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Microsociology of Killing in Mexican Video Executions

César Antonio Cisneros Puebla *

Abstract: »Mikrosoziologie des Tötens in mexikanischen Video-Hinrichtungen«. During the last decade of the 20th century, Mexico experienced one of the bloodiest times in its contemporary history. Conservative estimates pointed at more than 275 thousand deaths in those years and the number of war orphans exceeded that of the Croatian war. In the international media, there was talk of a war between drug cartels, but the war involved much more than that; the civilian population suffered a lot of damage. Just as the indigenous revolution of the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN for its acronym in Spanish) gained immediate worldwide attention through the internet, the actors of the war between cartels used the web to broadcast videos of executions and murders. Based on an exemplar analysis of videos on killing posted on the internet from Mexico during this decade, this contribution will focus on the sequential embedding of the actors' actions in performing the killing as the final episode of a long torture period. The central focus of this contribution is to expose the methodological and epistemological reflections that arise on empathy and voyeurism when analyzing the unequal hierarchical relationship between victims and perpetrators in these video diaries. Our theoretical observations are marked by the frames of conversational and narrative analysis in violent situations that will end with victims' deaths. But also, we will explore questions like what sociologists must do in such cases of state terrorism. What is the role for sociological research and social responsibility in such circumstances?

Keywords: Beheadings, death images, corpse, imagery, war, empathy.

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1. Introduction

The new forms of domination are designed as spectacles that seek to annihilate any strategy of effective rebellion, and they are very subtle, almost imperceptible. It looks like only the persons positioned at the highest spheres of politics have control over the contents and structure of social domination, and all the citizens, made of flesh and blood, receive just the changes of strategy every day in a kind of terrorism of state, or “state terrorism,” that turns the citizens themselves blind. For such situations, according to Jackson (2008), it is totally necessary to recognize “state terrorism” not just as social discourse but a raw reality that is present in our everyday life. State terrorism is most appropriately used to describe our current reality even though it has been largely missing as a subject in the social sciences literature. We need to overcome our blindness. In the '90s, the emergence of new conservatism and the rise of the right was already getting the attention of many scholars around the world (Finkelkraut 1987; Offe 1988). We all loved so much the idea of revolution (Cohn-Bendit 1998). But today, our expectations about the future come down in the way of showing us the disaster of utopias and democracies. If we position ourselves at the juncture of the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century, while we are still living in the times of the COVID-19 pandemic and the civilizational recompositing and mundane changes in our processes of daily interaction, work, love, solidarity, etc., it is necessary to ask: what is next? In the perspective of a transformative practice of research, such a question could be unfolded: Will left-wing activists of a younger generation aspire more radically to develop liberation strategies? Or will right-wing activists continue to deepen the practices of reactionary populism that they have been promoting around the world? Regimes like those of Xi Jinping in China, Erdoğan in Turkey, Mohamed bin Salmán in Saudi Arabia, Putin in Russia, János Áder in Hungary, Andrzej Duda in Poland, Donald Trump in the USA, Modi in India, and López Obrador in Mexico, just to name a few, show how the canons of state terrorism have been perfected based on past experiences (Fraser 2017; Brabazon, Redhead and Chivaura 2018; Geiselberger 2017; Jackson 2004, 2008).

Let me say that my inquiry has changed in the last decade because of what I call a civil war in Mexico (not a drugs cartel war, as the global media used to name it) becoming a research focus. Such civil war has dramatically changed the agenda for all Mexican social scientists with a critical way of thinking. Some of us have been investigating participatively in new forms of social protests, not just in Mexico (Cisneros Puebla et al. 2016; Santos 2015). Others are participating in the various social and economic strategies of resistance (Cisneros Puebla 2018; Petropoulou 2014; Petropoulou, Vitopoulou, and Tsavdaroglou 2016). Some others denounce the terrorism of the state or “state

terrorism” (Jackson 2004). It is crucial to maintain criticism to collaborate in deconstructing the fear politics directed to the social control of citizens and to collaborate in destroying the discursive hegemony of governmental discourses about war, peace, human rights, race, and social justice, among other topics of public interest. Another common feature in the 21st century is that they are all accomplices or facilitators of the new ways of accumulation by dispossession (Harvey 2003) that are creating new poverties and miseries around the world. According to Harvey (2004), in addition to the classical primitive accumulation of capital analyzed by Marx, to think about our current times “we have to look at the speculative raiding carried out by hedge funds and other major institutions of finance capital as the cutting edge of accumulation by dispossession in recent times” (ibid., 75).

