

Lost in space: introducing the spatial dispositif in space-sensitive discourse research

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Kamil Bembnista/Vivien Sommer/Sune W. Stoustrup

Lost in Space: Introducing the spatial dispositif in space-sensitive discourse research

Abstract: The appearance of New Materialism has brought about a rupture in the social sciences and opened new positions to analyze social entities like space. In our contribution, we claim that it also offers a starting point for theoretical considerations in reference to the relationship between discourse, space and materiality – especially regarding the perspective of materialization beyond a culture-nature-dichotomy. In our research on the German-Polish border area, we combined »classical« studies of newspapers with the study of discursive practices among local residents. Here, the questions that arose for us were: To what extent is material space important for our discourse analysis? And how can it be included as an element in our conceptualization of discourse on space? Building on Foucault's idea of the dispositif and Barad's understanding of materiality, we introduce the *spatial* dispositif as a way to conceptualize discourse-material interrelations in the analysis of space.

Keywords: Spatial research, Border Studies, Discourse Theory, Dispositif, New Materialism

Zusammenfassung: Das Erscheinen des New Materialism hat eine intensive Diskussion in den Sozialwissenschaften zur Folge gehabt und eine neue Position der Kritik eröffnet. In diesem Beitrag stellt dieser Ansatz den Aufhänger für theoretische Überlegungen in Bezug auf das Verhältnis von Diskurs und Raum und Materialität dar – insbesondere hinsichtlich der Perspektive auf sozialräumliche Materialisierung jenseits einer Kultur-Natur Dichotomie. In unserer Forschung zur deutsch-polnischen Grenzregion haben wir »klassische« Zeitungsanalysen mit Untersuchungen diskursiver Praktiken lokaler Bewohner:innen zusammengebracht. Dabei stellten sich uns folgende Fragen: In welchem Ausmaß ist der materialisierte Raum wichtig für unsere Diskursanalyse? Und wie kann er als ein Element in unserer Konzeptualisierung von Diskurs und Raum eingebettet werden? Aufbauend auf Foucaults Ansatz zum Dispositiv und Barads erweitertem Konzept von Materialität schlagen wir die Einführung eines theoretischen Ansatzes vom Raumdispositiv als einen Weg zur Konzeptualisierung von material-diskursiven Wechselbeziehungen in räumlichen Analysen vor.

Schlagwörter: Raumforschung, Grenzforschung, Diskurstheorie, Dispositiv, New Materialism

1 Introduction

»Words and things« is the entirely serious title of a problem.«
(Foucault 1997, p. 49, as also quoted by Barad 2007, p. 46)

The *raison d'être* for this paper is a struggle to conceptualize the inclusion of materiality in the study of discourse and space. In our initial attempts to understand how the border areas between Germany and Poland were constructed by de-bordering and re-bordering practices, we found ourselves »lost in space«. Although borders are understood as linked to social constructions, they are also clearly constituted by materiality that manifests itself through fences and border posts or natural separations like rivers or mountain ranges, interwoven with knowledge represented in texts, maps, and images (Horsti 2019). Even when borders are no longer »in function« to limit physical movements, the memory of them can materialize in monuments, street names, ruins, etc. (Frank 2016). The researched border area is characterized by a clear physical division of the Oder River, the desolation of the landscape and especially by the lack of social integration across the border and the remnants of destroyed bridges. In some places, a border-crossing was kilometers away, but the other side was visible, yet seemingly inaccessible. However, the river is not insurmountable even without bridges. It is neither very deep nor wide, and the banks are easily reachable. For example, large agricultural machines have been stolen from villages on the German side and simply driven across the river. These issues were reflected in our conversations with local residents who felt left behind as they were »on the edge of the map« and without protection against this type of »cross-border-criminality«. Furthermore, discussions on whether and where border-crossings should be built depend on the materiality of the river, the political discourses of a borderless Europe, and the lack of any rebuilding of bridges destroyed during World War II or by floods. The particular spatiality constituting the border area was thus clearly dependent on the disposition of a range of symbolic, social, but also material elements. In our research project on »Socio-spatial Transformations in the German-Polish Border Area«¹, we attempted to construct a comprehensive analytical approach by combining »classical« studies of newspapers with expert and ethnographic interviews, photo scripts with go-along interviews and participant observation. In this, the following questions arose for us: To what extent is material socio-spatiality important for our discourse analysis? How could we include it in our analysis as more than just a »reference« in written and spoken statements?

