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Can't read my broker face?—Tracing a motif and metaphor of expert knowledge through audiovisual images of the financial crisis

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Abstract

Based on the question of the representability of economy and economics in audiovisual media, developments on the financial markets have often been discussed as a depiction problem. The abstractness and complexity of economic interrelations seem to defy classical modes of storytelling and dramatization. Nevertheless, public opinion about economic changes and dependencies crucially relies on audiovisual media. But how can the public communicate in images, sounds, and words about forces that are out of sight and out of reach, and can supposedly only be adequately grasped by experts? In a case study on audiovisual images of the global financial crisis (2007–), this paper tracks and analyzes a recurring motif: the staging of expert knowledge as close-ups of expressive faces vis-à-vis computer screens in television news, documentaries, as well as feature films. It draws on the use of digital tools for corpus exploration (reverse image search) and the visualization of video annotations. By relating and comparing different staging strategies by which these "broker faces" become embodiments of turbulent market dynamics, the paper proposes to not regard them as repeated instantiations of the same metaphor, but as a developing web of cinematic metaphors. Different perspectives (news of market developments or historical accounts of crisis developments) and affective stances toward the

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global financial crisis are expressed in these variations of the face-screen constellation. The paper thus presents a selection of different appearances of "broker faces" as a medium for an audiovisual discourse of the global financial crisis. A concluding analysis of a scene from *Margin Call* focuses on its specific intertwining of expert and screen as an ambivalent movement figuration of staging insight. Between the feeling of discovery (of a potential future threat) and the sense of being haunted (by a menacing force), the film stages the emergence of a "broker face" in an atmospheric tension between suspense and melancholy. We argue that the film thereby reframes the motif and poses questions of agency, temporality, and expert knowledge.

KEYWORDS
cinema and film, film, film studies, journalism, media studies, research methods, social issues, 20th century and contemporary

1 | INTRODUCTION

The global financial crisis (2007–) and its aftermath dominated the global news cycle for many months, and even years later feature films, documentaries, and reports returned to the events that have been shaping an entire decade. A perceived lack of consequences for those presumably responsible for the loss of homes, life savings, and jobs, as well as the absence of significant reforms of global finance have created a drama without closure; given the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic, the next financial crisis is already looming. The contemporary world of finance, the digital nature of global trading, the inhuman temporalities of market dynamics, as well as the complexity of financial products, together pose a challenge for societal processes of joint meaning-making and moral positioning. Especially for audiovisual media, which constitutes a major voice in these discourses. Mass media with a target audience of non-experts is confronted with the challenge of finding audiovisual images to express financial dynamics that are beyond sensorily perceivable events and their consequences on the everyday life of a society. The abstractness and complexity of economic interrelations seem to defy classical modes of storytelling and dramatization (see Kinkle & Toscano, 2011; Meissner, 2012). Nevertheless, public opinion about economic changes and dependencies massively depends on audiovisual media. Meissner (2012) argues that the global financial crisis as a discursive event is not to be separated from the media. In a strict sense, one might argue that films *on* the global financial crisis are always also films *of* the crisis as they themselves are an essential part of societal communication that turns "developments on the financial markets" and their real-life consequences into a "financial crisis." From such a constructivist understanding of crises as cultural phenomena there is no "crisis" in the mere facts, but there is always some form of poetic meaning and a degree of fictionality involved no matter if it is in a scientific text or in a news report (cf. Gusfield, 1981). So we assume that what a society understands by and experiences as "the financial crisis" is partly constituted through audiovisual discourses unfolding in mass media.

Watching these films and news reports, one quickly realizes the amount of circulating images and sounds that appear identically or with a strong resemblance in different media formats and throughout different stages of the financial crisis: sale signs (that become, within weeks, metonymies of the US housing crisis), container ports (as a symbol for the real economy), laid-off Lehman Brothers bankers leaving the company headquarters (as pinnacle of the

