of the commodity. After all, surplus value can only be generated if the money introduced into the commodity is less than what is extracted (in the final sale). In other words, while the capitalist pays the laborer to produce the commodity, he sells the final product at a higher price than the cost of production.[16] The added value of the commodity is the worker's labor-power, which has not been fully compensated for. The capitalist purchases the worker's labor-power and in justification of the investment (for it would seem that the laborer would be unable to work without the capitalist's wages), the worker takes a deficit. That deficit in turn is what imbues the commodity with its magical qualities and results in excess value.[17] Because surplus value can only occur at the expense of the laborer, the arrangement between the worker and the capitalist — or the relations of production in capitalism — is thus fundamentally exploitative.[18] And if surplus value drives capitalism, then it follows that capitalism is fundamentally exploitative. Somehow, the unevenness of this arrangement goes unseen, or perhaps more accurately, neglected. And it is the reproduction of this unequal relationship that is crucial to understanding the persistence of the capitalist social organization.

For the purposes of this essay, ideology is considered the primary way in which capitalist production is secured, guaranteeing not necessarily that a specific group of people will maintain power, but rather that a relationship of power will always be maintained. As Louis Althusser asserts, capitalist production is predicated on the "reproduction of the conditions of production" which includes the "productive forces" in addition to the "existing relations of production."[19] Cinema is approached in a way that aligns with Althusser's theorization of the Ideological State Apparatus and more specifically the Cultural State Apparatus, a complex structure that executes the transmission of dominant ideology across all areas of the social organization. Moreover, Althusser's work is essential in theorizing how ideology produces the subject as a subject within capital. At the same time, it is crucial to understand that neither capitalism nor capitalist ideology is coercive in nature. Uneven distribution is not forced upon capitalist subjects. As Antonio Gramsci demonstrated, capitalist subjects come into capitalist

ideology "spontaneously" on their own accord.[20] This is also to say that the relations of production are reproduced because both parties within those relations agree to the arrangement on some level. Upholding capitalist ideology, commercial narrative cinema perpetuates these relations. As a result, it is an iteration of Gramscian cultural hegemony. It is a concrete instance where a fundamentally violent social arrangement is internalized by those within that arrangement, on their own accord.

It is here that we reach the core of this essay, the ethical and intellectual imperative to interrogate the violence of cinema. The deep contention with the relations of production is the foundational ground to Marx's work, articulated in his lament for the lack of dignity of the proletariat.[21] As with Marx and Friedrich Engels, this essay is informed by the desire to restore the lost dignity of the subject in capital. At stake is the enormous amount of suffering that has continued to persist in the last two centuries, the dynamic where someone must be sacrificed. One cannot profit without someone else being exploited. Surplus value cannot be produced without labor at a deficit. Capitalism cannot exist without a lower class. In the same way, on the individual level, which is also how cinema operates, one's sense of Self requires the diminishing of the Other.

THE ONTOLOGICAL VIOLENCE OF THE CINEMA AND THE CAPITALIST SUBJECT

Fundamentally, cinematic violence is a matter of ontological difference. If as Benjamin asserts, state violence has a lawmaking and law-preserving function,[22] then violent cinema produces and reaffirms the ontology of capital. Furthermore, violence and capitalism must be repeatedly legitimated in the same way that the relations of production must be reproduced, as does the subjectivity of those who inhabit those relations. Alongside violence and capital, Western logocentric Cartesian sovereign selfhood must also be affirmed. As Jean-Louis Baudry,[23] Ella Shohat, and Robert Stam[24] note, cinema has inherited the tradition of Western art, adapting the Renaissance perspective and the solipsistic, narcissistic, and avowing function alongside it. In addition to Baudry, Donald R. Lowe demonstrates even more pointedly how this perspective and the very perception that it enables is tied to the history of capitalism.[25] This is a crucial dimension as it is incessantly disavowed in normative cinema-going experiences. The world before the spectator — both in and past the cinematic frame — exists in as much as

it extends beyond the spectator's selfhood. The world can only exist in relation to him. That relationship simultaneously produces and reinforces the spectator's subjectivity; the world legitimizes the spectator just as he gives meaning to the world.

