Aesthetics in Distress: Gender-Based Violence and Visual Culture. Introductory Note

Estética em Angústia: A Violência de Género e a Cultura Visual. Nota Introdutória

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Gender-Based Violence

Gender-based violence, a social issue that involves acts of physical, sexual, and/or psychological abuse exercised towards a subject based on her/his/their gender (Boyle, 2019a, pp. 23–25), remains one of the most long-standing and challenging problems of our times. From intimate partner violence to street harassment, from labour exploitation and precarity to workplace mobbing, from disenfranchisement to criminalisation, gender-based violence is a "continuum" (Kelly, 1987). It refers not only to embodied violence but also to political, legal and economic violence perpetrated against women, girls and those whose gender does not comply with the binary categories of heteropatriarchal norms, which might extend to men and boys. Such violence, mostly deriving from hegemonic

masculinity and heteropatriarchy (Connell, 1995; Connell & Masserschmidt, 2005), often preys on and afflicts bodies who are further marginalised by other identity attributes such as sexuality, race, ethnicity, religion, age, ability and so on (Creek & Dunn, 2011; Crenshaw, 1990).

This multilayered issue, therefore, needs to be understood beyond the simplistic dualities of female/male and perpetrator/victim and should be taken into consideration from an intersectional viewpoint, examining socio-political power structures, systemic inequalities and norms in which gender-based violence is perpetuated. Moreover, given the prominent (hyper)visual, virtual and discursive dimensions of our contemporary culture (Agger, 2004; Hall, 1997; Rose, 2014), we are nowadays subjected to the imperative of studying the phenomenon of gendered violence by taking into full consideration its representations and related imaginaries.

Gender-Based Violence Between Visibility and Occultation

The last 2 decades have witnessed an increasing visibility and public awareness of gender-based violence, thanks to feminist, queer and trans* activism, antiviolence efforts at the grassroots level, social media mobilisations, enactments of transformative justice, and the momentous shift incited by the #MeToo (Boyle, 2019b; Clark-Parsons, 2019; Romito, 2005/2008).

The recent recognition of gender-based violence in the sphere of mainstream communication, media and political discourse gained by contemporary feminists is the result of a transgenerational and strenuous work that feminist movements and theorists have been undertaking since the late 1960s. This work has firstly and mostly focused on the need to conceptualise and, subsequently, give a name to patriarchal acts of violence against women and gender-nonconforming subjects, demonstrated by the milestones that have marked the feminist path towards the development of a common understanding and a shared vocabulary on the topic of sexist abuse. Among these, the publication of *Against Our Will* by Susan Brownmiller (1975); Liz Kelly's (1987) elaboration of the idea that gender violence is a "continuum" of interrelated phenomena (e.g., milder patriarchal discrimination, sexual harassment, domestic violence, etc.); the feminist adaptation of the term "femicide" introduced by Diana E. H. Russell and Jill Radford (1992) with their edited book *Femicide: The Politics of Woman Killing.* Feminists' notorious opinions according to which the act of naming is the first essential practice to guarantee the recognition of women's experiences as real, common and different from those conveyed by androcentric language (Spinelli, 2008, pp. 54–61). Moreover, the equally notorious feminist controversies and constant ruminations on the use of expressions such as "gender-based violence" and "violence against women" (Boyle, 2019a; Frazer & Hutchings, 2020) clearly showcase the central role played by the linguistic and textual dimension in

unveiling gender-based violence.

