

Bad behaviour sells; Does visual culture glamourise violence or Spread Awareness.

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Abstract

The focus of this research is to explore both the representation of violence and bad behaviour in visual culture, and if these types of representation of violence are creating a glamorization of harmful acts or providing a means to expose. The impact that mass media has on a population can be seen in the numerous examples of images presented to the public depicting crime, rebellion, and risk. These images create a sense of familiarity regarding the acts of violence and influence the perception and understanding of violence in general. The primary goal of this thesis will be to understand the transformation of violence into visual language; separate from its original source. This will be accomplished using major theoretical frameworks, including the concept of spectacle, the role of myth and hyper reality. Additionally, the thesis will examine how consumer culture uses fashion and advertising campaigns to represent violence as an attractive aesthetic. On the other hand, alternative forms of visual art will be used to demonstrate ways to counteract this trend by maintaining

the link to real world experiences and their consequences.

Ultimately, this research suggests that the effect of violent Image portrayals are not fixed, but instead subject to manipulation by the frame used to present them, how they are circulated, and how they are interpreted.

Introduction

With the rise of visual culture, transgression and violence have become far more visible within everyday imagery. Visual representation of violence, including through advertising campaigns, fashion editorial photography and social media posts provide consumers with a constant stream of images that are evoke crime, power, and social harm. Additionally, these images are typically visually stunning and have been appropriately framed for their respective environments. Therefore, the images that were once meant to convey the message of harm or danger are now often recontextualized in a way that is aesthetically pleasing, engaging, and designed to capture a viewer's attention quickly in a rapidly changing environment. Ultimately, violence is no longer just depicted, it is also reinterpreted, leaving us to wonder how we understand violence as it is transformed into visual representation.

One of the main concerns associated with this transition is how visual culture uses similar visual elements to depict harm and critique. For example, dramatic composition, high contrast levels, and emotionally charged tone are common components found in many types of imagery, from consumer advertisements to socially conscious art. Some examples of these visuals represent violence in an aesthetic manner that could potentially make the viewer want to emulate the actions depicted. Conversely, other examples of these visuals will engage the viewer in a negative manner by highlighting the consequences of violence in the real world. Given the similarities in how these visuals are created and presented, it is reasonable to ask if these visual depictions of violence are simply meant to garner attention or to convey a message that may have greater importance.

Additionally, the increasing prevalence of stylized representations of violence within consumer culture further complicate this assessment. Both advertising and fashion utilise themes of

rebellion, risk taking and aggression in order to create an emotional response and remain relevant. At the same time, artists and individuals who focus on creating awareness through their work utilise the same visual forms and styles to bring attention to issues related to abuse, conflict, and equality. The repeated presence of these visual forms across various areas of visual culture suggests that the meanings attributed to those forms are not fixed, but rather fluid and subject to interpretation based upon the specific context in which they are employed and viewed.

This thesis investigates the following question: when visual culture depicts bad behaviour, does it encourage violence, or can it be used to raise awareness? Rather than assuming that violent imagery serves a single purpose, this study investigates how its meaning varies depending on how it is constructed and presented. It seeks to investigate how violence operates within contemporary visual culture and what determines whether it is

perceived as aesthetic or critical, considering both theoretical perspectives and visual examples.

Chapter 1- Historical and Theoretical Context

It is vital to understand why violence works so well as an image before we determine if visual culture glamorises violence or draws attention to it. Crime, rebellion, and transgression continue to appear in today's visual culture, not simply because they do exist. They contain a specific symbolic power that becomes visually intensified. Violence disrupts the normalcy of every day. It elicits a response, produces anxiety, and demand the viewers' attention. This has 2 components, however, not only do these elements appear in images, but they are particularly well suited to being translated into an image that can be transmitted, duplicated, and interpreted.

