Violent Depictions
Violent Depictions
Representing Violence Across Cultures

Edited by

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface ............................................................................................................................ vii  
Acknowledgements ....................................................................................................... x  
The Violence of Representation  
Axel Fliethmann ......................................................................................................... 1  

## Part I: Women and Violence ...................................................................................... 17  
Fracturing the Self: Violence and Identity in Franco-Algerian Writing  
Trudy Agar-Mendousse ................................................................................................. 18  
“A Big Happy Family”: Violence and Displaced Identities in Italo-Australian Fiction  
Susanna Scarparo .......................................................................................................... 32  
“Fear and Fascination”: Women, ETA and the Crisis of Masculinity in Contemporary Spain  
Stewart King .................................................................................................................. 47  
Feminist Terrorists/Terrorist Feminists: Tracking the Rise of the Violent Feminist Threat  
Amanda Third ............................................................................................................... 67  

## Part II: Visual Violence .............................................................................................. 89  
*Mobbing*: A Cinematic Indictment of Psychological Violence against Women in the Workplace  
Bernadette Luciano .................................................................................................... 90  
Bertolucci’s *The Conformist* from “Rites of Passage” to Ritual Blood Sacrifice  
Raffaele Lampugnani ................................................................................................. 105
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table of Contents</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constructions of Violence and Feminised Masculinity in the Cinematic Ghetto</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah McDonald</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part III: The Ghosts of Violence</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oedipal Ghost: The Naturalisation of Violence in Contemporary Spanish Cinema</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ramón López Castellano</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cannibalistic Encounters: Discourses of Violence from Columbus to Ridley Scott</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roberto González-Casanovas</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Exception and Violence of Law in Kafka and Coetzee</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steele Burrow</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Woman Who Kept Silent: Remembering and Reconciliation in South Africa</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barbara Russell</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Contributors</td>
<td>204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index</td>
<td>206</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Compiling a book about violence is both ambitious and daunting in that everything and anything may come under the rubric of violence in a society that is by and large addicted to the images of violence that are an inescapable part of contemporary reality. Indeed, in the wake of recent international events, many have come to accept the perpetration of violence as a morally acceptable and just enterprise towards world peace. But what is violence? How do we identify something or somebody as violent? Is violence justifiable? If so, under what circumstances? In an attempt to avoid the limitations implicit in endeavouring to provide answers to these questions, we have chosen an approach that is deliberately wide-ranging and inter/cross-disciplinary to encompass a variety of cultural products (media, fiction and film) from different geographical contexts, such as Italy, France, Germany, Spain, Algeria, Brazil, U.S.A. and South Africa. The clear objective of this approach is to create a dialogue between different national contexts and scholarly disciplines.

Most research on violence conducted by social scientists and policy makers generally analyses cause and effect relationships while striving to construct a theoretical framework to explain why people behave violently. In contrast, within the humanities, most contemporary studies on violence focus on its manifestation as part of present-day popular culture, scrutinising everything from violence in television and mainstream cinema to the activities of comic book heroes and video game characters. In such studies, contemporary popular, mass-produced culture is understood as the site that feeds our obsession with the titillating images that correspond to a public desire to witness violent acts. Popular culture has become a territory of struggle between images of “strong” violence, which challenges the receiver and forces him/her to engage with alternate realities or reveals uncomfortable truths, and “weak” violence that panders to the whims of the passive mass, distracting them from any meaningful engagement with cultural texts.

While the focus on popular culture is a useful contributor to the analysis of cultural representations of violence, it also limits our awareness of violence to a restricted and predetermined set of cultural products, when in fact violence forms an integral part of our society at every cultural level. In order to break with the primacy of analysing violence through its manifestations in popular culture, Violent Depictions examines aspects of the cultural, social, political and personal representation of violence across varied cultural registers with the
intention of interrogating who represents whom, for what purposes, and in what contexts.

Violent Depictions is a reflection on the relationship between violence and representation and includes a number of thematic categories such as youth violence in films, violence against women in literary and cinematic texts, gendered representations of terrorism, the violence of colonial encounters and of the remembering of institutionalised violence. As such, Axel Fliethmann’s essay “The Violence of Representation” functions as an introduction to the general focus of the collection and explores the theoretical practice of connecting violence and representation. The essays are grouped under three sections that highlight the central thematic threads of the collection. These divisions have been chosen to give cohesion to the varied chapters while retaining the emphasis on the diversity of cultural contexts, social themes and texts analysed.

The first section, Women and Violence, deals with multiple understandings of violence by and or against women and reflects upon the role of violence in the construction of gendered identities. Cinematic representations of violence are the dominant preoccupation of the essays grouped in the second section, Visual Violence. As previously mentioned, the analysis of violence is often linked to mainstream popular culture, especially television and cinema. The essays in this section, however, discuss films that, often due to their cultural context, would not normally be interpreted as mainstream cinema and are more likely to fall into the category that is generally termed art house. Each of the essays reflects on how violence may challenge the assumptions of the viewer through undermining the traditional cinematic representations of violence (Luciano, Lampugnani), or via the manipulation of such representations (McDonald).

