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## Visibilities of Violence. On Visual Violence Research and Current Methodological Challenges

Thomas Hoebel, Jo Reichertz & René Tuma \*

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**Abstract:** »Sichtbarkeiten des Gewaltsamen. Über visuelle Gewaltforschung und aktuelle methodologische Herausforderungen«. The presence of (audio-) visual recordings of violent situations has opened up new perspectives for empirical violence research as well as for theoretical perspectives. Not only has this mediatization allowed for the public visibility and critical discourse on violent events, but social scientific methods have also moved towards the microscopic study of visible forms of violent events. Violence is a contested term and social researchers in particular wrestle with the question of which methodologies and methods are both appropriate and suitable for studying violence. We discuss how the theoretical development is connected to the visual data and the agenda can only be understood if we are clear about the extent to which social research itself is mediatized. The following chapters elaborate on specific research development that we call “new microscopy.” Against this background, we see a central challenge that violence research working with visual data in particular is heading towards. It consists in describing violent situations in an ultra-detailed way and at the same time being sensitive to at least three problems, which we approximate as underestimated embeddedness, presence bias, and visibility bias. We conclude by outlining what the issue may contribute to this debate.

**Keywords:** Audiovisual recordings, methodology, microsociology, (non-)visibility, visuality, video revolution, violence.

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## 1. Introduction

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**Figure 1** Scene of a Confrontation between Fans and Police in Front of a Football Stadium



Source/Copyright: Illustration by Marie Tuma, based on video recorded by research team led by Jo Reichertz.

Saturday afternoon – In a large German city it is time for soccer once again. The fans of the visiting team are in a playful but confrontative mood, chanting insulting verses. Some urinate on their way to the stadium in the bushes or on house walls, firecrackers are ignited, and flares color the air in a bright and dazzling red and white. First, the fans go to the stadium in several smaller groups, but slowly a larger block form more and more clearly. Leaders are recognizable, issuing commands. Cell phones are everywhere. Almost all participants repeatedly grab their camera phones, holding them up to film not only the scene and the police officers but also their own actions and share them directly with friends in the distance. Accompanying this procession is a multitude of journalists armed with cameras who record the events. Of course, the accompanying police will also be filming with professional equipment. There are permanently installed cameras at all relevant locations (CCTV). The images are relayed to the police control center and are analyzed by a private security company. If violent events do erupt, it is anticipated and will be documented, analyzed, and used as evidence.

**Figure 2** Recording of the Murder of George Floyd, Recorded by a Witness in 2020



George Floyd

Source/Copyright: Illustration by Marie Tuma, based on the publicly available video recorded and published by Darnella Frazier.

May 25, 2020 – “Please. Please. Please. I can’t breathe.” George Floyd’s last words became audible across the worldwide media after he was killed by policeman Derek Chauvin in Minneapolis, USA. His death during a police arrest became one of the key public events in 2020, fueling the Black Lives Matter movement, which criticizes institutional and police racism mainly in the USA but also around the world. The event became focused and politically important not only because of its sheer cruelty but also because it was recorded audio-visually. Stills and videos gained worldwide visibility and an iconic status of social injustice. They are since available for micro scrutiny not only by forensic professionals and police but also for the public, for twitter and reddit discourses, and critical investigations. In addition, it became a reference point for discourses about not only the interpretation of the specific situation but also the reasons and specific characteristics of police and racist violence.

**Figure 3** Scene Full of Excitement During the United States Capitol Attack of 2021 – Filmed and Shared Directly via Mobile Phones



Source/Copyright: Illustration by Marie Tuma, based on photographs from Win McNamee of the raid on the US Capitol in Washington, DC, on January 6, 2021.

January 6, 2021 – Fists balled; faces distorted in excitement, tension, or rage; bodies stretched; seized by the exhilaration of the moment and their own participation in it. There are scenes full of excitement, agitation, and anger that take place around the US Capitol in Washington, DC, and in the building itself while hundreds of people enter it illegitimately. Those involved are not solely targeting the integrity of the Capitol, a kind of profane sanctuary, as a symbolic body of democracy by smashing windows or trashing the office of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi. Attacks on security forces bear witness to sometimes excessive violence. A security guard shoots a woman in the stomach trying to enter a meeting room through a smashed window. The relevance of pictures and videos that are produced is essential to understanding the course of these events. Some of the intruders admit unabashedly that they had dressed up especially for the occasion. They could count on causing a world-wide sensation thanks to the coverage. What is particularly striking, however, is that a great many of the intruders walked through the building with their smartphones drawn. They flooded social media channels and chat groups with videos and photos in almost unmanageable abundance. For the attackers' self-empowerment during the occupation of Capitol Hill, power over the images of the event was crucial in this perspective. For them, it was showtime – but not solely in the place where they were. The Capitol acted only as a

backdrop. Their stage was their social media accounts. They represented a revolt that they had previously imagined with thousands in virtual communication.

Violent events, (audio)visual recordings and public discourse are often intertwined. On the one hand, the three mentioned events are different with regard to their participants, the course of what is going on, the verbal as well as physical attacks, and many more reasons, but rather in one aspect quite similar. They are recorded and thus preserved audio-visually. And here new differences appear. Their context of production ranges from the individual recording bystanders or participants to the organized and professional recording by police, media, and CCTV. Some forms of (public) violence are anticipated by the participants and made visible, some are even likely produced “for the camera.”