The medium specificity of hegemonic cinema in its historical practice has been used to affirm the ego-building enterprise of the viewing subject. Alone in the theater, or even in the hypermedial, ever-mutating world of the twentieth century, the incessantly fraying contours of the subject are constantly shored up by the project of visual culture. But a crucial dimension to Cartesian subjectivity, evident in its relationship to the world before him, is that it is relational. Contrary to liberal humanist ideology, the subject is not self-actualized. In order for selfhood to have meaning, it must be posited against the Other. And that relationship is both inherently and historically hierarchical. When the serial killing monstrosity Michael Meyers dies at the hands of the final girl in *Halloween* (1978),[26] this is another instance where the cinematic Other is quelled in the service of the spectator's lack.

While the history of Western subjectivity did not entirely coincide with the emergence of capitalism, today the two are inextricably linked. This is also to say that Western metaphysics are capitalist metaphysics, and thus, the subject is violence as he is Western, and he is Western as he is capitalist. In her treatise for a new practice of "feminist objectivity," Donna Haraway emphasizes this connection as well. Her object of critique is the "technological, late industrial, militarized, racist, and male dominated societies." Such a society was the US in 1980s during the time in which she was writing.[27] The contention with sexism cannot be separated from the critique of capitalism in the same way that cinematic violence cannot be extricated from industrial cinema. Furthermore, Haraway's practice of feminist objectivity stands in opposition to the science of the post-Enlightenment world, the allegedly "objective" logic that the feminist reminds us, is the very same omniscience that so happens to be male and white, a position that is assumed and normalized, as is the case in Classical Hollywood Cinema.[28] That position is unmarked and takes up the vantage of the God's Eye.[29] The very same omniscience and omnipotence is given to the spectator of violent cinema. One is never merely an objective viewer or a distant observer; the spectator is always embodied within a particular matrix of violence and capitalism.

Against the argument that modern subjectivity is fundamentally violent, some may assert that violence against the Other is an aberration as opposed to the norm. One could

suggest that Cartesian subjectivity is not violent, but merely self-absorbed. It is not that one actively or consciously seeks to harm the Other, it is only that one's own self is more often than not, the active priority. I would in fact argue that this form of passive devaluation is perhaps the most prevalent way in which our subjectivity exercises violence — through the erasure and disavowal of the Other and her suffering. Whether one is simply ignored such as the titular protagonist of *Carrie* (1976), insulted in the way that Walter Burns (Cary Grant) and Hildy Johnson (Rosalind Russell) constantly degrade one another in *His Girl Friday* (1940), tormented as with the unassuming high schooler in *Bang-gwa-hoo-ock-sang* (*See You After School*, 2006), struck with the same force that Rocky Balboa (Sylvester Stallone) applies to Clubber Lang (Mr. T) in *Rocky III* (1983), or killed with the extreme prejudice that Tom Powers (James Cagney) shows his rivals in *The Public Enemy* (1931), in the end, the underlying logic is the same.

And yet, violence is separated from subjectivity in the same way that violence is detached from both action and power. More importantly, violence is often understood as having no fundamental relationship to capitalism. After all, if one were to seek success in one's respective sector, how could that be seen as an act of violence? In reality this is a problem of cognitive mapping,[30] or more precisely, the lack thereof. If one were to rigorously chart the flow of one's labor, one would find that at some point my work is directly connected to someone else's exploitation, just as I myself am being exploited. The acquisition of surplus value that benefits me economically and also affirms my selfhood is identical to the mission of capital, and as such, both result in the same deficit. The desire for social mobility — whether it is economical or egotistical — is a vertical movement and not a horizontal one. To be socially mobile is to "get ahead" as it were and this is to move in relation to someone else. The desire for social mobility is in reality the desire for entry into the upper class. Ultimately, that which simultaneously marks and determines that movement is the accumulation of wealth. And my wealth can only have meaning – as with my subjectivity – in a comparative fashion. The desire for success is at once the desire to elevate oneself over the Other and to do so through the acquisition of private property. An example from *The Ten* (2007) demonstrates this truth of capitalist ideology, where suburban neighbors enter into competition when one man purchases an MRI scanner, which prompts the other to follow suit. The ordeal devolves until both men's properties are strewn with MRI scanners. While the film may suggest that this is

competition gone awry, it is rather the articulation of the entirely logical conclusion of the logic of competition.

