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# Opening the Black Box: An Ethnomethodological Approach for the Video-Based Analysis of Violence

Christian Meyer & Ulrich v. Wedelstaedt\*

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**Abstract:** »Öffnung der Black Box: Ein ethnomethodologischer Ansatz zur videoanalytischen Untersuchung von Gewalt«. In this article, we explore four different cases of “violence” that occurred in different interactional and mediated settings. We identify basic properties as well as continuities and discontinuities genuine to different modalities of social practices labelled as violent. Three of the cases are reconstructed by using sequential analysis of video footage or transcripts while one relies on the in-depth interpretation of an autobiographic account. We lay special emphasis on aspects of ethnomethodological video analysis – in particular, its potentials and limitations for violence research – and also address theoretical as well as methodological aspects. In our first case, this especially concerns tactile interaction. Drawing on accounts of torture victims, we discuss invisibilized aspects of violence and suggest a way of rendering them methodologically accessible. Our second case deals with “public violence” in the boxing ring. Here, we demonstrate how violent practices are accessible by video analysis though the (in-)visibilization of them is hard-fought (in the real sense). The two final cases feature air-to-ground attacks in warfare and will complement our analysis by explicating how the absence of physical contact affects the situation of violence and violent practices in its incremental sequentiality.

**Keywords:** Ethnomethodology, video analysis, violence, sports, boxing, torture, war, communication under pressure.

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## 1. Introduction

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In recent years, the videographic documentation of incidents and episodes of violence has become ubiquitous due to the increasing accessibility and availability of public and private recording technology (Murthy 2008; Mok, Cornish, and Tarr 2015; Miethe, Venger, and Lieberman 2019; Leijmi, Khalifa, and Mahjoub 2019; for the case of domestic violence detection in court cf. Moore and Singh 2018; for the case of war videos, cf. Mair et al. 2016; Wilke 2017). Not only is violence documented through public surveillance

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technology, the use of smartphones in situations of political protest or police violence, body-worn cameras in state institutions or by the police, footage of drone attacks, or propaganda videos of religious extremists in which violent action against non-believers occurs (see the papers in this special issue) is equally publicly available. Former documentation of violence was exclusively preserved in a genuinely reconstructive form, e.g., as official reports or personal narratives (see, e.g., Chatterji and Mehta 2007; Stanko 2006; Arnetz et al. 2015; Smangs 2017). These reconstructions often intrinsically comprise causal assumptions and motive ascriptions and do not represent neutral processual data of the violent occurrences themselves. In contrast, the new type of documentation that does not record violence in reconstructive form, but as technical footage, particularly videographic documentation, allows us to focus on the procedural and processual dimension and thus on the *how* of violence, in a much more detailed and authentic way to understand and explain the occurrence of violence. This is the path that we suggest to opening the black box of in situ violence.

As Hoebel and Knöbl (2019) have convincingly shown, extant sociological and historical research on violence usually explains it in isolated ways, causally referring exclusively to either motives of those who exert violence, to dynamics of the concrete situation in which violence occurs or to conditions, constellations, and opportunities like the absence of law and law enforcement or prospects of economic gains. Certainly, this restriction of perspective is partly also due to the kind of documentation about the respective occurrence available. For the reconstructive type of data is impregnated with ex post narratives, justifications, and rationalizations. There is an everyday assumption that necessarily “strong motives” underlie an act of violence. However, motives accounted after the fact are manufactured with the instruments, and for reasons, of plausibilization, e.g., in form of a narrative. The same is true for situational dynamics: As conceptualized by Collins (2008), they often develop on the basis of emotions of the persons present in (and often creative of) violent situations. In the sociological identification or the actors’ retelling of situational dynamics, however, distortions occur, which are also dependent on the time of data collection (cf. Hoebel and Knöbl 2019, 92ff.). When it comes to the question of what social conditions, constellations, and opportunities enable violence, simple cause-effect correlations fail, since in most cases of these same constellations no violence occurs.

Therefore, referring to isolated factors, as Hoebel and Knöbl (2019) argue, is unable to provide a full picture. The alternative methodological approach of these authors consists in bringing the question of transitivity or intransitivity of events, their temporal order, to the center of causal discussions in order to explain violence (Hoebel and Knöbl 2019, 157). This creates a sequential chain of causal connections that relates individual factors in such a way that they would not have occurred without each other (cf. Hoebel and Knöbl 2019,

159). The “transitive explanation,” that Hoebel and Knöbl (2019) suggest, lies in this specific consequentiality of individual factors. In their model of explanation, violent events take place as a sequence of events that have a transitive relationship to each other: previous ones condition the next. In the case of violence, this dynamic is not only sequential, but often escalatory as well. Thus, the isolated focus on motives, situational dynamics, or constellations becomes superfluous. By reconstructing the process by which these elements are sequentially connected, however, more complex explanations can be found (Hoebel and Knöbl 2019, 199). Nevertheless, we would like to emphasize that in the case of violence, non-social forms,<sup>1</sup> which are incomprehensible and inexplicable in their ruthlessness and damaging destructiveness – forms of violence that *give nothing to understand* (cf. Liebsch 2003, esp. 46-50) – are often taken as primordial. In reality, they empirically remain cases of exception (also cf. Hitzler 1999).

Drawing on this, our theoretical idea is to come to general conclusions about the sociology of violence by analyzing the processual *how* of violent conduct. This creates a multidimensional view of motives, situations, and constellations in their mutual, temporalized, interplay. We get to the *why* via the *how* and, as entailed, treat the *why* as a *how*.

We will present some examples of this transitivity approach drawing on interactional violence in boxing and the interactional preparation of violence air-to-ground attacks. Starting with examples from boxing, we start our empirical discussion with the example of direct interactional violence and subsequently move to more distant phenomena of technologically medialized violence in modern warfare. Before discussing the empirical examples, we will first look into the experiential qualities of violent touch and torture as they become accessible in their transitive progression through literature and philosophical investigations.

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## 2. The Invisibility and Privacy of Violent Touch<sup>2</sup>

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There are relevant blank spaces in the transitive model that uses a videographic data as basis for the investigation of violence: Many forms and instances of violence such as, prominently, violence in private or intimate contexts, e.g., domestic violence, remains largely undocumented and thus escapes the access of detailed video-based processual analysis.

Furthermore, videographic analyses underlie a “visibility regime” that focuses on visual information (cf. Meyer and von Wedelstaedt 2013). It thus

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, social forms of violence are not necessarily pro-social. Instead, even hostile relations are social insofar as they are grounded in forms of mutual action anticipation. Non-social forms of violence do not treat the object of violence as an alter.

<sup>2</sup> In this subchapter, we heavily draw on Meyer and Streeck (2020).

misses the experiential dimension of violence. For example, the possible violence of tactile interaction is not discernible through video footage alone. Violent touch harms, hurts, damages, tortures, and even destroys the skin and flesh, the touching organs, of the other. The experience of forcefulness and pain, or the subtle manipulation of a haptic grasp, cannot be included in this kind of study.

Touch is, thus, “interior,” and videos are unable to exhaustively cover its experiential qualities. It is often emphasized that the voluntary exertion of violence and the intended infliction of pain upon others requires the denial of the perpetrator’s humanity, compassion, and empathy (most famously perhaps in Sartre 1966, 525-7). However, it is equally true that the effective creation of pain in another body, e.g., in torture, is based downright on certain empathic capacities of those who inflict it.

