ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Contested Understandings of Violence: Refiguring Modern and Postmodern Perspectives

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Abstract

There are numerous conceptions of violence today, such as physical, psychological, emotional, structural, and epistemic. The question of which social phenomena are to be described as violence is itself a matter of furious dispute. In social theory, there is a widespread tendency to distinguish between 'modern' and 'postmodern' conceptions of violence. In this scheme, modern violence is primarily physical, while postmodern violence takes places across a broad spectrum of forms. The paper questions this binary. The co-occurrence and conflict between these forms of violence leads to a third form, which I call refigured violence. The refiguration of violence can be observed in three developments, which are mediatisation, polycontexturalisation, and translocalisation. I provide one illustration of these considerations with the example of so-called shock sites on the internet. In so doing, I emphasise that the sociology of knowledge can provide a valuable perspective for making sense of contemporary discourses about violence in all their complexity.

Keywords Violence · Refiguration · Modernity · Postmodernity · Violence cultures · Shock sites · Zygmunt Bauman

Introduction: Metamorphoses of Violence

Nowadays, violence can assume an astonishingly wide variety of forms. We encounter violence in different modes: it takes place as a physical act in domestic violence or torture settings; we encounter hate speech in social media; people of colour can be victims of structural violence; climate activists accuse governments and large corporations of ecological violence; #MeToo is against the high level of sexualised violence; and data protectionists warn against digital and smart violence.

Given how numerous the forms of violence are, the definition of violence is controversial. Whether a slap of a child is labelled as an act of violence or as an educational measure depends on the perspective of the person making the judgment. Whether interrogating suspected terrorists is called torture or a legitimate form of information extraction has an impact on whether it is understood as violence. Whether postings on social media are 'violent' or merely 'critical'

is also a question of interpretation. Whether or not social structures per se can exert violence is not uncontroversial in the social sciences (Imbusch, 2003). The idea that environmental pollution is ecological violence may also depend on whether the perspective of climate protectionists or the perspective of industrial and oil companies is adopted. Whether intrusive glances are considered violence is just as controversial as the assumption that data phishing and hacking are also forms of violence. There is, therefore, a very significant lack of consensus in the discourse on violence. What violence is and how it is to be judged seem to lie in the 'eye of the beholder' (Koloma Beck, 2011: 351). Nowadays, violence not only describes conflicts; the term itself has become the scene of conflict.

How can this development be adequately explained? What has brought us to the point where we are faced with mutually exclusive conceptions of violence? There is a sociological literature which deals with the transformation of understandings of violence (e.g., Bessel, 2015; Hearn et al., 2022; Lindemann, 2021). Sometimes a melodramatic 'epochal change' is assumed. Zygmunt Bauman (1996) provides a particularly clear example of this. He asserts that there was a *modern* understanding of violence in the past, which has been superseded by a *postmodern* understanding. It used to be self-evident, according to Bauman, which

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Table 1 Modern and postmodern violence (cf. Bauman, 1996, 2007; Bessel, 2015; Elias, 2000; Foucault, 1979; Miller & Soeffner, 1996; Pinker, 2012; Reemtsma, 1996, 2012)

Ideal-type	Modern order of violence	Postmodern order of violence
Concept of violence	A narrow concept of violence	A broader concept of violence
Understanding the individual	Individuals as producers and soldiers	Individuals as consumers and players
Dominant perspective	The perspective of the perpetrators	The perspective of the victims
Connotations of violence	Spatialisation, temporalisation, mystification	Everyday pathologisation
Limitation of violence	Containment through a state monopoly on legitimate violence, disciplining	Continuous violent corruption and scandalisation, control
Problematising violence	Violence becomes a problem	Individual and social issues become violence
Symbol of the relationship to violence	Horror	Terror
Self-description of society	Non-violence	Violence

social phenomena were to be regarded as violence, namely in relation to certain physical acts, such as beatings, executions, rapes, military conflicts, or genocides. According to Bauman, however, a postmodern understanding of violence emerged around the turn of the millennium. Privatisation, deregulation, and dispersion of identity problems have made the boundaries between violence and non-violence fragile. Numerous phenomena—including non-physical ones—may now categorised as violence, depending on who claims the sovereignty of interpretation.

