#### Research Article

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# Indexing authenticity in visual political (social media) communication: a metapragmatics-based analysis of two visual registers of the authentic

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**Abstract:** In this paper, I apply a metapragmatics-based approach to visual communication, combined with adapted concepts of Social Semiotics ("visual modality") and CDA-oriented visual analysis ("canons of use"), to reconstruct two visual registers of authenticity which are prevailing within a social media photo sample of recent Austrian chancellor Sebastian Kurz (Facebook, Instagram; total of 84 photos), posted during the parliamentary elections in 2017. Triangulated with the discourse analysis of the marketing manager's metapragmatic reflections on this social media campaign, the study shows how the partly intertwined registers of (1) "professional sensorism" (as a blended register comprising emblems of sensory modality and balanced composition, thereby drawing on the conceptualization of authenticity as sensory and affective experience of "now") and (2) "voyeuristic fictionalization" (comprising indexicals associated with fiction genre, and based on the notion of authenticity as arising via "unnoticed observing") are conceptualized and implemented as a—superior—visual stylization, acting as a social positioning, in mediatized political communication.

Keywords: authenticity, metapragmatics, social indexicality; social media, visual political communication

# 1 Introduction

According to Reckwitz (2017), "doing being authentic", conceptualized as a mixture of "realness", uniqueness, and (sensual) affectivity, functions as a crucial requirement for both the self and commodification processes in late modernity. Focusing on the field of politics, an orientation towards "staying/being authentic" is documented by many statements of, as well as about politicians (cf. Amling and Geimer 2016; Higgins 2018: 389ff.). Thereby, social media serve as central tools for showing and sharing authentic experience (cf. Reckwitz 2017: chap. IV-2; Zappavigna 2016: 289)—in everyday popular culture as well as within politics (cf. Higgins 2018; Schill 2012).

However, the conceptualization and (socio-pragmatic) meaning of the term "authentic" have been in constant change ever since (cf. Knaller and Müller 2006: 18ff.). Considering the high diversity of circulating discourses and socio-cultural styles in late modernity (cf. Blommaert and Rampton 2015), the hypothesis that different conceptualizations of authenticity are existing simultaneously seems to be strongly warranted (cf. Lobinger and Brantner 2015; Ravelli and van Leeuwen 2018: 293f.). Furthermore, the rise of (right-wing) populist actors has recently urged political research to consider a more actor-oriented perspective: While the communicative demeanor of right-wing populist actors is commonly judged as "vulgar" or "dilettantish" within mainstream media coverage, the political fan-bases evaluate their anti-elitist stars as "authentic" (Higgins 2018: 389ff.; Montgomery 2017; Wodak 2016: 149f.).

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38 — L. Blasch DE GRUYTER

Therefore, when studying aspects of authenticity within visual political communication, a conceptual perspective on socio-semiotic variation has to be implemented from the very start (cf. Blommaert and Rampton 2015; Spitzmüller 2018b).

In this article, I use a metapragmatics-based discourse-analytical approach to multimodal communication (Spitzmüller 2013b, 2018a) to study registers (sensu Agha 2005) and their respective conceptualizations of the authentic within visual political communication. Drawing on concepts originating within sociolinguistic variation research (i.e., indexicality, enregisterment, communicative and media ideologies; cf. ibid.), and using tools provided by Social Semiotics (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996; Ravelli and van Leeuwen 2018) and more recent work on visual, especially photographic communication (Bednarek and Caple 2019 [2012]; Ledin and Machin 2018; Zappavigna 2016), the aim of this article is to delineate two visual registers and their respective conceptualizations of the authentic (i.e., the registers of (1) professional sensorism, and (2) of voyeuristic fictionalization) which are dominant in a photo sample of the social media campaign (Instagram, Facebook) of recent Austrian chancellor Sebastian Kurz (total of 84 pictures) for the Austrian parliamentary elections in 2017. Following a multi-perspective approach, this qualitative study is based on an abductivecyclical research process to reconstruct socio-semiotic registers emerging from the data (cf. Wodak and Meyer 2009a: 23f.). Thereby, I triangulate (a) product analysis (i.e., the photo sample) with (b) the analysis of metapragmatic reflections from chief campaign manager Philipp Maderthaner (2017) and with (c) abductive, contrastive, and historical sensitive relation to relevant "canons of use" (Ledin and Machin 2018: 22-24, 37f.) of visual and photographic communication.

# 2 Authenticity, politics, and visual communication in late modernity

# 2.1 Authenticity as a virulent, valorized, and precarious social categorization

The conceptualization of the multi-faceted term "authentic" (originating in Greek meaning "authorized" and "original") has been in constant change since its common use in the 18th century (cf. Gill 2011; Knaller and Müller 2006: 18ff.). Much post-structuralist oriented research is focusing on the deconstruction of essentialist discourses conceptualizing the authentic as immediate expression and natural essence (cf. Blommaert and Rampton 2015: 32ff.; Coupland 2014; Reckwitz 2017: chap. II). In contrast, empirical research based on an actor-oriented perspective, reconstructing socio-semiotic repertoires and discursive conceptualizations of authenticity, appears to be underdeveloped (cf. Gill 2011: 62). In any case, searching for or critically questioning the authentic, either in relation to objects (art, brands, cultural rituals, documents, etc.) or in relation to subjects (regarding individuals, or certain "species" and memberships), has become a virulent topic of (late) modernity (cf. Knaller and Müller 2006). As Reckwitz (2017) has pointed out, the strive for authenticity conceptualized as a blended discourse of "realness", an orientation towards sensual and affective experience, and uniqueness-appears to be a prevailing requirement for both the self and successful processes of commodification within late modernity. In contrast to modern mass culture, socio-semiotic repertories and cultural practices signaling the authentic and unique serve as crucial cultural capital (cf. ibid.; Heller 2014). However, this conceptualization of authenticity is complemented by a quite antagonistic discourse nowadays: Foregrounded by fundamentalist and right-wing populist actors, the essentialist conceptualization of authenticity as "pure" homogeneity of social groups, deployed as exclusive regimes of social membershipping, functions as crucial counter-part to cultural-capitalist discourses (cf. Reckwitz 2017: chap. VI-2).

