

(Micro)evidences: a history of the violent sequence

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Abstract. *The present study capitalizes the specific meanings of the handbook term, defining the vague and imprecise (imprinted by ambiguity) frame of violence, in order to assign it a visual dimension (a history). Hence, the attention given to the concept of violence which represents both a resource marked by regularity, predictability, latency or action and an interactional model impregnated by disorder and re-ordering, but equally influenced by exciting signals and by a control / normalization impulse. Establishing a connection based on the equivalence between the handbook allegation found in International Handbook of Violence Research and the spectra of violence from the movie A History of Violence, the present study's conviction is that violence can be accepted as an extreme episode of disorder, a chaotic sequence or as an imposed precipitation.*

Keywords: *violent sequences, intermediated condition, microviolence, personal violence, private violence.*

The violent sequence / microviolence: ambiguity and disambiguating imprecision

Firmly and lucidly, Hannah Arendt¹ convincingly states that violence has only sporadically been the subject of special studies, which would plead for a perpetuation of normality, marginality and ignorance – or for the acceptance of accidental – status concepts whose position might already be accidental, inconsequential and unclear. The present endeavor's aim is to confirm any overtaking of hesitating experiences which propa-

gate reflexes in (just the ab)use of addressing violence as a consolidated, self-standing occurrence with nodal points within aporias decreeing that: from a phenomenological point of view, even though it can be partially assimilated to vigor, violence differs from it by its instrumental character; violence can be justified, but it is never legitimate; between power and violence there exists a compensatory relationship through which the status of prime and predominating factor is afforded to power.

With a clear target in underlining the (recent-date) escalation of analyses focusing upon the subject of

violence, and advertising itself as an *international manual for violence research*, the paper Wilhelm Heitmeyer and John Hagan² edit (re)launches the equivocal, ambiguous, diffuse and controversial status of the term “violence”, considered as *one of the most difficult concepts with which the socio-humanistic sciences operate*.

From the series of compositions, causal relations and derivations it accepts, the possible clipping of a certain particular sense, expressed by the word *violence*, would expose the concept’s ability to successively destroy and re-create a specific order, referencing the fracture and re-constitution of an apparently stabilizing perimeter with an accent upon the protean and chameleonic perspective of the term itself³.

In fact, we are being accepted inside a *wider exposure frame* banking upon three coordinates of intersecting *textbook notes* and *cinematographic images*, interested in repossessing a situational grid comprising both violence and its conceptual circulation; by delimitating violence – producing situations from the private domain, exposed to unmediated identification; by an enhancement of stimulating conditions and the perils which can, approvingly, maintain the violent act as a liberating mode and a positive solution, through sequential linking; by a release from the registry of humor while adopting a neutral, perhaps even ignoring, attitude towards any climate of satire and jest⁴.

Not able to nominate a theoretical current which would profoundly reassess the sense of this concept, the

present study will exclusively target a chain of *violent sequences*, of differing degrees and precipitated reifications. We note that *sequence* denominates here any episodic, particular frame with a high degree of contamination and maximal intensity; thus, we opt for a concentrating, monopolizing and exploiting concept of the violent act itself, with (im)mediate repercussions within the sphere dominated by rationing powers.

Without explicitly targeting a certain extended argumentative reflex – from Durkheim and Simmel, to Girard or Bourdieu’s symbolic violence – we can still defer, as theoretical premises of the present study, *sequentially* verified hypotheses stating that social factors imprint an external constraining power by appealing either to determined sanctions or to a degree of resistance which antagonizes any individual enterprise through abuse⁵. In a Simmelian⁶ way, conflict is unavoidable, representing a confrontation between actors and extracting its essence from dissociative factors – hate, envy, need or desire – a frame for solving diverging dualisms by appealing to either victory, compromise, conciliation or a decisive denial of any solution, with the avowed purpose of (re)launching a new co-existence.

The historical route of this concept confirms the inextricable link established between power and violence, a relationship illustrated and proven by an interference of suggestive terms included in the concept series of *possibility, aptitude and*

ability, force and energy, action and resistance, while maintaining at the same time and in the same Arendtian sense (1999) the statement that there can be no gradual difference between power and violence. Hence, the particular significance reattributed to violence by non- conflict, but also by the indication/indicative of conflictual possibilities, suggested by the connected proportion *cause- context- method*⁷.