In the meantime, other areas have also contributed to the process of recognising, representing and denouncing gendered abuse. These include visual arts and media, which have significantly enhanced the creation of a feminist imaginary of gender-based violence, supported the practice of social denunciation and facilitated the actual (not only metaphorical) visibilisation of the phenomenon. To the point that we can now talk about a feminist iconography of violence disseminated by artists, media creators and activists. Visual depictions of such violence became especially prominent from the 1970s onwards through plastic arts, happenings and performances in the wake of the increasing politicisation of artistic discourse and the intensification of second-wave feminism (Princenthal, 2019). Feminist artworks include Suzanne Lacy's *Three Weeks in May* (1977), a series of performances, demonstrations, and artworks presented to draw public attention to rape and murder victims of the so-called Los Angeles "rape epidemic". Ana Mendieta's *Rape Scene* (1973) is a performance and photography work where she reenacted the brutal rape of a fellow student[1]. Also, groundbreaking durational performance pieces such as *Rhythm 0* (1974) by Marina Abramović and its forerunner *Cut Piece* (1964) by Yoko Ono, where the artist invited the audience to physically intervene in her body with given props (a scissor in Ono's and 72 different objects in Abramović's case) to test the limits of human's deeds and demonstrate how violent and ruthless one can act on a female body. All have played a crucial role in portraying a large visual and material spectrum of violence. Later examples such as Kara Walker's *The Battle of Atlanta: Being the Narrative of a Negress in the Flame of Desire* (1995), among others, also brought the experiences of sexual violence on Black bodies and enslaved people forward, pointing out intersectionality and the biased representation of violence against women of colour within feminist art. Other visual artistic practices such as photography also contributed to the visibilisation of gender violence, as demonstrated by Nan Golding's famous photographic self-portraits as a bruised survivor of domestic violence, circulated as part of the photo book *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* (1986). Moreover, the potential embedded in visual feminist art is confirmed by the recurring and increasing use that activists make of it. The profusion of artivistic works on gender-based violence that now are part of our visual imagery of the phenomenon is vast. Among other examples, we can mention the murals portraying victims of femicide and pink crosses commissioned by women's movements active in Ciudad Juarez, the infamous city of Mexico renowned for its extreme level of gender-based violence, femicide and disappearances of women and girls; the red shoes symbol introduced in 2009 by the Mexican artist Elina Chauvet with a performance aimed at commemorating victims of lethal gender violence, recreated in hundreds

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[1]Ana Mendieta is one of the most-mentioned figures in the history of feminist art and gender-based violence since her sudden death still stirs controversies. In 1985, Ana Mendieta was found dead outside the 34th-story apartment of her partner and artist Carl Andre, who, many believed, allegedly pushed her out the window following a fight. Andre claimed it to be a suicide and was acquitted of the charges. However, to this day, his exhibitions are protested by those convinced otherwise, given the incident's testimonies and evidence.

of occasions around the world; the iconic reproduction (widely used by activists in the web and physical demonstrations) of female figures with the clothes worn by the protagonist of Bruce Miller's television series adaptation (2017) of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), which came to symbolise women's oppression, totalitarianism and resistance to gender violence.

Notwithstanding this undeniable process of exposure and revelation, gender violence remains invisible in some circumstances and cultural contexts. The changing façade and breadth of violence, accompanied by the intractable depth of digital communications, escalating financial precarity, worldwide political turmoils and environmental crises, ongoing colonial practices of land grab, arm conflicts and the rampant displacements thereof, as well as the recent COVID-19 pandemic, have exposed vulnerable groups to new and newly occulted forms of gender-based violence in sites that are not only homes, streets and workplaces, but also the cyberspace, camps, detention centres, industrial complexes, prisons, borders, and so on.