Conceptualizations and socio-semiotic registers of authenticity are deeply interwoven with the specific historical and socio-technical configurations of publics and media landscapes (cf. Budde 2013: 199; Ravelli and van Leeuwen 2018: 279–281; cf. Daston and Galison 2017 [2007]). Considering the history of photography, it was the media-ideological conception of the new medium as—seemingly—endowed with an impersonal, immediate,

and objective gaze (cf. Sontag 2018 [1977]: 87) that had tremendous impact on the conceptualization of reliability and authenticity. The (certain historical) visual standards of photos became the common (photo-realistic) standard register for indexing (or judging) the real and reliable (cf. Ravelli and van Leeuwen 2018: 283ff.). Therefore, photographic practices were crucially involved in the development of scientific objectivity (Daston and Galison 2017 [2007]). They have also had heavy impact on the popular construction of authentic types of "us" and "them" (cf. Ege and Wietschorke 2014; 22ff.; Mirzoeff 2009; chap. 5; Sontag 2018 [1977]: 57–61, 88).

Nowadays, social media function as central tools for managing the processes of (self-)branding, attention economy, and intelligibly showing and sharing authentic experience (cf. Reckwitz 2017: chap. IV-2; Zappavigna 2016: 289). Thereby, I conceive of social media as internet-based communicative forms (cf. Gruber 2008) characterized by (a) specific affordances (such as social interactivity; multimodality; visuality; social connectivity; a continuum from private to public communication; the potential of quasi synchronicity; tools for "produsing" and "spreading" mediatized artefacts, etc.; cf. inter alia Gruber 2018; Jenkins et al. 2013); and (b) specific social practices ("canons of use"), which are, in turn, related to (c) specific (socio-culturally stratified) social evaluations (i.e., media ideologies, Gershon 2010), such as "immediate" or "agile". Creeber (2011) discusses that the attributes of intimacy, immediacy, and authenticity, that is, evaluations formerly attached to (early) television, nowadays figure as common evaluations of social media platforms.

However, authenticity has gained a fairly precarious status in the digital age as well: While analog photography is able to insist upon its authenticity based on the material contiguity connecting picture and depicted reality (i.e., photographic indexicality, cf. Meier 2015: 92-95), digital photography is not able to (media-ideologically) claim material traces of reality as its asset (cf. Meier 2015). Nonetheless, as Meier (2015) points out, the proliferation of surveillance devices as well as of smartphone pictures and citizen-witnessing practices has yielded new socio-semiotic elements pointing to a new type of (documentarist) authenticity: e.g., the (stereotypically) wiggly, (partly) backlighted, slanted, and randomly composed style of (spontaneous) smartphone pictures and videos (cf. Meier 2015: 98-102).

# 2.2 Politics, (visual) political (social media) communication, and authenticity

Political communication in late modernity is crucially characterized by the erosion of traditional cleavages and party affiliations, by the deployment of branding practices, and increasing (digital) mediatization and visualization (cf. Higgins 2018; Schill 2012; Wodak and Forchtner 2018b). Moreover, and partly an effect of the proliferation of (audio-)visual media formats (cf. Fiske 1996), recent politics and political communication tremendously focus on politicians as mediatized figures (cf. Blasch 2020). Within this accentuation and celebrification (cf. Krzyżanowski and Tucker 2018a: 143) of political figures, social media have become standard tools for political communication (cf. Bernhardt and Liebhart 2017: 147). Quite contrary to their participatory potentials, and following the dominance of branding practices within the political field (cf. Crouch 2019: 124ff.), political actors soon discovered the strategic potentials of internet-based communication for political branding (cf. Krzyżanowski and Tucker 2018b: 142ff.; Gruber 2018: 422). Considering social media's prevailing mediaideological evaluations as "near" and "authentic", it is not surprising that especially (right-wing) populist actors celebrate their "immediate" relationship to "the people" via Twitter, Facebook, and the like (cf. Crouch 2019).

Recent discourse-analytical research on politicians' strive for authenticity is focusing on verbal communication, and on the right-wing populist conceptualization as anti-elitist "man of the people", as the authentic representative of a certain natio-ethno-cultural "species" (cf. Higgins 2018: 389ff.; Reckwitz 2017: 359ff., 413ff.; Wodak 2016: chap. 6, 149ff.). In visual communication studies, Bernhardt and Liebhart (2017) analyze picture content types as visual social-media strategies in the last Austrian presidential elections. They consider "contact to fans" as a central strategy but do not work with the concept of authenticity. Lobinger and Brantner (2016) are deploying a reception-based mixed-methods setting, asking their participants to judge the 40 — L. Blasch DE GRUYTER

favorableness of politicians' depictions; one of their findings is that the judgements partly rely on non-ideational visual phenomena.

# 3 Conceptual framework: a metapragmatics-based approach to multimodal analysis

### 3.1 Central theoretical foundations

My framework is related to the classic socio-semiotic concept of visual modality (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996: chap. 5): Drawing on the sociolinguistic notion of Basil Bernstein, Kress and van Leeuwen delineate four "coding orientations" (i.e., naturalistic, technical, sensory, abstract coding orientation) and their respective conceptualizations of reality ("truth of perception"; "pragmatic truth"; "truth of affect"; "truth of cognition"). These coding orientations are related to specific social practices and social groups, and are conceived as repertoires for displaying/judging images as something one can believe in (or not). They correlate with specific semiotic configurations on eight (non-ideational, continual) dimensions of visual communication (i.e., the "modality markers" such as color, depth, illumination, or brightness; cf. Ravelli and van Leeuwen 2018: 281-284). Ravelli and van Leeuwen (2018) outlined a revised research agenda on modality, problematizing the original framework in relation to new phenomena and the diversity of digital media culture(s). However, in addition to the authors' call for a sufficiently historical informed, actor-oriented, and reception-based research, my approach is crucially characterized by two further aspects: First, the central question of reliability, that is, judging whether one can believe in what is visually shown (cf. Rayelli and van Leeuwen 2018: 282), is not always a matter of truth and fact but, in many cases, a matter of authenticity (contrasting to fake, staging, or pretending, etc.). Second, appreciating the theoretical developments in the research of sociosemiotic variation (cf. Eckert 2012), I draw on the framework of metapragmatics and social indexicality (cf. Agha 2005; Blommaert 2015; Eckert 2008; Jaffe 2016; Silverstein 2003; Spitzmüller 2013b) to account for phenomena of socio-semiotic variation and diversity. Spitzmüller's (2013a, 2018a, 2018b) metapragmaticsbased discourse-linguistic approach, which is drawn on here, is based on a fundamental socio-pragmatic and actor-oriented conception of communication and semiosis. It is located at the intersection of (Critical) Discourse Analysis (CDA), linguistic anthropology, and (3<sup>rd</sup>-wave-oriented) socio-/linguistic research on variation and multimodality. The underlying linguistic-anthropological concepts have an explicit multimodal outreach (cf. Agha 2011; Blommaert and Rampton 2015; Spitzmüller 2013b), and more recent work (Spitzmüller 2018a, 2018b) explicitly addresses the topic of multimodality in general. Nevertheless, research applying a metapragmatics-based framework to visual communication is still scarce, especially with respect to photography.

