

Image Against Oppression: Adversarial Degradation as a VJ Interface for Critical Encounter with Sensitive Network Images

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Abstract: Image Against Oppression is an online audiovisual project performed with TouchDesigner and a MIDI controller. Using a locally stored corpus of internet-circulated sensitive imagery, the work performs adversarial degradation as a VJ interface through blur, thresholding, temporal stutter, displacement, and rhythmic blackouts. The paper frames this method as interface consciousness: a critical awareness of how seeing is conditioned by warnings, loops, and thresholds.

Tags: Media Art, Critical HCI, Interactive Arts, Livestream, VJing

Abstract

Image Against Oppression is an online audiovisual project performed with TouchDesigner and a MIDI controller. Working with a locally stored corpus of internet-circulated “sensitive” imagery—animal attacks, game violence, and media riots—the project stages **adversarial degradation** as a VJ interface: a live, performable reduction of recognizability that keeps images at a threshold of near-recognition. Rather than treating content moderation as external to images, the work understands “sensitivity” as an **interface form**—a negotiated boundary shaped by platform policy, imagined collective judgment, and embodied tolerance.

By modulating blur, thresholding, temporal stutter, displacement, and blackout rhythms in real time, the performance interrupts the feed’s seamless legibility and exposes the operational layer through which platforms distribute attention and affect. The project aims to avoid re-circulating graphic evidence while preserving the pressure of encounter, inviting viewers to reflect on digital identity, collective behavior, and emotional manipulation under algorithmic governance. The paper articulates this method as **interface consciousness**: a critical awareness of how seeing is conditioned by the screen’s warnings, loops, and thresholds.

Keywords: Media Art; Critical HCI; Interactive Arts; VJ interface; livestream aesthetics

Introduction: Sensitive Images as Interface Form

Images of war and violence carry a familiar ethical tension: they can be necessary for witnessing and political recognition, yet they also risk aestheticization, voyeurism, retraumatization, or numbness. Sontag describes how images of suffering can both disclose and distance, producing a spectatorship that is never simply innocent. (*Sontag, 2003*) Online circulation intensifies this dilemma: images arrive as feed items, shaped by ranking, compression, autoplay, and interface warnings.

When tech corporations label content as “sensitive,” the label appears to represent a shared judgment. Yet sensitivity is not easily shared. Whose threshold is being assumed—and what imagined community sustains that assumption? A “sensitive content” warning can function as care, but it can also filter political visibility and shift responsibility onto the viewer (“click at your own risk”). This project therefore asks: **what does it mean to encounter violence when the encounter is already formatted by moderation and interface design?**

Image Against Oppression answers by treating moderation not as an external constraint, but as part of the image’s operational condition. The work stages an encounter with **controlled illegibility**—keeping the image’s pressure while resisting the clarity that turns violence into consumable content.

The paper offers three contributions:

1. **Adversarial degradation** as a performable interaction pattern for working with sensitive images without relying on direct representation.
2. A concept of **interface consciousness**: awareness of how perception and affect are governed through screen-based thresholds, rhythms, and warnings.
3. A moderation-aware audiovisual workflow that binds ethical handling of materials to real-time image processing and performance.

Background: From Content Moderation to Operative Seeing

A key dilemma in war imagery is not only what images show, but what they *do*—to viewers, to public memory, and to political visibility. Sontag’s account of disclosure and distance helps explain why repeated exposure can produce both moral urgency and emotional fatigue. (*Sontag, 2003*) In contemporary feeds, repetition is not incidental: distribution systems return near-identical scenes, compressing catastrophe into scrollable continuity.

Iakovlenko insists that such images produce bodily effects—*closeness hurts*—while also showing how platforms manage this closeness through warnings and “sensitive content” features. (*Iakovlenko, 2023*) These mechanisms are not neutral: they can protect, but they also quietly reorganize what becomes publicly visible, and under what conditions. In this paper, “sensitivity” is therefore treated less as an intrinsic property of content than as an **interface form**: a negotiated threshold shaped by platform policy, imagined community norms, and embodied tolerance.

