Lighting up resistance: *Dalit Women Fight* projections and the power of ambient activism

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ABSTRACT

This article highlights the transformative potential of projection activism in sparking feminist discourse and advocating for equity, emphasising its role in occupying and redefining public spaces to challenge and dismantle oppressive structures. Using as a case study the *Dalit Women Fight* projections (2015) on the Brooklyn Bridge and on the Permanent Mission of India to the United Nations building in New York, curated by the US-based activist collective The Illuminator, the article illustrates the potent role of ambient activism in addressing gender-based violence and advocating for feminist equity. By occupying public spaces with powerful visual narratives, the projections serve as a catalyst for public discourse on feminism, particularly spotlighting the pervasive issue of caste-based sexual violence against Dalit women in India. Therefore, this article aims to delve into how projection activism, by showcasing political content outside institutionalised actions, transforms spaces into vibrant arenas of protest. Here, the built environment itself becomes a dynamic participant in the collective dissent, turning ordinary urban landscapes into powerful stages for social and political expression.

Keywords: ambient activism, cinematic placemaking, *Dalit Women Fight*, media façade, The Illuminator, projection activism.

Dates:
Received: 2025-04-15
Accepted: 2025-09-01
Published: 2025-11-24

Published by

SCHOOL OF THE ARTS
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA
FACULTY OF HUMANITIES

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2617-3255/2025/n39a21

Introduction

> Instead of being based on ritual,
> it [art] begins to be based on another
> practice – politics.
> (Walter Benjamin 1969:6)

16 September 2015, New York. The Brooklyn Bridge façade comes alive with moving images and a powerful hashtag: #DalitWomenFight (Figure1). On the same day, the building of the Permanent Mission of India to the United Nations is lit up with the slogans, "Dalit Women Demand an End to Caste-Based Sexual Violence" and "We Stand with the Survivors of Caste Violence". A map of India, drenched in red, emerges on a red granite wall with the caption "Atrocity Nation" and the hashtag #EndCasteApartheidNow (Figure 2).

This potent visual statement was made possible through the work of The Illuminator, a US-based art activist collective of visual artists, filmmakers and technologists, specialising in operating in the public sphere with guerrilla projections.[1] The collective has carried out hundreds of projection-interventions in public spaces, turning the city from a place of passive consumption and transit into a dynamic site of engagement, conflict, and conversation. Their work highlights the pressing crises our world faces and advocates for an ongoing fight towards a more just, peaceful, and sustainable society.[2]

Specifically, the *Dalit Women Fight* projections emerged in solidarity with a delegation of Dalit women from India that toured the US in September and October 2015, to raise awareness on the caste-based sexual violence affecting those women.[3]

Using the *Dalit Women Fight* projections as a point of departure, this article highlights the transformative potential of projection activism in sparking feminist discourse and advocating for equity, emphasising its role in redefining public spaces to challenge and dismantle oppressive structures. By occupying public spaces with powerful visual narratives, it is argued that the projections transform spaces into vibrant arenas of protest. Here, the built environment itself becomes a dynamic participant in the collective dissent. The aim of the article lies, therefore, not only in the context of Dalit women's activism but also within projection studies and projection activism, as it emphasises the power of using this tool to challenge the physical and conceptual boundaries of place and the public sphere.

FIGURE **Nº 1**

The *Dalit Women Fight* projection on the Brooklyn Bridge, New York, 16 September 2015. Courtesy of The Illuminator Collective.

With these considerations in mind, I trace the trajectory of the *Dalit Women Fight* projections, from a site-specific activist intervention to a globally shared expression of protest and feminist dissent. After examining the origins of the Dalit Women Fight movement, this article explores the mechanisms of the projections, advancing the term 'ambient activism' (Hancox 2024) as a framework for understanding their transformative power.

FIGURE **Nº 2**

The *Dalit Women Fight* projection on the Permanent Mission of India to United Nation's building, New York, 16 September 2015. Courtesy of The Illuminator Collective.

Illuminating injustice

Projection activism is increasingly recognised as an effective means of driving change, with contemporary interventions by activists and artists. However, contributions to the academic literature on this topic are limited. Seen as a practice handled by visual artists and activists, the landscape is quite scattered when it comes to providing a coherent body of literature.[4] Buchanan (2021) describes projection activism as a contextual street art that, through its operativity in urban space, can reconfigure such spaces and shed light on some mechanisms that usually regulate the presence of art in the public sphere. Specifically, Buchanan (2021:6) identifies two levels on which projection activism operates. First, through the explicit messages the projection conveys and the sites where it displays these messages; second, through the very act of its existence. Indeed, it is usually via unauthorised and guerrilla interventions in urban space that projection art and activism are concretised.

