Aesthetic Reconfigurations of the Political during the Pandemic: Group Representations in Covid-19 Special Programmes on German Public Television

CHRISTIANE BARNICKEL

Independent researcher

DOROTHEA HORST

Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung

dorothea.boehme@wzb.eu

Abstract

We analyse audiovisual media discourse on Covid-19 through the lens of the political in order to illustrate how discursive practices establish and reconfigure subject positions and social orders in times of crisis. Drawing on Jacques Rancière's understanding of the political, we suggest that these reconfigurations can either stabilise existing (political) communities and power relations, or intervene in what is perceived as 'normal'. Analytically, we approach these (re)configurations on the level of media-aesthetics (the tangible), language (the utterable) and audiovisual representation (the visible) to demonstrate how a sense of commonality is produced or revised through artistic media practice (Richard Rorty).

We demonstrate our argument by means of Covid-19 'special programmes' on German public television, as they can be considered cultural practices of making situated sense of a global crisis. By analysing the tangible, the utterable and the visible in the broadcast from 13 December 2020, our illustrative analysis reveals a constant struggle between reconfigurations of the political and stabilisations of (a new) normalcy. We conclude with a plea for including a media-aesthetic perspective into the analysis of Covid-19 discourse as it opens up a more comprehensive (multimodal) idea and experiential dimension of the discursive construction of the pandemic.

Key words: the political, media aesthetics, Covid-19 discourse, audiovisual data, Germany

1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has shaken up what was generally considered to be 'normal' and displays several features of crises. Crises in this sense can be understood as transition phases accompanied by high levels of uncertainty and intensive negotiation of (new) knowledge (cf. Wengeler & Ziem, 2013, 4f.). Looking at crisis discourse in general, and the Covid-19 discourse in particular, through the lens of the political can contribute to an understanding of the

way(s) in which subject positions are negotiated and re-negotiated. Such negotiations of a 'new world' are inherently intertwined with constructions of positions and positionalities in the (new) political and social order.

The aim of this paper is to uncover how the aesthetic composition of audiovisual images (re)configures such very positions and positionalities. We use German public television programming of Covid-19 special programmes as an exploratory case of daily media coverage of an unfolding crisis to illustrate our theoretical-methodological argument: that the manifold discursive practices which construct positions and positionalities in the audiovisual format establish 'an order of the visible and the sayable' in Jacques Rancière's (1999, p. 29) terms. In this regard, they can be considered what Richard Rorty has described as a poetic doing, i.e. an artistic practice, that aims to create a sense of commonality through constantly reconfiguring solidary belonging. By focusing on not only language but also on the media-aesthetic and audiovisual aspects of Covid-19 media discourse, we can grasp the construction, deconstruction and stabilisation of these very orders.

Unsurprisingly, discourse studies community has been drawn to questions of who is being constructed as a group or community, what characteristics are ascribed to particular ethnic, occupational or age groups, and how group construction proceeds in and through discourse (for an overview, cf. Barnickel & Horst, 2022). From various epistemological and methodological perspectives, these contributions have provided valuable insights into sense production and (re)ordering during the pandemic in different communicative contexts and at various levels. However, they tend to focus exclusively on spoken or written text of political statements and media discourse (but cf. e.g. Miyake, 2021; Salgado Andrade, 2020; Žákovská, 2022; for an overview, cf. Barnickel & Horst, 2022).

In the light of these findings, we argue that it is the multimodality of (crisis) discourse that creates experiences of boundaries and boundary-drawing by establishing 'an order of the visible and the sayable' (Rancière, 1999, p. 29). This applies not only to the linguistic landscapes we are confronted with, e.g. the signs that remind us to keep distance, but also to other images that are in motion. Audiovisual images are particularly apt in elucidating how their *(media-)aesthetic composition* can partake in both: in the reconfiguration of the political but also in the stabilisation of what is perceived as normal (or: the police order in Rancière's terms, see below). Through the aesthetic composition of the format, which we access through the means of audiovisual staging, we gain insight into a historically situated mode of experience, a sense of commonality in the making during a time of crisis. This is what Richard Rorty (1998) has called a 'poetic doing' of political communities.

Our aim is to analyse the way(s) in which audiovisual images constitute a collective self-reference and sense of the world that becomes visible, tangible and utterable as aesthetic articulation in linguistic and media practices. We further interrogate the status of this medially created sense of the world by drawing on Jacques Rancière's work on dissensus (Rancière, 1999) and the distribution of the sensible (Rancière, 2000). Is it based on the existing common sense and sense of commonality by appealing to and remanifesting subject positions of the actual order? Or does it implement a disagreement-based shift of the social and, thus, constitute the political itself (Rancière, 2000) by redistributing the sensible, its political subjects and their attributions and

power relations (Rancière, 1999, 2010[1996])? In our case study, we hence aim to illuminate how a media-aesthetic perspective elucidates such practices of reconfiguration in the context of creating sense(s) of the pandemic world through discourse.

We proceed as follows: in the next section, we introduce our theoretical and conceptual background by bringing together social science, philosophical perspectives on the aesthetics of the political and film and media studies with a focus on media aesthetics. This endeavour helps us to substantiate how modes of togetherness and separation are being constructed, stabilised but also reconfigured – not just 'explicitly' in words but also experientially in audiovisual images. In a second step, we introduce the method and the case we use to explore and illustrate the potential of such an approach. Subsequently, we present and discuss our findings and conclude with a summary and outlook.