Even though one could say that the torturer pays close attention to his victim’s reactions to the measures of pain-infliction and by adjusting his own actions accordingly, there is no interaction, because the victim is made into a completely passive recipient of whatever the active perpetrator can think of and do. (Breyer 2016, 12)

Violent touch is thus based on the paradoxical capacity of empathic non-empathy. While in affective touch, the reciprocal play of active and passive roles is constitutive, painful touch makes our lived and living body withdraw into the role of passive “undergoer,” into a mere object of touch. It is precisely this experience that auto-biographical accounts characterize as the most devastating experience of lived violence and torture. Jean Améry, Jewish member in the Belgian *résistance* who, before being sent to Auschwitz, was captured and tortured by the Nazi regime, describes torture as follows:

Whoever is overcome by pain through torture experiences his body as never before. In self-negation, his flesh becomes a total reality. [...] [T]he popular saying according to which we feel well as long as we do not feel our body does indeed express an undeniable truth. But only in torture does the transformation of the person into flesh become complete. Frail in the face of violence, yelling out in pain, awaiting no help, capable of no resistance, the tortured person is only a body, and nothing else beside that. (Améry 1980, 33)

Améry accentuates how torture and pain overwhelm the victim’s ego, who, beside enduring pain, is confined to witnessing its distorted body (Vivaldi 2018, 35). The active-passive unity of the body of being a subject and an object at the same time that Plessner (1970, 34-35) has once described as “always and conjointly” *being* a “living body” and *having* “this living body as this physical thing” is destroyed in torture. Through the inescapably one-sidedness of violent touch, the body is reduced to its physicality and objectivity (also cf. In-between et al. 2020).

Torture produces a radicalization of the objective-material dimension of the existential human bodily double structure: “The body is experienced under

torture as being foreign and resistive to oneself and as being the object of the torturer's caprice" (Breyer 2016, 7). But this is only one side of the coin, as Breyer (2016, 7) elaborates. Torture at the same time produces a radicalization of the subjective dimension of human double existence, "since the experienced pain completely fills subjective space, so that nothing else can be felt, up to a point where consciousness might faint altogether" (2016, 7).

Thus, in the process of violent touch, particularly torture, the subject experiences themselves as being reduced to the objectivity and to the subjectivity of their body at the same time, yet in a separate manner (Breyer 2016, 7). Both dimensions lose their oscillating reflexivity, and the subject is bereaved of the relationship with itself (cf. Vivaldi 2018, 36).

The agency of touch lies entirely in the hands of the torturer; it is them who, by inflicting torture, are able to manipulate or entirely remove the corporeal boundaries of the two and to thus force their ego upon the victim. "Torture eradicates both the physical and subjective boundaries that are set up between the body, the ego, and its surrounding. Torture makes the self boundless" (Vivaldi 2018, 31). Améry states,

The other person, opposite whom I exist physically in the world and with whom I can exist only as long as he does not touch my skin surface as border, forces his own corporeality on me with the first blow. He is on me and thereby destroys me. (1980, 28)

As Vivaldi (2018, 32; his emphasis) concludes, "[i]nfllicting and receiving torture bring about *undesired intimacy*. This is the unanticipated meshing of the victim's and torturer's bodies and private selves." In this situation, "the torturer dwells and lingers as an undesired other within the ego of the victim" (Vivaldi 2018, 36) and "one's fellow man" is experienced "as the antiman," which "remains in the tortured person as accumulated horror" (Améry 1980, 40). Here, torture possesses basic similarities to rape and other forms of violent bodily transgression (Améry 1980, 28; Bergoffen 2014; Vivaldi 2018, 52; Wood 2015, 181).

Even though our intersubjective capacities emerge from mother-infant interaction, they are constantly renewed as experiential ground for further intersubjective understanding in the oscillation of touching oneself and one another. As children we have experienced, and were socialized into, codes of touch; we know the attitudinal difference between caresses and pats of the hand, and surely our latent childhood memories of being held, cuddled, or comforted mingle with our present sensory and affective experience. Torture, in turn, eradicates the victims' trust in their physical and social environment by reinforcing that their bodies may be robbed of their kinesthesia as medium of their "I can's" (Husserl 1960, 97) and, as persons, of any presuppositions of a benevolent social world.

Trust in the world, which already collapsed in part at the first blow, but in the end, under torture, fully, will not be regained. That one's fellow man

was experienced as the anti-man remains in the tortured person as accumulated horror. It blocks the view into a world in which the principle of hope rules. One who was martyred is a defenseless prisoner of fear. It is fear that henceforth reigns over him. (Améry 1980, 40)

The result is alienation: a foreignness in, and detachment from, the world (Vivaldi 2018, 51-2). This operates on two different levels: on the level of “transcendental intersubjectivity (where the other is an anonymous function co-constituting the appearance of a world of perceptual objects)” and on the level of “mundane interpersonality (where the other is another person I encounter in a bodily and social way)” (Breyer 2016, 4). Through touch, interaction and interpersonal empathy can be forced upon the other, creating an undesired intimacy that grows unsupportable in the “tactile memory” (Vivaldi 2018, 29) of those who experienced it.

As we could see, even the experiential qualities of torture, though they are not visible on videographic data, can be accessed through a processual, transitive approach: torture is based on reactions, as torturers adjust their own actions to the reactions of their victims. A processual transformation of the tortured person into flesh occurs. The corporeal boundaries of the two are manipulated or entirely removed and the ego of the torturer is forced upon the victim, resulting in a foreignness in, and detachment from, the world.

These experiential qualities are understandable only processually as transitive processes of all three dimensions involved: motives, situational dynamics, and constellations. The transition of the victim into flesh and his or her accompanying foreignness in, and detachment from, the world only become possible through the intransparency of motives (is it “only” a job? Is it sadism?), the complete non-escalatory, non-emotional situational dynamic, and the constellation that renders violence political and ideological (e.g., racist). The use of violence for elicitation of information might be effective thanks to these processual specificities. These specifically involve the systematic invisibility, and vagueness, of the phenomenon in regard to motives, emotions, and, possibly, the institutional background and support of one part of the actors involved in violence.

Thus, on the example of torture, we could witness the depth of the personal and social dimensions of violent experience that escapes video-analysis and its visibility regime. In the next sections, we will demonstrate the advantages of a videographic processual approach.

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### 3. Visible Violence in Boxing

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The sport of boxing is usually perceived as an exchange of violent behavior between two persons in the ring. Questions of the relation between violence and the sport of boxing are broadly discussed in science and – as we found

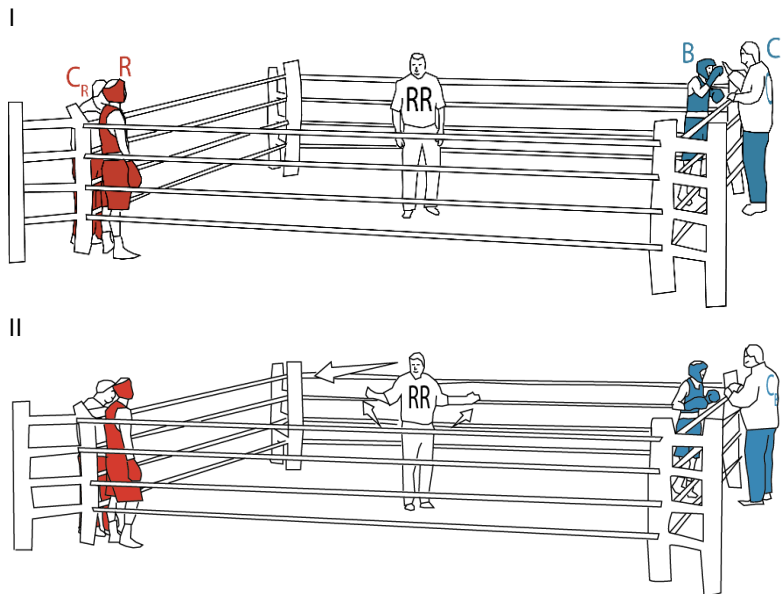
during our field work – among boxing professionals as well (i.e., concerning “motivation” evoked by rage or anger). With our video analytical approach, we are able to discuss the continuities and discontinuities of (supposedly) violent conduct in a different field of society. Thus, in the following we reconstruct the actual and immediate practices of boxing. As part of our study, we followed the professional boxers and their coaches during preparation for a national tournament and the tournament itself.