However, Bauman's binary distinction—and he is not the only one who employs it—between modern and postmodern conceptions of violence has itself been contested. The multiple changes in what academics, and people in general, construe as violence is a complex epistemic development. It cannot be understood adequately in terms of one paradigm shift—with binaries like 'then' versus 'now'. Nevertheless, when approached critically, this dichotomy can be leveraged for the analysis of hard-to-classify instances of violence, such as the shock sites examined in this paper.

Modern and Postmodern Understandings of Violence

It is evident that no one interpretation of violence holds true at all times, in every part of our world and across all social situations (Imbusch, 2003). Nevertheless, as mentioned, the sociological research literature sometimes schematizes the idea of an 'epochal change', an 'epochal boundary', or even a 'threshold'. The alleged epochs sometimes found in the sociological literature offer two ideal-typical orders of violence (see Table 1), which Bauman (1996) describes as *modern* and *postmodern*. These orders determine which phenomena are perceived as violence—and how claims to knowledge about violence are generated, distributed, and used. The value of the scheme below, which is distilled from Bauman and other theorists, is not that the scheme

is definitive but that it demonstrates a vision of historical and cultural transformation that has a certain purchase in contemporary social theory.

This straightforwardly binary comparison of modern and postmodern violence has been contested (e.g., Guhin and Wyrtzen, 2013). It may now be argued that this binary juxtaposition of modern and postmodern violence is no longer in keeping with the times. There are post-structuralist, feminist, gender, de- and post-colonial approaches that oppose such a strict dichotomy. Nevertheless, it can be beneficial to use this ideal-typical juxtaposition of modern and postmodern violence as a starting point to further a kind of *post-postmodern* inquiry. By means of the binary scheme, we can sharpen our perception of situations in which the two forms of violence occur simultaneously.

Against the background of this dichotomy of orders of violence, modernity is perceived as heavy, solid, condensed, and systemic. Its essential elements are Fordism, bureaucracy, and the panopticon, all of which follow a telos (see Bauman, 2000b: 16–52). The comprehension of violence appears to be homogeneous and strictly delimited. Within the modernity, violence is equated primarily with physical violence. Bauman (1996) attributes this to the modern individual being primarily conceptualised as a 'soldier' and 'producer'—a disciplined carrier of kinetic energy measured by his health (ibid., 52–81; see also Foucault, 1979). The individual body is at the centre of attention and thus serves as the anchor point of the understanding of violence. As Richard Bessel (2015: 44) has suggested, this 'earlier' understanding of violence is characterised by the fact that it centres on the perpetrator's perspective. However, the motivations of the perpetrators are socially repressed and branded as 'unmodern'. As Jan Philipp Reemtsma (2012: 145–153) mentions: modern societies tend to spatialise, temporalise, and mystify violence. Acts of violence occur in other regions, at other 'pre-modern' times or are an expression of pathological or unfathomable conditions. By suppressing violence from the self-description of modern

societies, every outbreak of violence seems to be perceived as horror (Reemtsma, 1996: 34–35).

