

Artemisia's Revenge: Rape and Art in the Work of Jean-Luc Nancy¹

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When Artemisia Gentileschi was eighteen years old, Agostino Tassi, a colleague of her father's, entered her house, found her painting, threw her down, and raped her. Today Artemisia² is recognized as one of the greatest artistic talents of the sixteenth century. Her first signed painting, *Susanna and the Elders* at Pommersfelden, was completed in the year before her rape, and depicts the biblical character Susanna, who was not raped, but was threatened with death to submit to the amorous desires of two community elders (Daniel 13). Although Jean-Luc Nancy does not directly speak about Artemisia's physical or artistic encounters with rape, the interplay of three of his ideas holds significance for the way in which Artemisia's two encounters with sexual violence interact with each other. By examining Nancy's theories of sense, violence, and image in relation to one another, this paper will address the possibility that images of violence structurally resist the force of physical occurrences of violence.

Sense and Violence

For Nancy, sense refers to a system of knowledge in which knowing subjects come to understand, or make sense of, the environment around them, and thereby create a sensible world. In Nancy's thought, this system of sense is necessarily dependent on a division within sense itself. In his paper "A Finite Thinking," Nancy (2003a) writes, "Sense depends on relating to itself as to another or to some other" (6). The act of sense, or the act of understanding, requires two participants: there is a subject who knows, and an object that is known—an object of understanding.

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² I refer to Artemisia by her first name in order to distinguish her from her father, Orazio Gentileschi, who was also a painter of note during the Baroque period.

Since the process of understanding moves from a lack of knowledge about the object of understanding to positive knowledge of the object of understanding, the object of understanding must be something that is initially foreign to, or removed from, the subject who understands. If there is to be understanding, there must be a space between the knowing subject and the object it knows, so that the subject can come to know the object through the process of understanding. In terms of sense, or the structure of understanding in general, this means that there must be a division within sense between that which understands and that which is understood, a division that makes sense itself possible (Nancy 2003a, 5-6).

Stated in another way, “what produces sense” is the act of sense “being grasped” or “grasping itself as sense” (Nancy 2003a, 5). If sense is indeed to be produced in this very movement of grasping itself, then sense is necessarily dependent on the otherness of itself. If sense did not relate to itself as to another (Nancy 2003a, 6), then it would be impossible to speak of sense grasping itself. The motion of grasping requires an element of otherness. That which grasps can only grasp what is other to it; even when one grasps oneself, say, when one grasps one’s own arm, the arm that is grasped is other than the hand that grasps it. If sense were entirely unitary, it would be unable to maintain the element of otherness that is required for sense to be possible in the first place, and sense itself would disappear (Nancy 2003a, 6).

For Nancy (2003a), then, sense “is the openness of a relation to itself” (6). The difference between sense and itself, the difference between the sense that grasps sense and the sense that is grasped by sense, generates the possibility of there being sense at all. Because there is this difference in the relationship of sense to itself, sense itself can exist. The difference gives sense something to grasp, thereby enabling sense to be sense, and thereby requiring that sense always maintain this difference.

Violence, on the other hand, is interested in destroying the influence of anything that differs from itself. In describing the destructive character of violence, Nancy makes three important points. First, destruction is built into the very definition of violence. In his paper “Image and Violence”, Nancy (2005b) defines violence as “the application of a force that remains foreign to the dynamic or energetic system into which it intervenes” (16). Violence is that which imposes itself onto a system foreign to itself without becoming a part of that system or respecting the logic of that system. Instead, violence “denatures, wrecks, and massacres that which it assaults” (Nancy 2005b, 16). This is the second point. In its lack of concern with, and attention to, the system it imposes itself on, and in its interest in nothing more than this pure imposition, violence does damage to the system. Third, violence seeks to make what is not itself, what it assaults, into nothing but an image of itself (Nancy 2005b, 16). Through the act of violence,

violence denies that its victims have any identity apart from the violent act itself. Violence identifies its victims as nothing more than victims, nothing more than those who have been assaulted, and in doing so it asserts that its victims have identity only through their relationship to their violators (Nancy 2005b, 16). Victims become nothing more than the imprint of violence upon them (Nancy 2005b, 16).