Microviolence consolidates the status of any individual violent act, which we consider to be engendered by social context. Intentional, deliberate and limited to immediate near space (both inside the public and private sphere) *microviolence* acknowledges personal guilt, engendering remorse, reproach, justifying explanations or personal consolations; and functions at all levels of personal responsibility. The category of *individual or private violence* exposes the sequence of enhanced public space as maneuver area for *microviolence*.

Frédéric Gros⁸ anticipates certain semantic values easily attributable to the concept of *microviolence/violent sequence*, and found also in the anarchical signs/signals specific for strategic fragmentation; they are identical to those *intermediate states* expressed by/through: *situation/ context – positioning the intermediary – the politics of the undefined – the reaction and the effect of passivity towards violence*.

Micro evidences: the violent sequence and its history

After finishing any inventory based upon a *dynamics of violent sequences*, Randall Collins⁹ notes that *microviolence* represents a recording of violent acts, capturing upon celluloid that violence which seals an edge situation, a self-maintaining alloy (*re- recording – reenacting – observing*) cumulating angst and tensions, and impacting upon the demolition of those [cinematographically] myths referencing violence: the non- infectious impact (distancing and detaching) and the length of the sequence (dramatic time is not real time, because it compresses the essence). Certainly, theorizing violence cannot ignore the physiognomy of a situational process, directed [*as a sequence*] by a careful mixture of tension and fear, approximated by interpersonal energy, with the necessary statement that the exclusive attribute deriving from the *micro* is that of *hard violence*.

A history of *microviolence* is imprinted by the observation that any *violent sequence* acknowledges an accelerated degree of development and is manifestly disinterested in open violence. Alternatively, it flaunts a tendency to project itself upon interactive media, directed towards the anticipation and prevention of conflictual tensions, which preserve certain shades/shadows and their reaction roles.

Randall Collins¹⁰ offers a frame which *microviolence* might use in order to control and coordinate vio-

lent sequences, generically placed under the sign of assault or targeting the weak, through directioning them towards the audience: an appetite for direct confrontation/ deliberate avoidance of violence at a distance; or the use of particular techniques based mainly upon deceit. In fact, all these unified layers certify an amplification and intensification of panic, by underlining a dynamics of *sequences* (the present study endeavors to illuminate just a few of the properties of our particular argumentation) and proving that the *history of violence* is still concerned with/by *dominating emotional factors* which, moderated by equal/unequal graduations, determines both the type and types of violence.

A certain history of violence notes, on one hand, the *situational action form*, which comprises a regulation of moral actions¹¹, and on the other hand, a *base of instrumental strategy* which, although riskily-dangerous, still possesses adaptive-functional formulations¹². From this conjoined perspective (of questioning a general theory of action, or overtaking any methodological blockings found inside a theory of determinisms – be they individual or social/environmental – and their effect upon individual action in particular) violent acts represent moral actions occurring as effects of perceptions or choices oriented either towards an individual inclination towards violence, or the existence of a favorable context, irrigated in its turn by social conditions and an individual's particular history.

One cannot avoid, at this point in our research, a Foucaultian¹³ analysis maintaining that “micro society appeals to external powers, thus helping them to constitute and extend themselves, to gather a body”. From this perspective, we consider that such an assertion guarantees both “avoiding the trap of one's own history” and a correct approach towards identity in its relationship with the problem of “individuating power”. “The micro-physics of power” contributes to the maturation and development of a strategic concept of power, while at the same time suggesting that avoiding any use of “passive forms” (keeping in mind the “dominated ones”) can lead to an inflexion determined by an imprint of “presentism”, “relativism” or “cryptonormativism”. Thus any optics of synthesizing *political power* is marked by a *new mechanics* (the instating of total discipline; individual isolation and regrouping; localizing bodies; optimal use of forces; control and efficacy improvement, etc.) – and by a *new physiology* (definition of norms; approximation of mechanisms; reestablishing normality by corrective, therapeutically punitive interventions)¹⁴.

The answer a history of violence offers to the seven questions of/in the manual

With the avowed intention of extending (*elasticizing*, we note) the theoretical lines concentrated near the concept of violence, *International*

Handbook of Violence Research offers an essential formulation of its own significance, resorting to *seven* questions about *seven* complementary dimensions of violence/the violent act.