For our purpose here, boxing represents an example of violence in which the processes are configured right from the start by the actors themselves in a way to be visible or invisible towards certain parties involved. That is, the field itself is organized by and in itself to provide data that can be analyzed by use of video analysis and its visibility regime.

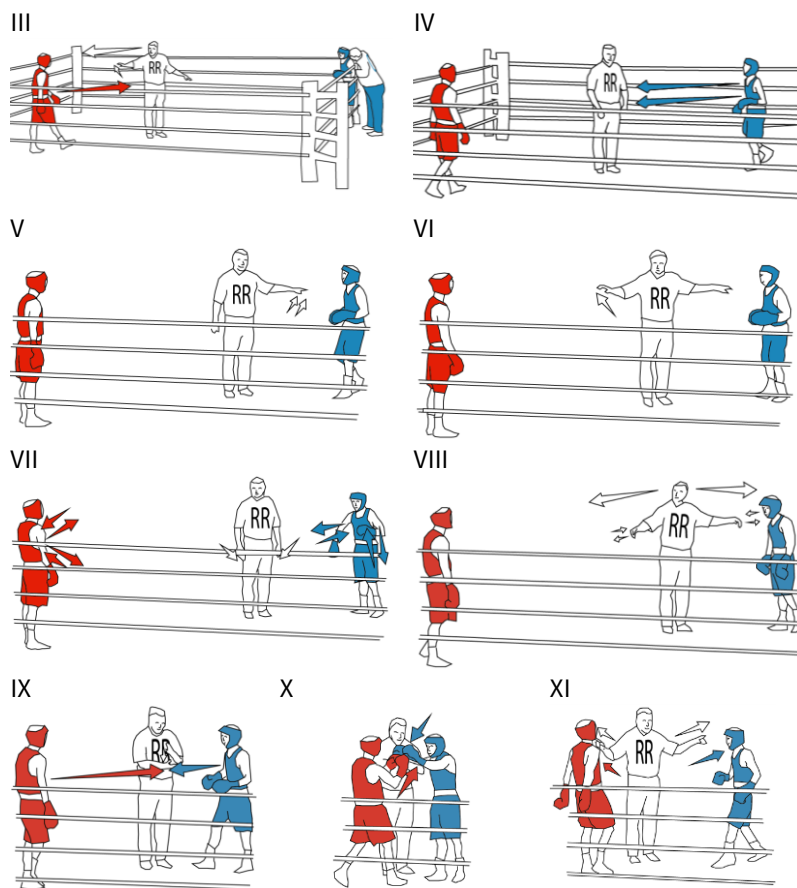
### 3.1 Establishing a Visibly Symmetrical Basis as Prerequisite for the Containment of Violence

Before the start of the fight, both coaches lead their boxers into the ring where the referee checks each boxer’s gloves and helmets. Just before the transcript sets in, the referee placed himself in the middle of the ring waiting for the hall announcer to finish some general announcements (not transcribed).

**Transcript 1.1** (R/B = Red/Blue Boxer; C<sub>R</sub>/C<sub>B</sub> = Coach Red/Blue Boxer; RR = Referee)







After final instructions and high fives from the coaches (still I), the referee lifts both of his arms simultaneously in the direction of both boxers (II). As the red boxer approaches fast and the blue boxer is still instructed by the coach, the referee turns his hand around and makes a “stopping gesture” towards the red boxer and lowers his hand towards the blue boxer (III). After the blue coach finishes instructions and both coaches step down from the side of the ring, the blue boxer quickly approaches the referee (IV). This leads to a quickly deployed “stopping gesture” by the referee towards the blue boxer (V). However, after a few moments the referee raises his other hand towards the red boxer as well (though the red boxer is standing completely still, VI). Moments later the referee lowers both hands simultaneously and the boxers shake their muscles (VII). When the hall announcer eventually finishes the

announcements, the referee lifts both arms at the same time making a “come closer gesture” looking at the red boxer (who is standing further away) longer (VIII). He signals both boxers to slap hands/gloves (IX), which they do (X), and sends them both to their respective corners (XI).

Through our micro-processual analysis, it becomes apparent that there is a complex set of spatial arrangements, visual coordination, and gestures deployed in order to reach a, for all co-participants, visibly symmetrical and “fair” starting point at the beginning of the boxing fight. The referee adapts his gestures to the movements of the boxers. This includes reacting to the boxer’s speedy movements with proper speedy gestures. Also, the commitment towards gestural symmetry becomes visible: e.g., when in still VI the referee raises his hand towards the red boxer, though he is standing still, only to lower both hands simultaneously some moments later. All this effort ensures that there is a visible equality among the boxers at the beginning of the fight. This is a fundamental part of the ritualized opening of a boxing fight which is a premise for the later violent exchange between the boxers (cf. Meyer and von Wedelstaedt 2015).

### 3.2 The Visibilization of (Non-) Violence

During the actual boxing fight, the boxers are anxious to keep distance between one another, unless they are in infight situations.

#### Transcript 1.2 (C = Red Coach)

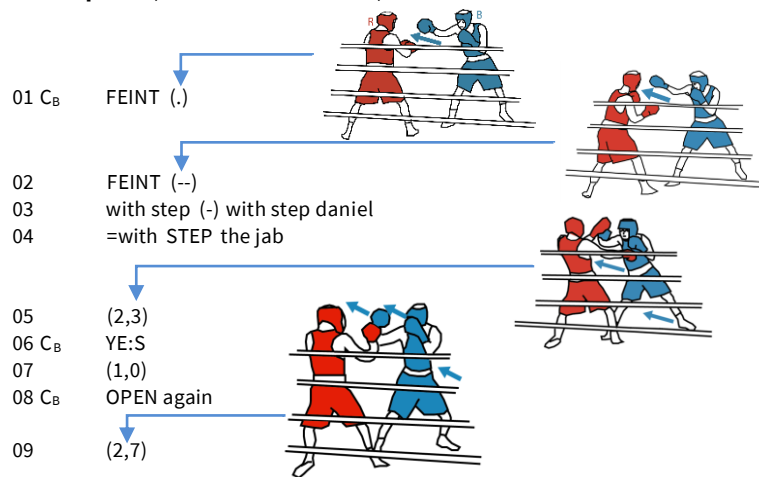
<p>01 C go first=          02 =it's okay to go first          03 YEA:=YEA:=YEA:          04 (.)          05 and long=long          06 (--)          07 go awa:y=Kevin          08 (1,5)          09 LE:ADhand=don't wait too long          10 go for it=go</p>	
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After standing in a covered position facing one another (still in line 05), the blue boxer pursues his opponent who retreats (still in 07). Following an instruction shouted into the ring by the coach (09), the red boxer tries to “open” his opponent (get him to lower his cover during an attack and then counter-attack himself) through light jabs by his lead hand (first still in 09). However, the red boxer is unable to counter the subsequent attack by the blue boxer and moves backwards quickly (second still in 09). The red boxer retrieves further and raises both his arms (and thus avoids getting hit by the blue boxer, still in 10).

