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# Public self-reflection in the context of the European migrant crisis: Towards a new transdisciplinary model of discourse analysis in politics, media and the arts

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## Abstract

While the European migrant crisis is omnipresent in political and medial discourses, two of its key causes are only seldom addressed by politicians and journalists: mistakes in Europe's domestic, foreign and development policies; and Eurocentric, clichéd or ill-informed press coverage on migration. What impedes such political and medial self-criticism? What happens if politicians or journalists publicly address their own mistakes? Creative culture, in turn, has a long tradition of public self-reflexivity. In the wake of the crisis, many literary texts and films self-critically reflect on the literary and filmic framing of migrants, and challenge the political and medial 'externalization' of the crisis. Building upon these observations, this contribution suggests a new direction for discursive research: the analysis of self-criticism as an ethical challenge for public communication. It highlights research desiderata, discusses the theoretical foundations for comparing self-reflexivity across discourses, and outlines a transdisciplinary terminology and exemplary methods for future research.

## Keywords

discourse analysis, film, literature, media, migrant crisis, politics, self-criticism, self-reflection

The term 'migrant crisis' has been omnipresent in public political and media discourses throughout Europe since the huge increase in migrant numbers from Syria, Afghanistan,

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Iraq, Eritrea and other countries in 2015.<sup>1</sup> In general, the term is not used to refer to threats in the migrants' countries of origin, but to a set of political, ideological and economic conflicts within Europe which are allegedly *caused by* migrants:<sup>2</sup> in political and media discourses, their arrival is mostly depicted as the starting point for the crisis, and as the 'external' cause for internal conflicts (Peeren, 2015). However, a number of cultural, political and historical scholars have been demanding that the focus shift to other, internal reasons for the crisis, especially on preceding and persisting flaws in Europe's own domestic, foreign and development policies (Krastev, 2017), as well as on Eurocentric, clichéd or ill-informed press coverage on migration that generates fear and prejudice (Chouliaraki et al., 2017). Thus there is a striking imbalance between the dominant media and political narratives of 'outside' causes, on the one hand, and the fundamental lack of recognition for those 'inside' causes for the European crisis which are rooted in journalistic and political practices, on the other hand.

This imbalance can be seen as a prime example of a problem which Javier Solana recently addressed when he stated that, in the light of the continent's numerous crises, 'constructive self-criticism is an indispensable exercise in today's Europe' (Solana, cover endorsement for Castells, 2018). The apparent lack of such 'constructive self-criticism' in the media and political discourses at hand raises a number of principal questions which are the starting point for the thoughts I will develop below:

1. Why are crucial problems of political and journalistic practice in the context of the migrant crisis (policy mistakes, media framing) so seldom addressed within public political and journalistic discourses? What happens if they are?
2. How can the problems and limitations of such discursive self-criticism (politics on politics, journalism on journalism) be analysed?
3. What are the requirements for enhancing the transfer of crisis-related academic criticism to constructive political and media self-criticism?

These are not mere abstract questions. Public media and political discourses have a fundamental influence on policymakers and voters worldwide (Bryant and Oliver, 2009; Habermas, 2006; Wettstein and Wirth, 2017). Understanding their mechanisms and flaws, in particular the massive lack of critical information in these discourses, is elementary for solving one of the biggest global socio-cultural challenges of our time. Anti-immigrant populism and nationalism are on the rise, borders and harbours are being shut down, people keep drowning in the Mediterranean, and the EU is struggling to find a common strategy. Europe's case is the perfect example of a global crisis, with the number of forcibly displaced people reaching an all-time high of 65.6 million, or 1 in every 113 people worldwide (UNHCR, 2017).

In this paper, I will propose a new direction for research, which aims to explain and tackle the lack of critical information about politics- and media-related problems *in* politics and the media, and I will outline some preliminaries for theorizing, analysing and explaining them. Obviously, 'criticism' and 'crisis' generally share much more than their etymological roots. A big part of crisis-related public discourse generally consists of 'critical' – mostly allocritical – communication (with politicians criticizing the 'mainstream media', cultural practitioners criticizing politics, etc.), which is then, in turn,

analysed by cultural scholarship. I argue that an analytical shift towards the problems and challenges of *self-criticism* in media and political discourses is necessary to tackle the questions formulated above. In a discourse-critical model, self-criticism can be conceptualized as a sub-form of self-reflection, and as a discursive mode that poses a number of specific discursive risks in the media and politics. To determine these specific risks, politics and journalism will be contrasted with a field for which public self-reflexivity has already been extensively analysed in cultural research, and which currently provides numerous examples for open self-criticism in the context of the migrant crisis: the arts, particularly literature and film. Based on this discursive comparison, a new overarching analytical model of public self-criticism will be developed.