Our first question would reference the definition of a *triggering agent* for violence – perpetrator, initiator and subject of the violent act; the second level concentrates upon *action per se*, activated by the initiation of a violent act (and offering due importance to *particular sequences*, arrayed into a certain phenomenological type of violence which establishes that violence is included into a characteristic space and is produced in a specific moment); the third segment questions *ways of exercising violence*, developing during the violent act; the fourth objective targets the *directioning of violence* and identifies the *object* of a violent act; the following problem addresses *motives of/reasons for violence*, annotating the abstracting perspective and its sets of particular impulses, as well as its irrational factor; the sixth phase states *the objective of violence* – its intentions and purposes, reuniting actual situations and rational approaches, availing itself of hypothetical justifications, but also with an expressively – communicational dimension, of symbolic origin, expressed by relationships between interests – possibilities – contingencies; the last clarifying intervention is destined for *justification models* and *legitimizing strategies* of violence.

Restricted to such an analytical blueprint¹⁵, our *textbook notes* state

that violence comprises, in equal measure, an action and a structuring component, which include both objective conditions and subjective interpretations able to complicate the evolution of any historical coordinate.

Faithful to *its own history of violence*, the movie *A History of Violence* (2005), directed by David Cronenberg, although not straying too much from what Haneke defined as a visual representation of violence (maintaining the double values of *evil* – *doing violence* and *necessary violence*, as *only alternative for escaping from a violent world* and maintaining a connection to a context of humor and satire, as triggering elements of violence) offers, in a succession of visual images included in the field of cinematic art, articulate answers to any dogmatic interrogations we previously mentioned. The particular history of violence subsequently confirms the Arendtian¹⁶ opinion about that type of violence which is neither animalistic nor irrational; to act flamboyantly means to oppose the natural properties of fury and violence, and to accept the idea that fury/rage is not an automatic reaction.

Sliding between arrhythmic deployment, preserving pre-defined transfixions and precipitous tensions or/even that kind of panic which violence engenders, the *history* narrated by Cronenberg's movie confirms a perpetuation of given reality, because "whatever happened in the past is happening now too".

It is not by chance that the movie acts upon a charged registry of *agents*

for the violent act itself – perpetrators, initiators and subjects – in a carousel which is not blocked inside identity questions (questionable in their turn) but forces/forges the dual levels of personality itself: the chameleonic character Tom Stall has a peaceful name, which is “useful” for hiding a violent identity – represented by Joey Cusack, who cannot deny his family sins, as violent as any (his brother Richie Cusack becomes the leader of an organized crime group). If Tom Stall can be identified both as a subject and an initiator of violent acts, their perpetrator is the Mafia leader controlling the East Coast, Carl Fogarty – who served fifteen years for assault, was accused of murder and kidnapping, and whose wounded eye is capable of seeing through everything and distinguishing anyone’s true identity.

The film examines a whole violent array of means, anticipating actions engendered by initiating any violent act, and insisting upon *particular sequences*: it starts with an episode of partially hard violence, real in its anticipated development, depicting Fogarty’s two henchmen who head east, far from big, noisy cities; a decision which expresses a primary form of violence. Because the scene where a little girl is killed is unclear and unexplained, the frame is developed (as a probable source of Romanian language translation of the film’s title) by a nightmare Tom’s daughter, Sarah, has – filled with monsters hiding in the wardrobe.

The filming of sequences concentrated upon the violent act – visually, consciously/unconsciously, verbally abusive – banks upon a symbolic clue which overshadows *ways of exercising violence*; in Tom Stall’s bar someone tells about the shocking incident of a just married girl who, during the night, mistakes her husband for a criminal and attacks him (“one night I found myself with a fork stuck in my shoulder while she was saying ‘I love you’); on the baseball ground, in the halls of the local high school or outside it, Jack Stall (the one who does not understand the purposes of violence – for him violence seems pointless and cruel) is challenged by the alpha male (who decided, in his turn, to give up fighting those criminals he saw driving around) and resorts to the extremely violent gesture which solves the conflict (killing Fogarty by shooting him) even if he is convinced his act is pointless, because “violence is not worth it, it does not mean anything”.

Starting from that type of violence (*seen as a justifying means – a terrible moment which passes*) which transforms Tom Stall into a local American hero, a family man with deep roots in his community, a small entrepreneur, a hard-working type, with a shocking but also very common reaction (in the sense of a legitimizing strategy expressed by an instinctive act – *anyone else would have acted in the same way*) the screenplay fractures any signals a good city, taking care of its good

people, could send, by offering the pretext (*object*) of deviating from *good violence* towards *genuine violence*. Resuscitating his latent alter-ego – Joey – Tom Stall prolongs the violent sequence until the conflict is solved, ensuring the direct participation of his family; Eddie sees the crime being committed, Sarah hides, and Jack, dominated by his violent impulses, shoots Carl Fogarty.

