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The Digital Image as Threat: How Mediatized Disrespect Matters

Jennifer Eickelmann

“Could language injure us if we were not, in some sense, linguistic beings, beings who require language in order to be?”
(Butler 1997, 2)

Introduction

Current debates on *Online Harassment* or *Online Hate Speech* demonstrate in a haunting way that discussions about the relationship of semiotic and material qualities of expression on the internet by now play out in numerous battlefields of scientific and political confrontation. The social category *gender* plays an important role in the emerging of *Online Hate Speech*, especially in the case that common gender norms are challenged and contested (Mantilla 2013, 2015; Massanari 2015).

Communications in the context of digital public spheres on the internet have to be regarded as multimodal practices of addressing and hence as practices of subjection. Phenomena of Online Harassment are not prior linguistic phenomena (Butler 1997) but multimodal addresses, containing comments, images, audiovisual media, and even interactive media products, e.g., digital games (Eickelmann 2014).

This article deals with the main dualism of the debate on the power to injure associated with multimodal addresses in digital public spheres: To what extent do images on the internet have the power to injure? Is the image violence itself (hate speech)? Alternatively, is it an expression of freedom of speech? In relation to this dualism (hate speech vs. free speech), I will discuss the entanglements between discursive practices

and material phenomena, in other words: between matter and meaning. Thereafter, the article suggests an alternative conceptualization of multimodal, offensive modes of address that emphasizes their contingency. I suggest the term *Mediatized Disrespect*, to show that multimodal addressings of being have to be seen as performative acts. A multimodal performative act is not always an efficacious action, but multimodal, offensive addressings “proceed by way of consequences” (Butler 1997, 17). After the conceptual clarification of the term *Mediatized Disrespect* I will explain the theoretical and methodological implications of this term with regard to Judith Butler, Karen Barad and Donna Haraway. Building on this I will discuss the injurious potential of images and practices of resistance by illustrating with concrete examples the entanglements of semiotics and materiality in order to develop a relational theory of the image as performative.

The Concept of *Mediatized Disrespect*

With regard to the question of how multimodal, offensive and threatening modes of address in digital public spheres *matter* there are two opposing positions in the current discourse. These can be differentiated by whether they ascribe a material dimension to addressings. The type of ascription of a material dimension to multimodal, offensive addresses in digital public spheres in turn determines to what extent the address has the (alleged) power to injure the addressed beings. The dualism in detail:

Free Speech: On the one hand are representatives of the position that signs are ‘just’ signs without any material component. This position is a result of the history of the first amendment to the United States Constitution which guarantees freedom of speech as a basic civil right (Walker 1994, 2). So, freedom of speech has a long tradition in United States culture. According to the idea of the *right to express anything*, this discourse assumes that signs are autonomous with no relation to a material dimension. The discourse of freedom of speech returns to the notion of the sovereign freedom of the individual (Butler 1997, 41) based on the principle *I can express my opinion without thinking about any*

consequences. Its alleged legitimacy comes from the assumption that speech or signs have *no material impact* in reality. That means for the present topic that offensive, injuring images do not exist. Any expression is protected by freedom of speech and seen as a basic civil right of individuals (Walker 1994; Eickelmann 2017, 118f.). If images operate without any material effectiveness, they cannot have the power to injure the addressed subjects: Images are *just* images. As a result, the semiotic dimension and the material dimension of images are conceptualized as dimensions that do not interfere with each other. Seen this way, images have a fictional character because they do not touch reality in its material dimension.¹ Threatening images are just signs; they do not have the power to injure the addressed subjects. However, One should take into account – especially in the current political climate² – that this argumentation is frequently used to legitimate multimodal degradation of different minorities.