In operating outside the institutional framework and without obtaining permission from the authorities, projection activism becomes a means to disclose (and sometimes reconsider) the democratic processes that try to govern its existence. Due to its bottom-up operativity, projection activism carries a double political implication. It not only conveys and exposes political messages in the public space but also discloses and critiques the very mechanisms of power, surveillance and control that usually define projection art in public spaces. By intervening directly in the public sphere, often by disrupting the site of institutional authority, projection activism both performs and exposes the politics of visibility (and its limitation) in the public sphere.

The *Dalit Women Fight* projections carry this double political power. Curated at the margin of the institutions using a van as a projection booth, the projections show the power of activism in its operativity. Moreover, in occupying public space, they implement urban space as a political arena. Urban space has always been a political arena, where power and control have been simultaneously produced and exposed (Amin & Thrift 2002). Therefore, projection activism, meant as a political tool utilised to politicise the urban space, might sound tautological. However, the argumentation here is slightly different yet provocative. Taking as granted that every form of art has a political dimension (Mouffe, Deutsche & Branden 2001), projection art (especially when associated with activism) implements its political dimension by reorganising what is visible and expressible in urban space (see Beyes 2010).

Following Buchanan (2021:8), the *Dalit Women Fight* projections behave as a political projection, and 'make the urban environment accessible at human scale, and able to be transformed in ways that architecture often is not'. It confronts the immateriality of digital

expression with the materiality of architectural façade; the static of the concrete with the fleeting of the moving images; the physical location of the media façade with the digital space generated by documentation of the event via social media. Overall, what the *Dalit Women Fight* projections (and others that share a similar political rationale) do is the creation of an alternative place, a place where some dichotomies are constructed: control and freedom, and oppression and subversion. Some scholars identify this phenomenon as "digital placemaking", exemplified by the emergence of media façades and urban screen (Hespanhol, Haeusler, Tomitsch & Tscherteu 2017; Basaraba 2021; Halegoua & Polson 2021). Although digital placemaking serves as the fundamental starting point for my analysis, I argue that projection activism not only activates a space where digital and physical entities intersect, but also reconfigures morphologies and meanings, ultimately creating a space of resistance that extends beyond just the façade and the media displayed on it.

#DalitWomenFight: From local struggles to global solidarity

Dalit women's activism is a powerful and transformative movement that intersects the struggles against caste discrimination, gender inequality, and social injustice. Dalit women, who belong to the historically marginalised "untouchable" communities in India, face a unique form of oppression due to their position at the intersection of caste and gender. As Aaron Karp, Sonal Marwah, and Rita Manchanda (2015:12) explain, members of caste and tribal communities are especially vulnerable to violence perpetrated by upper-caste groups, with women being particularly at risk. Dalits are more likely to be victimised and significantly less likely to receive justice through the judicial system. A study highlighted the social aspects of violence against Dalit women, revealing that some may view rape as "ordained" due to their dual disadvantage of being both Dalit and female (see Sengupta 2009).

Since the start of the twenty-first century, particularly after 2012, numerous Dalit women's groups, both large and small, have emerged across the country, striving to assert their identity and openly address the intersection of caste and gender (Masoodi 2018). This movement gained momentum after the 1995 Beijing International Women's Conference, which sparked more systematic discussions on caste and the issues faced by Dalit women. The first expression of an independent and autonomous assertion of Dalit women's identity came with the formation of the National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW) in Delhi on 11 August 1995 (Guru 1995).

From the time of their establishment, their activism advocates for social, economic, and political empowerment, especially by contrasting the overlapping system of caste-based discrimination, such as exploitation, and denial of basic human rights and gender-based violence, including sexual violence.

