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Emplotments of Violence. On Narrative Explanations and their Audiovisual Data

Thomas Hoebel*

Abstract: »Ausarbeitungen von Gewalt. Über narrative Erklärungen und ihre audiovisuellen Daten«. Today, researchers can make use of an immeasurable wealth of visual and audiovisual data to analyze instances that they consider as violent. Thus, this paper focuses on the question of how audiovisual data specifically contribute to making violent phenomena visible and thereby explaining them, but discusses it from a specific epistemological standpoint, which can be roughly outlined as an interest in how social phenomena in general and violent events in the narrower sense can be narratively interpreted and explained. To this end, it reflects on a case study on the so-called Charlie Hebdo Attacks in Paris in January 2015. The results are two arguments that might appear somewhat counterintuitive. First, stories are for sure an obvious methodological device for working on narrative explanations. However, like the term narrative, it is far too broad and misleading a category. It therefore makes sense to refrain from working on explanatory stories and to focus methodologically “only” on emplotments. Closely related to this, audiovisual data – secondly – then have a particular analytical status in the research process. While they are also, especially in violence research, considered as something with which much more detailed analyses are possible than without them, this is not necessarily the main point for the narrative analysis of violent emplotments. Here, they enable first of all the discovery of crucial happenings that shape a plot. In this way, audiovisual data are decisive in not imposing stories on an event that follow modern narrative conventions rather than exploring the factual causation of the event.

Keywords: Narrative explanation, emplotment, audiovisual recordings, theory of signs, Charlie Hebdo attack.

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1. Introduction

Sociological research on violence has a complicated problem with the visibility of the epistemic object in which it is interested.¹ It results significantly from a luxurious situation of data availability. Today, researchers in this field can make use of an immeasurable wealth of visual and audiovisual data to analyze instances that they consider as violent. This so-called video revolution promises a boundary-shift between the visibilities of violence on the one hand and its non-visibilities or invisibilities on the other in favor of visibilities of violence, because audiovisual recordings make it possible to preserve a fleeting event that disappears after its very moment of occurrence (Bergmann 1985, 305). Basically, it is a temporal boundary shift: these records allow one to watch (and/or listen to) a happening over and over again. At the same time, however, there is a material shift: the achievable depth of detail that allows this registering way of preservation is basically greater than in the case of a reconstructive preservation, i.e., when it is retrospectively narrated from subjective memory and/or written down.

The mentioned complication is an epistemological one. The audiovisual promise does not abolish the fundamental difference between epistemic research objects, material research objects, and the “traces” of these material objects of inquiry (for more on this distinction, see Krause 2021, 2). Researchers do indeed get to see a particular event with audiovisual recordings. What they see there, however, is not so much a question of the materials themselves, which researchers can treat as data, but a matter of their interpretation. The mass availability of audiovisual recordings does not release researchers from the task of making visible the social phenomena that they assume “in” the data with the help of their own texts.

In my paper, I am interested in the question of how audiovisual data specifically contribute to making violent phenomena visible and thereby explaining them. However, this is not a question that can be answered in general, but depends on the “knowledge claims” that researchers make in order to correctly and effectively explain, criticize, or interpret social phenomena (Reed 2011, 3). I therefore raise the question from a specific epistemological standpoint, which can be roughly outlined as an interest in how social phenomena in general, and violent events in the narrower sense, can be narratively interpreted and explained (Aljets and Hoebel 2017; Hoebel and Knöbl 2019). This interest does not arise simultaneously against the backdrop of increased interest in narrativity in violence research as a whole. Thus, I will first discuss this point of view and its analytical problems if the purpose is to make causations of violent phenomena visible.

¹ This is not to exclude that the same problem exists in other research fields. However, this question is not the focus of this paper.

For this purpose, I repeatedly reflect on a case study on the so-called Charlie Hebdo Attacks in Paris in January 2015 (Hoebel 2019), which I conducted some time ago and that in its processing was a continuous context of discovery of methodological questions of narrative explanation, for which I am still working on answers today. The brothers Chérif and Saïd Kouachi and their comrade-in-arms Amedy Coulibaly killed a total of 17 people within a period of about 54 hours, beginning on the morning of January 7th, 2015, when the two brothers first entered the ongoing editorial meeting of the French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo and shot at the attendees.

The study is an obvious object of reflection on the mentioned question, since it includes especially diverse videos, audio tracks, and photographs in the analysis that were taken during the event itself. These include audio recordings of interviews conducted by editors of the French television station BFM-TV with the attackers, as well as cell phone videos filmed by quick-witted individuals from relatively distant positions in the audience. Many more data are available, however, in a different mediality. In addition, there are written eyewitness accounts: interviewed by journalists, many participants in the situation describe in retrospect what they remember of the event, especially their impressions of the attackers and their attacks. And finally, there are criminal investigations as well as journalistic reports and background research.²

In essence, I am working toward two arguments that appear somewhat counterintuitive. First, stories are for sure an obvious methodological device for working on narrative explanations. However, like the term *narrative*, it is far too broad and misleading a category. It therefore makes sense to refrain from working on explanatory stories and to focus methodologically “only” on emplotments – and this not only as a retrospective narrative shaping of events, but because the participants emplot the events themselves. All available data can be used to explore such first-order emplotments of social phenomena (as narrative second-order emplotments). Closely related to this, audiovisual data – secondly – then have a particular analytical status in the research process. While they are also, and especially in violence research, considered as something with which much more detailed analyses are possible than without them (especially with regard to the sequentiality of violent events), this is not necessarily the main point for the narrative analysis of first-order emplotments. Here they enable first of all the discovery of crucial happenings that shape a plot. In this way, audiovisual data are decisive in not imposing stories on an event that follow modern narrative conventions rather than exploring the factual causation of the event.