During his evasive maneuver, the red boxer opens up his cover widely to visibly demonstrate towards the scoring judges and audience that his has not been hit (independently of whether he has actually been hit or not). A potentially risky move as his blue opponent could pursue and deliver some hefty hits. This shows how the visual orientation prevails over the actual physical exchange of blows aiming at hurting the opponent. This visibility regime of violence is oriented to the scoring judges and their way of counting points. They also consider general physical performance, which is likewise taken into account by the boxer’s and coach’s conduct. Hurting one another and aiming for a K.O. usually stands back behind delivering a visual performance of violence (and non-violence) that aims at collecting points (Meyer and von Wedelstaedt 2013).

During the actual boxing fight itself, there are only the two boxers and the referee physically present in the ring. However, there is a massive co-presence of other parties since numerous persons shout persistently into the ring. As already seen in the transcript above, the coach’s instructions are closely connected with the actions of the boxers.

**Transcript 1.3** (C<sub>B</sub> = Coach Blue Boxer)



The blue coach instructs his boxer to deliver a feint (01) and the boxer reacts within a short pause (still in 01). This adjacency pair is repeated right after, but with a longer break (02/still in 02). The coach then formulates a more complex instruction with a repetition (03-04). In the following longer pause the blue boxer moves forward and delivers a hit (05/still in 05), which is commented on by the coach (06). After a pause (07), the coach instructs the boxer again to move forward and deliver a feint (and hereby “open” the opponent, 08). The boxer implements this moments later (still in 09).

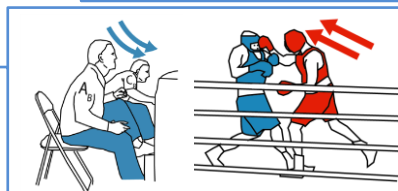
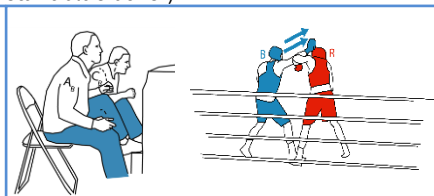
As seen in this transcript, the boxer’s action and the coach’s verbal instructions correlate closely. There is a fine tuning of the coach’s orders with the boxer’s possibilities of implementation: When the coach gives more complex instructions or requests movements towards the opponent he leaves longer pauses. This allows the boxer to decide on the best moment in time for the step-blow-combination. Other, “easier” tasks are carried out right away, as seen in the first lines of the transcript.

The coach’s ability to deliver such in-time instructions, timed with the conduct inside the ring requires a physical involvement by the coach as well, as depicted in the following transcript.

**Transcript 1.4** (C<sub>B</sub>/A<sub>B</sub> = Coach/Assistant blue boxer)

01 C<sub>B</sub> EH::: ((claps 3 times))  
 02 (0.67)

03 look there  
 04 (0.48)



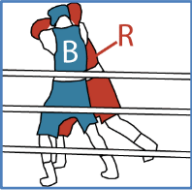

The blue coach delivers an extended interjection and claps three times (01); while both boxers are in close fight, the blue boxer delivers a blow to his opponent (right still in 01). After a short break (02), the coach warns the boxer to watch out (for a counterattack, 03). Moments later, the red boxer counterattacks and lands a hard hit on the blue boxer (who has his cover down in this moment, right still in 04). In this very moment the coach “dives” down to his right (left still in 04).

This evasive maneuver by the blue coach corresponds precisely with the attack by the red boxer: If the blue boxer would have done a similar movement as his coach, he most likely would have been able to avoid the hit by the

opponent. Still, the coach's movement is not only mimicking the conduct inside the boxing ring. As it is perfectly timed with the attack by the red boxer, it becomes apparent that the coach is actually co-fighting the boxing fight. In order to be able to deliver his instructions in time with the fight itself he co-engages physically. This physical involvement allows him also to enlarge the visual perspective of the boxer by shouting instructions or warnings (as in line 03) into the ring for the boxer to react upon.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the visibilization of (non-)violence in direction of the scoring judges and the audience is a well-aligned joint accomplishment of several parties: coach and boxer.

Despite the aforementioned prevalent visual performance of the boxing fight, however, it still remains a physical confrontation exchanging violence. The boxers are confronted with a physical altercation that can lead to serious harm or injury at any time, and there are moments in which the situation escalates to a heavy infight. Even these moments of escalation routinely involve the coach as well.

**Transcript 1.5** (C<sub>B</sub>/A<sub>B</sub> = Coach / Assistant of Blue Boxer)

01 C <sub>B</sub>	<<ff>KE`vin->	
02	(0.86)	
03	<<f>kEvin close IN on him;>	
04 A <sub>B</sub>	↑ THIRty kEvin;	
05	(1.63)	
06 C <sub>B</sub>	<<ff/clapping>^ye::^ey::>	

In the heated closing moments of a round, the blue coach calls his boxer several times with a loud and emphatic voice (01-03). The assistant coach shouts the time left into the ring (30 seconds, 04). In the following circa 1.5 seconds, the blue boxer attacks the red boxer and brings his opponent into a significant imbalance (the red boxer's head is seen over the blue boxer's left shoulder in the still in 05). The blue boxer's coach immediately engages in loud shouting and clapping (06). The blue boxer pursues and lands a heavy hit on the opponent's unshielded face, setting him into a backwards movement (still with 06).

These kinds of direct and heavy hits are rather rare to observe and regularly encompass the coach's lively involvement. By his loud shouting and clapping the coach "pushes" the boxer into an infight situation and into the pursuit of

<sup>3</sup> Physically engaging in the fight and adjusting and coordinating the perspectives of coach and boxer for the fight is indeed a longer process that takes place before every fight during warm up sessions (cf. Meyer and von Wedelstaedt 2014).

his red opponent. As seen before (transcript 1.4), the involvement of the coach in the fight is fine-tuned and well aligned with the conduct in the ring. This is recognizable in the moments of escalating infights or pushing up as well: The coach's loud para-verbal utterance is precisely aligned with the blue boxer's chance to land a heavy hit on his opponent. Without this "pushing," the boxer might not pursue his opponent but simply settle with the smaller hit (as it happens dozens of times during each fight).

The situational dynamic here consists of an escalation of violence for which emotions and motivational stances created between boxer, coach, and assistant coach play an important role. However, this dynamic is also based on conditions that were ritually accomplished before (as we saw at the beginning of this subchapter). We thus witness a sequential, incremental interplay of the factors of "constellation," "motive," and "situational dynamics" as distinguished by Hoebel and Knöbl (2019). None of these factors can be taken for granted as stable, independent variables determining violence externally. Rather, what we witness is an everchanging "gestalt contexture" (Garfinkel 2021; Watson 2022) of violence that comprehends all these factors and can only be analyzed "from within" (Meyer 2022). Each of these factors must be sustained constantly (and accomplished ongoingly) by the actors.