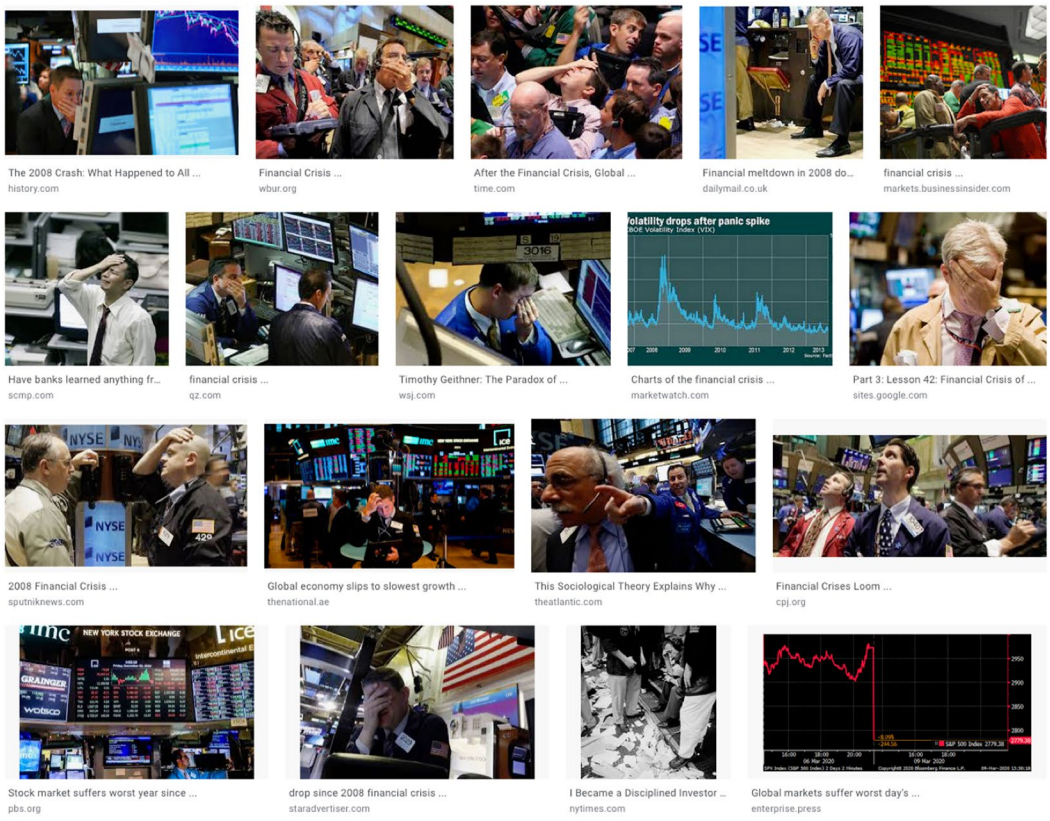


FIGURE 1 Google image search results from 2021 for "financial crisis 2008 trader"—a collage of "broker faces".

whole financial crisis), or the iconography of all-night emergency meetings between political actors and the financial industry. Referring to the financial crisis audiovisually is therefore inseparably linked to referring to other audiovisual images on the global financial crisis. But how can the public envision shared stances in images, sounds and words about forces of a world of crisis that "we have to deal with politically" but that is ontologically "out of reach, out of sight, out of mind" (Lippmann, 1922, p. 29)? We can get insights on how a media public dynamically envisions the financial crisis (and with it forces that can supposedly only be adequately grasped by experts) by tracing recurring motives in the audiovisual discourse about the crisis. In particular, we address in the following a specific motif that focusses on the affective dimension of expert knowledge in the time of crisis. This paper reflects on its rhetorical usage as part of a larger financial crisis discourse: the expressive faces of anonymous traders, bankers, or brokers that often appear in combination with screens that display graphs and tables. These "broker faces" not only appear in films but are also omnipresent in the digital and print journalism on the financial crisis (see Figure 1). So what is the appeal and purpose of these well-known images?

In most cases, the audience does not know the name of the depicted individual and the specific reason for the strong display of emotion is also unclear. The motif works rather as a widely shared symbolic image for dynamics on the financial markets. In many cases "broker faces" seem to signify disruption and change on the markets while at the same time—being predominantly male and white—reinforcing stereotypical power structures within the financial industries. Our hypothesis is that "broker faces" establish a relation of the viewers to the financial world with the expert figure as intermediary and interface—thereby they often perpetuate (stereo-)typical images but sometimes "broker faces" also enable the viewers to reflect on this relation. Often, a visual tension between the soft oval faces and the sharp rectangular screens dominates the image composition. The interplay of hands and faces offers an

FIGURE 2 Courbet: *The Desperate Man*; Holl: *Despair*. Doré: *Illustration for Paradise Lost*.

endless variation of gestures of hiding, self-repression, and self-assurance. So, in contrast to the proverbial "poker face" that hides emotions and mental states within, the "broker face" serves as a melodramatic display that expresses (individual) subjectivity by encompassing the surrounding world. Resemblances in pose, composition and lighting (see Figure 2) could open up speculation about traces to art-historical pathos formulas and genealogic lines in the sense of Warburg (2012). From such a perspective, economic news appears as a highly stylized moral drama that draws from culturally ingrained forms of expressivity.