The spectacle, as developed by Guy Debord, (1967). Provides a perfect model of this process. Debord argued in *The Society of the*

Spectacle that increasingly, in contemporary society Individuals experience reality through the mediation of their experiences via images rather than directly. Social relationships become observed and facilitated through images, as much as experienced. Therefore, in this larger framework, violence is included in the same way that other objects have been converted into visual constructs. It is no longer merely an event with immediate social ramifications; it is now a product that can be consumed, reproduced, and viewed. The spectacle does not remove from our perception of violence, it is inherent reality. Rather it changes how we perceive it. When violence enters this structure of consumption, reproduction, an observation, then it is subject to aesthetic consideration related to its frame, composition, and display. Thus, violence moves from an event to a visual construction and allows us to shape his perception.

Roland Barthes takes this concept a step further in his book *Mythologies*, in which he examines how mass media converts

complexities into recognisable symbols. He describes the way images become detached from their origins and take on meanings that feel normal and familiar. When applied to depictions of violence, this means that aggressive acts of rebelliousness can be converted into simple symbolic expressions. Broken windows, weapons, or poses that appear confrontational are no longer necessarily representative of actual danger or disruption. Rather, they can represent concepts like power, resistance, or authenticity. With each subsequent viewing of the symbol, they lose their ability to shock. As a result, the focus shifts away from the physical acts of violence and towards what violence represents. Subsequently, violence is not removed from visual culture, is merely transformed into a type of style within it.

The development of this thought is complicated when viewed through Jean Baudrillard's hyperreality. In *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard (1994) asserts that today's visual

representation of reality does not simply depict reality. Rather, representations generate a reality in addition to the one formed by experiences. As a result, independent pictures exist, forming a reality based on media rather than experience. From this point on, violent images may have meaning even if they have nothing to do with real events. An image of rebellion, for instance may generate both emotional and cultural responses despite being either entirely faked or stage. Furthermore, hyperreality creates confusion regarding what is real versus what is presented. Ultimately, this allows violence to present itself as an image separate from reality. Additionally, the fact that it can be easily reproduced, altered over time contributes to its strength as an image.

The conversion of violence into an image is both culturally and economically based. Naomi Klein's book *No Logo* examines the use of symbolic meaning rather than product value by today's brand names, Klein (2001). For many companies in a market that

has been fully developed, the goal of becoming visible creates an environment where imagery is necessary. As a part of this rebellion, taking risks and breaking the rules creates cultural influences. While rebellion, risk taking and rule breaking are employed as visual components in advertising and fashion, they often symbolise more than what they represent. Violence in particular has a cultural impact in terms of presentation as an 'edge', providing an explanation of difference, authenticity and boldness. Klein's findings provide an explanation for the widespread presence of visual depictions of bad behaviour in consumer culture using high packed visuals allow brands to differentiate themselves and convey their identity and importance.

While the previously mentioned concepts help describe how violence can be transformed into images, they do not establish how the image will be interpreted. Stuart Hall's *Theory of Encoding and Decoding* illustrates that meaning is unstable in

representations, Hall (1980). Hall notes that creators produce images with certain interpretations in mind; however, consumers do not receive images without interpreting them based on their own cultural background and experiences. Therefore, an image depicting violence could be viewed differently depending on the individual viewing the image. An example would include one person viewing images as strong or glamorous while another person finds it intimidating or critical. As such, the creation of meaning occurs at the intersection of the image and the observer, rather than the image itself. This is especially relevant when examining if visual culture glorifies violence since it suggests that those creating the image have no absolute authority to define the ultimate interpretation of the images.

Laura Mulvey's *Gaze theory* obscured the viewers function even more. Mulvey (1975) explains that visual culture constructs the views of the observer in relationship to structures of power, specifically through gender views. Typically, images are created to

align the viewer with authority and encourage them to see from a place of control. When violence is presented in this manner consistent with this format, it can be visually appealing rather than unsettling. The viewer may be conditioned to relate to control versus vulnerability. This presents great significance for the way violent images are received. If the construction of an image emphasises control, strength, or domination, then violence may be perceived as appealing or desirable. As such, the construction of an image is a major factor in defining whether an image is viewed as detrimental or alluring.