2. Media Aesthetics and the Political: Doing (Re)Configurations of Togetherness and Separation

Audiovisual images come with a particular media-aesthetic framing that engages the viewer and provides for specific bodily experiences (Müller & Kappelhoff, 2018; Sobchack, 1992). They cannot be considered self-evident representations of a commonly shared everyday world (Curtis, 2006) that transport information or entertainment; rather, they have the potential to configure and reconfigure a particular sense of commonality. Particular broadcasts or programmes have the power to either stabilise existing (political) communities along with the identifying inclusions and exclusions or intervene in what is perceived to be normal and partake in a reconfiguration of the political, depending on how they are composed.

Jacques Rancière and Richard Rorty share the idea of politics and poetics as being interwoven in artistic practice, such as cinema, literature or television. For both, artistic practice fulfils the utopia of a commonly shared world. According to them, this sense of commonality and its boundaries are subject to continuous negotiation and revision. Group characteristics and groups themselves are stabilised – through discursive, medial, institutional and pragmatic practices – and appear to be normal in a certain 'distribution of the sensible' (Rancière, 2013), the '*partage du sensible*' (Rancière, 2000). This notion is a central concept in Rancière's thinking on the political and aesthetics.

To describe this 'distribution of the sensible', he uses the term 'police'. Contrary to everyday usage, 'police' does not refer to the organisation tasked with enforcing the law but to a broader force of order: the social and political order that is considered 'normal'. The distribution of the sensible not only defines the configuration of spaces and places and what is utterable; it also demarcates what is visible:

> The police is thus first an order of bodies that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying, and sees that those bodies are assigned by name to a particular place and task; it is an order of the visible and the sayable that sees that a particular activity is visible and another is not, that this speech is understood as discourse and another as noise (Rancière, 1999, p. 29).

Rancière's understanding of 'police' defines 'a normalcy' or indeed 'the normalcy'. The distribution of the sensible, by demarcating and separating, constructs order, meaning and difference as well as commonality at the same time (Rancière, 2006; Tanke, 2010). In doing so, it renders alternative meanings invisible and unutterable (Rancière, 2009a). The distribution of the sensible consequently involves practices of determining and ascribing positions from which experience can be articulated as an allegedly commonly shared world, or, to borrow from Foucault's ideas: it defines institutional places from which speech is legitimate, distributing positions of (legitimate) speakers and (legitimate) arguments (Foucault, 1981). Those can be readable in newspapers or postings on social media, visible in official seats of particular institutions and in pictures, or perceptible in audiovisual images such as films or reports on television.

In a police *order*, however, none of these instances reconfigure positionalities. They do not question the distribution of the sensible. They do not question what is visible, utterable and tangible in the normalised order. Rather, it is at key political moments in which the police order is shaken up that alternative ways of what can be said and seen may be inscribed (Rancière, 1999). In Rancière's understanding, the dissensus-based political implies a disidentification of inscribed and prescribed positionalities by means of a (self-)empowerment and reclaiming of voice by those who are marginalised or assigned to a certain (subordinate or subaltern) position (Rancière, 1999, 2008). The political, hence, is an intervention into the police order that renders alternatives possible. For it to be considered a political moment, it must allow for such disidentification or dissensus; otherwise, if it prevents the articulation of dissensus, it remains a police order (Rancière, 1999, p. 65). The political is the moment or act of intervention in a given police order, disrupting and subsequently reconfiguring what can be seen, said and done. The result leads to a new and different (police) order that stabilises new positions and normalities until a new political moment stimulates further reconfiguration (Barnickel, 2019; Rancière, 2010[1996]).

In 'real' political moments, the relevance of aesthetics comes into play. Rancière understands the 'politics of aesthetics' as 'the way in which the aesthetic experience – as a reconfiguration of the forms of visibility and intelligibility of artistic practice and reception – intervenes in the distribution of the sensible' (Rancière, 2009b, p. 5). As political practices interweaving feeling and thinking, they intervene in this (at least temporarily) stabilised 'police' by constituting a 'counter-aesthetic sensibility to the accepted order of things' (Tolia-Kelly, 2019, p. 127) and by challenging the distribution of the sensible (Tolia-Kelly, 2019).

This fundamental idea of an aesthetically mediated construction of commonality (and difference) brings Rancière and Rorty into dialogue. In Rancière's thinking, politics of aesthetics presuppose a radical equality of everybody (Muhle, 2006; Rancière, 2010[1996]), a utopia of an aesthetic community that for him can exist in artistic practice (Rancière, 2010). For Rorty, politics and poetics are two interrelated aspects of the political (Kappelhoff, 2015). Functioning as vehicles of change, through which new forms of description are invented, poetic practices associated with art, literature, cinema of television can raise awareness of others, include them in the community and, thus, reconfigure the commonly shared world (Rorty,

1989). In Rancière's case, it is those who have no part who bring themselves to bear in an act of subjectification by demanding the inscription in the normalised order on the basis of radical equality (Rancière, 1999, 2008). For Rorty, it is the poetic activity that implies a self-distancing from the *we* in order to extend it through sensibility to the outsiders and the unfamiliar (Rorty, 1989).