To investigate the above questions, I depart from the following hypotheses:

1. The general problem of the transfer from academic criticism to political and journalistic self-criticism is a cultural one, rooted in the cultural restrictions of these discourses. If public self-criticism occurs in these discourses, problems of credibility, power and other discursive risks arise.
2. In contrast to journalism and politics, creative cultural practices in film and literature on the migrant crisis provide a variety of critical self-reflection, for example on the filmic and literary framing of migrants. Comparisons with these artistic practices of self-reflection are crucial for a new understanding of the limitations of journalism and politics.
3. Self-criticism as a form of self-reflexivity is not only an ethical core value for individuals (as classically attributed, for instance, by Immanuel Kant to distinguish man from animal), but also – as a discursive mode – for public communication.

In order to develop a new model of cultural analysis and a new cultural theory framework to investigate, compare and evaluate the forms and problems of self-criticism in different discourses, an interdisciplinary approach will be combined with a transdisciplinary terminology. In the following section, I will briefly address some main lines of existing research on the migrant crisis in several relevant research fields – political science, history, media studies, literary and film studies – and highlight desiderata concerning the topic of self-reflexivity in these fields. Secondly, I will discuss the theoretical foundations for comparing these discourses with each other, and for conceptualizing self-reflexivity as a discursive mode, drawing on Michel Foucault's discourse theory, epistemology, and elements of Zygmunt Bauman's conception of culture. And, thirdly, building on these foundations, I will outline the core elements of a transdisciplinary terminology and some suggestions for future research, before finally addressing some ethical dimensions of public self-reflection.

### **The migrant crisis and self-reflexivity: disciplinary approaches and desiderata**

The approach I propose builds on recent research strands in several disciplines that deal with various aspects of the migrant crisis. Recent political and historical scholarship has addressed numerous indicators for the migrant crisis being largely the result

of failed European policies. Much-discussed examples are the lack of a common EU strategy on migration and asylum (Collier, 2018; Krastev, 2017); a dearth of integration measures (Ther, 2017); and the unreflective promotion of national or European ‘cultural identities’ that foster populism and xenophobia (Jullien, 2016; Rensmann, 2017). The Schengen policies of inner ‘debordering’ have been critically analysed with regard to their outer ‘rebordering’ effects (Scott, 2012). On a broader scale, ‘systemic crises’ in Europe have been explored as expressions of an overarching cultural crisis (Castells et al., 2011). In this connection, it seems that precisely ‘the decisions that made possible the development of the EU created the conditions for its multiple crises’ (Castells, 2018: 3). While these and other ‘inner’ factors, as well as solution strategies, continue to be discussed extensively in academic contexts, to date there is: (a) no comprehensive account of the effect of these discussions on the discussed political discourses – i.e. on the route from criticism of European politics towards what Solana has called productive *self*-criticism within these fields; and (b) no analytical model or theory on the processes and the discursive mode that would enable this transfer of critical knowledge.

Media studies scholars, in turn, have provided numerous qualitative and quantitative studies of the press coverage on the migrant crisis within and across different European countries (Berry et al., 2015; Cavedes, 2015; Chouliaraki et al., 2017; Dekker and Scholten, 2017; Fotopoulos and Kaimaklioti, 2016; Haller, 2017; International Centre for Migration Policy Development, 2017; Kosho, 2016; Musarò and Parmiggiani, 2017; White, 2015; Zeitel-Bank, 2017), and the number of critical analyses of news media representations of migration has been growing rapidly in recent years (Bleich et al., 2017; La Rocca, 2017; for work done before the peak of the current crisis, see: Bischoff et al., 2010; Moore et al., 2012; Ommundsen, 2014; Vliegenthart and Roggeband, 2007). These studies focused on a variety of topics, such as different framings of migrants and migration, their negative effects, and comparisons of media coverage in different countries. However, the role of self-reflexivity in the coverage on the migrant crisis, such as journalistic reflections on problems of framing, has not been dealt with systematically. This is particularly significant since ‘meta-journalism’ has been on the agenda of media studies for some time, but is mainly seen as a means of ensuring journalistic authority (Carlson, 2017); and because research on general mass media developments (Marcus, 1997; Weber, 1999) suggests that self-referentiality – i.e. coverage building on previous coverage – has continued to rise in the last few decades. As Winfried Nöth (2007: 3) summarizes, drawing on McLuhan’s famous dictum that the medium is the message: ‘[T]he news [is] more and more about what has been reported in the news.’ In the few cases in which the term ‘self-reflection’ is used in media studies approaches to the migrant crisis, it happens to denote the dehumanizing effect of specific visual media framings of migrants, namely regarding

- pictures of benevolent Western celebrities visiting, helping or supporting migrants, and playful social media collages recontextualizing elements of well-known migrant images in the crisis context. ‘Self-reflection’ here refers to the depiction of Western benevolence and compassion replacing the focus on the migrant as a human being (Chouliaraki and Stolic, 2017); and

- pictures and films which show migrants taking selfies, e.g. after their successful arrival on European shores, or with celebrities. Such ‘remedializations’ often replace the testimonial impetus of refugees’ self-representation with oppositional effects of ‘symbolic bordering’ (Chouliaraki, 2017), by fuelling suspicion-driven hate discourse of ‘dismay and disgust’ (Risam, 2018).

