

## THE EVENT: ON SCREEN, REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS



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### ABSTRACT

A filmic analysis of the feature film *The Event* (Audrey Diwan, 2021) is made from the journey and experiences of its protagonist – a young French woman, in the 1960s, in search of a safe abortion, even living in a patriarchal scenario marked by oppression, condemnation of women's bodies and violence. The objective is to relate the aesthetic, visual and sound analysis to the current and urgent debate on women's reproductive rights, with emphasis on abortion. The theoretical framework is anchored in authorships of contemporary feminist theory and criticism, especially Federici (2018) and Diniz (2020) and the methodology of film analysis is understood here as a recreation of the original narrative, an exercise in which passages and frames are privileged combined with interlocutions with the theme addressed.

**Keywords:** The Event, Cinema, Women, Abortion, Feminist Theory and Criticism.

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## INTRODUCTION

We didn't remember the day or the month – but it was spring – only that we read all the names, from the first to the last, of the 343 women who declared, in the magazine *Le Nouvel Observateur*, that they had had an illegal abortion (...)

One Saturday afternoon, there were thousands of us marching in the sun, placards in hand, looking up at the all-blue sky in the Dauphiné region, telling each other that it was our responsibility to put an end to the red deaths of women for so many millennia for the first time. Who, then, could forget us?

Anne Ernaux. *The years*. pp. 100-101

Women's right over their own bodies has been one of the main feminist agendas for some decades and, in this scenario that includes reflections and struggles for the inclusion and maintenance of this right, access to voluntary termination of pregnancy is, without a doubt, an urgent debate. This reproductive right, which must be guaranteed to people with the capacity to conceive in general, and to women in particular, has been attacked and questioned in several countries in recent years, a fact that is largely linked to the strengthening of governments aligned with conservative, exclusionary and misogynistic thoughts and practices.

Obstetric violence and the repeal of laws that guarantee access to health services for the safe interruption of pregnancy are two examples that materialize this scenario. In addition, there are also lawsuits in the judicial sphere, such as the case that came to light in Brazil in June 2022, when an 11-year-old girl, pregnant after being a victim of rape, was prevented from having an abortion (in this case, guaranteed by law)<sup>5</sup> in Espírito Santo, by various means, including by representatives of the then federal government. Thus, it is urgent to bring the political debate on reproductive rights closer to academic production, understanding abortion as a public health issue, and also to the strength that cinema imprints, from the promotion of representativeness on the theme, as a way to contribute to this understanding, reflection and debate.

In this sense, there are several works in the field of Cinema whose central or secondary themes bring to the forefront women and their struggles, whether personal or collective, when they decide to have an abortion, and here we cite those that, in our

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<sup>5</sup> "It is worth remembering that, in Brazil, abortion is only legalized in three particular cases: when the pregnancy is due to rape, when there is a proven risk of death of the pregnant woman and in cases of pregnancies of anencephalic fetuses. However, the restriction of the law has not curbed the practices of clandestine and unsafe abortion, thus keeping maternal mortality at high rates. It is necessary to consider that the numbers are always estimated (or underestimated) because abortion is involved in the scenario of illegality in many countries" (SELL, 2015: 503).

personal curatorship, are decisive: *One sings, the other does not* (1977), by Agnès Varda, *A Matter of Women* (1988), by Claude Charbol, *The Secret of Vera Drake* (2004), by Mike Leigh, *A Severina Story* (2005), by Débora Diniz and Eliane Brum, *4 months, 3 weeks and 2 days* (2007), by Cristian Mungiu, *The abortion of others* (2008), by Carla Gallo, *Clandestinas* (2014), by Fadhia Salomão, *24 weeks* (2016), by Anne Zohra Berrached, *My body, my life* (2017), by Helena Solberg, *The Passage of the Comet* (2017), by Juliana Rojas, *Roe v Wade: Women's Rights in the USA* (2018), by Anne Sundberg and Ricki Stern, *Never, Rarely, Sometimes, Always* (2020), by Eliza Hittman, *Lingui, the Sacred Bonds* (2021), by Mahamat-Saleh Haroun, *Verde Esperanza*, by Maria Lutterbach (2022), and *Levante*, by Lillah Halla (2023).