Bauman (1996: 53; my translation) claims that 'in particular, the relatively new, postmodern mechanisms [...] are built right into the structure of everyday life and thus translate into typically postmodern manifestations of violent action'. Against this background, the postmodern order of violence exhibits characteristics that cannot easily be reconciled with the features just mentioned. According to Bauman (2000a, b), societies that are linked to this type are described as light, liquid, diffuse, and network-like (Bauman, 2000a, b: 16–52; Castells, 1996). They are associated with uncertainty, ambiguity, and loss of identity. The individual is perceived as a 'consumer' and 'player'. It is, first and foremost, a creative organism of experience measured by its fitness (Bauman, 1996; Bauman, 2007: 72–116). Whereas in the modern order of violence, the perspective of the perpetrator was in the foreground; in the postmodern order, it is the perspective of the victim that is increasingly adopted and becomes the guiding discourse (Bessel, 2015: 44). By emphasising the victim's perspective, individual and social issues increasingly gain even more potential to be interpreted as violence. Against this background, the space of interpretation opens up and non-physical acts also become negotiable as violence—e.g., bullying, stalking, social dispositions, and the distribution of knowledge (Hearn et al., 2022). Since a lot of things can be interpreted as violence in the postmodern order, there is an apparent obsession with violence, which is supported by a 'therapeutic discourse' (Illouz, 2008). Violence is seen in the postmodern order as an inherent component of today's society that must be examined through a critical theory of all dimensions of everyday life. Whereas violence was regarded as an exceptional horror in the modern order, it allegedly takes the form of ongoing terror in postmodernity. It can appear discursively at any time.

In this comparison, the change from the modern to the postmodern order of violence seems to have epochal importance. The possibility of simultaneity and the resulting field of tension are not considered by theorists given to binary thinking,[1] or are at least only implied. Empirical evidence shows that both orders of violence can co-exist and that there is undoubtedly an unresolved struggle for interpretative sovereignty over violence—for example, in the question of whether the structural disadvantage and discrimination of people of colour (Weissinger, Mack, & Watson, 2017) are already considered violence. Against this background,

the narrative of a clear epochal boundary in understanding violence becomes questionable.

By juxtaposing the two ideal types—the modern and the postmodern order of violence—it becomes observable that allegedly different orders merge seamlessly into one another, while violence is increasingly mediatised, integrated into different contexts, and freed from its spatial constraints. Here, we see a change in how society deals with violence and what it knows about it. Modern and postmodern orders of violence co-exist and lead to social phenomena that can be categorised as neither one nor the other. Instead, we encounter a process from which third, independent understandings of violence and corresponding forms of action emerge. I want to call this process the *refiguration of violence*.

Refigured Violence

Norbert Elias' (1978: 104–133) used the term 'figuration' to create 'a simple conceptual tool to loosen this social constraint to speak and think as if "the individual" and "society" were antagonistic as well as different' (ibid.: 130). Figurations are to be understood as structures of tension that result from interdependencies. According to Elias, it is a characteristic of figurations that they can change with people and societies in the course of life.

The term 'refiguration'[2] (cf. Christmann, Knoblauch, & Löw, 2022; Knoblauch, 2020: 207–278; Löw & Knoblauch, 2019, 2020, 2022; Löw et al., 2021) builds on Elias' reflections about figuration. It encompasses more than just the principle of inter-connection or two trends at the same time. Instead, it is a development resulting from the tension between modernisation and postmodernisation. The tendencies of postmodern heterogenisation, dissolution of boundaries, and de-centralisation do not simply replace modern homogenisation, containment, and their organised centralisation but also stand in an ongoing conflictual, tense relationship that reshapes violence. It is not only about the postmodern opening, pluralisation, or ambiguity of violence, which individuals must now deal with in their own way. Modern tendencies can be seen as 'regressive' only if it is assumed that the development from modernity to postmodernity is logically necessary. The refiguration concept attempts to undermine precisely this assumption (cf. Knoblauch, 2020: 368 et seqq.). It assumes that 'heavy/solid/condensed/systemic modernity' (Bauman, 2000b: 25) does not seamlessly transform into its 'light/liquid/diffuse/

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[1] Cross-cutting this finding are non-binary approaches, such as the 'procedural orders of violence' (Lindemann, 2021: 231–273) or the 'violence regimes' (Hearn et al., 2022), which do not distinguish between modernity and postmodernity. My conception of refigured violence is partly informeed by these theories.

[2] The concept of *refiguration* was essentially developed by the Berlin-based collaborative research centre CRC 1265 'Re-Figuration of Spaces'. My explanations build on the theoretical assumptions developed in this research centre. An overview can be found at: https://sfb1265.de/en/.

network-like' counterpart. Instead, what emerges from the differences between the two tendencies is a spatial, temporal, and social reordering of the relations between people and things, which also affects their relation to violence.