The notion of ‘self-reflexivity’ on which the following considerations are based is rather different: I conceptualize ‘reflection’ as a form of critical meditation, rather than mindless ‘mirroring’. However, relevant aspects of the insightful analyses by Chouliaraki, Stolic and Risam are to be considered when the investigation of ‘closed’ self-reference in the media is discussed (see below).

Finally, literary studies and film studies have produced numerous studies of recent migration movements as a topic of cultural production (Bayraktar, 2015; Köhn, 2016; Maeding and Siguan, 2017; Peeren, 2015; for work done before the peak of the current crisis, see: Berghahn and Sternberg, 2010; Bischoff et al., 2010; Moore et al., 2012; Ommundsen, 2014; Vliegthart and Roggeband, 2007). While scholarship has provided numerous critical perspectives on European and other Western migration and crisis issues as negotiated in a growing number of literary texts and films, the question of how these works and their authors locate themselves as parts of European or Western cultural settings has not been systematically dealt with. In my previous research on critical documentaries and essay films on the crisis, I have addressed a number of films that do not merely criticize political or societal aspects of the crisis – mistakes ‘made by others’ – but also *self-critically* assess filmic and other aesthetic and cultural practices that contribute to the crisis (Lippert, 2018). For instance, I have shown how Gianfranco Rosi’s highly acclaimed Golden Bear winner and Oscar nominee, *Fire at Sea*, self-reflexively demonstrates the distance between Europeans and non-European migrants by depicting them with different camera techniques and by ‘separating’ them throughout the filmic narrative, despite the fact that they are in the same place. Another example is Oscar nominee *4.1 Miles*, made by Daphne Matziaraki: in this film, the distance between the camerawoman and her filmed subjects is ostentatiously broken when the former is asked to help rescue migrants, obliging her to put down her camera. The screen turns black, revealing the incompatibility of passive observation and active participation. Such works, I suggest, do not try to position themselves ‘outside’ the cultural frames from which they have emerged, but rather aim to question and subvert these frames from within.

These preliminary observations on self-critical works about the migrant crisis challenge traditional reductionist assumptions about the roles that creative self-reflexivity can play. In general, self-reflection has been investigated quite extensively in literary studies (see, for example, Hutcheon, 1980; Neumann and Nünning, 2014; for a detailed overview, cf. Lippert and Schmid, forthcoming), as well as in film studies (Karpf et al., 1996; Kirchmann, 1994; Kirchmann and Ruchatz, 2014; Stam, 1992) and art history (Bantleon, 2011; Lippert, 2008; Wyss, 2006). While many scholars today associate such self-reflexivity primarily with ‘playful’ or ‘aestheticist’ postmodern literature and art, it has in fact a much longer and more diversified aesthetic tradition (Waugh, 1984; Wolf, 1993). In recent contributions, I have argued that aesthetic self-reflection can question

social determinism (Lippert, 2017), change reading attitudes (Lippert, 2009), and provide critical perspectives on science (Lippert, 2013).

Picking up on these preliminaries, further research on discursive self-reflexivity in literature and film in the context of the migrant crisis must involve broader empirical studies of their audience effects, which will enable well-founded comparisons with other discourses. An example outline of such a study is presented below; beforehand, I will discuss the theoretical foundations for such comparisons.