Some recordings become part of public discourse and negotiation. Here, the viewing and interpretation of the videos in different contexts and by different concerned groups ranges from entertainment and voyeuristic pleasure to strategic political use and critical investigation. The question of what can be seen is often contested. Which forms of violence, which of its specific qualities, and which perspectives on violence do the recordings document? Who observes the events as (non-)violent and for which reasons? In which situative context do the attacks happen and how do the recordings play part in the discussion of its (il)legitimacy?

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## 2. Putting Visibilities of Violence on the Research Agenda

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The sheer and ever-growing abundance of visual data has opened new avenues not only for public discourse but also for the contested field of violence research to rethink and address methodological problems in recent decades. Against the horizon of the conceptual and normative contentiousness of the phenomena they are interested in, visual data have enabled social researchers to use much more microscopic research strategies.

On the one hand, they benefit from the fact that many recordings of violent assaults and confrontations now exist because, in urban public spaces, the norm of non-violence is often, if not enforced, at least symbolized with the help of CCTV. They are systematically produced not only to surveil and control situations in real time, but also to document, produce evidence, and to evaluate and use the recordings for training and improvement. It is not uncommon that this kind of data is used in systematic “vernacular video analysis” (Tuma 2017b) by professionals, as well as by academics, that can use the recordings to develop theories as well as to train algorithms of surveillance

and develop new visual dispositives, infrastructures, and practices (Norris and Armstrong 1999; see also Reichert 2007).

Professional photographers and filmmakers but also laypeople accidentally or deliberately go to places where they encountered or expected violent action. It was initially people with Super 8 cameras, camcorders, and cameras who, in documenting both their everyday lives and special events, also recorded violent scenes from time to time – and today it is smartphone-carrying people who register and share these events. The availability of portable recorders transforms every citizen from a mere subjective observer into a “mechanical witness” (Schwartz 2009), especially of happenings that appear noteworthy, relevant, or even spectacular.

Against this background, this special issue, *Visibilities of Violence*, focuses on how social researchers currently do use the abundance of visual data for analyses of violence, which social-theoretical and epistemological premises they take as a basis, how they proceed methodically and in research practice, and which problems they encounter. It presents, in a sense, snapshots of current research practice. Its aim is not to depict the field of research in its full extent but to provide a glimpse into the laboratory of research and to gauge which opportunities and limitations are concretely associated with visual data in order to study violence.

It is often repeated that a picture is worth a thousand words. But contrary to aphorisms like these, stills as well as videos are ambiguous, depending on the context and the way they are viewed (Mitchell 2005). They have to be interpreted (Breckner 2012; Reichertz 2013), and it remains contestable what they show and what readings they allow. In particular, the killing of George Floyd introduced above became so widely-known not only because of its cruelty but also because it was video recorded, and the video became publicly available. On the one hand, it shows the situational unfolding of the event, allowing for detailed micro analysis of each movement and the painful begging of Floyd and the (missing) reactions of the police. The video allows for detailed micro scrutiny not only by the general public but also by forensic professionals, which allows for new “counter forensics” initiatives. On the other hand, it must be understood as a disputed discursive object, similar to the video of Rodney King beaten by several police officers in 1991 (Collins 2008, 4, 89-94; Goodwin 1994). The video of George Floyd’s death is a central reference point for social movement as well as academic discourses not only of the interpretation of such a video but also about the sources of violence, about the structural problems that are documented and unveiled by such a video or neglected as a conventional police procedure. The evidence of what images of violence show is something that must first be communicatively generated. They do not carry evidence per se (Fassin 2013, 120).

For sure, it has not only been since the mass availability of audiovisual recordings that “violence” has been considered a highly contested

phenomenon. In short, violence belongs to the category of “essentially contested concepts” (Bauman 2002; de Haan 2009; Schinkel 2010, 34-7; Schotte 2020). What can be considered to be violence is not self-evident but depends on how an event that can potentially be regarded as violent is actually being communicated about (Koloma Beck 2011). From a sociological point of view, it can be seen that the term violence changes its meanings in the course of ongoing social debates about what it can and should signify, and that these meanings vary socio-spatially and between social milieus (Dwyer 2017; Goltermann 2020, 29).<sup>1</sup>

Social researchers in particular wrestle with the question of which methodologies and methods are both appropriate and suitable for studying violence. In addition to the question of the causes or causation of collective violence (Collins 2009a; Hoebel and Knöbl 2019; Kron and Verneuer 2020; Nassauer 2022; Tilly 2003, 2006), the analysis of “violent individuals” (Heitmeyer and Hagan 2003, 455), their biographies and careers (Athens 2017; Malthaner 2017; Sutterlüty 2007), and the study of discourses or procedures in how violence is justified or legitimized (Lindemann 2017; Reemtsma 2012), the debate particularly revolves around how to succeed in researching the very acts, situations, and contexts of concrete violence and how to make them the key starting point for theorizing (Collins 2008; Katz 2002a; Trotha 1997; Weenink, van Bruchem and Tuma in print). What is disputed here is if and by which methods the course of violent situations is accessible and can be reconstructed (Böttger and Strobl 2003). Equally at stake is the question of how far detailed descriptions allow valid explanations of violent phenomena (Katz 2001, 2002c; Hoebel and Knöbl 2019, 182-96). It is inextricably linked to another crucial question, namely the availability of data and the mediality in which they are available.