One of the key activist initiatives created to raise awareness of the oppression of Dalit women is the Dalit Women's Self-Respect March, also known by its hashtag #DalitWomenFight. This initiative was launched by the All India Dalit Women's Rights Forum/All India Dalit Mahila Adhikaar Manch (AIDMAM) in 2014, when Dalit survivors and activists travelled across India to highlight the pervasive issue of caste-based violence and apartheid.[5] Since then, the march has grown into a more expansive movement, encompassing talks, art projects, and public meetings where the participants embraced the Ambedkarite principles of 'educate, organize, agitate' – a phrase coined by Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, the influential economist, reformer, and one of India's most prominent Dalit thinkers (Murray 2019:195). In 2018, at the thirty-eighth session of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) in Geneva, a representative group of the All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch (AIDMAM) advocated for the Dalit women's cause, aiming to bring global attention to their issues.[6] On this occasion, they released a report, 'Voices Against Caste Impunity: Narratives of Dalit Women' and showed a short documentary, *#DalitWomenFight.*[7] While the film told the story of a seventeen-year-old girl from the scheduled caste who was sexually assaulted and killed in Haryana in 2017, with the perpetrators yet to be brought to justice, the report quoted the official data on caste-based gender violence and discrimination, illustrating several such narratives of Dalit women and girls. The participation of a delegation of Dalit women at the UNHRC opened the door for international awareness of their cause and helped bring their struggle and fight to a global stage.

Another important factor that permitted a global outreach of the Dalit women's fight is digital activism and the use of digital media as platforms for expressing and reporting their issues. Even if access to digital media platforms is tricky for Dalit women who are continuously fighting for fundamental human rights and human conditions,[8] the online presence of such forms of activism is important to create solid friendships and alliances (see Stewert & Schultze 2019). One such instance of transnational alliance is the series of collaborative events organised by the organisation, Dalit Women Fight, with grassroots #BlackLivesMatter activists in 2016 (Murray 2019:195). However, even earlier, in 2015, working beyond and within institutional organisations, Dalit Women Fight, a delegation of Dalit women founded by Thenmozhi Soundarajan, a Dalit-American transmedia artist, toured multiple cities in the USA, including Los Angeles, Seattle, Berkeley, Chicago, Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Washington DC, and Austin. Through this activist campaign, hosted mainly by universities, they exposed issues of caste privilege in India and within

South Asian American communities and formed connections with women from other minority groups who were fighting similar injustices.[9] Members of #BlackLivesMatter and #SayHerName supported the tour, finding impressive similarities amongst the social movements. It is within this context that The Illuminator Collective conceptualised, in solidarity with the Dalit women's issues, the *Dalit Women Fight* projections.

FIGURE **Nº 3**

The *Dalit Women Fight* projection on the Permanent Mission of India to United Nation building, New York, 16 September 2015. Courtesy of The Illuminator Collective.

I consider the *Dalit Women Fight* projections a form of what Donna Hancox (2024) defines as 'ambient activism'. With this concept, Hancox (2024:152) describes 'those processes and cultures focused on illuminating hitherto overlooked aspects of a social or political issue by explicitly presenting them in the practices and sites of our everyday life'. Hancox (2024:148), citing Malcom McCullough (2013:18), describes ambient as a complicated and complex set of phenomena where a new attitude about attention meets a new wave

of information technology, becoming situated in the world. The new attitude toward attention that McCullough refers to, and which Hancox highlights, is a shift away from focused, singular attention (as typified in older media like books or traditional computing environments) toward distributed, partial, or ambient attention. This attitude reflects how people engage with digital environments in more fluid, backgrounded, and context-aware ways. Ambient activism, therefore, relies on this intersection between attention and technology. As I explain later in my discussion of the two projections, within the context of ambient activism, attention is not commanded in the traditional manner typical of direct protest and cinematic screenings. Rather, it is momentarily invited, or even passively absorbed through the release of activist messages diffused by the technological apparatus of the projection.

Under this framework, urban projections, like the *Dalit Women Fight* ones, operating in places that one can understand as familiar to everyday routine and surrounded by noises and backgrounds that one recognises as "usual", take the form of ambient activist operation. These projections generally activate attention through a technological device. In turn, the attention is amplified through the digital platform, promoting and proliferating the activist content globally. However, while Hancox emphasises the phenomenological relationship between place, technology, and activism, I underline its subversive feature. With the term ambient, indeed, I want to encourage a rethinking of the urban projection not just as a technological tool for activist purposes nor as a vehicle that grabs our attention (as spectators or passers-by), but would like to emphasise the projection as an active component of the activism itself. As a result, the projection's presence subverts the overall space in terms of power dynamics: ontological, morphological, and experiential. In this subversion resides the implementation of projection activism, which redefines urban space and the political protocols that function in it. If, as Hancox (2024:149) suggests, ambient activism invites us 'to attend to place, and to be aware of ourselves as we move around or to be aware of the way others might intrude our space,' then the *Dalit Women Fight* projections offer a compelling example. They operate within a place, intruding upon and occupying our space in the wake of resistance. The following section elaborates on this claim.