Judith Butler has furthered this line of inquiry through her argument that the value given to violence varies based on its presentation. Butler (2009), in *Frames of War* argues that media portrayals do not view all lives as being equally grievable. Only certain types of expressions of pain are represented and therefore recognised, while others go unrepresented or made abstract.

Therefore, the extent to which violence can be viewed as having significance is directly related to the frame in which is displayed.

Susan Sontag's *The Pain of Others*, first released in 2003, presents another perspective concerning how violence works within visual culture, specifically in terms of viewer participation. Sontag believes that representation of suffering always serves as subjective interpretations of the actions of violence depicted. These images can potentially provide education and increase awareness of violent events. However, they can also create distance between the viewer and the event itself. Through repeated viewing, this creates an opportunity for the viewer to develop a sense of desensitisation towards harm. As the viewer becomes used to seeing representation of violence, there will likely be lessened shock over time. With each subsequent viewing, the image intended to illustrate damage may transform into something merely observed. Given the context of this thesis, Sontag's theory exemplifies the conflict that arises between

aestheticizing and an exposing violence. Once violence is visually represented, it is open to multiple readings and ultimately becomes part of a pattern of consumerism in which its effect is created by both how often it is viewed and how it is consumed.

What develops as we explore these theoretical frameworks are several elements that contribute to the idea that violence is uniquely suited to the medium of visual culture, in addition to the fact that violence has an emotional impact and is so inherently engaging. Violence also becomes easily reduced into recognisable visual symbols through processes of mediation and repetition. Circulation also removes violence from its original context. Visual culture then frames violence in such a way that it may be interpreted in multiple ways. These interrelated forms transform the experience of observing violence into a transformation of violence. Establishing how harm transforms into an image will provide a foundation for examining how violence is utilised within visual culture. Chapter 2 builds upon

this theory by examining how consumer culture hugely utilises violent images and creates attractive commercial products based on bad behaviour.

Chapter 2 - How Consumerism Sells Violence

This second chapter examines the impact of violence as an image upon entry into commercial culture. Visual impressions are vital in both advertising and fashion. Commercial companies compete to attract consumers attention in highly competitive markets.

Therefore, it is common for brands to employ intense images and/or messages to stand out. For example, rebelliousness, aggression, and damage become creative tools to help differentiate and stimulate interest in certain brands.

Subsequently, violence becomes a productive visual element for consumption purposes and shifts its focus from being a part of social reality to consumption. Therefore, the second chapter explores how consumer culture has been glamourising crime and

other forms of deviant behaviour and using it as a stylistic vocabulary to sell product style.

An exemplar of this process is seen in the '*Heroin Chic*' campaigns launched by Calvin Klein during the early 1990s. The young women featured in these advertisements were depicted as very pale and extreme skinny, and they were photographed against plain backgrounds with virtually no decoration. They appeared to have no emotional connection on their face and looked exhausted and vacant. Although the advertisements did not depict the girls' using drugs, they employed the undeniable visual language of addiction, which included vacuous eyes, gaunt cheeks, and fragile bodies. The manner in which the aesthetic was utilised to advertise Calvin Klein clothing created controversy instead of portraying addiction as something damaging the girls in the photographs were presented in a style-based format. The models were strategically placed in minimalistic settings, the lighting was controlled, and the composition was carefully

considered. The signs of potential harm caused by addiction became expressions of emotion. As cultural critic Susan Bordo explained the advertisement “*transformed emaculation into fashion and posed pathology*” (Bordo,1999). This clearly demonstrates how the visual evidence of addiction was altered from a depiction of disease to one of minimalistic aesthetics and disconnected from its social implication.