Rather than analyzing the historical depth of these "broker faces," this paper is primarily concerned with the discourse dynamics of the financial crisis after 2007. As previously mentioned, these faces of anonymous traders appear mostly not in isolation, instead they are looking at screens or they are surrounded by screens looking at them. However, whatever information these computer screens and display boards actually show is either hidden in the off-screen or unrecognizable through blur or distance. The closeups of brokers' faces are thus intertwined with screens that never *show* but always *suggest* crucial knowledge about the financial markets. The viewers are not exposed to financial information directly, but to a highly affective embodiment of knowledge through the expert figure.

Finally, the "broker face" does not appear on its own, but is always related to the address in specific rhetorical situations taking into account different media formats—from a Wall Street Journal article with a somber headline about investment risks to an investigative documentary. Regarding its media specificity, we will focus solely on the appearances of "broker faces" in audiovisual media. An exploratory excursion through various audiovisual "broker faces" using digital annotation and visualization tools shows that these images can be more than a short handle for "market slumps" or easy-to-digest dramatizations that simplify complex dynamics for the lay people. These "broker faces" appear embedded in movement figurations, aesthetic compositions in which this motif creates an affective involvement by establishing a perspective on the phenomenon. We argue that there is no uniform rhetorical agenda in the mere constellation of the "broker face" itself but that the motif rather constitutes a node in the financial crisis discourse—a developing web of cinematic metaphors (Müller & Kappelhoff, 2018) which produces different stances. Close readings of exemplary versions and variations of the motif—from documentaries, news reports, and a feature film—will show that it can be part of a rhetoric of appeasement as well as a figuration of grief about a lost future.

2 | EMBEDDED "BROKER FACES": CINEMATIC EXPRESSIVE MOVEMENTS AND HOW TO ANALYZE THEM

So how do these "broker faces" appear in movement-images of the financial crisis discourse? To address this question, it is necessary to sketch out the cornerstones of the underlying theoretical understanding of audiovisual media as well as the methodological approach these assumptions lead to. We understand the dynamics and recurring patterns of this discourse as audiovisual rhetoric in the sense of "an experience of evidence" (Grotkopp, 2021, p. 188) that

grounds the transformation of "mere" facts into stances toward the societal problem. Audiovisual images establish different perspectives on the financial crisis—different ways of feeling and thinking (about) a problem that potentially concerns us all and demands action. This may be an attempt to reassure the public on the stability of the financial market, or exposing those potentially responsible, a demand for consequences, or solidarity with victims of the crisis. So how are stances and shared perspectives toward a topic established?

First of all, the idea that audiovisual images only unfold in the perception of their audience is central. This theoretical position does not presume the notion of a psychological subject, but starts from film-viewing as an aesthetic media practice—the *poiesis* of viewing film (Kappelhoff, 2018a). "Audiovisual images" are hence not understood as mere representations of objects, persons, and locations, but as *cinematic expressive movements* (Kappelhoff, 2004; Müller & Kappelhoff, 2018). This framework draws on Deleuze's (1983) notion of movement-images, the theoretical concept of "expressive movement" (at the intersection of early twentieth century art theory, social philosophy, and anthropology), as well as on a neo-phenomenological, intersubjective understanding of experience in film viewing as embodiment: "A film is an act of seeing that makes itself seen, an act of hearing that makes itself heard, an act of physical and reflective movement that makes itself reflexively felt and understood." (Sobchack, 1992, p. 3).

The motif of "broker faces" will not be analyzed in this study as isolated depictions of the emotions of bankers, but from this perspective of their embeddedness in an encompassing audiovisual composition, which unfolds as an affect dramaturgy in film viewing: audiovisual images unfold as movement patterns, combining different staging dimensions such as sound design, montage rhythm, camera movements, and bodily expressivity of the actors to one temporal *gestalt*. "They do literally move spectators, because they organize their perception processes in the temporal course of the film reception." (Scherer et al., 2014, p. 2083). By describing these segments across different articulatory levels and their temporal interaction with one another, it becomes possible to reconstruct the perceptual and affective parcours spectators go through in viewing a film (Kappelhoff & Bakels, 2011).