Refiguration makes it possible to describe and explain those phenomena that arise from the tension in the transition between modern and postmodern orders of violence. Hubert Knoblauch (2020: 273) writes, 'With the concept of refiguration we want to avoid a mere juxtaposition and emphasise that we are not concerned with a new epoch, an epochal boundary, or even a threshold. Communication society is not a dominant type of society, but a diagnosis in the context of an ongoing transformation process. Refiguration describes this change'.

Against this background, the refiguration of violence asks how understandings and forms of violence are related to each other individually and institutionally and what tensions and balances of power this results in. The question of interpretive authority over violence has become a field of conflict unto itself that can divide society. In contrast to the assumption that postmodernity almost necessarily leads to a 'world society' (Dasgupta & Kivisto, 2014), the concept of refiguration also considers opposing tendencies. The tension between different logics is constitutive for many contemporary societies. This tension often results in political, social, or cultural conflicts (Löw & Knoblauch, 2021: 32–33). The concept of refiguration illustrates a change in the quality of the social. It articulates non-linear and non-dialectical tensions based on opposites but cannot be reduced to their binarity. These tensions are active forces expressed in communicative action and thus determine the expression and direction of social change (Löw & Knoblauch, 2020).

The refiguration of modernity can be observed in three developments,[3] which are mediatisation, polycontexturalisation, and translocalisation (Löw & Knoblauch, 2022: 22–24). Although these concepts are closely interwoven, they refer to different dimensions of the 'refiguration of violence'.

Mediatisation highlights the medial aspects of violence. It refers to a change in the relationship between people, technologies, and communicative actions (Suchman 2007; Hepp, 2013). The current refiguration of violence is essentially brought about by digital transformation. Digitalisation increasingly influences every area of society (Hepp, 2019). Digital mediatisation has changed violence, social action, and imaginaries of violence. This is particularly true as digital media enable a rapid trans-situational exchange about violence. They lead to the circulation of images of violence and are thus sometimes involved in the production acts of violence (Coenen & Tuma, 2022). In contrast

to previous mass media, the new information and communication media enable many-to-many communication. But they also increase the quality, frequency, and density of one-to-one and one-to-many interactions (Couldry & Hepp, 2016). This makes it easier to disseminate and discuss texts, images, videos, and voice messages about violent events, as exemplified by the role of social media in the early Egyptian Revolution (Kharroub & Bas, 2015) or the context of Black Lives Matter (Mowatt, 2018). Digital mediatisation is not only a driving force of the refiguration of violence, but it sometimes takes on specific forms of violence, such as 'digital' and 'smart' violence (Lumsden & Harmer, 2019). This means that violence can be perpetrated through digital media. Smart violence is, for example, domestic violence perpetrated through digital surveillance and restraint with the help of smart devices. Thus, the current refiguration of violence cannot be understood without a digitalisation of violence.

Another development is *polycontexturalisation*. This concept highlights violence's references to meaning. Following Niklas Luhmann (2013: 167 et seqq.), it can be said that violence is integrated into various references of meaning in a functionally differentiated society. As Knoblauch and Löw (2020: 279 et seqq.) follow on from this, 'polycontexturality refers only to meaning, so that different sense relations are simultaneously established on different functional systems levels like economy, politics, science, religion, etc'. Through this 'multiple inclusion', institutions, spheres of action, and forms of violence are now also linked in new and complex ways (Knoblauch, 2020). Multiple framings of a given violent situation circulate. For example, the attacks in Christchurch and Halle—in which right-wing extremist perpetrators streamed their deadly deeds live on the internet—and the debates about #MeToo are integrated into political, mass media, legal, artistic, scientific, and many other discourses. Violence is embedded in 'contextures' (Knoblauch, 2021; Coenen & Tuma, 2022). Contextures can link different violent actions to each other in a material way that they can affect the enactment of violence itself.