In the volume’s final section, The Ghosts of Violence, the essays provide an insight into the ways in which violence is remembered within specific institutions or cultural practices. State repression and institutionalised aggression are examined in relation to cultural contexts as diverse as Franco’s Spain, the discovery of the New World and the legacy of violence in South Africa. Each chapter (to different degrees) analyses the processes of remembering and representing the effects of past violence within their national contexts in the present.

Through the breadth of the essays contained in this collection, Violent Depictions investigates and assesses depictions of violence in order to understand the role these representations play in articulating fears, desires, agency or lack thereof. In so doing, the volume analyses how violence not only challenges and contests but also creates national, cultural and gendered identities within and across different social contexts.

Sarah McDonald and Susanna Scarparo, August 2006
Notes

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Unless otherwise indicated, translations from the Italian, French, German, Spanish and Portuguese are by the authors of the individual essays.
THE VIOLENCE OF REPRESENTATION

AXEL FLIETHMANN

The notion of the “Representation of Violence,” as well as the title I have chosen for this chapter, “The Violence of Representation,” share the same distinction. In both cases the distinction between representation and violence is hidden by the grammatical structure. But although the genitive form might suggest otherwise, neither term is possessed by the other. To look at the distinction as a distinction I have to change the title to “Violence and/or Representation.” The following comments will circulate around the conjunction/disjunction, the “and/or” between violence and representation.

Both terms are antonyms. Their negation has to stick to the terms: thus re-presentation is negated by the prefix mis-representation, violence by non-violence. Whereas on the one hand, traditional semantic oppositions—light vs. dark, true vs. false, good vs. evil or civilisation vs. nature—seem to have a structural function in Western discourse, antonyms, on the other, seem to point us to aporias of Western discourse. Rather than being a structural element of the discourse, they inherently process the limits of discourse.

I. Violence

One might argue, for example, that the concept of violence defines the limits of the judicial discourse. Walter Benjamin in his essay “Critique of Violence” suggests that every critique of violence has to deal first and foremost with the distinction of law (Recht) and justice (Gerechtigkeit). Benjamin further distinguishes purpose (Zweck) and means (Mittel) as the main elements of the law. Violence now should only be dealt with within the realm of means, not within the realm of purpose. Benjamin then points towards the aporia that lies in the question of “how to justify the means” (Benjamin 1991, 196). And his answer will transgress the judicial discourse to overcome an inherent indecisiveness—that of justifying the means by means of justification—by introducing the concept of “mythic violence” (196). Jacques Derrida, in his reading of Benjamin’s “critique of violence,” has shown another form of transgression for overcoming the aporia spelled out by Benjamin. Derrida’s
distinction between _force de loi_ and _violence de loi_ (Derrida 1991, 12-13: the force of law which is deemed to be justified, and the violence of law, which is deemed to be unjustified) points to the same structure of inherent indecisiveness, but transgresses the line of distinction by explicitly overlapping it with his own methodological approach. The paradox thus reads: the law lends itself to deconstruction, justice doesn’t. Hence justice is deconstruction (30). In addition, for Derrida, one has to admit that no interpretation is without violence; violence and readability form a connection that share a structure of aporia, but this time not just referring to the readability of layers of judicial texts but possibly of any text.

Derrida’s interpretation already touches upon the question of representation. To round out these introductory comments, let me quote Giorgio Agamben, who has shown the same paradox referred to by both Benjamin and Derrida at work in that oldest of written documents, Pindar’s Fragment 169. The fragment describes how _nómos_ as sovereignty creates a connection between _bia_ (violence) and _díkē_ (justice) and through this connection drives them into a state of indecisiveness (Agamben 2002, 41).

The paradox of violence as briefly spelled out so far does not disappear if one turns to the semantic distinction in various languages. Although the German word _Gewalt_ means both force and violence, the semantic distinction in the English or French language between force and violence is obviously caught up in the same paradox, which also shows up in the etymology of these words: violence comes from the Latin _violare_, its stem deriving from the Latin _vis_, meaning force. Violence is thus explained as the exercise of force, whereas force, from Latin _fortis_, carries in Latin also the meaning of violence, among others (such as strength, power, etc.).

And perhaps more importantly, the paradox of violence does not disappear if one turns away from the political or judicial discourse that has predominantly established the distinctions according to which western discourse has traditionally discussed the question of violence. The academic discipline of sociology, which has added probably the most thorough as well as prolific research to the debate on violence in recent years, still seems to grapple with the paradox of violence. Since the 1990s, especially in sociology, there has been an impressive as well as unexpected increase in studies concerned with, to stick to the sociological terminology, the “phenomenon” of violence. The surge in research on the topic of violence could be seen as unexpected since the topic traditionally has been overlooked in sociology, partly because of the discipline’s strong inclination toward the prevalent theories of modernity. It seems that the majority of sociologists strongly believed in a successful process of modernisation, which at its core saw the progress of rational enlightenment and democratic values through means of communication being responsible for a
general decline of violence within western societies. Norbert Elias’ book *The Process of Civilization* could be seen as one of the canonical texts in this regard. In this book, written in the 1930s, Elias describes the changing historical standards of a set of behaviours and their underlying psychological make-up that occurred parallel to the socio-economic changes and refigurations of political power in the western world over the past thousand years. The political process of centralisation during the time of absolutism, which caused a growing interdependence among social players, partly caused through the rise of the monetary system, partly through a growing administration to centralise tax revenue, legal rights and military power, produced at the same time a strong notion of social distance, self-control, pacification and regulation of affects among the social players. This psychological make-up has since become habitual for the western world. As a result, physical violence in particular has slowly been excluded from the standards of social conduct (Elias 1976, 369).