Figure 1

Figure 1 shows the clear example of this in a Calvin Klein advertisement featuring Kate Moss. Her body was portrayed as something that could be viewed but not understood and removed from its environment. The fact that there is no story to tell about the pictures made the symbolic nature of the photograph even

clearer. This is based on Barthes’ (1957) theory of *Myth*. The indications for a disease have been replaced with references to

identity and style, so thinness can indicate that you belong to or fit into a cultural group. Brands will often utilise images that represent subcultures in order to remain current, as stated by Naomi Klein (2001); however, in this case, the advertising campaign utilised some aspects of the visual language of the subculture associated with drug abuse. As such, the campaign clearly demonstrates how the violence of an individual's body can become aestheticised when they are detached from society. Therefore, it allows them to be used as a desirable code of beauty instead of being considered a social problem. These examples relate well to the argument provided within this chapter.

A further illustration of this transformation can be seen in an ad from Dolce & Gabbana from 2007. In the advertisement, a female model is shown being restrained on the floor by a male model. The overall structure of the image is well managed through lighting, body positioning and frame alignment. This ultimately results in a visually pleasing image. However, as stated by the

Guardian (2007) the advertising received immense criticism as it seemed to promote or romanticise sexual assault.



Figure 2

The relationship between the structure of the image and the activity being depicted in **Figure 2** is a perfect example of how an image can alter the way we perceive the event itself. Instead of showing chaos or damage, the events are shown in methodical, almost theatrical way. Rosalind Gill argues that this type of visual representation changes “*coercion into choreography*” (Gill, 2008). This means that instead of viewing violence as something meant to cause harm, it is viewed as a form of entertainment. The Deboards (1967) theory of the *Spectacle* also applies well here.

The viewer consumes the image visually as opposed to using critical thinking to understand the context. The viewer becomes part of the overall visual experience and is drawn into the construction of the image rather than questioning the content. As relates to the theme of this chapter, it is very apparent in this image that violence has been glamorised through aesthetic control. The significance of the event has been lost as it has now been transformed into a visually attractive image to garner attention and create brand recognition.

Despite providing a more sophisticated portrayal with their ads, Benetton utilises the same ideal for visual consumerism. The campaigns launched by Benetton in early 1990s, including Franco's Zecchin's murder series, which ran from Spring/Summer 92' utilised documentary photo styling depicting real murder scenes. Unlike traditional models of advertising, Benetton did not place its logo near the garment being promoted, but instead

directly besides the photos. Although presented as socially aware, this campaign was firmly rooted in commerce.



Figure 3

This is obvious in **Figure 3**, which presents a graphic representation of violence after the fact. The photo itself has been made to become an icon of consumerism due to branding. Klien (2001) states that shock advertising increases the visibility of products because they engage with social issues. Regarding the claim presented in this chapter, the photo demonstrates how actual violence can be converted into aesthetic capital when

used within a business context. When a Benetton logo is placed over an image of violence, the intention of the image shifts from being documented to being a visual representation of their company brand. Violence is not eliminated, rather it is manipulated to make consumers aware of it and understand it. The previous point of illustrates that consumer culture does not simply present images of violence, however it utilises violence strategically to garner attention.

Similar dynamics are also observable in Diesels *Be Stupid* Campaign (Diesel 2010). Although Diesel took commercialization of bad behaviour beyond mere depictions of violence into the broader aesthetics of danger, the advertisement intended to promote spontaneous and reckless behaviour as positive expressions of individuality and freedom. Unlike representation of these behaviours as detrimental or careless, Diesel depicted these behaviours as bold and inspirational, creating publicity and controversy through provocative slogans and staged imagery. Due

to the high level of public scrutiny and potential impact upon younger demographics, the advertisement was scrutinised and investigated by the ASA for potentially promoting anti-social behaviour (Advertising Standard Authority, 2010.)