Didi-Huberman’s reflections on conflicts between images and gestures help sharpen this framing: images do not merely depict events; they choreograph positions, distances, and bodily responses—what eyes and hands do, and what bodies can bear. (*Didi-Huberman, 2018*) The “sensitive” label, in this sense, is part of a broader choreography of distance and permissible attention.

To connect moderation to a longer media genealogy, I draw on operational seeing. The curatorial text *War-Image-War Chapter I–III* begins with a 1912 illustration from *Le Petit Journal*, *Le tir au cinématographe*, where a rifle is aimed at a projection screen—viewing and firing assembled as one operation. (*BISFF, 2025*) It recalls Marey’s 1882 chronophotographic gun, which consolidated framing, tracking, and aiming into a single ergonomic system: **to see is to target**. (*Musée des arts et métiers, 1882*) Farocki later names “operative images” as images that “do not represent an object, but rather are part of an operation.” (*Farocki, 2004*)

While Farocki’s concept is often tied to military and industrial imaging, it is productive for platform encounters: feeds and moderation interfaces do not merely show; they **operate**—sequencing attention, allocating visibility, and distributing affect. *Image Against Oppression* borrows this operational lineage but refracts it through livestream aesthetics. The work does not weaponize images; it weaponizes **uncertainty** in the interface. Degradation becomes an act that interrupts the feed’s seamlessness and forces the viewer to register the operational layer.

The Work: Adversarial Degradation as a VJ Interface

The project is structured as a live VJ performance system built in TouchDesigner. It ingests a local corpus of internet-circulated sensitive imagery and outputs a livestreamed composite. Degradation is treated as an instrument: the performer “plays” the image through a MIDI controller, modulating recognizability, tempo, and compositional stability.

In practical terms, adversarial degradation is not a single “censoring” gesture, but a family of operations that keep the image at a threshold: the viewer senses what might be present, yet the system refuses a clean, extractable statement. This threshold condition shifts the encounter from “content consumption” to “interface awareness”: the viewer confronts not only violence, but the screen’s role in shaping how violence becomes legible, repeatable, and emotionally consumable.