² For further details on the mentioned data, see the online appendices of the study (Hoebel 2019, 114n14).

2. Going Narrativist in Violence Research – and its Problems

In 1974, during a meeting of the Pacific Sociological Association, some sociologists met in the session Analyzing Qualitative Field Data. Fred Davis (1974) dealt with a problem that is all too familiar to empirical social researchers. You have collected “tons of data,” as he calls it, in a field that interests you – now the question is what to do with them. “What is in there?” He meant by that: “in” the collected data. And he gave an answer that at first seemed quite trivial: there are stories in the data.

In the 1970s, however, it was anything but self-evident in social research to treat stories as more or less central methodological devices. Since sociology as a discipline was formed in strong demarcation to historiography, discussions of its own narrative and representational modes remained marginal. Davis, however, belonged to a generation of ethnographically working sociologists in which it was not all that common, but also not entirely unusual, to work explicitly with narrative forms in order to formulate research findings (Atkinson 1990, 104), especially when they were dealing with trajectories of social interaction (Abbott 1992, 429).

Since the 1980s, the situation has changed. In social research, a “going narrativist” (Uebel 2012, 52) can be detected (Abbott 1992; Hyvärinen 2016; Maines 1993; Polletta et al. 2011). In particular, a veritable strand of debate has developed around the question of how stories can be used to investigate causation or production sequences of social phenomena and to make them visible. It is a question that is posed especially in more or less critical distance to Standard Causal Analyses (SCA) and mechanistically oriented explanations. However, the debate is by no means consolidated, let alone canonized. But one could perhaps say that crystallization points have emerged in historical sociology (Calhoun 1998; Griffin 1993; Steinmetz 2007) in the form of a “narrative positivism” and its further development as a “processual sociology” (Abbott 1992, 2016) and in the form of interpretative causal analyses with more or less close proximity to philosophical pragmatism (Hirschman and Reed 2014; Katz 2001, 2002; Reed 2011; Tavory and Timmermans 2014). In this perspective, narratives are not everyday explanations that people give to each other in the sense of “accounts” (Heritage 1988; Scott and Lyman 1968) to give reasons for their actions when asked about them (Tilly 2006). Rather, stories function as methodological devices for researchers here. “From this point of view, events are not caused by anything other than the story that led them to be the way they are” (Becker 1998, 61). What is at stake here are narrative or even processual explanations of the causation of social phenomena (Abell 2004; Aljets and Hoebel 2017; Roth 1988).

Historical-sociological research on violence has played a significant role in this narrativist project. Here, experiments with narrative-based explanations of social phenomena are increasingly found. It is striking that researchers here – despite all social-theoretical and methodological diversity – quite often work with detailed, data-saturated descriptions of violent processes and/or of individuals’ and groups’ entanglements within violent processes. In doing so, the contingent and for the explanation of violence crucial concatenation of certain events is grasped with sociological concepts, which have a narrative character in their core, because they allow to grasp the specific temporal order of events. Examples are, on the one hand, concepts such as “career” (Sutterlüty 2007), “turning points” (Katz 2016), “trajectories” (Malthaner 2018; Reichertz 2018; see also the articles by Reichertz as well as by Coenen and Tuma in this issue), “scripts” (Klatetzki 2016; Wolters 2022, 202-24), or “performances” (Fujii 2021). On the other hand, approaches that discuss the relational character of “collective identity narratives” (Smångs 2016, 1333) and advocate the “activation of shared stories” (Tilly 2005, 62) in social conflicts (Tilly 2005; Polletta 2006) can be included here, as well as Jack Katz’s (2016, 279) proposal to focus primarily on how violent episodes acquire their sequential meaning through participants’ execution of narratives. He reckons that participants work with and against each other on stories.

It is not a question anymore whether narrativity plays a central role for violence research, but in which way it works with stories for analytical purposes (Jung, Reimann, and Sutterlüty 2019, 29). But the numerous studies that deal (more or less explicitly) with violent happenings from a narrative perspective should not obscure that the question of how to proceed methodologically in this regard remains to be clarified further.

A crucial methodological problem is that stories and narratives (usually both are treated as synonyms) have become umbrella terms for understanding human expressions and encounters. This is due to the fact that a significant proportion of speech acts can basically be conceived of as stories or as being infused with narrative elements (Maines 1993, 21), just as any historical event can be modeled as narrative (White 1973) – namely, whenever an utterance is about something changing its shape, from state A to state B, or narrative reconstruction is interested in such a transformation.³

Especially because stories are a ubiquitous element of everyday communication, their analytical value is questionable – above all when it comes to questions of the causation of certain processes, e.g., violent ones.