## **Discourse comparison and self-reflexivity as a discursive mode: theoretical preliminaries**

The aim of comparing and contrasting self-reflexivity in political, media, literary and artistic discourses comes with a number of theoretical and conceptual challenges. First, relevant overarching principles of *self-reflexivity* have to be discerned. While it has never been researched as a discursive mode in public communication, there are numerous other notions of the term. Most prominently, it has a long tradition in the history of philosophy, and particularly epistemology, where it has most often been discussed either as a cognitive capacity of individuals (cf. Renz, 2017), or as a logical, formal or pragmatic challenge for philosophy (Bartlett and Suber, 1987; Bartlett, 1992). In the former context, self-reflection is most generally defined as the act of reflecting upon one or more aspects that characterize, shape or define one's own actions, beliefs or ideas. In Western history, the most prominent example for this line of thinking is the epistemological career of the Delphic maxim 'γνώθι σεαυτόν' ('know thyself') throughout different ages, systems and philosophical sub-disciplines. The conviction that individual self-reflection is crucial to human culture in this general sense can be found in the philosophy of Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, medieval mysticism, Descartes and Kant to name but a few (Renz, 2017). The formal principle that unites these diverse lines of thinking, and that is relevant for virtually every conceptualization of the term, is the overlap between the subject and object of reflection: while 'outward' reflection is based on the difference between the reflecting human and what is reflected upon, self-reflection relativizes or abolishes this distance to different extents, including extreme cases in which both seem to become virtually indistinguishable. In logic, such cases are usually described as paradoxes. In my conceptualization of self-reflexivity as a discursive mode, these overlaps should be analysed as discursive risks that might lead to contradictions and self-weakening – especially when they involve self-critical qualitative judgments (see below).

Secondly, the term discourse itself requires clarification, given the wide range of its usage throughout different academic fields and traditions. My use of the term goes back to the roots of its socio-philosophical application: Michel Foucault, in several of his ground-breaking works (1970, 1971, 1977), has established 'discourses' as a field of critical socio-cultural analysis. As I have discussed previously (Lippert, 2013: 70–5), Foucault's elaborations and examples, dispersed throughout these works, can be subsumed under a number of general core principles: societal discourses are to be analysed as settings of cultural rules for communication which are established by social procedures and sustained by communicative practice, i.e. the unreflective adherence to those

rules. Arts and literature, in turn, can subvert such blind obedience through self-reflexivity, as Foucault exemplified in several of his early works; literary texts can question the normativity of their own use of language, show that signs and the objects they refer to are never identical (cf. Lippert, 2013: 114–18), or even establish completely new, individual sets of norms (Klawitter, 2003: 213–304). However, for even the most radical cases of what Arne Klawitter refers to as ‘self-implication’ – signs that seem to show that they do not show anything at all, such as, for instance, in works by Blanchot and Roussel (Foucault, 1963; Foucault and Blanchot, 1990) – Foucault never diagnosed an ‘end’ of communication. On the contrary, he saw such extreme self-reflection as the necessary antidote to the lack of reflection that dominated other social discourses, and the radical critique of linguistic meaning-making as a counterweight to the uncritical adherence to societal or political ‘meanings’ that seemed to be fixed once and for all (cf. Lippert and Schmid, forthcoming). Through subversion, literature can thus provide a training ground for the subject’s critical self-awareness in non-literary discourses.

Thus, while Foucault’s early texts have since provided the blueprints for many analyses of literary self-reflexivity and self-criticism, and his works of the 1970s established the foundations for discourse-historical research, both sets of texts already point towards the crucial ethical role of self-reflection and self-criticism that was discussed more explicitly in the later phases of his work. As Foucault elaborated in the second and third volumes of his *History of Sexuality – The Use of Pleasure* (1990) and *The Care of the Self* (1988) – human beings can transcend the discursive restrictions they are caught in by reflecting critically on their own actions and motives in relation to the moral codes of a society (Robinson, 2018). Self-reflection, as a ‘technique of the self’, serves as the crucial interconnection between moral codes and moral conduct. In this sense, as Robinson stresses, Foucault defines ethics as ‘a relation of the subject to itself’, which can lead to ‘subjectivation’ and the constitution of a moral being. Put in more simple terms, self-reflection starts with questions such as ‘what am I doing and why’ and establishes a direct link to ‘what should I do?’

Thirdly, if these insights are to be used for the conceptualization of self-criticism as a mode of contemporary political and media discourses in European societies, some coupling with cultural and social theory is necessary. In his 1999 edition of *Culture as Praxis*, Zygmunt Bauman differentiated between three interrelated abstract levels of ‘culture’: culture as a general trait of human existence; culture as creative production; and culture as political and social practice. Regarding the latter level, Bauman addressed self-reflexivity as a crucial trait of modern democracy, since the latter involves both human self-empowerment and the urge to secure this empowerment with rules. He addressed the permanent renegotiation of these rules as the ‘self-consciousness’ of modern democratic societies (Bauman, 1999: ix) and outlined it as a process of inherent self-reflection, self-questioning and self-correction. In a similar direction, Leszek Koczanowicz (2015: 3) has recently envisaged these societies as dialogical, ‘self-reflective’ communities.