Why write about state terrorism in this paper if the objective is to present an analysis of extreme violent actions such as transforming living human beings into corpses? It is not premature to affirm that our present time is different from everything that has gone before in terms of exercises of violence perfectly directed at certain groups. Sémelin (2002) has pointed out that extreme violence, as a qualitative phenomenon, is associated with cruelty and, as a quantitative phenomenon, is directed towards the destruction of civilian populations. Also, the practices to generate terror in the population have been perfected. We could affirm that that old problem of Hegel’s dialectic between the master and the slave has been modernized and is staged by the invisibility of the dispossessed, the illegal immigrants, and the new forms of poverty (Brighenti 2007). Looking at our current times from the perspective of terrorism will allow us, together with von Behr et al. (2013), to think critically about the role of the image in the genesis of novel forms of social control, and the ways the internet has become a domain of activity for terrorist activities.

In the following pages I will present a brief micro-situational analysis of Mexican beheading videos, but first I will reflect on the notion of scopic regimes in general to generate an epistemological framework. Then I will apply this notion to the arena of violence materialized and visualized from the production of such videos. But a general view of the production of extrajudicial video executions in other parts of the world, particularly the Middle East, will be necessary to assess the impact of these practices on the imagery of citizens who value peace, harmony, and well-being.

In some way, the visual analysis that was performed here led us to also reflect on ethics in sociology of horror. Our micro-situational analysis can also be useful for sociologists of conflict, military sociologists, sociologists of violence, and/or sociologists of war since the systematic study of the violence exerted between the videotaped actors shows some characteristics of great interest from the perspective of symbolic interactionism. Microsociology of violence, in the sense proposed by Collins (2009, 2012), and video analysis, as

proposed and systematized by Knoblauch and Tuma (2019) and Knoblauch and Schnettler (2012), are some of our theoretical references.

2. Scopic Regimes and “Representation”

The role of the image in social history comprises several important facts that are deeply linked to the definition of the real. There is an interesting point in relation to the position that images have occupied at different times in history, at least in the West. This refers to the existence of a certain hierarchy of the senses, in which sight has begun to gain importance since the invention of the printing press.

With the invention of photography, cinema was made possible and all the daily magic around the creation of narratives in various formats and genres that today form the visual imaginary of contemporary societies, from Lebanon to the US and from Berlin to Bombay. Indeed, with the release on the market and mass production of devices for digital video recording, the notion of “representation” became more realistic. However, from a critical perspective, it is possible to argue that all representation in general, as well as the images themselves, are necessarily subject to processes of convention. If we agree on this argument, we have the conditions to accept that each age and culture shape what John Berger has called “ways of seeing.” According to Berger (1972), the ways of seeing are constituted by a series of hypotheses associated with the visual object, the object “seen,” whatever the type. Thus, the ways of seeing constitute kinds of predispositions and reactions to visual objects, configured by interpretive repertoires available for and in certain historical and cultural contexts.

Some terms that refer to similar processes are those such as “period eye” (Baxandall 1988) or “scopic regime” (Jay 1988). Through them the same phenomenon is pointed out, referring to the sociocultural configuration of visibility. Definitions aside, the processes of visibility of the possible are articulated and establish sensibilities that organize the gaze and delimit it. Looking, dreaming, imagining, even hallucinating, are formed as acts that make sense based on visual regimes. And studying such processes requires emerging strategies.

From a phenomenological and constructivist approach, perception, as a constitutive part of the cognitive activity of looking, is not a reflection of an objective reality, but rather operates through intersubjectively constructed typifications. Hence, the experience and perception of the visual is conditioned by this intersubjective essence. This idea is at the bottom of the reflections of ethnomethodologists, such as Melvin Pollner (1974) when he proposes that what we see is not necessarily the stimulus of light that reflects a property of physical objects in our retina, but that we see and observe mainly

through socially and culturally constructed cognitive categories. This explains why when people are questioned about what they see, they generally respond by referring to concepts and words learned through socialization (squares, streets, buildings, vegetation, people, actions) and not to the luminous quality of the “stimulus.” The eye does not act as a mirror that, as it captures, reflects, since what it captures it no longer sees as data without attributes but as things, as food, as people, as enemies, as stars, as weapons. Nothing is seen nakedly or naked (Goodman 1968, 8). To look is to name and classify. There is no mere contemplative issue: I look because I have words to name what I look at or hear, while for this reason, a framework of action is established: I act in consequence of those names with which I classify what is perceived with the gaze (Strauss 2017).

However, it is of crucial importance to point out that those studies, from which concepts such as *ways of seeing* or *scopic regime* were derived, were generated within art criticism and history (Panofsky 1972; Hadjinicolaou 1978), and therefore its epistemological domain has been about how, in various sociocultural transitions, art has impacted the ways of seeing in Western society.