³ In everyday life as well as in historical and social research, stories are often linked to other communicative genres, especially descriptions (Abbott 2003; Katz 2001) and arguments (White 1972). Both are respectively distinct from stories because descriptions can also simply refer to states of a thing, character, place, or moment without engaging in transformation. Arguments, on the other hand, can be formulated as stories, but they are only one modality among many for formulating valid reasons and conclusions. Syllogisms, for example, link major and minor premises, not events.

The demand is high, since such analytical narratives are not only meant to represent a reality told after the fact, which may contain a moral, be entertaining, or serve to present a certain person, e.g., the narrator, in a favorable light, but to approach a “real reality” and its causation as closely as possible. Such narrative approaches to explanation are rightly viewed critically (Polletta et al. 2011, 110). At this point, I will focus on three objections that seem to me to be particularly serious, without being able or wanting to exhaust the topic with them. (The objections are at the same time independent of the question of the data required to formulate narrative explanations. I will deal with this question in more detail later on.)

(1) Charles Tilly’s problematization of stories and their analytical value in social research is very instructive at this point. Here we find a sharp critique of the social scientific adaptation of narrative modes, which he called “standard stories” and that, due to the layout of the narrative, attribute a great deal of creative space to individuals per se: a great deal of directorial capacity. Although standard stories functioned in everyday life as social explanations that were tried and tested for shaping everyday life and relationships, they were usually useless as sociological explanations. He saw the problem in a mixture of four points:

The difficulty lies in the logical structure of [standard] storytelling. Remember its elements: (1) limited number of interacting characters; (2) limited time and space; (3) independent, conscious self-motivated actions; and (4) with the exception of externally generated accidents, all actions resulting from previous actions by the characters. Standard stories work that way, but on the whole social processes do not. (Tilly 1999, 260-1)

His central concern was that such an excessive methodological individualism would obscure rather than discover the causation of concrete sociohistorical processes. Thus, Tilly is basically calling attention to a typically modern narrative convention that personalizes causation and attributes it to single or a few individuals. He advocated instead a relational realism in the form of analytically following not primarily actors through the social world, but asking how they relate to each other directly in “transactions” or mediated by consequences that diverse transactions occurring in many places and at many times have for each other.

(2) Particular stories draw coherence, clarification, and persuasive forms of description into goings-on that are clearly more complex than a story can ever be.⁴ Narratives have to leave out much that could also be told – the object in focus can hardly ever be described completely in all its facets. This, again,

⁴ To be sure, stories share this simplistic character with virtually every other scientific method of elicitation and evaluation. But unlike, for example, the transformation of sometimes complicated considerations into a simple number in the case of scaled surveys (Maines 1993, 25), the narrative simplification is easily recognizable and criticizable, especially since stories typically are linked to the claim to include as many details of an event as possible. Thus, one can ask whether this is actually a serious objection against narrative procedures.

is largely due to narrative conventions or “three minimally necessary elements of narrative” (Maines 1993, 21). In addition to the methodological individualism already mentioned or ideas of collectives capable of acting, which then form the cast of the story, these usually include that beginnings and ends are specified and certain lines of action or scenes are singled out, which are described more or less concretely, have a certain chronological sequence, and evoke the impression that their course is synonymous with a causal relationship between individual occurrences. Stories are selective in all these respects and exclusive, at least for the moment of telling, because they suppress alternative representations. This is what gives them their meaning (Jung, Reimann, and Sutterlüty 2019, 13-5). But an event described retrospectively usually has manifold, often incongruent meanings for the participants themselves as well as it is often patterned multi-sequentially and generated multi-causally. Violent attacks are cases at hand: the divergence of the three modes of experience of doing, suffering and observing alone speaks against an intersubjectively shared understanding of the situations concerned (Koloma Beck 2011) – or to grasp the production of shared meanings not as a casual, but as an extremely presuppositional, demanding, and always fragile process.

(3) It is controversial whether and to what extent the unfolding of events are themselves already narratively ordered, regardless of whether and how they are later told (Carr 1986, 7-17). Hayden White (1980, 8, 27) stresses a gap between real events and stories told about imaginary events insofar as the former do not possess the formal attributes narrators attribute to the latter. Paul Ricœur (1984, 38-41) argues that ideas of beginning, middle, and end are not taken from experience or real action but are effects of retrospective poetic ordering of a historical past or of imagined events. In this perspective, stories are something that is subsequently imposed on an actual event. There is nothing to be said against understanding them as explanatory accounts that serve, for example, to shape social relationships (Tilly 2006, see above). But they cannot explain an event that is understood as real and its causation by claiming that this event itself is structured like a story in its course.