This general idea of modern democracies being fundamentally dependent on a form of societal ‘self-consciousness’ in order to survive is obviously crucial for research on public self-reflection as a discursive mode. It is not to be confused with the phenomenon of self-reference in politics, which has been examined extensively in sociological systems theory after Niklas Luhmann. In Luhmann’s constructivist model, self-referentiality was regarded as

a characteristic of closed social systems and subsystems, which are not able to influence each other directly. According to him, politics, media, the arts and other subsystems would remain isolated from each other, since each subsystem was enclosed in its own self-referential 'codes' of communication; self-reflection (in Luhmann's terms simply 'reflection', or 'self-observation') as a self-critical, productive act was only possible to a very limited extent (cf. Baraldi et al., 1997: 155). Bauman's idea of societal 'self-consciousness', in contrast, demands precisely such productivity. Following and expanding this idea, and referring back to the epistemological roots of the concept (see above), it is necessary to refer to human beings as actors (a category rejected by Luhmann, who instead focuses on communication and other systemic operations), i.e. performers of self-reflection in different contexts. Luhmann's concept of 'closed' self-reference, in turn, can serve as a diametrically opposed counter-concept to what I will describe below as the discursive 'opening effects' of self-reflection.

To conclude, research on self-reflexivity as a discursive mode in media, politics, literature and film: (a) is to be based upon the epistemological principle of an overlap between subject and object of reflection, with all its risks and conceptual pitfalls; (b) must expand the dimensions of Foucault's discourse-historical works by critically investigating contemporary discursive practices; and (c) must aim to connect Foucault's ethics of individual self-reflection with a societal dimension, as addressed in Zygmunt Bauman's idea of societal 'self-consciousness'. Based on these preliminaries, an analytical framework is to be developed which integrates all discursive fields and allows for subject-specific tailored analyses as well as comparability. This framework must provide a transposable transdisciplinary terminology that is compatible with discipline-specific research on self-reflection in political and media fields as well as in literature and film. In the following chapter, I outline such a framework.

## **Transdiscursive terminology and discursive-specific studies: a methodological outlook**

### *Transdiscursive terminology*

An overarching terminology of discursive self-reflection which allows for the analysis and comparison of the indicated fields requires a high level of abstraction. At the same time, it must offer appropriate and precise connections to discourse-specific processes, actors and problems, and define the interrelations between them. Core questions are: who reflects on what? What is the 'self' in different discourses? What are the differences between the discursive, i.e. *public* acts of self-reflection on which this research will focus, and private ones? As laid out above, the works of Foucault and Bauman, enriched with insights from other theories, are primary starting points for the following outline. The terminological framework is to be built around the definition of essential key terms and must determine their relations to each other along key lines that follow from the preliminaries discussed above.

*Subject/object of reflection:* as in the epistemological tradition, the human being remains the principal subject and object of reflection. To determine the degree of 'overlapping' between them, socio-cultural psychology provides a useful differentiation according to the perspective from which reflection takes place, namely between

‘self-mediation’ (triggered by an actor’s perspective) and ‘short-circuiting’ (triggered by an observer’s perspective) (Gillespie, 2007).

*Discursive mode:* self-reflexivity is to be investigated as something that is communicated within different public discourses. Key to the connection between private and public is the conception of the subject as establishing itself through reflection in public discourse, as described by Hannah Arendt and Jacques Lacan (Lundberg, 2012).

*Modalities:* the modalities of discursive self-reflection are to be broken down into processes of ‘X reflecting on X as Y’, where ‘Y’ can refer to different discursive positions or functions, e.g., ‘as a politician’, ‘as an artist’, or ‘as a journalist’. Furthermore, a qualitative differentiation between such narrow modalities (in which ‘Y’ is an individual actor) and wider ones (in which ‘Y’ represents a wider group or movement, e.g. ‘as part of the political establishment’) and between direct and indirect modalities of self-reflexivity is to be established.

*Processuality:* processes of self-reflection are to be described as a sequence of specific steps, including self-distancing, self-observation and self-evaluation.

*Qualitative judgements* evolving from self-reflection must, besides the crucial notion of self-criticism, also involve self-accusation, self-questioning, self-correction or self-praise.

*Discursive risks* of self-reflexivity include, for instance, potential self-weakening (cf. Lippert and Schmid, forthcoming), self-contradiction, paradox or the loss of symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1998).

*Limitations* of self-reflection are to be differentiated from its risks, and defined as inherently connected to the nature of self-reflexivity. Formal limitations include, for instance, the idea that what can never be observed is the very act of observation itself, as stressed by Luhmann (1984) in reference to George Spencer Brown’s mathematical concept of the ‘re-entry’. In the terminology I propose above, this insight justifies the need for different modalities. Besides, a crucial question that is to be addressed for every given discourse is whether there are discourse-related limitations – e.g. things which, in Foucault’s terms, ‘cannot be said’ in specific contexts – or whether these elements are rather to be understood as *risks* that can be overcome.