This special issue on discourse and materiality thus speaks directly to the conundrum challenging us. The proposition of discussing how the field of Discourse Studies should position itself in relation to the material turn and its explicit antagonism towards the linguistic or discursive turn as well as the ambiguous relationship between New Materialist scholarship and Foucauldian approaches offers us an opportunity for theoretical reflection. These new approaches comprise a heterogeneous group encompassing different approaches and theoretical orientations (Lemke 2021, p. 3) which since the late 1990s have been producing work chal-

1 This was a DFG-NCN funded project within the Beethoven funding stream carried out 2018-2020 at the Leibniz Institute for Research on Society and Space (IRS).

lenging what they see as an estrangement of materiality from social sciences (see Dolphijn/van der Tuin 2012). As New Materialism is a »vivid and dynamic field, it is difficult to chart the terrain« (Lemke 2021, p. 2) with also incompatible approaches (ibid., p.4); in our contribution, we mainly engage with the work of Karen Barad. Like Discourse Studies, Barad draws on the work of Foucault (as also shown by the quotation opening this paper). However, she is also vocal in criticizing the role of materiality in his work (ibid., p. 9). She criticizes what she sees as a practice in the social sciences of representationalism, i.e. a belief in an ontological distinction between representations and what they suppose to represent (Barad 2007, p. 46), stressing that materiality (or »material conditions«, as she writes) does not matter because it might (or might not) »support« particular discourses or that we need to include material factors in addition to discursive ones. Rather, it is proposed that we should see the constraints, conditions, and practices as conjoined material-discursive constructions (Barad 2003, p. 823).

However, the engagement of Barad with Foucault's description of the relationship between discursive practices and material phenomena is deficient and misses that »Foucault's notion of the *dispositif* is informed by a material-discursive understanding« which »assembles discursive and non-discursive elements and spell out its ontological, technological, and strategic dimensions as well as its analytical and critical value« (Lemke 2021, p. 11). Thus, while we agree with Lemke (ibid., p. 7) that New Materialism raises important questions, we share his uneasiness regarding Barad's criticism of Foucault². However, especially the focus of Barad, as well as other New Materialist scholars, on the »processes of becoming« rather than »states of being«, together with the emphasis on hybrid assemblages and relational entanglements (ibid., p. 8), in many ways echoes the so-called *processual shift* in Border Studies where border areas are seen as a complex interplay of symbolic processes and material settings (Wille 2021; Yuval-Davis et al. 2019).

We start our paper by outlining theoretical approaches that have attempted to link space and materiality in social sciences, with a focus on Border Studies, as well as human and social geography. In a second step, we focus on the entanglement of discourse, space and materiality in Foucault's notion of the *dispositif*, followed by outlining Barad's critique of the work of Foucault. Based on these discussions, we propose our notion of »spatial *dispositif*«. Finally, we illustrate this concept by referring to empirical examples from our research project on socio-spatial transformations and practices of de-bordering and re-bordering in the German-Polish border area.

2 The Question of Materiality in Space-related Research

There have been multiple attempts by scholars of different disciplines to think discourse and space together, for instance, in human geography (e.g. Glasze/Mattissek 2009, 2012; Bauriedel 2012), urban studies (Richardson/Jensen 2003), political science (Glasze 2012)

- 2 Keller (2017; 2019) likewise points out that while authors within New Materialism turn our attention to neglected issues, they ignore possible affinities with already established approaches to materiality in Sociology and the Social Sciences.

and sociology (see e.g. Christmann 2014a, 2014b; Keller 2016; Sommer/Bembnista 2021). However, while many of these have progressed the theoretization of the relationship between discourse and space, it has been recognised that a theoretization of objects, bodies or landscapes as passive propagates the negligence of how the material world is significant for (cultural) practices (see Schmitt 2016). Thus, as Becker and Otto (2016, p. 221) succinctly write: »Whether and how materiality should be captured is one of the most important conceptual questions«.

As the quotation at the beginning of this paper conveys, this is not a new discussion, and an answer has been proposed in a range of works characterized by a strong relational standpoint. For example, non-representational theories (e.g. Thrift 2008; Anderson/Harrison 2010), actor-network theory (Latour 1991), assemblage research (McFarlane 2011) and New Materialism (e.g. Dolphijn/van der Tuin 2012; Barad 2007) all attempt to conceptualize materiality as a constituent element of social reality, without falling into essentializations and dichotomization between people or social structures as separated from things and »non-human« actors (see Becker/Otto 2016). Following this relational ontology, authors like Mattissek and Wiertz (2014, p. 166) suggest to understand how both the discursive and material processes are equally indispensable for critical explanations of social change. Concurrently, Border Studies have experienced a processual shift (see Newman/Paasi 1998; Konrad 2015), which defines borders as results of continuous (re)production through *bordering* practices, stressing how borders are determined through both physical/material and symbolic/discursive orders (see e.g. Brambilla et al. 2015; Weier et al. 2018; Fellner 2021). Notably, Brambilla et al. (2015; see also Gerst et al. 2018; Wille 2021) suggest a multidimensional and processual perspective that includes territorial, economic, social, linguistic and cultural aspects in the process of bordering. One good attempt of implementation in Border Studies is Strüver's (2020) analysis of how practices, identities, representations and materialities together affect everyday performativities constituting spaces in border areas. However, by building on a praxeological thinking (from Reckwitz 2012) and highlighting that space only has effects when appropriated, it is, to us, an example of how »materiality« often mainly means an engagement with »human bodies«. Hence, the analysis becomes (too) absorbed in »the micro-scale of personal feelings, identities and daily practices« (Strüver 2020, p. 627). Thereby, the integration of the socio-spatial *materiality* remains insufficiently operationalized.