Finally, *translocation* emphasises the spatial networks in which violence is embedded. According to Knoblauch and Löw (2020: 281), translocation refers to 'the embedding of social units such as families, neighbourhoods, and religious communities in circulations that connect the various places with each other. This can involve the mobility of people, the mediatization of communicative actions, or the movement of goods, technologies, and other objectivations, such as those found in commodity chains'. Today's wars, for example, cannot be understood without the mobility of people, cross-local communication, and the circulation of things and technologies. The ecological violence cited in the context of climate protests forces people to leave regions. This movement is in turn debated via digital and mass media. The

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[3] Theoretical groundwork for these developments can be found in Knoblauch (2020: 233–267).

translocation of violence is also evident in the use of drones (Bauman, 2013), in which the weapon systems extend over several regions, and the places where a bomb is dropped and where the bomb hits can be enormously distant from each other. Local acts of violence can have a global impact on the corresponding discourse. For example, the death of George Floyd fuelled a global and high-profile discourse on the relationship between physical and structural violence. These discussions in turn have an influence on the perception and interpretation of racist and police violence.

Shock Sites: A Vignette Beyond Modern and Postmodern Violence

In the following, I reveal an empirical vignette that shows that current social attitudes towards violence cannot be easily divided into teleologically framed modern and postmodern understandings. Instead, it represents a phenomenon that stands in tension between these two understandings of violence. It cannot be subordinated to either a modern or a postmodern understanding.

The case in point are homepages on the internet, where pictures and videos particularly perceived as disturbing and shocking are collected. These are so-called shock sites or gore sites. The apparent foci of these sites are pictures and videos showing injured, tortured, and killed bodies. Over the past 4 years, I have conducted online ethnographic fieldwork (Kozinets 2015; Hallett & Barber, 2013) on these homepages and the communities that are constituted on them. My research centred on two gore sites that can be found on Clearnet[4] and are currently available online.[5] The subject of my research is, on the one hand, a member-based streaming website on which videos provided by registered members can be viewed and, on the other hand, a forum where all visitors can upload images and video material without registering.

The social dissemination and discussion of images of dead or suffering bodies are not new. Killings have long been part of the history of audiovisual media (Kerekes & Slater, 1995). For example, the film *Faces of Death* (directed by John Alan Schwartz, USA 1978), which features partly real and partly re-enacted killing scenes, was traded under the table in schoolyards in the 1980s and 1990s. But this practice was bound up in a different figuration. It was local and personal. Shock sites, on the other hand, are based on the fact that numerous users can anonymously and translocally exchange recordings of lethal acts. The spread of smartphones means that killings can be recorded more often and uploaded to the internet without much effort. Videos of killings are a global phenomenon, as they are sent around the world. So here we meet another figuration in which the sharing of violent images is involved: pictures and videos of violence are embedded in a new media context. In some cases, they are produced precisely for this purpose to unfold their effect in this milieu—such as the killing videos of the terrorist organisation ISIS, which are aesthetically oriented towards online reception (Chouliaraki & Kissas, 2018). At the same time, they no longer circulate locally but globally. Shock sites can be accessed worldwide and, thus, enable a trans-local exchange of violent images and videos. These homepages are also integrated into different contexts. They can aim at various audiences (Meis 2013; Üngör 2019). The fact that people share extremely shocking depictions of killings is linked to legal, economic, ethical, political, and educational issues, among others. Against these developments, we can only explain how the 'Internet Death Video Community' (Khayambashi, 2021), a community that focussed exclusively on collecting, discussing, and evaluating death videos, emerged in refigured modernity.

Some shock sites that have gained a degree of notoriety are the homepages ogrish.com, rotten.com, and bestgore.com, which have since been shut down. On these sites, lethal acts, in particular, are exposed. The homepages state that they are not meant to glorify violence. It is about illuminating the dark side of the world. One shock site states the following: 'This site does not condone violence. […] We simply document the reality of the world in which we live in. Instead, it is about documenting the events happening in the world'. Rotten.com's homepage described it as 'an archive of disturbing illustrations'. At the time, Ogrish.com advertised with the slogan 'Uncover reality'. Bestgore.com claimed to 'show the truth', and LiveLeak.com claimed to redefine mass media reporting.