The myth of competition informs capitalism.[31] Capitalism is competitive because competition is necessary to the relations of production. To maintain class antagonism, the uneven configuration that behooves the ruling class, the systemic disenfranchisement must be justified. It is valorized through the ideology of competition, an ideology that simultaneously disavows its fundamental violence while keeping its potentiality available by configuring it as the engine of meritocracy. Competitive ideology ultimately validates violence and allows for the systemic exploitation of the working class to be rationally explained. It is not structural disenfranchisement; it is rather that they did not work hard enough. Cinema, as culture industry, as cultural state apparatus, takes up this mission of disseminating capital's violent ideology. It coaxes us and aids us in reconciling the aporia within capitalism, where everyone is simultaneously equal but also not.

THE VIOLENCE OF CINEMA: SPECTACLE AND THE TYRANNY OF NARRATIVE

While this essay attempts to attend to a gap in film studies scholarship, it is also not entirely accurate to claim that film scholars have been uninterested in cinematic violence. Instead, it may be more precise to say that there has been a great deal of interest in cinematic violence, only in an indirect fashion. As opposed to violence, film scholars have attended to spectacle. Violence and spectacle share an intimate and vital relationship to one another, just as they do with the medium of film. Spectacle, as violence, is that which grips the spectator. It is the compelling visual and aural stimulation of the titular bank robbers being riddled with gunfire in *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) or the mass of colliding bodies in *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). Spectacular violence engages the spectator as one of the primary anchor points with which the spectator is sutured into the cinematic experience, as theorized by Kaja Silverman.[32]

Spectacular violence is not always the set-piece of a film, but the set-piece is almost invariably a sequence of spectacular violence, the "money shot"[33] [34] as it were, so crucial to the development of high concept cinema.[35] In the same way that spectacle demands payment by way of price of admission, so too it requires financial investment. As is the case with the aforementioned *Bonnie and Clyde* and the seminal *Jaws* (1975), violence

maintains a reciprocal relationship to the development of special effects. The invention of squibs (small exploding pockets of synthetic blood) were critical to the shocking brutality of *Bonnie and Clyde*, which was part and parcel of a generation of American and Italian films that introduced a new degree of cruel verisimilitude. A more recent, comparable example of this relationship between screen violence and special effects would be the much-lauded and appropriately-named "Bullet time" camera technology used on *The Matrix* (1999) which enabled 360-degree filming. The relationship between film and technology has long occupied scholars, but in the intersection between cinema, violence, special effects, and economics, we find a parallel with Paul Virilio's illustration of how cinema was indebted to the development of military technology.[36] His is another instance where we observe how cinema cannot escape violence.

Spectacle understood as violence is what commercial films share. Spectacular violence is also what, for the most parts, separates commercial films from art cinema.[37] At the same time, because art cinema too hinges on a dialectic of conflict and resolution, it cannot completely evade the fundamental violence of cinema in capitalism. In a similar fashion, spectacular violence extends beyond commercial narrative cinema and bridges it with its predecessor, the early cinema practice identified by Tom Gunning as the cinema of attractions.[38] To this day, spectacle attracts (and as Adorno and Horkheimer would remind us, distracts[39]) — and yet, unlike the films of the Lumiere Brothers, Thomas Edison, and Georges Méliès, spectacle is not in the service of attraction. Spectacle is no longer a self-sustaining organ of the cinema. As cinema moves away from the potentiality of the time-image,[40] so too can we observe that which guides violence. The master of spectacle today is narrative.