Looking at Elias’ book not from within the context of its time but from within a wider context, his findings can easily be related to general ideas that have shaped the enlightenment, a period which has been repeatedly described as the basis for modern societies: Bildung vs. violence, education vs. divine right, positive laws vs. natural laws, rational thought vs. traditional belief or society vs. inclusion/exclusion of social players. And looking at this wider historical context there have been only a very few theorists who attacked the very basis of modern western societies. Horkheimer and Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, for example, made the very forces that drove Enlightenment also their nemesis: “In multiplying violence through the mediation of the market, the bourgeois economy has also multiplied its things and its forces to the point where not merely kings or even the bourgeoisie are sufficient to administrate them: all human beings are needed” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2000, 33). And it was still in the 1990s that Zygmunt Bauman re-enforced this view by noting that his book *Modernity and Ambivalence* would only add “historical and sociological flesh around the ‘dialectics of Enlightenment’” (Bauman 1991, 17).

In his *Reflection on Violence* (1908), Georges Sorel had already accused every bourgeois philosophy of being incapable of understanding the phenomenon of violence, since bourgeois philosophy has traditionally regarded violence as a relic of the times of barbarism that eventually would disappear if the proper and promised historical progress of enlightenment could be sustained (Sorel 1981, 82). But Sorel did not investigate this question further since his political essay was looking at legitimising proletarian violence for a political cause that the “new” Marxist movement he supported sought to establish as just. Besides the questions of legitimate or illegitimate violence, or the problems of theorising violence from within the context of modernity, there has been a continuously growing interest in the topic of violence linked to the cultural and
political changes of the time. The first rise in interest could be witnessed in the 1960s, triggered by the student revolt, colonial wars of liberation and the Vietnam War; but the debate was still centred on the state monopoly of violence. This debate was prolonged in the 1970s parallel to the increasing rise of domestic terrorism in Europe. Only since the 1980s has individual violence become a more prominent topic in sociology (cf. Imbusch 2000, 24). A good survey on the research of the topic of violence has been recently published by Heitmeyer and Soeffner. Heitmeyer is the director of the Institute for Interdisciplinary Violence and Conflict Studies, established in 1996 at the University of Bielefeld. The book assembles all the theoretical efforts which have been undertaken in the last decade to address the phenomenon of violence. The concept has been put under surveillance from seemingly all possible perspectives: direct and indirect violence, violence against persons or against things, structural, cultural and symbolic violence, psychic violence, mental violence, instrumental or expressive violence, hidden or open violence. The list is endless. A second list could concentrate on agencies of violence: the state monopoly of violence, class structure and violence, institutions and violence, individuals and violence, etc. Investigating violence as a ubiquitous contemporary phenomenon seems to preserve but also conceal the abstract question of indecisiveness in favour of empirical studies, which operate on a rather normative concept of violence to pursue further case studies. But the shift from the political and judicial discourse to the discovery of violence in all spheres of modern society disseminates the problem rather than addresses it. Consequently even after a decade of intensive interdisciplinary research on the topic the opening remarks of Heitmeyer’s book echo the problem of ambiguity: “The normal case of violence is ambivalence …” (Heitmeyer and Soeffner 2004, 11). Nothing seems to have happened since the days of Pindar. Violence still escapes definite description or at best allows for a self-contained description: “The procedures that keep men’s violence in bounds have one thing in common: they are no strangers to the ways of violence” (Girard 1977, 23).

II. Representation

In classic Latin the concept of representation does not play a significant role in philosophy. It is to be found in the context of rhetoric, especially in the *ars memoria*. Representation here means to imagine vividly something absent, something not present.

Throughout history the concept has then been adapted in various areas. The most common meanings of representation (within a very complex semantic field) are the following:
The most powerful concept of representation to reach into modernity was developed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Its main feature—the coincidence of representation and signification—stems from the adaptation of the concept to the realm of logic. The Parisian Logic of 1500 establishes William Ockham’s forms of representation as a dogma for philosophical studies: it distinguishes between objective, effective, formal and instrumental representation. Signification and representation refer to each other in all these forms of representation, but their relation is still seen as different from each other (cf. 797-800). The philosophy of René Descartes will then conflate signification and representation indiscriminately; at least this has been one of the most powerful lines of reception of Descartes’ work. I am not going to argue here in favour of Descartes and against a reception that has made him via simplification the founder of modern “representationalism.” I am also not going to argue for an understanding of the historical complexity of the concept itself. Although Descartes hardly ever used the word representation as a central category of his philosophy, as a verb—to represent—it figures quite strongly. And it is here that representation and signification are conflated. Most memorably it was Foucault who made Descartes’ philosophy responsible for “our” understanding of representation: ideas and images represent material objects, but neither the form of the idea, nor the form of the image touch upon the truth of the representation as such. The truth of a representation lies in the truth of the idea, not in the truth of the represented.

