

Violence and Visibility.

Historical, Cultural, and Political Perspectives from the 19th Century to the Present

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Moralistic criticism of physical violence is at the heart of modernity. It is tied to a teleological understanding of modernity and civilization as evolutionary processes, which implicate a steady lessening of violent incidents in number and cruelty. These perceptions are based on a concept of physical integrity that has been established as a moral and legally protected value since the age of enlightenment. Transatlantic discourses have configured this morally critical stance towards violence in general, and towards state violence in particular, such as legal torture and the death penalty. Till this day, these discourses have been shaping a specific cultural self-perception of modern societies grounded in an aversion to violence.

Yet, as we all know, violence - understood here as physically aggressive human interaction - continues to be an inherent characteristic of modern societies. This creates a seeming paradox and inevitably raises the question of which techniques and strategies are employed to make the persistence of physical violence on the one hand, and a "civilized" self-image on the other hand, compatible. This seeming paradox is the starting point of our interdisciplinary and international conference. Scholars from Germany and the United States, working in the fields of history, literature, media studies, and cultural studies are invited to discuss the relationship between violence and visibility in societies on both sides of the Atlantic from the 19th century to the present.

This project revolves around the major thesis that neither the amount of violence nor its intensity have undergone measurable changes in this period of time, but that first and foremost its forms and visibilities have been radically transformed. Or, to put it differently, cultural uneasiness in the face of physical violence is less influenced by its scope and degree, but rather by its visibility. Visibility shall be understood here first in the phenomenological sense of the term as „being-visible“, and second, as a concept which implicates a discourse analytical approach. Whereas the phenomenological perspective raises questions regarding the images and mediatization of violent acts, the discursive concept of visibility investigates the conditions of possibility for specific types and acts of violence to come into view within a certain cultural configuration.

After all, the creation of multiple and new (in)visibilities of physical violence in modernity are closely related to the media revolutions since the beginning of the 19th century, particularly the development of photography, film, and modern mass media. We seek to explore the interdependencies of violence, visibility, and media with several guiding questions, such as: How is violence presented in

pictures of everyday life, films or photography, such as war photography, or legal photography? To what extent and under which circumstances may representations of violence serve either to legitimize or to scandalize violence? Or, to put it more generally: Which multiple and diverse effects are generated by the visibility of violence, created *in* and *by* modern media?

At this point, power structures come into play. The seeming legitimacy of certain types of violence does not only depend on their visibility, but also on the power structures they are embedded into. Acts of violence are directed at certain subjects, re/producing their different positions in certain cultural, social, and political configurations. Often enough, these subjects are defined by visible markers and violence might be employed and presented to visibly oppress or enhance them. We will analyze violence and visibility as socially structuring forces that contribute to the positioning of human beings within power structures and influence their opportunities to criticize, delegitimize, and/or scandalize their subjection to violent experiences. In this complex and multilayered field of violence, visibility, and power, we intend to focus particularly on the significance of racism and scrutinize the differences and similarities between Germany and the United States.

The sessions, contributions, and discussions at the conference shall revolve around five different types of visualization that we deem as specifically suited to exemplify the interdependencies in this complex field:

1. Display

First, we seek to discuss the relation of the phenomenon of violence in modernity and different types of its display. We intend to scrutinize the relation between violence, corporeality, and the public in different historical and cultural configurations. A fertile approach to these aspects could be the exploration of the function of photography in public performances of violence.

2. Scandalize

Second, we ask you to discuss scandalization as a crucial modern strategy for dealing with violence. Which different forms and dynamics of scandalization were employed in specific cultural and historical configurations? Which role does the visualization of violence play within attempts to scandalize acts of violence in modern societies, and to what extent is this related to 19th and 20th century media transformations?

3. Document

Third, we want to focus on documentation as a crucial practice of modern societies in their efforts to deal with violence. Here, we seek to explore how different documentation practices and techniques interact with (de)legitimizations of physical violence and the interplay between documentations of violence and attempts to claim and to assert legal rights.

4. Conceal

Fourth, concealment is another modern strategy for dealing with violence by making it invisible. Different techniques of masking violence shall be discussed, and a focus might be laid on the means employed by the state to disguise its own violent practices. Which role, for example, does the claim to uphold the bodily integrity of human beings play within attempts to justify and legalize modern torture techniques? Which new invisibilities of violence have come into existence, for instance through the implementation of modern practices of punishment and new methods of imprisonment? And: How is the visual representation of state violence regulated and what implications does it have for the configuration and perception of modern statehood?

5. Fictionalize

Last but not least, we would like to explore explicitly the relation between fact and fiction, between the continuity of violence in modern societies and its fictionalization. How can we grasp the relation between the fictionalization of violence and its representation in historic documents? What is the relationship between forms of fictionalization and the overt (de)legitimization of physical violence in modern societies?