Also part of this powerful scenario is the fiction feature film *The Event*, by Audrey Diwan, a 2021 French production based on the autobiographical novel by Anne Ernaux, from which we draw the starting point to propose this reflection that theoretically and conceptually seeks to bring reflections from the field of contemporary feminist criticism and theory on abortion closer to that of film analysis, going through elements that structure our political vision on the subject. After all, as Carol Hanisch (1969) taught us some decades ago, "the personal is political", that is, events in the private sphere must be of interest to the collective debate so that public policies can be ensured. And our writing, perhaps not in conformity with traditional academic rules, seeks to be close to a commitment to female freedom and autonomy, digging gaps in increasingly scarce time and also redesigning fiction constituted between silence, speech, writing and screen (thank you, bell hooks, for how much it was and is, in us and in many others!).

For this, it is important to point out some markers, doubts that were ours in the early moments of writing: wouldn't *The Event* be a dated film, whose central theme would be overcome due to the advance of the decades that separate us from it? What happened to the character in the 1960s has not been overcome, since abortion was no longer considered a crime in France in 1975, and in some countries it is allowed in situations such as rape or congenital diseases? Is it possible to promote a theoretical approximation between a French film and authors of contemporary feminist criticism that reflect on other political-geographical realities? In relation to the local and contemporary context, is it possible, from this film, to reflect on some of the conditions experienced by Brazilian women?

The choice for *The Event* to address the issue of abortion was for the following reasons: the fact that the year of release is recent shows how current and relevant the debate is, in addition to the very positive reviews about the work and its awards at important film festivals, such as the Golden Lion in 2021 and the TIFF Awards in 2022, confirm the ethical and aesthetic quality of the work, responsible for bringing to the screen issues that until a few years ago were considered matters of the private environment and the personal lives of women, and not of the collective, political and public health spheres, as we defend. Dealing with abortion in academic writing, whether in the legal sphere or in aesthetic representations, is also to contribute to the promotion of its debate in the intellectual field, assuming it as an urgent and necessary research agenda.

### **THE EVENT (2021)**

In dialogue with passages, dialogues and frames of the film, the character's abortion, which at the time of the narrated story is considered a crime in France, takes shape. The film introduces us to Anne, a young French woman of close age to adulthood, a dedicated and promising student who wants to enter university and become a writer. His desires for the future translate not only a search for freedom and autonomy via a future profession but also the rupture with a world with which he does not identify: life in the countryside and the work as small merchants carried out by his parents. The confirmation of her unwanted and unplanned pregnancy puts all these expectations in check, since in addition to running the risk of being arrested for performing the abortion, she perceives herself alone in much of the screen time, looking for clues and help to perform the procedure. This loneliness as one of the main marks of the character is a feeling common to women who experience induced abortion:

Feelings of guilt, fear of dying, fear of punishment from God, grief, remorse, regret, physiological and existential pain, fear of being blamed by other people, and shame. Other feelings were expressed on a smaller scale, but no less worrying, as a demand for sociopolitical and health actions: feeling of abandonment, tension, loss of faith, low self-esteem, hostility, anger, despair, helplessness, hurt and bad feelings related to the people connected to the situation, desire to break the relationship with the partner, loss of sexual interest, inability to forgive, nervousness, nightmares, feelings of loss, sadness, loneliness, uncomfortable hospitalization, desires to review life projects, suicidal impulses and relief (SELL, 2015: 506).

The character's feelings of loneliness and anguish are built in the narrative from the precise and safe performance of Anamaria Vartolomei as the protagonist and the proposals for direction and cinematography printed by Audrey Diwan and Laurent Tangy, respectively.

The option to use the handheld camera in much of the film makes us, spectators, very close to the events and feelings experienced by Anne, since this camera follows the paths and movements of the character's body and practically puts us at the center of the events. The *mise-en-scène* develops from her displacements, whether when she bathes in the girls' accommodation where she lives, when she walks on the road to visit her parents on certain weekends, when she goes to the beach with the father of the fetus she is gestating, or even when she searches for and performs an abortion.

