



Call for Papers.

Avisa project conference 9-10 December 2021.

Writing the long-term history of sexual harassment: naming, denouncing, representing, picturing and putting to music.

This conference is part of the AVISA project co-directed by Armel Dubois-Nayt from the University of Versailles-Saint-Quentin (DYPAC) and Réjane Vallée from the University of Évry Val d'Essonne (Centre Pierre Naville in partnership with the SLAM research centre) and funded by the MSH-Paris-Saclay with the sponsorship of SIEFAR and SAGEF. This project aims at laying the foundations of the historicization of the social phenomenon known today as sexual harassment by recovering its historical occurrences but also turning to its representations in literature, the visual and performing arts as well as the cinema. For an overview of the project see: <https://avisa.huma-num.fr/s/avisa/page/accueil>

Shortly before her death, Françoise Héritier reflected on the historical moment that the Western world had been facing in the wake of the Weinstein case. This moment seems to be marking a departure from the way in which sexual harassment has hitherto been perceived while granting women the freedom to speak about the violence they experience.

To establish the historical singularity of the post-Weinstein era, it is however necessary to consider sexual harassment as a historical phenomenon which can be traced back to the Middle Ages. That epistemological stance was adopted as early as 1994 by Carol Bacchi and Jim Jose who cautioned against the tendency to represent sexual harassment as a “discovery” of contemporary feminist movements (Bacchi & Jose 263). This is the overall dynamic of the AVISA project.

As we are collectively working over a long period of time and several geographical areas, sexual harassment is understood here outside a precise legal framework and within a conceptual framework that encompasses its various versions in Europe. It therefore includes acts of unwelcome social behaviour, such as:

- repeatedly making comments or gestures of a sexual nature (eye contact, whistling, shouting, etc...)
- imposing unwanted physical contact (kissing, touching, pinching, etc.)
- making unwanted sexual advances.

Sexual harassment may come before sexual coercion or rape just as it does in the hierarchy of sexual violence. It consists of micro-aggressions, which as Mary Bularzik put it, can be likened to “petty rape” since they represent an invasion of an individual by suggestion or intimidation through a more or less brutal confrontation of the victim with their vulnerability (Bularzik 118). Sexual harassment is therefore a form of pressure aimed at destabilising a person so that they will give in and cave into the sexual act. It is a tool of mental control which annihilates any possible form of consent and which is rendered invisible by the recurring suspicion that women fake resistance.

Studying the history of sexual harassment through the lens of its representations first involves recovering its semiotic existence. In the first instance, this entails reconstituting the vocabulary of sexual harassment and its evolution over the centuries since contemporary

categories, in the various linguistic areas covered, are inadequate to grasp how acts that would fall under this qualification of violence in today's terms were understood and described (Myriam Soria 58) in the past. Alain Boureau has stressed the difficulty of finding a name for this offence, which is both old and new and which entered the French penal code in 1972 under the term *harcèlement sexuel*, a phrase which, in his opinion, is not appropriate as it is the translation of the English "sexual harassment" which "refers to a metaphorical system of assault and war specific to the American version of the *common law*" (Boureau 9). He also disapproved of the metaphorical use of *droit de cuissage* in the business world as he demonstrated that a Lord's First-night as a legal norm in medieval France was nothing but a myth. This does not mean however that we should give up the idea of reconstructing the vocabulary used to report and denounce "the disseminated problem, difficult to label, which covers the social use of social power by men for sexual purposes" (Boureau 18). All the more so as the terms *harceler* and *harasser* were used in French, although very occasionally, to refer to this type of violence as early as the sixteenth century as attested by an Idyll by Jean Vauquelin de La Fresnay in which a shepherdess reproaches a hunter with his behaviour in those terms. The difficulty encountered by Alain Boureau in naming such acts stems from the fact that he considers sexual harassment in an exclusively work context, which is not our focus.

In this session, through historical and literary sources as well as films and works of art, we seek:

- To recover past victims of this signifier of male domination to make them visible again while addressing the power relations – be they economical, political, material, or symbolical – between the harasser and his victim and/or the social category of the woman involved (maid, wife, widow, nun, spinster).
- To reconstruct the legal, literary and ordinary vocabulary used in different places and at different times to describe these acts while specifying whether they were lawful or unlawful, authorised or unauthorised on the basis of an analysis of the literary norms, social mores or theoretical rules of the time. The lexical evolution towards a common linguistic usage might be evidence that sexual harassment was not only experienced in an individual life but also that it took part in the construction of a gender identity, since it was linked to a social category that implicitly recognized itself as such.
- We also invite papers that will study the animal analogies and bestiaries drawn to denounce these acts, such as the one displayed in the campaign against sexual harassment launched by the Ile de France transport association in 2018.
- To shed light on the reasons that might explain the lack of reaction to this type of violence against women, this may also encompass contributions that will confront the words of the victims to those of their harassers who hide behind love, humour, jokes or familiarity.

We also welcome papers that will comment scenes of sexual harassment in movies or in TV series. This may involve considering how they are shot and represent sexual harassment both in terms of images and sounds.

Although rape and sexual assault seem at first glance more marked and present in films, a quick examination of the corpus shows that sexual harassment, in contrast, is notably frequent. It is however trivialized, in trite remarks, situations or scenes and is rarely at the heart of a film. The comic or dramatic function in the plot as well as the director's bias and the way it was received/perceived by the audience and the critics is also of interest to us. Contributions may also consider how the genre of the film, its nationality, period or the director-producer team impact the nature of this representation as well as its format. For

instance, can we consider that the long format of the TV series offers the possibility to represent sexual harassment in a different way?

Finally we invite art historians to examine the systems of meaning which structure works of art that deal with sexual harassment. Suggested areas for papers to address include:

- the nature of the depiction of this type of sexual violence (erotic, edifying, misogynistic...) in paintings and drawings.
- the gender relation in those paintings and drawings.
- The ideological function of the setting which may naturalize or instead urbanise sexual harassment as well as identify it with a social class (luxurious and lecherous, or on the contrary lower and immoral)
- The possible identification expected from the viewer as a voyeur, the harasser or the victim.

The shared goal of these contributions will be to consider the beliefs about and perceptions of sexual harassment that have been conveyed in the long term by films, television and the arts as well as their role in passing on accepted notions about the profiles of the harasser and the victim.

Please submit an abstract (no longer than 250 words) and short CV to armel.dubois-nayt@uvsq.fr and rejane.vallee@univ-evry.fr by June 15th 2021.

The conference will take place on 9 and 10 December 2021 in Evry and Versailles. The format will depend on sanitary conditions and might be held as a hybrid conference offering onsite and virtual sessions to accommodate all participants.

Scientific committee: Mathilde Bombart (University of Versailles-Saint-Quentin), Susan Baddeley (University of Versailles-Saint-Quentin), Line Cottagnies (Sorbonne University), Brigitte Gauthier (University of Évry Val d'Essonne), Marie-Elisabeth Henneau (University of Liège), Didier Lett (Paris University), Caroline Muller (University of Rennes 2), Guillaume Peureux (University Paris Nanterre), Anne Rochebouet (University of Versailles-Saint-Quentin), Sarah Sepulchre (Catholic University of Louvain), Sylvie Steinberg (EHESS – The school for Advanced studies in the social sciences).

Organizers: Armel Dubois-Nayt (University of Versailles-Saint-Quentin), Louise Piguet (Sorbonne Nouvelle University), Chloé Tardivel (Paris University), Réjane Vallée (University of Évry Val d'Essonne).

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