Hate Speech: On the other hand, the hate speech discourse has established itself as a counterpoint to the free speech discourse. This position argues that a sign performs its deed *at the moment of utterance* (Butler 1997, 3). This is based on the idea that multimodal addresses are *illocutionary* expressions, following John L. Austin's Speech Act Theory (Austin 1962; Butler 1997, 3). The main argument here is that the illocutionary act "is one in which in saying something, one is at the same time doing something" (Butler 1997, 17). As a result, the semiotic dimension and the material dimension become one – in an inseparable way. From this perspective, offensive and threatening images *are* an act of *violence*. When the threatening image does not *represent* the threat but *is* the threat *itself*, there is no possibility of escape. In this perspective,

1 The difference between reality and fictionality is based on Elena Esposito's concept of different dimensions of reality. Both dimensions, reality and fictionality, can be understood in this perspective – based on Luhmann's systems theory – as parts of a dualism that emerged with the culture of mass media (Esposito 1998: 282). Esposito conceptualizes virtuality as a third dimension that lies diametrically to the dualism of reality and fictionality in order to emphasize that the specific point concerning virtuality is its contingency (Eickelmann 2017: 62–63).

2 For example, in the context of the populist and aggressive rhetoric of Trump's US presidency and in Germany of the AfD party. Racist and misogynic addresses are frequently used here to generate attention and justified with regard to freedom of speech.

the addressed subjects are victims of an act of violence. This explains the regulatory efforts of the hate speech discourse which are strongly connected with a juridification of the current debate on the injurious potential of signs (Butler 1997, 39–41). These efforts are not unproblematic insofar as they seek to codify the meaning of signs. The contingency of signs is abandoned in order to legitimate the juridification of the problem and hence make regulatory action plans and state-sponsored censorship possible (Banks 2010; Consalvo 2012; Eickelmann 2017, 123; Eickelmann, Grashöfer, and Westermann 2017).

Moreover, the political efforts to regulate *Online Hate Speech* make it increasingly difficult to obtain material – many examples are thus becoming invisible to scientific research. Practices of archiving will continue to grow in importance during the coming years.

We have seen that there are two opposing kinds of arguments that lead to different answers concerning the question whether the power to injure is inherent in multimodal addresses. Furthermore, the image's putative power to injure is inevitably a question of the *materiality* of offensive, multimodal addresses.

Beyond Dualisms

Based on the exposition of the dualism of hate speech/free speech and its problematic implications, I would now like to propose a conceptual alternative that goes beyond this main dualism. My point here is to find a way out of the logic of an 'either/or' relationship and make a suggestion which emphasizes the contingency of addresses. For that purpose, I propose the term *Mediatized disrespect* which can be understood as

dis-respect, that means abjection and degradation contingent on media technology, producing exclusions and limiting the survivability of beings. Mediatized disrespect can be understood as a threat for beings in the existential tension between reality and virtuality. Its consequences cannot be determined in advance. How the threat operates, i.e. its performative effectivity, and its consequences are embedded in a power setting produced by digital public spheres. This power setting is in turn influenced by technological and economic infrastructures in the context of digital hypermediality as well as historically embedded, performatively constructed, discursive formations. (Eickelmann 2017, 22)

The main point of this terminological purpose is to provide an instrument for describing the relationship between alleged opposites “without defining one against the other or holding either [of the opposites] as the fixed referent for understanding the other” (Barad 2007, 30). The focus here lies on the contingency of the destructive, injurious potential of the address regarding its relation to technological aspects of the internet.

The extensive pervasion of life by digital technologies and the internet marks a cultural development that requires a perspective which can consider the entanglements between different modes of reality and matter and meaning. On the one hand, the dualistic separation of *reality* and *fictionality*, as well as the dualistic separation of discursive and material approaches, is a problematic simplification which undermines the contingency of addresses and subjection. On the other hand, the equation of both sides is problematic insofar as it renews an alleged ontology of matter and meaning because this position argues that materiality is an *evitable* condition of signs (Ahmed 2008, 33). Instead, the contingent *relationality* of different *dimensions* of reality as well as discourse and materiality are characterized by an enormous complexity which shows that we need perspectives which put the *separation* and the alleged *congruency* of dimensions in question.

More precisely, what could such a perspective look like?