While this framework shares significant common ground with CDA-based Social Semiotics (cf. Wodak and Meyer 2009b), it critically goes beyond this approach and emphasizes the need for an ethnographic foundation and reception-based revision of major tools (cf. Ledin and Machin 2018; Spitzmüller 2018a). Metapragmatics is especially interested in how social actors conceptualize and reflect on communicative actions (their own and the actions of others), thereby re-/producing specific historically bound and socioculturally stratified epistemes of social meaning and communication (i.e., communicative knowledge and communicative ideologies, respectively) (cf. Spitzmüller 2013b: 264). This approach is—at least as vanishing point of operationalization—characterized by systematically triangulating the perspectives of (a) product analysis (multimodal texts, photos, etc.; including their production), (b) analysis of relevant metapragmatic discourses on the respective communicative practices and social meanings, and (c) analysis of reception processes (cf. Spitzmüller 2013a: 436). Following the principle of methodological pragmatism (cf. Weiss and Wodak 2003: 7ff.), I draw on Norris' concept of modal density as well (Norris 2020).

# 3.2 Central concepts

This framework is based on four intertwined concepts:

(1) Social indexicality corresponds to the basic assumption that semiotic-communicative elements do not only refer to denotative meaning but also connotatively index, that is, point to, social meanings and evaluations (cf. Ochs 1992; Spitzmüller 2013b: 264). Semiotic variants (e.g., phonological items, visual elements) may have identical denotative reference but "convey different social meanings, e.g. differences in social class or ethnicity of speakers [or producers], differences in social distance between speaker [or producer] and addressee, differences in affect" (Ochs 1992: 338).

Six aspects are crucial for modelling indexicality at this point (see for detailed discussion: Auer 2017; Blommaert and Rampton 2015; Eckert 2008; Jaffe 2016; Ochs 1992; Silverstein 2003; Spitzmüller 2013b): First, the relationship between indexical elements and social evaluations is always *mediated* and tripartite; the discursive conceptualizations of the respective social meanings serve as a mediator. For example, in applying this concept to visual modality, e.g., to technical coding orientation, it is important to notice that the specific indexical assemblage (i.e., semiotic choices of modality markers) is not directly connected to the social evaluation "real": In the first instance, the semiotic elements as such are (only) evaluated as "useful" (measurable, functional, etc.). It is only against the conceptual backdrop of "pragmatic truth" (i.e., the topos that the reality of an image depends on its technical usefulness) that these semiotic elements are pointing to a certain socio-cultural understanding of "reality" (see Figure 1).

Second, indexical elements are context-sensitive and (may) point to different social meanings within different socio-cultural settings and according to different social actors (e.g., vernacular talk evaluated as "authentic" vs. "impolite" vs. "stupid"). Third, the context-sensitive social meanings potentially related to one indexical element constitute indexical fields, that is, "a constellation of ideologically related meanings, any of which can be activated in the situated use of the variable" (Eckert 2008: 454). Jaffe added the concept of fields of indexicalities for the converse perspective of mapping "the linguistic and semiotic variables associated with a particular social object" (Jaffe 2016: 95). Accordingly, the model of visual modality can be conceived as a certain field of indexicalities connected to the social object of "(visual) reality"; discussing registers of authenticity correlates with this perspective as well (see Figure 2 with the adaption of visual modality to social indexicality).

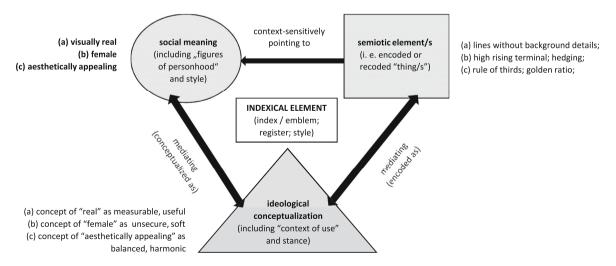


Figure 1: Schema of indexical elements with three examples of registers/styles (i.e., (a) "(visually) real" sensu technical coding orientation, (b) "female", (c) "aesthetically appealing"), their respective communicative ideological conceptualizations, and some of their respective emblems.

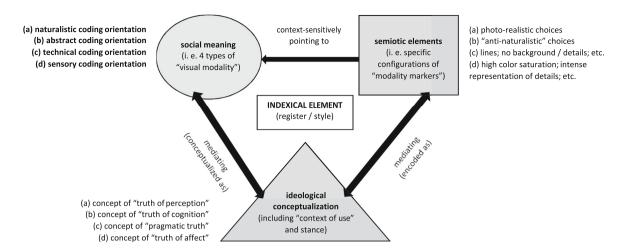


Figure 2: Field of indexicalities for the (socio-culturally stratified) social meaning of "visual truth": Adaption of the original framework of visual modality and coding orientations (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996: chap. 5; Ravelli and van Leeuwen 2018: 281–284) according to the metapragmatic concept of social indexicalities.

Fourth, social indexicality follows a recursive logic: Indexical elements with a certain social meaning on level "n" (e.g., "visually balanced") may meta-indexically point to a further social meaning on level "n + 1" (e.g., "beautiful"), and so on (cf. Silverstein 2003). Fifth, if sufficiently accompanied by other semiotic and contextual elements pointing to a certain social meaning (e.g., "elitist"), and if sufficiently contrastive to divergent social categorizations (e.g., "underclass"), indexical elements are part of *styles*: that is, multimodal bundles of semiotic features indexically connected to a certain social categorization (cf. Auer 2017: 295; Jaffe 2016: 93ff.). Sixth, indexicalities (and their inherent communicative ideologies) are historically bound, and differ in their social reach and dominance within social groups. Echoing Foucault, Blommaert (cf. 2005: 73ff.) developed the concept of *orders of indexicalities* to account for these socio-historical arrangements of ir-/relevances, valorizations, and hierarchies of indexicalities.