Still Frames: Stylization, Tearing, Reconstruction

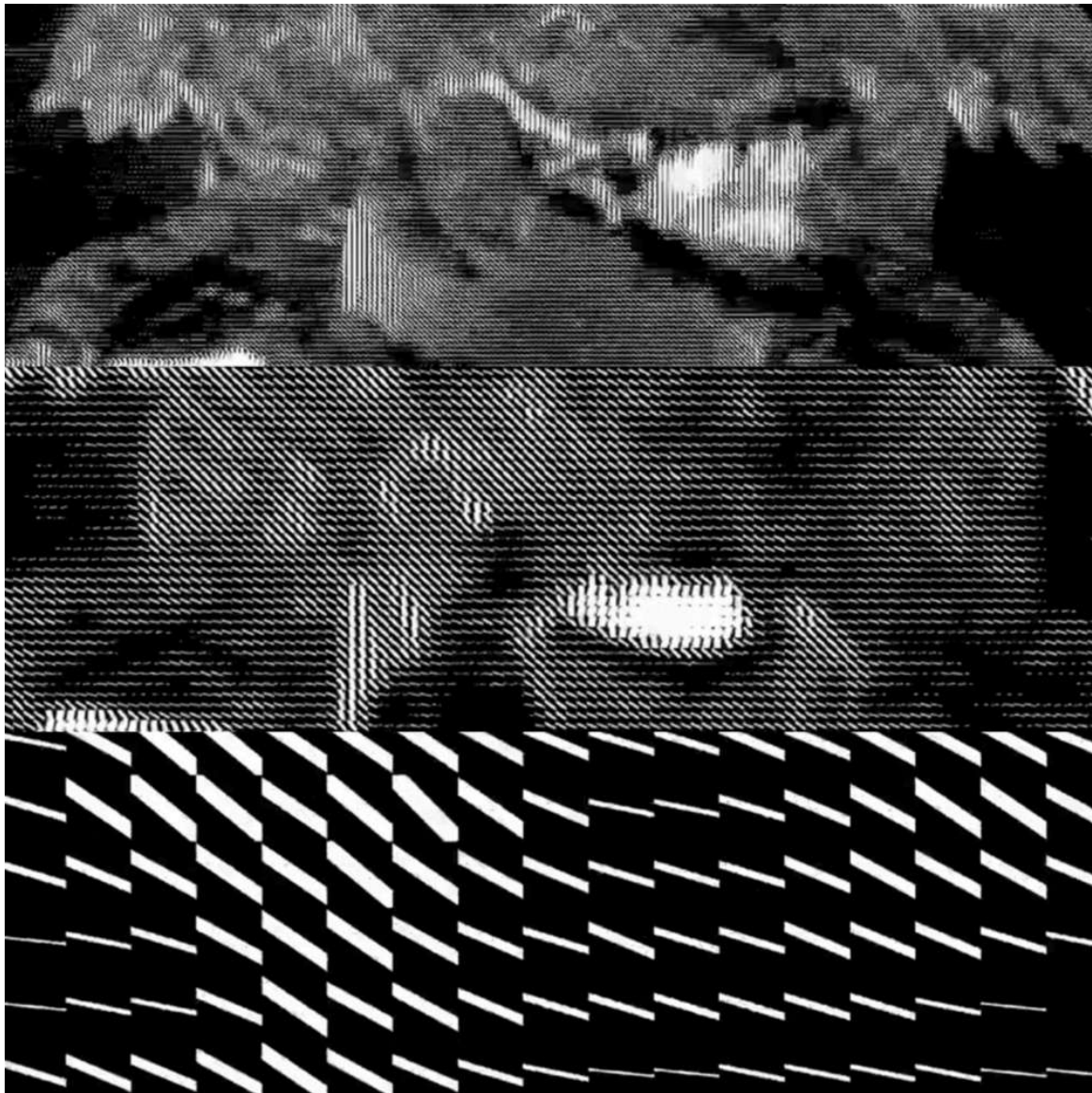


Figure 2: Algorithmic stylization and disruption, producing controlled illegibility while preserving situational pressure.



Figure 3: Adversarial degradation as rhythmic interruption—legibility destabilized through pattern, tearing, and reconstruction.

Interface Consciousness

“Interface consciousness” names the reflective state produced when the viewer becomes aware that affect is orchestrated not only by what the image shows, but by how the interface sequences, warns, blurs, and repeats. In this project, recognition is held at a threshold: the image is **almost** identifiable, but not fully delivered. This “near-recognition” generates tension—between desire to know and refusal to consume. Degradation becomes a hinge: it interrupts the feed’s promise of frictionless access, and makes the viewer feel the operational conditions of visibility as a lived, embodied problem.

The Helmeted Persona

The performance is staged with a helmeted persona—an anonymized, non-expressive “interface body.” The helmet functions as an anti-portrait: it reduces personal identity while foregrounding the role of the operator who manipulates visibility. The performer is present, yet withheld—mirroring the platform condition in which agency is experienced as modulation rather than confession. This figure also complicates responsibility: when moderation becomes “personal choice,” burden shifts onto individuals; the helmet frames the work as a critique of that individualized responsibility.

System and Performance Pipeline

The system is designed around **performable control** rather than post-production filtering. Its workflow can be described in four layers:

1. **Inputs (local corpus):** a curated set of clips and stills collected from online circulation and stored locally.
2. **Processing modules (degradation + compositing):** modular operations that shape legibility and temporality (pixelation/blur/thresholding; stutter/freeze/frame skipping; displacement/tiling/scanline drift; inversion and luminance remapping).
3. **Control layer (MIDI mapping):** parameters are grouped into families and mapped to faders/knobs/buttons to support performance gestures (cuts, blackouts, slow reconstruction, sudden pulses).
4. **Output (livestream/record):** the composite is captured as a continuous session, streamed and recorded as an event with duration rather than a discrete consumable image.