Perspective

Theoretical Considerations

Judith Butler's work *Excitable Speech. A Politics of the Performative* (1997) is a helpful groundwork in order to assess the materiality of threatening images in digital public spheres insofar as this performative theory lays stress on the constitutive role of the address:

Thus, to be addressed is not merely to be recognized for what one already is, but to have the very term conferred by which the recognition of existence becomes possible. One comes to 'exist' by virtue of this fundamental dependency on the address of the Other. (Butler 1997, 5)

Consequently, the “occasion of an address, a call, an interpellation” (Butler 1997, 5) is a fundamental aspect of subjection, because “the address constitutes a being within the possible circuit of recognition and, accordingly, outside of it, in abjection.” (Butler 1997, 5)

However, from a media theorist’s point of view, Judith Butler’s works focuses on the *linguistic* part of subjection in particular. However, the present article focuses on the *mediality of the address* regarding the digital and the internet, so we have to broaden Butler’s approach towards an understanding of the address as a *multimodal* part of being, embedded in technological contexts.

Regarding the phenomenon of *Mediatized Disrespect*, here understood as a potentially harmful practice of multimodal degradation, the mediality of internet technologies is constitutive: Data is the technical basis of the digital and can be characterized as a number-based system of code (Haber 2010, 121). That means, among other things, that there are many different modes of subjection in the context of digital technologies, embedded in different media applications that exist side by side and are constitutive for the performative genesis of the subject. In this sense, images appear as digital and multimodal signs which are inevitably *embedded* in technological and economic infrastructures as well as in the aesthetics of specific interfaces.

So, the question about the materiality of linguistic degradation focused on by Judith Butler has to be extended to a question about the materiality or materialization of multimodal semiotic degradation regarding the digital. Consequently, operations of the apparatus have to be mentioned as constitutive aspects of this perspective. However, this extension of the perspective regarding technological aspects has to be conceptualized by theoretic approaches.

In that sense, I will refer to the works of Donna J. Haraway and Karen Barad in order to broaden the work of Judith Butler. This strategy can be understood as “a way of attending to entanglements in reading important insights and approaches through one another” (Barad 2007, 30). This methodical procedure make sense insofar as it allows for taking into account the technological aspects of the digital and its public spheres on the internet: “... apparatuses produce differences that matter – they are boundary-making practices that are formative of

matter and meaning, productive of, and part of, the phenomena produced ...” (Barad 2007, 146).

The work of Karen Barad has to be contextualized within Feminist Technoscience and is widely known and considered in the field of New Materialism (Ahmed 2008; Davis 2009). Barad’s approach of “Agential Realism” is oriented toward the quantum physics of Nils Bohr. In contrast to Newton’s physics, which constructs materiality as passive and follows a representational understanding of science, Barad emphasizes about quantum physics the constitutional role of *apparatuses* as well as the *observation conditions*. These aspects are constitutive to an ongoing becoming of phenomena which cannot be seen as causally deterministic power structures (Barad 2007, 206): “The world is intra-activity in its differential mattering” (Barad 2007, 141).

Barad shows how specific experimental designs and situational contexts constitute complex intra-active phenomena by means of different laboratory situations regarding experimental quantum physics (Barad 2007, 97ff.). The performative account of material reconfigurings underlines the inseparability of apparatuses, practices of knowledge and their objects and subjects, as well as the intra-active, becoming of materialities, discursive forces and exclusions (Barad 1998, 96–97). The crucial term *intra-action* refers to those mutual entanglements of different discursive-material practices and apparatuses (Barad 2007, 18; 31; 84). Barad’s conceptualization of intra-action makes it possible to map the materiality of pictorial operations in the context of their technological conditionality.

The yield of reading Butler and Barad through one another is the possibility to widen Butler’s approach in order to conceptualize an understanding of the body’s materiality which is not prior human, but a materiality which is inherent to human-technological entanglements. In this regard, subjectivity appears neither as an ontological human nor solely technological entity but as an intra-active phenomenon. It follows that images are *one* dimension constituting the body’s matter.