The transformative power of ambient activism

The Illuminator collective collaborates with activists to protest multiple causes, promoting self-organised activist projections that are aligned with their political agenda (Horwatt & The Illuminator Collective 2018). By projecting onto urban edifices, the collective transforms these structures into 'auto-critical screens' (Horwatt & The Illuminator Collective 2018:2).

Everyday buildings, whose architectural features often go unnoticed, become canvases for expressing dissent and resistance. This juxtaposition of immaterial visuals against concrete walls has drawn scholarly attention, highlighting the time-based nature of these projections. Researchers focus on the transformative power of projections in converting physical facades into digital platforms. Martin Tomitsch (2016) describes using digital media to shape urban experiences and structures as 'digital placemaking'. However, digital placemaking emphasises the screen, highlighting the textural and textual elements of the media façade.

While the screen-centric approach is crucial for understanding the projection's meaning and the messages it conveys in the public sphere, the screen is not the only site where the experience and morphology of the place are changed. Nor is it the sole factor indicating the projection's powerful political intervention in urban spaces. Instead, it is the projection beam that, once activated, initiates the transformation of the place and drives real political change in the surroundings. Many projects curated by The Illuminator exemplify this, in which the projector beam signifies both a commitment to illuminating hidden injustices and serves as a form of direct action (see Horwitt & The Illuminator Collective 2018). So, while other forms of projection activism amplified the film medium, its content and resonance in the public sphere, The Illuminator's practice casts a different light on it, emphasising the role of the light beam. As Eli Horwatt (2018:2) pinpoints – describing their practice – the projection beam 'crystallizes a set of power dynamics in the space of the street, producing an unusual concatenation of protest and strategies, where organising, educating, and action converge'. Starting with these words, I now explore how the *Dalit Women Fight* projection beams function in urban space, reshaping spatial morphologies and reconfiguring power dynamics.

Materialising dissent

In hitting the façade of the Brooklyn Bridge and the building of the Permanent Mission of India to the United Nations, the projection beam materialises slogans and images of resistance against caste and gender-based violence inflicted upon the Dalit Women. One could argue that these images and words were already condensed in the *materiality* of the film. However, once projected on the façades, these found new life in the urban environment. The projections act as a thought – in our mind, it is only a matter of synapses connected to each other, but when vocalised, it becomes something tangible and audible. In being materialised on the brick façades of the bridge and on the red granite wall of the building, the images did not, however, preserve their original feature; instead, they were altered by the physiognomy of the wall. Materialising, in this context,

entails transforming parts of the urban space – such as the façade of a bridge or building – into active components of protests. It is not merely making dissent visible but embedding it into the city's physical and symbolic (considering where these projections occur) fabric. Through this process, elements of the cityscape become part of the protest itself, rather than just serving as its backdrop. In my approach, I see the urban environment as an active, vibrant material: its surfaces and structures help to carry and amplify political messages. The city becomes a stage for dissent and a sort of co-agent in its expression. At the same time, materialising the projected light on the façades entails a subversive operation, beyond the confines of the semiotic reading: it means reading the encounter between the immaterial light and the material surface as a vibrant encounter. Media façades – as produced in the projections discussed here – are totally new architectural and semiotic phenomena. What I mean is that being formed by the juxtaposition of the built environment's materiality and the images' immateriality, they constitute a new composite surface. Giuliana Bruno (2020) speaks about the 'tension' of such a surface, which is both textural (architectural) *and* textual (semiological). In creating a new meaning and layout of the textual and textural, they collide to form what I call a new ambient semiology.