Following Lemke (2015, p. 11, 2021, p. 90), we suggest the relational and processual concept of *dispositif* as a fruitful starting point for approaching space as the result of a co-production of discursive-material processes and entanglements (see also Keller 2017). The notion of *dispositif* generally includes how materialities are involved in the constitution of social space, for example, architecture or infrastructures. Pløger (2008, p. 57) suggests that materialities have to represent historical, social or explicitly political symbolism in order to have a »discursive effect«. Although the current debate on the relation between discourse and *dispositif* (cf. van Dyk 2013; Egbert 2019) acknowledges the *dispositif* as an »enlarged notion of discourse« (Schäfer 2013, p. 155; author's translation), it also stresses the relationship of the elements in their mutual production. For example, Bührmann and Schneider (2008) outline the *dispositif* as a set of relationships embed-

ding discourses in material practices, and furthermore propose the distinction between discursive and non-discursive practices where non-linguistic discourses are assigned to the dispositif, while linguistic practices are characterized as discursive (see also Jäger 2001). Keller (2011, p. 138) draws the distinction between dispositif and discourse in terms of the material, i.e. the interplay of the visible (materialities) and discourses, and describes dispositifs in the function of infrastructure, such as formalized procedures, specific objects, technologies, etc. Hence, discourses, with the inclusion of material artifacts, determine dispositifs, which in turn reproduce relations of power and realities and, therefore, again, discourses (see Keller 2016 p. 24). However, material elements of the dispositif, just as immaterial elements, transform through their relation and connections to other elements (Moss et al. 2016, p. 49). For instance, material elements (for example, cross-border bridges) are objectifications of discursive practices (such as the discourse of a borderless Europe) through non-discursive practices (such as the removal of border guards), whereby the existence of all visibilities and materialities can only be maintained through discursive *and* non-discursive practices and point to the active role of socio-spatiality in the constitution of borders.

3 Linking Discourse, Space and Materiality by means of Foucault's notion of ›dispositif‹

Discourse analysis focuses on how knowledge is constituted through practices. However, if we consider not only speech-related practices but also non-verbal practices that correspond with materiality, we need to reflect how the (re-)production of discourses and orders of knowledge (see also Egbert 2019; Reckwitz 2008) are linked to performative practices, materialities and embodiments (see e.g. Schurr 2012) and together constitute specific spatialities. Although Foucault puts effort into dealing with the spatial dimension of social processes, he does not give an ontological definition of space per se. However, he states that it is arbitrary to dissociate »the practice of social relations, and the spatial distributions in which they find themselves« (Foucault 1984, p. 246). In this understanding, the production of space depends on physical and symbolic dimensions of materiality in their entanglement. Accordingly, spaces do not just present themselves, but they are rather being constituted by relations of power between a set of socio-spatial elements (Richardson/Jensen 2003, p. 18). However, to us, no satisfactory answer has yet been found as to how the material and not only the symbolic dimension of space can be included in discourse theoretical approaches. Although, as Keller (2019) rightly points out, Discourse Studies are engaged with how for example, »garbage, shale gas, nuclear energy, floods, bodies [etc.]« are all constructed through an interwovenness of materiality and symbolic orderings, we nonetheless concede that framing the inter-relationship as »how discourses shape physical materiality« (ibid., p. 165) or how the relationship between dispositif structure and discourse as the formed attributed to the existence of the other (Keller 2017, p. 30) might subsume materiality and social actors underneath a ›layer of discourses‹. For example, ›spaces‹ are often seen as essential parts of everyday

life, e.g. as stable metaphors, visual references and materializations (like bridges, houses, or memorials) and are often connected to historical references, identity constructions, economic ambitions and political visions. However, approaching them as such does not (necessarily) foster an engagement with materiality beyond its representations which can lead to ›textualism‹ whereby, e.g. ›imagined geographies‹ (as analysed from literary texts or personal accounts) are uncoupled from the ›historical and material geographies‹ with which they are entwined (see Gregory 1995). Thus, we argue that we should acknowledge Barad's (2003) critique that language, or to be more specific, »written text« or, as in the mentioned example, »spoken statement«, has been privileged in the social sciences (Fox/Alldred 2016, p. 6), resulting in the loss of a sense of material reality (Hardy/Thomas 2015, p. 680).