However, shock sites are not only used to upload violent images and videos. In many cases, communities also form on these sites (Khayambashi, 2021). The users build social relationships with each other. They discuss the content of the videos, support each other in different life situations, and often see themselves as an exclusive community. There are sometimes strong distinctions between the gore pages. The videos found by members are treated as 'property', which is associated with a particular commitment and should not be passed on to others. Members praise each other for particularly 'gory' videos that have been found. Friendships are formed that can also lead to offline meetings. And if users have problems, they

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[4] The Clearnet, also known as the Surface Web or Open Internet, refers to the part of the internet that is accessible via standard web browsers and search engines. It consists of websites and content that are publicly accessible and indexed by search engines. The Clearnet is, therefore, the counterpart to the Darknet, an overlay network that is not accessible via standard web browsers and requires special software and configurations to access.

[5] For research ethics reasons, I will not mention the names of the websites. I do not want to contribute to disseminating this image and video data, and I also want to protect the anonymity of those involved in the field.

are supported. For example, a woman who said she was being stalked was given advice and emotional support by community members and was offered emergency contacts. Shock sites can thus be understood as violence-related communities with their viewing habits and ways of acting. These include a usually harsh and sarcastic communication style and crude black humour that degrades the victims or perpetrators of violence in the photographs and videos.

But users do not make fun of all victims of violence who are shown in the videos and pictures. Instead, they have their own 'moral codes' (Alvarez, 2017). As my field research shows, different groups are sometimes degraded, admired, and mourned to various degrees. Violence towards parents in the presence of their children or, currently, Ukrainian soldiers is devalued and highly despised. A recording showing a Ukrainian soldier who has surrendered being beheaded, for example, is commented on as follows: 'This is bullshit even after he surrendered I hope that mfer who did gets same fuck that animal shit'. If, on the other hand, a video or picture caption states that the people beaten, tortured, or killed were people who abused children or women or were homosexuals, the violence is partly affirmed. For example, a video of a man being burnt who is believed to be a rapist is commented on with the following post: 'got what he deserved! not so cocky now is he!!!' Another post about this reads: 'they should do this everywhere... to rapists and child molesters... They should allow their victims to be the ones to exact this sort of justice. Might make the rate of such crimes to diminish'. Nevertheless, the relationship between the videos and the groups acting in them is ambivalent. It may well be the case, for example, that the terrorist militia ISIS is despised on shock sites, but its videos are celebrated (Cottee, 2022).

At first glance, shock sites may be associated with a modern understanding of violence. The images and videos collected on the sites are based on a narrow concept of violence. Without exception, they are visualisations of physical violence. In many cases, violence is also spatialised and temporalised (Reemtsma 2012). Although there are also videos that originate from a Western context, most videos are nevertheless attributed to Latin American, African, or Middle Eastern countries. They are also sometimes labelled with stereotypical and Western-centric comments. For example, the following post can be found under a video that is supposed to show an act of violence in an African country: '[T]hat's why Africa is a third world country. Good idea, let's go backwards instead of moving forwards'. Not only the African continent, but also the violence in the video is interpreted here as unmodern and 'out of date'.

Nevertheless, some aspects cannot be subordinated to a modern understanding of violence. Violence is not consistently perceived here as horror and as something negative. Instead, violent videos are spectacular and entertaining (Morse, 2020). A video showing the execution of a man, for

example, is commented on with the words 'nice........really nice!!!!'. Numerous reaction videos can now be found on YouTube in which people film themselves watching killing videos, staging this as a kind of gruesome event and then sharing and making fun of their reactions. Violence is in no way romanticised, but neither is it pathologised. It is a phenomenon that belongs to social reality and should be documented. The communities that emerge on shock sites can be understood as 'affectual tribes' (Maffesoli, 1996: 95). They form around a shared interest in watching violent and homicidal videos and are united by a common fascination with depictions of violence and the associated emotions such as shock, suspense or sensationalism. It is about sharing a violence-related experience.