At times the camera is in front of her, almost making us predict what her next moves will be, at others, most of them, follow her very closely, just above her shoulder, close to her head. In others she is behind the protagonist, literally. This option for the use of a handheld camera, with moments of loss of focus and shaky images, puts us in permanent tension about the dramatic actions that will unfold in the plot and is aesthetically consistent with the character's trajectory: her search for safe abortion is a cruel, lonely search permeated by the fear of being arrested at any moment, in case someone discovers it and/or reports it. In addition, the camera imprints an atmosphere of realism by assuming a certain approximation with documentary cinema, almost a story based on real events, and it is still so, after all Anne's story is the story of many of us, it happens daily and is not dated or outdated:

An important piece of data from the 2021 PNA was the age of the interviewees at the time of the first abortion: half (52%) were adolescents (19 years old or younger). Since this population is especially vulnerable to the effects of criminalization on abortion needs, the finding demonstrates the critical need for an integrated reproductive justice policy in Brazil, from comprehensive sexuality education to the decriminalization of abortion. In general terms, there was no substantial change in the general profile of women who had abortions: they reflect all age groups, religions, education levels, races, social classes, and geographic regions (DINIZ, MEDEIROS, MADEIRO, 2023: 1605). [Our translation]<sup>6</sup>

Women abort and resist. The protagonist's experience can also be classified as an act of resistance, whether to patriarchy and its norms, rules and laws imposed on female bodies, or to her own story narrated in the film, to the scenery that surrounds her, to the camera that tries at all times to frame her through the use, in various sequences, of close-

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ups and detail shots. In this way, script and photography converge in language, while the character rebels against them, the norms imposed on him, whether social or aesthetic. While the plot of patriarchy and its practices of violence and exclusion are evident on stage, including in the sound design of the film - especially in the sequences in which she tries to abort at home and in which she manages to perform the procedure, marked by moans, grunts and screams, always very restrained and expressed in a very low voice - the tight framing of the image suggests and puts us in a situation of suffocation in which we can almost feel the rope around her neck, a rope that also becomes ours.

## THE CONTROL

On the norms, rules, laws and surveillance imposed on women's bodies, Silvia Federici is one of the contemporary feminist authors who has dedicated herself to reflecting on the theme. In *Caliban and the Witch* (2017) she established her interpretive scheme to analyze an important historical issue of the early modern era in the West: the scrutiny, persecution and death of thousands of women considered witches. Not coincidentally, the emergence of capitalism happened at the same time that this movement was gaining strength, which has its centrality in the quest to destroy something very dear to women: control over their reproductive function. This movement was also marked by a genocidal attack against them in order to establish, on violent bases, an increasingly oppressive patriarchal regime. In the following lines, we will highlight some excerpts from the work in which the author deals with the issue of abortion, seeking to relate them to excerpts from the film *The Event*.

In the context of the fourteenth century, what the author classifies as the embryo of a new sexual division of labor is constituted, which has as one of its main characteristics the confinement of women to reproductive work and, consequently, to the cloister of the home. It is also in this scenario that the Catholic Church makes efforts to establish an increasingly rigid and intense control over bodies, especially over the practices of sexuality and marriage. Social behaviors considered deviant from the imposed moral and religious norm are considered heretical, and sodomy and abortion are associated with heresy and become crimes, contributing to the creation of an atmosphere of condemnation of all forms of contraception.

In the midst of the social and ideological transformations promoted by this capitalist reproductive policy, which gained strength over the centuries, the author points out, already

in the seventeenth century with the apogee of mercantilism, the action of the State in countries such as England and France in the sense of adopting pro-natalist and public assistance measures, which made marriages subsidized, penalized celibacy and, they also gave a "new importance to the family as a key institution that ensured the transmission of property and the reproduction of the labor force" (Federici, 2017, 173).

This type of state intervention did not stop at the practices of supervision of procreation, family life and sexuality, but was configured in a broader panorama, as a kind of war against women and ancestral knowledge about their bodies, based on disciplinary actions on reproduction that demonized practices and forms of non-procreative sexuality and birth control. In parallel, a war is also constituted in the field of imagery and aesthetic representations: the image of the witch who sacrificed children to the devil. The author points out that, since the mid-sixteenth century, European governments began to impose harsher penalties against conception, abortion and infanticide, redefining what was understood as reproductive crime:

New forms of surveillance were also adopted to ensure that women did not terminate their pregnancies. In France, a royal edict of 1556 required women to record each pregnancy and sentenced to death those whose babies died before baptism, after a secret birth, regardless of whether they were found guilty or innocent of their death. Similar statutes were passed in England and Scotland in 1624 and 1690. A system of espionage was also created with the purpose of surveilling single mothers and depriving them of any support. Even hosting an unmarried pregnant woman was illegal, for fear that they might escape public surveillance, and anyone who befriended her was exposed to public criticism (Federici, op. cit., 176).

