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Languages of Violence
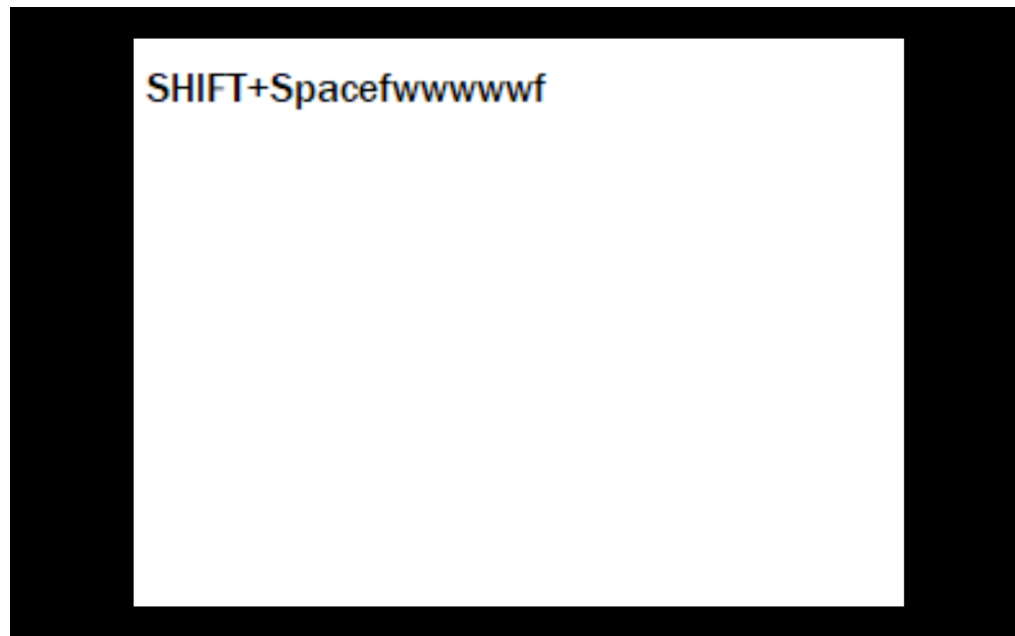
Ansel Arnold

Ansel Arnold, Languages of Violence *(still), 2019, 4 minutes 18 seconds*[1]

Notes

[1] *Languages of Violence* (2019) is available for viewing at https://escholar-ship.org/uc/item/0g4831q5#supplemental.

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On *Languages of Violence*

Ansel Arnold

Languages of Violence is a gaming/sound performance mediated by the streaming service Twitch.[1] The visual elements represent the active key registrations and inputs being made during a video game, while the sound is of the game as it's played and mixed through analog pedals and feedback loops. The context of the game and the event that it produces are obscured by this interpretation. What's left is an impressionistic gesture that mediates a fact of violence. At the outset of this work, I was exploring what I saw left open by realistic digital violence, in that it can be directed beyond its actual origins. Gunfire is made indistinguishable from a real-life event, but its context as a video game rescues it or makes it acceptable.

At one point in the early stages, I was recording sounds outside my window when I triggered an audio recording of one of these performances without realizing it and moments later was unexpectedly assaulted by the sounds of increasing rapid gunfire. In the moments prior to realizing what I had done, my body instinctively reacted as my heart immediately sped up, and I quickly shifted my focus to the street to find out where this sound was coming from. Within a few seconds I was able to locate the source—my laptop and amplifier—but was nonetheless physically unnerved by this spontaneous disruption. Even though a first-person shooter game is not real life, considering this violence to be "fake" or not real seems disingenuous, as the experience of it is, even momentarily, very real. Representation is blurred as violence becomes the only palpable object of perception.

Afterward I continued to think about this dislocation of violence and how it relates to nearly any form of media or language. What is critical is that this

dislocation intentionally breaks understanding linked to its real event. I refer to this as "subtle violence," wherein violence is made unclear. Violence is often passed over in everyday communication as if it were nonexistent, even as the fabric of our societies rests on its existence. This short essay follows some thoughts that have come up alongside this work and considers how media and communication can reinforce subtle violence.

Violence in the Cracks of Our Everyday Lives

When thinking about media such as television, film, sports, and video games through the framework of violence, we will notice that a relationship to violence is, more often than not, nearly everywhere. Sports play an interesting role because they are both somewhat fictive and objective when it comes to violence. The violence present in sports is similar to war in the sense that they both depend on physical domination measured on a scale of defeat and victory. In sports, you're not supposed to kill your opponent, but both in war and in sports the objective goal is the ultimate submission of your opponent, and, in essence, their loss is your gain.

Despite the presence and popularity of violence in sports, video games, film, and television, there is a deflected acknowledgment of the fact that violence is actively perpetuated in these forms of entertainment. This isn't to say that there are not conversations about the violence represented in video games, sports, or film. Violence is heavily criticized and is usually a subject of controversy, but only when it is something deemed unacceptable. The paranoia surrounding violence in entertainment even takes the form of Parental Advisory labels that help parents, like mine, limit their children's musical options. There is an ever-present threat of legitimizing a certain kind of violence—not just any but a particular and "unacceptable" violence.