However, as Hook (2001) argues, many approaches to ›discourse analysis‹ are misapplying Foucault's conceptualization of discourse. He points to how Foucault also states that focusing on power as a function of texts and spoken interactions alone will come close to reducing them to merely representations (ibid., p. 16) and attribute unjustified power to the internal properties of language: Rather »power in language links to, and stems from, external, material and tactical forms of power [and] must be grasped and traced through the analysis of tactical and material relations of force« (ibid., p. 15). As Prado (2006) writes on Foucault's view on »truth« (i.e. the existence of an »extradiscursive« reality), the ontological proposition is rather that ›nature‹ or ›reality‹ has no objectivity and independence from language, culture and history. This means that the ›nature of the world, ›facts‹ or ›materiality‹ have no independent role or priority with respect to what we consider ›true‹ or ›real‹ (see also Hardy/Thomas, 2015). Therefore, it is clearly not Foucault's argument that the material world does not exist or that it is only a product of discourse, but rather that we do not distinguish between what we could call our social(ly constructed) environment and its materiality in our day-to-day lives. Hence, like Lemke (2015, 2021) and Keller (2019), we partly oppose Barad's critique of Foucault but stress that a Foucauldian inspired discourse-theoretical approach does not entail an ontological rebuke of »extralinguistic« or »extradiscursive« reality. Rather, the research interest of Foucauldian discourse-theoretical approaches should be the investigation of the constructs deployed as constituents of ›reality‹ by stressing the »interwovenness of materiality and symbolic orderings or discursive constructions of reality« (Keller 2019, p. 165).

Looking at Foucault's historical inquiries, they involve the spatial distribution and arrangement of people, activities and buildings, animals, forests, rivers, slopes, buildings, roads and railways, to name just a few (Philo 2000). Foucault explicitly accentuates that a discourse-theoretical approach does not imply that meaning is immaterial or disconnected from any material world (Foucault 1978, p. 36; see also Egbert 2019) but rather he was interested in analysing the historical discursive formations of scientific knowledge and their interwovenness with discursive practices and objects (Keller 2019, p. 165). In his work, Foucault provides clear illustrations of the crucial role materiality plays in his analysis: prison architecture, dossiers, systems (Foucault 1980, p. 71), spaces for confessions and the separation of adults' and children's bedrooms (Foucault 1978). This places mate-

riality in a central position in his analysis of the mechanisms *governing* human relations and behavior. According to Löw (2016, p. 122), Foucault views space as a result of a process of arrangement which forms ensembles of relations among sites – that makes space a »configuration or a network that puts people, things or actions in order or expresses an order«. It is thus through the reconfiguration of these relations that symbolic orders are (en)abled to change. Spaces are thereby not just »containers« inhabited by the »things in them« (see Kornberger/Clegg 2004), but relational and situational »spaces of possibilities« (Foucault 2002, p. 23) constituted by the relation between objects, places and living creatures without division of the physical and the social (Löw/Weidenhaus 2018, Löw 2016). In Hardy and Thomas' re-reading of »space« through Foucault, they find that

»rather than ›being‹ relational, spaces are ›made‹ relational through the way particular bodies, objects, practices, and talk are co-located and, depending upon the particular configuration of the co-location, opportunities [...] to exercise power and resistance differ. Thus we can see how power-resistance relations arise from the way in which both the discursive and the material are organized in space.« (2015, p. 686)

For example, buildings can be imbued with an oppressive quality, similarly to Bentham's Panopticon, »if people [are] prepared to use their own presence in order to watch over others« (Foucault 2001, p. 355). The space is thereby only made to be, or experienced as, oppressive through specific actions (or ideas about possible actions) and thus appears as a continuum of possibilities afforded by the interlinkages between materiality, action (as embodied) and discourse (knowledge of the possibility of being watched). Hence, the constitution of »spaces« inherently incorporates temporality, and any analysis needs to explicate the *changing* relationship between space, discourse and materiality. As an example, Foucault illustrates how the emergence of new knowledge in biology and disease management propagated a change in perception away from seeing phenomena as independent and towards understanding them as an »intersection between a multiplicity of living individuals working and coexisting with each other in a set of material elements that act on them and on which they act in turn« (Foucault 2009, p. 22). This fostered a need to control the organization of the living environment as both a material space and a population together with the circulation and mobility of human and non-human units (Lemke 2019, p. 3). Foucault (2009, p. 21) stresses that the material means of circulation is not limited to a material network (e.g. roads, etc.), natural givens (like rivers, marshes, hills) and artificial givens (agglomeration of individuals, houses, etc.). Rather, he underlines that this also includes »circulation per se«, here meaning any regulations, restrictions, or limitations are put in place (i.e. the intersection of materiality, human biology and science) which facilitate and promote the circulation of people and things (Lemke 2019, p. 4). This process is thus understood as both material and discursive and defined by specific knowledge and spatio-temporal regimes of power seeking to »anticipate and control future events in order to achieve specific objectives« (ibid., p. 5). Foucault uses the notion of ›milieu« (2004, p. 37) to articulate »the link between a naturally given space and an artificially constructed space, without systematically distinguishing between them«

(Lemke 2021, p. 130) and defines it as a spatial constellation which also re-configures and attempts to control existing temporalities and future trajectories (ibid., p. 131). He introduces the notion of the ›dispositif of security‹ as what »work[s], fabricate[s], organize[s], and plan[s] a milieu even before the notion [of it] was formed and isolated« (Foucault 2009, p. 21). Thereby, a milieu is conceived as more than »environment« or »background, and rather as an interactive space constituted by a relational network of the elements »of which it consists as much as it is itself their endpoint or outcome« (Lemke 2021, p. 130).