Figure 4

This is clearly demonstrated in **Figure 4**, which shows a man running down the street wearing a large costume head as he is chased by the police and is followed by the phrase “*Smart is in the shade, stupid is in the spotlight*” (Reynolds, 2010). The image

shows anarchy and disrespect for authority but is presented in a humorous way with action; therefore, no sense of consequence exists. From this perspective of how visual culture may glamorise risk through the transformation of the act into spectacle or identity, the example is also consistent with Barthes' idea of *Myth* (1957) that real world dangers are erased from the experience and replaced with a symbolic confidence, invisible acknowledgement, where "in the spotlight" implies not consequences but rather recognition. Klein claims in *No Logo* (2001) that companies use either antisocial or countercultural behaviour to develop identity and to remain viable by turning risk into some type of athletic capital. Well's (2010) points out, the campaign celebrates disobedience through provocative images and embraces controversy as a tool for attention. Here, the campaign indicates that bad behaviour doesn't have to be explicitly violent to be glamorised. Instead, it can function through deception, making disorder and resistant, visually appealing, and marketable as style.

This approach extends beyond traditional advertising and enters the broader domain of visual culture, including Streetwear and music videos. A prime example is Travis Scott *Sicko Mode* (2018). In sicko mode, highly stylized editing and cinematic framing is used to portray fast-paced, fragmented scenes in urban settings with police motives and moments of implied confrontation. Even though these elements are carefully managed and aesthetically satisfying, they're also captivating to look at and give the impression of danger and disturbance. A consistent pattern can be seen in these examples. Violence isn't typically shown in a way that puts its effects on society. Instead, decisions about styling, abstraction, and framing change it. It can be seen differently depending on the lighting, composition, and background, so it can be used as a visual strategy instead of a social fact. Even debate helps this process along because more attention makes something more visible and culturally relevant.

It has been established that in consumer society, pictures of bad behaviour, while demonstrating violence are used to show that violence is acceptable. Visualising the actions of violence without showing the consequences of those results allow the use of violence to appear acceptable. The visual depiction of violence is directly associated with power and identity, so when violence is shown repeatedly, consumers view it as something they would like to emulate. Once again, through repetition, what was once violent behaviour is now normalised in our visual society. What this means is that this type of behaviour will continue to be seen in consumerism as long as it provides an opportunity for style and that opportunity to be visually appealing. While it does not mean that violence is desirable by nature, it can be easily accepted into a system based on attention and visual impact. A good example of this is the way in which consumerism continues to use high intensity visuals to differentiate themselves from other types of business. Violence is also an extremely powerful visual element of high intensity visuals. Therefore, bad behaviour as

demonstrated through the use of violence, is not something viewed negatively but positively. As such, it has become a commodity that can be bought and sold.

Chapter 3 - Violence as Awareness

We have seen in chapter 2 that consumer culture removes violence from its consequences and transforms it into a form of artistic capital. In this chapter, I will examine how visual culture may operate in a different manner. While some photographers/visual artists also employ visual techniques that make bad behaviour appear attractive, they do so with the intention of connecting those actions to their personal, political, and social meanings. What makes a difference does not lie in the fact that violence is or is not depicted; rather, what matters lies in how violence is depicted. When the consequences of violence, the fragility of individuals who experience violence as well as lived experience associated with violence are placed at the forefront of an image, then violence cannot be made visually appealing and

therefore the demand of recognition is made. In this context, visual culture can disrupt the process of transforming violence into a fashion item and therefore the process identified in Chapter 2 whereby violence is removed from reality and transformed into detached capital.



