Worlds of Feminism, Queer and Networking Conditions



ism, Queer and Networking Conditions

Marina Gržinić / Rosa Reitsamer (eds.)

Löcker

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Notes

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Virginia Villaplana

Global Representation, Gender and Forms of Violence

The video essay in the digital age

The violence of such conflict cannot be isolated from other expressions of violence. In every militarized society, war zone and refugee camp, violence against women and men is part of a broader continuum of violence that transcends the simple diplomatic dichotomy of war and peace. This continuum of violence resists any division between public and private domains.

Marie Indra (2004)

Gender, non-fiction storylines and fractures

The motivation that drives this essay is to situate a place of action in the representation of gender violence and its fractures, and to attempt to approach the problematic relation between representation and visual culture mechanisms, artistic practices, media discourse, violence and gender: a critical reading of how the exercise of power has deeply influenced the experience of real and symbolic gender violence in the discourse of visual culture. This perspective stems from the deep-rooted conviction that the exercise of violence, and more specifically, the symbolic representation of this violence, situated between cultural and historic memory, involves the emergence of a reality which, owing to its dimensions, goes beyond any interpretation that does not confirm the cultural failure of the modern West.

The manifestations of violence represented in non-fiction storylines and reflections created about violence are not recent, nor do they belong to a certain degree of media opportunism. For a long time in the memory of humanity, in its spheres of social and/or political coexistence, violence has surfaced as an agent that citizens and governments must come up against. In this sense, collective violence includes social violence, political violence and economic violence. The direct violence that women suffer from can be divided into five forms, ranging from physical aggression – many times resulting in death – to sexual, psychological, econo-

mic and symbolic violence. Structural violence is consolidated in the feminization of poverty, wage discrimination, the glass ceiling, the sexual segregation of the job market and the double-triple shift.

In 1975, the artist Cara DeVito made Ama l'uomo tuo. Using early video technology, she recorded the story of her maternal grandmother Adeline LeJudas who. for the first time, appears as testimony of domestic violence in the family environment, an exhibition of patriarchal rules unleashed before the camera as a way of recording the invisibilization of a generation of silenced women. The subjective production of the knowledge and memory of this experience recorded by video technology embarked on a path of visibilization with no return through the narration and exchange of intergenerational personal histories. Two other utopian moments in video were Losing a Conversation with the Parents by Martha Rosler (1977), a video made in tandem with Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained (1977). After these works came How to Sleep at Night or A Simple Case for Torture (1983), where Rosler addresses, through a voiceover narration and an assortment of print media excerpts, cases related to human rights violations, unemployment and the global economy. This gathering of media fragments exposes the support of the US government and its business interests of regimes that systematically use torture. Rosler challenges the US-American press on its role as a disinformation agent through selective news coverage, its use of language and the implicit legitimation of a point of view that justifies the use of torture. The deliberately fractured narrative strategy recalls the fragmentation of the voiceover used in Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained, which situates the female body in a discursive position, in an ideological place of struggle, a psychic place of domination constructed of different levels of demands and gratifications. In the case of Losing a Conversation with the Parents, the staging of an interview that simulates the traditional codes of the television interview presents two of the problems perpetuated by capitalism and patriarchal values: anorexia nervosa and global hunger. The staging of actors and the dialogue between a mother and a father reveal the causes that have made their daughter ill, reflecting the impossibility of comprehending the consequences of the symbolic universe that fashion imposes on the culture of youth consumption. However, the contact of documentary forms with non-fiction storylines and the representation of symbolic violence and gender violence can be traced back to the Sixties and the emergence of the so-called New German Cinema and its ties to the Women's Movement. Frauenfilm was politically committed to the feminist posttions of the period, and its narrative forms emphasized the subjective perspective. From the mid-1970s to the late 1980s, female German directors showed the relationship between state power and its effects on women's lives, and urged them to

become aware of the patriarchal structure encouraged by institutions. This was when the first *Women's Film Festival* was set up (Berlin, 1973), as well as the feminist film culture magazine *Frauen und Film*, 1974, in which Helke Sander, Jutta Brückner, Helma Sander-Brahms and Margarette Von Trotta played key roles. The goal of these filmmakers was to create a platform for spreading film, showing feminism's inclination towards an international movement of women, on the one hand, and on a smaller scale, towards everyday policies about »the personal,« offering a new political vision between the dichotomy of body/State as a consequence of political and social disillusionment after 1968.