By and large, the cinema that is discussed here fits the model of what David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson have named Classical Hollywood Cinema. Classical Hollywood Cinema can best be characterized as a character and character psychology motivated teleological, narrative-based mode of filmmaking.[41] Considered in that regard, it becomes evident that as a mode, Classical Hollywood Cinema is not limited to the US. The majority of commercial narrative cinema internationally aligns with Classical Hollywood Cinema. This is of course not to suggest that neither narrative as a mode, US cinema as an industry, nor cinema as a medium is inherently and essentially violent. However, in historical practice, the dominant mode of filmmaking preferred both US and internationally is indeed violent. To reiterate an earlier point, this is all the more

case considering that the *telos* of Classical Hollywood Cinema is that of conflict and resolution, cinema is violent due to this movement even in the absence of representation of direct physical harm. In regard to the structural requirement of narrative, Linda Williams's theorization of melodrama offers further evidence regarding the violent character of narrative cinema. Williams writes, "Melodrama is the fundamental mode of popular American moving pictures." She continues, "It is the foundation of the classical Hollywood movie."[42] Melodrama thus overlaps with Classical Hollywood Cinema as a description of the most hegemonic form of film, but for Williams the specificity of melodrama is its desire to begin and return to a "space of innocence."[43] This is not to suggest however that films open and close in an identical space. Instead, cinema reflects the general formula of capital, where the endpoint has added surplus value that is produced in the movement through conflict. The pleasure of melodrama is the promise of excess value — similar to the vulgar excess of "body genres"[44] — that can only come as the result of violent acquisition.

Consider the 2006 crime film *Lucky Number Slevin*. A film that details one young man's personal vendetta against the mob following the murder of his father, the scheme of Slevin Kelevra (Josh Hartnett) is extraordinarily convoluted, with hidden identities stockpiled and new revelations for both the characters and the spectators with every scene. The incredibly elaborate plot of *Lucky Number Slevin* makes one wonder if it is worth the effort of both the filmmakers and the audience. In reality, the convolution of *Lucky Number Slevin* is due to the untenability of violence: violence is volatile and must be legitimated. The film achieves this through the logical backflips and loopholes of reason. This is noteworthy considering how instrumentalized and common sense the logic of violence is, which is also to say that the film goes to great lengths to legitimate violence, even though violence is already commonly understood as legitimate. But moreover, *Lucky Number Slevin* is complicated because the complication is goal-oriented. In other words, the serpentine plot of the film serves a legitimizing function as well as a narrative function. The narrative and its numerous twists elicit the promise of a "payoff," as it were; the reward to the spectator for following and making sense of the film. Incidentally, that payoff happens to be the spectacular discharge of explosive violence – a bullet to the head of a vile character. In that sense, the violence of *Lucky Number Slevin* requires narrative, just as narrative requires violence. The question remains as to which of the two motivates the other. Regardless, it is undeniable that the two are inseparable.

In John Boorman's 1967 *Point Blank*, the humor is in how little motivation it takes for Walker (Lee Marvin) to wreak mayhem in the search of an incredibly thin, and thus unreasonable goal. The joke carries over into the 1999 remake *Payback* (Brian Helgeland). While the illogic of the protagonists of *Point Blank* and *Payback* is central to the films, I would identify a similar thread in recently emerging national cinemas, albeit in a less immediately self-aware fashion. Take the related and contemporaneous development of Thai and Indonesian action cinema in the 2000s and 2010s. The two movements, spearheaded by *Ong Bak* (2003) and *The Raid: Redemption* (2011), anchored by stars Tony Jaa and Iko Uwais, mirror the global emergence of Hong Kong cinema in the 1970s through the bodies of Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan. What all three national cinema movements demonstrate is how international film can only compete globally through the masterful display of physical violence. Moreover, Jaa's *The Protector* (2006) and Iwais's *The Raid* demonstrate how very little is needed to serve as character motivation and narrative legitimation for the actors' violence. The minimal plot of *The Protector* has the protagonist searching for his stolen elephant.[45] The 120-minute running time of *The Raid* on the other hand, sees its protagonist ascend an apartment building against wave after wave of deadly assailants. And yet, even though spectacle is the life force of *The Protector* and *The Raid* and despite the fact that their narratives are sparse, the films *still have narratives*. While the films certainly operate as opportunities to showcase the talents of Jaa and Iwais, that virtuosic demonstration of violence must be framed by narrative. Similarly, even though the bodily ability of stars such as Jaa, Iwais, Lee, and Chan are crucial to these films and their respective national cinemas, the actors do not simply appear as themselves. In the same way that these films must have narratives, the actors must perform as characters.

As Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson note, "Character drives classical Hollywood narration."[46] As opposed to modes, movements, and genres where external forces, whether it be the destitution of post-World War II Europe or the crippling domination of colonial forces — films that also often resist and/or critique the capitalist mode of production — characters are the agents of change in commercial cinema. Moreover, in the same way that narrative cinema structurally requires conflict, its characters are of a particular type, not figures of a text[47] but rather characters substantiated by clear psychology[48] and even clearer motives. It is these psychologies and motives that enable the characters to singlehandedly see the narrative to its only logical conclusion. From the

lone assassin [*Le Samouraï* (1967)] to a farmer rescuing the galaxy from imperial tyranny [*Star Wars* (1977)] to an Army Captain preserving the dignity of the samurai [*The Last Samurai* (2011)], the protagonists of cinema have forced change. In this entanglement of character and change, we observe how narrative cinema is enamored with causality in the same way that it is preoccupied with Cartesian subjectivity, in as much as the latter is the agent of the former. If cinema has substantiated any claim, it is that the only change is made possible through force.[49] What hegemonic cinema asserts is that an individual can alter the order of things, but this is an act that elevates oneself at a high cost. In doing so, an ideology that constantly favors the Self but writes off the Other as a necessary expense, is incessantly reproduced.

The pleasure of narrative cinema so eloquently articulated by Laura Mulvey[50] is the indulgence of having one's subjectivity fortified and one's ego assuaged; it is the corporeal experience of viewing simulated violence, as long as it is within a tasteful, acceptable, and ultimately *legitimate* range alongside the reassurance that the world is still such where a single individual can affect history. If Foucault and Gramsci have demonstrated how power is no longer coercive in modernity, then narrative cinema provides an explanation as to why correspondingly, the socialist revolution has not yet occurred. Simply put, the need has yet to be sufficiently felt. As opposed to a fascist exercise of power that is coercive and closes off the horizon of possibilities, capitalist culture keeps those potentialities seemingly opened. Our world has not been saved because as opposed to the world of *Avatar* (2009), it does not yet need to be. At the same time, films such as *Avatar* serve as potential visions into what such a situation would resemble: this is to say that it assures us that if the state of things were to deteriorate enough that it would warrant intervention, then any single individual would be able to decisively bring the crisis to conclusion.[51] In other words, I am suggesting the following as effects of commercial cinema: the world has yet to be recovered because unlike its fictive worlds, our world is not yet in such a dire state to require such a drastic act; one does not exercise one's agency because one has yet to feel that agency being threatened. Narrative cinema has assured its audiences time and time again, that if they needed to be an agent of change that they too — like Luke Skywalker or Frodo Baggins or John Connor or James Bond — could fulfill that role.

Cinema must constantly assure its audience, coddle it even, because it must do its utmost to silence the dread that is constantly bubbling beneath its surface. In the same

way that the theater serves as shelter from the reality that work awaits the laborer the next day (the great irony being that that shelter is precisely what enables them to return to work),[52] cinema quells any lingering misgivings regarding the structural disenfranchisement of capital that are always already evident. It is only with the promise that I may profit from that same subjugation — the accumulation of surplus value in regard to my subjectivity or my private property — that that process can be disavowed and/or tolerated. The relations of production must be upheld, and what better way to ensure them than to convince those within those relations to sustain them on their own backs? That is after all, the lesson of hegemony by consent. At the conclusion of *The Usual Suspects* (1995), Verbal (Kevin Spacey) remarks "The greatest trick the Devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn't exist." The greatest achievement of capitalist cinema is to convince its spectator that he too could benefit from the violence he is subjected to.