Foucault approaches a conceptualisation of agency as not exclusively a property of humans but rather recognizes the idea that »agential forces originate in relations between human and non-human entities« (ibid., p. 131). He outlines how the stability of the arrangement and relation between the elements is what constitutes the dispositif and makes it able to ›discipline‹ or structure space and inscribes a hierarchical and functional distribution of its elements (Foucault 2009, p. 256ff). He defines the dispositif as a »heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions« (Foucault 1980, p. 194) *produced* through an interweaving of meaning and materiality. In his definition of the dispositif, Foucault stresses its processual character propagated by an urgent need for change (1977: 195) in a specific historical moment, thus defining it as »a moving field of continuities predicated on continual change« (Frost 2019, p. 159). Foucault's notion of the dispositif thus makes us able to analyse the continuous mutual production of discursive and material formations and the effects of their interaction towards structuring discursive and non-discursive practices (see Schmitt 2016). Foucault's dispositif is thus aligned with Barad's outline of the apparatus as »constituted through particular practices that are perpetually open to rearrangements, re-articulations, and other re-workings« (Barad 2003, p. 817). We will use »dispositif« as the common name for both (see also Lemke 2021, p. 99; Keller 2017; Pløger 2008 on the question of translation and interchangeability). While we thus do not set New Materialism in an antagonistic position to discourse-theoretical approaches inspired by Foucault, we see the work of Barad as an opportunity for reflection, both on the notion of the dispositif and on analysing the entanglement of discourse-material-space as processual. While Foucault's concept of the dispositif focuses on its ability to control and regulate conducts, as will be explicated, Barad's account furthermore allows for an investigation of »how materializations are entangled with forms of exclusion, and analyzes how temporalities, spatialities, and materialities are mutually constituted« (Lemke 2021, p. 15).

The aim driving Barad and ›New Materialism‹ is the emphasis on the materiality of the world and on everything – social and natural – in it as a question of social production rather than social construction (Fox/Alldred 2016, p. 4). In these theorizations, Foucault's scholarship plays an ambiguous role: While his studies on genealogies as well as his »insistence on the productivity of power relations« are mentioned as »an influential source and inspiration for problematising any stable concept of the ›human‹ or the ›subject‹« (Lemke 2021, p. 9), the attempts to integrate materiality by means of the notion of the dispositif have been criticized for struggling to theorise the relationship between ma-

teriality and the immaterial or between discursive and non-discursive practices. While Barad sees Foucault as also attempting to overcome representationalism (2007, p. 47), she criticizes him for failing to »give an adequate account of the complex and dynamic relations between meaning and matter« (Lemke 2021, p. 10) and thus not being able to understand »how discursive practices produce material bodies« (Barad 2003, p. 808). To Barad, Foucault's analysis excludes »non-human bodies whose constitution he takes for granted« (Barad 2007, p. 169) and, thus confines agency to human subjects without taking into consideration non-human forces (Lemke 2021, p. 10) without specifying how »the biological and the historical are ›bound together‹ such that one is not consecutive to the other« (Barad 2003, p. 809). As she stresses: »To be entangled is not simply to be intertwined with another, as in the joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence« (Barad 2007, p. 11).

In her theoretization of agential realism, Karen Barad outlines how agency is »not something that someone or something *has* to varying degrees« (Barad quoted in Dolphijn/van der Tuin 2012, p. 54). While not denying the importance of agency, she instead displaces the notion of »independently existing individuals« and replaces it with a relational ontology where agency is not about making conscious choices but about »an enactment, a matter of possibilities for reconfiguring entanglements« (ibid., p. 54). From this, she stresses that

»[t]he primary ontological units are not ›things‹ but phenomena — dynamic topological reconfigurings/entanglements/relationalities/(re)articulations. And the primary semantic units are not ›words‹ but material-discursive practices through which boundaries are constituted.« (Barad 2003, p. 818)

Thereby, phenomena become meaningful through material-discursive practices and relational constellations rather than by any ontological demarcations between nature and culture. Subjects or objects are thus not seen as entities but as only unified through relations. Both are included as relevant for socio-material practices, opposing the idea that discourses are part of a *social* structure that forms natural, supposedly non-discursive phenomena (Barad 2007, p. 146). This ontological shift is informed by a reconceptualization of the dispositif towards focusing on what enables the configurations to work (Lemke 2021, p. 64). Barad (2007, p. 148) introduces a perspective on the dispositif as a connection of discursive practices and »boundary-making practices« by which »specific material (re)configurings of the world through which determination of boundaries, properties, and meanings is differentially enacted«. Instead of understanding the world through looking at »interaction, where we start with separate entities and they interact«, or by assuming the work of intermediaries »between subject and object, between knowledge and the world, culture and nature, the material and the discursive« to bridge this gap (see Lemke 2021, p. 61), Barad introduces the concept of intra-action (2007, p. 33) to emphasise that it is »the action *between* (and not *in-between*) [elements] that matters« (Dolphijn/van der Tuin 2012, p. 14). Dispositifs are thus not seen as bounded objects or structures. Rather, they are open-ended practices delineated by »agential cuts«, and it is