Renov situates the period *Post-truth* between 1970–1995 to show the reflexivity of the I through documentary strategies, that is, the appearance of *New Subjectivities* (Renov 1999) in documentary enunciations. The concept of the real pulsates in these documentary statements, a return that Hal Foster analyzes in his essay from the mid-1990s, *The Return of the Real: Art and Theory at the End of the Century*, giving two referents: one comes from Lacan's psychoanalytic theories and alludes to the reality of the obscene, traumatic and abject – that which resists the symbolic, which speaks of an injured body, a raped individual. The other involves the real in a socio-reality understood as a new field of art, in which the real functions as identity or community. To the latter, we would also add a revision of the symbolic forms of violence, history and memory.

The objectivization, media globalization, colonized visual codes, the panoptism of biopower denounced by the philosopher Michel Foucault; scientific taxonomization, social regulation through the visual regime; and the construction of the gaze as a strategy proposed in the 1970s and 1980s were the starting points for revisions based on Laura Mulvey's 1975 text *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, in which she went into the notion of voyeuristic scopophilia in fictional cinema. With regard to this subject I would like to point out that, inversely, the codes governing non-fiction storylines allude to a displacement of the politics of truth that I will discuss again later in relation to Hito Steyerl's text *Documentarism as Politics of Truth*.

In parallel with these revisions, feminist visual practices started constructing autobiographies and video journals, making use of the politics and technologies of gender which, following Michel Foucault and Teresa de Lauretis, they took into account when considering the metaphoric use of the term »technology.« Beyond any sort of techno-determinism, these theorists demonstrated that the construction of body and gender has always been technological.

Therefore, I argue that politically committed aesthetic strategies should go beyond coded fantasies, private and public, socially and visually controlled to give

Virginia Villaplana way to the relation between alternative figurations of subjectivity and the forms of real and represented violence, so as to create new spaces for identity and culture. I believe that identity politics is still a key issue that directs and »produces« subjects and multiple, hybrid and politically differentiated codification agents. From a distant approach, video and cinema technology united with the notion of experimentation, the idea of portrait and oral portrait, and embarked on a path of no return. Feminist visual practices have been developing a critique of gender violence, and following this idea, the biographical resumed a lively strategy until the

Sadie Benning's video A Place Called Lovely (1991) reveals a society in which violence and its diverse forms are a part of our everyday lives. It shows us a racist, homophobic North America. Sadie Benning uses her voice to describe the discovery of violence: one hot, humid July day in 1979, a woman walking along Niskey Lake Road in southwestern Atlanta came across the bloody limb of a corpse. When the police arrived, they found the bodies of two adolescent boys, Alfred Evans and Edward Hope Smith. The bodies of twenty-seven more boys were found in the next few years. Benning's voice explains: »I never met them but I'll never forget those boys, because when those kids were murdered, all of us kids died a little.« (voiceover of the video A Place Called Lovely, 1991) Allusions to the unsettling proximity of firearms are mixed with violent images of video games or clips from films like Psycho. The video ends with a scene in which Benning, in front of a US flag, presents her discourse about the signs of a culture of violence. In another attempt at video as biography, Mindy Faber, in Delirium (1993), constructs the personal experience of the creator's mother via Jean-Martin Charcot's 19th century classification of »feminine hysterics,« which would lay the foundation for modern neurology. While at no point is her mother's position reduced to a simple explanation, Delirium relates her mother's illness to the historic position of women subject to patriarchal culture. Popular culture imagery and humorous iconoclasm are thrown together, juxtaposing episodes of the US-American television series I Love Lucy with photographs of sick bodies taken by Charcot in La Salpêtrière. Delirium stresses the need to understand female mental illness within a political and social context, and the reactions of many women to situations of gender violence. In this sense, Pierre Bourdieu, in the preface to the German edition of his Masculine Domination, published in November 1998, argues:

Against these historical forces of dehistoricization, a mobilizing enterprise should be directed that tends to put history back in motion by neutralizing the mechanisms that have neutralized history. This typically political mobilization, which will open up the possibility of

collective resistance to women, directed at legal and political reforms, opposes both the resignation that drives all essentialist views (biologist and psychoanalytic) of the difference between the sexes as well as resistance reduced to individual acts or those constantly restarted discursive happenings that some feminist theorists advocate: heroic breaks from daily routine, such as the parodic performances Judith Butler is so fond of, surely demand too much for such a small, uncertain result. (Bourdieu 2000: 8)

In reality, rebellion against symbolic discrimination resides in collective forms of organization and action, as well as effective tools, especially symbolic ones, capable of creating fractures in the state and legal institutions that contribute to eternalizing their subordination to forms of real and represented violence by describing, as I have elsewhere (Villaplana 2003), the fragmented narrative forms that make up the discourse of neotelevisión.

Video essay, overrepresentation and the politics of truth

Social violence having to do with rape as a weapon of war is the focus of Karin Jurschick's documentary The Peacekeepers and the Women (2003). The international intervention in Bosnia and Kosovo was coming to an end after years of war. Peace was planned with the presence of the SPOR and KFOR peacekeeping forces. One of the most lucrative areas of the new postwar economy was the trafficking of women, a process of violence that came from Ukraine, Romania and Moldavia. Women were forced to prostitute themselves, their clients oftentimes being the very members of the international peacekeeping forces, who earned 150 Euros per day, half the monthly salary of a Bosnian professor. The investigation carried out by this documentary shows how the trafficking of women became an exercise of violence against women's human rights. Testimonies from the peacekeeping forces and nightclub owners, and the individual testimonies of the women clearly describe that the presence of the international forces in Bosnia and Kosovo was an important factor in the rise of prostitution. On their part, Calling the Ghosts by Mandy Jacobson and Karmen Jelinèiè, 1996, and Daughters of War by Maria Barea, 1998, are two other documentaries which, in the mid-1990s, suggested the need to fight for the political violence of rape to be recognized as a war crime. Calling the Ghosts tells, in the first person, the story of two women, Jadranka Cigelj and Nusreta Sivać, who lived in Bosnia-Herzegovina until they were captured and deported to Omarska, one of the Serb concentration camps, where they were systematically raped and humiliated by their Serb captors, along with other

Croat and Muslim women. The documentary *Daughters of War* explores the context of the Peruvian guerrilla war, where norms of coexistence have been destroyed, and violence and abuse of women have become new social norms of conduct. Through the lives of Gabriela and a group of friends made up of 17-year-old girls in Ayacucho, we see how these survivors reflect on the effects of the civil war that took place in Peru during the Eighties, where drugs and poverty marked an entire generation wrapped up in the trauma of their country's war-ravished history.

Gender violence as political violence has multiple, heterogeneous problematics. It includes the physical, sexual and psychological violence that occurs within the family or any other interpersonal relationship. It also includes rape, abuse, sexual abuse and sexual harassment in the workplace, educational and/or public health institutions, as well as violence exerted because of the victim's ethnic group or sexuality: torture, the trafficking of individuals, forced prostitution and kidnapping, among others. In the media news discourse, the stereotype of the victim, just as the sexual stereotype, appears as an overrepresentation of women within gender conflicts. Women are more personified, more close-up shots are taken of them, and they are more likely to be the focus of sensationalist coverage. As Marian Meyers points out in her book News Coverage of Violence Against Women, the news is part of the problem of violence against women if it represents victims as being responsible for the abuse (Meyers 1997: 117), or when the news excuses the aggressor because whe was obsessed, whe was in love or some other such thing, and then it represents the aggressor as a monster or a psychopath when it reports on this situation of conflict, ignoring the systematic nature of violence against women. In these cases a norm of visibility of violent acts is established, considered as »natural,« whereby the public - violence as a reality people suffer from - intermeshes with the private - the privacy of abused individuals. The story - whether in print, radio, advertising or television - becomes ostentatious, almost obscene when it promotes a hypertrophy of listening and watching.