For this reason, it is necessary to recover this interest and emphasis on the sensitive dimension, in this case of visual experience, in relation to other areas of reality that impact our contemporary daily life. This approach had already begun with the work of John Berger, for example, when he emphasized the phenomenon of advertising, according to which it seems to have replaced the role of art in the constitution of ways of seeing. It is also important to return to and underline the importance of the realistic notion of representation based on the photographic, cinematographic, and video image, especially because of the repercussions it has on what it is possible to call the contemporary world visual regime, to move away from visions such as that of Sartori (1997), which impoverishes rather than enriches the possibilities of the analysis of the visual.

This contemporary visual regime is immersed in a process that we could in turn call “*video culture*,” to indicate the ways in which the production of the visual is “democratized” through digital tools and the internet. When thinking about “*video culture*,” the process of production-dissemination-consumption becomes important. It should be noted that technological progress and market dynamics implied an extraordinary change in this process, since it gradually generated greater access to various social sectors in terms of production and dissemination. Despite this, it could be pointed out that there is a phase of gradual transformation of practices around the production of what is “worth looking at,” in which people no longer only play the role of spectators, but also take a more active role in production and dissemination activities. The greater access to personal video cameras in the middle and popular sectors, for example, has represented part of that transformation for several

years. The filming of family parties is an example of how society involves a tool in its famous, memorable, or exceptional practices that allows to participate in a new way in this process of experiencing (with) reality. It allows reflection on what can be filmed, how and for what, with its own resources. Seko (2013), for example, analyzes the practice of taking photos of self-produced bodily injuries and making them available to members of interest groups on the internet, through Flickr. Analyzing a photograph taken during the Second World War that represents a violent act of rape, its aftermath, or a simple mimicry carried out by German soldiers, Mailänder (2017) seriously problematizes the representation of social interaction embodied in a photograph. She poses two fundamental epistemological questions that also guide our study of the videos: “What does the photograph communicate to the viewer? What remains silent and unseen?” (2017, 490).

As we will see later, the position of the viewer, observer, voyeur, beholder, watcher, eyewitness, or analyst is central to the qualitative research of still or moving images. In the production of violent acts as social processes, not only the victim and the perpetrator intervene, but also the person who observes that production. In some way it could be affirmed, following Elwert (2003), that there are markets of violence, and the images and videos are imbued in them.

3. The Triangle of Victim, Perpetrator, and Observer in the Mexican Violence Scopic Regime

The possibility of disseminating unofficial or professional videos on the internet represents another step in the transformation of this relationship with audiovisual tools, since the possibility of self-production is now combined with that of diffusion worldwide, exceeding the field of self-consumption. This thus allows for another series of possibilities regarding the purposes of the products that are necessarily linked to the contents. The fact that the practices associated with this have initially remained within a circuit of self-production and self-consumption of individuals and groups does not detract from their contribution to the phenomenon of image production and “*video culture*” in Mexico or worldwide.

Due to the establishment of the so-called “drugs cartel war” in Mexico, images related to their high-powered weapons and their wealth accumulation practices were widely disseminated. The images of murders or dead people can also be part of a visual regime when their production becomes massive to the point of being part of the daily life of people in a society. When horrifying images or videos of horrible mutilations or beheadings of prisoners or

hostages become daily news, we must worry and study what social, organizational, or institutional processes make this possible.

It is of total interest that the practices of violence in the context of such “drugs cartel war” have transcended to more dynamic channels, such as the internet, through the production and circulation of videos, among other things, that as concrete messages and documentaries show explicit violence (documented executions). Thus, the conflict is inserted in a cybernetic media dimension; war and violence do not only occur in the material scene of the events, but also have a presence and impact from the channels through which it is disseminated, consolidating the spread of fear and terror. Friis (2015, 2018), for example, has been carefully analyzing the production-circulation and international effects of the beheading videos of James Foley, Steven Sotloff, David Haines, Alan Henning, and Moaz al-Kasasbeh made by ISIS and posted in 2014.