The movement of violence is entirely contrary to the movement of sense. Instead of opening a space between itself and others, violence seeks to appropriate everything that is not itself into itself, so that there is no opening between things, but simply the mark of violence everywhere (Nancy 2005b, 16). Violence refuses to enter into a relationship that would generate sense, opting instead for relationships that are destructive to the very idea of sense. In Nancy's (2005b) language, this makes violence "profoundly stupid" (16); the ontological structure of violence, the way in which violence exists, shuts down the space that is necessary for the generation of sense.

Rape as an Act of Violence

Rape is one of the many forms violence can take. In "In Praise of the Melee", Nancy (2003b) writes that rape is "A null act, a negation of sex itself, a negation of relation, a negation of the child, of the woman; an act of pure affirmation on the part of the rapist, in whom a 'pure identity' is unable to offer anything better than a vile imitation of what it negates: relationship and being-together" (286). Sex, in its non-violent form, is an intimate act that marks two people converging on one another, or coming together. It is entirely, inherently, completely, relational. When a person is raped, she is forced into a sexual relationship in such a way that the relational aspect of sex is destroyed. That she is being forced, that her will and her voice are being ignored, is a denial of her significance as an individual. She does not matter; what matters is the will of her rapist. By raping her, her rapist is asserting that she is insignificant to him, meaningless to him, that she has no influence over him. His existence, his identity, is not impacted by her in the least.

Nancy (2003b) speaks of rape in a paper written for Sarajevo, in which he asserts that his project is

To do justice to identities—without giving in to their delusion, to the presumption that they are, substantially, identities: this is the job at hand. It's both immense and very simple: to remake culture, no less, to remake thought so that it is not crude, rubbish, like any thinking of purity; to remix lineages, paths, and skins, but also to describe their heterogeneous trajectories, their networks, which are at once crossed and distinct. (279)

Nancy wants to retain the distinction of identities, or the singularity of identities, without falling into the myth that identities are what they are completely independently of any relationship to anything else, of any mixture with anything else. “By definition, identity is not an absolute distinction, cut off from everything and therefore distinct from nothing: it is always the other of an other identity” (Nancy 2003b, 280). For Nancy, identity is what it is precisely by not being something else. We are what we are because we are able to distinguish ourselves from what we are not. This means, in turn, that what we are not is an essential part of what we are; if we were unable to differentiate ourselves from what we are not, if there was no “what we are not”, we would have no identity. “What we are not” enables us to be what we are. And so just as sense needs to be an other to itself in order to exist, identity exists through the other that is equally itself.

Nancy is writing, literally, in praise of the *melee*. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “*melee*” as “A confusion, jumble; a medley, a mixture.” The “*melee*” indicates that identity is not pure, that identity comes closer to being a confused blend. On Nancy’s interpretation of Sarajevo, the rape camps served the purpose of negating the *melee* of identity:

[T]he systemic rape of Bosnian women unfurled in exemplary fashion all the figures of the delusional affirmation of a community “one” with itself: rape in order to engender “bastards,” deemed unacceptable, excluded *a priori* from the presupposed unity; rape in order to force the abortion of these bastards; rape, then, in order to kill and destroy the very possibility of the bastard; rape so that this repeated act will draw its victims into the fantastic unity of their “community”; rape in order to make manifest in every possible way that there *should be no relations* between communities. (Nancy 2003b, 285)

The rape camps created children, a mixture of mother and father, who were then aborted (Nancy 2003b, 285).³ In so doing, the rapists were negating the *melee*, the mixture of mother and father, the linking of communities. The rapists were asserting their independence from the *melee*, establishing the identity of their community independently of the influence of any other community. And as much

³ There are feminist scholars who would disagree with Nancy’s argument that the Sarajevo rape camps were primarily interested in aborting “bastards.” Catharine MacKinnon, in particular, notes that Bosnian rape camps often held pregnant women until it was unsafe for them to get an abortion, indicating that one of the purposes of the camps was, in fact, to generate children (see Mackinnon 2006).

as these other communities constitute an essential part of their identity, the rapists were denying the self that was other to them.