Although video material showing physical violence is expressly desired in the Internet Death Video Community, 'violence' and 'violation' between users are undesired. There is a broad understanding of violence in these communities, namely when it comes to interactions between members. Here, not only physical but also verbal assaults are regarded as violence. Respectful communication between users seems to occur frequently[6] and is sometimes explicitly prescribed. Verbal violence is forbidden in many cases and leads to exclusion from the sites. The websites 'terms of use' generally prohibit users from engaging in violent communication. They are not allowed to insult each other in a racist, sexist, or phobic way. For example, the 'terms of use' of a shock site states: 'Do not use terminology that would conventionally be considered racist or derogatory towards a specific ethnic group. Do not use terminology that would conventionally be considered a slur against a person's gender or choice of gender identification. Do not use terminology that would conventionally be considered derogatory towards a person's sexual preference, whether that be by design or by choice. Site Administrators will have the final determination on what words are in violation. […] Threats of violence towards other members, the public, or any person or group of people is strictly prohibited, will result in immediate ban, and I will personally contact law enforcement if I feel it's warranted'.

There are many indications that individual aspects of a modern understanding of violence can be found here. Nevertheless, shock sites cannot be subordinated to this attitude towards violence. Instead, a juxtaposition of modern and postmodern understandings of violence takes place. Concerning the video content, a homogeneous, narrow concept of violence often takes effect, which puts the perpetrator's perspective and an apparent reference to the body in the foreground. The discussions about the videos are not about

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[6] Hall, Hearn, and Lewis (2022) make a similar finding, noting a 'polite misogyny' between perpetrators of upskirting. Here, respectful communication takes place between those who share upskirting images online.

psychological or structural violence or about what the victim perceives as violence. They are about how the perpetrators act on their victims' bodies, torturing, decapitating, dismembering, burning, and disfiguring them. The members of the Internet Death Video Community do not describe the acts of violence seen in the recordings as illegal per se but tolerate or even affirm them in some cases. In contrast, a heterogeneous, broad concept of violence is found at the level of the video community, which is characterised by the accentuation of the victim's perspective and personality. The terms of use and administrators prohibit racist, sexist, and phobic statements among members and sometimes even sanction these with exclusion from the community. While, in many cases, decentralised control of members and an internalised renunciation of violence are the order of the day, there are also explicit references to the state: Those who post videos that show violence against children and animals as well as paedophile acts are not only excluded from the community but are also reported to the police.

The previous comments on shock sites should have clarified one thing clear: These sites are found in a tension between modern and postmodern orders of violence. To explain this phenomenon, it is not enough to refer only to domestication and individualisation and to look at the discourse level. Instead, a look at mediatisation, polycontexturalisation, and translocation can be helpful here. How are shock sites linked to media change? How are they integrated into different provinces of meaning? And in which spatial networks are these homepages embedded?

The communication about violence observed on these websites can primarily be explained by digital *mediatisation* (Hepp, 2019). Many images and videos are circulating that show injured, tortured, and killed bodies. This can be attributed, among other things, to the fact that the mass industrial production of camcorders and smartphones makes it easy to record violent situations audiovisually and distribute them online (Collins 2008: 3ff.). Whereas in the middle of the twentieth century it was the exception rather than the rule that (then still quite large) film cameras were present in killing situations, nowadays the smartphone is an everyday tool that is also quickly to hand in lethal situations. This means that images of violence can also be quickly posted online (Meis 2013). The social media in the Clearnet and the development of the Darknet also facilitate communication about violent footage—primarily through the possibility of anonymous and trans-local exchange. Killing videos can be shared, collected, and made available more easily thanks to the tools? structures provided by the internet, without having to disclose who exactly is involved in these practices. The platform structures of social media sites make it possible for the recordings to be quickly shared among those with a thematic interest in them using hashtags and algorithms. The acts of violence seen on shock sites are influenced by changes in the media (Hoebel,

Reichertz, and Tuma 2022) and are spread faster, further, and of different quality (Harju and Huhtamäki 2023).