Pursuing this interplay of elements leading up to violent conduct, in the following we take a look into interaction in warfare. This example considerably varies from the boxing example as it focuses mainly on the interaction of a "group of applicants of violence." Unlike in boxing, the "suffering party" of the violent conduct is invisible in the following examples.

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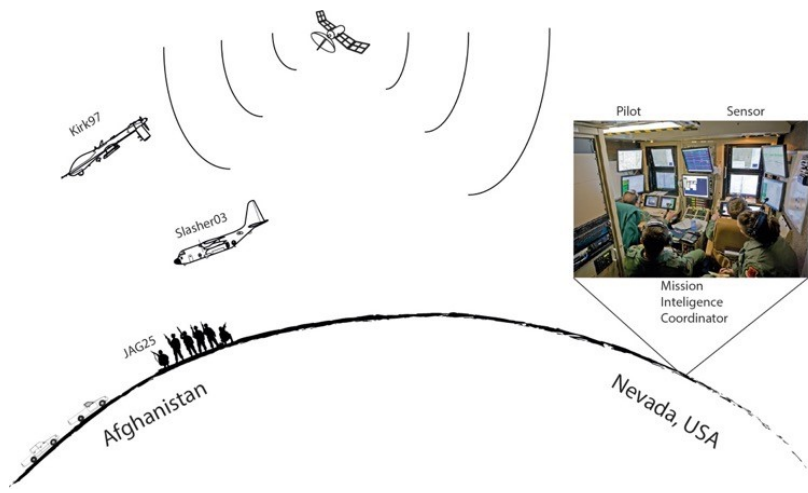
#### 4. Drone Attack on a Group of Persons in Afghanistan in 2010

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Our approach of investigating violence focuses less on the individuals and their behavior but rather on the sequential and incremental process of interaction that include physical violence. So far, the focus of the analysis of violence in the "drone war" has often been one-dimensionally on the operators of such vehicles and their motives and psychological attitudes (Asaro 2013) rather than with interactions unfolding. In the following section we close in on the latter, i.e., on the processes that are only *ex post* endowed with specific motivation, constellations, or situational dynamics. Again, we intend to show, in contrast, how these dimensions interrelate.

Our first example on interaction in warfare stems from the US-Coalition combat operations in Afghanistan. On February 21, 2010, a US military unit conducted a ground operation that was monitored by multiple aircraft, including a drone, as depicted in figure 1.

**Figure 1** Sketch of Scenery and Military Units Involved



The ground unit with the attack controller JAG 25 conducted an operation inside a village in early morning hours. For the purpose of monitoring and securing the vicinity of the village, multiple aircraft were deployed, among them a drone (Kirk97). This drone was remote controlled from a base in the US via satellite. The persons involved controlling the drone were a pilot, a sensor, and a Mission Intelligence Coordinator (see small photo on the right side of the above sketch). Connected to them, but outside of the main radio network, was additional personnel supporting and/or overseeing the drone crews work, especially the “screener” (also called DGS in the transcript). Next to the drone a heavily armed gunship (Slasher03) in the airspace delivered close air support for the ground troops. All units were in radio contact and some of the video data captured by the drone were streamed directly to the other units.

During the operation, several pickup trucks, each occupied with multiple persons, were sighted some kilometers away from the ground units (depicted on the left side of the above sketch) heading roughly into the direction of the village where the ground unit was operating. After four hours of observation, the vehicles and persons were attacked with missiles fired from the gunship to ensure large-area destruction. Subsequent to the attack it became apparent, however, that there were indeed women and children present among the passengers. Later inquiries affirmed that the cars were occupied by civilians who were on route to a distant village and the number of reported fatalities among these group varies between 15 and 23, among them possibly three- and four-year old children (Cloud 2011).

The material used in the subsequent analysis stem from a 76 sites long transcript (orthographical transcription only) that was produced by the US

military as part of an investigation into the attack and later published after journalists' inquiries. There are multiple omissions in the transcript marked as classified (especially concerning names, mission intelligence details, or call signs, but also curses of personnel). These factors lead to limitations concerning the possibility to perform a reconstructive analysis on the material. Despite these constraints, in the following we deploy sequential methods to reconstruct the ethnomethods of the personnel during their observations that transform "some cars" into a "valuable military target" that justified an attack.

The transcript presents the communication between all units involved who formed a radio network and heard what was talked about on the radios. Additionally, the internal communications of the drone crew are depicted in the transcript as well (marked with "i"). Their talk inside the drone operating room (which was not audible to other units) is included in the transcription as well.

#### 4.1 Producing Relevance and the Ethics of Help

The following transcript depicts a moment when the assignment of the drone to the mission is at stake (it might be reassigned to a mission in the south of Afghanistan). The ground troops and other aircraft personnel draw an image of urgent threats, and the drone eventually stays with the mission.

##### Transcript 2.1

01	JAG25	We are going to hold on containment fires and try to attempt PID, we would really like to take out those trucks.
02		
03		
04	...	...
05	Pilot	JAG25, Kirk97 be advised we just received a retasking, we've tried to hold it off for as long as possible, looks like they're sending us down to the Marjah area. We still have eyes on your compound no movement here at this time
06		
07		
08		
09		we will try to hold out as long as possible but it looks like we will have to leave pretty soon.
10		
11	Slasher03	3 [Slasher 03] the vehicle on the east side of the river stopped momentarily appeared to have dropped off one pax off he's dismount walking towards the objective and vehicle proceeding east bound now... toward a compound.
12		
13		
14		
15	Slasher03	That dismounted individual is now meeting up with another individual who came out of the compound
16		
17	JAG25	Roger, say again they're linking up with somebody who came out of the compound, over
18		
19	JAG25	Slasher03, JAG25
20	-	*Radio Static*
21	JAG25	JAG25 roger thinking about the situation, I'm pretty sure we are covered [REDACTED] demonstration of hostile intent tactical maneuvering in conjunction with the ICOM chatter [signal intelligence information] it would appear that they are maneuvering on our location and setting themselves up for an attack *radio comm. is stepped on by crew on intercomm*
27	Slasher03	Copy that *Broken Radio Chatter* up to 3 additional pax.
28	Slasher03	Again that compound with the rendezvous there's an additional pickup truck appears hot and we're tracking multiple personnel throughout
29		
30		
31	JAG25	Slasher03, JAG25 roger
32	Pilot (i)	Is that a dude outside?



33	Sensor (i)	Yeah
34	Pilot (i)	Alright
35	Pilot (i)	JAG25 / Kirk97
36	?	In the south *Radio Static*
37	Pilot (i)	Pass that to SOTF [Special Operations Task Force] South that this guy is back outside of his house and off in the field to the south
38		
39	MC (i)	Roger.
40	...	...
41	Pilot (i)	Can you tell whoever is expecting us down in Marjeh, that we are part of a tactical engagement right now and we can't move.
42		
43		

The ground troops controller states the wish to attack the inbound vehicles (01-03). A short while later, the drone crew informs the other units involved about a potentially soon to follow retasking of the drone to another mission (05-10). Over the next lines, the ground troops controller and the manned aircraft discuss observations of movement on the ground (11-31). Doing so, they deliver detailed descriptions (and tactical assessments) of the observed conduct, and they practically ignore the drone pilots' announcement concerning their retasking. Subsequently, the drone crew exchanges some observations internally (32-39) and shortly after the pilot instructs to call the retasking off (41-43).