- (2) Enregisterment: According to Agha (2005), processes of enregisterment are discursive processes (e.g., regularities in use; explicit discursive evaluations) where semiotic features, and perceivable entities in general, are encoded (or recoded) as social signs and attached to certain social meanings (cf. Auer 2017: 294f.; Spitzmüller 2013b: 268). A socio-culturally stratified set of indexical elements (i.e., "emblems" in Agha's terms) pointing to a certain social categorization (i.e., to certain "figures of personhood" and "contexts of use" in Agha's terms) is called a *register* (e.g., the stereotyped register of "White Trash"; see Figure 1). Following the recursive logic of indexicality, registers can, in turn, serve as emblems of other (meta-indexical) registers (e.g., the set of elements—or visual style—signaling "visual balance" serving as emblem of a certain register of "aesthetic appeal"; see Figure 1).
- (3) Communicative ideologies are part of the socio-historically stratified communicative knowledge demarcating the acceptable use and meanings of communicative tools in certain socio-pragmatic fields. Communicative ideologies (i.e., language ideologies, media ideologies, etc.) comprise assumptions about and valuations of communicative variants, which are meta-communicatively expressed by or in relation to any communicative practice (Spitzmüller 2013a: 285f.). In this sense, the golden ratio is a common ideology concerning "professional", "aesthetic appealing" photos (cf. Bednarek and Caple 2019 [2012]: chap. 7) (see Figure 1). Accordingly, I interpret "canons of use" of semiotic materials (Ledin and Machin 2018: 22–24, 37f.) as communicative knowledge and ideologies.
- (4) Social positioning: Following a constructivist and context-related notion of (social) identity (cf. Blommaert and Rampton 2015; Bucholtz and Hall 2016), it is especially indexical elements that are drawn on by social actors—sensitive to relevant context parameters and orders of indexicalities—to inter-/actively position selves and others, respectively, either rather habitual and unconscious, or explicitly staged and stylized (cf.

ibid.). According to the concept of stance-taking (Du Bois 2007; Spitzmüller 2013b), social positioning is inter-/actively achieved through explicit or implicit (i.e., by affirmative, satirical, or other forms of usage) context-sensitive evaluations of objects of any kind-if ratified by all involved social actors: "I evaluate something, and thereby position myself, and thereby align with you" (Du Bois 2007: 163). Therefore, by affirmatively and explicitly deploying sufficient emblems of the register of "visual balance" in a photo (e.g., the rule of thirds), producers also position themselves as adhering to a certain visual (aesthetical) style. A style which might be evaluated as a "professional" stance in certain social contexts but as an "elitist" stance in others (cf. Jaworski and Thurlow 2009).

# 4 Research design: data and methods

#### 4.1 Research data

In this study, I draw on one subset of a research project based on a sample of photographic depictions of the leading candidates of the six most promising parties, posted during their social media campaigns (Facebook, Instagram) for the Austrian parliamentary elections in 2017 (total of 435 photos). In this broader project, the three layers of product analysis, analysis of metapragmatic discourses, and analysis of (situated) reception processes are combined. Due to this design, and according to the specifics of working with social media data (cf. Meier 2018: 429ff.), the data sample is restricted to photos (including video thumbnails; excluding textpicture compositions) showing the respective politician, posted on the candidates' profiles (Facebook, Instagram) between 20 August and 8 October 2017 (total of 50 days, comprising the start and intense phase; election date: 15 October 2017).

In this paper, I draw on the subset of recent Austrian chancellor Sebastian Kurz (neo-/conservative and partly right-wing populist Austrian People's Party, ÖVP; total of 84 pictures, see Table 1; see for politicalideological analysis: Wodak 2018). This data is triangulated with the analysis of political-PR manager Maderthaner's (2017) metapragmatic reflections on the campaign (see in Sections 3.1 and 4.2).

Kurz' ÖVP (31.5% votes) was the winner of the elections and formed a governing coalition with right-wing populist and nationalist FPÖ (26% votes) (cf. Inneres 2017). This administration resigned in May 2019 after a hidden camera scandal ("Ibiza video affair"). Kurz is famous for his media savvy performances and his massive -and expensive-use of political branding and celebrificated politics, especially on social media (cf. der-Standard.at 2018; Hofer 2017; Wodak 2016: chap. 6). Accordingly, his subset is slightly overrepresented in the whole data sample (19.3%, 84 of 435). A further reason to focus on his subset is the explicit foregrounding of the topos of authenticity in the campaign manager's reflections (cf. in Section 5). Due to limitations of space, there are no reception-based data of the broader project included in this paper.

## 4.2 Methods

Following a multi-perspective and mixed-methods approach, this study is based on an abductive-cyclical research process (cf. Wodak and Meyer 2009a: 23f.) to reconstruct socio-semiotic emblems and registers

Table 1: Overview data sample of Sebastian Kurz (photos depicting the candidate, posted on Facebook or Instagram, Aug 20 to Oct 8, 2017, total of 50 days).

| Leading candidate in Austrian parliamentary elections 2017 | Facebook photos | Instagram photos | Total                   |
|--|-----------------|------------------|-------------------------|
| Sebastian Kurz (ÖVP)                                       | 18              | 66               | 84 (incl. two doublets) |
| Social media accounts: facebook.com/                       |                 |                  |                         |
| sebastiankurz.at Instagram.com/sebastiankurz               |                 |                  |                         |

emerging in the data (using the QDA software Atlas.ti). Thereby, the layers of (a) product analysis (i.e., the photo sample) are combined with (b) the analysis of the metapragmatic reflections on the Kurz campaign by its manager (Maderthaner 2017), and with (c) abductive, contrastive, and historical sensitive relation to relevant "canons of use" (Ledin and Machin 2018: 22–24, 37f.) of visual and photographic communication. Following a metapragmatic interpretation, such "canons of use" are operationalized as comprising communicative ideologies and (respective) regularities of usage.