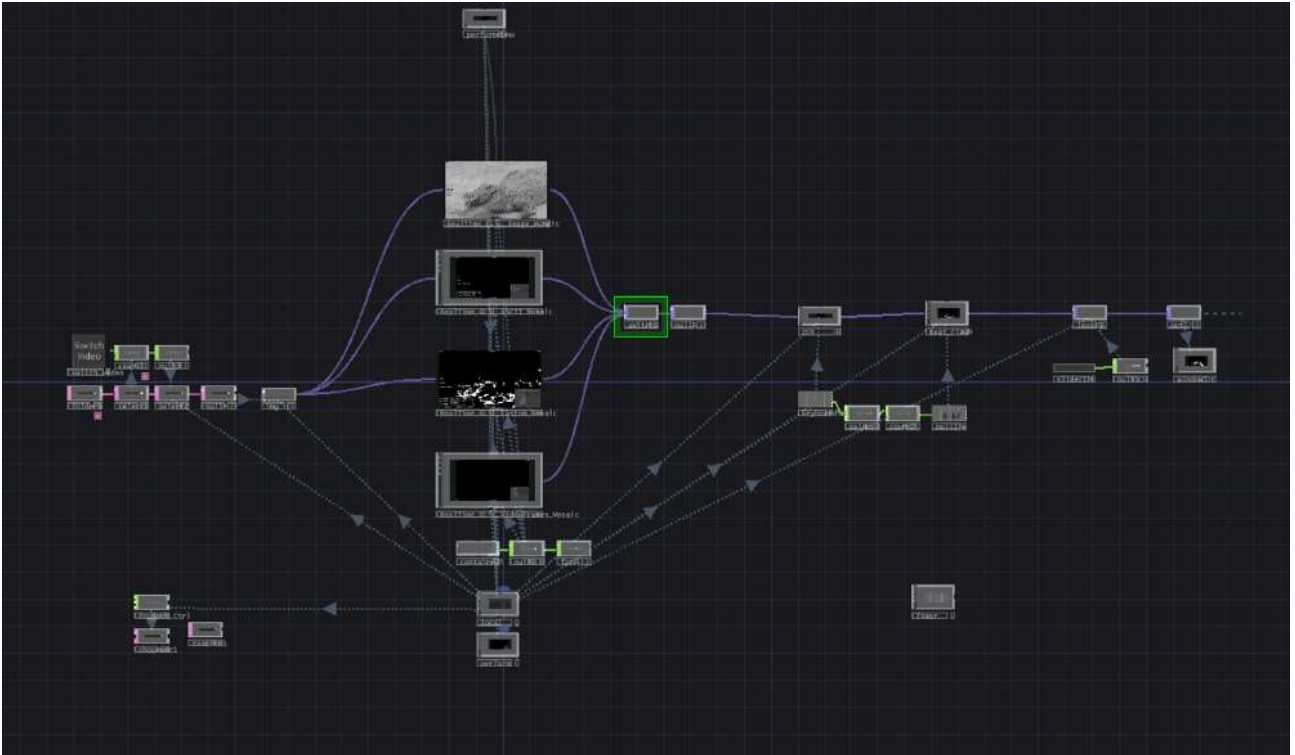


Figure 4: TouchDesigner project view—routing between corpus inputs, degradation modules, and compositing/output.