Film is the media setting that, according to Rancière, plays a significant role in creating a new or reconfigured spatiotemporal sensorium through which ways of being inside or outside are determined (Rancière, 2010). By 'spatiotemporal sensorium', he means a particular mode of experience specific to audiovisual images: their *media-aesthetic* framing that viewers realise as bodily felt sensations in the act of watching. In order to get to the heart of this new or reconfigured spatiotemporal arrangement the specific media-aesthetic framing that modulates the viewers' perceptual experience needs to be reconstructed.

In line with that, neo-phenomenological film theory proceeds from an inherent intertwining of motion and emotion and has highlighted that the dynamics of audiovisual staging materialises as embodied sensation of and in the viewers (Sobchack, 1992). This is what we refer to as media aesthetics of audiovisual images. It is important to bear in mind that these aesthetic experiences by no means represent feelings of fictional characters. They are artistically produced through cinematic staging tools like sound composition, montage rhythm, camera movement and acting that merge into one temporal gestalt and shape spectators' perceptual experience in the process of viewing: cinematic (aesthetic) expressivity and the perception of viewers are directly interwoven (Schmitt & Greifenstein, 2014; Sobchack, 1992). This holds for audiovisual images, no matter of what genre or media context:

> Across the various media formats, from web videos to films for the cinema, audiovisual images are characterized by the fact that they are not a succession of isolated, immobile pictorial representations, but rather generate temporal gestalts. These gestalts are created [...] as a changing flow of shapes, positions and movement qualities. (Müller & Kappelhoff, 2018, p. 22)

Rather than being mere visual content that is passively observed at a distance, audiovisual images qualitatively manifest in their temporal unfolding as felt experiences on the part of spectators and thereby create, both literally and metaphorically, a particular *sense* of the world.

Audiovisual media are of particular interest for the question of reconfigurations of the political in discourses around Covid-19, because audiovisuals combine visible (what is shown) and utterable (what is said) articulations with this very aspect of tangibility (how it is staged and experienced). Hence, they are composed of and refer to the three core dimensions of (stable) police orders and their (potential) political reconfiguration: what is said, what is seen and what is felt or is tangible. What and how audiovisual media show, say and stage things, can either stabilise the normalised police order or subvert it and experiment with new ways of seeing, saying and experiencing/staging. As audiovisual meaning constructions of a commonly shared world, their political dimension is thus rooted in their media specificity, i.e. their aesthetics as movement-images. Audiovisual images are

not political per se. However, they can be – if they reinvent what is utterable, visible and tangible in the normalised police order.

Two fundamental assumptions result from the previous theoretical remarks for our approach to group constructions in Covid-19 special programmes on German public television:

(1) We do not regard audiovisual images as mere reflections of 'reality'. Instead, they are always already part of versions or conceptualisations of the world that are shared collectively. Love stories or accounts of historical moments, whether novels or films, do not tell us about love or the particular event but only *bring into being* and *specifically construct* what we call or think of as love or the event. Following Rancière, these constructions can either be stabilisations of existing normalities (e.g. heterosexual love stories) or they can aesthetically intervene in prevailing hegemonic constructions and visibilities (for instance, by opening up non-binary love stories).

(2) Through their media-aesthetic expressivity, audiovisual formats involve their spectators affectively in a most concrete and active manner. Instead of (re)presenting 'reality' or an external world, they project, modulate and shape worlds as an embodied feeling sensibly perceived by viewers in the process of their viewing. This shared feeling that takes effect as a collective self- and world reference configures a particular *sense of commonality* (Rorty, 1991, 1998). Audiovisual images and formats negotiate and potentially reconfigure the boundaries of a political community. Rorty understands these configurations and reconfigurations as parts of a history of 'poetic doing' (Rorty, 1998), in other words, as a continuous refiguration of the sense of commonality (in this regard, love stories from different years and styles bear witness to the historical transformation and reshaping of the feeling of community, such as moral values in love films of the 1950s and 1960s by contrast with contemporary ones).

In sum, through media in general and audiovisual images in particular, people fundamentally and continuously construct their perceptions – and make sense(s) – of the world, of community, of commonality. Films and television reports embody and make tangible what it means to acknowledge the conditions and limitations of existence, its contingency and incompleteness. For this reason, it is worthwhile to take a closer look at audiovisual formats from a media-aesthetic perspective in concert with (spoken or written) language or the seemingly self-evident visual 'content' of audiovisual images. What comes to the fore is the political dimension of audiovisual images in general, and of particular formats at a certain moment in time in particular.

Which media-aesthetic framing is dominant and what (re)configurations of the utterable, the visible and the tangible does it propose? Can these audiovisual formats eventually be considered political in Rancière's understanding by challenging the prevailing hegemonic distribution of the sensible, or do they rather reproduce it and are not to be considered political? We will address these questions by means of an exploratory case study of a Covid-19 special programme on German public television. Before doing so, we will introduce this particular audiovisual format and our film-analytical and media-aesthetic method.