The very limits of visual research strategies and interpretations are therefore a second main focus of this issue. At the end of the 1960s, Johan Galtung already pointed out in a seminal essay that some forms of violence were apparent (he called them “personal,” especially since they also revealed themselves directly to their objects), while other forms (he called them “structural”) were often even below the threshold of perception of those who were affected by them (Galtung 1969, 173). This duality has not disappeared with

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<sup>1</sup> Closely related is the normative contentiousness of violence, especially who is recognized as entitled to call something violence and who is denied this right. Who has the power of definition here and for what reasons? And on what is its acceptance based? Physical attacks on the integrity of human life are widely criminalized, especially with the help of criminal law, just as the police use of coercion is set with narrow limits – although this does not say how these limits can be determined in concrete cases (Fassin 2013, 113-43). From a socio-historical point of view, the situation is basically paradoxical: against the background of the norm of non-violence, there is a high sensitivity to the fact that violence is an almost ubiquitous phenomenon (Liebsch 2021; Trotha 1987). On the other hand, the normative contentiousness of violence concerns the question of who even belongs to the circle of social persons who can experience violence (Lindemann 2014, 15).

the increasing availability of photos and videos; it has only become more pronounced. This issue is therefore also concerned with the question of how forms of violence can be made visible in research for which (still) no visual data are available, either because the events in question took place a long time ago or because none of those involved are interested in the existence of film recordings. (Many other reasons are feasible.) Seen from this perspective, visibilities (and non-visibility, for sure) of violence are a contested area of its own right.

In addition, research on violence raises ethical questions (see *César Antonio Cisneros Puebla*, in this special issue). What should be shown in studies, and what should not? This is an extra dimension of the contentiousness of violence – and, moreover, it is not only tied to visual data but also to all presentational forms with which someone tries to make violence visible. This is not just about the moral feelings that are potentially violated. Rather, researchers have a responsibility not to re-traumatize victims and not to incite or instruct anyone to become violent themselves. Moreover, the analysis of violent events that intentionally aim for broad public attention runs the risk of serving the purpose of the perpetrators.

The purpose of this issue is not to seek straightforward answers to these questions, but to put them on the agenda of violence research in a bundled form. We discuss how the theoretical development is connected to the visual data, and the agenda can only be understood if we are clear about the extent to which social research itself is mediated (Ch. 3). In the following chapters of the introduction, we would like to elaborate a bit more on specific research development that we would like to call “new microscopy” (Ch. 4). Against this background, we see a central challenge that violence research working with visual data in particular is heading towards. It consists in describing violent situations in an ultra-detailed way and at the same time being sensitive to at least three problems, which we approximate underestimated embeddedness, presence bias, and visibility bias (Ch. 5). We conclude by outlining what the issue may contribute to this debate (Ch. 6).

This special Issue of *Historical Social Research (HSR)* presented here continues the discussion on innovative and qualitative methods of social research, which has a long tradition within HSR – see volumes 40.3 (Methods of Innovation Research; 2015), 33.3 (Qualitative Data; 2008) and 30.1 (Qualitative Social Research; 2005). Considering its content, the current volume of HSR, on the one hand, continues reflections on violence that were already addressed in issue 45.4 (Violence Induced Mobility; 2020). On the other hand, the topics of visibilities and their analysis were the focus of issue 43.2 (Visibilities – Sports, Bodies, and Visual Sources; 2018).

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### 3. Mediatization and Violence Research

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Social research in general is intrinsically intertwined and connected to the specific forms of media that are used to observe, produce, and analyze data and make social phenomena. The finding that a field such as the social scientific study of violence is now gaining key insights through the analysis of audiovisual recordings can therefore only be understood if one takes into account, that people's lives and experiences in everyday life increasingly take place in and with reference to *mediatized* worlds (Hepp 2011, 2020; Krotz 2001): "Technological communication media saturates more and more social domains which are drastically transforming at the same time" (Hepp 2020, 3). Media is understood here primarily as the new, digital media, i.e., also all forms of (everyday) digital videography. Nick Couldry and Andreas Hepp (2017, 34) even speak of a "deep mediatization" having occurred in recent years, in "which all elements of our social world are intricately related to digital media and their underlying infrastructure" (Hepp 2020, 5). This means that culture and everyday life, as well as all parts of society, are significantly influenced, often even shaped, by the use of media, by the materiality of media, by the media capital they confer, and by the content of media (Reichertz 2017).<sup>2</sup>

Deep mediatization takes place in several manners. First, video cameras of all kinds and (here especially the already mentioned mobile phones and CCTV) record events that occur naturally in everyday life. Either something is recorded because a CCTV happened to be within range or because a passerby (for whatever reason) thought it was worth recording – at least to make the recorded events publicly available and scandalize them (the murder of George Floyd is a striking case).