Miriam De Rosa (2016) has previously spoken about the 'space-image' of the new semiotic formation we can perceive in media façades and urban screens. She explains that when the moving image is in contact with the environment, 'it acts on it, penetrates it' as if it were 'building materials' (De Rosa 2016:155, translated from Italian by the author). In acting like this, the (moving) image becomes part of the environment in 'a kind of fusion that originates the space-image' (De Rosa 2016:155, translated from Italian by the author). By offering itself as 'building material', the moving image operates in urban space through its semantic meaning and physical and formal properties. Despite being analysed as a situated presence or an environmental medium, the formation of the "space-image" represents a transition from a semiology of images to what is being suggested here as "ambient semiology". Whereas the former is concerned with representativeness, the latter encompasses the signs and properties of the screen-space and has a peri-representational approach. The passage shares similarities with Craig Buckley, Rüdiger Campe and Francesco Casetti's (2019) observations on the spatialisation of the medium from optical device to environmental medium. However, ambient semiology emphasises the material aspect of such spatialisation and its potential for generating new morphologies and, consequently, new meanings.

As shown in Figure 4, one can witness a detailed view of one of the central visuals used in the Brooklyn Bridge projection, emphasising the encounter and integration between the immateriality of the moving images and the materiality of the wall. The projection beam generated *new* images, born from the images' textual configuration and the wall's

FIGURE **Nº 4**

Close-up of a still from the *Dalit Women Fight* projection on the Brooklyn Bridge, New York. 16 September 2015. Courtesy of The Illuminator Collective.

textural morphology. The stylised faces of Dalit women appear to merge with the brick façade of the bridge. This overlap suggests a deep connection between their fight for human rights and the place where this is actually projected. Rather than focusing on the local, the projection seems to emphasise the global, highlighting the solidarity of The Illuminator Collective with the Dalit Women Fight Confederation. Their physical projection in New York City and global digital outreach via social media underscore the sense of proximity, transcending geographical borders.

While the projection on the Brooklyn Bridge emphasises the textural dimension of ambient semiology – where new visual meaning emerges from the interaction between the wall's surface and the moving images – the projection on the building of the Permanent Mission of India to the United Nations emphasises its *textual* aspect. In this case, the slogans and images were projected onto a political building, the headquarters of the Indian delegation to the United Nations. Choosing this building, therefore, was not casual; instead, it was specifically done to amplify the resonance of the protest. Daniel Endres and Samantha Senda-Cook (2011) speak about the 'rhetoric of place' when discussing projection activism, and in exploring how social movements tactically engage with place,

they argue that protests often generate 'ephemeral fissures in the meaning of place' through either material or conceptual strategies (Senda-Cook & Endress 2011:268). By deliberately opposing the established meanings of a location, these movements employ a distinct rhetoric of place that temporarily reconfigures its significance. Similarly, this happened in the *Dalit Women Fight* projection on the building of the Permanent Mission of India to the United Nations – the significance of the building was systematically reconfigured by the significance of the texts and images. The new ambient semiology seems to proclaim, "these walls, emblems of the nation itself, both embody and exhibit this violence".

Situating bodies, situating thoughts

The projection beam behaves as a spatial re-configurator, as projecting it deliberately occupies spaces, obscures the local built environment and bans some passages in the urban space. Gabriel Menotti and Virginia Crisp (2020) describe this form of urban occupancy as a type of topographical protocol, where the projection creates a 'territory of control'. Acting as a topographical agent, the projection 'operates by embedding the subject in a tangible system of positions' (Menotti & Crisp 2020:12). Specifically, in producing representations, it shapes and alters the surrounding environment. As Menotti and Crisp (2020:12) clarify, the projection 'entails not only situated practices, but also situating ones'. Specifically, this destabilisation of spatial and power dynamics is exemplified by the projection through the delimitation of movement, the interdiction of places and the staging of perception. In doing so, the individual 'becomes implied in a system of exceeding power relations', where 'certain economies of visual representation are made concrete' (Menotti & Crisp 2020:12).

When made concrete, these economies of visual representation form a spatial and a political regime. Firstly, as Menotti and Crisp (2020:12) describe, they include the individual into a system of positions regulated by the spatial presence of the projection beam and projected moving images. Here, the individual is often restricted in their everyday wandering through their familiar places. This restriction is frequent because projection activism is often curated in crowded places and enacted onto famous (sometimes political) buildings. Secondly, the economies of the visual representation include the individual into a system of vision, transforming the individual from a passerby to a beholder. Thanks to the operativity of the projection(s), the place became a host-space for a political action, where a form of resistance is created out of everyday urban life. In this new space, ordinary routines are infused with activism, imbuing a simple walk with an opinion formation process.