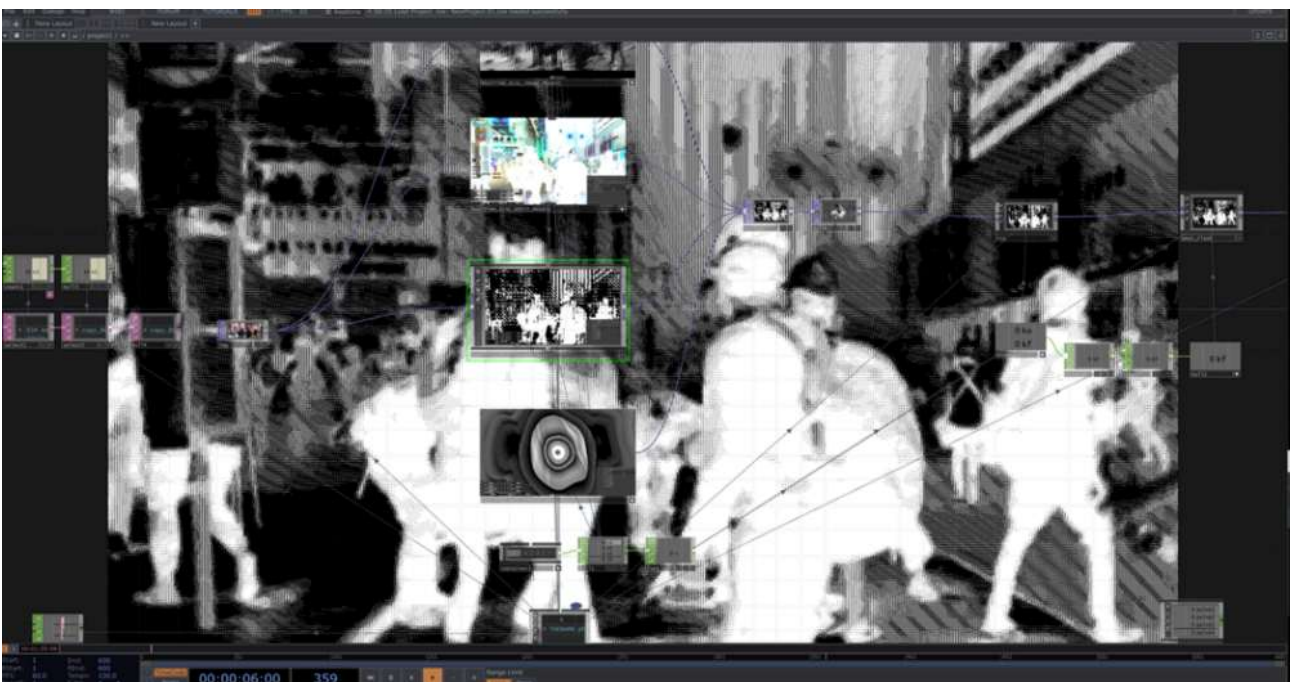


Figure 5: Live monitoring and compositing during performance—degradation treated as an instrument.

This pipeline matters conceptually because it binds ethics to form. Rather than editing a finished image to look “responsible,” responsibility is enacted as *live control*: a choreography of thresholds that prevents the image from settling into a stable commodity.

Corpus, Ethics, and Moderation-Aware Handling

Because the project deals with sensitive images, the workflow prioritizes *traces over exposure*. Materials are kept local; the system avoids re-uploading raw clips. Degradation is not framed as evasion, but as **controlled illegibility**: a way to reduce recognizability, mitigate re-circulation harms, and foreground the interface conditions that govern what becomes visible.

This approach resonates with Iakovlenko’s insistence that the politics of war images are inseparable from the body—both the bodies depicted and the bodies that look. (*Iakovlenko, 2023*) The work treats the viewer not as a neutral observer but as a participant in a mediated ecology shaped by repetition, warning labels, and algorithmic similarity.

