

Room/Սենյակ (2021) by Anna Grigorian

Interview by Vidéographe

<https://vimeopro.com/vedeographe/nouvelles-acquisitions-1/video/682943643>

Established in 1971 in Montréal, Vidéographe is an artist-run centre dedicated to the research and the dissemination of moving image practices. This includes experimentation in video art, animation, digital arts, documentary, essay, fiction and dance video.

Vidéographe -The film borrows from legal and medical discourses, how did you approach this material (sources, research, etc.)?

Anna Grigorian - Weaving factual text into my work is something that I have done in my previous projects as well. In this case, the language of judicial acts was chosen because of their dryness and precision. The legal text creates anonymity, and sets an emotional distance for me, and the viewer, necessary to approach the violent events. Personal tragedies are neatly categorized, and described with clinical precision; the tragedy becomes a case that can be examined. The murder cases recited in the film are found on DataLex judiciary portal, and included in the 2016-17 report on femicide in Armenia “Silenced Voices” prepared by Coalition to Stop Violence Against Women. Coalition’s report does not mention the full legal name of the victims, and I am mimicking this approach to protect their identity.

V -The appearance and gestures of the characters are very particular, referring to the factual and precise aspect of the texts without trying to reproduce the actions evoked. How did you develop this aesthetic?

AG - The appearance and the gestures of the personages, as well as the whole set, are particular to the world of theater. Using theatrical and performative elements, just as using factual data, is quite specific to my style in general, at least for now. Theater is another layer that helps me augment or reduce aspects of an issue depending on what I want to put the stress on.

I mentioned that the dryness of legal text creates a distance between the violent subject the work is exploring, and the viewer. Once that distance is established, it becomes possible to work backwards towards the viewer, reaching them through a different route, and here I resort to the help of theatrical elements. Considering various theatrical and performative styles, I decided to borrow some elements of pantomime, since it was best suited for distancing oneself enough from violence, but at the same time keep the expressive strength to communicate the tragedy.

V -How do you think a film can contribute to the discussion on violence against women, in Armenia and elsewhere?

AG - First of all the film is honoring women who are victims of femicide, in Armenia and other countries.

The line "She brought it on herself," quoted in "Room" from the testimony of the husband who'd just killed his wife, is not an isolated mindset, unfortunately. The responsibility not to be abused is accepted as a default, while the responsibility not to abuse is not taught and seen enough. Reporting to the police can make things worse for the victim, because law enforcement often takes the side of the abusers. This is tied with the larger social stigma around abuse towards women: we are always the primary responsible for it. Violence against women is connected with domestic violence as well, which, unfortunately, is viewed as a private family matter, making it harder for the victim to seek protection of the law. Regarding the law against domestic violence in Armenia - it was introduced only in 2018, and it's current state is extremely underdeveloped. So the main contribution would be fueling legal change allowing more protection of women by law.

Of course, I am not so naive to hope that after watching my work the politicians in Armenia, or anywhere, would immediately start making legal changes, provided they watch it at all. Nonetheless it should not stop me, or anyone, to speak about the issue that keeps getting shelved. If after watching the work at least one person stops and lowers their fist in the moment of blinding and dehumanizing anger, that would be great.