Second, there are now plenty of events in our society where video recordings play a supporting role. They are even part of the institutional inventory of such events (weddings, rock concerts, football matches, etc.). Think of the introductory example of the Capitol Hill with its scenes full of excitement, agitation, and anger. Some commentators characterize the mingling as a mob, while others call it an attempted coup, pointing out that President Trump (still in office at this time) himself called on his supporters to march on the Capitol. There is indeed something planned and military about the disciplined, military-like march of the Proud Boys, a self-styled militia, on the Capitol building. Both interpretations – mob and coup – however, tend to

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<sup>2</sup> Theoretical reference points of mediatization research are mostly symbolic interactionism, cultural studies, medium theory (McLuhan 1994; Meyrowitz 1994), the premises of social constructivism (Berger and Luckmann 1966), or more recently the theoretical program of a communicative constructivism (Keller, Reichertz, and Knoblauch 2013; Knoblauch 2020; Reichertz and Bettmann 2018; Reichertz and Tuma 2017).

overlook the situational relevance of the pictures made during the course of the events (Hoebel 2021). First of all, one would have to think of television images and the documentation of the events by professional photographers, of which most of those involved would have been aware. The intruders took the pictures that flooded social media channels and chat groups with videos and photos in almost unmanageable abundance. For the attackers' self-empowerment during the occupation of Capitol Hill, power over the images of the event was crucial in this perspective. For them, it was showtime – but not in the place where they were. For them, the Capitol acted only as a backdrop. Their stage was their social media accounts.

The video cameras are deliberately brought to such events by the actors and passers-by involved, but there is also often a video infrastructure tailored to the locality of the events. The recordings are used either to document them, to use them as evidence, or to make one's own "exploits" publicly available. Thus, third, many performances only take place to be recorded by video cameras and then publicly disseminated, which certainly applies in part to the storming of the Capitol. Events like these are public demonstrations in a broader sense of the word (Rosental 2013, 2021).

In the course of the mediatization of social life, social research not only has a larger volume of potential data to work with, but it is also faced with the task of dealing with the specifics of various types of data. The data-producing media on which social research could draw on are intrinsically connected to what researchers are able to see (Guggenheim 2015; Ziegeus 2009).

In the 1960s, interpretive social research started to gain traction, following Wittgenstein's advice, fed by theoretical considerations, "Don't think, but look!" (Wittgenstein 1969, 31). The object to look on was to be the world of everyday interaction and communication. Here qualitative research assumed the place where reality is created. Connected with this empirical orientation and the commitment to everyday life was the search for methods of data collection with which one could substantiate this claim, and by then the tape recorder had become increasingly available as was being used as one of the primary devices for studying ephemeral phenomena. In the 1970s, the focus was primarily on linguistic communication, and people were interested in the practices of how exactly reality is produced by means of communication. Especially the tradition of conversation analysis that developed was interested in every little thing – rhythm, pitch, dialect, pauses, interruptions – and researchers would survey all and sundry and would note exactly when someone interrupted another and how. For speaking meant acting with language, so every element was significant in the speech action. "Order at all points" (Sacks 1984, 21; see also Reichertz 2005) was a battle cry, especially for conversation analysis. In such a situation, it did not help to write down roughly from memory what someone said and how, nor did shorthand really help, but only the invention of the tape made it possible to

record and record linguistic interaction precisely down to the smallest detail by means of objectivation (Bergmann 1985), and then to transform it into another medium, usually a text, in order to interpret it. It already was obvious to many scholars that the world is not only produced with words, that the world is therefore more than a text. The question was merely with which media could bodily expression, positioning in relation to one another, gestural and mimic communication, mood, and the interaction of bodies be captured?

Already early on, visual data was used for the interpretation of human conduct, as the famous Doris Interview, produced by Bateson and Myers and analyzed by an impressive cast of researchers in the 1950s in Palo Alto known as “natural history of an interview” and other early studies, had illustrated (McElvenny and Ploder 2021; Pittinger, Hockett, and Danehy 1960). Based on those pioneering works and with the increasing availability of recording devices, researchers such as Majore Harness and Charles Goodwin (2018), Christian Heath (1986), and Frederick Erickson and Jeffrey Schultz (1982) started developing systematic methods to record and study human conduct based on video recording (for an overview, see Schnettler 2013). This developed into a number of different directions (ranging from multimodal conversation analysis to video hermeneutics) and was finally – surprisingly late – adapted to the field of violence studies. Nevertheless, since the 1990s at the latest, research in this area has been increasingly microscopic. Audiovisual recordings promise above all to enable ultra-detailed comprehension of the unfolding of violent events in their enactment. However, the deeper methodological debate about the merits, obstacles, and limitations of this way of working is underway, but still in its infancy. But let us first consider this New Microscopy in Violence Research, as we would like to approximate it, before going into a bit more detail about some key video-based research approaches and methodological challenges.

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#### 4. The New Microscopy in Violence Research

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Social research on violence is anything but a well-arranged field, but if there is one trend that has emerged in recent years, it is that it is becoming increasingly microscopic. Above all, the situationist paradigm, originally put on the shield by a number of different authors (Denzin 1984; Felson and Steadman 1983; Katz 1988; Scheff and Retzinger 1991), but now primarily associated with Randall Collins’s micro-sociological theory of violence (2008), can be considered the most influential strand of international violence research, at least for the 2010s. This is especially true with regard to the younger generation of researchers interested in violence (Bramsen 2017, 2018; Bramsen and Poder 2014; Hoebel 2014; Reichertz 2018; Klusemann 2009, 2010, 2012; Leuschner 2013, 2016; McCleery 2016; Nassauer 2011, 2015, 2018, 2019;

Weenink 2013, 2014, 2015; Wolters 2018, 2019, 2022). Even those approaches that were skeptical of situationism in the sociology of violence usually developed their positions in direct critical engagement with situationist research on violence (Braun 2016; Fujii 2013, 2021; Hartmann 2016; Hoebel 2019; Kron and Verneuer 2020; Malešević 2008; Mann 2019; Mazur 2009; McClelland 2014; Schinkel 2010; Sutterlüty 2015; Wieviorka 2014).