For instance, recent studies have demonstrated how the developing digital technologies have catalysed and escalated sexual and gender-based violence against women, LGBTQI+ individuals and girls through cyberstalking, monitoring, impersonation, verbal harassment and non-consensual dissemination of intimate visual materials, most of which reduce victim-survivors to silence by creating the fear of physical and psychological safety (Dunn, 2020). The current COVID-19 lockdowns, which prompted economic strains, confinement-based cohabitation, enforced isolation and virtual dependency thereof, have aggravated not only such online attacks but also exacerbated intimate partner violence and child abuse at a physical, mental and economic level, in both heterosexual and LGBTQI+ families behind closed doors (Almenar, 2021; Drotning et al., 2022). In the meantime, the ongoing anti-trans* hate crimes worldwide made 2021 the deadliest year for trans* and gender-diverse people, according to the *Trans Murder Monitoring (TMM)* project (*TMM Update TDoR 2021*, 2021), many of which intersect with racism, xenophobia, misogyny and hate towards sex workers while the others remain unreported or undocumented. Such life-threatening violence against LGBTQI+ individuals has been extremely intensifying yet getting even more inconspicuous in places "far from eyes" such as correctional facilities, detention centres and border camps where the disenfranchised detainees have been further exposed to sexual and gender-based abuse such as strip-search, rape and harassment, as well as to other punishment techniques, ranging from extra policing and deprivation of material needs to solitary confinement (Canlı, 2020; Luibhéid & Chávez, 2020). On another front, accelerating climate injustice and ongoing extractivism as an extension of colonial anthropocentric exploitation have detrimental effects on indigenous women and girls, whose survival depends on natural sources, especially in regions where environmental conflicts, gendered community care, and poverty prevail yet remain off the radar (Desai & Mandal, 2021; Santisteban, 2020; Vergès 2021). Last but not least, although sexual harassment and gender-based discrimination in workplaces have hit the fan in the wake of the #MeToo revelations, androcentric power relations and male

chauvinism still dominate public institutions and academia, and even reported cases of violence keep being swept under the carpet (Ahmed, 2021).

Besides their contextual differences, the common characteristic of such multifarious forms of gender-based violence is their disguised and intricate nature and deep entrenchment in the oppressive triad of heteropatriarchy, capitalism and coloniality. That is why they mostly fall through the cracks of attention, remain hard to reach, or get covered only by a limited number of activist organisations and media outlets. It is precisely what makes visibilisation more important and urgent than ever, as a way to detect, address and counteract the matrix of systemic and structural domination by every possible means, from linguistic to visual expressions, the latter of which shapes the blueprint of this special issue.

Gender-Based Violence, Representability and the Visual

The visual modality has always been crucial to the perpetuation of and resistance to the patriarchal symbolic order from which sexist violence originates. Visual arts and media such as film, painting, plastic arts, comics, advertisement and design have notoriously been recognised as sites for the reproduction of gender-based violence through the biased representation of binary gender categories, the infamous male gaze (Mulvey, 1989; Oliver, 2017), the objectification of feminine/gender non-conforming bodies and the fetishization/spectacularization of violence (e.g., Lopez, 2018; Ussher et al., 2022). Simultaneously, the visual has, over the last half-century, reached the status of a privileged battlefield for cultural interventions carried out by feminist, LGBTQI+, intersectional and decolonial artists and media activists interested in confronting and possibly subverting the aforementioned sexist regime of representation (e.g., Rovetto & Camusso, 2020; Slivinska, 2021).

Despite the undeniable prominence, in contemporary culture, of the representation model based on the use of descriptive and/or symbolic references to the phenomenon of gender-based violence, this mode is not the only possible one in the field of the visual. Certainly, it is not the least controversial. Scholars have been debating for decades on the risks embedded in the practice of representation, which has often been read as inherently violent, given its inevitable propensity to manipulate, distort and exclude (Burfoot & Lord, 2006, p. xv; de Lauretis, 1987). Critics who work at the intersection of trauma and gender studies in visual culture have showcased different opinions on this matter. For some, engaging in practices of representation is essential in the context of feminist art, activism and artivism because it permits denouncing the pervasiveness of patriarchal abuse and overturning its discursive mechanisms (e.g., Chute, 2010; Mandolini & Williamson Sinalo, in press). For others, such as the art historian Griselda Pollock (2013), one needs to identify the dangers of the representation model, which might contribute to the survivor's re-victimisation and the consolidation

of patriarchal patterns or symbolisms. By drawing on the idea of trauma as a rupture of the symbolic order (Hartman, 1995, p. 543), Pollock (2013) praises visual artworks that stress the affective dimension, the one that allows, in her opinion, affirmative aesthetic reconfigurations that foster compassion and change beyond simple recognition (pp. 153–156).