Against this background, it is hardly surprising that some authors (Polletta et al. 2011; Hyvärinen 2016; Honegger 2010) define something like a “narrative sociology” in terms of the study of contents, social norms, and “social performances” (Polletta et al. 2011, 110) of stories, but not with a view to explaining the causation of social phenomena narratively. They assign stories the status of objects of inquiry rather than treating them as methodological devices that serve knowledge. I share this reticence insofar as it is indeed overstated to assume that sociality is largely organized as stories that largely conform to (modern) narrative conventions and form reasonably clear-cut temporal wholes. However, there is no compelling necessity to approach narrative explanations as stories or to make the ontological

commitment that a social event of interest is already structured in its concrete execution as a story in the ambitious sense suggested by narrative conventions.

The fruitful methodological alternative is to draw on the distinction between stories and plots and to approach narrative analyses of the causes of social phenomena not as a reconstruction of “real stories,” but to ask in which plots those involved in events work out with and against each other and how they shape the phenomenon of interest in this way. Consequently, I propose to understand emplotment not only as a narrative performance, as it is common in narrative theory, but as a factual concatenation of crucial happenings during a course of events.

To lay out the further argument: Narrative explanations in this perspective are second-order emplotments that aim to approximate those first-order emplotments that take place in the events of interest. In other words, emplotments are the causations of a phenomenon that shall be explained – without having this phenomenon to be understood in the strict sense as a story, as a temporally organized whole that is coherent, follows a certain script, of which the participants already have a shared idea in the execution, which per se has an end, from which beginnings and middles are understandable, and much more. As I would like to show on this basis, audiovisual recordings in particular enable this approach, especially because researchers can construct them as “luminous indices” and, as a result of these pointers to crucial happenings, evaluate them semiotically as icons that are closely interwoven with the events of interest. But one after the other.

3. First-Order and Second-Order Emplotments

The concept of emplotment has a very precise meaning in narrative theory. It describes the configurative performance of a narrator, which consists in making a historical past or an imagined event intelligible as a story, “a synthesis from a second point of view,” as Ricœur (1992, 21) calls it. For this purpose, emplotments mediate between heterogenous temporal elements and stories as narratively organized wholes (Ricœur 1992, 22; Polkinghorne 1995), whereby a thematic thread is inserted into the event by the narrator, not least by using a specific narrative style or a literary genre (White 1973), through which individual steps of the story gain their meaning for each other and result as parts of an unfolding movement in a certain outcome (Polkinghorne 1995, 5). Emplotment, at its core, means telling a story of a particular kind and giving it its persuasive power “by identifying it as a certain *kind of story*” (White 1972, 9; emphasis in original), i.e., by imposing a certain dramaturgy on an event that links the end and the beginning to form a temporal whole. Thus, it must not be overlooked, as White in particular

insisted (1973, 142), that this specific meaning is produced by emplotment in the first place. This is delicate, because against the background of the “multiple plot structures of the social world” researchers forced to be selective (Abbott 1992, 438).

The concept of emplotment is actually an elegant solution for not having to make the ontological commitment that social life itself is largely structured narratively. The price to be paid, however, is the “problem of historical time” (Simmel 1980), which, in my view, suggests the alternative of not reckoning with the fact that an event of interest is itself organized as a story, but with an emplotment of the events by the participants. In one of his late essays with the mentioned title, Simmel is concerned with the fact that a certain, continuous, though not necessarily linear course of events (in the sense of a specific sequence of individual occurrences) is the product only of subsequent descriptions. According to him, who chooses the example of the Seven Years’ War between Prussia and Austria for his argument, such continuities are narrated *exclusively* in retrospect. And as Ricœur and White mentioned many decades later, these retrospectives usually follow dramaturgical conventions that synthesize the events, e.g., with the help of terms like battle, victory, or defeat. Simmel did not yet have this concept at hand, but one can call this synthesis emplotments. In contrast to this narrative voice, the persons involved in the events themselves did not experience them as continuity but as an unsteady succession of turbulent-chaotic encounters and phases of supposed calm. He thus addresses a fundamental discrepancy between historical narrative and actual involvement in an event.

In his argument, however, Simmel focuses only on individual experiences of those involved in goings-on, but not on their “interaction,” to use the central term of his sociology here (Simmel 1950, 9). What he does not consider is that the persons involved in an event themselves ensure, with and against each other, that a battle or a war continues – as discontinuous as the event itself may seem to them. The narrative-explanatory task of a correspondingly sensitized research on violence would then consist in dealing with who, and in what form, produces the events through which at least those directly involved as present then simultaneously pass.

To be more precise, it could be said that the participants themselves work out something like a plot from their respective positions, which they take up in the events and which they can consolidate, dissolve, and change in the course of the events (Becker 1998, 60-1; Katz 1997, 414; 2016). Narratively, this opens up the methodological option of reckoning with emplotments in the events themselves: with first-order emplotments, which can be followed up with analytical second-order emplotments.

The relationship between stories and plots is then different from what the narrative concept of emplotment usually presupposes. The construction of

plots is then no longer an intermediate step to a story as a temporally organized whole, but itself the goal of the investigation, in order to make visible and explain the causation of a phenomenon. Narrative explanation is then first of all the renunciation of imposing a continuous and coherent story on an event. Rather, it consists in concentrating on the question of how the participants in a multifaceted event produce a certain course of events without themselves working on a joint story. It is then, on the other hand, rather an empirical question whether individual or several participants have something like a coherent story in mind, which they seek to realize in encounters with others.