For the purpose of collecting information as part of intelligence missions or air support, drones are perceived as a superior epistemic tool (in relation to ground troops or conventional, manned aircraft; cf. Kindervater 2016; Woods 2015), but they also are a rare resource. Because of the physical distance between drone operators from the site of operation, continuous communicative efforts are necessary to integrate the drone perspective with the perspectives of the ground troops and the other aircraft. By ignoring the drone crew and their message about their unstable involvement in the mission and by continuing their evaluation of the putative threat the other parties (the ground-based attack controller and the personnel of the other aircraft) set up a sense of acuteness, emergency, and pressure. This eventually leads to the drone staying with the task.

From this excerpt it is clearly visible how motives (as stated by the ground controller, the wish to take out the vehicles), constellations (the drone as scarce resources and its proposed retasking), and situational dynamics (production of emergency) play together and result in a highly contingent outcome.

The aforementioned production of relevance is grounded in a close cohesion among the troops. The physical distance between drone crews and troops at the scene moreover produces a special ethical connection among the personnel, which is illustrated in the following transcript.

**Transcript 2.2**

01	JAG25	Roger, good copy, confirm you're going to be staying on station?
02		
03	Pilot	Affirm, we're staying with you. We've got about 8 hours playtime left
04		
05	JAG25	Roger that, Kirk, sounds good to us we appreciate it
06	Pilot	Kirk97, no problem, we're glad to help

The relation between the units involved – especially ground troops and drone crews – is characterized by an ethics of helping rather than duties or orders. Gregory (2011) points to the spatial distance, which leads to a decoupling of drone crews from the conduct. At the same time a close relation is established, and the above transcript shows an instance of this implementation.

**4.2 Producing Evidence by Ascribing Suitable Motives**

At the center of the following transcript is the negotiation between drone crew and ground troops concerning the armament of the group of persons observed.

**Transcript 2.3**

01	Sensor (i)	what do these dudes got, yeah I think that dude had a rifle
02		
03	Pilot (i)	I do too
04		
05	Sensor (i)	yeah they called a possible weapon on the MAM [military aged male] mounted in the back of the truck
06	MC (i)	the MAM that mounted the bed of the truck had possible weapon
07		
08	Pilot	All players, all Players from KIRK97, from our DGS [screener] the MAM that just mounted the back of the hilux had a possible weapon, read back possible rifle
09		
10		
11	JAG25	Kirk we notice that, but you know how it is with ROEs [rules of engagement], so we have to be careful with those, ROE's *broken radio chatter*
12		
13		
14	Sensor (i)	sounds like they need more than possible
15	Pilot (i)	Yeah

During the first half of the transcript (01-07), the drone crew discuss internally their possible weapons sighting. After that the pilot states the observation to the other units involved (08-10), and the ground controller responds with reference to the rules of engagement (11-13). Internally within the drone crew, this is reformulated as (possibly unmanageable) request for further and more reliable observations and descriptions (14-15).

During the conversation, a shift occurs insofar as remarks that were at first only tentative perceptions and offers for further interpretation are then reformulated as facts. This mainly happens within the knowledge asymmetry between drone and ground troops. However, as observable in the excerpt

above, the interactional interplay between the different units involved also results in epistemic demands towards the drone and its crew.

This, in turn, results in interactional negotiations regarding weapon sightings, as seen in the following transcript.

**Transcript 2.4**

01	MC (i)	one weapon on ground may have picked it up and walking around the pickup.
02		
03	Sensor (i)	I didn't quite catch that but I believe it.
04	Pilot	JAG25, KIRK97
05	Jag25	JAG25
06	Pilot	JAG25, KIRK97, update, our screener just called out one additional weapon. Was laying on the ground, where praying, picked it up and now has entered the hilux truck.
07		
08		
09		How copy?

While two members of the drone crew internally state a possible but unclear observation of a weapon (01-03), the pilot – who was not involved in stating the observation before – relays that information as certain to the other units (06-09). Doing so, the vague descriptions from before are reformulated into clear statements.

This finding corresponds with observations on combat helicopter missions where internal insecurities are regularly complemented with the resources from outside communication: While internally sometimes contrasting or unresolved observations or statements are not further elaborated, they become reformulated and are equipped with full epistemic certainty in external communications (von Wedelstaedt 2020).

The described reformulation of vague descriptions is also at the core of the following transcript. It depicts an observation by the drone crew about the pickups stopping at a house and about another car joining the group of vehicles.

**Transcript 2.5**

01	Sensor (i)	Wonder what these other dudes at this compound are doing.
02		Picked up at third vehicle on their train.
03	MC (i)	Guilty by association.
04	Sensor (i)	Well they briefly stopped. Nobody got in or got out and,
05		uh, there were some active, uh, persons active at the
06		compound and then this SUV just joined the, uh, the train
07		here. That looks like a, uh, grouping of forces.
08	MC (i)	Yep.

The sensor initially asked a question and stated a rather neutral observation (01-02), which opened up the question of motivation. The mission controller comments on that (03). Right after, the sensor reformulated his observations (04-07), first as description, then in military terms, which is again commented by the drone crew's mission controller (08).

The drone crew as well as the ground troops continuously connect actions and intentions in this way. The observed and observable actions are connected with background assumptions that are *unobservable* (cf. Wilke 2017;

theoretically Blum and McHugh 1971). In our data, this is achieved via semantic upgrading. While at first, the meeting with another car is called a “pick up,” it is later reformulated in military terms and upgraded a “grouping of forces.” Thereby, the observed conduct is characterized as (para)military activity. The procedure observed among the personnel here is consistent with methods deployed during police interviews. The connection between actions and intentions is a premise for pursuing or impeding legal measures (cf. Edwards 2008; Watson 2018, 2022).

### 4.3 Producing Consistent Observations and Accountability

The ascription of motives is also used for the bridging of contradictory observations. As sunrise approaches, the strategically unlikely attack during daytime and in daylight is discussed among the drone crew.

#### Transcript 2.6

01	MC (i)	These guys got balls if they're going to attack during the day
02		
03	Pilot (i)	That's what they like to do, because they know that
04		they're fucking ██████████, you know? (they're under)
05		technologied at night, I guess, you know?

While the mission controller states a possibly contradicting observation in regard to the interpretation established so far (01-02), the pilot offers a reading of the situation that allows for a consistent explanation, drawing on the ascription of particularly bold motives, and asks for consent on this (03-05). Thus, even apparent contraindications are used to support the running interpretation through the ascription of motives that fit.

This interactional dynamic is recurrent: From a certain point onwards, even new observations that strongly contradict the adopted interpretation are framed within the already interactionally established framework (in our case the upcoming attack by the group of persons with the vehicles). Although these observations contradict aspects of this framework, they are even used to eventually support the established interpretation (cf. Wilke 2017).

This also includes cultural explanations, as seen in the following excerpt.

#### Transcript 2.7

01	MC (i)	Looks kinda like blankets, they were praying, they had like...
02		
03	Sensor (i)	<u>They're praying, they are praying.</u>
04	Sensor (i)	(...) <u>Praying? I mean seriously, that's what they do.</u>
05	MC (i)	<u>They're gonna do something nefarious.</u>

The Islamic morning prayer, which is a core part of daily routine of many Muslims, is not recognized as being associated with the time of day but with upcoming actions (preparatory to the fight) and evil intentions.