The Contingency of Performativity

Following a performative account of media and its materiality, this article emphasizes performativity's *contingency*. That means that the effects of the address cannot be foreseen *ex-ante*. *Mediatized Disrespect*, i.e., a threatening image, is neither a violent act nor an innocent act *per se*. In a performative account of media and its materiality, the matter of what is an image that wounds is not reducible to the image itself. Instead, the matter of what is an image that wounds is a question about its context and its consequences (Butler 1997, 13–14). In this account, threatening images have to be understood as perlocutionary acts (Austin 1962). Hence, the image's putative power to injure can neither be derived from the image itself nor from the addressor's intention because "not all utterances that have the form of the performative, whether illocutionary or perlocutionary, actually work" (Butler 1997, 16). As a result, this gap between the address and its consequences facilitates an alternative notion of agency and responsibility which considers that any address is embedded in a symbolic field "of enabling constraints from the outset" (Butler 1997, 16). In other words, agency is about worldly reconfigurings and not about a single choice of a (human) actor by themselves.

The effects of threatening images on the internet are inevitably embedded in a power setting which is produced by specific digital public spheres which are again embedded in technological and economic infrastructures. These dynamic *entanglements* are (re-)configuring the image's power to injure, which cannot be determined *ex-ante*.

Methodological Considerations: Diffractive Designs

These theoretical accounts give rise to the question of how to analyze the phenomena of *Mediatized Disrespect*, i.e., threatening images. Karen Barad's methodological framework is based on Donna J. Haraway's understanding of *diffraction* (Haraway 1997). Haraway's heuristic of *diffraction* can be understood as a critique of representational concepts of scientific knowledge: "Unlike reflections, diffractions do not displace the same elsewhere, in more or less distorted form." (Haraway 1997,

273). The heuristic of diffraction refers to physical phenomena that occur when a wave encounters an obstacle. One effect is that a diffraction pattern comes into existence. To give an example: If white light falls on a CD that is functioning as a diffraction grating, one can see the diffraction pattern. The diffraction pattern consists of the interference of different light waves.

The diffraction grating *makes us see the interference*, i.e., the entanglements, of different light waves. The key issue in this methodological approach is the rejection of the established metaphor of the mirror. Diffractive designs do not aim to *reflect* their objectives – like the metaphor of the mirror suggests – but to constitute a specific point of view which inevitably differs from the described object:

Haraway's point is that the methodology of reflexivity mirrors the geometrical optics of reflection, and that for all of the recent emphasis on reflexivity as a critical method of self-positioning it remains caught up in geometries of sameness; by contrast, diffractions are attuned to differences – differences that our knowledge-making practices make and the effects they have in the world. (Barad 2007, 72)

As a result, diffractive readings can be understood as a consistent relational account of phenomena, i.e., images. To describe these processes of differentiating, Barad's account of Haraway's thoughts provides the term 'agential cut' (Barad 2007, 140). Agential cuts can be understood as practices of making differences within. Moreover, "... the agential cut enacts a causal structure among components of a phenomenon in the marking of the 'measuring agencies' ('effect') by the 'measured object' ('cause')" (Barad 2007, 140). So, differences are not assumed in advance but are an object of an investigation.

However, there is one critical aspect of Barad's account of diffraction: In her view diffraction is not 'just' a metaphor or a process of symbolization, as Haraway supposes, but an ontological characteristic of worldly becoming: "Of course, diffraction is also more than a metaphor. ... In fact, I will argue that there is a deep sense in which we can understand diffraction patterns ... to be the fundamental constituents that make up the world" (Barad 2007, 72). This argument is problematic – especially from a feminist theory point of view – because of its naturalizing gesture. When diffraction patterns are not a metaphor for *reading* phenomena but the ontology of phenomena, Barad

falls back behind the notion of Judith Butler who questions ontological and naturalizing views on discourse and materialities and argues against a metaphysical order of the world (cf. Ahmed 2008). So, this text is following Haraway's account of diffraction and considers it as a metaphor which makes it possible to display phenomena in a relational manner.

Examples: About the Injurious Potential of Images

#Battlefield: Digital Games Culture

So far, we have the theoretical and methodological basis to investigate the dynamics of images and their discursive-material effects regarding select examples. These examples are embedded in wider debates about digital games culture and gender.