CONCLUSION

Capitalism is the accumulation of surplus value through the production and exchange of commodities. In turn, the production of surplus value is neither magical nor natural — it requires a deficit on the part of the actual producer of the commodity, the worker. As such, surplus value structurally requires the active devaluation of an entire segment of the global population, which as the last two hundred years of world history have demonstrated, is the majority of that population. This entirely irrational social structure, where the majority of its inhabitants are disenfranchised, must be rationalized and legitimated. Which is why it is necessary to assure members of the social organization that entry into the ruling class is of such great boon that they would overlook the fact that so many will be barred access. Furthermore, this uneven distribution of wealth is constantly obfuscated; capitalism asserts that it consists of a free market where everyone begins on an even plane. On occasion, the vertical movement from working class to upper class does occur, which gives credence to such ideas. Such instances are however, far and few between. And even if they were not the exception but rather the norm, there would still remain a lower class, which is unacceptable. By and large, the ruling class has continued to occupy one space in capitalism while the working class has inhabited another. This

organization is precisely the relations of production. And those who determine the relations of production also control the means of production. Conversely, those who are subjected to the relations of production also submit themselves to those relations, selling their labor-power at a deficit in the hopes that they too can transcend their current position. But of course, this is not to say that the ruled class will always remain so, or that the only possibility of flight is to join the ruling class.

The structure of capitalism is violent both actively and passively. In the first sense, it physically harms the corporeal bodies of the workers. In the second, it subdues them and limits the potentiality of their labor. Because the structure of capitalism is violent, so too its culture, including the multi-billion-dollar culture industry that is global commercial cinema. In both capitalism and cinema, violence is a fundamental component, which is why it cannot be completely erased. Instead, it can only be mediated through partial concealment, disavowal, deferral, or partition. This process of mediation in turn, where violence remains on the surface, is also part and parcel of its process of valorization. The violence of capitalism is legitimated through the violence of cinema, and cinema achieves this through the production and dissemination of ideology which is in turn achieved through narrative and spectacle.

Through its tools of film form, cinema prolongs the project of asserting that violence is legitimate and unavoidable. According to capitalist cinema, the only possible configuration of its subjects is hierarchical — there can be no horizontal plane of interrelations and coterminous subjectivities are an impossibility. In capitalism, this is the relationship between capitalist and worker, in cinema the relationship is mapped onto the classical protagonist and the diegetic world. In both of these configurations, capitalism and cinema repeatedly sacrifices the Other in order to serve the Western ego of the capitalist subject. One constantly relates oneself to others as Self and Other, which is why the Other can only exist in relation to oneself. In turn, one is *always already capitalizing* on the Other, an act that only enables further capitalization. The Other exists to be exploited and the capitalist subject has already resigned himself to this configuration. One is and continually becomes the subject in capital — produced in the cinema just as one continually actualizes one's own subjectivity.

While this essay has remained theoretical and abstract in its concerns, I also argue that the violence of capitalism and its relationship to cinema is evident in the material reality of historical domination. While critics unsophisticatedly tie the horrible acts of the

Columbine High School shooting with *Natural Born Killers* and the 1997 North Hollywood Shootout with *Heat* (1995) in a rather direct fashion, it would be dubious to suggest that there is absolutely no connection whatsoever. Indeed, the violence of *Battle Royale* (2000) is related to the troubling number of youth incidents in Japan in the late 1990s and 2000s,[53] just as the violence of *Banlieue 13* (*District B13*, 2004) can be understood in relation to the 2005 French riots. All of the above examples are more direct instances where film is in dialogue with its historical context, the familiar assertion that cinema reflects reality. But this essay has further argued that it is not only that films reveal insight regarding the immediate historical context of their production and distribution, but also that cinema speaks to the context of its entire history, which also happens to be the modern history of capitalism.

It is precisely here, both in the unavoidability of violence in capitalism and in cinema, that we find its emancipatory potentiality. Because violence is ever present, it also generates infinite opportunities for its own critique and dismantling. As Marx himself demonstrated, the hope of an alternative sphere was produced by capitalism itself, because capitalism structurally required that which would also be the key to its own undoing: the proletariat. This is also to say that the critique can only emanate from within. The majority of the films discussed thus far have been used as examples to demonstrate the violence of capitalism. I have also thus argued that these films have played a substantial role in the propagation of the violence of capital. In analyzing the role of cinema in the reproduction of capitalist ideology, Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni suggest films can be organized according to their orientation to ideology. Comolli and Narboni present a spectrum of five categories that are distinguished by the degree with which a film either submits to or critiques ideology.[54] At the same time, the two provide grounds for a mode of reading where films can belong to all five of the categories: this is also to say that a film can simultaneously contribute to dominant ideology while also subverting it. I would suggest that in that sense, film mirrors the potentiality of the proletariat.