During the years 2010 and 2011, as full-time professor at UAM Iztapalapa, Mexico, I conducted two-hour-long seminars with postgraduate students with the objective of selecting and qualitatively analyzing, using different software programs, video executions that began to be presented publicly on the internet. Technicians in audiovisual production and video editing came to participate in some sessions in our seminar room, who provided us with tools to improve the quality of video reproduction and made comments on the technical conditions in which those videos were possibly recorded. During that time, we discussed visual analysis, videography, the practice and methods of interpretive visual analysis (Schnettler and Raab 2008), the use of visual research methods (Knoblauch et al. 2008), and visual ethnography (Pink 2008). Over those years, it became fully evident that what I can present today here is based on my understanding of the methodologies generated by Knoblauch and Schnettler (2012) and Knoblauch and Tuma (2019). We collected and watched dozens of videos. We made databases with them and decided to concentrate our analyzes on some of them. To evaluate its tools, capabilities, and friendly interface, we used programs such as Atlas.ti, NVivo, F4 video, and MAXqda, since we transcribed the audio and encoded video segments. The comparison exercises were very useful, but our intellectual concerns were not focused on the software. Instead, our main interest was on the interaction between victims and perpetrators, even though we gradually realized that, as watchers, we also needed to analyze our relationship with such bodies and images. Nowadays, the meticulous and accurate analysis of the observer and observability developed by Koloma Beck (2011) guides our reflections as we will show below. The problem of how inferences are made to interpret the actions of moving actors in a video clip, for example, was tackled by Sacks’s inspiring contribution (1989) on the inference-making machine.

In the first decade of the new millennium, Mexican drug traffickers started to get some presence in the cyberspace using web sites, blogs, and YouTube

video postings. A most flashy and significant website dedicated to spread drug trafficking news was blogdelnarco.com, which was created in 2010.

Downloaded from such a website, let me present a brief description of two videos on which I based the analysis for this contribution. In the first of them we see a man with an uncovered torso, shirtless and blindfolded, sitting on a chair surrounded by four people with high-powered weapons and covered faces. One of the men interrogates him with questions like “what is your name?” “Who do you work for?” and orders such as “repeat it!” The video lasts 4 minutes and 22 seconds. It is a decapitation scene in which the verbal exchanges between victim and interrogator are structured as brief question-answer-question-answer. One of the four armed persons beheads the victim with a knife in a period of 2 minutes and 20 seconds and shows on camera the head already separated from the body. The execution was recorded in a room that looks like a police interrogation room in which the lighting comes from a ceiling lamp whose effect resembles a triangle that illuminates the body of the person being interrogated.

The second video has a duration of 5 minutes and 36 seconds. We see two adult men lying on the dirt floor, leaning on an adobe wall. Unlike the first video, this one was shot out in broad daylight, in an open rural space. It begins with a 43 second verbal exchange between the interrogator and the youngest victim who is the second victim’s nephew. Then, to the question, “your name?” formulated by the interrogator to the second victim, the latter responds for 3 minutes and 40 seconds providing details of their activities, gives names of people linked to them, gives advice to interested persons, assumes their position as a victim on the verge of death and emphasizes that the end of his life is near. A perpetrator in a military uniform appears on the scene and cuts the head off the person who was speaking with a chainsaw. Then another perpetrator appears, in denim clothes, armed with a knife and, over a period 1 minute and 50 seconds, decapitates the nephew, who was always immobile looking only at the camera: A fixed camera.

Campbell (2014) has proposed criminal organizations should be treated analytically as political entities whose actions, such as videos and cyber-postings, genres of music and lyrics, public messages, spectacles of symbolic violence, and control and censorship of the mass media, constitute a powerful new form of political discourse. These images and videos of the homicides or femicides of anonymous or named persons are both horrific and terrifying. Around the world, we find visual testimonies of massacres, homicides, genocides, and so on. The Mexican videos and the images of death and dying in ISIS media and the beheading of Steven Sotloff (Winkler et al. 2019) and the beheading of Daniel Pearl (Furnish 2005), among others, are an irrefutable sign that we must pay attention to the new use that images are having in the construction of societies that live in terror. Tinnes (2021) has developed an enormous bibliography containing extrajudicial video executions of hostages

that have occurred all around world, which is very useful when investigating about these murderous and inhumane practices.

From the analysis of violence that we have carried out, focusing on such videos, I am presenting the following annotations that, at the analytical proposal level, allow us to discuss with researchers interested in this phenomenon. Methodologically, I must affirm that we watched the videos during our seminar sessions, dozens of times, repeatedly, and by concentrating on them, using methodologies assisted by the afore mentioned software programs, we found what I list below as 11 relevant points of discovery:

1. These videos are like “*video diaries*” of groups of social actors: Social actors that have been generically named by the press “organized crime” or “cartels.” From the beginning, the observer immediately identifies the positions of the participants in the video: executioners-prisoner; hangmen-victims; victimizer-unarmed.
2. Contrary to what one might think, they are not videos of natural situations in which “natural” social interactions take place. In most of the videos observed, performances were noted: the designed interactions had already been *repeated several times*, making evident the hopelessness of the victims who will be dead in a few minutes.
3. These are videos in which the people to be executed are “*defenseless*,” unarmed, and helpless. “Defenseless” can be defined following Blair (2004) as a human condition where the victim is the one who has no weapons and therefore cannot offend, kill, hurt. According to Caravero (2009), being under the domination of the other, i.e., substantially defenseless, is a condition of passivity whereby individuals suffer violence to which they cannot escape or respond.
4. Before the video begins, the victims had already been *tortured previously*, in their condition as detained, kidnapped, frightened, horrified persons. What could have been their feelings from the moment their freedom was taken from them? For Sémelin (2002, 430), the extreme violence, “whatever the degree of its excessiveness, [is] seen as the prototypical expression of the negation of any kind of humanity since its victims are often ‘animalised’ or treated as ‘things’ before being annihilated.”
5. These are, although it is difficult to accept, videos with “some prior preparation” on the part of the executioners. *The stage was set up or previously defined*, the participants were organized, the lighting and sound were calibrated, and the words were scripted.
6. From the perspective of the executioners, it is about the elaboration of a visual document (record) of an action already planned, we could say “mentally rehearsed.” It must be a video for posterity: a perfect video because the execution cannot be repeated, it has already been *rehearsed*.
7. From what is known, it is highly probable that they are ex-soldiers, with training in the “*art of killing*.” Carlin (2012, 504) has written, for instance,

“take for example a group called Los Zetas, a relatively new player in the Mexican drug trade, consisting of ex-special operation soldiers from the federal army who have taken the corporatization and militarization of the cartels to a new level.”

8. Former military trained with *KUBARK* interrogation manual (Central Intelligence Agency 1963) to apply principal coercive techniques as arrest, detention, the deprivation of sensory stimuli, threats and fear, debility, pain, heightened suggestibility and hypnosis, and drugs.
9. From the perspective of the helpless, unarmed victims, the interaction situation is that of *saying what has been indicated*, staring at the camera if they are not blindfolded.
10. What we see in the posted video is the culminating act of *long seasons of torture* in which the victims have repeatedly heard the noise of the weapons, the threatening voice of the executioners, and the death sentence.
11. The interaction space is perfectly *delimited as well as the rules and talk turns*: I ask you and you answer what I have indicated.

In the absence of a narrative of war or even of war crimes in Mexico, everything is completely unpunished. It is like Carlin (2012, 511) has asserted:

All of it – drug cartel public executions, beheadings and burnings, the government’s carefully orchestrated spectacle of mutilation – serves to create an aura around forms of power that belong to the current State of things and the maintenance of this status quo. Violence of this kind is a power consolidated in the convergence of specific objects and images that not only incite horror but instil a sense of awe in the observer.

Here it is prudent to compare the Mexican case with the case from Campbell (2004, 70) who, analyzing the media’s blindness towards the war crimes committed in Israel-Palestine, Sierra Leone, South Africa, and the Sudan, has proposed that

In relationship to images, context involves three dimensions: the economy of indifference to others (especially others who are culturally, racially, and spatially foreign), the economy of “taste and decency” whereby the media itself regulates the representation of death and atrocity, and the economy of display, wherein the meaning of images is produced by the intertextual relationship of captions, titles, surrounding arguments and sites for presentation.

In the case of the Mexican videos, the economy of indifference to others works perfectly because the victims are seen as guilty of something they committed and are receiving what they deserve: the victims are the other. I have not misbehaved. I am different to him/her. The economy of taste and decency is shown because the monstrosity of the act is self-justified by the cleanliness that the executioner performs by eliminating the undesirable from society: whether the alleged accusation or petition on which the execution is based is true or false. The economy of the exhibition makes it politically correct to

repeatedly execute victims who die once when they are beheaded and die repeatedly as the video is played. The multiple repeated exhibitions of an undue extrajudicial execution.

Indisputably, images contribute to building scopical regimes/ways of seeing/period eye that are shaped by our worldviews and visual realities of everything that exists, everything that is sensible, everything that is felt, everything that is thinkable. Our human history is full of sad, bloody, painful, and sometimes horrifying images. Images like that of the dead Syrian refugee boy, Alan Kurdi, lying face down drowned on a Turkish beach in 2015 and videos timely and casually recorded by citizens about the police violence that slowly murdered George Floyd in 2020, generate new collective sensitivities. From that sensitivity, Mäenpää (2021), a Finnish photo agency and a Finnish news magazine, when exploring the practices of selecting news images that show death in a global photo agency as Reuters Pictures, states that

If death is made invisible or aestheticised in media imagery, the media fails to show the world as it is. This may shape the societal understanding of violent death in a way that people do not feel an urgent need for action, for instance, in cases of injustice. (2021, 16)

But it is precisely in this context of mobilization of collective sensibilities that the images are constituted to instruments of policies of fear designed by state, social, or criminal organizations. Although the opposite also occurs, because by aestheticizing, embellishing, or definitively hiding the horror and cruelty of what exists or happens, a policy of uncertainty is generated. Sontag (2005, 85), based on her fierce and blunt criticism of the innocence of the camera and the prototypical modern revelation that she coined as “negative epiphany” when looking at horrific photos, wrote

Protected middle-class inhabitants of the more affluent corners of the world – those regions where most photographs are taken and consumed – learn about the world’s horrors mainly through the camera: photographs can and do distress. But the aestheticizing tendency of photography is such that the medium which conveys distress ends by neutralizing it. Cameras miniaturize experience, transform history into spectacle. As much as they create sympathy, photographs cut sympathy, distance the emotions.