Artemisia's Two Encounters with Sexual Violence: the Physical and the Artistic

Artemisia Gentileschi was not a part of Sarajevo; nor was she the survivor of a rape camp. But Artemisia Gentileschi was—allegedly—raped. Artemisia was born in Rome on 8 July 1593 to Orazio Gentileschi and Prudentia Montone. As a youth she was schooled in art by her father, who was himself an accomplished artist. Artemisia made her first original, and remarkable, contribution to the artistic community at the age of seventeen. Two years later, in March of 1612 Orazio publicly accused Agostino Tassi, an artistic colleague, of raping and “deflowering” Artemisia. This accusation led to a seven month trial in which Artemisia was subjected to public physical examinations by two obstetricians, and was tortured with the *sibille*—a device that tightens metal rings around the fingers of its victim—in order to ascertain the truth of her testimony. Despite Tassi's previous sexual offenses, and the numerous flaws in his testimony and in the testimonies of the witnesses who spoke on his behalf, the charges against Tassi were dismissed, and he was released after serving only eight months in prison. On 29 November 1612, Artemisia married Florentine artist Pietro Antonio di Vincenzo Stattes, and left Rome for Florence. Artemisia subsequently became a respected artist, and she is currently recognized as one of the greatest talents of her time (see Garrard 1999).



Artemisia Gentileschi. *Susanna and the Elders*. 1610. Oil on Canvas. 66.9 in. x 46.9 in. Pommersfelden, Schloss Weissenstein.

In 1610, the year before her rape, Artemisia completed her first signed painting, *Susanna and the Elders* at Pommersfelden. The story of Susanna is found in the Apocryphal thirteenth chapter of the Book of Daniel, which describes Susanna as a beautiful and God-fearing woman, the wife of a pillar of the Jewish community. According to the text, two judges fell in love with Susanna, and happening upon her alone in her garden one day, they demanded that she submit to their desires, threatening that if she did not they would accuse her of adultery, a crime that was punishable by death. Susanna refused the judges. She was subsequently charged with adultery, and sentenced to death by stoning. Before she was executed, the young Daniel

publicly denounced the judges and proved that they had been lying, saving Susanna and condemning her accusers to execution in her place.

Unlike Artemisia, Susanna was not raped, and in this her experience differs from Artemisia's. But Susanna was threatened with rape, she was threatened with death, and she was subjected to the brutality of slander, all of which display a violence that is fundamentally similar to that of rape. When Artemisia was raped, the significance of her existence as an individual was denied, affirmed as nothing more than the object of her assaulter's violence. Susanna's assaulters did much the same thing, denying that her existence had import apart from her submission to their will, and even asserting that her existence would cease if she resisted their will. Despite the differences in their situations, the assaulters of both Artemisia and of her artistic subject used sexual violence as a way of stamping out the women's individual existences.

Art and Violence

Four centuries after Artemisia was raped, Nancy crafted a theory of art that casts a unique light on the relationship between Artemisia's rape and her painting of Susanna's assault. The core of Nancy's theory of art revolves, once again, around difference and identity. In "Image and Violence" Nancy (2005b) intimately links the identity of the image of a thing to the subject it represents, speaking of the image as showing its audience the "unity and force" of that which it represents (22). The image, for Nancy, does not show us only the features of the represented subject, as if it were merely giving us an inventory of parts. Rather, in showing us the features of the represented subject, the image shows us something deeper; it shows us the force that holds the features together, the force that makes the features something more than a disjunctive series of components, the force that makes the represented subject an entity, a thing (Nancy 2005b, 22). The image displays the identity of what it represents, making the image an expression of the represented subject, and essentially connecting the very being of the image to the represented subject. The identity of the represented subject is displayed by the image, making the image the canvas of the subject's identity. The image becomes, in a way, what it represents: the very core of the subject.

However, Nancy notes that in its representation of the subject, the image also acts as the represented subject's rival, competing with the represented subject for existence itself. In his own words, the image of the represented subject "rivals the thing, and this rivalry implies not so much reproduction as competition, and, in relation to what concerns us here, competition for presence" (Nancy 2005b, 21). The term "presence" denotes the fact of existing, or of being present (*Oxford English Dictionary*). In rivaling the presence of its represented subject, the image

of the subject competes with the subject it represents for existence. Competition, by definition, involves competing parties attempting to win something by beating or by bettering their competitors. That the image competes with its represented subject means that the image does not simply assert itself; it attempts to assert its own existence over and above the subject it represents.