And even if everyone were in agreement, nevertheless their beliefs would not be enough, for we never, for example, become mathematicians by remembering all the demonstrations of others unless we are also capable of solving any kind of problem that may be proposed, nor do we become philosophers by reading all the arguments of Plato and Aristotle, for if we cannot ourselves reach a firm judgment concerning whatever is at issue, it would appear that we are not devoting ourselves to science, but to history (Descartes 1961, 9).

The means of representation seem to have gone undercover in the name of mathematics, or as Foucault put it: they have been neutralised:

This being so, the written word ceases to be included among the signs and forms of truth. … Language has withdrawn from the midst of beings themselves and has entered a period of transparency and neutrality (Foucault 1970, 62).
Where in all this lies the aporia of representation? The transparency of the very means through which something is represented seems to have gone long ago if we consider late nineteenth century Nietzschean scepticism of language as a correction to the transparency claim, or further into the twentieth century the questioning of the materiality of all forms of representation in the name of media studies. One can hardly accuse the last century, drifting from the so-called “linguistic turn” to the “pictorial turn,” of blindly prolonging the classical Cartesian notion of “representationalism.” Nevertheless the aporia of representation is far from being eliminated from today’s descriptive exercises. Rather the intellectual movements of the linguistic and the pictorial turn constantly remind us of the different forms of possible descriptions, significations, representations.

It seems that even if we could cut through all the layers of representations that have enfolded an “object” over time, the very first representation of something already seems to evade unambiguity and only reveals itself as a representation of a representation. And the problem only intensifies if the means of representation and the represented become a distinct problem within the concept itself: we cannot represent a signification while signifying a representation at the same time. Every representation is also a presentation of its signification. And every signification is a series of representations.

III. De Sade

How, after all this, could it not be a desperate act of violent representation to try to find a place where representation and violence meet? And what, if anything, would this place have to offer?

Since our theories of modernity have not produced copious ways of describing violence but rather have produced copious ways to confine violence as the opposite of discourse there is always the possibility of turning to fiction. And indeed de Sade’s *The Hundred and Twenty Days of Sodom* could be the place to visit if the style (stylus) of violence is to be taken up. But it is not just the status of fiction which makes de Sade’s text an interesting prospect. His work was also written at the core period we regard as “our” modernity and has been matched from various theoretical points of view to the intellectual efforts of his contemporaries. Jacques Lacan has noted of de Sade that “it is precisely the Kantian criteria he advances to justify his positions that constitute what can be called a kind of anti-morality” (Lacan 1992, 78). Lacan suggests in particular: “If one eliminates from morality every element of sentiment, if one removes or invalidates all guidance to be found in sentiments, then in the final analysis the Sadian world is conceivable—even if it is its inversion, its caricature—as one of the possible forms of the world governed by a radical
ethics, by the Kantian ethics as elaborated in 1788” (79). And Žižek has emphasised in a reading of Lacan’s odd coupling of Kant and Sade that “it is not Kant who was a closet sadist, it is Sade who is a closet Kantian” (Žižek 1998, 13). But I am not interested in questioning violence in the context of ethics since the philosophy of ethics is in close alliance with the legal discourse. More interesting from a general perspective is that there are several attempts from different angles to find analogies between Kant, who undoubtedly has been made the canonical philosopher of modernity, and Sade, whose works have been censored and were left unpublished for nearly a century, although both authors seem to engage in similar principles.

Departing from an epistemological as well as representational rather than an ethical question, Foucault has also emphasised an affinity between the two authors. And again it is Kant who seems slightly advanced in comparison to Sade’s oeuvre, although both authors mark the threshold of modernity:

In this sense, Ideology is the last of the Classical philosophies—rather as Juliette is the last of the Classical narratives. … Confronting Ideology, the Kantian critique, on the one hand, marks the threshold of our modernity; it questions representation, not in accordance with the endless movement that proceeds from the simple element to all its possible combinations [as in de Sade — A.F.], but on the basis of its rightful limits (Foucault 1970, 263).

In both cases the odd couple is not regarded with respect to the different genres in which they composed their writings. Both cases subsume their analogies between Kant and Sade under a master-discourse: ethics or modern epistemology. Both interpretations in a positive sense also employ what Derrida has called the necessity of violence in every interpretation. I would like to approach the question of violence and representation from a slightly different angle: fiction or better Literature. One could hope that Literature would bring to light an alternative route to the distinction than that which theory has mapped out for us. And of particular interest could be the genre of the novel since it has been described as the literary predecessor of sociology (Lepenies 1985, 171; Feyerabend 1984, 48).