In her outline of a social theory of violence, Koloma Beck (2011) proposes replacing perpetrator and victim with performer and target to develop a constructivist theoretical approach that integrates a third element: the observer. She rightly argues and demonstrates that such inclusion

[...] permits us to bridge the gap between research on the micro- and meso-level dynamics of violent interaction on one hand, and theories of power, domination and the formation of social order on the other. (2011, 347)

By including the observer as a third moment of the violence as social process, it is possible to critically discuss the role of the scientist as beholder, observer, public, analyst, citizen, or bystander and so on, since that way violence “[...]”

evolves in a triangle where it is not only exercised and suffered, but also observed and judged” (ibid., 350).

Regardless of the scenario in which the production of any image of subtle, weak, strong, or extreme violence is carried out, it is impossible to imagine or calculate all the possible reactions that it could cause its exhibition or observation: perhaps admiration, disgust, repulsion, astonishment, sadness, humiliation, sympathy, awe, surprise, disappointment, concern, empathy, and many others, among them. In our effort to construct a situational micro-analysis of Mexican videos of executions, the epistemological question emerged about the conditions necessary to produce empathy from the analysts to the perpetrator or to the victim; the methodological question about the role of the observer-analyst-scientist as voyeur also arose. Jacobs (2004) has analyzed the voyeurism that appears when some sensitive images are brought into the public debate or spread in academic language. However, from a humanitarian perspective that is highly critical of academic voyeurism on issues of violence and war atrocities, Houge (2022, 2) has recognized that

[...] it is difficult to avoid any stain of sensationalism or academic instrumentalization of suffering, if you engage in a field that receives international attention for its spectacular violence.

Nowadays, the market of scopic regimes of world violence has been updated both technologically and digitally to the degree that some economic wars become wars of images. And due to the massive dissemination of these images, feelings such as empathy towards the participants, whether victims or perpetrators, becomes an epistemological question. Just as the voyeuristic lure as a debated visual act becomes a topic of methodological discussion.

4. Reflections on Empathy and Microsociology of Killing

Since the 12th century to modern times, Christian art has accumulated more than 100 pictorial representations of the biblical episode of Judith beheading Holofernes. It cannot be an exaggeration to affirm that the whole different scopic regimes of art have shared the need to show the head of Holofernes separated from his body, or different moments of the beheading process. That is what the story of the deuterocanonical Book of Judith is about. Although we can also remember another biblical story such as that of Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great, who had John the Baptist beheaded because of his daughter-in-law Salome, with whom he fell in love. This story is mentioned by Kant (1760 [2011], 194) when reflects that “[...] the purely lustful

drive or the amorous rage can even be exclusive with respect to the object of love, hence rape.”

Both biblical episodes have been depicted by artists such as Caravaggio, Tiziano Vecelli, Giorgione, Cristofano Allori, Andrea Mantegna, and Sandro Botticelli, among others. Contemplating the sublime, the beautiful, the artistic, the historical, the metaphorical, and other singularities that any of these famous and valuable paintings can have, it is possible to ask: From what human need arises the action of showing the head separated from its body as the final act of a beheading? Is it a cruel act? Is it an act of power? Is it an act of dominance? Or an aesthetic need? What is the impulse that drives the executioner?

I wonder along with Kohn (2017) what the artistic statements are that the photos published on the official website of the Israel Defense Forces or on Instagram or Facebook by Israeli soldiers have? Do individuals who perform surgical decapitations in front of video cameras have artistic aspirations? Or do those behind the cameras have it? The controversial film *Martyrs* (Laugier 2008), written and directed by Pascal Laugier, represents perhaps an extreme case in this line of thought about image and horror in which the outrageous photos of the humiliation of prisoners in the Abu Ghraib prison (Fattah and Fierke 2009) are also inscribed. Anxiety-fear-fright-panic-horror-terror: are these the phases or moments of the escalation of violence and dominance over the other, as an unarmed body? Are these the emotions associated with spaces or places of detention on the way to the slaughterhouse?