Today, we might consider our societies as being generally peaceful even as we live surrounded by armed security, police, and military. There is a strong tendency in mainstream culture to see state violence as a necessary function, presupposing legitimate action. In the same way, colonialism and slavery appear as oppressive systems of the past when we fail to confront the ways our present lives are rooted in them. Active force maintains the system of security, policing, and militarization whether we wish to think of it as violent or not. And since violence is at the heart of the contemporary situation in which we find ourselves entangled, then it's not the violence committed by the state or of colonialism that is made to appear objectionable—it is the violence that threatens its presumption of

necessity. When violence is used as a framing mechanism, it begs the question of legitimacy so much so that we cannot avoid it. When something is simply described in violent terms, it appears before us as an open question. We cannot just assume that it is also illegitimate—as the legitimacy of violence is not just wide open but wholly unclear if the act is not given much context. So when we begin from the frame of violence, it requires us to answer the question of whether it is appropriate. Even if the context is provided in a biased way, it places the onus on the individual to prescribe the action from their own particular position, which acts to instill a sense of duty and moral responsibility to the individual who is tasked with interpreting the violence.

In contrast, when the news media report on state violence, they never seem to encounter quite the same problem. For instance, we all know that war is violent, and it wouldn't take much to accept that. But when we hear about the military in the Middle East, the events are masked by terms like *democracy* and *freedom*.[2] The violence is seemingly passed over and celebrated, precluding us from answering its question. This nuanced framing grants an assumed legitimacy through language and mediation. How can an operation for *freedom* be wrong? How can the support of a military coup for *democracy* be illegitimate? These are questions that governments and most media would rather not entertain, as the laws of property and the monopoly of violence might be conceptually threatened. When these standards are questioned, it will usually devolve into some logic that accepts "the way things are," which means that we are no longer speaking of values but making exceptions to them.

Locating a Junction

Only when we understand that violence is the question being asked can we attempt to respond to it appropriately. To help illustrate the way that context surrounding an event is masked, I want to think about violence in terms of two interactive forms: blatant violence is when the context surrounding violence is clear, and subtle violence is when the context surrounding violence is opaque. When the context of violence is clear or transparent, the question of violence is not able to evade answer. Blatant violence is when the fact of violence itself cannot be denied. Blatant violence is necessary to subtle violence because it is the understanding of violence as such, where subtle violence is the denial, ignorance, or seeming unawareness of it. Subtle violence is simply blatant violence that is made privy to some and not to others. In our everyday lives, when it comes to answering the question of the violence we come into contact with, we can generally identify it and make a

more instinctual reaction to it. When violence is brought into being, it is not made clear by default. Understanding any violence relies first on our perception, which is based on the ways we understand the world. Like indiscriminate racism, the reason racists are unable to first consider their own actions or "views" as being violent and thus harmful is because they would be forced to consider their own actions as wrong or anything but normal. They would first have to question their own belief system. Their worldview effectively depends on the acceptability of that particular violence. Those who are the victims of racism have no way of being shielded from confronting this question, since it is being done *to* them. They are denied the legitimacy of their reaction to violence in favor of misunderstandings, poor taste, and ignorance. Even if victims of racism—or any other form of subtle violence—did not accept violence as to what they were subjected to, they are none-theless left open to its harm psychologically, as the experience of violence does not depend on a clear representation or a locating of violence.

When the language that describes representation is considered an author-ity, it can be directed in any way despite its actual context of events. Although we acknowledge the inherent differences of violence in television, film, sports, and video games, they are made decidedly "good" or "bad" through a representation where context is only selectively accessible. When we experience violence through media, knowing that it is violent is not enough to understand it, as we need to know of it beyond a representational level. Guided by social norms, our main forms of entertainment and media further disrupt our ability to respond to vio-lence, as they assist in dislodging its context of events. The problem I see is not with types of media themselves, as they do not harbor intentionality until they are interacted with. The question I'm focused on is how violence is communicated outside its real event—which is to say *through media*. When watching a video game through its symbolic movement and hearing it played more as an instrument, its violence becomes detached and somewhat more loaded. Heard from another room or unaware of what it was, it would be masked by this subtlety, where its context and legitimacy would be experienced far differently than what it was.

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Ansel Arnold is an artist and writer who is broadly interested in the way that media representations structure knowledge and guide our everyday experience. By re-presenting these media, his work is critical of the knowledge that those represent-ations produce. Through this critique, he rejects monolithic preconceptions of the world by reconstructing narrative space.

Notes

[1] *Languages of Violence* (2019) is available for viewing at https://escholar-ship.org/uc/item/0g4831q5#supplemental.

[2] For example, Operation Iraqi Freedom emphasized replacing Saddam Hussein's reign with a "democratically elected government." See Office of the Press Secretary, "Fact Sheet: Operation Iraqi Freedom: Three Years Later," U.S. Department of State Archive, March 18, 2006, https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/nea/ci/iz/63367.htm.