As most of the aesthetic theories in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century excluded the novel as an art form for its lack of form, so Kant excluded the novel in his Critique of the Power of Judgement:

Novels, sentimental plays, shallow moral precepts, which make play with (falsely) so-called noble dispositions, but in fact enervate the heart, and make it un receptive to the rigorous precept of duty and incapable of all respect for the dignity of humanity in our own person and the right of human beings (which is something entirely different from their happiness), and in general incapable of all firm principles …” (Kant 2000, 155).
Since novels are of no use for strengthening and fostering “noble dispositions,” of what use are they? De Sade answers this rather traditionally: “Of what use are novels?” Of what use, indeed! Hypocritical and perverse man, for you alone ask this ridiculous question: they are useful in portraying you as you are …” (Sade 1800 (1990a), 109).

Let us read this quote as a warning, since we all know that novels are of no use; therein lies their beauty, and only a perverse man could ask the question and hope to receive a useful answer. And to extend this comment into the topic of violence: maybe we should not be looking for a useful solution to the question of violence and representation, but for a figurative one; one that allows us to experiment with different forms of description/reading (and not just by assuming different forms of violence, but only one academic form of description).

Without doubt various series of what could be considered as “violence” unfold in The Hundred and Twenty Days of Sodom, although violence as a central concept is not mentioned by name. In a first reading that focuses on representations of “violence,” different forms of violence could be easily accounted for.

First we might read about violence against persons, in particular against women, although not exclusively. We might think of the enforced exercises in masturbation, the acts of defloration, sodomy, coprophilia, coprophagia, necrophilia and torture as violent acts, even if the persons subjected to these procedures seem to have consented to the “project.” Many depicted acts of “passion” certainly transgress normative sexual behaviour, now as well as then. The depicted sexual and literal appetite of one of the main characters foreshadows to the reader what can be expected in The Hundred and Twenty Days from a violent point of view:

Furnished, as we have pointed out, with prodigious strength, he needed only one hand to violate a girl, and he had proved it on several occasions. One day he boasted he could squeeze the life out of a horse with his legs; he mounted the beast, it collapsed at the instant he had predicted. His prowess at the table outshone, if that is possible, what he demonstrated upon the bed (Sade 1990b, 202).

Secondly we might read forms of violence against certain master discourses: a figurative violence, which through analogies links sexual practices to “holy” concepts in the discourses of theology, literature, ethics, education and the law. The vagina and the anus for example are described as temple (35), the penis as relic (195). As frequently as to theology, the text alludes to concepts in literary writing and aesthetic theory such as “heroes” or “imagination” to link them to its characters, which are all but the negation of these concepts.
He advances, surveying his Dulcinea, she makes him a bow of deepest respect. “No nonsense, you old bitch,” says the rake, “I don’t care for elegant manners. Get out of your clothes. … But wait just one moment. Have you any teeth?” “No, Sire, not a one is left in my head,” quoth the lady, opening her foul old mouth. “See for yourself, may it please your Lordship.” Whereupon up steps his Lordship and, grasping her head, he deposits upon her lips one of the most passionate kisses I have seen in all my life. … I should have much difficulty describing [it] to you (357).

We might read into passages like these a whole array of literary allusions from the myth of Kadmos, in which the analogy between teeth and the alphabet speaks for the warriors subjected to language and war, to Cervantes’ Dulcinea, who is the verbose projection of Don Quixote’s heroic love.

A third string of violence we might find is one of structural violence as it is spelled out in the framework of the narrative. The group of people who go ahead with the so-called “project” in a hidden castle secluded from the outside world is led by the male protagonists, the Duc de Blangis, his brother the Bishop of X, the Président de Curval—who is also an author—and Durtet, an old school friend of Blangis. This aristocratic elite is accompanied by their four wives and a group of a further thirty-two subjects (eight virgins, eight young boys, eight mature men whose qualities lie in the length and strength of their penis, four female narrators and four female cooks). The “project” follows a strict set of rules, the so-called “statutes.” The rules, the written constitution, for this society en miniature, organise the routines of the day. Every day follows the same routine. At the heart of this routine, between 6 and 10 o’clock in the early evenings, the four female narrators tell stories depicting 600 passions, starting with 150 simple passions, followed by 150 unusual passions, then 150 criminal whimsies to end with 150 tales of torture. The narratives are told to incite the imagination of everybody for the orgies that follow the stories after an intermediate dinner. During the process of telling these passions, the narrators have to stop their récits every time a story has led to sexual activities and resume after these have faded. Further, the rules, which as it turns out, clearly subject the male protagonists as well as the female narrators (although the latter to a lesser extent), define the punishments that await those who have transgressed the rules. The rules establish a clear hierarchy among the members of this society and by doing so establish injustice right from the start; thus violence is deemed as justified force.

To end this short list, a fourth string of violence, a reflection on violence, seems to be at work in The Hundred and Twenty Days. At the start of the “project” the female narrators are granted some freedom from being subjected to the whole force of the law by the male protagonists. These protagonists however lose their control as the narrative unfolds and the planned ending of the
unfinished *Hundred and Twenty Days* foresaw their submission at the hands of the female narrators. “Martaine has begun to exert upon Durcet much the same lubricious influence Duclos exerts upon Blangis” (603).