Whereas digital games culture was linked to the idea of the white, male gamer until the beginning of the 21st century, the emergence of #gamergate provides evidence to fundamentally question this assumption (Chess 2015).³ Henceforth, digital games culture is a contested field. First, because the *representation* of women in digital games is suspected to be an effect of hierarchy building and normalizing gender stereotypes; and second, because women receive no recognition as gamers even though by now they play an important role regarding *participation* in digital games culture (Paaßen, Morgenroth, and Stratemeyer 2017). So, the digital games market has discovered women as a target group, but the cultural assumptions of the typical white, male gamer serve as a striking contrast. As a consequence, digital games culture is opening up to other identity models on the one side. But on the other side, these developments are complemented by restitutions of boundaries constituted by discursive-material gender norms.

3 The gamergate controversy is a debate about sexism in digital games culture which is characterized by harassment campaigns against women and feminist ideas in particular as well as critiques of the digital games industry. For further remarks on #gamergate see Kidd (2016).

In 2012 Anita Sarkeesian, who describes herself as a media and culture critic, promoted her project *Tropes vs Women in Video Games* via *Kickstarter* and *YouTube*. At this time, it was not possible to predict how the discussions about digital games culture and gender would become a part of the politicization of digital games regarding #gamergate two years later. The aim of the project was to criticize the pictorial and narrative representation of women in video games, e.g. the motive of the *damsel in distress* and the *male gaze* and the related objectification of the feminine body, and to raise money in order to produce an entire web series on the topic (Sarkeesian 2012).

The reactions to Sarkeesian's video on *Kickstarter* and *YouTube* have been tremendous: she was addressed by huge outrage. Her project caused an affected debate and indignation which was characterized by an opaque chaos. One constituent aspect of these reactions has been multimodal, offensive and injurious as well as threatening addressings in different digital public spheres, e.g., *twitter*, *Instagram*, *4chan* and *reddit*.

Below, I will focus on the processing of threatening (moving) images in this case in order to explore the vulnerability of subjectivity in digital public spheres.

It may be argued that images do not have the power to injure like a slap in the face. However, and this is an important issue to show, images can also be seen as powerful agents that can change the world we live in and even threaten our existence. In this sense, images are not 'just' images, but they are images which proceed in a performative sense. Hence, the effects of how these images proceed are constitutive for their discursive-material impacts. In order to illustrate this assumption, I draw upon two examples. The first can be described as a visualization of a rape scene (Fig. 1).

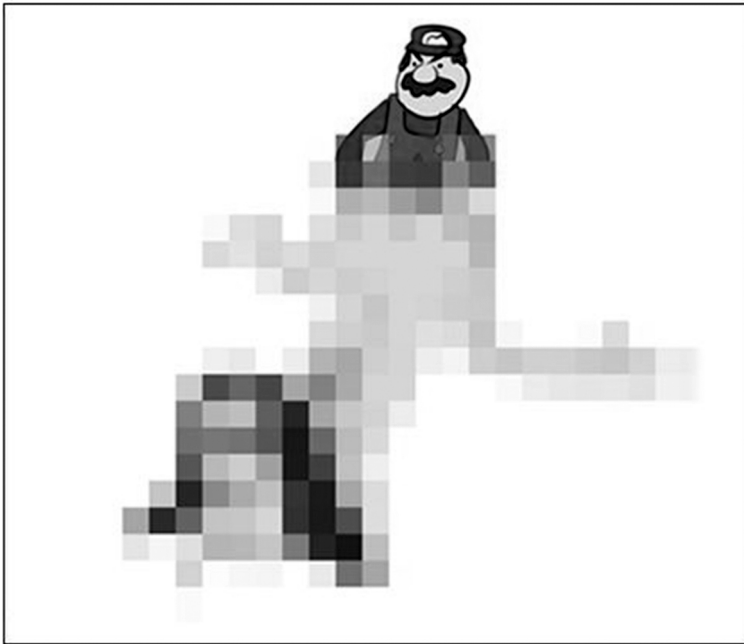


Figure 1: Visualization of a rape scene. Super Mario as rapist. (Source: <https://feministfrequency.com/2012/07/01/image-based-harassment-and-visual-misogyny>)

The active part, the rapist, looks like Super Mario, the hero of Nintendo's game classic Super Mario Bros. The passive part involved looks like the addressed Anita Sarkeesian (this was pixelated by Anita Sarkeesian). This interpretation is *not* based on the image itself, but on the context. The image proceeds in the context of various addressings via Twitter like "Bitch were not talking about that so i hope you get fucking raped u fucking whore [sic]" or "kill yourself oh wait sorry did I hurt your tits with my keyboard [sic]" (FeministFrequency.com 2015).