3. Special Programmes on Covid-19 in German Public Television

We aim to make analytically accessible configurations and reconfigurations of the political in times of the Covid-19 pandemic. To illustrate how self-references and senses of the world are being constructed, we conduct an exploratory analysis of a special programme on German television. The programme is called *ARD Extra* and was broadcasted after the main news programme at 8.15 pm. The TV channel ARD is second in market share and its news programme *Tagesschau* is among the most watched in the country and a common source of official news for 14 million Germans.[1] The format was created specifically for reporting on the Covid-19 pandemic and was broadcasted in the time slot otherwise reserved for *Brennpunkte*[2].[3] Almost all of the episodes broadcasted were dedicated to the pandemic situations and other 'long-term processes' (e.g. the war in Ukraine) are still covered by *Brennpunkte*. In 2020, the ARD broadcasted more than 70 episodes of the programme (at times almost daily), usually titled *Die Corona-Lage*, i.e. '*The Covid Situation*', with another 30+ episodes in 2021 and in 2022 only six.[4] The programmes lasted between 10 and 50 minutes, most of them 10 to 20 minutes.[5]

Due to its prominent time slot, the *ARD Extra* is given authority as a special programme to foreground a particular moment in time and to shape how the moment ought to be conceptualised – at least as an exceptional situation and presumably also as a moment of crisis. At the same time, it intervenes in the construction and negotiation of a circumstance's respective exceptionality and/or crisis both in the moment and over the course of time. This is all the more important as crises shake up the existing order and require some extraordinary sense-making efforts (Wengeler & Ziem, 2013). But crises are open-ended and as such their outcomes can result in substantial transformation and a substantially reconfigured post-crisis order. However, the status quo ante can also endure and be preserved even during or after crisis hits. As flagships of public television, the special programmes play a prominent role in this endeavour with regard to what is crisis relevant – in this case the pandemic – and important in the aforementioned sense-making practices in times of heterogeneous simultaneities.

For our exploratory analysis, we take up the programme broadcasted on 13 December 2020 to look at how reconfigurations of the political (and stabilisations of the police order) can be captured by drawing on analytical tools inspired by media aesthetics and film studies. We have chosen this episode for our illustrative analysis as it had the highest TV ratings[6] of the format *ARD Extra*. On that day (the third Sunday in Advent), the heads of the German federal states, together with Chancellor Angela Merkel, decided to tighten infection control measures as of 16 December due to high numbers of Covid-19 infections[7]. The decision included, among other measures, the closure of most shops and businesses, day nurseries and schools as well as an upper limit on the number of people allowed to meet in private households (although the decision provided for exceptions during the Christmas period). Germany, thus, entered its second lockdown shortly before Christmas 2020. The high TV rating is probably due to the prior announcement of the decision on stricter protection

measures and the related public debates over the measures in the run up to the broadcast.

Apart from the fact that it had the highest TV ratings, the selected programme is interesting and worth analysing for the context- and the content-related aspects. The fact that it was broadcasted in the context of the second wave of the pandemic leads us to assume that the format was by then no longer exceptional. The urgency of the pandemic's beginning had passed, but the programme content was still outstanding enough (due to its overall relevance with regard to the upcoming holidays) to be considered adequately relevant and meaningful to constitute special programming. The content-related aspect refers to the – at first glance – unremarkable structure and ordinary staging in terms of the political doing and boundary drawing. On the surface, it could seem that the entire programme of that day neither constructed nor drew boundaries. Moreover, it does not seem to display particularly remarkable thematic parts, but to merely serve to establish forms of reactions to the lockdown decision. However, as we will demonstrate throughout our analysis, a media-aesthetic perspective that combines who is speaking, about what and in which manner with the audiovisual experience unfolding over time provides fruitful insights into utterable, visible and tangible aspects of Rancière's distributed or reconfigured sensible – even in the 'hard case' of a seemingly unspectacular programme.

4. The Utterable, the Visible and the Tangible in Audiovisual Media

The analysis of instances of a 'poetic doing' of visibility, utterability and tangibility in selected TV reports demonstrates how a media-aesthetic perspective can help to elucidate practices of discursive construction of the pandemic and the sense(s) of the world it created. In doing so, our media-aesthetic approach decidedly rejects a perspective that is blind to mediality. We do not take audiovisually represented objects and actors for granted or consider the process of viewing to be a passive act. Shedding such biases allows audiovisual programmes come into focus as cultural practices for *making sense* of a global crisis (situated in time and space).

Methodologically, we drew on an interdisciplinary descriptive sequential method that has already been applied to news reports, films and face-to-face interaction (Müller & Kappelhoff, 2018) as well as video tutorials (Horst & Ladewig, 2022). It has brought together the media-aesthetic aspect (the *tangible*) with the analysis of language (the *utterable*) and audiovisual representation (the *visible*) – the core dimensions of the police order in Rancière's terms, which may be reconfigured by political interventions that change what can be seen, said and experienced.

Therefore, we identified dominant elements of cinematic staging in their temporal orchestration over the entire special programme with its various thematic parts (the macro-level), across certain parts that relate to one another (the meso-level) and within individual parts (the micro-level). This way, we reconstructed the viewers' bodily-affective experience through the specific aesthetic structural elements of the special programme and their interplay at

different temporal levels, understood in terms of an affective parcours (Müller & Kappelhoff, 2018).

In our example, we focused on camera position, movement in the frame, framing and mise-en-scène, because they represented the central elements of the specific staging by the chosen special programme. We described these central parameters of audiovisual staging both individually and in their interplay over the temporal course of the episode. This reconstruction of the media-aesthetic framing – i.e. the *tangible* – was complemented with an analysis of more explicit and representational articulations of the political: language (the *utterable*) and audiovisual representation (the *visible*).