The case of the Charlie Hebdo attacks is instructive here (Hoebel 2019). The statements and self-representations of the attackers in the ongoing events suggest that they launch the attacks because they are striving for a certain ending that is as perfect as possible for them. They are concerned with sacrificing themselves for an audience of co-believers and, in the process, inflicting not only physical but also symbolic damage on an opposing party. In a 7-minute-video, that Coulibaly recorded of himself, he presents himself sometimes in a bulletproof camouflage vest, sometimes in a leather jacket and black cap sitting next to a Kalashnikov, and finally crouching on the ground in a white caftan. Interview-like, he explains that he is a “soldier of the caliphate” and follows IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

Unlike Coulibaly, the Kouachi brothers are not committed to the Islamic State, but to Al Qaeda. While they are already holed up in a print shop outside Paris on January 9th, 2015, surrounded by police, Chérif Kouachi tells a journalist in a telephone conversation that his brother and himself are not killers. “We are defenders of the prophet,” he emphasizes, “we don’t kill women. We kill no one. We defend the prophet.” It’s about revenge, he says, shortly before the phone call ends. Basically, he is explicitly addressing two different audiences – all those who believe in the Prophet Mohamed and a very general “you” of those he sees involved in military actions in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. In doing so, he presents his brother and himself as noble warriors.

To bring their story to the end they aspire, the Kouachi brothers as well as Coulibaly, not only set out to kill but also to find counterparts who fight back or attack them in turn. Therefore, the brothers do not flee quickly after leaving the editorial building. They fire at three policemen who approach them on foot. They handle their weapons and one of them steps out into the street, tightens his posture, raises his fist in the air, and shouts that they have avenged the Prophet Mohammed. Afterwards they step into their car and start to leave the area. They do not get far, because a police car approaches them. Here, for the first time, we observe a sequence of events that will occur several times in the following hours and days – and not only with the participation of the Kouachi brothers, but also in the case of Coulibaly. Rather

than reacting fearfully or discouraged when they encounter police officers or special forces, they behave in a very risky manner. First, they do not wait and see, but run toward their presumably armed opponents. Second, they do not seek cover, but expose themselves relatively unprotected to counterattacks.

But the factual employment of the events with and against their public and several security forces takes another course than the aspired story of the attackers. One could even say that the plot differs from their narrative projections because of the “perfect ending” they aspire. Their actions suggest that both the Kouachi brothers and Coulibaly deliberately seek risky situations in order to use them as a stage on which they can present themselves to their imaginary audience and sacrifice themselves by being killed by their opponents. But instead of getting injured or dying a martyr’s death, they prevail against their opponents again and again, who in fact retreat after being shot at. They are now forced to continue to work on their aspired story instead of dying gloriously at the hands of a police officer in the editorial offices or being killed shortly thereafter in an exchange of fire with approaching security forces. Instead, they kill a policeman shortly afterwards, who approaches them on a bicycle, they force a driver to surrender his vehicle to them, and they rob a gas station the following day. The glorious holy warriors have become murderers and thieves.

If we return to the general methodological implications of reckoning with employments in an event, there are at least three other noteworthy consequences in addition to a changed conception of the relationship between stories and plots.

- (1) While in narrative theory employments are usually a quality of texts (Polkinghorne 1995, 5), in the narrative approach just presented they are instead, as first-order employments, event concatenations that participants in an event actively produce – thus giving it its specific course, which can then be written about afterwards.
- (2) Second-order employments of the researchers are not mediations between happenings and coherent stories, but the decisive heuristic procedure to analyze the causation of certain phenomena that occur in the course of an event or result from the course itself.
- (3) The identification of first-order employments is non-teleological because researchers cannot presuppose that participants are working toward the end or intermediate outcome of something that they themselves know. Rather, the task is to approximate something like “first-time-go-throughs”: to discuss the events not from their subsequent outcome, but starting from the fact that the participants themselves live through the events they are more or less actively involved in producing for the first time, working out a plot scene by scene without knowing in detail and advance what comes next.

- (4) If we also take as a basis a prominent, albeit controversial distinction of the novelist E.M. Forster (1985, 30, 86), that stories are in essence arrangements of “and then happens X and then happens Y” sequences, while plots address the causal transitivity between certain events (and by no means all possible occurrences), then second-order emplotments are precisely not sheer chronologies. Rather, they aim at identifying crucial happenings which, in their relation to each other, decisively shape an event, whereby they can be multi-sequentially linked and do not have to be directly connected to each other. How they shape an event in relation to certain other occurrences is an empirical question.

Finally, this empirical question specifically addresses the way in which available data can be used to work on narrative explanations that, at their core, consist of the valid “casing” (Ragin 1992) of second-order emplotments. This is a creative activity in which those investigating an event more firmly link theoretical ideas and empirical data (Ragin 1992, 221). In doing so, they work through the fundamental problem I touched on at the outset. When they deal with an epistemic puzzle posed by the consideration of a material research object, they typically have only “traces” of these objects at their disposal, as Monika Krause (2021, 2) puts it. This is because social research usually deals with objects of investigation that have already taken place as historical or social processes or that they cannot survey in their entirety from a subjective observer’s point of view.