Gender violence in Spain has of late taken on a greater public dimension than in the past, due to the profusion of interpretations made by different sources – this is what is addressed in the documentaries 10 años con Tamaia by Isabel Coixet (2003), Amores que matan by Icíar Bollaín (2000) and Empezar de nuevo by Lisa Berger and Claudia Hosta (2001). A similar situation occurs in Mexico and Latin America, where preventative, non-punishable laws have proliferated, although it is the only region in the world with a Convention against All Forms of Violence against Women. This is where the phenomenon of femicide has broken out, the murder of women for reasons related to their gender. I had to include and articulate the theoretical contributions about memory and trauma, subjective and techno-

logical, in which film narrations, video graphic stories and incomplete stories were presented like an unfinished story via interdisciplinary counter-images positioned against the overrepresentation that the media focuses on from a single point of view. In other words, it is a question of considering other cycles where the representation of the relations between violence and gender are situated between the narrative strategies and the telling of the facts via non-fiction storylines. Regarding this subject, the documentary by Frederick Wiseman, Domestic Violence, 2001; Macho by Lucinda Broadbent, 2000; and the animated documentary short film Survivors by Sheila M. Sofian, 1997, explore the cycle of domestic violence in two different societies, the United States and Nicaragua. These works, which employ documentary strategies, suggest dynamics of social support via the monitoring of work groups on domestic violence. That memory then acts as a form of representation by which an invisibilized collective history is reconstructed in the circle of blood and shit.

Intrafamily violence and childhood violence are the central themes of the documentary *Loud and Clear / Laut und deutlich* by Maria Arlamovsky, 2001. In them, the interview space is defined as an area of therapy and appropriation of experience through biographical narration in front of the camera, without showing the dialogue between interviewer and interviewee.

Family and violence, tradition and cultural memory also come together in Jean-Marie Teno's Le mariage d'Alex, 2002. The dramatic and veiled reality of polygamous marriage in Cameroon are revealed through a delicate look at the wedding ceremony and the wedding night - rituals of customs and rites that speak of submission and the position of women and men in patriarchal society. Tracey Moffatt also addressed this situation around 1987 in Nice Coloured Girls, through experimental fiction exploring the attitude of urban Aboriginal women in Australia and male supremacy. In this film, Moffatt develops a postcolonial criticism based on the urban ritual of picking up white men. The film contrasts the relationships of Aboriginal women with their »colonizers« some 200 years ago with the attempts of urban Aboriginal women to reverse their fortunes. Nice Coloured Girls uses the plausible juxtaposition of images and a voiceover that reads extracts from the diary of a colonizer to question the representation of the so-called »Aboriginal Cinema.« The documentary Señorita extraviada (Missing Young Woman) by Lourdes Portillo, 2003, explores a system of gender violence outside the family, centered ⁰ⁿ the idea of disappearance. Since the film was shot in 2002, over three hundred women have died and the disappearances continue. As a result of the publicity that the film is starting to get, now the bodies of the disappeared women are simply not found, and both Portillo as well as the organizations involved in this struggle have

received threats. In this sense, gender is a place where – or through which – power is articulated and as Joan W. Scott proposes, gender is involved in the actual construction of power. (Scott 1992) Señorita extraviada does not offer solutions - it only presents the facts; it is the Mexican government that has to provide a solution. Thus, Portillo issues an appeal to sign a petition to be sent to the president of Mexico and the governor of Chihuahua: »Solve the terrible crimes committed against our women in Ciudad Juárez, which both levels of the government are avoiding.« The Ciudad Juárez murders are currently being repeated with identical characteristics in Chihuahua, Nuevo Laredo, Nogales, Zihuatanejo and Guatemala: non-fiction storylines that keep popping up in a dramatic way and that behind these lines you the reader are now interpreting, mark this plot.