According to the data triangulated, I combine different methodic frameworks, all of which are grounded within socio-pragmatic approaches to (multimodal and visual) discourse:

- (i) The analysis of metapragmatic discourses equates the procedures of (Critical) Discourse Analysis (cf. Spitzmüller 2013b; Wodak and Meyer 2009b): In this study, this procedure aims at analyzing the communicative ideologies and ethno-concepts of authenticity within the metapragmatic reflections of the campaign manager.
- (ii) For reconstructing indexical elements (emblems; registers) within the photo sample (abductively related to relevant "canons of use"), I draw on analytical tools of Social Semiotics (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996; Ravelli and van Leeuwen 2018) and other frameworks for multimodal and visual discourse analysis (Bednarek and Caple 2019 [2012]; Ledin and Machin 2018; Zappavigna 2016); furthermore, I use (additional) technical categories of (digital) photography practice (cf. Gockel 2012), and of film studies (cf. Dyer 1998). The overall task leading this process is to reconstruct visual features emerging from the data, which are metapragmatically reflected on and contrastively linked to certain communicative ideologies.

These semiotic features have the potency to point to different social meanings. With focusing on different registers, I take a certain social meaning (i.e., authenticity) as starting point and ask which visual variants of politicians' photos in my sample are linked to different social conceptualizations of authenticity. According to considerations of analyzing linguistic variables as indexicals (cf. Auer 2017: 290–297), it is likely that the regarding photographic features already have a history of encoding and recoding/s. Furthermore, especially in the case of stylization as a focused and foregrounded action (cf. Kotthoff 2012: chap. 2 and 3), the regarding visual features are conceived to be salient (also) in terms of modal density, that is, regarding their intensity and/or complexity (Norris 2020: 44ff.).

# 5 Delineating two registers of authenticity in visual political (social media) communication

According to the introduced research design and data triangulation, I shall now briefly discuss the authenticity concepts and related communicative ideologies which are deployed within the reflections of PR-manager Maderthaner on the Kurz campaign (Maderthaner 2017). His article appeared in a political experts' volume on the parliamentary elections of 2017 (Hofer and Tóth 2017). PR-expert Maderthaner uses a catchy style of marketing journalism, typical of the small and simple, professional and affective stories told in social media marketing (cf. Reckwitz 2017: chap. IV-2). Besides praising the competences and success in using social media tools, he deploys the media ideological—and (right-wing) populist—topos of social media as "immediate" and "unbiased" communication (cf. Blasch 2020: 50). Thereby, Maderthaner uses the frame that traditional mass media do not meet the needs and opinions of "the people" (cf. Maderthaner 2017: 57), and conceives of digital media as "direct" communication (ibid: 59f.).

Furthermore, Maderthaner explicitly frames the Kurz campaign as clinging to "authenticity as dogma" ("Authentizität als Dogma", Maderthaner 2017: 56). He explicitly focuses on the aspect of authenticity, framing his campaign as driven by a journalistic ethos, so to speak, stating that "each photo originated in 'real' situations with 'real' people and supporters. A campaign as reportage showing what is, instead of drawing a picture of how one wants to be seen." ("Jedes Foto der Kampagne entstand in 'echten' Situationen mit 'echten' Menschen und Unterstützern. Eine Kampagne als Reportage, die zeigt, was ist, anstatt ein Bild zu zeichnen,

wie man gesehen werden möchte.", ibid.). The marketing expert does not draw on a naïve notion of journalistic, documentarist neutralism here—as it might seem at first sight. Rather, by contrasting two campaigning styles—i.e., "the campaign as tailor-made suit" ("Die Kampagne als Maßanzug", ibid.), implicitly contrasted to "the campaign as suit of-the-rack"-, Maderthaner conceptualizes "being authentic" as the product of focused and foregrounded mediatized (visual) performance under expert guidance: "Being authentic", in this conceptualization, is conceived as a superior register of (mediatized, visual) stylization and this mediatized stylization is the product of a superior practice of campaigning (the "tailor-made suit"). This conceptualization matches the above mentioned theoretical considerations on authenticity as an asset of the "digital self" in cultural capitalism (cf. in Section 2).

# 5.1 The register of professional sensorism

According to these conceptualizations by the campaign manager, one prevailing visual style of authenticity within the Kurz data is a (meta-indexical) blend of different registers. The emblems of these registers are characterized by a high modal density, that is, by a focused and foregrounded visual stylization. Merged into what I call "register of professional sensorism" are (a) emblems of Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996) sensory coding orientation (extended by further emblems); and (b) emblems of the (meta-)register of "aesthetic appealing" visual professionalism. This register comprises what Bednarek and Caple (2019 [2012]: chap. 7) call a "balanced composition" and other emblems ideologically associated with a classic conceptualization of aesthetic, skillful pictures (e.g., the artistic implementation of light).

Building on the framework of sensory coding orientation at this point (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996: chap. 5; Ravelli and van Leeuwen 2018: 283f.), I re-interpret the concept of "truth of affect" in terms of Reckwitz' notion of authenticity as the sensual, affective, and "immediate" experience of "the moment". Furthermore, I re-interpret the semiotic choices "marking" sensorism as indexical elements: Rather than conceiving them as quite nuanced settings on different continuant visual dimensions, I (only) consider those visual elements as indexicals which are explicitly talked about in reflexive metapragmatic discourses, be it scientific or popular.

Several indexical elements within this register are encoded as both sensory and professionally aesthetic. And, in fact, the (meta-indexical) association of these two registers is to be found in several metapragmatic discourses on painting and photography: As Bednarek and Caple put it regarding appealing photo composition in journalism, there are "many elements that contribute to the aesthetic quality of a photographic image including lightning, color, shutter speed and composition" (Bednarek and Caple 2019 [2012]: 199). Moreover, the essentially sensory practice of "capturing" light in paintings or photographs serves as a central topos and (iconic) emblem of professional and/or artistic visual competence (see for photography: Freeman 2014; see the topos of "chiaroscuro", i.e., extreme contrasts of light and darkness, throughout art history, cf. Wikipedia 2020a). An example for the stereotypical reach of this meta-indexical linkage between the knowledge/practice of visually "showing light" and the social evaluation of (visual) expertise is given in an episode of the popular German TV-series "Das Traumschiff" ("Dreamboat"): In a scene introducing the character of an art historian, she talks about the use of light in a favorite painting (cf. ZDF and ORF 2020, https://www.zdf.de/filme/ das-traumschiff, 6 June 2020).