The foundation for destruction and rebuilding and the potential for an alternative are already present. They must only be actualized. The cinema I have discussed thus far serves for the most part the agenda of the capitalists, but that is not to say that it cannot or does not have a place in dismantling that agenda. I would even suggest their inclusion in this discussion would attest differently. These are films where the emancipatory potential

is perhaps less evident, as the fundamental violence of capitalism is far more obfuscated, transformed into cinematic spectacle. Let us end this conversation with a consideration of cinema where contingency reveals itself more readily. Historical practices of Marxist cinema, whether it be the familiar movements in Russian film or Third Cinema are immediate examples and for good reason. I would like to add that Marxist cinema — or cinema that invokes the spirit of Marx and Engels and their ethical disdain for the way that capitalism grinds humans within its cogs — does not always take an explicit Marxian tendency. The work of South Korean filmmaker Kim Ki-duk for example is a Marxist cinema of a different sense. An explicit evocation of Marxist philosophy or theory is absent in Kim's films. However, nearly all of his films are fundamentally and deeply critical of the social organization, which is in turn characterized by class antagonism. The class antagonism for example of *Nabbeun namja* (*Bad Guy*, 2001) is one that produces violence on real bodies, a circular violence that affects everyone in the filmic world, for the filmic world is also one of capitalism.[55] Through that universal process of victimization, *Bad Guy* produces a coalition of victims that creates new potentialities that resist classical Western interrelations and produces new horizons of being.

Moreover, the violence of Kim Ki-duk returns us to another crucial dimension of film violence — the particularly cinematic dimension. The violence of Kim Ki-duk and other politically-conscious yet violent filmmakers is challenging. This is a crucial dimension that *Screening Violence* touches on but does not fully explore. The controversial violence of Kim Ki-duk — exemplified in the widely circulated reports that viewers vomited during the Venice Film Festival screening of *Seom* (*The Isle*, 2000)[56] — begs the question, why does this violence cause such *violent* reactions? Is this corporeal discomfort, this disgust, repulsion, and abjection the reason why the violence of Kim Ki-duk is referred to as excessive or gratuitous? Does this not imply that the normalized spectacle of violence in commercial cinema that does not (for most viewers) disgust but rather titillate and engage, is both acceptable and meaningful?

What this means is that as long as cinematic violence is directed outward toward the Other and not towards the viewing subject, that it is not excessive. In affecting the viewer corporeally and destabilizing normalized cognitive processes in the viewing of violence, excessive violence *assaults* the viewer. In turn, that violence implicates the viewer, placing them in the position of harm, a position that has been historically displaced but is in reality the viewer's very position, that of the subject affected by capitalism. What films

such as *Seom* and *Nabbeun namja* among others, presents then, is a mode of cinematic violence that can affect us in defamiliarizing manners, a process which both lays bares the dominant intersubjective relationships in capital and prompts the spectator to imagine the possibility of new configurations. Every violent image is another reminder of the fundamental violence of capital. In turn, each image confesses to us that capitalism itself maintains both the possibility and the conditions of its own undoing. Capitalism is violent. Cinema is violent. I am violent. But that does not mean that this must always be so.

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1. *Violence and American Cinema* was a crucial contribution while other scholars have also recently advanced the study of cinematic violence. See for example, Steve Choe *Sovereign Violence* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016), or James Kendrick, *Film Violence: History, Ideology, Genre* (London: Wallflower Press, 2009), or Alison Young, *The Scene of Violence: Cinema, Crime, Affect* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

2. J. David Slocum, "Introduction: Violence and American Cinema: Notes for an Investigation," in *Violence and American Cinema*, ed. Slocum (London: Routledge, 2000), 2.

3. East Asian names will be written in the traditional fashion with the family name first and the given name last.

4. I would suggest that this approach to the representation of violence could be referred to as "media violence" or "violence in the media," which are often the terms that the public discourse deploys. This study on the other hand, includes media violence within the problematic of cinematic violence. Indeed, many of the texts that were invoked in relation to the incidents mentioned above are part and parcel of the phenomenon described here.