For Federici, the lack of reproductive public policies that recognize and enable women to access and control their own bodies dates back centuries, as already pointed out in the text, and is part of a State policy that resorts to the regulation and coercion of female bodies as a form of control, in which women are often forced to procreate against their will, which configures an alienation of his body and his work as perhaps never experienced:

No one can describe, in fact, the anguish and despair suffered by a woman when she sees her body turning against herself, as happens in the case of an unwanted pregnancy. This is particularly true in those situations in which pregnancy outside marriage was penalized with social ostracism or even death (Federici, op. cit., 180).

Still on the criminalization of contraception, the author points out that potions and pessaries (vaginal suppositories) used to create sterile conditions, stimulate menstruation or cause abortions were methods dominated by women in the Middle Ages, being

transmitted from generation to generation and guaranteeing a certain autonomy over their bodies. With the criminalization in the following centuries, this knowledge was expropriated and its place became that of clandestinity and illegality. This withdrawal of power over women's bodies by the State, especially in the context of the seventeenth century, contributed to the degradation of motherhood to the condition of forced labor, confining them, almost exclusively, to the practice of reproductive activity, of producing sons and daughters for the State, to domestic work and to the so-called housewife tasks. In the words of the protagonist of the work under analysis:

Figure 02: Ruthless law (against women). Source: film "The Event"



Separated by more than four centuries, what Federici tells us from his research on women and control of their bodies and what happens to Anne, the protagonist of The Event, are very close stories, although separated in time. In the next section, some crucial points of this intersection will be elaborated.

## THE CROSSROADS

Throughout the film, we realize that Anne, in order to gain access to safe abortion, acts illegally and often in silence, constituting a pact with us about her secret. The dialogues in the film are not numerous and especially in the sequences in which she tries to abort at home and in which she manages to perform the procedure, the lines are practically non-existent, because there is not much to be said in situations like this. There are, however, dialogues that deserve to be highlighted because they weave important relationships.

"With the love drama, she talks about the personal drama. The theme is political", says Anne during a class in which she analyzes the main issue of a writer's poem, in an

evident relationship with the theme of the film itself, which is not only a personal drama but a political issue. Continuing her literary analysis, she deals with the way the author elaborates the main drama and the recurring themes in her verses: "fires, tragedies, memories". Here it is possible to notice not only the relationship of the film with the book of the same name by Anne Ernaux on which it is based, but also a narrative and metaphorical possibility of talking about abortion.

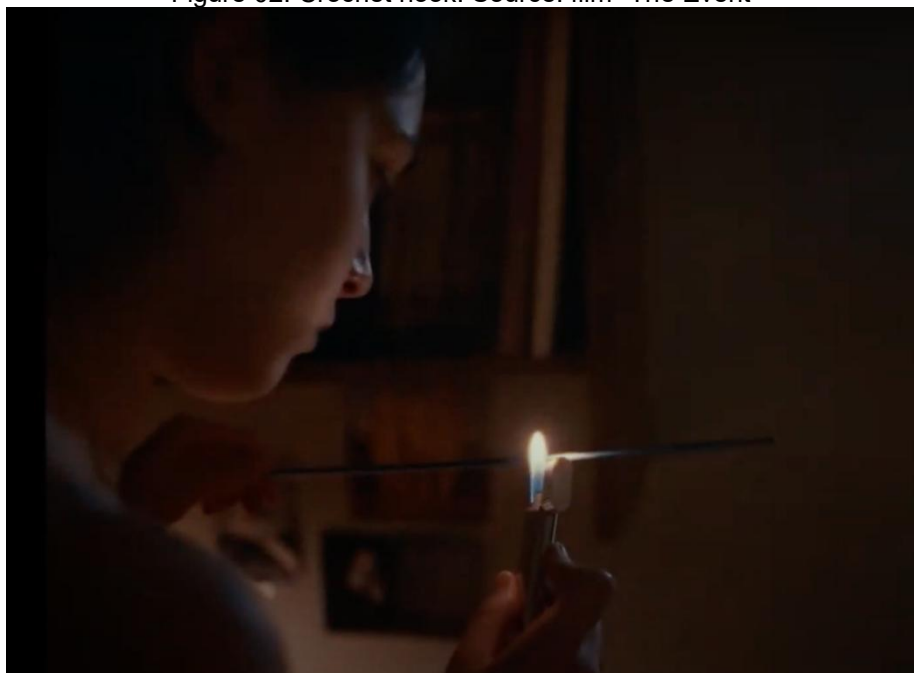
The narrative resources used in the film, either to not talk directly about the theme or to treat it metaphorically, are important because they lead our attention to relevant social elements when it comes to abortion: fear and silence, which in turn evidence the surveillance imposed on female bodies for centuries. In addition to this surveillance, the control exercised by the State over procreation, which Federici classified as a pre-natalist crusade, contributed on a large scale to the understanding of the uterus as a political territory and of procreation as a "fact of nature", instead of problematizing it as a determined historical activity permeated by the most diverse power relations. Anne's fear is explicit: she is always looking around, focused and serious, determined by the daily dramatic actions in which the character is inserted and by the precise performance of Anamaria Vartolomei, which contribute to the presence of a permanent atmosphere of doubt and fear that something worse could happen at any moment.