In the following, I discuss six layers of emblems of professional sensorism which are salient in the photo sample:

(1) Professional-sensory color emblems (i.e., vibrant colors; brand color as subtype): The "more than real"-intensity of colors is saliently used to exemplify sensory coding orientation (cf. Ravelli and van Leeuwen 2018: 283f.). In fact, there are very different visual dimensions and technical procedures of post-/production involved to get what is commonly called "vibrant colors". Nonetheless, this collocation is used significantly in metapragmatic discourses on color in photography, comprising all those techniques to produce sensually pleasing aspects of color with high modal density in an image—be it saturation, contrast, brightness, or other. Therefore, I consider "vibrant color" as labelling this emblematic use of color ("vibrant color photos" functions as an auto-completed search string on Google, yielding more than

- 110 million results, with the thematic sections of the platforms gettyimages.com and shutterstock.com as top results, date: 20 June 2020). Furthermore, I conceive the focused use of a party's brand color in a photo (in the case of Kurz: turquoise) as a special case of vibrant color and, therefore, as an emblem.
- (2) Professional-sensory light emblems (i.e., staged light & shadow; lens flare, back-lighting, and chiaroscuro as specific subtypes): Traditionally considered as central flaws, lens flare (i.e., reflections of light in a camera's lens due to back-light in a certain angle, appearing either as light rays or geometrical forms on an image) and back-lighting (i.e., the central source lighting the picture, e.g., the sun, is in front of the camera; this may lead to several effects regarding contrast, brightness, etc.) had a significant career of metapragmatically recoding within the last years. Eventually, they ended up as central emblems of professional-sensory stylization in visual communication (cf. Freeman 2014; Wikipedia 2020c): Due to technical improvement, cameras are built to cushion undeliberate lens flare nowadays. Hence, the deliberate, foregrounded, and appealing deployment of lens flare and back-lighting effects has become the outcome of—and an emblem for—expertise in styling sensory, spectacular images (either by photographic techniques or by digital post-production; cf. e.g., the opening credits of TV-drama "Game of Thrones", https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s7L2PVdrb 8, 16 June 2020). While lens flare was heavily recoded by its artistic deployment in science-fiction films (e.g., by J. J. Abrams), the professional career of backlighting is essentially connected to the everyday and spontaneous use of smartphone photography (cf. Meier 2015: 98–102). In contrast, the above introduced "chiaroscuro" has a long tradition in painting and professional visual communication. Therefore, I use this term for specific emblematic instances of highly contrastive and dramatized staging of light and darkness (see for classic examples: Wikipedia 2020a). Furthermore, I consider "staged light and shadow" as the overarching (meta-)emblem for all those focused, modal dense actions of visually showing light (often concerning the main participant's face/ body), which comprise chiaroscuro, back-lighting, and lens flare as specific emblematic subtypes.
- (3) *Professional-sensory selective blur*: Similar to the wrong implementation of light, blur in general must be considered as a traditional emblem for the dilettantish photographer: "Main thing: sharpness" ("Hauptsache scharf"), as user "Frau Müller" put it in a post (from 19 December 2019) on a German amateur photography blog, criticizing the practice of uninspired but wannabe-professional amateur photographers (https://fotografische.de/blog/knipser/, 16 June 2020). However, the selective use of blur, especially for guiding the viewer's attention by de-/focusing certain elements, has become a common feature of recent narrative and fictional visual communication (cf. in *Section 5.2*). For its contrast to the common overall sharpness of photo-realism (cf. Kress and van Leeuwen 1996: chap. 5), as well as for its quality of mimicking the human eye's procedures of de-/focusing, the modal dense use of selective blur (e.g., blurring the background and/or foreground elements) is conceived as an emblem of professional-sensory stylization.
- (4) *Professional-sensory dynamic slant:* The slanted depiction of things and scenes is encoded as a central emblem for the dilettante since the early days of snapper photography: In an article on motifs in the amateur photography journal "Der Photofreund" ("the photo friend") from 1930, the slanted depiction of a church serves as the very emblematic example for the—dilettantish, pejorative—"snapper-style" (cited in: Starl 1995: 16). However, nowadays, slanted depiction is recoded due to digital photo practices and has gained an indexical potential to point to spontaneous (smartphone) photography (cf. Meier 2015: 98–102). Moreover, if deployed within a professional visual style, slanted visual lines (such as the horizon, etc.) are very commonly conceived of as having a dynamic and sensory effect: They are put in contrast to the quite static effects of exclusively using symmetric composition principles by the book (cf. Bednarek and Caple 2019 [2012]: chap. 7; Vorenkamp 2016; see below).
- (5) *Professional-sensory perspectival depth:* Intertwined with emblems of balanced composition, I consider an emphasized and spectacular perspectival depth, visually "sucking" the viewer into the picture (e.g., by deep perspective with strong leading lines, blurred participants in the picture foreground, vignettes), as a professional-sensory emblem.
- (6) Professional-balanced composition emblems (i.e., single VUI; level & upright alignment; balanced positioning [rule of thirds]; balanced lines; one-point perspective): In adapting elements of the "balance

framework", developed with regard to photojournalism by Bednarek and Caple (2019 [2012]: chap. 7), I consider the deployment of the most classic compositional rules as indexical elements. I conceive of these classic compositional rules as mediated by fairly dominant and stereotypical communicative ideologies of aesthetics (see below), and as central emblems of a professional-balanced visual style. Following Bednarek and Caple (2019 [2012]: 204, 215f.) in what they call "visual unit of information" (VUI, i.e., semantically connected elements within an image frame, making up a coherent whole, especially a scene of social action, e.g., fans cheering for their star), one of the most emblematic features of an "ugly", "unbalanced" picture is to include more than one (competing) VUIs. Vice versa, the clear focus on one single VUI must be considered as a basic emblem of a "balanced" and professional photo. Extending the framework of Bednarek and Caple, I add the emblem of level and upright alignment of the main visual lines within the image frame (most crucially the horizon; cf. Vorenkamp 2016). One of the most classic rules for producing balanced pictures, the "rule of thirds", as a simplified version of the golden ratio (see for details: Bednarek and Caple 2019 [2012]: 201), has become materialized as a digital gadget (i.e., grid lines) within many (smartphone) cameras nowadays: Following the most common version of this rule (cf. e.g., a photographer's blog, https://www.karsten-kettermann.com/blog/der-goldene-schnitt, 16 June 2020). central elements of a picture are to be positioned within or at the intersection points of the middle section of a grid divided into nine equal rectangles. As well, the rule of thirds is implemented if elements are clearly positioned according to the grid lines or sections (e.g., a central element positioned in a corner section). Associated to this rule is the emblematic use of (leading) lines (e.g., the horizon, a hallway, etc.) and their horizontal, vertical, or diagonal positioning within the picture, especially when aligned to the grid lines. Finally, the explicit and emphasized implementation of one-point perspective, deployed with central angles and strong visual (vanishing) lines, has to be conceived as a classic emblem of a skillful visual style: An epitome of symmetric composition (cf. da Vinci's "Last Supper"), central and emphasized one-point perspective was famously recoded as sophisticated visual style by filmmaker Stanley Kubrick (cf. Saporito 2021). Moreover, it is prominently used within recent high-quality TV-drama series such as "House of Cards" (cf. the clipping-mix in a fan-made YouTube video: https://www.youtube.com/watch? v=yYipbPRKqzQ, 16 June 2020). Therefore, this compositional emblem must also be considered to potentially point to fictional genres nowadays.