5. The New Normalcy of an Established Distributed Sensibility

To analyse (re)configurations of the utterable, the visible and the tangible proposed by the special programme and to determine whether it challenged the prevailing hegemonic distribution of the sensible or rather reproduces it, we followed a zoom-in principle from the macro-level to a meso- and micro-level. In the following, we first introduce and describe the structure of the special programme from 13 December 2020 as a whole, i.e. we reconstruct its entailed single reports and their formal, thematic and aesthetic arrangement. The reason for this is that the content-related order and logic of the entire programme can already be considered to contribute to a particular distribution of the sensible by foregrounding particular topics.

From this overall perspective, we move on to the meso-level and describe a particular sequence consisting of various successive (thematic) parts for a closer media-aesthetic and multimodal analysis. Here, we focus on the formal, thematic and aesthetic structure of each of these parts (micro-level) and their mutual interplay (meso-level) and describe their movement-image units with regard to the staging and aesthetic experience. Additionally, we consider the verbal commentary and how it relates to the affective experience of the thematic units. On this basis, we finally substantiate whether and how the particular programme (re)configures 'normalised' orders.

5.1 Macro-Level

The entire programme was almost 16 minutes long, starting with an introduction by the TV presenter and ending with a short outro. Within this frame we found three main segments, which were distinctive not only with regard to their topic but also to their staging.

The first segment dealt primarily with a general perspective on the government's recent lockdown decision. It began with a statement by Markus Söder, Minister-President of the federal state of Bavaria, followed by reactions collected from citizens in Hamburg and an interview conducted by the TV presenter with the head of Chancellery, Helge Braun. The sequence was intermitted by a statement from the chief executive of the trade association.

The second main segment focused on the situation in Saxony, where infection numbers were particularly high, and the lockdown measures therefore came into effect earlier than in other federal states. The structure of this

segment was similar to that of the first: first, the situation was outlined by showing impressions from Annaberg-Buchholz, the capital of the district of Erzgebirgskreis in Saxony, and by presenting citizens' reactions to the government's lockdown decision. The report was followed by an interview with the Minister-President of Saxony, Michael Kretschmer.

The programme ended with a third segment that dealt with insufficient testing capacities in nursing facilities such as day nurseries or care homes. The segment started with the moderator showing statistics on Covid-19 related deaths, and, after a report on an exemplary case from Duisburg, another interview was conducted, this time with the virologist Jonas Schmidt-Chanasit. The last 13 seconds offered closing words and farewell.

As illustrated in the timeline below (Figure 1), the selected programme showed a tripartite overall structure framed by the TV presenter's introductory and concluding remarks. Furthermore, the tripartite structure itself was structured by a repetitive pattern of two sequential parts: one (rather narrative) report followed by a longer statement given by experts or authorities from politics or science, all of whom we read as male. These two parts also stood out against one another with regard to their audiovisual staging and aesthetic experience: while the reports contained a remarkable amount of heterogeneous dynamics through camera movement and movement within the frame, various camera angles and shot sizes as well as different cadrage and mise-en-scène[8], the interview parts displayed a high degree of stasis (or minimal movement) and an invariable mise-en-scène due to the interviewee's position in the centre of the audiovisual image. The similar staging of the different parts of the interview implied an aesthetic relation between them (the dim lighting and the recurrent suit and tie dress code also contribute to this perception). This way, even at the macro-level, the programme unfolded in a particular perceptual rhythm that led to the experience of a specific thematic structure.

The combination of two aesthetically different parts in one segment led both to their distinctive experience and to the recognition of a similar structure across the three themes of the programme. It is noteworthy that in all three segments, the statements by 'people on the street' were subsequently complemented by the perspective of a person of authority. This way, aesthetic experience and world knowledge interacted to create a sense of distinct groups and their positionalities. Looking at the statements' content (i.e. who is speaking and what is uttered), it was obvious that neither the citizens' statements nor those of the experts entailed clear-cut critical aspects. Consensus between the two established groups of laypeople and experts was foregrounded regarding the understanding and necessity of the latest political decision.

In the following, we will zoom in on the meso- and micro-level of the programme and take a closer look at what is uttered, made visible and tangible.
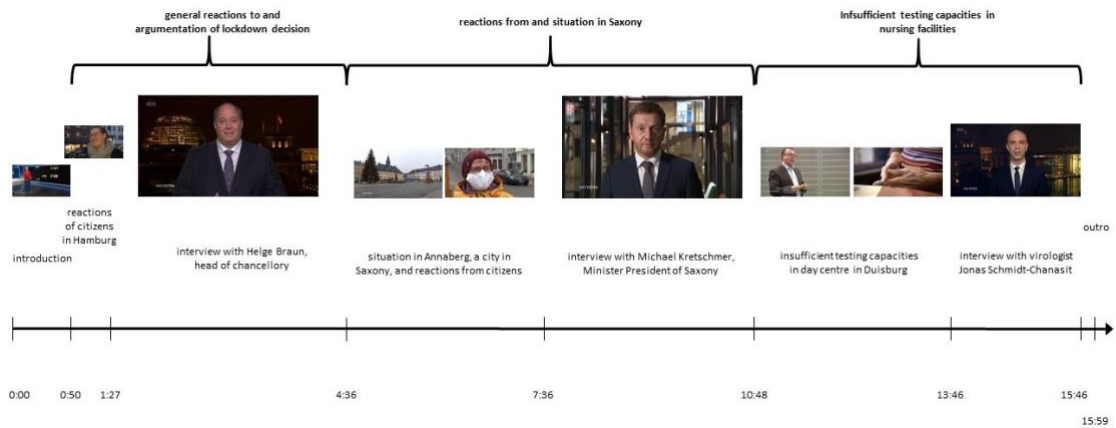
Source: Authors' own, using screenshots from the programme analysed.