Methodically the following analysis will study "broker faces" as unfolding cinematic expressive movements and processes of meaning-making. To reconstruct those forms of audiovisual expressivity, the analysis furthermore draws on the systematic annotation of audiovisual images. With the AdA Filmontology (Bakels, Grotkopp, et al., 2023; Bakels, Scherer, et al., 2020), audiovisual images can be described interpersonally in their basic affect dramaturgy. These annotations and their dynamic development are visualized as "graphical scores" (cf. Bakels, Grotkopp, et al., 2020) that will be used in the following case study to ground analytical observations more closely to audiovisual dynamics. This systematization and digital coding of film analytical observations additionally simplifies the integration of (semi-)automatic analysis tools such as shot detection, speech recognition, optical flow, or a custom image search (cf. Agt-Rickauer, Aubert, et al., 2018; Agt-Rickauer, Hentschel, et al., 2018). The latter feature allows an initial exploratory search by visual similarity between an uploaded reference image file and frames from the movie files. Basically, this works similarly to commercial tools such as *Google Image Search*, but can be applied specifically to a custom generated set of films and news reports: in our case, audiovisual media of the financial crisis discourse (2007–), which—based on a German audience perspective—encompass 13 European and US-American feature films, 76 documentaries, and 315 broadcasts of Germany's most important TV daily news format, *Tagesschau* (cf. https://ada.cinepoetics.org/corpus/). Each film is automatically segmented into shots and for each individual shot an exemplary frame is extracted and stored.

After uploading an image file, the tool returns a list of time-coded frames from the corpus sorted by similarity and the respective metadata (see Figure 3). In this way the tool allows us to test various research hypotheses on reoccurring visual motifs such as the "broker face" or images of container ships as metaphor for the economy within seconds on our specific set of films—even though we did not have these concepts in mind when we initially watched large parts of the corpus. While such a perspective might be achieved also by other means the tool allows us as media scholars a higher degree of flexibility when tracing resemblances through dozens of hours of audiovisual material without depending solely on the opaque algorithms of major search engines or time-consuming manual viewing notes. An image-to-image search limited to 500 results allowed us to quickly identify 84 "broker face" sequences through frames in which soft oval faces are staged in contrast to the sharp rectangular shapes of monitors. Based on