At the same time, shock sites are integrated into various contexts, and violence is *polycontexturalised*. According to the self-descriptions of these websites mentioned above, the operators and users of shock sites endeavour to disseminate killing videos worldwide in order to document what is happening in the world. In addition, the wide dissemination of killing videos is also attributed to the fact that these recordings fascinate significant numbers of viewers and can be seen as a spectacle (Morse, 2020). In the postings, the videos are integrated into various contexts. War footage is used to discuss political issues and place the acts of violence in the context of current world events. Professions close to death, such as soldiers, undertakers, and firefighters, sometimes use the recordings to process their professional experiences (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2009). The videos are used to discuss the anatomy of the human body. Users state that the death videos also lead to a new attitude towards life by acting as a memento mori (Khayambashi 2021). Many contents are hidden behind a paywall, so the sites are also integrated into economic structures. In contrast, there are legal, educational, and political efforts to restrict the distribution of these videos. This is done, for example, by imposing sanctions for disseminating these recordings in some countries. In 2005, for example, German youth protection authorities called for access to the website Ogrish.com to be blocked via German IP addresses. The reason for this was an offence against the law on the distribution of material glorifying violence. The site was also blocked in Spain by order of an investigating judge when footage of the 2004 Madrid bombings appeared on it (Astley 2016). Death videos thus find themselves in a tense relationship that is symptomatic of the refiguration of violence. On the one hand, they are forcing their way into the public discourse, while on the other, attempts are being made to push them out of it again.[7]

Finally, shock sites are also involved in *translocalisation*. They collect images and video material from various countries. They show the deeds of Mexican drug cartels, Russian and Ukrainian soldiers, Brazilian gangs, Pakistani lynch mobs, US police officers, and much more. These are juxtaposed and sometimes compared with each other. In this way, shock pages function as a global archive of physical violence. They can also be viewed worldwide. Users from different regions of the world interact with each other on the pages. Although some sites are blocked in individual

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[7] A paradigmatic figure who has to deal with this tension is, for example, the content moderator, who is responsible for viewing all video material uploaded to social media sites and deciding whether it may be published. To enforce the legal framework, this person must deal with the violent and disturbing content of killing videos. This often happens without professionalised psychosocial support, which in turn has an impact on the mental health of the content moderators (Gillespie 2018).

countries, users counteract this to some extent by using VPNs to cover their tracks. The practice of sharing and discussing death videos is therefore no longer as localised as it was as recently as 50 years ago, but has become a global, cross-spatial phenomenon (McKenna 2023).

Refiguration and Violence

Understanding the present as a 'refigured modernity' (Knoblauch, 2020: 270) makes it possible to better describe and explain current phenomena of violence. Not only do shock sites result from the tension in the transition between modern and postmodern orders of violence, but domestic violence, torture, hate speech, the debate about violence in the context of Black Lives Matter, climate activism, #MeToo, and smart violence can also be located in this field of tension. They are all influenced by (digital) mediatisation, their polycontextural embeddedness, and trans-local references. And they all illustrate the critical role that knowledge about violence plays today (Coenen, 2022).

Refiguration enables new analyses and explanations, such as how a 'brutalised life' (Beauchez, 2021) emerges. It shows that people develop their understanding of violence and their relationship to violence amid mediatised fields of action, numerous references to meaning, and networked spaces. It also shows that different forms of violence influence each other in the midst of these developments (Schinkel, 2013). The application of the concept of the refiguration of violence thus opens up a perspective through which aspects of violence come into view that modern or postmodern approaches cannot readily grasp. It shows that we live in distinctively violent times today because not only has the definition of violence changed but also its technical, spatial, and contextural conditions.

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