Thus, in view of the proposed approach of working with the concept of emplotments to understand social phenomena and their causation, it is highly unlikely that researchers simply locate first-order emplotments and are faced only with the task of “simply to produce a reproduction of observations” (Polkinghorne 1995, 20). Rather, both factual first-order and explanatory second-order emplotments are “made.” While in the concrete interactions in which the participants meet and profile with and against each other what they are actually doing there, all situational elements can be given practical or symbolic meaning for this or new ones can be introduced, researchers on such only have data available. To be more precise: they have to acquire artifacts, utterances, records, etc., which they then treat as data to which they attribute empirical evidence. A datum does not acquire this status by itself, but because researchers construct it as such and, together with the recipients of their analyses, treat it qua (tacit) agreement as fact (Becker 2007, 13). In a sense, these are indeed “traces,” but the term seems to me to be merely a proxy for the presumption that the datum says something about the object of study. This, too, is “only” an interpretation. A more fine-grained consideration, on the other hand, allows us to closely follow Charles S. Peirce’s semiotics and his theory of signs, in which he distinguishes between

symbols, indices, and icons (Peirce 1955, 98-115) – especially with regard to the meaning that is interpretatively assigned to signs in each case.

As I will discuss in the next and last section, especially with regard to the analytical value of audiovisual recordings, the distinction between indices and icons is particularly instructive for narrative explanations using the concept of emplotment. I do not want to make a general statement about the function of audiovisual recordings as a whole, but I want to show that their value for narrative explanations of violent events is not primarily to be able to describe an event as detailed as possible, but to serve as luminous indices and to prevent a superimposition of stories that follow more common narrative conventions than the factual concatenation of crucial happenings that cause the phenomenon on which the epistemological interest focuses.

4. Second-Order Emplotments of Violence and Their Data: The Case of the Charlie Hebdo Attacks

Second-order emplotments are the closest possible approximations to the plots that shape an event under investigation – but they do not escape the fundamental problem of being selective and excluding competing interpretations of data for the time being. The heuristic function of the concept of emplotment is to identify such happenings, which in their temporal concatenation are crucial for a sometimes multisequential, not seldom muddled and by the participants possibly experienced as ambiguous and discontinuous event, because this concatenation is synonymous with the causation of a social phenomenon, which is puzzling from the researcher's point of view.

The equally necessary and possible selectivity of emplotments is not contained in technical procedures, but an interpretative one, often intuitive and not easy to grasp even for the interpreters themselves – and point of view dependent (Abbott 1998, 171-2). The data in themselves are basically meaningless as long as researchers have not at least roughly outlined what phenomenon they are concerned with and what analytical puzzle it raises. But they only have the data at their disposal to clarify which phenomenon can be studied with them at all. They need clues from the data to do so – and it is then a separate performative act to actually make visible the phenomenon then to be studied in more detail (Atkinson 1990, 105; Garfinkel, Lynch, and Livingston 1981, 133; Hirschauer 2006).

Following Peirce (1955, 98-115) closely, this is primarily a semiotic work: as resignification of available signs. The idea is thus to conceive of data as signs that are themselves, at least in their making, “minimal interpretations” (Reed 2011, 23) of an event – as signification of “what is it that's going on here”

(Goffman 1986, 8-9). This is especially the case when the data are linguistic statements (“We are defenders of the prophet,” see above) or even in textual form. However, it should also be remembered that producers of audiovisual recordings have already put relevance of meaning into the video material by means of certain actions (from camera work to production and editing; Reichertz and Englert 2011; Knoblauch, Tuma, and Schnettler 2014, 56-7, 68-9). If one reads Isaac Ariail Reed (2011, 29, 91-2), resignification of these data then means primarily to work on “maximal interpretations” of an event and to arrive at causal explanations of phenomena, “in such a way that the referential functions of evidence [the available data; TH] and the relational functions of theory [such as a bundle of concepts like emplotments, events and causation; TH] are subsumed under a deeper understanding” (Reed 2011, 23). Narrative explanations via second-order emplotments are thus, in this perspective, resignifications of signs that infer first-order emplotments – with the aim of making them visible as such in the first place. Semiotically, this making visible is a symbolic process, as the use of words, sentences, and whole texts are governed by conventions that constrain the interpreter of signs and at the same time enable him to claim explanatory value.