Figure 1: Timeline and tripartite structure of the special programme

5.2 Meso- and Micro-Levels

For our more fine-grained analysis of the programme, we have chosen the two thematic and aesthetic segments from the middle and the end, i.e. the situation in Saxony (min. 0:04:36–0:10:48) and the insufficient testing capacities in nursing facilities (min. 0:10:48–0:15:46). Both segments were of about the same length and, evidently, shared the repetitive pattern of a (rather narrative) report showing primarily laypeople, followed by a longer statement from an authority, in this case a politician and a virologist.

5.2.1 The utterable

The reports of both segments shared a similar focus concerning who speaks, as in both cases the people speaking or being shown were primarily assigned to specific professions. In the case of Annaberg-Buchholz, the focus was mainly on the retail sector, with interviews of the mayor and a bakery worker. A person working in nursing care was also interviewed, but as a layperson who happens to work in the health sector, not as a medical expert. The first part of the segment on the issue of too few testing capacities, in turn, emphasised the health and care sector and granted a remarkable amount of time to statements by the executive director of the care centre and the chairman of the German Foundation for Patient Rights.

It is remarkable that both thematic segments lacked any explicit criticism in the statements presented by laypersons and experts, although they purported to address critical aspects and problems related to the most recent lockdown or the pandemic policies in general. For instance, one woman who gives a statement on the street in Annaberg-Buchholz acknowledges that 'it is all our own fault as we did not follow the rules' (translation by the authors). The bakery worker, shown in her empty shop, described what the situation would be like without the pandemic. This was then backed by the interview with the Minister-President, Kretschmer, who links the decision to apply stricter measures to the 'irresponsible subject' in order to rationalise and justify it. As shown elsewhere, the construction of a 'responsible subject' was a recurrent theme throughout

the pandemic (Costabile Nicoletta, 2022) and served as a supra-individual higher authority within (Western) political discourse.

Groups other than the presented professionals did not speak. This was particularly evident in the report on geriatric care, where people receiving care were shown (see below) but not interviewed. Rather, it was representatives of organisations or associations concerned with patient protection or running residential care facilities who were given a voice. Admittedly, the report on geriatric care did mention a vulnerable group and brought it to the fore. However, the group was not given a chance to speak for itself; rather, it was the object being talked about by others.

5.2.2 The visible

This focus on particular groups being entitled to speak and to set the agenda was likewise evident in the realm of who became visible and in what way. The interviews with the two experts (the politician Kretschmer and the virologist Schmidt-Chanasit) stood out with regard to their balanced and centred audiovisual staging – interestingly enough, a similar staging could be seen for the representatives of the health care associations who were interviewed (see Figure 2) – as against the much shorter statements of citizens which were rather visually embedded within, or framed by the urban scenery through cadrage and mise-en-scène. Moreover, they were part of a dynamic flow of audiovisual movement showing different locations, things and people, while the interview parts strongly emphasised the speaking experts. These were only interrupted by short cuts showing the TV presenter in front of the screen with the expert. What was also striking was the distinct degree of distance produced by the interplay of shot size and mise-en-scène in these two types of interview situations: the citizens of Annaberg-Buchholz were shown in close-ups and thus appeared closer than the experts, who appeared rather in medium-close shots and therefore more distant and formal, creating a perception of authority.

Source: Screenshots from the special programme.

Figure 2: Staging of interviewees

Compared to these people who were shown in different ways but all entitled to speak, the staging of the allegedly vulnerable group, that is, the subject of the report on insufficient testing capacities in a nursing facility in Duisburg, was remarkable (see Figure 3). Since the report clearly foregrounded the consequences of inadequate testing capacity as a danger to the elderly group, one would expect them to be visually foregrounded. Instead, the elderly were not visible as persons: they are only shown partially, e.g. through close-ups of

wrinkled hands and without faces[9] or from behind. Through this metonymic staging of body parts, which stand for the whole person or the entire group of elderly people, they were essentially de-individualised and shown as an anonymous mass of old bodies. This rather clinical staging resonated with the way in which the testing utensils in the care facility were presented. The tracking of the camera, which slid along the orderly arranged tools on the table, recalled the image of sterile surgical instruments in a hospital before a surgery.

Source: Screenshots from the special programme.

Figure 3: Visual representations of elderly persons

Taken together, these modes of staging merged into an image and a perceptual experience of foregrounded distance. This was also supported by the fact that the elderly were shown through or behind windowpanes or by tilted shots of partially opened windows from the outside.

By contrast, the report on the situation in Annaberg-Buchholz staged an empty space, a void, by presenting the interviewees on the street in a distant, wide scenery surrounding them or by pans across empty squares – all of that strongly highlighted emptiness and stasis. The only movement emphasised was that of a huge Christmas pyramid, which was filmed in a slight and then extreme low angle shot. Its uniform revolving movement thereby only reinforced the feeling of going nowhere.