When leading the seminars in 2010 and 2011, at the moment of stopping the video to concentrate attentively on an image, Sontag (2004) invited us to question ourselves about what kind of knowledge we obtain by looking at photographs of other people's suffering. And with that question we focus on the object of a visual sociology that does not analyze the ugly, the horrific, the fearsome, what is scary because it offends good customs and good living. And we also reflect on a sociology of violence that is interested in a certain type of violence but not in all, as if there were violence that must be invisible, because it is real, because it is horrific, macabre, repulsive, monstrous, and bloody, unsightly, disgusting, inhuman. Today, there is discussion about the visibility (Brighenti 2007) and the pornography of violence (Kilby 2013b) that guide our investigations to the point of asking us if while watching videos of executions

[...] perpetrators will solicit admiration, anger, empathy or prurient interest depending on who their victim is, what violence they use, whether they act alone or in groups; and how frequently they act. (Kilby 2013a, 263)

It was necessary to discuss among the participants in the seminar about personal empathy towards either of the two opposite extremes of the video: executioners-prisoner; hangmen-victims; victimizer-unarmed. On what ethical framework does personal empathy towards one or the other depend? Is

cruelty, barbarism, dehumanization, “naturalization” of the mutilation of bodies likely to generate empathy in the analysts? There were times when we thought it took a callous heart to be able to watch the videos again.

On the other hand, based on the analysis of Mexican videos of executions, it can be affirmed that the notion of confrontational tension/fear (ct/f) proposed by Collins (2009) does not apply to the created social space of the slaughterhouse in which the beheading process will happen. It does not apply because the social situation has been defined by one of the participants and the social or criminal organization to which they belong: the violence that will culminate in the beheading has been prepared well in advance and there are no feelings that modify any chain of interaction. What are the emotions if any expressed by the perpetrators? At least for everything carefully observed during our video analysis, none were discovered.

Among the many questions that emerge when analyzing videos of executions, I think the following were central: 1) How should we analyze social interactions when one or more of the participants are in a total disproportion of balance?; 2) Is the empathy sought the one that is generated towards the executed so that hatred and/or rejection against the executioner emerges?; 3) On what ethical framework does personal empathy towards one or the other depend?; and 4) What is the role for sociological research facing such horrifying events? Guided by the previous analysis, let us briefly examine each of these questions.

1) How should we analyze social interactions when one or more of the participants are in a total disproportion of balance? Due to the conscious theatricality of the executioners' actions, the very high surgical and/or military preparation to make very precise cuts was evident. Undoubtedly, in the videos you can see merciless killers. Inspired by Collins (2012), the details of the body movements, the wording, the calculation, and the determination of the executioners became microsociological evidence for us. Our permanent challenge was how could we become better at interpreting the details of visual evidence. And the constant questions, now and always, in any case, could be: what is visual evidence in decapitation processes? Show the head as in the imagery that Christian paintings have inherited to modernity?

As in the studies of Campbell (2014) and Kohn (2017), it is possible to affirm that the design of the images and videos are a political propaganda strategy with specific purposes of social influence. Our response to the question, “what are the intentions when distributing them through the internet?”, is that it is definitively that the market of violence (Elwert 2003) that has grown significantly as images and videos are used as central material for political propaganda strategies. Using a performative analytic framework, Fujii (2013) analyzed three extra-lethal war episodes to demonstrate the value of performative and dramaturgical approach for theorizing on violence social processes distinguishing carnival, spectacle, and one-man show in her typology.

Performer=perpetrator, victim=target is a pair in the triangle proposed by Koloma Beck (2011) and the third part, the observer is watching the drama, be it carnival, spectacle, or one-man show. There are diverse circumstances for watching, observing, or analyzing terrifying images of massacres, war, rapes, mutilations, beheading, and so on, but watching, observing, or analyzing is not an innocent or naive action as Sontag (2005) has said. Doing micro-situational analysis of extreme violent actions such as murder by beheading, as in the Mexican videos, has been really very challenging, but there are now excellent and inspiring approaches like the ones mentioned above. 2) Is the empathy sought the one that is generated towards the executed so that hatred and/or rejection against the executioner emerges? By covering their faces, the executioners not only hide their identity but also add a characteristic of theatricality to their action: who we see with their face uncovered or only blindfolded is the victim. Collins (2012, 148) noted that “violence in prisons and in police raids is higher when either the attackers or the victims wear hoods over their head, thereby hiding their human expressiveness.”