It is important to notice that I conceive of proportional principles such as the golden ratio as indexicals, that is, as mediated by certain communicative ideologies—and not as context-independent constants of visual human perception. Besides empirical criticism of considering these principles as anthropological preferences and "natural" evaluations of "balance" or "beauty" (cf. van der Schoot 2005; Wagemans et al. 2012), it is also crucial to keep in mind that this (naturalistic) communicative ideology has a classist, bourgeois inscription.

As Table 2 shows, the high frequency of central emblems of balanced composition (such as balanced positioning with 100%, and single VUI with 97.6% of occurrence) create the backdrop of professionalism against which the less frequent sensory emblems (such as back-lighting or dynamic slant) can be read as part of a professional sensory, spectacular, and "authentic" visual stylization. In contrast to their context-sensitive potential of being read as indexicals pointing to dilettantism.

# 5.2 The register of voyeuristic fictionalization

The second conceptualization and respective visual register of authenticity which is salient within the photo sample of Kurz is mainly deployed by means of visual focalization and the narrative positioning of the implicit viewer (cf. Zappavigna 2016: 275–277): As film theorist Dyer (1998: 122) points out, it is non-public contexts and, especially, (seemingly) unobserved situations which serve to show the "true selves" of social actors—and, therefore, also function to authenticate fictional characters. Accordingly, the more the implicit viewer is put into a position which makes her an "unnoticed observer" to the main social actor watched (e.g., at long distance, behind other participants), the more authentic the scene and actions depicted.

48 — L. Blasch DE GRUYTER

**Table 2:** Frequencies of the emblems of the registers of professional sensorism and voyeuristic fictionalization, respectively, in the photo sample of Sebastian Kurz. Subtype emblems are coded as both main type and subtype.

|  | Facebook sample (18 photos) | Instagram sample (66 photos) | Total (84 photos) |
|--|-----------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------|
| Register of professional sensorism       | 18                          | 66                           | 84 (100%)         |
| (occurrence of at least one emblem)      |                             |                              |                   |
| Color emblems                            |                             |                              |                   |
| Vibrant colors                           | 16                          | 54                           | 70 (83.3%)        |
| Subtype: Brand color                     | 4                           | 20                           | 24 (28.6%)        |
| Light emblems                            |                             |                              |                   |
| Staged light and shadow                  | 9                           | 44                           | 53 (63.1%)        |
| Subtype: Lens flare                      | 0                           | 3                            | 3 (3.6%)          |
| Subtype: Back-lighting                   | 1                           | 7                            | 8 (9.5%)          |
| Subtype: Chiaroscuro                     | 2                           | 6                            | 8 (9.5%)          |
| (Narrative) selective blur               | 11                          | 51                           | 62 (73.8%)        |
| Dynamic slant                            | 3                           | 22                           | 25 (29.8%)        |
| Perspectival depth                       | 8                           | 13                           | 21 (25%)          |
| Balanced composition emblems             |                             |                              |                   |
| Single VUI                               | 18                          | 64                           | 82 (97.6%)        |
| Level and upright alignment              | 14                          | 38                           | 52 (61.9%)        |
| Balanced positioning (rule of thirds)    | 18                          | 66                           | 84 (100%)         |
| Balanced lines                           | 18                          | 47                           | 65 (77.4%)        |
| One-point perspective                    | 1                           | 5                            | 6 (7.1%)          |
|  | Facebook sample (18 photos) | Instagram sample (66 photos) | Total (84 photos) |
| Register of voyeuristic fictionalization | 16                          | 64                           | 80 (95.2%)        |
| (occurrence of at least one emblem)      |                             |                              |                   |
| Emblems of "fourth wall"                 |                             |                              |                   |
| Offer                                    | 16                          | 64                           | 80 (95.2%)        |
| Oblique horizontal angle                 | 10                          | 46                           | 56 (66.7%)        |
| Subtype: Shown from behind               | 1                           | 14                           | 15 (17.9%)        |
| Demarcation of scene                     | 9                           | 45                           | 54 (64.3%)        |
| Long shot                                | 1                           | 14                           | 15 (17.9%)        |
| Narrative selective blur emblems         |                             |                              |                   |
| Narrative selective blur                 | 11                          | 51                           | 62 (73.8%)        |
| Subtype: Narrative out-of-focus          | 0                           | 7                            | 7 (8.3%)          |
|  |                             |                              |                   |

Visual practices to position depicted participants as gaze objects, offered to uninvolved observation, may also point to documentarist or scientific genres. However, in this sample of social media photos, these indexicals are co-occurring with several other indexicals pointing to fictional genre. Therefore, they are part of a fictionalized visual style, basically implemented by genre-indexical means of the "fourth wall" of (visual) fiction (e.g., no eye contact between characters and audience; cf. Kress and van Leeuwen 1996: 126).