Methodologically, the situationist drift in violence research is deeply entangled with the promising trend away from overly holistic perspectives on wars, genocides, and uprisings, as well as on battles, massacres, and riots (to name but a few examples). Instead of treating the events in question a priori as a single event, research has become more microscopic and detailed. It focuses its attention on the many situations in which the people involved act antagonistically and at least one person physically attacks others present (see *Laura Keesman and Don Weenink*, in this special issue).

Besides situationism in a narrower sense, significant contributions to this trend toward microscopy in violence research have been made by the rather intensive debates on programmatic claims, objectives, methodologies, and theories of a genuinely sociological research on violence that have been conducted over the past three decades. During the 1990s, Trutz von Trotha (1997), for example, formulated the critical objection that the way of investigating violence that had been common until then did not, strictly speaking, represent a sociology of violence, but rather a sociology of the causes of violence (this meant, above all, classical correlation analyses). This, however, did not reveal anything about violence itself. Jack Katz (1988, 1999, 2002b) advanced a similar argument almost simultaneously. He primarily problematized the search for motives for violent action, which are usually determined via common survey methods in the social sciences, but which misses the actual event. Randall Collins (2008) later adopted this fundamental doubt about the usefulness of motives for action as a causal explanation of violence in his micro-sociological theory of violence.

Both von Trotha and Katz argue for replacing the usual question of why in violence research with questions of how in order to get closer to the empirical course of violent interactions. This shift from why to how has primarily ensured that both the bodily affective aspects of violent phenomena and the perspective of victims and the suffering of violence have gradually come into sharper focus. To put it differently, recent theorizing efforts have brought bodily experiences into focus primarily because researchers are interested in the occurrence of violence itself.

From today's perspective, there are two strands of debate in particular that have played a major role in shaping the trend toward microscopy in violence research – and which, interestingly, have barely touched for many years. On the one hand, the so-called *phenomenology of violence* is mainly inspired by Heinrich Popitz's "Phenomena of Power" (2017). This strand is empirically

and theoretically interested in social processes, sensual experience, and bodily consequences beyond the immediate doing and suffering of physical harm: in short, in modalities and forms of violence. For Trotha, who understands violence primarily in terms of the experience of physical suffering, pain must therefore be at the center of research. For this sociological strand of violence research, the aspect of corporeality is therefore central in order to be able to examine how injuries are inflicted and how victims of violence suffer physically (Nedelmann 1997, 62-3). In this line, Jan Philipp Reemtsma (2012) suggests differentiating violence by the extent to which human bodies are “locatively” removed, “raptively” disposed of, or “autotelically” destroyed.

On the other hand, the already mentioned *micro-sociology of violence* delivered main contributions. Those involved argue primarily in terms of the sociology of emotion and with a view to sensory experiences that people have or wish to avoid in confrontational situations (Katz 1988; Scheff and Retzinger 1991; Collins 2008). What is meant here are encounters that are antagonistic or develop into such.

In addition to these two more distinct strands of debate, the microscopically conducted research on violence is quite fragmented, not least because in various places particular interests are pursued in specific substantive areas (Walby 2013). Theoretically, various approaches exist more or less unconnected next to each other (Hauffe and Hoebel 2017). The analytical capacity for problem-oriented research on violence, which is to be found not least in targeted contrasting, creative eclecticism, or careful syntheses, has hardly been exhausted. And in empirical terms, there are detailed studies of various violent phenomena that are currently booming in the whole, but which have so far taken only little notice of each other. The situation is quite a mess, so we only want to mention some striking examples that, for instance, focus on domestic violence (Nef 2020), riots (Auyero and Moran 2007; Malthaner 2019), “infantry tactics” (King 2013), “genocidal dynamics” (Straus 2008), the escalation of violence during soccer events (Keysers and Reichertz 2018) and “football violence” (King 1995), “violent crimes” (Athens 2005), “drug market violence” (Stitt and Auyero 2018), or, comparatively, on “violent displays” (Fujii 2021).

However, it is striking that in spite of studies that work more or less conventionally with interviews, with documents, or ethnographically, procedures are emerging or even beginning to consolidate that primarily draw on visual data to study violence. We can distinguish at least four streams of work:

(1) Ethnomethodological research based on visual data of violent encounters is on the fore within the last years, however focusing most on the interpretation (Else, Mair, and Kolanoski 2018; Tuma 2017b; Watson and Meehan 2021), and only in few cases on the practice of performing violence (Lloyd 2017; Weenink, van Bruchem, and Tuma in print). The respective work here continues a significant research tradition: one of the most established schools

within social sciences that uses video data in an interpretive manner is known as ethnomethodological conversation analysis (EMCA) with an understanding of all activities and social (inter-)actions as ongoing accomplishment (see *Christian Meyer and Ulrich v. Wedelstaedt*, in this special issue). Originally concerned with analyzing audio recordings of encounters, EMCA has turned to numerous other areas of research with the availability of video recordings such as doctor-patient interaction (Heath 1986), presentations (Knoblauch 2008), or religious events (Haken 2022). Likewise, it established the field of workplace studies focusing mainly on the co-production and cooperation of work practices and technology use within situative and increasingly also multi-sited and distributed environments (Heath and Luff 2000). This led to the work in methodological frameworks for video analysis (Heath, Hindmarsh, and Luff 2010), videography (Knoblauch, Schnettler, and Tuma 2014), ethnomethodological interaction analysis (vom Lehn 2019), and visual ethnography (Pink 2006). Conflict and professional discourse on the interpretation of violence has been an important topic, e.g., in the seminal study of Charles Goodwin (1994) on the court discussion of the Rodney King case.