In addition to this narrative resource, another that deserves attention concerns the characters that are around the protagonist: her parents, whom she visits with some regularity, her friends from boarding school, who abandon her when they discover her pregnancy, and several men: her boyfriend, who does not share with her the responsibility for the pregnancy and much less for the decision to procreate; the father, a supporting actor in the parental relationship, which is practically exercised by the mother; The teacher, who questions her about the classes she missed and if she is sick, to which she promptly replies: "A disease that only affects women. And turns them into housewives"; the doctors with whom she consults and who, even in the face of her distressed and imploring request, deny any help to perform the abortion; and the "friend" from school, who gives her the way and the contact to access the procedure, not without first harassing her with undignified questions and attempting sex, since she "was already pregnant".

Anne seems to be alone in her search, but in fact she is not alone. Those who help her, after all, are women: the journalist, who at a night meeting in a park tells her about her experience and how she should proceed so as not to be arrested for performing the

procedure. They always speak very quietly as they walk, implying to those close to them that they are engaging in a casual dialogue. In addition to her, the nurse, who performs the procedure inside her own home, also afraid of being arrested, and a friend from the boarding school, until then a supporting player in the narrative but who saves her after finding her in the bathroom losing a lot of blood. This demarcates in the narrative the direct action of patriarchy, in which men occupy strategic positions of power and, at the same time, exempt themselves from their responsibilities, while women need to act underground, occupying subordinate roles in society and with little or no decision-making power over their own lives. This social birth control, which forces women to have children under any circumstance, characterizes what Federici understands as the criminalization of women's control over procreation: "it is a phenomenon whose importance cannot fail to be emphasized, both from the point of view of its effects on women and its consequences (...)" (op. cit., 181).

Figure 02: Crochet hook. Source: film "The Event"



One of the most distressing sequences of the film, which puts us viewers both in a situation of tension and complicity with Anne, is when the character tries to perform the abortion alone, in her room, using a crochet hook, as shown in the image above. This is a common practice among women, especially among those who do not have the material conditions to pay for the procedure in private clinics, assisted by doctors and nurses. In

addition, there are women who are afraid of social exposure and also of the possibility of being arrested, since in many countries, such as Brazil, except in a few situations, abortion is considered a crime. This leads them to perform the procedure at home, most of the time in the company of friends, relatives and/or neighbors, sometimes alone.

## THE MOVEMENT

In the throes of modernity (in hypermodernity or post-modernity, as the theoretical line is adopted), whether in Brazil or in some other countries of the world, such as Poland, religion definitively enters politics with the constitution of political parties, benches in parliaments and even direct ingestion through sermons disseminated via the internet. What during Modernity was just an overflow, starts to dictate the agenda of politics, with the power to decide elections and overthrow elected presidents. Thus, in the twenty-first century, Brazilian society is grappling with the debate that wants to prevent even legal abortion, that is, the one authorized by the Brazilian Penal Code (1940) in its article 128, due to the risk of death of the mother or in case of pregnancy resulting from the crime of rape, and the one authorized by the Federal Supreme Court (STF) in 2012, which is that of the pregnancy of an anencephalic fetus.