5.2.3 The tangible

The two selected segments of the programme displayed both a recurring structure of a rather dynamic report part and a rather static interview part with an expert. Their respective aesthetic experience had a markedly different quality, however: stasis and emptiness in the former and highlighted distance in the latter. The analysis at the meso- and micro-levels revealed not merely an internal thematic structure of the special programme, but above all an aesthetic, experiential structure, comparable to an affective parcours that viewers go through while watching the programme. This affective parcours made the pandemic tangible in various ways.

Four aspects stood out in this respect:

First, the pandemic world was a *distanced world* – tangible and graspable only through mediation: only a view through something – such as the camera's view through the window in the report on the residential care unit – allowed for an impression of the pandemic world. Another example of the distanced experience was the representation of physical barriers such as fences or gates. In Figure 4, the sign *Wir schaffen das* ("We (can) make it", echoing Angela Merkel's statement during the so-called migration crisis, maybe another instance where a new normalcy stabilised through a purported 'we' of supporters) exhibited a non-simultaneous communication situation in which the sender and the addressee(s) of the 'we' were not only distanced physically (the sign being hung up at a fence) but also in time, i.e. the sign poster has left.

Source: Screenshot from the special programme.

Figure 4: A distanced world

Related to such distance, the pandemic world was, second, a *hidden interior world*. The windows through or at which viewers look not only created an experience of distance; they also insinuated an inside life shielded from our view. In the report on the residential care unit, a window hung Christmas decorations was shown from the outside (Figure 5). Its effect was similar to the background image of illuminated windows from a dark exterior shown in the introductory segment: social life confined to the private space and restricted to a small number of persons, as expressed by the moderator when showing this picture. Additionally remarkable was, even though the image created an idea of the hidden social life, there were no silhouettes of people to be seen.

Source: Screenshots from the special programme.

Figure 5: A hidden interior world

The outside world – or the public space –, in contrast, was shown as an *empty and atomistic world*. Basically, all of the reports unfolded a vivid experience of emptiness, e.g. in the case of Annaberg-Buchholz by showing the empty marketplace or the empty bakery. The test station in the report on residential care was also empty – albeit this was the representation of an 'exceptional' space, created due to the pandemic situation. In the case of Annaberg-Buchholz, the exhibited emptiness was contrasted with what would have been normal by showing archive footage from pre-Covid times of Christmasy sequences and by the comments of the speaker and the interviewee from the bakery. The people in this empty space were also atomistic and alone – they were not shown in groups (except for families) (Figure 6) – and the

speaker in the Annaberg-Buchholz report, for instance, commented that it was a 'lonely' time.

Source: Screenshots from the special programme.

Figure 6: An empty and atomistic world

Despite presenting the world as distanced, hidden and empty in opposition to what is 'normal', the programme, forth, simultaneously staged this representation as an *accepted 'new normalcy'*. On the one hand, this was underlined by the statements and gestures; for instance, interviewees shrugged shoulders as if to say, 'what can we do?' in a sequence of the report from Hamburg. On the other hand, as has been shown above, the visual images present the new normalcy as abnormal, yet the interview segments still engendered an experience of order and stability through the static way they were staged. When dynamic movement was shown, it tended to be a balanced and regular circular movement (e.g. the Christmas pyramid in the market square and the revolving door at the entrance to the hospital in Annaberg-Buchholz), contributing to a sense of continuity.

6. Media Aesthetics and the Political

In applying our theoretical considerations to the analysis of an – at first glance – unremarkable ordinary episode of *ARD Extra*, we have demonstrated how our perspective contributes to uncovering instances of boundary stabilisation and of boundary-(re)drawing in Covid-19 discourse. Our exploratory analysis has revealed how even an ostensibly 'ordinary' and 'unspectacular' episode draws boundaries through the interplay of language and embodied audiovisual movement-images. We found instances of such boundary (re)drawing at the macro-, meso- and micro-levels of the programme complementing and reinforcing each other in the flow of audiovisual images and in the process of viewing. The new boundaries thereby merge into a specific conceptualisation of the pandemic.

- At the *macro-level*, we revealed that the overarching tripartite thematic and aesthetic structure, together with a two-part repetitive pattern of report and expert interview, accounts for a particular way of guiding viewers' attention and modulating their perceptual experience. This leads to a differentiated perception of laypeople and experts (such as politicians and virologists) along with an implicit ordering of the two established groups that cannot be found on the level of explicit verbal articulation; it emerges only within the aesthetic experience of the

audiovisual movement-images in the flow of the episode. Altogether, all three thematic segments of the episode themselves and in their interplay foreground an image of societal acquiescence and acceptance with regard to the government's protective measures. Who speaks in which sequence, what is being said and how it is audiovisually staged tends to represent rather the existing order by subtly distributing (actually, stabilising) who speaks and with what authority.