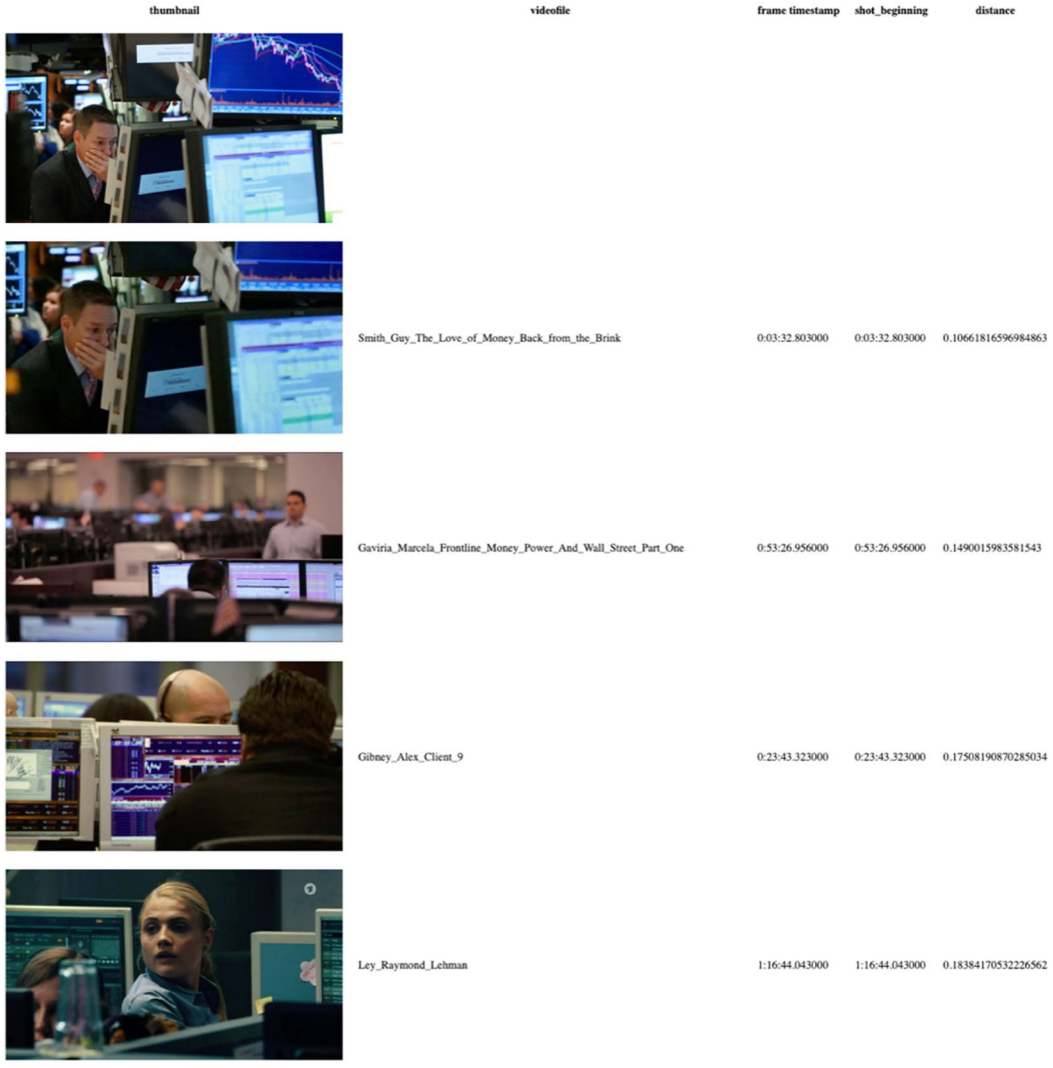


FIGURE 3 On top, the uploaded image is displayed; below, images from the corpus of financial crisis film sorted by similarity (increasing distance-value). The entered image is one of the search results from Figure 1. The search shows that this exact image was used (slightly cropped) in the documentary *The Love of Money: Back from the Brink* (Mitchell & Smith, 2009); similar image compositions appear in other video files.

these automatically generated similarity claims, it is possible to find several starting points for a further investigation of the recurrence and different rhetorical uses of "broker faces." Our explorative survey of the audiovisual discourse of the financial crisis will follow a small selection of these detected "broker faces" and discuss them in a cross-media comparison to reflect on their role in societal audiovisual communication. We are thus not aiming at a distant reading of hundreds of those static images and their graphical pattern, but focus rather on specific studies of their embeddedness in audiovisual sequences.

To give an example, with the custom image search we can trace the appropriation of one of the images found in the Google Image Search (see Figure 1) by an early sequence of the documentary *The Love of Money: Back from the Brink* (Mitchell & Smith, 2009). To see how this instance of a screen-face constellation is embedded in the sequence, we use the AdA Annotation Explorer, a tool for querying and displaying all (semi-)automatic and manual annotations of the corpus. The Annotation Explorer allows to (re-)view the "broker faces" —located as still images via the image