This belated shift in perspective had been already foreshadowed by several reflections throughout the text where a form of representation is in control of the action: “It is commonly accepted amongst authentic libertines that the sensations communicated by the organs of hearing are the most flattering and those whose impressions are the liveliest …” (218). Throughout the text, copious analogies between the form of language and the form of the body are to be found. The description of the fourth female storyteller, Madame Desgranges, for example, converges language and body: “… her body was a picture of ugliness, her soul was the depository of all the most unheard of vices and crimes. … Her present calling was procuring; she was one of society’s most heavily titled furnishers, and … to much experience she joined a more or less agreeable prattle …” (222). Peter Cryle has referred to the mixed roles of language and sexual conduct in *The Hundred and Twenty Days* as “second-order-ejaculations” to stress the fact that there is no ejaculation without it simultaneously being commented on by those who ejaculate (Cryle 2001, 118).

And Roland Barthes has emphasised several connections between the function of bodily members in the text in analogy to the function of words: “Being analytical, language can come to grips with the body only if it cuts it up; the total body is outside language, only pieces of the body succeed to writing …” (Barthes 1976, 127). Erotic figures are “cut up and combined like rhetorical figures” (133). And if the body is subjected to a form of language that in itself is thrown back onto body parts, so the topic of violence seems to meander between *physis* and *nomos*.

To sum up this first list: despite the neat classification of forms of violence, there seems to be no coherent argument that would link these *made-up* forms of violence. A closer reading would rather require a methodological *tour de force* to try to fit every form of assumed violence exclusively to one of the above-mentioned categories. Some enforced pleasures for example could also be seen as educational, some figurative references to master discourses as enlightening, etc.

A second, closer reading would thus be forced to pay attention to the violence of representation. The interesting question then is not whether violence, as we presumably know it, is simply inverted in *The Hundred and Twenty Days*, which places “violence” as justified within the rules given to this unjust society. The interesting question is whether there can be violence without representation. And this question should lead to an interrogation of the forms of representation themselves. To read along these lines one must pay less attention to the obvious phonocentric parameters—narrator’s voice, reader address, character dialogue,
etc.—the text puts in place as a means of representation. Rather, attention should be directed towards two forms of representation entangled within one process of signification, the text. These forms, I would suggest, are protocol and irony. The accounts of what happens in the everyday routines of *The Hundred and Twenty Days* are reported in the style of minutes. The personnel taking part in the “project” are listed:

Eight Fuckers

Hercule, twenty-six, very pretty, but also a very mean character, the Duc’s favourite; his prick measures eight and one-quarter inches around and thirteen in length. Plentiful discharge.

Antinoüs is thirty. A fine specimen of a man, his prick is eight inches around and twelve inches long.

Bum-Cleaver, twenty-eight years old, has the look of a satyr; his majestic prick is bent saber fashion, its head, or glans, is enormous, it is eight and three-eighths inches in circumference and the shaft eight in length. A fine curve to his majestic prick (260).

The listing of the personnel goes on with the same precision as the intended description of the routines of each of the 120 days as well as the narrative about the 600 passions. The statutes give a detailed routine of the day: “The company shall rise every day at ten o’clock in the morning. … At eleven o’clock, the friends shall repair to the quarters appointed for the little girls. … The friends shall move from there into the little boys’ apartments in order to perform the same inspections …” (241-3). In this manner the statutes describe the daily routines which are followed through deep into the night.

The genre of the protocol also follows the system of pleasures mimitically, to which the text also refers as program. There is no intended *diegesis*. Therefore nothing in this form of a protocol should be suspicious; it is a short account of all possible passions. The form of the protocol is also mirrored in the symmetric spaces that shape the castle and its rooms as well as in the symmetric number of people involved in the project. The main room of the castle, the assembly where the female narrators tell their stories to incite the orgies according to the cases told,

was semicircular; set into the curving wall were four niches whose surfaces were faced with large mirrors, and each was provided with an excellent ottoman; these four recesses were so constructed that each faced the centre of the circle; the diameter was formed by a throne, raised four feet above the floor and with its back against the flat wall, and it was intended for the storyteller …” (237).

The protocol is mathematical, follows its own rules, it is transparent, neuter and self-contained. And if everything is *mimesis* of passion, violence is just another form of passion listed by the protocol. The protocol is a form of self-
authorisation and suggests being in control. But as a protocol it violates every other form of representation by claiming to be the first of its kind. There is no textual predecessor to a protocol; it pretends simply to be protos, the first.