(2) Quite similar to ethnomethodological video analysis is the field of hermeneutic video interpretation, which has been worked on especially in German-speaking countries (Raab 2008; Reichertz 2007).<sup>3</sup> Phenomena of violence have only been sporadically undertaken with hermeneutic video analysis (Reichertz and Englert 2021; Reichertz 2022). Characteristic for this kind of analysis is that not only the communicative actions in the situation are analyzed anymore but also the whole social setting and their embedding in a social process that reaches from the past over the present into the future. Nonetheless, this strand of research is promising for the research on violence because some elaborated methods to analyze video recordings have emerged, among them documentary video analysis (Bohnsack 2009; Przyborski 2018), the sociological-hermeneutic video analysis of knowledge (Reichertz and Englert 2021; Roth and Reichertz 2020), the sociological video hermeneutics of knowledge (Raab and Stanisavljevic 2018), and video interaction analysis, which despite its ethnomethodological self-understanding must be understood as hermeneutic (Knoblauch and Schnettler 2012; Meier zu Verl and Tuma 2020; Tuma 2017a). In recent years, Marc Dietrich and Günter Mey (2018) have designed a video analysis oriented towards Grounded Theory, which can also be categorized as hermeneutically proceeding video analysis. Despite some differences, the hermeneutic procedures rest on a shared theoretical and methodological foundation: theoretically, the aforementioned approaches see themselves as sociological of knowledge and all procedures

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<sup>3</sup> Discussions of the methodological and methodological problems of hermeneutic video interpretation are provided by Dinkelaker and Herrle 2009; Knoblauch, Schnettler, and Raab 2006; Knoblauch and Schnettler 2012; Loer 2010; Meier zu Verl and Tuma 2020; Moritz and Corsten 2018; Reichertz 2013; Reichertz and Englert 2021; Tuma 2017b.

practically work hermeneutically. The goal of these mostly sequence-analytical procedures is to reconstruct the non-subjectively available knowledge patterns or action structures behind what is shown with the video: thus, it does not remain with the reproduction and duplication of what is shown on and with the video, but it is also always about finding the social meaning of the action of the image design plus the action captured by it in the image.

(3) A promising approach that genuinely emerged from the analysis of video recordings of violent events is so-called Video Data Analysis (VDA) (Nassauer and Legewie 2020, 2021, 2022). It stands above all in the tradition of the micro-sociology of violence (Collins 2008). Here, the use of visual data for research on violent encounters has become an important stream within the field (Bramsen 2017, 2018; Klusemann 2009, 2010, 2012; Nassauer 2019). Originally, Collins used not only ethnographic observations, narrative accounts and interviews, and reconstructions of violent situations but also included visual data, taken either from photographs or video recordings of violent events, “data which are unusual in the social sciences” (Collins 2009b, 600). Introducing the methodological developments from the study of communication within sociology and neighboring disciplines, such as conversation analysis and psychology, Collins focused mostly on the coding of emotional states displayed by participants in the visual documents to illustrate his analysis. In particular, Anne Nassauer and Nicolas Legewie (2020, 2021, 2022) have been refining this methodology in recent years, using the emotional framework, coding the datasets with respect mainly to grounded theory methodology, and embedding situational analyses in more systematic accounts of the unfolding, more or less violent events (see *Anne Nassauer*, in this special issue).

(4) At least, an encouraging connection between interpretative analysis and data collection and more standardized forms, i.e., using ethograms developed in ethology to code specific behaviors, is elaborated. Such approaches share a quantitative explanatory approach while integrating more interpretive and qualitative steps in earlier phases (Pallante et al. 2022). The main promise of such an approach is a higher compatibility with algorithmic analysis and computer vision (Bernasco et al. 2022), even if this endeavor raises massive concerns about general limitations as well as ethical questions.

In sum, video recordings do not only play a major role in violent events in contemporary society. Rather, with the forementioned approaches new opportunities arise to study violence as a situational phenomenon, embedded in trajectories and being based on bodily action, ranging from gazes to gestures and obviously bodily violations. Nonetheless, it is crucial to reflect on the entanglement of social research in the way societies produce and use visual data.

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## 5. Challenges for the Study of (In-)visible Violence

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Visual data today open up the opportunity for violence research not only to work microscopic, but ultimately to reach analytically into the nano realm of human encounters. While a micro-scope conventionally refers to the realm of more or less conscious and often intentional everyday interaction (Goffman 1967, 1969, 1983), a nano-scope, on the other hand, focuses the expressive level of social interaction, where the individual meaning-bearing units are either of such short duration or else manifest themselves in minimal changes (something is wrong, is minimally out of sync) that are either imperceptible to normal scientific observation (by means of the eye and ear), but in any case are barely rememberable and thus not available for analysis.