In this range of approaches, the notion of gender (Colaizzi 1990) has appeared as a key element in gender studies, political theory, cultural studies, film narrative, sociology, studies deriving from communication theory and social education, cultural anthropology, aesthetic critical theory, post-Western and post-colonial studies, studies of visual culture and the positions of queer feminist criticism recently revisited and centered on violence. Failing to take gender into account in the study of political violence is a dead end, as today, gender violence continues to be a democratic practice. Gender entails looking at sexual difference considered as social construction - it means an alternative interpretation to the essentialist interpretation of feminine and masculine identities. The concept of gender makes the socio-cultural organization of sexual difference the central axis of the political and economic organization of society. That is, gender discourses have constructed the various cultural representations that have originated and reproduced popular archetypes of femininity and masculinity. Over time, these have played an important role in the reproduction and survival of social practices, beliefs and behavior codes differentiated according to sex. However, the gender discourse of this new century, despite its chance to adapt to socio-cultural changes, is still not founded on the principle of equality. And this inequality is one of the central causes of violence.

The center of the definition of gender will lie in the all-embracing connection of two propositions: that gender is a constitutive element of social relations based on the differences perceived between the sexes and that it is a primary way of representing power relations. In this sense, documentary work during the Eighties and the Nineties meant exploring the concept of gender. Red Sari by Pratibha Parmar (1988) portrays the racial and cultural conflict in Europe's major cities. On a cultural level, the film offers a post-colonial reflection of the murder of the young Kalbinder Kaur Hayre in 1985. Violence against Asian women in European cities is taken from the public sphere to the private sphere. To do this, the voiceover is

constructed as an intersubjective enunciation of the denouncement of racism. Unlike approaches about sex that have spread around queer theory, it is interesting to note that queer feminist texts, in this case explored in Red Sari, underline the question of race, gender and class through verbal enunciation, adopting a poetic register. To do this, Parmar constructs a voiceover that acts as the focus of the account of violence, showing that representation of violence comes from both gender and social conflict, and in this case racial conflict as well. In the Nineties, the director Pratibha Parmar adapted, using documentary forms, Alice Walker's novel Possessing the Secret of Joy. The realm of the symbolic and the relation between real and represented violence serve as a connection to Ursula Biemann in Writing Desire, 2000. This videographic essay on the ideal screen of the Internet shows the global circulation of bodies from the »Third World« to the »First World.« The emergence of new technologies and with them, the Internet, has accelerated these transactions. Biemann proposes a reflection on the political, economic and gender inequalities obvious in these exchanges, simulating the gaze of one looking for a docile, traditional, pre-feminist partner on the Internet, the observer's implication in a new voyeurism replete with sexual consumption. The documentary forms of the last decade of Post-Vérité are defined as a site of conflict, which has correctly brought up two mutually exclusive questions: that the ambition driving the documentary is that of finding a way to reproduce reality without detours or manipulations, and that this pursuit of a non-adulterated reality is useless. Not only in recent years, but throughout history, the task of formulating ideas, values, symbols, metaphors and rhetoric, the task of appropriating reality - both on the imaginary and symbolic level as well as on the practical and emotional level - has been tied to a more violent, traumatic and long-lasting task, many times invisible and unrepresentable, as social psychologists point out, which is that of disciplining: the production of sensual-sexual features, the production of the necessary bodies-spaces, the amnesias, the fears, in short the historical production of human bodies, which enables us to speak of the production of sensibilities and aesthetics - the colonial aesthetic, modern aesthetic, revolutionary aesthetic and neoliberal aesthetic. With this in mind, we adopt the reflection posed by Hito Steyerl in her text Documentarism as Politics of Truth that the documentary, in its role of structuring and intervening in the social sphere, adopts biopolitical tasks. (Steyerl 2005) Thus, action through symbolic products can be essentially developed in the terrain of culture, and this is where mechanisms of diffusion will have to be constructed that allow a new way of seeing and contribute to revealing the deceits of media hegemony. Documentary forms in a context like Spain have to assume the function of biopolitical governmentality, which Steyerl situates in representation, a task which

should not exclusively be assigned to the mass media, since artistic practices and ways of doing things are a space of symbolic exchange, proliferation of representations and production of cultural knowledge.

This text is dedicated to my mother, for so many years of words.

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