In this clash between female autonomy and patriarchy, although Brazil is steps behind in the fight for the broad guarantee of the right to abortion in relation to neighbors such as Argentina, Uruguay and Colombia, something seems to be slowly changing. In March 2017, the Socialism and Liberty Party (PSOL) filed a lawsuit with the Supreme Court for the decriminalization of abortion practiced up to the 12th week of pregnancy. Before her compulsory retirement, Justice Rosa Weber, then in the presidency of the Supreme Court, voted for the merits of the PSOL's claim, indicating important reasons that should guide the entire debate on abortion in Brazil from then on. In her vote, Rosa Weber shows that there are reasons to presume on the part of the State the moral judgment that abortion would be wrong, that is, that it would be a mistake for the woman to interrupt her pregnancy. It is from this reasoning that the former Minister, then, demonstrates that the criminalization of abortion invades the sphere of autonomy of the woman and infantilizes her to the point of making the decision not to interrupt the pregnancy for her (through the threat of imprisonment of her or of the person who has helped her in the practice of the act).

"This issue involves one of the most intimate choices that women can make throughout their lives, a fundamental decision for the construction of their dignity and personal autonomy. The State cannot judge that a woman has failed to act in her

freedom and in the construction of her personal ethos just because her decision does not converge with the orientation presumably accepted as correct by the State or by society, from the perspective of morality" (STF, ADPF 442).

Another case that refers to the hope of recognition of the right to abortion and its maintenance for cases already authorized by the Penal Code is the example of the Hospital de Clínicas of the Federal University of Uberlândia, in the Triângulo Mineiro. In the institution's gynecology and obstetrics outpatient clinic, the Center for Comprehensive Care for Victims of Sexual Assault, Nuavidas. There, children and adults receive multidisciplinary follow-up after suffering sexual violence – and, if they have become pregnant, they can choose to abort safely and carefully.

Far from being the rule, studies indicate that the service is a very rare exception: about five years ago, only seventy-six hospitals performed abortions in accordance with the law; and of these, only forty-two (less than two per federative unit) kept their services active during the Covid-19 pandemic (Silva, 2020). As a result of another study, it was pointed out that the absolute majority (92.6%) of the approximately 16 thousand procedures performed between 2010 and 2019 in the Unified Health System (SUS) were concentrated in only 2.6% of Brazilian municipalities (Jacobs, 2022).

The data are more terrifying in contrast to the almost ten thousand live births registered per year in children up to fourteen years old in Brazil (Collucci, 2024), cases in which the crime of rape can be presumed due to the age of the pregnant woman, considered absolutely incapable of consenting to carnal intercourse in the current understanding of the current legislation, obtained only in the last decade (STJ, 2017). In 2022, given the delay in pacifying the issue, and against the backdrop of all the conservative action within the Legislative Branch to make abortion even less accessible in Brazil, the feminist movement raised the #CriançaNãoéMãe campaign on social networks (Criança não é Mãe, undated, online).

Since then, there have been several occasions in which the campaign has been highlighted on social networks, illustrating the sad picture of recurrence of attempts to roll back the already precariously guaranteed right to legal abortion in the country. In 2024, in turn, France became — after pressure from feminist movements — the first country to include the right to terminate pregnancies in the national constitution (BBC, 2024). This increases, on the one hand, the distance from the predominant legislative agendas in our

country; on the other hand, the aforementioned hope of recognition of this right in our society in a possible, albeit distant, future is growing.

## **FINAL CONSIDERATIONS**

As we have constructed in this article, the issue of abortion directly touches on the autonomy of women to decide about their own body. The issue, which in a pre-capitalist era, could be understood as something shareable in the public sphere – especially among women – passes to the domain of the private, a place imposed on women in a reproductive logic that supplies labor for the two industrial revolutions that would follow in the history of humanity.

Women who dared to disagree with their new place are labeled witches, sorceresses, madmen or prostitutes. Over the centuries, even with the opening provided by the European Enlightenment, for example, women still had only a few authorized positions in the public sphere: those of teachers in schools or nurses in war hospitals.

Abortion, once a common conduct of women's daily lives, is now considered a crime scandalized by a religious morality overflowing from the (private) religious sphere to the public sphere. Paradoxically, the modern State, which exalts itself by separating itself from the Church, authorizes in its political core the resumption of conservative religiosity through the criminalization of behaviors such as abortion. Even so, as the film analyzed in this article shows, the logic that permeates the criminalization of all types of abortion still lives among us, as Theodor W said. Adorno, the point is not to prevent Auschwitz from happening again, but rather to keep happening (1966).

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