Finally, as indicated above, *self-reference* is defined as a concept of closure in contrast to the opening effects which *self-reflexivity* can entail. In the specific context of this research, self-reference relates to operations by which the migrant crisis has led and is leading to the growing translation of a humanitarian disaster into discourses of identity, security or economy. Conversely, self-reflection describes a discursive mode which can break such self-referential loops (Lippert, 2018: 102–4).

This outline is merely a starting point for the further development of a comprehensive transdiscursive terminology. Its aim, as laid out above, must be to provide a detailed set of instruments to connect analyses of self-reflexivity in creative, journalistic and political discourses in the wake of the migrant crisis, examples of which I will sketch in the following.

### *Studies on literary, filmic, journalistic and political self-reflexivity*

Works of film and literature which deal with the migrant crisis in self-reflexive ways would be discussed as representative creative media that can be contrasted with forms of

news media coverage. As indicated above, literature, art and film have a longstanding tradition of self-reflexivity. In the context of the re-politicization of aesthetics, negotiated under terms such as ‘the return of the real’ (Foster, 1996), ‘new realism’ (Ferraris, 2014), or ‘post-postmodernism’ (Braun and Stiegler, 2012), many literary texts and films in recent years have dealt with the social and political complexities of migration in new aesthetic ways, and have questioned Eurocentric perspectives on cultural hegemony and citizenship. As I have shown elsewhere (Lippert, 2018), self-reflexive elements play important roles in a considerable number of these works: not only do they challenge suspicions of aestheticism and playfulness, but they also ‘reconstruct’ (Ferraris, 2014) self-reflexivity as a humanist ideal, replacing deconstructivist ‘narcissism’ (Ziegler, 1993). In light of the overarching terminology drafted above, crucial questions that need to be posed include: how do authors and filmmakers present, through the use of literary or filmic means, reflections on literary or filmic representations of the migrant crisis (wide modality), especially their own (narrow modality)? And, despite the risks attached (e.g. self-contradiction), how is effective transfer of self-distancing, self-questioning or self-criticism to the *readers* or *viewers* envisaged (e.g. concerning reception habits), and what are the limitations and problems of such attempts? Do they work? Concerning the latter questions, special attention must be given to the subject/object distinction as an attempted communication of self-reflexivity between author/work and recipient. For this, previous research on: (a) the roles of authorship in self-reflexive literature (Lippert, 2017); (b) the exposure of filmic techniques in self-reflexive films (Stam, 1992; Karpf et al., 1996); and (c) literary and filmic self-reflexivity as reader- and viewer-oriented devices (Kirchmann, 1994; Lippert, 2009; 2013; Wolf, 1993) must be consulted. Relevant self-reflexive films and texts on the migrant crisis from across Europe include numerous very popular and/or recognized works (e.g. Michael Winterbottom’s *In this World* (2002); Gianfranco Rosi’s *Fire at Sea* (2016); Ai Wei Wei’s *Human Flow* (2017); Chris Cleave’s *The Other Hand* (2008); Sunjeev Sahota’s *The Year of the Runaways* (2015); and Jenny Erpenbeck’s *Go, Went, Gone* (2015)) as well as experimental formats (e.g. Pezzani and Heller’s *Liquid Traces* (2015); Wagner, Siebert and Sidibé’s *Les Sauteurs* (2016)) and avant-garde pieces (e.g. Merle Kröger’s *Havarie* (2015); Abbas Khider’s *A Slap in the Face* (2016)).

A qualitative study of such works could be based, for example, on data collection in think-aloud feedback settings and interviews with readers and viewers, the results of which would then feed into critical hermeneutic analyses. The study could be developed and conducted to investigate the reception effects of filmic and literary self-reflection in a selection of the works collected in the corpus, using techniques from empirical studies on literary narrative effects on recipients (Bortolussi and Dixon, 2003) and from empirical film reception studies (Reinhard and Olson, 2016). The instructions for the think-aloud setting and the questions for subsequent interviews would need to be developed and specified for each work selected in this project phase, and focus on two main aspects:

1. Diegetic and non-diegetic responses (Miall and Kuiken, 2002): i.e. responses that are evoked by participating in the fictional world, and those that relate to the formal aspects of the works. Questions relating to both types of responses would aim to measure the tension that is expected to evolve precisely from the

self-reflexivity of the works. While metalepses and other self-reflexive disruptions of the diegetic illusion might raise risks such as causing irritation, self-contradiction, self-undermining or implausibility, positive non-diegetic responses in particular might relate to the work's political or ethical credibility, honesty or originality.