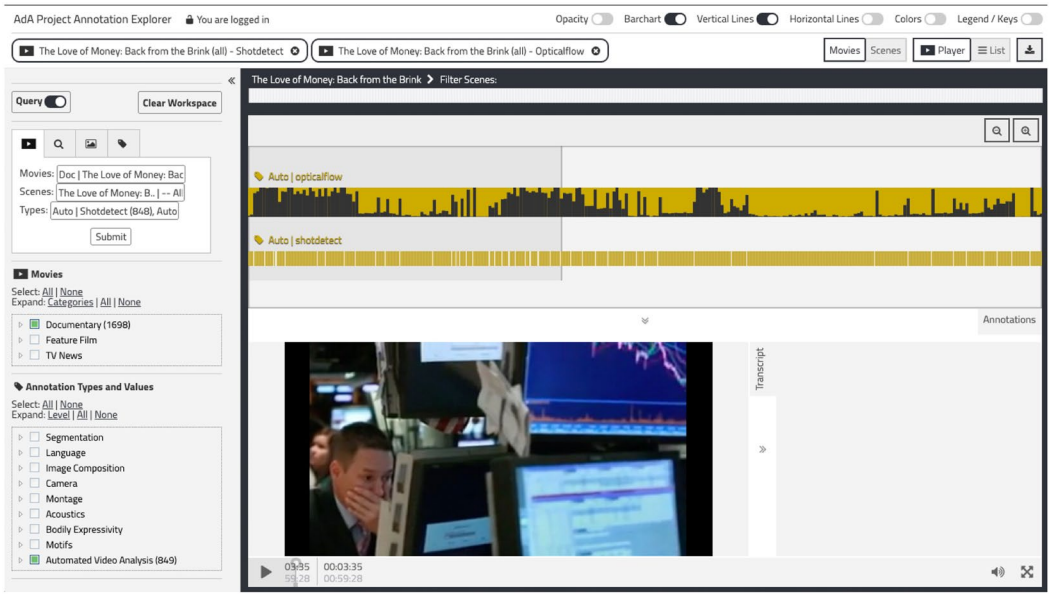


FIGURE 4 Interface of the annotation explorer. Displayed in the workspace are the automatically generated optical-flow analysis and an automatic shot detection.

search—in the context of the expressive dynamics of these annotations. Its interface combines a video player with a workspace in which the retrieved annotation data can be displayed (including multiple visualization options).

The aforementioned image is placed at the turning point of an audiovisual crisis dramaturgy which begins with an off-comment: "In New York the Dow [Jones] fell a record five hundred and four points. The Footsie [FTSE] lost fifty one billion in value." Simultaneously, a high-paced montage of people in the street, the reflection of a stock ticker in a skyscraper facade, and hectic traders speaking on their phones is shown. These images, as can be seen in Figure 4, have a high degree of optical flow, that is, detected overall movement of pixels (due to a shaky camera and high amounts of movement within the frame). In contrast, the consecutive "broker face" as well as the following images—still photographs dynamized by a steady camera pan—have a lower degree of optical flow. It appears at the beginning of a series of slightly longer shots (see shotdetect in Figure 4). The "broker face" thus appears at a rhythmical turning point of the sequence. Through diverging compositional patterns, the financial crash is experienced as a critical event. After a short pause, the shot is accompanied by the sounding male voice of the off-comment "The dramatic numbers and anguished faces on Wall Street and the city were the obvious effect." The staging of "broker faces" as resonating shock through multiple shots of petrified traders covering their mouths further heightens the contrast to the earlier images of traders negotiating frantically on the phone: the "broker face" as an interruption is experienced in the abrupt slowing down and decreased vitality of the film that leads to an understanding of the imminent threat of interbank lending coming to a halt.

Looking at another example from the same image search, a similar dramaturgy of "broker faces"—from frightened staring faces to (exhausted) traders covering their eyes—can be found in a scene from Michael Moore's *Capitalism: A Love Story* (2009), in which the developments of the financial crisis (revolving around the Lehman Brothers collapse) are staged as a dam break by the rhythmical montage of a series of "broker faces" and flows of ticker columns (see Figure 5). Another example which also includes such dynamics but adds another type of face can be found in the French documentary *Morts à Crédit [Death in rates]* (Castaignède, 2016). Through a series of "broker faces" intercut with graphs, tickers, news footage, and bank logos, a brief historical account of the global financial crisis is given: here the trader in a state of despair between computer screens is met by angry faces of striking factory workers in France, followed by shots of protests and riots. A chain reaction from falling share prices via the inwardly directed despair

FIGURE 5 "Broker faces" in Michael Moore's *Capitalism: A Love Story* (Moore, 2009). TC 01:17:34–01:18:23.

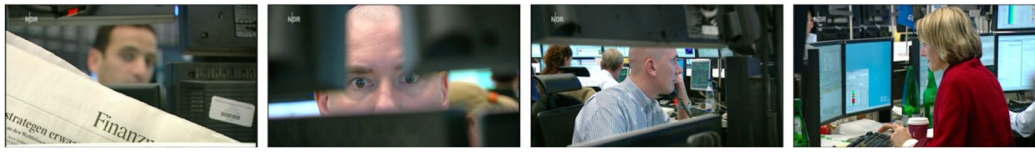


FIGURE 6 A cluster of "broker faces" in *Tagesschau* January 21, 2008, 8 p.m. (Immel, 2008).

of the "broker faces" to an eruption of anger from the protesting people on the street is suggested audiovisually. It becomes clear through the contrast to the enraged workers with political demands and existential fear that the "broker face" marks an internal perspective from within the world of finance.