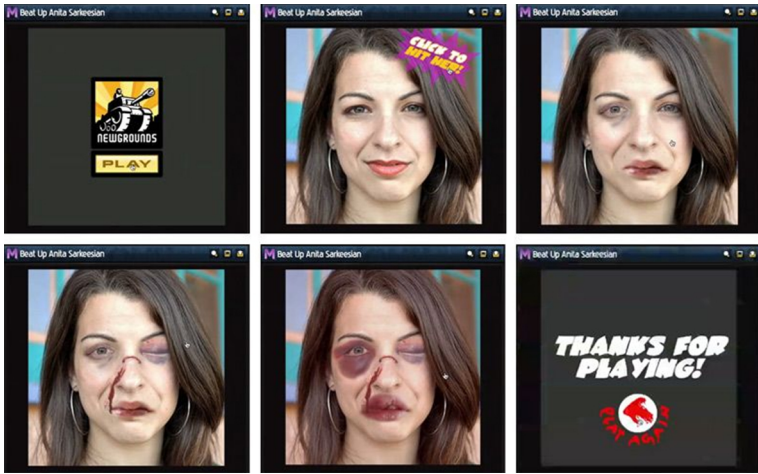


Figure 2: Browser game Beat Up Anita Sarkeesian. (Source: <https://feministfrequency.com/2012/07/01/image-based-harassment-and-visual-misogyny/>).

Figure 2 gives an overview of the different moves of browser game ‘Beat Up Anita Sarkeesian’ which was published on *Newgrounds*, a digital public sphere for browser games. At the beginning of the game, the player sees a photographic image of Anita Sarkeesian. The logic is simple: By inviting the player to “punch this bitch in the face” and “click to hit her!” the virtual representation of Sarkeesian’s face is ‘visual injured’ – every click adds wounds, lacerations, and blood to the image (Newgrounds.com 2012). The game is won when the player’s display turns completely red. The game is embedded in the free speech discourse insofar as the argumentation in the comments on this game lays stress on the (alleged) fictional character of games. This means that games are a part of a fictional sphere, so they cannot be a serious threat.

The freedom of the game is based on the assumption that games have no serious consequences (Esposito 1998, 166).⁴ Regarding this game, most comment on reddit and 4chan sounds like this: “I don’t think the game by itself is either harassment nor criticism. It’s just a

⁴ In the field of ‘serious games’ the link between the game and reality is more tight, but here there is also an alleged difference between the game – understood as fictional exercise – and the implementation or translating of insights into reality.

dumb banal game about beating up someone you dislike” (Reddit.com 2015). So, the game’s images have to be analyzed as a diffraction pattern which consists (non-exclusively) of media-specific aspects like the hypermediality of digital media, interactivity, and its opportunities to participate.⁵ As well as specific cultures of articulation on reddit and 4chan, their regulation of awareness in digital public spheres, other comments (e.g., rape and death threats) which are embedded in these media-specific operating modes, specific gender norms, and last but not least: their consequences. Therefore, it is not expedient to analyze an image without that context, because the context is constitutive for the image’s becoming and mattering.

The threat of these images – understood as a part of a diffraction pattern of multimodal degradation – is their power to constitute *possible occurrences* in the *future* which are linked to the addressed subject’s reality in a tight way: “In a sense, the threat begins the performance of that which it threatens to perform; but in not quite fully performing it, seeks to establish, through language, the certitude of that future in which it will be performed” (Butler 1997, 9). These images are a mode of subjection that is able to bring about corresponding discursive-material effects in reality.