Figure 5

Your Body Is a Battleground by Barbara Kruger (1989) is an outstanding example of the use of visual culture as a weapon against those who have too much power but does so with no aesthetic appeal. The bold typography treatments, high contrast

images and graphic layouts used by Kruger borrowed from the visual language of advertising, which she has taken and turned into a form of critique. Instead of using this kind of style to sell products, she uses it to show just how many ways bodies, especially women's bodies, are controlled and commodified in visual culture. This is seen in the fragmented fractured quality demonstrated in **Figure 5**, with each half of the face split for an unpleasant inharmonious viewing experience. The bold graphic nature of the words disrupts the viewers ability to passively view this piece. They are forced to become engaged. In addition to breaking away from the stylistic representation of the body shown in the image presented in Chapter 2, Kruger's use of symbolism in her image ties it directly back to the political context that she was attempting to convey. Therefore, even though it is a depiction of violence, it is a depiction of systematic violence rather than physical violence and therefore does not represent the glamorisation of violence discussed in this thesis. This piece also represents how one can visually present one's message through

the utilisation of symbolic language rather than aesthetically presenting a message.

The same focus on consequences can also be identified in documentary photography, and particularly in the work of Gilles Peress. The way Peress presents violent events in his images of conflicts are presented by him not as visually pleasing parts of violent acts, but instead by placing them into everyday contexts.



Figure 6

This is evident in **Figure 6** depicting Mostar, Bosnia-Herzegovina (1993) and the positioning of a weapon within the living area of a home indicates the invasion

of violence into everyday life. Unlike the very structured photographic images I described in Chapter 2, **Figure 6** does not present itself as a cohesive visual presentation. Rather, It presents it as an unstable image that fits with instability and

chaos in which it was recorded. There is no effort to create harmonious visual presentation or to create balance through composition. As opposed to creating visual pleasing and balanced image there is a feeling of disruption and urgency that exists throughout the entire image. Thus, through this example, violent action may be depicted without glorifying the violence because they remain rooted in environments and therefore cannot be abstracted into visual representations.

This emphasis on relationship as lived experience is furthered through Nan Goldin's photographs that capture aspects of

vulnerability, emotional pressure, and personal suffering within a person's relationship.



Figure 7

The photograph, *Couple in bed. Chicago, 1977*, as shown in **Figure 7**, depicts an emotionally distant couple at a point where they are indicating tension beneath their relationship surface. However, they do so without using obvious dramatical, stylized photographic techniques. Goldin does not intend for her photographs to have polished styles. Instead, she uses casual compositions with natural light to make them feel immediate. The

lack of polished visual techniques is important to how well these photographs' function; the reason being that the unpolished nature of Goldin's photographs prevents the photographs from having an over aestheticized quality, consequently maintaining a strong connection to peoples experience in life.

The research question was explored through Goldin's photographic work, which illustrates how visual culture can demonstrate violence without celebrating it. As such, Goldin did not isolate the violent moment or emphasise its visual impact. Instead, her photographs are incomplete and ambiguous, leaving no clear picture or visual impression. Thus, the clarity needed for an audience to easily digest what they see is absent from their work. This parallels Susan Sontag's contention that depictions of suffering should always been grounded in reality to prevent the transformation into spectacle (Sontag, 2003). Goldin's images do not create the distance identified by Sontag as a risk when creating visual depictions of suffering. The spectator has been

drawn into the emotional state of the situation depicted there. Therefore, the two theories of representation become highly applicable to Goldin's work. First, Stuart Hall's Theory of representation, (Hall 1980). Specifically, his contention that the meaning of an image is not pre-determined at the point of creation, but instead is produced by the act of interpretation applies here. Second, the theory of representation also addresses Goldin's method of production in that she provides no singular reading or solution to the emotional conflict embedded within each image. Instead, Goldin offers space for critical engagement, allowing the spectator to develop their own conclusion based on their interaction within the emotion and relationship dynamics embedded with each photograph. Violence in these contacts, therefore, cannot be consumed visually. It emerges out of both emotional and relational stability, making violence much more personally relatable to the viewer than would be possible if it were transformed into a spectacle or even a creative expression.