If a majority of comments regarding Cronenberg's screenplay – without addressing numerous fans of both the director and the film, and without offering any privileged space to Cronenberg's screenplay accents or the relationship between the film and the *graphic novel* it was based upon) reveal the exaggerated importance given to those two violent landmark – characters – Fogarty and Richie – expressing an undisguised interest in avoiding the precarious delineation between/in naturalism and the ironic registry, the two landmarks which imbue violence with a certain simplicity, as a distinctive sign (through complicating antagonisms); if Richie is an atypical, theatrical gangster, with a clear role in amplifying the final seriousness of the situation and augmenting the subtlety of word exchanges throughout the film, Fogarty is the perfect type of charismatic promoter, incisive, terrifying, but also profound, able to decree two particular inflexions of violence; the allusive tone and the grave substance.

In Cronenberg's opinion, making history means identifying and activating, with recourse to instruments

and methods identical to this discipline, certain reference points defined both by/through intensity and efficacy. Not forgetting such a contextual approach, underscored by an equidistant reception of the explicit message, but also discernably closer to a range of possibilities which invest the transmitted message with a mission of exploring the surface of any central concept, the movie relies upon the triple nuance of farce, appearance and double, seen as *motives/reasons for violence*.

The ambiguity of Joe's nebulous past, allusively centered upon a dialogue with Richie, opens another registry of generic narrations and retrospectively values violence's different hierarchies, by giving its particular forms/formulas, reunited in an epicenter of violence, the main status, received as a sum, of *micro-sequential links*. In fact, Cronenberg's objective resides in a sublimation of violence – its eruption, with an intentional underlining of repercussions, results and systematic tracings of these sequences.

If, up to a point, the meeting between Joe and Richie (in that East announced/traced from the beginning, but pushed farther and farther away) creates the impression of an absolutely mediatic contact (allusive, by telephone, or intermediated by Ruben) their confrontation involves, though *the rule of the versus*, the *antinomian doubles*; *austerity versus ostentation*, *reserve versus gregariness*, *marriage versus homosexuality*¹⁷, not keeping them at a distance but on the

contrary placing them inside an obvious rapport; the brothers' embrace seems more like the premonitory sniffing preceding a violent confrontation between two carnivores, with a role in the indecisive selection of yet another violent insert. It is not by chance that the scene is subsumed to a tendency of regaining consolidating positions, seen as *an objective of the violent act* (Richie – “you cost me a lot” or “you should have been strangled when in diapers”) and reassesses Cronenberg's lack of interest for brute/brutal violence, and the way he is able to film violent scenes in quick succession, by passing without any pause from one scene (murder by shooting) to another. Hence the notable lack of any *flashback*, predominantly accrediting only the second term of a language- image relationship; Eddie reveals and denounces the identity change which consequently turns Tom into Joey, the extremely easy personality substitution taking place fast, seemingly at the touch of a hidden button, as the scene already suggested by Fogarty's statement and explaining the reason for his violent acts is the one polarizing the central message of personal sequences; Joey does not kill for money but for his own pleasure¹⁸.

If Cronenberg insists upon formatting his scenes depending on correspondences established between *good violence* and *bad violence* (with direct repercussions in family life, or in the sexual act; initially fun, normal, playful, and subsequently forced, abusive, abnormal, violent) the trapped

idea illustrated here is that of empathy with certain forms of violence to the detriment of others, a false observation if we consider the final scene which threatens, definitively, any possible solution of the conflict.

Banking upon the primordial idea of a reunited family by presenting an idyllic, representative image of Tom/Joey's family members seated at a table and saying their prayers, the *signals of violent sequences*, apparently or superficially solved, are conveyed by accumulated tensions in any scene with subjective echoes (the complicated playfulness of looking, frustration and affective sensations) and the symbol of the flesh/meat (being the main course at the family dinner) signifying a preference and/or inclination towards the violent, cruel act deciphered as a ritual inheritance and familial complacency.