In my own studies, however, I have found that the distinction between indices and icons is of particular interpretative value for working on narrative explanations with the help of available data. The fundamental problem of interpretative selectivity cannot be solved with the distinction, but it can be dealt with in the context of one’s own empirical analyses. The data are neither exclusively indexical nor iconic. Rather, if we understand them as indices, they allow us to understand them as pointers to crucial happenings. They suggest that what they refer to may have a certain significance from the observer’s point of view, for example, because they draw attention to a confrontation between attackers and security forces that is crucial for the further progress of violent attacks (see above). However, they alone are not sufficient to justify this assumption in more detail. They serve to discover aspects that might be explanatorily important. If, on the other hand, they are understood as icons, then they open up the possibility of a more profound hermeneutic work of substantiation. For then connected with the data is the assumption, requiring justification as it were, that they are already in their origin so closely interwoven with the actual event or object to which they refer – “a sign may be iconic, that is, may represent object mainly by its similarity, no matter what its mode of being.” (Peirce 1955, 105) The idea to be gained from this is therefore that iconic data are very similar to at least one moment shown or aspect to be seen, and on this basis this interpretation can be elaborated into a valid explanation. In order to distinguish indices, their analytical significance then lies primarily in the fact that they constrain interpretative selectivity, because interpretations and descriptions must be designed in such a way that their content must be tied back to what is shown

or described in the data – even if pieces of data contradict each other in terms of content (e.g., because eyewitnesses describe the sequence of certain events differently) and the analysis cannot simply ignore this contradiction.

In order to deal with first-order emplotments, as in the case of the Charlie Hebdo Attacks, the research-practical steps of treating the available data as both indices and icons are recursively intertwined – as a commuting in which at the same time it is always up for disposition how not only the phenomenon to be explained can be grasped, but what actually constitutes the puzzle that can be worked on with the available data in the first place. In order to interpret the sampled data in the case of Paris “maximally” (Reed, see above), I have begun to develop their character as signs with the help of a sheer (multi-)sequential event table, in which each line contains the description of a particular moment in time, usually an encounter between several participants. I have considered and processed all available indices as far as possible, without prioritizing them appreciably. The temporal distances can be milliseconds, but also several hours – depending on the availability of indices. The table thus first of all demonstrates how incomplete the retrospective knowledge of the events of interest is. The basic orientation perhaps comes closest to a multi-perspective reportage since the table of events does not serve to describe only one version of the events, but also to sensitize for where data pieces contradict each other. The descriptions are kept in a restrained style, avoiding at least strongly judgmental expressions, but this also means that I as narrator remain “shadowy and anonymous” here (Atkinson 1990, 116) and do not thematize my own affectation by the events (see Alkemeyer 2022, in this issue).

What irritated me early on in the case of the Paris events was their comparatively long duration of about 54 hours. In other words: why did the plot develop this duration, or how did the participants ensure its prolongation? Audiovisual data in particular offer the possibility to view and analyze events in ultra-detail, to “reconstruct the exact sequence of interactions frame by frame” (Nassauer and Legewie 2021, 141). However, when it comes to investigating longer periods of time and asking about the concatenation of crucial happenings, the ultra-detailed focus on micro-changes to micro-redundancies is initially of limited use. Rather, what is needed are indices that point to the variation in the relevance of individual occurrences for concrete progress – based on the assumption that some “interactions” (Simmel) or “transactions” (Tilly) of the participants are more significant than others and that events do not just flow along in a straightforward linear fashion. With regard to the event table described above, the research practice is thus concerned with those scenes that stand out in the entire data set with regard to the puzzle posed.

From a technical point of view, a suggestion by Jack Katz, who ultimately makes a virtue out of the compulsion to omit, is particularly helpful here. He

draws primarily on observational notes and thus formulates from an ethnographic perspective. At the same time, he is interested in the causal theory of the turning point “from data that show ‘how’ to accounts that explain ‘why’” (Katz 2002, 65) – why things such as violent attacks happen. He emphasizes the importance of such data, which he calls “luminous descriptions” and which are therefore particularly compelling “because they contain leads to why social life takes the forms we observe” (Katz 2002, 65). Here, Katz formally meets Simmel and Tilly, because he has in mind in particular interactions – not all possible ones, but those in which the way the participants act or experience the moment emotionally changes more or less abruptly (Katz 2002, 64-5) Thus, he is especially concerned with identifying “crucial interactions,” crucial with regard to the progress of the event or an intermediate outcome. He thus urges introspection and explication as to why one considers certain descriptions of moments to be revealing. These are then possibly those data that allow to narratively highlight, prioritize, and chain those moments of an entangled event that help to make its phenomenological shape and its causation visible.

In regard to the fact that data of diverse mediality are available for the case of the Charlie Hebdo attacks, it makes sense not only to start from notes (“luminous description”) but also to take into account how diverse indices are available in order to ask for decisive interactions. The point, then, is to examine “luminous indices,” which do not have to be descriptions per se. With respect to the Paris case, I would argue that there are three cell phone videos in particular that are interpretively luminous. One shows the Kouachi brothers immediately after they leave Charlie Hebdo. The recording begins with one of the brothers shouting “Allahu Akbar” while one or both of them shoot into the air with no specific target. When they have already reached the getaway car, one of them turns away once again, runs to a nearby intersection, gestures with his arm raised and shouts, according to eyewitnesses, “We have avenged the Prophet Muhammad! We killed Charlie Hebdo!” Their performance aims to be seen, heard, perhaps filmed – and the fact that there is a video but they did not shoot it themselves draws attention to the fact that they expect this attention but cannot force it. In contrast, two other videos show confrontational situations with approaching police officers, in which the brothers offensively leave their protective cover. They accept to be injured or even killed by their opponents in order to realize their stories, as I mentioned above – without being able to ensure that this will happen.