Taken together, these two elements of Nancy's artistic theory imply that the image is both a representation of the subject it images—a representation that is intimate enough to display the unifying force of the subject—and an entity distinct enough from the imaged subject that it can wrestle with the imaged subject for existence. Through this dual-natured relationship, the image presents the represented subject to itself. Nancy (2005b) writes, "The image is what takes the thing out of its simple presence and brings it [...] to being-out-in-front-of-itself" (21). To move from "simple presence" to "being-out-in-front-of-itself" is to move from the state of simply being, to the state of examining oneself. That the image is distinct from the subject it represents means that the image can be, and is, out in front of the imaged subject, such that the imaged subject can gaze upon it. And that image is reflective of the subject it represents means that what is out in front of the represented subject is the represented subject itself, requiring that the represented subject face itself, confront itself. The image creates a space between the represented subject and itself such that the represented subject becomes an issue to itself.

What is significant for this project is that the structure of Nancy's theory of art mirrors the structure of his theory of sense. The image, like sense, is dependent on an act of the self becoming other to itself, while at the same time keeping something of the status of the self. This is what image is, the representation of the imaged subject that is at one and the same time identical to the imaged subject and distinct from the imaged subject. To image violence, then, would be to make a representation of violence that is at the same time distinct from violence. It would be to bring violence to "being-out-in-front-of-itself," which reverses the movement of violence. Instead of closing down the space between individuals by denying the significance of diverse individuals, violence would be put into a form where it would necessarily be faced with a self that is other than it, thereby opening the space between individuals that violence shuts down. And insofar as this reverse movement of violence—the movement of violence confronting itself that is brought about through image—is also the movement of sense, the imaging of violence could hold the potential to bring violence back into the realm of sense.

Artemisia's Revenge

Nancy's thought indicates that the imaging of violence, or artistic depictions of violence, could have two remedial functions. First, the imaging of violence could be interpreted as restoring a certain moral equilibrium to situations of violence. By creating a multiplicity of identity in a system that seeks to deny any multiplicity, and thus denies the significance of individuals other than itself, art could open up the possibility for survivors of violence to reassert their individuality. Violence denies the significance, and the very being, of its victims. Art affirms both the presence and the value of diverse individuals. It gives individuals who have previously been oppressed or abused the chance to reestablish their worth, their importance, and their existence.

Secondly, art could help generate conversations about violence. Conversations always happen within the context of sense, or acts of understanding: in order to communicate with one another, we must be able to understand what the other person is saying. Violence disrupts understanding by destroying the diversity that is at the heart of understanding. Art maintains understanding by creating diversity. Artistic depictions of violence bring violence back into the realm of understanding, which means they also bring violence back into a setting in which meaningful communication is possible. If violence is in the realm of understanding, then we can begin to speak about it, and its survivors are given a context in which their experiences, and their voices, can be heard.

When Artemisia imaged the violence done to Susanna, then, she did two things. Artemisia remade Susanna's violence into a form that, on a structural level, mended the damage Susanna's assaulters had done to her individuality. Artemisia also placed Susanna's violence into a context where Susanna's voice could be heard; she helped her audience hear Susanna. And while Artemisia never painted her own rape, by painting the general subject of rape she made a stand against the identity-crushing force of rape in general, and she contributed to a discourse about rape. Both of these things could have established an environment conducive to her recovery from her own encounter with rape. Through her depiction of Susanna, Artemisia fought back against the violence done to Susanna, and the violence she would undergo herself a year later.

It is important to note here, with Nancy (2005b), that "Art is not a simulacrum or apotropaic form that would protect us from unjustifiable violence" (26). Whatever remedial functions art might have, it still cannot end or undo actual acts of violence. That Artemisia painted the violence of the Susanna story does not mean that the violence of the story has somehow been undone, or that the wrongs Susanna suffered have been righted. Susanna's story is still violent, and the wrongs she suffered are still wrongs. Art cannot change that. Nor can art prevent future violent acts from happening. When Agostino Tassi raped Artemisia, he was not stopped by her *Susanna*. He did not look at the violence in the image, see the

agony on Susanna's face, and halt his own assault. Imaging Susanna's violence did not prevent Artemisia from experiencing violence of her own.

But Artemisia's painting did do something else, something important. In imaging violence, and in bringing violence back into the realm of understanding, Artemisia created the possibility of meaningful interaction with violence. She created the possibility for her audience to think about violence, to speak about violence, and to come to know the survivors of violence. Artemisia opened up a space in which the voices of survivors could be heard. And while this did not undo the violence that was already done, perhaps it did offer a small amount of revenge; perhaps *this* is Artemisia's revenge.

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