Figure 8

Tracey Emin's *My Bed* (1998) takes these examinations of lived experience even further through their betrayal of the after effects of a person's traumatic experience in a real and raw form. Unlike photographs, which capture a single moment from an image, Emin's installation captures real space and forces the viewer to witness the actual physical remnant of an individual's experience. As seen in **Figure 8**, Emin has depicted an unmade bed surrounded by various personal items. These items represent both lack and access, as well as unease and anxiety at the same

time. The viewers perceive this scene to be both extremely intimate and yet completely open. It is essential that Emin did not attempt to organise or clean up the room for the sake of the aesthetics. Rather, she chose to leave it disorganised, fractured and incomplete, therefore emphasising its relationship to the world of lived experience as opposed to the realm of fabricated images.

My Bed presents evidence that visual culture may counteract the glamorization of bad behaviour by using visual elements in opposition to create beauty from those behaviours. This relates directly to the question presented in my thesis. Visual culture cannot convert human suffering into something aesthetically pleasing. Instead, Emin uses her art to expose the ramifications of human suffering in a manner that is both urgent and inevitable. Through her use of art, Emin demands acknowledgement of the suffering represented within her works, as she refuses to allow any form of abstractions or dismissal of one's own experience. As

such, Emin challenges the process described by Barthes (1957), where meaning is often reduced to recognisable symbols. The objects used in Emin's installation do not conform to this type of symbolism; they remain specific, personal, and physically present. Consequently, they reject any form of symbolic shorthand that would reduce them to being merely representative. By preventing the viewer from experiencing the installation as appealing, Emin urges the viewer to witness her work as evidence.

A comparable reluctance to represent violence aesthetically can also be seen in graphic awareness raising campaigns about gender based violence. The UN *Stop Violence Against Women* campaign presents, for example, very starkly presented and sometimes disturbing representations of violence against women to raise consciousness among its audiences. They present the viewer with the combination of photographs of people who have been victims of violence against women, combined with data and

or text that provoke background information regarding the victims, the perpetrators, and the consequences of the crime.

Unlike the examples given in Chapter 2 where representations of violence were represented by means of style or identity rather than by the reality of violence itself. *Stop Violence Against Women* represents violence in a manner that is grounded in consequence of violence. Therefore, there is little room for alternative readings of the image.

In addition to providing viewers with a clear understanding of the nature of the subject matter, using words and numbers to explain/represent the crime eliminates any potential for readers to interpret images differently than what they intend. In other words, language provides a way to establish clarity while establishing legitimacy. To the issue at hand, the use of language and numbers and stop violence against women also reflects on Sontag's (2003) point that, unless an image continues to relate to real suffering at the time of its creation, it will become a

spectacle. With an emphasis on pain, vulnerability and witness the ads for *Stop Violence Against Women* make sure that violence cannot be perceived as visually appealing in addition to the intent established by the framing of the image, which limited the possibilities of different interpretations. Hall's theory of *Encoding and Decoding* (1980) is relevant here too. Instead of positioning the viewers as a spectator *Stop Violence Against Women* positions them as one who has evidence of harm/injury presented to them. As follows, reinforcing the moral obligation associated with the image.

A consistent strategy has started to develop across these cases indicating that violence has no existence independent of the environment that promotes it. Rather than abstracting and repeating the forms of violence that are aestheticised by consumerism, this work refused the process of simplification that convert violence into visual shorthand. Rather than stripping away complexity from the subjects of their images or works each

maintain an element of them. Although they use powerful visual tactics, contrast, composition, fragmentation to create strong visual statements with their pieces, these techniques do not serve the purpose of creating desires to consume. Instead, they attempt to redirect our focus towards the subject itself. Thereby maintaining an association between the subject and lived experience. Thusly we have further evidence for one of the primary arguments in this thesis that visual culture may not inherently promote violence. However, it creates the condition for violence to be aestheticized if the consequences of those actions are removed from the process. In turn, refusing to separate though the aestheticization of violence from the consequences of violence allows for similar languages to produce very different effects; to move from spectacle to conflict.