2. Reader and viewer evaluations of the main topics and claims of the selected works. Here, another tension is to be investigated, namely between the perceived relevance of the diegetic topics and claims (aspects of migration and the migrant crisis) and the claims posed by self-reflexivity (aspects of filmic and literary practice).

The second and third areas on which the analytical model would be applied are journalistic and political discourses on the migrant crisis. Drawing on leading studies regarding the influence of media coverage on recipients' understanding of events in general and of the migrant crisis in particular (see above), a content analysis of current forms, functions, problems and limitations of self-reflexive discourses in the crisis context must have two main foci:

1. *Journalism-on-journalism*: reflections by European journalists and other media actors on the roles of media actors, including themselves, in the coverage of the migrant crisis, and on the general problems and perspectives of media discourses in the crisis context (e.g. agenda-setting, priming, framing and language use, as well as meta-discourses such as reliability debates on 'mainstream media'); and
2. *Politics-on-politics*: reflections by European politicians on the problems and shortcomings of European policies, including their own, in the context of the migrant crisis.

For both foci, the text corpus would comprise press publications from representative sources (see further details below). In line with the overarching terminological framework, the main questions to be addressed would be: in which specific contexts of the crisis does self-reflection appear in journalistic and political discourses? Which predominant risks and limitations can be discerned, particularly relating to the (non-)transfer of critical (academic) information and perspectives to politics and journalism? What is enabling and what is impeding 'constructive self-criticism'? Are there predominant modalities (narrow/wide, direct/indirect) and qualitative judgements in journalistic and political discourses?

In order to be included in the corpus, texts thus would not have to be overtly or predominantly self-reflexive – rather, I assume that implicit or wide modalities would be more common, especially in the case of *politics-on-politics*. As laid out above, the analysis of implicit, wide, superficial or vague reflections which are impeding or lacking constructivity sits at the core of the problems this research is aiming to address. For instance, the corpus would include admissions by politicians concerning 'past mistakes' in the crisis, such as the 2016 *SZ* interview with German Chancellor Angela Merkel (Braun, 2016) about German migration policy failures, which sparked an enormous international media echo; but also more general references to the lack of EU strategies, made by EU

representatives; passing reflections by political decision-makers on the difficulties of their task; or reactions to questions about recent research, polls, etc., on the crisis. For the case of *journalism-on-journalism*, the corpus might include, for instance, press texts that refer to research on the media representation of the crisis, such as the regular *Guardian* columns by Roy Greenslade (2015a, 2015b, 2016a, 2016b); journalistic discussions about the media effects of shocking imagery, such as the photograph of the drowned three-year-old Syrian boy, Alan Kurdi, in September 2015; or journalism addressing debates on ‘fake news’ or ‘mainstream media’ in the crisis context.

The generation of a relevant corpus would involve several phases: in the first phase, a preliminary general dataset of media coverage on the migrant crisis in a number of selected countries must be created (this would later be searched for self-reflexive elements, see below). It should comprise data from a number of representative countries (e.g. at least one country that is a major entry point for refugees; at least one country that has taken in a high number of refugees; and countries with governments of different political agendas on migration) and be focused on particular timespans and disruptive media events (Figenschou and Thorbjørnsrud, 2017), which have the potential to generate significant shifts in both coverage tendencies and public opinion (Mitu and Poulakidakos, 2016). The selection should take into account the status quo after important developments, such as Brexit, the further development of the Italian naval blockade, the elections in a number of EU countries and the European Parliament, the development of common EU migration and asylum policies and the EU–Turkey ‘deal’. Timespans and events must therefore be determined according to recent developments. For each of the selected countries, key sources with a high readership should be chosen, and the selection should aim at a balanced picture, covering different political views and tendencies and including both broadsheet and tabloid papers. The single criterion for the creation of the general dataset is to retrieve coverage on the migrant crisis in general for the chosen timeframes.

In the second phase, the general dataset would be searched for contributions that actually contain self-reflexive elements; these will then form the specific corpus of self-reflexive media coverage (*journalism-on-journalism*) and self-reflexive political communication (*politics-on-politics*), and would be coded according to a set of questions (see below). For *politics-on-politics*, if press coverage refers to particular EU or national parliamentary debates or other publicly accessible documents, the corpus could be enriched by findings from these. For the particular discussion of discursive limitations and risks of self-reflexivity, special attention would be focused on continuing debates, i.e. contributions with subsequent reactions (and possibly counter-reactions). The codebook applied in this second phase would serve to provide orientation for subsequent detailed qualitative analyses of crucial cases (the main focus). Furthermore, the framework could enable an additional quantitative overview by focusing on the most prominent features of self-reflexivity, following the terminology already developed. Coding questions could include:

- Which modalities of self-reflexivity can be observed – narrow (e.g. a political actor referring to her/his previous actions) or wide (e.g. to governmental decisions in which s/he was involved)? Is this self-reflexivity direct (explicit) or indirect (implicit)?