5. Slocum, "Introduction," 1.

6. Stephen Prince, "Graphic Violence in the Cinema: Origins, Aesthetic Design, and Social Effects," in *Screening Violence*, ed. Prince (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 25-33.

7. Slocum, "Introduction," 2.

8. Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 1, 1913-1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 2004), 236.

9. *Ibid.*

10. Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt Books, 1970), 46.

11. *Ibid.*, 44-47.

12. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

13. Karl Marx, *Capital: Volume One: A Critique of Political Economy* (London: Penguin, 1992), 293.

14. *Ibid.*, 250.

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*, 254-256.

17. *Ibid.*, 165.

18. *Ibid.*, 270-272.

19. Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in *Lenin and Philosophy and other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 127-128.

20. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 12.

21. Karl Marx, "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1972), 62-65.

22. Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," 243.

23. Jean-Louis Baudry, "Ideological Effects of the Basic Apparatus," in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, ed. Philip Rosen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 289.

24. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, "Introduction," in *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*, ed. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam (New York: Routledge, 1994), 2.

25. Donald M. Lowe, *History of Bourgeois Perception* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

26. I reference *Halloween* in order to invoke Carol J. Clover's seminal *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992) to note that the points of reference are of course, not stable and fixed. But the key point in transferring identification is that the viewing subject and his ego, is always in control.

27. Donna Haraway. "Situated Knowledges," *Feminist Studies* 14:3 (Autumn 1988), 581.

28. *Ibid.*

29. *Ibid.*

30. Fredric Jameson, "Cognitive Mapping," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

31. Karl Marx, "The Illusion Created by Competition, *Capital: Volume Three: A Critique of Political Economy* (London: Penguin, 1992), 293.

32. Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983).

33. Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible,"* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 93-95.

34. See Joshua Gunn, "Maranatha," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 98 (2012): 359–385 for further consideration of the relationship between the money shot and violence in his analysis of *The Passion of the Christ* (2004).

35. Justin Wyatt, *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994).

36. Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception* (London: Verso, 1989).

37. David Bordwell, "The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice," *Film Criticism* 4:1 (Fall 1979): 56–64.

38. Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde," *Wide Angle* 8:3-4 (Fall 1986): 63-70.

39. Max W. Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," in *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Guzelin Schmid Noerr (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

40. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001) and *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

41. David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (London: Routledge, 2003), 12-13.

42. Linda Williams, "Melodrama Revised," in *Refiguring American Genres: Theory and History*, ed. Nick Browne (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 65.

43. *Ibid.*

44. Linda Williams, "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess," *Film Quarterly* 44:4 (Summer 1991): 2-13.

45. The majority of Jaa's dialogue had him demanding, "Where is my elephant?" The lack of diversity was to the point that the English-language dubbing added new dialogue.

46. Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood*, 12-13.

47. Roland Barthes, "XXVIII. Character and Figure," in *S/Z: An Essay* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974).

48. Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood*, 20.

49. I would also propose that mainstream criticisms of representation in cinema oriented around empowerment and the female-driven cinema of *Game of Thrones* (2011-ongoing) and *Haywire* (2011) are merely inversions of the practices of capitalist cinema. To propose empowerment is to still insist on a relationship of power, which is ultimately violent.

50. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16:3 (Autumn 1975): 6-18.

51. Joshua Clover makes a related comparative approach in analyzing *Avatar* and *The Potentiality of Storming Heaven* (2009). While both films intersect in their anti-imperialist sentimentalities, Clover points out how the politics and purposes of the films diverge. In Joshua Clover, "The Struggle for Space," *Film Quarterly* 63:3 (March 2010): 6-7.

52. Horkheimer and Adorno, "The Culture Industry," 109.

53. Andrea G. Arai, "Killing Kids: Recession and Survival in Twenty-First Century Japan," *Postcolonial Studies* 6.3 (2003): 367-379.

54. Jean-Luc Comolli and Jean Narboni, "Cinema/Ideology/Criticism," in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

55. Hye Seung Chung, *Kim Ki-duk* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 104 and Kyung Hyun Kim, *The Remasculinization of Korean Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 135.

56. Grady Hendrix, "Vengeance is Theirs," *Sight & Sound* 16.2 (Feb. 2006): 18-21.