A few conclusive assignments

In the same Arendtian¹⁹ registry, an intersection of textbook notes with the trajectory of *a history of violent sequences* attests to the fact that *fury* and *violence* belong to natural human categories, impossible to repress (cure, heal, forget); and reiterate the relationship between the individual and the irreversible act, as well as the rational attitude of protection; concluding that *violence is unable to control the evolution of history*²⁰.

If *the history of violence* is based upon a *slow retro travelling*, the sense of the term explains [here] something

other than a *potentiation of the violent sequence*; it possesses a family case history and is indebted to alternately independent actions, simultaneously confirming its status as a *resource* for violence (with nodal points in regularity, predictability, latency and action) but also as a *model* of interaction, impregnated by disorder and re-ordering, guided by exciting signals and an impulse towards regulation/normalcy.

It is the present study's conviction that a *violent sequence* (illustrated and commented, in this case, by a cinematic example) reclaims its con-

ceptual significance as an *experience* targeting both the dynamics and the content of reality, and reinstates a narrative – representational dynamic succession, understood and defined as a *history* of ideas, mounted inside a frame, and including the critical event and all its consequences²¹.

In fact, what is offered here is a narrative of *history*, without avoiding a contact with *History*, and respecting a self-imposed order and rhythm, which certify its status of linked-sequence concept, accepting a functional role in relation to the whole.

Note

¹ Hannah Arendt, *Crizele republicii (The Crises of the Republic)*, Humanitas, Bucharest, 1999.

² Wilhelm Heitmeyer, John Hagan (eds.), *International Handbook of Violence Research*, vol. 1, Kluwer Academic Publisher, 2003.

³ Wolf-Dieter Narr, *Gewalt*, in Ekkehard Lippert/Günther Wachtler (eds.), *Frieden. Ein Handwörterbuch*, Opladen, 1978, p. 158.

⁴ Michael Haneke, "Violența și mass-media" (*Violence and the Media*), *Idea Artă + Societate*, 44, 2013.

⁵ Émile Durkheim, *Regulile metodei sociologice (The Rules of the Sociological Method)*, Polirom, Jassy, 2002.

⁶ G. Simmel, "The Conflict in Modern Culture", in K.P. Etkorn (eds.), *The Conflict in Modern Culture and Other Essays*, The Teachers' College Press, New York, 1968.

⁷ Peter Imbush, *The Concept of Violence*, in Wilhelm Heitmeyer, John Hagan (eds.), *International Handbook of Violence Research*, vol. 1, Kluwer Academic Publisher, 2003, pp. 13-41.

⁸ Frédéric Gros, *Etats de violence*, Gallimard, Paris, 2006, p. 242.

⁹ Randall Collins, *Violence: A Micro-sociological Theory*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2008.

¹⁰ Randall Collins, "Micro and Macro Causes of Violence", *International Journal of Conflict and Violence*, 3 (1), 2009, pp. 9-22.

¹¹ Per-Olof Wikström, Kyle Treiber, "Violence as Situational Action", *International Journal of Conflict and Violence*, 3 (1), 2009, pp. 75-96.

¹² Manuel Eisner, "Uses of Violence. An Examination of some Crosscutting Issues", *International Journal of Conflict and Violence*, 3 (1), 2009, pp. 40-59.

- ¹³ Michel Foucault, *Anormalii (The abnormalis)*, Univers, Bucharest, 2000.
- ¹⁴ Axel Honneth, *Kritik der Macht. Reflexionsstufen einer kritischen Gesellschaftstheorie*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt/M., 1986.
- ¹⁵ Peter Imbush, *The Concept of Violence*, in Wilhelm Heitmeyer, John Hagan, (eds.), *International Handbook of Violence Research*, vol. 1, Kluwer Academic Publisher, 2003, pp. 21-23.
- ¹⁶ Hannah Arendt, *Crizele republicii [The Crises of the Republic]*, Humanitas, Bucharest, 1999, p. 165.
- ¹⁷ Bart Beaty, *David Cronenberg's A History of Violence*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2008.
- ¹⁸ John Wagner, Vince Locke, *A History of Violence*, Titan Books, 2011.
- ¹⁹ Hannah Arendt, *Crizele republicii [The Crises of the Republic]*, Humanitas, Bucharest, 1999.
- ²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 180.
- ²¹ Jean-François Lyotard, "Idea unui film suveran" (*The Idea of a Supreme Film*), *Idea Artă + Societate*, 17, 2004.

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