- What qualitative judgements are expressed?
- Which particular aspects (e.g. for *journalism-on-journalism*: agenda-setting, priming, framing, ‘mainstream media’ reliability, ‘fake news’) are addressed?
- Are specific contexts or particular recent events (e.g. political decisions, humanitarian emergencies) indicated? Are scientific sources quoted or referred to?
- Debates: does the contribution directly refer to previous contributions of the same kind (i.e. journalists to other journalistic coverage, or politicians to statements by other politicians)?

Media and political discourses would be understood as performative discourses, for which linguistic form and style are of crucial importance (Broersma, 2010). Thus, for the analysis of the results of the empirical studies, critical discourse analysis (Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999; Fairclough, 2001; Wodak and Chilton, 2005) provides practical tools concerning types of language use and formulas: for instance, recurrent crisis-related phrases such as ‘we have made mistakes’, which would be analysed regarding their constitutive vagueness, appropriative appeal, and media echo in subsequent debates. The third and final phase would thus predominantly consist of qualitative critical discourse analyses of particular cases. The selection of these cases and debates would be based on the results of the coding process. Crucial questions on discursive risks and limitations must be at the centre of the qualitative studies: if self-reflection occurs, where does it stop and why? Are there explicit or implicit self-contradictions? The quantitative analysis of the findings can provide additional indicators on broader connections, relationships and tendencies, shedding light on the proportion of texts containing self-reflexive elements in relation to the overall coverage; proportions according to country, political orientation, and tabloid/broadsheet format differences; specific contexts in which self-reflexivity appears more often than in others; predominant modalities and judgements; average references to research; and interconnections between all these items, e.g., correlations between self-critical judgements and references to sources.

### **Outlook: towards an ethics of public self-reflection?**

While Bauman states that ‘self-conscious’ modern democracies are necessarily in permanent renegotiation of their own rules, the argument developed above suggests that their political, media and cultural proponents must strive for ‘self-consciousness’ by continuously questioning their own discursive roles. Based on this idea, I have presented the preliminaries required for a new theoretical framework of public self-reflection, and have outlined a research design to analyse the lack of critical information in discourses on the migrant crisis, and to better understand what enables and what hinders public critical self-reflection.

From a pragmatic perspective, such self-reflection bears a number of problems and risks which seem to disqualify it particularly for media and political public discourses: self-reflexivity can blur the lines between subject and object, is prone to paradox, implies a ‘distance’ to the ‘self’, and might relativize one’s own discursive position. However, a closer look at the increasingly ‘hardened’ (Berry et al., 2015: 4) discourses on the migrant crisis which foster populism and xenophobia suggest that precisely these subversive

qualities might make self-reflexivity a necessary ethical requirement. Foucault has defined ethics as a relation of the subject to itself, which would ultimately enable the constitution of a moral being. The thoughts presented above enable further questions on the ethical dimensions of discursive self-reflection. What is ‘gained’ by it, and what is ‘lost’? Which specific ethical demands arise for cultural production, journalism and politics? Thus, as a number of previous studies on the press coverage on the migrant crisis have concluded, with lists of recommendations for more ethical, fairer and better informed journalistic practices (Chouliaraki et al., 2017; International Centre for Migration Policy Development, 2017), building upon the ethical evaluation of case studies, the research outlined above could provide a unique new set of discussion topics on the ethics of journalistic, political and cultural self-reflexivity.

The migrant crisis has been depicted as the core conflict of contemporary Europe, which will determine the EU’s political fate in the decades to come (Krastev, 2017). Public discourses both negotiate and shape this crisis. If media, political and cultural actors are to play productive roles in solving it, they must address both ‘external’ and ‘internal’ causes of the crisis – including those related to their very own problems and failures.

## Notes

- 1 The term ‘migrants’ includes: (a) forcibly displaced people, i.e. refugees and asylum seekers according to the UNHCR (2017) definition; and (b) other persons from the named countries who ‘move, either temporarily or permanently, from one country of residence to another’ (*Oxford English Dictionary*) but do not formally fall under the categories above. This notion was chosen to mirror the public discourses which are this contribution’s main topic.
- 2 In the following chapter, I will use the term ‘European migrant crisis’ to denote this cultural setting in Europe. The fact that the term is highly problematic, particularly due to the ‘transfer’ of the crisis notion, has been stressed by numerous scholars, who therefore use it in quotation marks only. My contribution, however, will depart from the result of this ‘transfer’, i.e. deal with the crisis as a set of conflicts evolving from European discourses. Therefore, the term will be used without quotation marks.

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