In a further step, I will focus on these contingent effects in order to show the image’s material impact and, in this sense, its injurious potential.

Consequences

On 27 August 2014 Anita Sarkeesian’s home address was published on *Twitter*: “I’m going to go to your apartment at ... and rape you to death. After I’m done, I’ll ram a tire iron up your cunt” (Sarkeesian via Twitter 2014a). On the same day, she left her apartment and informed relevant authorities (Sarkeesian via Twitter 2014b; Campbell 2014).

In October the same year she canceled a talk at Utah State University: “Forced to cancel my talk at USU after receiving death threats

⁵ For example, meme generators, photoshop hacks, wikipedia vandalism, DDos attacks. These are examples for multimodal articulations which depend on technological issues and the mediality of digital media.

because police wouldn't take steps to prevent concealed firearms at the event" (Sarkeesian via Twitter 2014c).

Michel Foucault argues in his renowned article "Subject and Power" that the exercise of power is "a way in which certain actions modify others" (Foucault 1982, 219). In this sense, power has to be put into action. In contrast to violence, power can be understood as a way of "acting upon an acting subject", in which the subject acted upon is *not forced* to alter their actions but becomes more likely to (ibid., 220). The avoidance of places is an example of the effects of power relations because Anita Sarkeesian is not directly forced to, but a sense of discomfort and fear increases the probability that she avoids specific places. This configuration of bodies in space can be understood as one central aspect of Foucault's account of governmentality which means specific rationality of the regulation of individuals:

To govern, in this sense, is to structure the possible field of action of others. The relationship proper to power would not therefore be sought on the side of violence or of struggle, nor in that of voluntary linking (all of which can, at best, only be the instruments of power), but rather in the area of the singular mode of action, neither warlike nor juridical, which is government. (Foucault 1982, 221)

In the words of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari and their account of (de)territorialization it can be argued that these (re)configurations of bodies in space and time create rhythmic movements that can be understood as demarcations as well as dissolutions of borders and classifications: „Rhythms pertain to these interstratic movements, which are also acts of stratification. Stratification is like the creation of the world from chaos, a continual, renewed creation" (Deleuze, Guattari 1987, 502). The occurring rhythmic movements are changing permanently and have to be understood as discursive and material consequences of addressing. In consequence, „an oscillational constant is established" (ibid., 320).

Regarding the example of Anita Sarkeesian, the diffraction pattern in which the threatening images and the game are embedded shows how multimodal mediatized disrespect is articulated in a way that produces distance to feminist accounts of digital games culture. At the same time the rhythmic movements of bodies in space are also a part of producing distance: Anita Sarkeesian's flight from her home, the

moving of her body in space, the marked distance between the feminist idea and the alleged male-dominated game culture, mark the entanglement of discursive and material consequences of threatening images in the context of mediatized disrespect in a haunting way:

The territory is first of all the critical distance between two beings of the same species: Mark your distance. What is mine is first of all my distance; I possess only distances. Don't anybody touch me, I growl if anyone enters my territory, I put up placards. Critical distance is a relation based on matters of expression. It is a question of keeping at a distance the forces of chaos knocking at the door. (Deleuze, Guattari 1987, 319–320)

Recapitulating, mediatized disrespect is a (re-)configuring of territorial boundaries and produces discursive-material, distance producing, rhythmic movement. Not least, these movements are regulated by emotions like anger and fear.

Anger and fear are constituted by distance at the same time as they are producing distance. The regulation of bodies and emotions, regarding rape or death threats in the case of Anita Sarkeesian, makes clear that social dangers, e.g., sexual harassment and violence, are suggested to be an aspect of self-care (Dhawan 2013, 98). The utterance of consequences aims at the 'individual decision' to take care of oneself; the threatening addressings force the addressed to make a decision: Stay or flee?