In a comparable way, in the following excerpt, the drone crew observes an at first unclear situation but produce a consistent interpretation fast.

### Transcript 2.8

01	Pilot (i)	you see that?
02	Sensor (i)	what's that?
03	Pilot (i)	they just threw someone into the back of that truck, and were like, wrestling with somebody did you see that?
04	Pilot (i)	Yeah I saw those two dudes wrestling.
05	Sensor (i)	they probably are really using fucking human shields here, that's probably what that is.
06	Pilot (i)	let's see if the SUV's in tow here
07	Sensor (i)	JAG25 KIRK 97 be advised there was a brief scuffle in the bed of the hilux, prior to its departure, looks to be potential use of human shields, but definite suspicious movement, and definite tactical movement
08	Pilot (i)	
09	Pilot (i)	
10	Pilot (i)	
11	Pilot (i)	
12	Pilot (i)	

While the conversation at first seems rather vague (with two questions being asked and two rather neutral accounts of observations given, 01-08), the pilot informs all stations (via radio network, 09-12) of an observation that he interprets as the involvement of civilians.

In accordance with the rules of international law and the rules of engagement effective at that time, prior to an attack, troops need to establish:

1. Distinction: Attacks need to be limited towards military targets and civilians or civilian objects are not allowed to be the target;
2. Proportionality: Attacks that might harm civilians are only allowed if they are proportional in regard to direct and clear military advantage.

The association of all observed persons and conduct with a military (and not civilian) activity is part of precise and explicit communication during the whole conversation documented.

In contrast, aspects of proportionality are rather vaguely negotiated and watered-down.

### Transcript 2.9

01	MC (i)	Yeah they're trying to confirm which vehicle has the kids in it oh the adolescents in it.
02	MC (i)	Who is?
03	Pilot (i)	SOTF South... Screener is talking about it right now.
04	MC (i)	Okay.
05	Pilot (i)	But JTAC [JAG25] already said that well they can grab a gun... so.
06	MC (i)	Hey you know what? Those mujadeen 13 years old.
07	Sensor (i)	Yeah, well that's what we were talking on this. I was talking to the JTAC he said the exact same thing man. Um they called them an adolescent. We called it you know... most likely double digits age range. And he was like that's old enough to be dangerous.
08	Pilot (i)	Yep.
09	Sensor (i)	Which is true.
10	Pilot (i)	
11	Pilot (i)	
12	Pilot (i)	
13	Pilot (i)	
14	Pilot (i)	
15	Pilot (i)	

While at the beginning of the excerpt, the mission controller (MC) mentions the word "kids" (01) regarding passengers of the vehicles, this is fast replaced (in a self-repair) with "adolescents" (02). Subsequently, these adolescent

passengers are described as Mujahedeen (08) and a potential threat emanating from them is mutually agreed on (09-15).

The Obama administration's doctrine of limiting drone attacks to *high value* or *quality targets* (which led to new rules of engagement) is negotiated in the same way among the crew. These references are made even though the threat towards the ground troops is dominant:

**Transcript 2.10**

01	Pilot (i)	that is definitely not a hummer right?
02	Sensor (i)	No just a regular SUV it's got a roof rack, kind of bulky
03		and boxy, maybe a Toyota
04	Slasher03	we have all those pax, looks like the majority of them
05		have tried to offload onto the hilux. Still have about 6
06		that weren't able to fit, may be moving over to the other
07		vehicle
08	Pilot (i)	wouldn't surprise me if this was one of their important
09		guys, just watching from a distance, you know what I
10		mean?
11	Pilot (i)	yea he's got his security detail

After the pilot asks about a US military vehicle (to exclude any friendly fire incident, 01), a rather descriptive observation is given (02-07). This, however, is reformulated using a tactical or military framework (08-11). This allows to ascribe a higher value to the supposed target.

To summarize, although there is a large physical distance between the drone crew and the site of operation, there is considerable closeness between the units involved. The unavailable methods of engaging with one another physically (or at least from being in a somewhat immediate vicinity) are substituted by the personnel through the joint production of relevance and the engagement in an ethics of help. According to Gregory (2011), the closeness that characterizes drone engagements leads to problematic situations:

it becomes possible to see that the problem there may not be remoteness and detachment but, rather, the sense of proximity to ground troops inculcated by the video feeds from the aerial platform. (ibid., 188)

The kill-chain and its communicative organization (radio networks, chat rooms, video feeds, etc.) work like a social network and bind the units closely together until a sense of "intimacy" arises (ibid., 200). This constellation constitutes the social basis for the emergence of the formerly stated ethnomethods such as producing consistent interpretations in regard to the observed conduct. It became apparent how the interactional dynamics between the different members of the drone crew inside the cockpit and the drone crew and the other units involved result in a specific outcome. This outcome consists of ascribed motives that triggered further dynamics and, at the end, result in a lethal attack on civilians.

Due to the kind of data, especially the type and style of transcription used here, the interactive dynamic inherent to such complex communicative settings can only be reconstructed very roughly. Prosodic aspects, turn-organization, and all aspects of arranging visual consistencies in exchange with the

technological equipment which have been found to play a major role in military engagements (von Wedelstaedt 2020) go unnoticed above. These aspects are at the core of the following analysis on the basis of a multimodal transcript.

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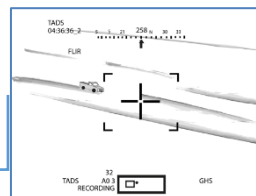
## 5. Interactional Dynamics of an Apache Helicopter Attack

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The following case features a video recorded by an Apache combat helicopter as part of a tactical engagement during the US-led mission *Operation Iraqi Freedom* in early 2006. The video was obtained from a public video sharing website and has been crosschecked as far as possible to ensure authenticity. The Apache helicopter crew consists of a pilot (P) and gunner (G), who are seated behind one another in the helicopter and are connected via the Apache's internal radio network. The crew is also radio connected to other units engaged in military activity at the time and place of operation (in the transcript: S1, S2). The Apache was monitoring an area in proximity to ground troops' activity. During the mission, the crew spotted a vehicle advancing in the direction of the ground troops and traveling at high rate of speed. After confirmation from commanding station (S2), the crew engaged in firing warning shots at the vehicle. The transcript sets in shortly before the first shots are fired.

### Transcript 3.1<sup>4</sup>

01 P (if youre clear fire) (...)  
02 G right



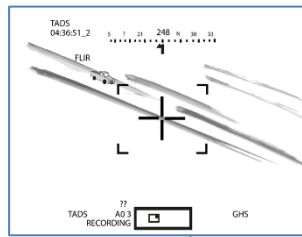
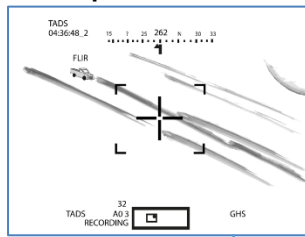
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<sup>4</sup> The radio transmissions not immediately relevant to the conduct in the Apache's cockpit are left out in the transcript. If a transmitting station is marked with an asterisk, it radio-transmits (P = Pilot in Apache's internal network, audible to the gunner only; P\* = Pilot on joint radio network, audible to all units at the scene).