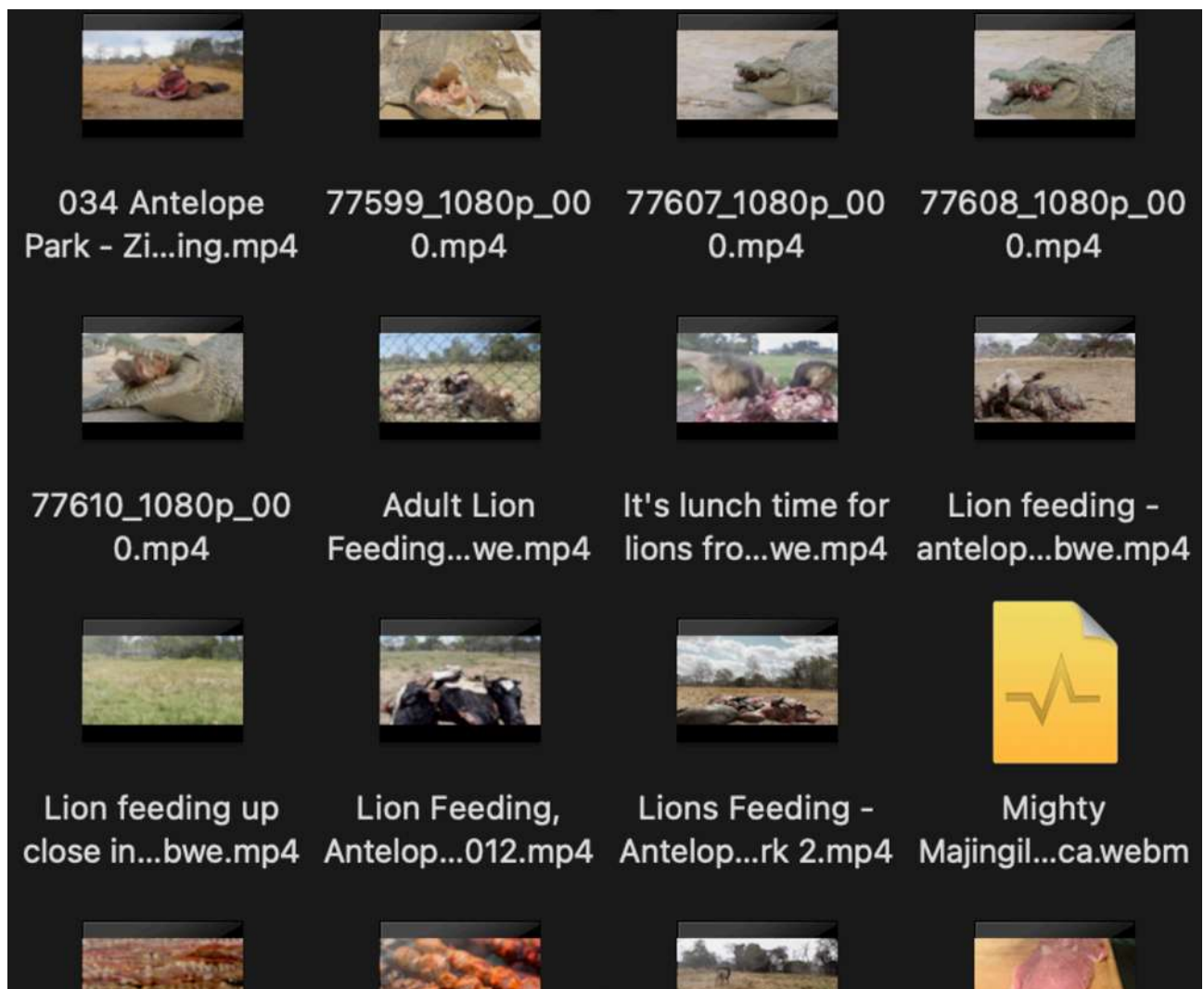


Figure 6: Local corpus management—moderation-aware handling and non-redistribution workflow.

Documentation (Video)



Image Against Oppression

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Conclusion: Encounter as Interruption

Image Against Oppression proposes adversarial degradation as a VJ interface for critical encounter with sensitive network images. By reframing “sensitivity” as an interface form, the project shifts attention from content alone to the operational conditions that shape perception: warnings, thresholds, repetition, and algorithmic similarity. Within a livestreamed panorama, degradation interrupts seamless consumption and produces interface consciousness—an awareness of how seeing becomes targeting, and how the screen’s operational logic governs affect.

Rather than presenting “clear” images as evidence, the work insists on the friction of encountering—where uncertainty is not a deficit, but an ethical and aesthetic strategy. In that sense, degradation is not simply a loss of information, but a refusal of the interface’s demand that everything become legible, searchable, and shareable.

Acknowledgments

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