Sara Ahmed clearly shows in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2014) that the regulation of emotions has to be understood as a central aspect of the political (Ahmed 2014, 64). Emotions – and that is important – are not individual feelings but have a *structural* component. In this sense, emotions are political insofar as they are the consequences of societal negotiation processes and are embedded in social norms and the related exclusions of alternative concepts of life. The materiality of the threatening image and the threatening game comes into existence in the Foucaultian sense of governance of the self: by avoiding spaces that are classified as dangerous as well as informing the authorities. So, threatening images do *not* proceed in *fiction* without any consequences. Threatening images in digital public spheres *do* have consequences in *reality*. There is an infinite variety of images that could be discussed in order to show the multimodality and materiality of images in regard to #gamergate. What they have in common is that they are based on

specific gender stereotypes. Hence, these images have to be understood as political because they cannot be separated from their wider diffraction pattern that is constitutive for their mattering. More precisely, these images sanction the questioning of boundaries, e.g., the feminist critique of digital games culture, and reconstitute these boundaries. The addressed subjects are “put in their place” (Butler 1997, 4) in this context. The image’s materiality, embedded in multimodal addressings, cannot be conceptualized without taking its normative and technological relationality into account. The consequences of images are in turn an aspect of governmental becoming of subjectivity in digital public spheres.

Resignification/Reconfiguring

I already mentioned above that a performative account of media and its materiality lays stress on the contingency of performativity. That means that its consequences are a non-necessary effect which is *partially open* (Butler 1997, 38).

So, in a next step, my argumentation focuses on the possibilities of resignifications or reconfigurings regarding threatening addressings. If images have no ontological characteristics themselves but are embedded in a diffraction pattern that constitutes their mattering, this mattering has to be alterable. The same point applies for the course consequences take: Consequences of the addressings cannot be anticipated *before* they occur. The image has no sovereign power. So, how could the reconfiguring of threatening images look regarding our example?

Anita Sarkeesian has issued the addressings on her homepage *feminist frequency*. On July 1st 2012 she wrote:

“I’m making it a point to strategically share some of the online harassment I’ve received after launching my Tropes vs Women in Video Games Kickstarter. I’ve already posted about the harassment via YouTube and Wikipedia but these were not the only abusive cyber mob tactics employed to try and silence me” (FemenistFrequency.com 2017).

This issuing can be understood as recontextualization because the images are no longer functioning as mediatized disrespect but as a

testimony of mediatized disrespect. Under the heading *Image Based Harassment and Visual Misogyny* she issued (until 2015)⁶ the visual addressings and so the matter changes.

Another example of the reconfiguring of threatening images is the so-called “Rape Threat Generator” (Rapeglisch.com 2017). It is one example of a resistant practice which has the aim of archiving threatening, offensive addressings that many women in different digital public spheres are confronted with. The online tool operates in the following manner:

“It makes no sense. Until you realize that this is not about individual women. It is about gender” (Rapeglisch.com 2017). These brief references to the possibilities of reconfiguring threatening addressing and the related gender norms are intended to illustrate the possibilities linked to a performative account of images. The contingency of consequences has to be understood as an opportunity. However, there is no certainty. Numerous examples show that mediatized disrespect has the potential power to destroy existences. Hence, to recognize the relationality of existence regarding mediatized disrespect can be understood as an ethical issue based on the lack of sovereignty of subjectivity. This lack of sovereignty is simultaneous risk and opportunity.

Conclusion: Towards a Performative Theory of Images

In summary, one can bring together different aspects of the argumentation in order to conceptualize a performative theory of images:

- The intra-active becoming of images has to be seen as a diffraction pattern. The entanglements of images and further systems of signs require a relational conceptualization of phenomena.
- The materiality of images proceeds by way of consequences. This consideration marks the image’s productive character as well as its power to injure and destroy existences.

⁶ Now you can find a description of the images but not the images themselves.

- Images are just one dimension of the constitution of subjectivities and bodies which calls the alleged boundary between technology and the human into question.
- A performative account of images lays stress on the contingency of their materiality or their consequences, following a perlocutionary understanding of signs.

This theoretical frame is inevitably linked to methodological remarks: Multimodal addressings have to be analyzed as diffraction patterns. These diffraction patterns consist of discursive-material aspects, like technological and economic infrastructures, as well as practices of knowledge and their linked social norms, power settings that are produced by digital public spheres and the complex interference of virtuality and reality.

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