by the continuous material-discursive re-configurations that the field of possibilities and impossibilities occurs (Barad 2007, p. 170). Agential cuts are about differentiating rather than othering, and thus these should not be taken as acts of separation or as in individuation (Barad in Dolphijn/van der Tuin 2012, p. 69). This conceptualization fosters us to rethink ontological boundaries and instead focus on »boundary-making practices, where what is inside and what is outside is intrinsically indeterminate and can only be understood by the workings of the [dispositif] itself« (Lemke 2021, p. 64) and which »enact what matters and what is excluded from mattering« (Barad 2007, p. 148). We propose this as a point of departure to analyse the spatial materiality of the border regions as part of a complex interplay of social processes and material settings.

4 Towards Conceptualising the Spatial Dispositif

By means of Foucault's dispositif, we suggest the term *spatial dispositif* (see also Pløger 2008) to conceptualize discourse-material interrelations in our analysis of space, extending Foucault's notion through Barad's (2007) conceptualisation of agential cuts and intra-actions. Finally, to illustrate how we envision our approach to analyse specific spatial phenomena, we draw on examples and empirical data from our work on the German-Polish border area³.

As highlighted earlier, borders are not static entities but processual and multidimensional phenomena (Gerst et al. 2018). Barad's concept of agential cuts helps us understand how borders can be described as specific moments in which they are brought forth (see Barad 2007, p. 148 and p. 333) and, thus, demarcating and constituting specific spatialities. However, the materiality of the border and the surrounding area is not to be understood as encompassing agency through any intrinsic force (for example, through physical division like a river or mountain range). The production of (border) spaces as constituted and stabilized by spatial dispositifs should rather be understood as dynamic processes in which spatial phenomena, such as borders, emerge through the intra-actions and differentiations between elements linked in a network by boundary-making practices. Thereby, the processes and developments fostered by the dispositif cannot be traced back to any individual elements but only exist as a result of their interplay. It is not assumed that »things act«, but rather that »subjects« are not to be seen as the sole determinant of actions. It is thus the arrangement and interplay between discourses, subjects and things which »in certain relations or constellations, obtain power to regulate, govern, institutionalize or empower a specific element in space« (Pløger 2008, p. 56) towards facilitating particular behaviors while making others more difficult (see also Schmitt 2016; Bührmann/Schneider, 2008). Any analysis should thus not be taken as »just« a listing of the elements involved or how they are juxtaposed. Rather, it should examine what links these elements and makes them facilitate and regulate specific practices and discourses

3 For more comprehensive account of the research see Sommer/Baxter 2022; Sommer/Bembnista 2021; Bembnista 2020.

(see Schmitt 2016). For example, territorial border markers appear as physical material lines for the constitution of national (container) spaces through the arrangement of various elements (inhabitants, politicians, police, fences, towers, vegetation, rivers, border posts).

5 Empirical Illustration: The spatial dispositif of the German-Polish border area

Border Studies have long emphasized security as central to understanding historical as well as contemporary border formations (see e.g. Boucher-Côté et al. 2014). This is especially true for the German-Polish border, the complexity of which is centrally built around matters of security and related aspects such as economic disparities (cf. Gerst 2020, p. 150). Before Poland became part of the Schengen Area in 2007, the border represented the need for control and the national territory as something to be guarded. As the political relations changed, there was an *urgent need* for re-arrangement and re-stabilizing the elements generating security of the (new) territorial constellation. With the opening of the border, the question of security was still a dominant discursive frame. For example, many articles reporting on the »rising crime rate« could be observed in local German newspapers. It was pointed out that this was part of the »new border experience« (Metzner 2011). Thus, in the German-Polish border area, a problem of an open and therefore insecure border area emerged. Furthermore, with the discourse of a borderless Europe, the spatiality of the border transformed through the changing intra-actions between the elements constituting the spatial dispositif of security, as well as the addition and detachments of others. While the primary need linking these elements is the aim to organize the security infrastructure spatially to correspond to the new territorial »reality« of free circulation of people as well as the spread of politico-institutional ideas of European integration, the dispositif of security is entangled with other dispositifs (for example those stabilizing national identities, EU politics, etc.) and the intra-actions make specific (new) actions possible and propagate them:

»The German population needs the feeling that we are doing something and that perhaps both sides are doing something. And I think that helps them to become more united. If the German population has the feeling that they are the victims of, let's just say, Polish criminals and no one intervenes, then growing together will not succeed.«
(interview with public prosecutor)