Far from having reached a closure, these discussions need to be further investigated in light of recent trends, events and controversies, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the intensification of the digital turn and the visual literacy of generation Z, all in the field of communication and artistic production. For instance, what is the affective and political significance of today's digitised and thus entirely visualised memorials dedicated to the victims of gender-based violence?[2] What are the implications of posting a black image or a rainbow flag on social media in the aftermath of racist or homophobic violence? How does our collective consciousness respond to the inadvertent dissemination of — and even overexposure to — sexual violence contents popping out our screens rampantly and circulating freely in the deepest of the dark web? In times when the ocular experience is increasingly materialised and three-dimensionalized through augmented and virtual realities, is it possible to create and be the spectator of new visual narratives of violence and survival from the lenses of the female gaze, queer gaze and oppositional gaze[3] (hooks, 1992)?

This Issue of *Vista*

For this issue's thematic section, we aim to select contributions from feminists, activists, academics, artists, independent researchers, and others who work on gender-based violence, its perpetrators and its victims/survivors on all subject matters that merge gender violence and visual culture. These will include case studies and wider scholarly examinations of artistic and media products aimed at sustaining or challenging gender-based violence in the realms of the symbolic, the discursive, the affective and the material. By gathering contributions that touch upon different research fields and investigating cultural or media products distributed in various cultural contexts, we stressed our interest in promoting a transdisciplinary and transcultural reflection on gender violence and the challenges of our contemporary visual culture.

Among studies from other visually-oriented areas (e.g., arts, design, architecture, cinema, performance, media, etc.), we are particularly welcoming contributions that engage with art-based research (ABR). ABR or artistic research are um-

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[2]See works such as http://anitsayac.com/, an online counter and ever-growing monument built to commemorate the cis and trans* women murdered by men in Turkey since 2008. The monument delineates the outrageousness of the vast number of cases but also pays tribute to the victims by naming them and uncovering their stories that are otherwise anonymized on third-page news.

[3]Oppositional gaze is a term coined by bell hooks (1992) to define a possibility of an insurgent and active position against the white male gaze and a tactic for the Black female spectators' right to look.

brella expressions that describe the use by researchers of artistic practices as methodological tools in various phases of their work: data generation/collection, analysis and interpretation, findings' representation and dissemination. Despite not being a particularly recent trend, ABR is still a blooming field that can contribute to the understanding of complex social phenomena that require a holistic approach (Leavy, 2015, pp. 20–21) and an engaging dissemination policy (Leavy, 2015, p. 32), as well as a careful treatment of vulnerable participants (Ward & Shortt, 2020, p. 2), and a specific interest for anti-oppressive practices (Capous-Desyllas & Morgaine 2018, pp. xiv–xvi). Gender-based violence is among the research fields that benefit the most from the employment of arts-based inquiry approaches. That is because research on sexist abuse is inherently interdisciplinary (Mandolini & Williamson Sinalo, in press) and demands a methodological approach that overcomes the boundaries of traditional disciplinary divisions. Moreover, scholars have argued that gender-based violence is deeply rooted in the (re)production of the cultural division and hierarchization between genders (Bourdieu, 1998/2002; Goldner et al., 1990), which makes the inclusion of artistic methodologies that necessarily reflect on the symbolic/affective dimension of the phenomenon crucial in the design of empirical research projects aimed at studying sexist violence. With these media, methods and approaches in mind, in this thematic section, we undertake to expose, analyse, tackle and shed light on contemporary manifestations of sexual and gender-based violence through art and visual communication at large.