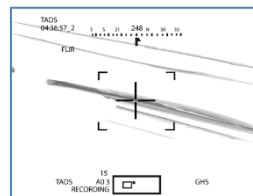
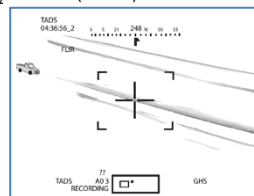
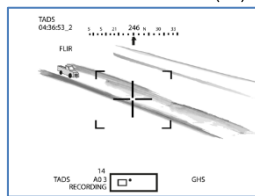




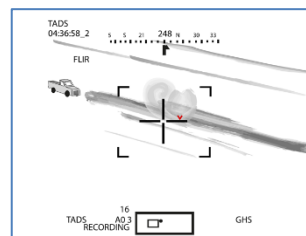
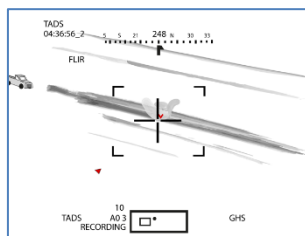
**Transcript 3.1 continued**



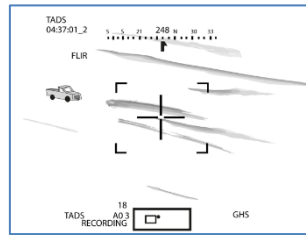
07 P (-) yeah (2.5)



08 P firing (nother) one  
09 G (-- roger (-- firing (--)



10 A \*shooting, 0.6 .....\* [\*0.5 ...\*] (1.8)



11 P\* \*l s\* rednight three be advised the ve-  
 hicle we fired (...)  
 12 upon (.) he will not stop (.) i will say  
 again <<dim/rall> he  
 13 will (.) nOt (.) stOp> (1.8)  
 14 S2\* \*m\* roger (.) eh rednight three go ahead  
 and engage that vehicle  
 15 (.) over (--)

After having confirmed the gunner's observation (07), the pilot instructs the gunner to fire another burst in the vehicle's pathway (08). This is confirmed by the gunner, who then pulls the crosshairs away from the vehicle as before (stills in 08-09) and announces firing (09). The helicopter fires another burst of 10 rounds (10), this time hitting closer to the vehicle (stills in 10). After a short pause, the pilot contacts the commanding station (11-13) using a staccato-like intonation and a repetition. The same features have been observed to be deployed in handball time outs by coaches, being associated with pushing the team's engagement to seek hard confrontation with opponents (Meyer and von Wedelstaedt 2018, 241). The commanding station replies with an order to engage the vehicle (14-15). As a reaction, the helicopter hits the vehicle shortly after (out of transcript) with several firing bursts and it stops on the side of the roadway. The occupants most likely died during the attack.

Several points are noteworthy here: After the second burst of gun fire, the Apache's crew does not seek internal coordination anymore. While after the first shots the observed behavior by the car and its occupants was described and evaluated among the crew, the second shooting is followed up only by outside communication. Doing so, the pilot draws a prospective picture of the upcoming events in stating that the vehicle "will not stop."

As we can see, the situation develops in an interaction-like manner: the helicopter sends warning messages by first shooting in front of the car at some distance and then a little bit closer to it. Since the car does not react by slowing down significantly or stopping, the helicopter escalates and applies violence by hitting the car directly. In so doing, the helicopter crew took into account the constellation that the car approached the own troops in high speed: if the

car had turned left or right, slowed down, stopped, or returned, this constellation would have changed and violence would have become of no use. Furthermore, for the helicopter crew, the motives of the car driver remained unclear. Both the unchanging constellation and the unclear and unchanging motives at the end made the situation escalate.

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## 6. Conclusion

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We started our considerations with the example of torture, by which we emphasized the interiority and experiential dimension of violence. Torture is effective since, for the co-participant, the unemotional, institutionally supported, and technical application of violence is relevant for the situational development. The subsequent example of boxing showed that both the constellation of the fight as framework and the motivation of the actors have to be accomplished by the co-participants throughout the violent event, and the situational dynamics of the actors are oriented to it. In drone war, the technical as well as ethical conditions provide for a constellation that encourages the ascription of wicked motives to observed persons, categorizing them as evildoers and enemies, which leads to a principally escalatory situational dynamic possibly ending in overreactions and war crimes. Finally, the helicopter example demonstrated how the non-response to attempts to change the constellation and clarify the motives of the opponent made the situation escalate. Our examples might at first sight appear to be relatively non-enigmatic and accessible, and a 'strong program' of violence research would need to have the scope of also explaining more seemingly irrational instances of violence such as mass looting or rampage. However, we believe that these seemingly more normal types of violent events are the regular forms of violence, and a focus of the irrationality of violence tends to mystify it.

Out of our examples, we prominently draw two main conclusions: First, the actors themselves in some way or other principally semiotize the acts of violence they exert, suffer, or observe. They visibilize or invisibilize it and make it, to use a prominent ethnomethodological term, "accountable" – i.e., render it "detectable," "countable," "recordable," "reportable," "tell-a-story-able," "analyzable," "storyable," "proverbial," "comparable," "picturable," or "representable" for others (Garfinkel 1967, 33-4). Thus, violence is mostly not "silent" but social, consisting of ethnomethods by which social reality is produced and manipulated. Any research on violence therefore needs to take the specific semiotic modalities of the violent event methodologically into account and develop for each case a "unique adequacy of methods": How is violence specifically visibilized or invisibilized, rendered narratable, and made accountable in situ by the actors themselves as social violence and how do we, as researchers, have to calibrate our methodological tools to become

adequate to these modalities? Any processual analysis must therefore be based on the most adequate type of data and documentation available.

Secondly, the actors, in the course of observing, exerting, and even suffering violence, themselves reflect upon constellations and motives that give reasons for it, orienting their contributions to the further situational dynamics. Constellations, motives, and the contributions of their opponents to the situations are used for the mutual understanding and elaboration of each of these factors: one factor is used to elaborate the others. The totality of these factors is perceived by the actors as temporally unfolding “gestalt contexture” (cf. Watson 2022). The actors include these reflections in their assessment of the situation for the possible engagement in violent action. In so doing, the actors not only use their common-sense, but also their expert knowledge. It is only thereby that situational dynamics are sequentially connected and incremental up to the point of escalating.

In regard to this matter, we are able to state a continuity between empirical examples where the applying and the suffering ends of violent conduct are in direct interaction (best visible in boxing) and examples in which initial observations are followed by unilateral violent conduct (maximized in the drone example, where the victims never even got to see the aggressors). This continuity, as we view it, is based on the shared feature that in all these examples, one party is, at some point in the sequential process, excluded from the interactional conduct and made “mere flesh” (for torture), rendered unable of their body control (boxing), or transformed into a “shootable” (warfare; cf. von Wedelstaedt 2020). In our diverse cases, the sequential incrementation of the interoperation between constellations, motives, and dynamical elements eventually leads in different ways to the exertion of violence.

These sequential connections, incremental increases (or decreases), and unfolding “gestalt contextures” constitute the *how* of violence that we intended to take as a methodological starting point for our ethnomethodological approach for studying violence. Focusing on the “how” of violence often is sufficient for the development of an understanding, an explanation even, while retrospective interpretations attributing intentions to the personnel involved often blur the picture (cf. Mair et al. 2013). Opening the black box of violent events means transforming the *why* into a *how* and describing constellations, motives, and dynamics “from within” the event.

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