Irony on the other hand needs a representation already in place to question the assumed adequacy of just this representation. Irony questions the representation of protocol, and by doing so, violates the protocol’s code. Obviously I am interested in irony as a structural counterpart to protocol, and not as a distinctive figure of speech. “And now, friend-reader, you must prepare your heart and your mind for the most impure tale that has ever been told since our world began, a book the likes of which are met with neither amongst the ancients nor amongst us moderns” (253). Is this protocol or irony since the very claim the text makes—to be the first of its kind—is also the stereotype every novel claims for itself? There is no definite answer to this question; indeed the “hundred and twenty days” constantly produce double-binds. “The man who is addressing you at this very instant has owed spasm to stealing, murdering, committing arson, and he is perfectly sure that it is not the object of libertine intentions which fire us, but the idea of evil, and that consequently it is thanks only to evil and only in the name of evil one stiffens, not thanks to the object ...” (364). Earlier in the text it says: “If one were to raise the objection that, nevertheless, all men possess ideas of the just and the unjust which can only be the product of Nature, since these notions are found in every people and even amongst the uncivilized, the Duc would reply affirmatively, saying that yes, those ideas have never been anything if not relative ...” (199). Either ideas are relative, which makes them an easy target for irony, or they form a hierarchy, which allows one to secure a principle, a universal idea that drives the protocol. “Never ought fuck be allowed to dictate or affect one’s principles; ‘tis for one’s principles to regulate one’s manner of shedding it” (535).

The text makes it hard to distinguish between protocol and irony, between the literal and the figurative. This feature is also its aesthetic strength. The protocol itself might be read as being ironic since it accounts for passions, for something that is also described as unaccountable. Passions must escape control according to The Hundred and Twenty Days: “Many of the extravagances you are about to see illustrated will doubtless displease you, yes, I am well aware of it, but there are amongst them a few which will warm you to the point of costing you some fuck, and that, reader, is all we ask of you...” (254).

Are we supposed to stop reading at times or rather when we come across certain passages? Are we supposed to violate the act of reading by replacing it with an act of passion? As much as The Hundred and Twenty Days is a text about passion to a point where single passions supposedly could violate the process of reading, at the same time it incites a passion for different readings. It
seems that if one wants to observe the distinction between violence and its various representations/significations one always fails in the case of de Sade. And not just in the case of de Sade but possibly in all Literature, if we follow Paul de Man’s emphatic concept of Literature, which values Literature as good if the literal and the figurative meanings are indistinguishable (de Man 1988, 40).

So what is offered by a place where representation and violence meet? In *The Hundred and Twenty Days of Sodom*, rather than conflating representation with signification, the text conflates two different forms of textual representation: protocol and irony. If “violence” is the topic in question, we might find it, if we were investigating “how it is articulated,” but hardly in the purity of the depicted actions as such. However well we are trained to allow the conflation of representations in the arts, it seems that, in the daily news or in academic writing, irony is out of the question when “violence” is the topic. The form of the protocol in these areas seems uncontroversial in terms of a justified representation. But as we can learn from reading *The Hundred and Twenty Days*, protocol violates every other form of representation, thus often leaving the question of representation deserted in favour of assumptions about normative standards of violence. This signifies the inevitable irony of empirical studies on the subject of violence. And to know this can be useful, especially outside the arts.

There is no inherently “violent” matter without representation. Further, every representation is violent. So the question of “what is represented” has always already lost “violence as matter” but gained “violence as a matter of representation”; furthermore it has gained the awareness of the form of signification which impacts on our understanding of a particular representation. And finally, how is every interpretation always also a violent interpretation? I believe that I have just shown that by giving a violent reading, since violence is not a *topos* in *The Hundred and Twenty Days of Sodom*.

So if every representation inherently also suggests a necessity of being a “violent description,” but violence inherently seems to escape description (or is at least described as the opposite of description), the rhetorical form to apply, in order to approach the limitations of discourse, would be metalepsis. Metalepsis suspends every assumed causal relation between the two concepts, but at the same time makes it impossible to disconnect them.
Works Cited


PART I

WOMEN AND VIOLENCE
FRACTURING THE SELF: VIOLENCE AND IDENTITY IN FRANCO-ALGERIAN WRITING

TRUDY AGAR-MENDOUSSE

Introduction

From the beginning of French colonisation in 1830 to the bloody civil conflict of the 1990s, Algerian women have been victims of various forms of violence, both symbolic and physical. The violence intrinsic in the French colonisation of Algeria has had a strong presence in women’s writing from within the Franco-Algerian literary field. Three of the most well-known Algerian women writing in French—Assia Djebar, Malika Mokeddem and Nina Bouraoui—have published autobiographical texts that engage with the historical Franco-Algerian conflict. The daughter of a liberal-minded teacher in the colonial school system, Assia Djebar rewrites, in her three-volume autofiction, the history of her life alongside the history of the Franco-Algerian conflict from 1830 to independence in 1962 as well as Algeria’s civil war. Malika Mokeddem, the descendant of nomads who were forced into a sedentary lifestyle by hardships caused in part by colonialism, also engages in a rewriting of the history of the French colonial presence in Algeria in the two volumes of her autofiction. Nina Bouraoui has published four autobiographical works, the first two of which interrogate the nature of her dual ethnic and sexual identities and speak the pain of exile. All three writers live in exile today.

I investigate here the ways in which these contemporary Franco-Algerian writers destabilise both the autobiographical subject and the French language in their texts. Violence proves to be a major force that brings them to question their own fractured identity, as it is determined by colonial and postcolonial discourses, as well as to rewrite this essential identity as a subjectivity invested in multiplicity and becoming. These writers both assume and turn the symbolic violence of which they have been victims back on the symbolic of the perpetrators and on the perpetrators themselves. I will then examine how the
Deleuzean concept of “minor literature” can inform an understanding of both language and identity in these texts.