At the same time, (microscopic) research on violence, which works with visual data, is also facing manifold methodological, epistemological, and theoretical problems. The discussion on the consequences and adaptations that a “going micro more and more” or even “going nano” requires must be complemented by dealing more explicitly with these questions. While *Thomas Alkemeyer* (in this special issue) discusses the intricate involvement of researchers’ bodies in the analysis of audiovisual materials and *Gesa Lindemann, Jonas Barth, and Johanna Fröhlich* (in this special issue) focus on the methodological relevance of a theory-of-society perspective for the empirical analysis of violence, we want to highlight three further utmost significant challenges that we grasp as underestimated embeddedness, presence bias, and visibility bias.

(1) *Underestimated embeddedness of violent events* – Visual micro- and nanoscopies in violence research risks underestimating the question of the social embeddedness of violent encounters (Hoebel and Knöbl 2019, 135-8; Knöbl 2019; Koepp and Schattka 2020; Nassauer 2022). Following Georg Simmel (1980), this issue can also be understood as “problem of historical time.” In a seminal essay with this title, Simmel dealt with the question of how useful it is to deal with details of social events on the smallest possible scale so that we can get as close as possible to empirical reality. On the one hand, he obviously was an advocate of such microscopy. On the other hand, he saw the problem that by zooming in more and more on the details of spatiotemporally individuated events, i.e., their relations with other events, would be lost from view and ultimately their historical meaning would no longer be recognizable. Simmel thus asked himself how the singular is linked to the continuous, how an individual situation is embedded in a larger event – and described a paradox: for instance, a fight between two soldiers in a battle is unlikely to be any more different from a duel in any battle in any other place and time. Thus, the consideration of the singular details of a historical date suggests an ahistorical, ultimately meaningless way of looking at things. The question is thus

what a context-saturated microscopy of social events looks like, especially when we are dealing with phenomena such as violent attacks, which in themselves are usually quite brief.

The new microscopy in violence research has so far managed the problem of context-sensitivity by paying little systematic attention to macro-narratives (but see now Collins 2022). In doing so, however, it has disconnected itself from the historical context of theoretical discussion from which Collins himself, in particular, was still able to develop his methodological situationism. This refers to the social theoretical debates around the so-called micro-macro link (Alexander et al. 1987; Collins 1981; Knorr-Cetina and Cicourel 1981). Especially for violence research oriented in the narrower sense to situationism, however, theoretical questions of this kind played only a minor role until recently (Hoebel and Knöbl 2019; Kron and Verneuer 2020; Nassauer 2022). Thus, coming to terms with the embeddedness of violence in events remains a complicated task, especially when we ask how concrete transactions or interactions themselves presuppose and elaborate longer socio-historical trajectories (see *Wolff-Michael Roth* as well as *Thomas Hoebel*, both in this special issue).

(2) *Presence bias* – As already mentioned, the new microscopy is concerned with Goffmanian “encounters” in which participants are physically present and perceive with their senses the co-presence of other human bodies. The focus is on reconstructing the gradually unfolding and always precarious relational quality between the persons present, who can perceive each other and physically interact. Situational aspects that do not help shape these relationships are basically explanatorily irrelevant. But this “productive reductionism” (Hartmann 2019) has come at a price: theory-building to this day drags along a barely reflected “presence bias” (Hoebel and Malthaner 2019, 9). It manifests itself in the exclusive consideration of persons present and the neglect of persons absent. Here, the condition of spatial co-presence of the participants not only forms the starting point of the sociological study of violence, but it also marks a theoretical limitation. First, the interference of violent interactions with other, usually cross-situational forms of social association remains underexposed. Second, the use of the term “violent situation” (Collins 2008, 1) in particular does create the impression that one is dealing with a clearly contoured object of research. However, there is no explicit discussion of this question, so that the beginning and end of violent situations basically remain theoretically unresolved. Thirdly, it is to be objected that such situationist approaches underestimate (or do not even investigate) the explanatory potential of situational elements that do not express themselves in the form of physical movements and are consequently not perceptible or recognizable as such for others present (Kalyvas 2011; Sutterlüty 2017; see also *Jo Reichertz*, in this special issue). These include, for example, interpretations of the participants, justifications or the normative power of

preexisting social frames, or the form and content of speech acts as well as the relevance of third parties for the unfolding of the events (see *Ekkehard Coenen and René Tuma*, in this special issue).

(3) *Visibility bias* – Most researchers who can be attributed to microscopic lines of research generally deal with phenomena that either occur in the context of political conflicts, including above all armed conflicts and social protest movements, and in encounters with the police that are at least present in social or conventional media and thus publicly visible. For some objects, such as terrorist violence, both are true.

The microsociology of violence in particular gains its special profile as a “visual micro-sociology” (Collins 2015) that is rigorously “foregrounded” (Katz 2002b, 376). It follows the methodological principle of starting reconstructions and explanations at the elements of a phenomenon that are also potentially visible to the participants.

But visual reductions are not only productive. At the same time, they are a central reason for the formation of collective attention preferences that follow political and media logics rather than (social) scientific ones. However, research on violence that follows non-scientific tendencies in its selection of cases and theory formation must accept the reproach of not being able to offer sufficiently reflexive approaches to its subject.