The historical and popular image of the executioner has always been that of an implacable and insensitive character without a face. Is empathy for the executioner then ahistorical and timeless? It would depend on the scene of the crime or the execution and the position of the viewer, the direction that their empathy will have towards any of the participants, of course. But what the Campbell study (2004) shows in relation to the economy of indifference is crucial to understanding the origin of empathy to any of the executions’ participants: victimizer or victim. Although here I propose that studying the operation of Sacks’s inference-making machine (1989) in visual analysis can be extremely useful: Is empathy towards one of the participants arising through the inference that the analyst makes from the visual evidence presented and interpreted? My response is affirmative because the active role of the observer gives him absolute freedom to build his visual evidence from his personal, existential, moral, religious, and social position as Koloma Beck (2011) has proposed based on her constructivist theoretical approach.

3) On what ethical framework does personal empathy towards one or the other depend? Regardless of religion or moral beliefs, carefully observing the gradual process in which any living human being becomes a corpse greatly affects the viewer’s sensitivity. And observing it not only once but many times to try to study what happens there is very heavy, exhausting. Above I have presented 11 relevant points of discovery based on our analysis carried out during the biennium 2010–2012. Mexico’s civil war, dubbed the drug cartel war by the media, has continued ever since. The number of deaths and people in forced disappearance have increased greatly, as well as the number of extrajudicial executions. Obviously, the executions of journalists by ISIS militias are not comparable to extrajudicial executions in Mexico or South America, but the ethical issue of the position of the observer/viewer of the

video remains critical. In the Mexican video executions, what did the victims really do to be in that unfortunate situation? Anxiety-fear-fright-panic-horror-terror as phases or moments of the escalation of extreme violence culminating in beheading executed in the slaughterhouse or in rural space as in the two videos described here. How should we analyze such deaths ritual chains? This question was an attractive methodological challenge. Sontag (2004, 78) wrote, “for all the voyeuristic lure – and the possible satisfaction of knowing.”

Is it just for the itch to know that we get involved as scientists to analyze what is happening and propose radical changes? Does it make sense for us as qualitative researchers to wonder about our own human sensitivity that leads us to analyze small ritual chains of interaction in videotaped episodes in which someone is killed? What could have been the motives for the executioner’s action of such a monstrous ritual chain? Following Collins (2012), I would like to ask about the ethical status of microsociological visual evidence that guides the path of empathy since, on the one hand, we have the ethical, non-ethical, or unethical status of the production and dissemination of these images and videos in the global market of violence. And, on the other hand, we have the ethical, non-ethical, or unethical statute of empathy produced as an effect of the political propaganda strategy.

4) What is the role for sociological research facing such horrifying events? As qualitative sociologists, we cannot be passive in the face of this immense reality that is presented to us in the form of new forms of political propaganda that make digital use of cruel images and videos of extreme violence. Finally, all that we do not want to see, however horrible it may be, will continue to happen. We must not allow our obsessive foolishness to blind us and not attend to the demands that the dark side of society is asking for. I think Otis (2006, xvi) is right when he writes,

Pain administered publicly as punishment has been used for its demonstration effect: It is designed to deter opposition, control populations, and display the power of the government, or of rulers. Individuals have been punished to deter others from proscribed acts; entire groups have been executed in painful, public ways in order to maintain control over empires. Of course, the effect of such a public spectacle has depended on the character of the viewing audience. The public might find it simply fascinating. Some well-known examples include Aztec flaying, Roman circuses, group beheadings by Genghis Khan, and public tortures known to the Hindu dynasties in early India. It is said that Nero enjoyed watching people being thrown off the city walls; the Nazis took pictures of their victims for later viewing; and drawing and quartering as well as hanging in medieval England were accepted public spectacle.

If the history of humanity has had these moments, are we condemned to continue witnessing such cruelty? At least we must generate useful knowledge that shows microsociologically how the social interaction between performer, target, and observer is structured. I must affirm that with the

collective learning achieved by doing the microsociological analysis of the video executions, the impulse to contribute to the construction of this useful knowledge was strengthened. As I have tried to show here, such an effort faces epistemological, methodological, and ethical challenges to critically avoid academic voyeurism. But political or judicial uses must also be critically and actively eradicated whether we are analyzing carnivals, spectacles, or violent one-man shows, as Fujii (2013) has distinguished extra-lethal war episodes. Even so, it is still also possible that the efforts fall into pitfalls and are manipulated as shown in the detailed study of Goodwin (1994) on the video of the beating of Rodney King and the trials, just to mention an example.

For the safety of all our efforts to build a rigorous qualitative sociology committed to the video analysis of violence, we must continue to gather the contributions of authors as honest, creative, human, and sensitive to pain, to suffering, and to injustice as those cited here. If our current time has become a total and vast scenario for a scopic regime of global violence led by right-wing activists who have deepened reactionary populism throughout the globe using digital media to generate terror in the population, the microsociological study of violence becomes urgent. I hope this brief paper on the microsociology of killing in Mexican video executions could be a humble contribution in such a direction.

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