**From Fractured to Fracturing Subjects**

The daughter of an Algerian man and a Frenchwoman who met during the war of independence, Nina Bouraoui was born in France. Her family left France to live in Algeria after the war ended in 1962. Bouraoui produces writing of a singular, creative violence that attempts to rewrite the identity she inherited through the collision of two languages, two cultures and two spaces. She sees this collision as a source of creative power for her writing: “As a writer, I owe my fullness to this double blood that flows through my veins. To my mind, the future is exactly this mixing up of cultures. It’s a fantastic richness. Other colours, other smells: you have to multiply everything by two. It’s a double soul which produces open-mindedness.”

Bouraoui’s writing is thus located at the crossroads of two literary fields. This question of the nature of her identity, both as a writer and a woman, is a major theme in her writing. She experiences her double French/Algerian ethnicity not just as a source of creative richness but also as violence, and expresses her subjectivity through a writing of violence in her first two autobiographical texts, *Le Jour du séisme* (1999) and *Garçon manqué* (2000). Bouraoui establishes in her autobiographical writing a binary opposition between the two poles of her ethnic identity, Algeria and France. Algeria, where she spent the first fourteen years of her life, is the land of happiness, bodily freedom and friendship. It is also the land of a violence that appears on every page of her first two autobiographical texts and that is present in every aspect of the Algerian setting. The dual identity of Bouraoui’s autobiographical subject, Nina (who is at once author, narrator, protagonist and the subject that emerges through the process of writing), is not a simple equation. She finds herself unable to be accepted by either the French or Algerian communities, who see marked on her body the traces of the war that opposed them. Her identity is at once Algerian or French, Algerian and French, neither Algerian nor French: her ethnicity is undecidable.

Bouraoui underlines the impossibility of resolving the opposition between her two origins; they cut across the terms of the binary opposition France-Algeria and upset the logic of distinction. Nina fluctuates between her two belongings in *Garçon manqué* but never succeeds in shedding the foreignness others see in her. Every effort she makes to resolve her undetermined ethnic identity is doomed to failure.

Similarly, Djebar’s ethnic identity is fractured, ambiguous and shifting. In the second volume of her autobiography, *Vaste est la Prison* (1995), she stages the ambiguity of the French presence in Algeria during her childhood. The scene,
“De la narratrice dans la nuit française,” a title that evokes the dark period of Algerian history that Algerians refer to as the “nuit coloniale,” relates a moment of “slippage” for the narrator, a moment in which she becomes conscious of her situation as an Arab girl living in a colonial society. In this scene, her French neighbour and son, frightened by the German army’s bombardments, ask to sleep in the narrator’s house. The three-year-old Djebar awakes to find these two strangers in her parents’ bed. Troubled, the child imagines that her parents have been replaced by a French family, a scenario she finds both seductive and terrifying.

While she mourns the loss of maternal culture that resulted from her education in the French colonial system, Djebar is also at pains in her writing to point to the benefits this education represents for her—the freedom to move, see and be seen. In *L’Amour, la fantasia* (1985), she uses the image of the tunic of Nessus to evoke her bi-cultural identity. The “tunic” is the French language she was given by her father, a gift inspired by love and a desire to protect her from confinement and the harem. It carries with it, however, a mortal danger—the death of her native, maternal culture in favour of the French culture imposed by Djebar’s French education. Cut off from underground, female meetings (*hadras*), Djebar’s very body becomes westernised through her formal education. She finds it difficult to sit cross-legged and is unable to produce the *youyou*, or ululation, that traditionally expresses both female joy and sorrow. The impact of French colonisation on maternal culture is also strongly evoked in *Vaste est la Prison*, in a scene where French soldiers enter the narrator’s house and tear up her mother’s music notebooks in which she had carefully transcribed Andalousian *noubas*. Her mother weeps over this “erasing” of her feminine, intellectual heritage as other women weep for a lost husband or son.

Mokeddem’s ethnic identity, in *Les Hommes qui marchent* (1990), appears to be firmly connected to the nomadic past of her family. In this, her first published text, she mourns the loss of aspects of nomadic culture due to colonisation. Through the character of her grandmother, Zohra, Mokeddem articulates a nomadic ethic that aspires to tolerance, imagination and independence. Yet this ethical nomadism is only loosely connected to her ethnic identity. While the desert is portrayed in her writing as the locus of nomadism, Mokeddem discovers during her childhood, under the influence of her grandmother’s storytelling and stories of her legendary poet ancestor, the ability to live as a nomad in other places and through other types of wandering. Writing is a way for her to embrace the non-exclusion of difference she sees as the cornerstone of ethical nomadism. While she praises her nomadic ancestors for their endurance and their love of freedom, she distances herself from any identification with them that would be based wholly on ethnicity, or essential identity. Indeed, Mokeddem expresses a strong rejection of notions of