It is also problematic in this context that collective attention preferences often imply evaluations of social phenomena, such as that certain forms of violence are socially more important than others. They may contribute, even if unintentionally, to the fact that those actors who already do not have a significant voice in the social discourse on the infliction and suffering of violence do not find much of a hearing through research. This is not only problematic from a socio-political point of view but also has repercussions for research itself. For research that pays disproportionate attention to publicly visible incidents ultimately exacerbates a fundamental problem that Stefan Hirschauer (2006) once aptly described as the “silence of the social.” Social processes that are usually, but not per se, voiceless, inexpressible, speechless, indescribable, pre-linguistic, incapable of speech, or wordless, but which could be verbalized through (primarily ethnographic) research, remain mute because scholarly inquiry focuses too much on the publicly visible instead of finding ways to methodically balance this “visibility bias” (Hartmann and Hoebel 2020).

Against this background, it is quite revealing to see what one does not get to see when one asks what social science research on violence is primarily concerned with empirically. Take for instance phenomena of domestic violence. Apart from a few serious approaches – Norman Denzin (1984) or Jack Katz (1988, 12) come to mind here – domestic violence does not play a noteworthy role in the general theorization of violence (Wolters 2019; but see also Nef 2020 and *Susanne Nef and Frederike Lorenz-Sinai*, in this special issue). Yet the

silence of the social manifests itself here almost paradigmatically as the silencing of violence. In this case, the metaphor denotes both what everyday language understands by silence – i.e., not wanting to talk about it, not being able to talk about it, not being allowed to talk about it, etc. – and a particular challenge for research on violence to make something speak that resists verbalization for methodological reasons, because it takes place in secret and because power relations restrict possibilities of articulation or cultural norms impose a refraining from speaking. Conventionally, visual data is not available here to investigate these phenomena micro- or even nanoscopically. Hence, to make visible violence entangling data of diverse mediality or without available audiovisual recordings is a main methodological concern that remains to be addressed constantly, not all with regard to objects of investigations in which the participants do not have any interest of getting observed during their violent actions (see *Frithjof Nungesser*, in this special issue).

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## 6. Aims and Contents of the Special Issue on Visibilities of Violence

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From a dispassionate point of view, audiovisual recordings are just another medium that researchers can treat as data to study violent events. At the same time, studies that make use of video analyses or entangle audiovisual recordings with other sorts of data (for instance, artefacts, documents, or interviews) have undoubtedly left measurable traces in violence research both methodologically and due to substantive insights. But on the one hand there is violence beyond the visible, on the other hand violence is not only explained by what can be seen in stills or videos. Media-theoretical and methodological reflections on which implicit theories about the object are contained in media help to understand these limitations. Thus, using video recordings to research violence is only one way of approaching the question of violence from a sociological perspective, but it is not the only one. It is often useful to use other methods or to complement video analysis with other methods, depending on the epistemic interests researchers are pursuing.

The contributions to the special issue typically have a double character. On the one hand, they deal with concrete violent events along the lines of diverse epistemological interests; on the other hand, they deal more or less explicitly with methodological, epistemological, and social-theoretical questions that have usually been posed to them in a very practical way or that their studies touch upon or raise. In the course of our introductory text to this special issue, we have already repeatedly referred to aspects to whose deeper understanding the particular articles contribute. At the same time, we have decided to group them into three thematic clusters, the titles of which are intended to

identify core aspects of the special issue – and we have opted for this grouping with the proviso that it makes the individual texts appear more distinct from one another than they actually are, precisely because of their dual character.

Part One – *Facing Violence: Microscopic Studies with and without Audiovisual Data* – contains detailed studies on violent phenomena that focus on video data (Nassauer on police use of force, especially on People of Color; Meyer and v. Wedelstaedt comparatively on torture, boxing, and drone attacks), linking audiovisual data with other types of data (Keesman and Weenink on bodily action in police-civilian encounters), or contrasting interpretative analyses with and without video data (Nef and Lorenz-Sinai on the co-production of violence through research) as well as dealing with the problem of making violence visible without having audiovisual recordings available (Nungesser on Guantánamo).

In Part Two – *Shifting Limitations: The Temporal Embedding and Unfolding of Violent Events* – material studies of violent events and their reflection on them serve above all to make methodological, epistemological, and social-theoretical proposals for further research into (in-)visibilities of violence. The contributions meet each other in that they make quite strong temporal arguments (Roth on transactions and trajectories; Reichertz on escalation in ambiguous confrontational situations; Coenen and Tuma on the situational consequentiality of third parties; Hoebel on emplotments within the course of violent events).

Finally, Part Three – *Challenging Research: Methodological, Theoretical and Ethical Problems of Analyzing Violence* – is reserved for contributions dealing with very fundamental problems of audiovisual analysis of violence. These include the physical involvement of researchers (Alkemeyer), the question of the social-theoretical foundation of understandings of violence that are incorporated into the analyses (Lindemann, Barth, and Fröhlich), and the social responsibility of researchers in dealing with data and in presenting results (Cisneros Puebla). In any case, one thing stands out in this issue: further discussions will be necessary. We would like to invite all readers to join.

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## Data Availability

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Some transcripts and video data used in this special issue are available at aviDa (<https://fdz-avida.tu-berlin.de>), the research data centre for audio-visual data of empirical qualitative social research, hosted by Technische Universität Berlin, and can be accessed here: <https://dx.doi.org/10.14279/depositonce-15976>.

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