- Three layers of emblems of voyeuristic fictionalization are salient in the photo sample (cf. Table 2):
- (1) Emblems of the "fourth wall" of fiction (i.e., offer; oblique horizontal angle with "shown from behind" as subtype; demarcation of scene; long shot): Drawing on the label of Kress and van Leeuwen (1996: 126), "offer"—that is, no eye contact between depicted participant and implicit viewer—serves as essential emblem of the "fourth wall". Moreover, the following elements have to be considered as emblematic for recent fictional visual genres (cf. the above mentioned "House of cards"-clippings): the use of oblique horizontal angles (including showing main participants from behind), detaching the implicit viewer from the depicted social action (cf. Kress and van Leeuwen 1996: 130f.); and the—mostly blurred—depiction of elements in the picture foreground to explicitly demarcate the depicted scene of social action (e.g., other characters or parts of interior). Finally, I consider a long shot on (main) social actors in a photo as emblematically associated with fictional genres (cf. the traditional use of the long shot as introducing the main location and setting of the unfolding narrative, e.g., in Wikipedia 2020b).
- (2) Narrative selective blur emblems (i.e., narrative selective blur with narrative out-of-focus as subtype): As mentioned above, selective blur is canonically used within fictional genres to narratively guide the focus of the viewers' attention. Furthermore, showing main characters out-of-focus due to narrative guidance through an unfolding scene is strongly associated with fictional genres (cf. the above mentioned "House of Cards"-clipping).
- (3) Voyeuristic gaze: While classic cinema in general has been prominently analyzed as the scopic regime of voyeuristic gaze (cf. Metz 2000), putting the implicit viewer in the explicit position of a voyeur is a classic topos of visual fiction in its own right. As Schroer (2010: 451ff.) points out, the voyeur is essentially defined by being excluded from the situation she is intruding with her gaze: She is unnoticed by its object of desire, possibly hiding in ambush, and/or using remote vision devices to get visually near. Therefore, I consider those images as emblematically pointing to a voyeuristic gaze which explicitly show a barrier between the scenic situation observed and the observing situation of the implicit viewer. A constellation implying that the camera's gaze is unnoticed by the main participant/s. A specific emblematic version of the voyeuristic gaze is deployed if the implicit viewer is positioned in ambush (observing from out of another room, from behind a door, etc.). According to this concept of authenticity, showing parts of the "backstage" of mediatized politics (e.g., cameras, journalists, etc.) additionally serves to authenticate such arrangements.

Considering the indexical potential of these visual elements, it is important to notice that the syntagmatic arrangement of such photos within a social media profile emphasizes its fictionalizing reading: Clicking through such photos within a gallery makes them seem like stills from a recent TV-drama series or a movie.

As Table 2 shows, the essential emblem of fiction genres, the "offer", is highly dominant in the whole sample (95.2%). Moreover, against the backdrop of the high frequency of basic fictionalizing emblems i.e., narrative selective blur (73.8%), demarcation of the scene (64.3%), and oblique horizontal angle (66.7%)—, the less frequent staging of highly emblematic fictional shot arrangements—such as showing a main character out of focus, from behind, or at long distance—leads to a very fictionalized visual arrangement (if read according to this order of indexicalities).

# 6 Conclusion

In this study, I deployed a metapragmatics-based approach and triangulated product analysis with the analysis of metapragmatic reflections and relevant ideological "canons of use". The study has shown how two blended visual registers (of visual variants) serve for the specific visual stylization, and social positioning, as being authentic" within a photo sample of political social media communication. Conceptualized as a superior—style of mediatized self-visualization within the context of (digital) political marketing, the deployed notion of "being authentic" comprises two discourses: The concept of "unnoticed observation", which underlies visual practices typical of fiction genres, is complemented by the concept of unique-but still intelligible—, sensory, and affective experience, typical of visual practices on social media.

In particular, the construction of the implicit viewer as unnoticed, partly voyeuristic observer seems to be essential in photojournalist news coverage of politics as well (cf. Blasch 2020: 191f.). Thereby, these procedures of visual communication serve for a (further) fictionalization of politics (cf. Wodak and Forchtner 2018a): While allegedly aiming at "immediacy" in political communication, the implicit positioning of citizens as voyeurs of fictionalized political figures implies their conceptualization as detached and excluded from actual participation. However, considered through a metapragmatic lens, this visual stylization and social positioning as "authentic" is context-sensitive and depending on the interpretative repertoires of concrete social actors: The heavily bourgeois background (and the indexical field) of several emblems indexing "aesthetic appealing" authenticity puts this stylization at risk of being read as "elitist" and "mannered". This is echoed by the fact that explicitly breaking the rules of a balanced visual style is not (only) considered as "dilettantish" in certain social contexts but as "anti-elitist" and "authentic" (Weixler 2012). In any case, such a "professional" and "balanced" media style is built on bourgeois ideologies of aesthetics. Therefore, it implicitly perpetuates classist distinctions and communicative ideologies.

Accordingly, and with respect to the limits of this research, it is important to notice that the two registers delineated in this study must not be misunderstood as an exhaustive and context-independent model of authenticity registers in visual communication. The outcome presented here is restricted to the prevailing indexicals in this data set and to visual variants sensu Ochs (1992: 338): that is, to different photographic features referring to the same denotative meaning (i.e., picture content). Therefore, I did not consider content-type registers such as "behind the scenes" of (mediatized) politics (cf. Bernhardt and Liebhart 2017). The data sample used has to be considered as highly significant for the Kurz campaign in 2017, due to the time of data collection during the intensive phase of the campaign. Nonetheless, the sample size of this subset is quite small, especially regarding the Facebook subset, due to the research design of the overarching project. Finally, the data layer of situated discursive reception (e.g., conducted with focus groups in experimental settings with selected stimulus material) is not included in this study (due to limits of space). Nonetheless, this dimension is regarded as crucial within a metapragmatics-based approach.

Considering the potential of this study for future research on political communication, delineating registers of visual political communication provides tools for analyzing the strategic mediatized creation of political figures—as well as for analyzing diverse patterns of reception and recontextualization (cf. Blasch 2020: 223–227). With respect to recent phenomena of "post-truth politics", empirical research on the registers, discursive conceptualizations, and functions of authenticity within political communication seems crucial (cf. Montgomery 2017).

Recent digital media societies are characterized by the convergence of "old" mass media and the bottom-up oriented practices of users and activists (cf. Blasch 2020: chap. 5). Therefore, a framework integrating the dimension of diverse patterns of reception and recontextualization seems needed and valuable (cf. ibid.: 223–227). Following research in Critical Discourse Studies, analyzing registers and "orders of indexicality" in visual political communication helps explicating communicative procedures of social hierarchization and social exclusion (cf. ibid.).

With focusing on actors and on the inherent mediatedness, situatedness, and socio-culturedness of (discursive) perception, semiosis, and communicative means (or mediational means/cultural tools in terms of Norris 2020), a metapragmatic-based approach shares also significant common ground with Multimodal (Inter)Action Analysis (cf. Norris 2020). A further (future) dialogue between these approaches to multimodal analysis—especially in regard to reception-based data, and drawing on concepts such as frozen action—seems fruitful in any case.

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