The possible aims and implications of such endeavour are manifold. The first is to continue challenging problematic and biased representations of women, queer, trans* and non-binary bodies, which serve as an extension and perpetuation of symbolic violence. That includes a critical look at visual depictions of gender-based violence in media, cinema, arts and material culture, even those that have been (re)produced with the best intentions yet failed to provide a counteractive critique. The second is to contribute to the ongoing debates around changing forms and conditions of sexual and gender-based violence, inquiring how its increasing visibility would potentially pave the way for further awareness and an eventual decrease of the violence rates at a societal level. The third motive is to provide yet another "temporary" academic, artistic and activist "zone" for listening, sharing, caring, and support, as a collective and intellectual locus through which existing experiences can be exchanged while new ideas can be fostered and loomed for further understandings and mobilisations. More generally, our aim is to shift the direction from "what has been" to "what else would be", especially when it comes to the multiple aspects and actors that the practice of violence might contain. While most studies (even most media coverages) on gender-based violence, for instance, focus on the victim-survivors, the question of what happens/should happen to the perpetrator remains mostly unaddressed or contested, though our modern punitive justice system has long proved that "correctional" facilities are able to neither correct nor rehabilitate offenders, but often witness recidivism (Heiner & Tyson, 2017). Therefore, aligning with feminist abolitionists and transformative justice activists, the goal of this issue

is also to open a space for discussing and envisioning new visual models and artistic expressions that can serve not only as a critique and as a means to make violence visible, but also as a re-imagination, relearning and reparation strategy aimed at reshaping the way we deal with violence — maybe even by allowing to project a different justice system (Davis et al., 2022; Levine & Meiners, 2020; Vergès 2021). We hope these discussions will eventually contribute to the greater efforts of (White, Black, Latinx, decolonial, trans*, queer, and indigenous...) feminists whose struggle and dedication have been more daunting, strong and fierce than violence itself[4].

Acknowledgements

Biographical Notes

Ece Canlı is an artist and Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia junior researcher within the cultural studies research cluster at the Communication and Society Research Centre at the University of Minho (Portugal). She is a PhD in design from the University of Porto (Portugal) and was a visiting researcher in the Empirica research group at Aalto University School of Arts, Design and Architecture (Finland). Her work sits at the intersection of material regimes and body politics, specifically, socio-spatio-material constitutions of gender, sexuality, race and other identity categories. In her current project titled "Prison Heterosexual Complex", she investigates spatial, material and technological conditions of queer incarceration from the viewpoint of materiality — design, architecture and emergent technologies in particular. She was a lecturer in the sociology of gender master's programme at the University of Minho and the design programme at the Lusíada University of Porto. She has published in edited volumes released from SAGE, Bloomsbury and Spector Books and in journals such as *Design&Culture* and The *Design Journal*. She is a founding member of the research collective Decolonising Design Group.

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[4]An attribute to the Sojourner Truth's "I Am as Strong as Any Man" as part of her famous speech "Ain't I a Woman?", delivered at the Women's Convention in Akron, Ohio, on May 29, 1851.

of Minho (Portugal), where she is working on the project *Sketch Her Story and Make It Popular. Using Graphic Narratives in Italian and Lusophone Feminist Activism Against Gender Violence* (https://www.sketchthatstory.com/). She worked as an FWO Postdoctoral Researcher at KU Leuven (Belgium) and holds a PhD from University College Cork (Ireland). She authored the monograph *Representations of Lethal Gender-Based Violence in Italy Between Journalism and Literature:* Femminicidio *Narratives* (Routledge, 2021). Among other articles on sexist abuse in contemporary literature and media, she co-edited the volume *Rappresentare la Violenza di Genere. Sguardi Femministitra Critica, Attivismo e Scrittura* (Mimesis, 2018). She is an active member of the Centre for Advanced Studies in Languages and Cultures research cluster on Violence, Conflict and Gender that she co-convened from 2016 until 2019. She is a founding member of Studying'n'Investigating Fumetti.

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