While the press and media often influence public opinion, the government's agenda projection activism can serve as a platform for the power of those restricted interests to be vacillated. In exposing content in the public realm, for example, without the authorised licensing of a particular administration (state, municipality), projections such as the *Dalit Fight Women* ones, allow for a *collective* opinion formation.[10] As Mel Jordan (2017:2) posits, recalling Habermas's concept of the public sphere, 'collective opinion formation operates as a shared force to monitor the decisions made by the state and the market'. As a result, a 'united view by a particular group of individuals can persuade the state and the market to reconsider its actions and policies' (Jordan 2017:2). The broader connection between art and the public sphere is made possible thanks to the exit of art production, exhibition and distribution in the public space. This process allows art to be linked with social and political agendas, rather than being solely a matter for critics and

FIGURE Nº 5

The *Dalit Women Fight* projection on the building of the Permanent Mission of India to the United Nations, New York, 16 September 2015. Courtesy of The Illuminator Collective.

gallerists. In operating in the public space, artists and art collectives such as The Illuminator are projecting their opinion in the public realm, contributing to the formation and development of dialogues and controversial discussions. In fact, it is not only the publication of content via the *Dalit Women Fight* projections that art activates the social and political, but it is around the opinion formation that such specific projection creates, that resides the powerful political importance of projection activism. Jordan (2017:11) explains that art contributes to the construction of the world; it works upon the formation of values that we collectively agree with or decide to dismiss. Individuals can form their own opinions on the Dalit women's struggle, perhaps encountering for the first time the caste and gender-based violence these women face in India. Some may reshape their perceptions of this atrocity, making small activist choices to prevent its growth. Others might simply pass by, choosing not to engage. In both scenarios, a shift occurs, transforming them from mere passers-by to active observers. Their presence in that political space, even if it does not directly contribute to the Dalit women's cause, is tangible. Their bodies become temporary hostages to the power dynamics of the visual representation, held captive by the spatial and material presence of the projection beam.

Structuring information

One of the key strengths of The Illuminator projections is their digital outreach. Through their social media channels and website, they share visual reportages of each projection, featuring photos taken by attendees. Their social media accounts have evolved into a rich and powerful digital platform – a multimedia archive where one can explore the impactful role of projection activism in combating global injustices and violence. Additionally, the digital platforms represent a prolific tool for sharing formed opinions. Individuals who attended the projections shared the event via their social media channels. In doing so, they amplified the resonance of the political action created by such interventions. They made possible the concretisation of the ephemerality of the projection beam; its reconfiguring action became tangible, sharable and archivable.

In examining the presence of everyday screens in our lives, Vivian Sobchack (2016) argues that the screen creates a sort of illusional 3D sphere in the viewer's mind. She identifies this concept as the 'screen-sphere'. More precisely, the screen not only acts as a flat surface, where content is presented to us. Rather, the viewer engages with an immersive space through the screen. The screen-sphere, therefore, represents a way in which a two-dimensional surface creates an illusion of a three-dimensional space. As I discuss elsewhere (Rizzioli 2025a), the screen-sphere is not only a visual-virtual framework in the viewer's mind but also constitutes a liminal space where moments of transition

(morphological, semiotic, and ontological) are concretised. These transitional moments extend into the public sphere in both real- and digital-time space. In projection activism, these transitions manifest through the material interplay between the façade and the *screen* where moving images are projected. This creates a *sphere* of activity shaped by the interaction between the projection beam and bodily, urban, and spatial elements, and extends into global digital networks. Therefore, the digital outreach of the *Dalit Women Fight* projections amplified the power of ambient activism, amplifying the opinion formation into the digital public sphere, impacting onto not beholding, nor passers-by, but constructing 'affective publics' (Papacharissi 2016:125). The term is borrowed from Zizi Papacharissi (2016:125) and describes 'networked public formations that are mobilized and connected or disconnected through expressions of sentiment'. These publics are not merely users sharing personal opinions, but collective formations driven by affective expressions such as tweets, hashtags, and memes. Indeed, as Papacharissi (2016:126) specifies, if the networked structure is the architecture of affective publics, *sharing* is their political impetus. Without delving deeply into affect theory, which falls beyond the scope of this article, it is essential to note that affect is not reducible to personal feelings or clearly definable emotions. As Kaisu Hynnä, Mari Lehto, and Susanna Paasonen (2019:2) specify, affect is 'transformative in moving bodies from one state to another and in building up and shattering affiliations'. Therefore, the emergence of affective publics via the digital dissemination of the projections (photos, hashtags) suggests the importance of the political performativity of ambient activism, beyond the confinement of structured topographies (the building/ *screen*) and towards other, more virtual ones (the networked *sphere*).