- At the *meso-level*, we have illustrated our finding by showing how two segments orchestrate particular feelings of a void or empty space in Annaberg-Buchholz, and of distance and restriction in the case of the report on the lack of testing capacities. What both of them share is a marked emphasis on professions, both verbally but also visually. There is an obvious constructed differentiation between inside and outside in the two segments: in the Annaberg-Buchholz report, laypeople are always staged outside with foregrounded emptiness of the surrounding cityscape, while the interviewed Minister-President of Saxony and the bakery worker are staged inside. In the care facility report, the vulnerable group of the elderly is staged from an outside perspective as being inside and confined, while the two functionaries and the virologist are shown inside, but not from such a highlighted distance. The audiovisual staging and aesthetic experience of inside vs. outside thus contributes to the perception (and construction) of different social groups.
- At the *micro-level*, we have revealed audiovisual staging details that contribute to the perceptions and constructed images described for the meso- and macro-levels. In the report on Annaberg-Buchholz, for instance, shot size and mise-en-scène distinguishes a palpable degree of distance between the laypeople on the street and the professional 'experts'. In the report on the lack of testing capacities, distance was highlighted by showing the elderly from a marked outside position of foregrounded windowpanes, which, although transparent, obscure what is behind them. In this way, a boundary is drawn between the elderly and the 'rest' that becomes tangible. Another remarkable feature is their – de-individualised – staging in that they are shown as body parts, but never as full persons.

In this light, our perspective allows us to extrapolate a further notable feature of the pandemic discourse. On the one hand, we have demonstrated that the programme does indeed exhibit a certain 'counter-aesthetic sensibility to the accepted order of things' (Tolia-Kelly, 2019, p. 127), which – quite explicitly – opposes it to the pre-pandemic 'normal' order. It could, thus, be considered political in Rancière's understanding as it disrupts the normalised police order. For instance, visual representations of emptiness or separation (e.g. through glimpses through windows or closed gates) are often accompanied by explicit speech broaching the issue of 'deviance from normal' or, rather, from what would have been considered normal before the pandemic. At the same time, the 'new normal' tends to be represented as an unquestionable 'new order' (e.g. in the voices raised by the laypersons in the reports, which sometimes also include gestures such as shrugging of the shoulders, suggesting acquiescence out of a certain helplessness), which can be interpreted as a new stabilisation of a reconfigured order after a political moment.

On the other hand, however, the underlying logic of the 'new normal' perpetuates existing power relations and hierarchies and appears to be deeply entangled with and to be reinforcing the pre-pandemic 'distribution of the sensible'. In this sense, the audiovisual format stabilises the existing order rather than (politically) intervening in it. This order attributes and characterises people by their 'economic' value (focus on professions) and gives a prominent voice to experts and authorities, which is foregrounded and undergirded by their visual representation, contributing to an experience of experts (virologists) and authorities (politicians) as *the ones who are in control* in the uncertain situation.

It should be noted that our analysis is of an exploratory nature. As such, it concerns a particular domain of the pandemic discourse yet by no means represents it completely. Nevertheless, it has been proven that a media-aesthetic approach to news programmes is a fruitful perspective for uncovering subtle instances and practices of boundary-drawing and -redrawing. In this respect, the interdisciplinarity of our approach draws attention to the multimodality and mediality of crisis discourse for social sciences and media linguistics. While on the verbal level it might appear that the established distribution of the sensible is questioned in a particular audiovisual data source, the aesthetic experience which 'operates' on an experiential level – not primarily on an explicit level – may indeed contradict this. Last but not least, our media-aesthetic perspective fills a research gap in crisis discourse (cf. Debelle dos Santos, 2022), as it introduces (embodied) affective aspects of this discourse into the analysis and makes them empirically accessible. In this light, the sense-making function of crisis discourse can be understood metaphorically and literally: by getting a feeling for a crisis, people make a certain sense of it.

Notes

1. https://www.statista.com/statistics/385359/tv-stations-market-share-germany/, https://www.statista.com/statistics/413198/market-share-of-tv-broadcaster-ard-germany/#:~:text=In%202022%2C%20ARD%20had%20an,the%20highest%20value%20since%202015 (accessed: 27.10.2023).

2. https://www.dwdl.de/nachrichten/76596/coronasondersendung_ard_extra_statt_brennpunkt/ (accessed: 11.06.2022).

3. Such formats are not unique to the pandemic. *Brennpunkte* (which can be translated as 'focal point' but also as 'hotspot') are also being broadcasted in special circumstances. However, an ARD spokesperson explained the choice to rename *Brennpunkte* to ARD Extra for the Covid-19 coverage, because it served an 'advisory and service function' as well as the intention to continue special broadcasts under this label in the future, 'which are primarily of an educational nature and do not concern breaking news, but rather long-term processes' (https://www.dwdl.de/nachrichten/76596/coronasondersendung_ard_extra_statt_brennpunkt/ (accessed: 11.06.2022), translations by the authors).

4. https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liste_der_ARD-Extra-Sendungen (accessed: 11.02.2023).

5. https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liste_der_ARD-Extra-Sendungen (accessed: 11.02.2023).

6. https://www.dwdl.de/nachrichten/80694/neue_lockdownentscheidung_sorgt_fuer_hohe_tvquoten_/ (accessed: 01.07.2022).

7. https://www.bundesregierung.de/resource/blob/997532/1827366/69441fb68435a7199b3d3a89bff2c0e6/2020-12-13-beschluss-mpk-data.pdf?download=1 (accessed: 01.07.2022).

8. Cadrage is a specific image field from a larger spatial continuum as determined by a given image frame. Mise-en-scène means the compositional and creative staging of the audiovisual image in terms of the spatial arrangement of represented figures and objects (cf. Wulff, 2003).

9. Without wanting to speculate about the reasons why the elderly are neither shown nor interviewed, we want to highlight that it might be due to reasons related to data protection and protection of a vulnerable group. For our argument and the effects of the media-aesthetic staging, however, the supposed motive does not play any role.

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