Conclusion

This thesis was aimed at investigating whether visual culture could potentially reveal violence or if it could visually present

violence as attractive. Both theories of understanding as well as wide array of visual examples have demonstrated that violent images do not always carry the same significance. The significance of violent imagery is determined by the creation, formation, organisation, and interpretation of the information. Depending on the context, the same visual language, tension, confrontation, and intensity can either provide aestheticization of harm or illustrate harm.

In Chapter 1, I illustrated that violence is exhibited through methods of mediation, simplification, and repetition. The Theories of Debord's *Spectacle*, (1967) and Barthes' *Myth*, (1957) exhibit how acts of violence are converted to visible forms that may be distributed and interpreted. Once violence is converted into pictures, the physical experience of violence is no longer felt directly, but rather through representation. Baudrillard's (1994) *Theory of Hyperreality* complicates this matter by stating that these representations may develop complete disconnections to

reality, allowing violence to take shape as a visual construct detached from its original context setting. Sontag (2003) emphasises the role of the viewer in this process and asserts that numerous exposures to images of suffering can change the manner in which they are perceived, turning the initial reaction of shock to familiarity. These concepts collectively indicate that violence is particularly susceptible to aestheticization because it may be changed, recreated, and consumed in visual culture.

Chapter 2 built upon this topic by illustrating how consumer culture is active in promoting this transformation. Harm is consistently separated from the impact of harm in visual media, including advertising and fashion, and repurposed as a type of aesthetic capital. For example, campaigns such as Calvin Kleins *Heroin Chic* and Dolce & Gabbana 2007 campaign illustrates how visual indicators of harm may be manipulated to represent emotions, identity, and desires. Furthermore, although some examples may display actual violence, their placement in a

commercial structure alters the representation of that violence shown, thereby increasing brand awareness. So, based on these illustrations, it appears that harm becomes appealing when it is separated from its context and associated with aesthetic appeal. As opposed to presenting harm as something to understand, it presents itself as something to view. This lends weight to the claim that in consumer culture, bad behaviour is not only betrayed, but transformed into a weapon for marketing style, identity, and products.

Chapter 3 presents an alternative example showing how the above-mentioned process is not inevitable. Artists like Barbara Kruger, Nan Goldin and Tracey Emin demonstrate through their works and awareness raising initiatives that violent images can be presented differently if they remain connected to living experience. In these cases, violence is neither abstracted nor fantasised. It remains grounded in suffering, vulnerability, and context. Therefore, the audience is no longer situated as a passive

viewer of spectacle, but as a witness to an experience. That is why the shift from one position to another is so important, since it excludes violence from being aestheticised. Rather than becoming part of a visual culture style violence resists consumption and remains unappealing and resolved.

In contrast to each other, the two chapters demonstrate a significant difference. Visual culture does not represent violence as attractive; instead, it creates the conditions for representing violence as artistic. When it is isolated from its effects and transformed into an aesthetic expression of its extreme visual forms, violence is converted into a form of cultural capital that can be absorbed quickly by mechanisms of consumption. On the contrary, it cannot be consumed in the same way when it's representation continues to refer to the experience and context of the violence

This distinction is relatively weak. According to Sontag (2003), images of pain are created through how people see and repeat them. As a result, even those images intended to contradict violence will ultimately develop an acquaintance with time.

Consequently, we have a permanent conflict in the realm of visual culture concerning whether something is aestheticized or exposed. Ultimately, visual culture functions dually in relation to violence. It represents violence but also transforms it.

Nevertheless, in our contemporary consumer society there is a clear tendency towards aestheticization, driven primarily by the desire for visibility and attention. Due to its high level of visual intensity, violence provides excellent material for stylistic purposes, therefore, it can easily be used as a style. Bad behaviour sells not because it is inherently desirable, but because visual culture has developed ways to appear it so.

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