A solution emerged by the instigation of closer cooperation of German and Polish law enforcement and customs agencies, with, for example, customs officials jointly inspecting cars or passengers on trains at both stationary border crossings and as mobile patrol units. A joint police station was furthermore established in what used to be a border post to join German and Polish security authorities and foster collaboration. At this station, a specific spatial production, the security of the border, is formed. For example, while

there has always been the need for shared communication. Now, German and Polish authorities have shared tables where they sit opposite to each other. As outlined by a German police officer, »[to function] *you need your partners face-to-face*«. Similarly, while the border area is still separated into two territorial states with their own jurisdictions, joint operations are set up. However, this is done by specific practices which clearly mark national distinctions:

»[When] a joint patrol is taking place on German territory, both officers are in their official uniform, but in a German vehicle to make clear this is a German authority [and] the Polish officer [acts only as] an observer of this control operation. On Polish territory it is exactly the other way round.« (interview customs officer)

While all internal European borders allow police officers of the other country to cross borders, with the 2015 German-Polish Police Act, the boundaries of the area which needed to be encompassed by border-security practices were expanded. Hereby, police officers were allowed to cross the border without explicit permission and, more crucially, arrest people across all of Poland and Germany if the case concerned cross-border criminality. The security production at the border is defined by the cross-border cooperation and mobile teams present in the German-Polish border area, which should generate a feeling of security for citizens who can be protected regardless of the open border. On the other hand, for potential criminals, the arrangement where they can be controlled and arrested at any time, no matter if they cross the border, should create a feeling of insecurity.

These examples demonstrate how the spatial dispositif related to security shifted over time from securing the border itself towards conveying a sense of security to the population. As the changes fostered by the Schengen agreement re-configured the relations between elements connected through the dispositif, it consequently fostered a border area constituted both discursively and materially as an *expansive interstice* rather than a fixed and guarded materialized *demarcation*. As the example shows, the actions undertaken by the local Polish and German governmental institutions to establish this facilitation of cross-border security is a phenomenon which specificity is made possible *only* through its constitution by particular change of relations and entanglements of material and discursive elements. This is both, for example, when it comes to physical proximity and face-to-face communication around tables in the police station or joint patrol cars but with individual national uniforms. Rather than understanding these as relations between separate elements, it is only by these elements *together*, which facilitate and regulate specific practices and discourses that the particular border area defined by institutionalised security is made possible.

Nonetheless, a sense of security is not achieved everywhere, especially not in rural areas. For example, since security measures are no longer institutionally demarcated or visible in a materialized form, it is also fostered by subjectively perceived situations of danger and counter-actions in peripheral border villages. This experienced insecurity materializes in a German border village through practices of demarcation rather than co-operation, and the residents interviewed felt they were living »on the edge of the national

territory and forgotten by the center«. Furthermore, the Oder flood in the summer of 1997 caused massive damage on both sides of the riverbank, and in some places, this has not been repaired due to disagreements between the national authorities. The area was characterized by desolation, destroyed and never rebuilt bridges, and with border crossings kilometres away. The »other side«, therefore, was an abstract entity. In the absence of exchanges with residents on the other side, they were locally perceived not as neighbours but as potential threats. Challenged by everyday confrontation with »the other side«, neighbours who used to be »behind the border« now seem closer due to the territorial integration and abolishment of border controls. Although the lack of bridges seemingly made it possible to maintain a closed border, residents stated that the shallow water allowed border-crossing by criminals. A local response was the establishment of vigilante groups to provide security and protect the residents on the German side from criminal activities and from what they perceived as »invasive migrant flows from Poland«. The establishment of a »citizen watch« was furthermore intended to instigate institutional action – as one of the residents explained to us: »I brought it up, but only to provoke (...) because nothing happens here, no patrols«.

In the presented case, the border area is a construct that is analytically inseparable in its elements (Wille 2021), i.e. while the river clearly divides the two sides at the German-Polish border, this division is indistinguishable from the territorial separation: e.g. the river is the border – the border is the river. Similarly, the »phenomenon« which is the (local) border area constituted by a local discourse of *insecurity* or peripherality cannot be separated into »discourse« and »materiality« or »culture« and »nature« but only emerges through mutual (changing) relations between different elements. The examples explicitly link political and institutional re-configurations to »local« discourses, de- and re-bordering practices and materialities towards constituting the border area as encompassing particular residential spaces and cross-border mobilities. Via agential realism, the narratives of the border area presented above are not just texts describing borders or positioned *externally* to the dispositif, but they are rather part of coalesced material-discursive configurations. How these are linked to other elements shapes the spatial dispositif towards fostering a specific spatiality.