These indices outlined refer, on closer inspection, to confrontational situations between attackers and security forces that appear to be crucial to the course of events because of their relation to each other. Thus, they refer to a specific emplotment that the participants of the events work off with and against each other. In order to work interpretatively on second-order

emplotments from them, they are precisely not remarkable in themselves, but in comparison. At this point, however, the videos no longer function as indices that draw attention to comparable basic features of the scenes, but as icons with the help of which it is then a matter of proving this assumption.

At first, it becomes apparent that they are repetitive in their inner course. When it comes to these encounters, the assassins in particular do not behave in a waiting manner, but run towards the presumably armed opponents. Thus, they do not seek cover, but expose themselves to possible counterattacks relatively unprotected.

Likewise, however, data becomes more accurately “readable” with the help of the initial clues to understand why the events in Paris continue to unfold. The attackers are waiting to be killed. Even on the third day, when they entrench themselves in a print shop (Kouachi brothers) on the one hand and in a supermarket (Coulibaly) on the other, the three wait for the dramaturgically right moment for their final actions. Only when the security forces storm the buildings do they run toward them one last time.

At least the outlined confrontational situations between attackers and security forces are crucial here, because they have a paradoxical effect from the perspective of the attackers striving for martyrdom. Rather than being injured or killed themselves, they prevail in multiple situations against their opponents, who either retreat or are injured or killed in the course of the armed confrontation. The events continue because the attackers repeatedly succeed in retaining the initiative, which they actually want to give up. The individual situations thus significantly shape the emplotment of events through their transitive causal relation to each other (see Hoebel 2019; Hoebel and Knöbl 2019, 164-6 for a more detailed discussion).

Viewed from a “second order view” (Ricoeur, see above), this plot is then a specific one that can be conceived narratively not only as “repetition” (Atkinson 1990, 128) but also above all as a “synecdoche” (Atkinson 1990, 122): individual parts stand for the whole, although for the explanatory value of this interpretation the clear contours and internal coherence of this whole can remain open.

Viewed less from the point of view of the offenders than as crucial interactions, the synecdochal ones in question characterize the overall events. This concerns not only the pursuit of specific publics, but in a narrative-explanatory perspective such points in time, at which it is decided again and again whether the violent course of events will continue or not. These are always short passages of a few seconds or minutes. However, they help to explore the puzzle why the events took nearly 54 hours.

5. Against Narrative Overconfidence

The case of the so-called Charlie Hebdo Attacks virtually suggests standard stories that Tilly criticizes so much. This is partly because the events are limited in time and space: for a little more than two days in some Parisian *arrondissements* and in the immediate surroundings of the French capital. On the other hand, there are only a few protagonists who undoubtedly initiate the events, two brothers and an acquaintance of the two, who separately storm first the Charlie Hebdo editorial conference and a supermarket, shooting up the place. It is quite obvious to understand them methodologically individualistically as independent, conscious, and self-motivated characters who decisively shape the events (Tilly 1999, 260-1).

However, a narrative explanation of the case sows doubt about such standard storytelling – even if it is based largely on data that are *offender-oriented*. By this I mean that they were created (as verbalized and written memories in the case of the investigation protocols, on the one hand, and as video recordings of unusual events, on the other) not least because certain performances by individual or a few persons attracted particular attention and affected the observers. However, insofar as they describe or record encounters between multiple participants, they allow us to write not only about individuals and their interactions, but interactions and their participants (Goffman 1967, 3) to focus primarily on the character of the events they create with and against each other.

Yet not only the data as such but the event tables as a first step of (minimal) interpretation are crucial to ask for such emplotments within the course of the events. Especially, they serve a dual function for the narrative analysis. First, they allow the intuition that the data initially identified as luminous refer to crucial interactions to be justified more precisely now. Closely related to this, secondly, they form the material basis for not only addressing basal research questions in the sense of “What happens when?” or “Who is involved in what processes?” but also for formulating the analytical puzzle in the first place, towards which a narrative explanation can be worked. In essence, it is only at this point that one can deal with the analytical second-order emplotment of first-order emplotments in the events themselves. Here it is elementary not to overdraw one’s own narrative and explanatory claims. In the concrete, event tables have helped me to recognize that the data at hand allow for many questions, but only for few valid answers.

On the one hand, these answers do not consist in having to tell stories themselves in order to explain a violent event like the one in Paris. On the other hand, maybe counterintuitively, they are not per se based on ultra-detailed sequential analyses of data, especially when they are in audiovisual form. With regard to historiography, Bill Sewell (2005, 11-2) has spoken of a

“narrative overconfidence” that consists of to avoid methodological questions of analytical narrative by, among other things, delving too much into existing data but not reflecting on how one narrates the discoveries in them. In my impression, Sewell basically outlines a task here that is especially relevant for violence research working with audiovisual data. It consists of both diving into the data and debating methodological questions (including that of what qualifies certain signs as data from the researcher’s point of view in the first place; pioneering for ethnography here, for example, Clifford and Marcus 1986). A basic insight then might be that audiovisual data makes violence visible only if we can make a good case for such an interpretation. Working on narrative explanations is one possible search for these reasons.

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