Conclusion

This article has argued that projection activism, exemplified by the *Dalit Women Fight* projections, not only conveys political messages but also transforms urban space and reconfigures the dynamics of power and attention through what I call 'ambient activism'. In my analysis of ambient activism, I proposed considering the *Dalit Women Fight* projections as a temporary parenthesis of moments of transformation, beyond visibility and message dissemination. Ambient activism emphasises the material and spatial transformation of the built environment, the occupation of public space and the affective reconfiguration of publics. Here, the projection beam operates both as a medium *and* a protocol for enacting activism.

Firstly, it materialises dissent, particularly against the caste- and gender-based violence inflicted upon Dalit women in India. By showcasing solidarity through creating slogans and protest images, the projection beam brings this dissent to life on the urban canvas

of the Brooklyn Bridge and the building of the Permanent Mission of India to the United Nations. In doing so, the dissent is woven into the city's fabric, both materially and symbolically, becoming an integral part of the edifices. Within ambient activism, the materialisation is ephemeral and temporal. The projections bring the voices of Dalit women to the forefront, exposing their struggle, but it does so in a way that engages the urban environment temporarily and contingently. In this sense, the "ambient" is reconfigured, if only for a moment, into a space of resistance and protest. The ontological status of the urban setting is subverted, as are the morphological features of the facades where the beam hits, transforming them into a platform for dissent.

Secondly, ambient activism situates bodies within diverse spatial coordinates, integrating individuals into the topographical framework of the projections. This framework alters the usual flow of the space by restricting or prohibiting access to certain areas. As a result of the delimitation of space, individuals are simultaneously placed within a set of positions and forms of knowledge. In fact, it is not only the topographical framework that influences the spatial positioning of individuals, but also how it situates them within a process of opinion formation, where thoughts, dialogues, and comments are constructed collectively and individually.

Lastly, ambient activism structures both information and publics by creating what Vivian Sobchack (2016) describes as the screen-sphere: a hybrid space where the real and virtual intersect. Each projection not only transforms the morphology and ontology of the urban space but also extends its presence through digital platforms, such as social media and online media channels. This digital outreach redefines the public sphere, amplifying the activist power within a networked and affective digital framework. Hashtags, images, and shared posts generate *affective publics* who are not merely receivers of information but participants in a spatially distributed form of resistance, linking emotional expression to political action across topographies.

The *Dalit Women Fight* projections remind us to question how projection activism can continue to challenge oppressive structures in public spaces while engaging global audiences through digital platforms, and what the implications are of this dual presence as ambient activism – both material and virtual – for the reach of protest movements. In considering these questions, we must reflect on how projection activism could evolve, not only as a tool for raising awareness but also as a strategy for creating change in both the physical and digital worlds.

Notes

1. The Illuminator collective was born out of the Occupy Wall Street Movement in 2015. Since then, it has been instrumental in facilitating various urban space projections.
2. For information on The Illuminator collective see The Illuminator ([Sa]).
3. Dalit women belong to a marginalised community officially classified as part of the Scheduled Castes in India. They face triple discrimination, based on caste, gender, and class. For a contextualisation on Dalit women and caste-based discrimination in India, see: Irudayam *et al* (2011) and Rage (2013). See also the International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN), which provides comprehensive information on Dalit issues, including caste-based discrimination and the situation of Dalit women in India, https://idsn.org.
4. I curated a special dossier for the *Mediapolis Journal* on projection activism, intended to serve as an initial collection of cohesive contributions on the subject. For more details, see Rizzioli (2025b).
5. See Mitra (2018).
6. The Report of the Human Rights Council on its thirty-eighth session can be read here: https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/38/2
7. More information on the presence of Dalit Women at the 38th session of the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva can be found here: https://mattersindia.com/2018/06/dalit-womens-group-bats-for-rights-at-united-nations-forum/
8. See Chattopadhyay (2003).
9. See Wang (2015) https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/dalitwomenfight-brings-fight-against-caste-based-violence-u-s-n454056
10. Although ethnographical research was not conducted on how people perceived these projections in urban space, their share on social media represents a testimony to how people were willing to expose the atrocity and injustices Dalit women are forced to suffer.

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