However, spatial dispositifs can also obfuscate spatial-material coherence and create constructions »disconnected from geography« or likewise re-construct the border as fixed demarcations. For example, the Polish newspaper discourse on the »threat of uncontrolled immigration into Poland« following the 2015 migration crisis. Here, a Polish newspaper ran a headline »The immigrants are already in the West« (Głos Wielkopolski 2015) with a photo of refugees in *Budapest* and a text referring to refugees arriving in *Munich*. Similarly, in the »rosary to the border« action of 2017, the Catholic Church in Poland encouraged its followers to travel to designated spots along the border to carry out a »mass rosary prayer for the salvation of Poland and the world« and was sponsored by state-owned companies which subsidized train tickets and timed to coincide with the celebration of the Feast of Our Lady of the Rosary, commemorating the Holy League's victory over the Ottoman navy in 1571. This shows »the border« as the entanglement of discourses of security and anti-Muslim sentiments, the reiteration of historic events,

religious performance and practices (e.g. prayers) together with »bodies« moving and establishing space towards reinstating the border as *both* the limits of Polish territory and a link between Poland and the rest of »Christian« Europe. These examples are not meant to discount any ›feeling of threat‹, but to show how the Polish border (at times) is construed as a coalescence of spaces geographically disconnected but discursively and institutionally connected with the border not necessarily placed at the immediate borderland. The spatial dispositif rather links and makes possible the compounding of elements and spaces ›near‹ and also ›elsewhere‹ by material-discursive practices. Accordingly, the border is not to be understood as spatial construction in-between predefined (container-) spaces. Rather, the intra-actions that occur enact boundaries (agential cuts), which then demarcate entities as separate from one another. For example, in the case of the border, the differentiation between performative practices of the (borderless) police station and the local insecurity discourse. The changes happened through the creation of particular relations (as in intra-actions), which fostered the elimination of ontological separations between elements (e.g. discourse/materiality, body/consciousness, borders/mobilities) in the constitution of the particular spatial configurations, but without any unlinking or externalization of elements.

6 Concluding Remarks

The aim of our paper was to show to what extent material space can be conceptualised within discourse theoretical approaches and be included in the analytical engagement with discourse and space. Starting from an understanding that includes the »ontological multidimensionality« of borders (Brambilla 2015, p. 26), we were faced with the challenge of investigating not only the discursive or social dimensions of the border area but also the spatial-materiality which is also part of its constitution. While Barad's critique of language being granted too much power to us is appropriate, we disagree with her criticism that discursive, linguistic, semiotic, interpretative or cultural ›turns‹ are solely stressing the »matter of language or some other form of cultural representation« (Barad 2003, p. 801). Rather, we stress that the importance of discursive structures in the construction of social reality should not entail the obfuscation of materiality. This applies especially when attempting to understand the relationship between discourses, practices and materiality, which together produce specific spatialities. Here, Foucault's notion of the milieu as a spatial construct coalescing the naturally given and the socially constructed space through mutually constituting relations between social, symbolic as well as material elements stabilized by dispositifs already made a socio-spatial expansion of our discourse analysis possible. However, in his depiction of a supposedly passive milieu as just a »space in which a series of uncertain elements unfold« (Foucault 2009, p. 20), we were lacking the conceptual vocabulary for describing the changing boundaries that would demarcate the elements constituting spatial phenomena.

To this end, we proposed the concept of spatial dispositif for approaching the German-Polish border area as consisting of a range of complex multidimensional socio-spa-

tial elements and that these elements are constituted through mutual entanglements. For example, how the spatial dispositif of security organizes relations between the natural givens (landscape) and the artificial givens (lack of bridges), which in turn reinforce the feeling of abandonment in the region. Through this understanding of space as a relational arrangement, its production is clearly dependent on social, symbolic, and material elements in mutually meaningful relations. By approaching the dispositif through Barad's conceptualisation of agential cuts and intra-actions, the attention was fostered towards how boundaries, properties and meanings are *mutually co-constitutive* and towards an understanding of (spatial) dispositifs as entangled with discourses. As exemplified, it is not one element determining the border area but rather the co-production of all active elements that produces spatiality, through a kind of agency that is realized as the result of small shifts and reconfigurations of spatial dispositifs of bordering. Hereby we can pursue a conceptual expansion towards integrating space as a socio-theoretical category rather than as only a ›context‹ or a ›container‹ (see also Löw 2018, p. 17).

While the scope of this paper does not allow for more than a discussion on extending Foucault's notion of the dispositif through the conceptualizations made in the work of Barad, our approach should not be seen as conclusive. One direction here would be an expansion towards a more comprehensive examination of how to deal methodologically with the analysis. Here, for example, Egbert (2019) proposes to not only theoretically engage with the notion of dispositif but also with material sensitive methods like (dis-course-)ethnography and artifact analysis. Furthermore, like others (e.g. Lemke 2021; Keller 2017), he points to how work from Science and Technology Studies can be an inspirational source for conceptualising the inclusion of non-human elements in the social sciences. Furthermore, the analysis could be expanded to follow beyond-representational approaches like performances of (collective) emotions or affects in interview situations or corporal multisensory experiences (see Schurr/Strüver 2016, p. 94ff.) to thus expand the range of elements included.

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