The theoretical and methodological framework that we laid out in this section is the basis for discussing different figurations of the "broker face" in the following: As an interface, as a means of crisis containment, as a counterpoint to the metaphorical grid of the system or as a glance into the otherworldly dimension of finance.

3 | THE "BROKER FACE" AS INTERFACE

In an earlier study (published in Müller & Kappelhoff, 2018, pp. 139–143), we analyzed a *Tagesschau* report from January 21, 2008 (Immel, 2008) that contains a cluster of "broker face" shots and stages prominently the gaze of financial experts at the Frankfurt Stock Exchange (see Figure 6).

The sequence can be found in the middle of a report that stages the development on the German stock market as an experienceable slump: a sequence of downward orientation opens the report; the camera pans from the gallery down onto the trading floor and the falling stock graph draws the interest of the camera; this is followed by interviews and, in the center of the report, the above mentioned "broker faces": The first of these shots echoes the falling graph of the stock market by a diagonally positioned newspaper in the foreground. Through a shift in focus, the eye area of the broker in the background is emphasized. When the man turns his head toward the camera, the report cuts to another broker with eyes wide open, also framed by monitors facing the camera. Through this match-cut, the different men melt into one movement gestalt, creating a feeling of constriction—focused gazes in an increasingly tightening image space. During these shots, the off-comment tells the audience that the situation is "hard to map out" (*unübersichtliche Lage*—lit. transl. "a situation hard to overview") on the financial markets, and that investors have to prepare for further turbulences. The subtle metaphoricity of "understanding as being able to see" that is implied by this phrase is activated through this emphasized staging of the experts' gaze. At the end of the report, the camera pans up to the ceiling of the trading floor. The slump of the graph is thus metaphorically echoed in the structure of the whole report.

The expressive movement—temporally unfolding movement gestalt—of the news report also provides the basis for metaphorical processes of meaning making: Metaphor not in the sense of instantiations of A-is-B-relations of

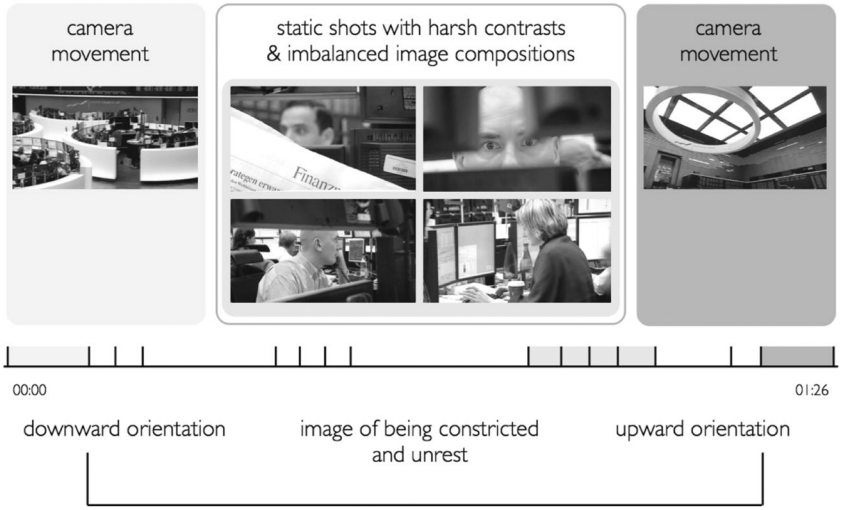


FIGURE 7 Macrostructure of the report from *Tagesschau* January 21, 2008, 8 p.m. (Müller & Kappelhoff, 2018, p. 142).

represented concepts, but the emergence of metaphoricity from the affective experiences that the audience goes through in film-viewing. Cinematic metaphor can be thus conceptualized as "understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 3), with a particular attention to its media specificity. Meaning-making is thus understood as an active poetic doing instead of a passive unpacking of messages that have been intentionally designed by the producers (Müller & Kappelhoff, 2018; see also Gibbs, 2018; Horst, 2018; Jensen, 2017). The "slump" in the market is experienced by an embodied notion of gliding downward, being constricted and then at the end looking up again (see Figure 7). This means that share prices are falling, but potential recovery is grounded in the experiential gestalt of the report.

The falling graph on the main display of the Frankfurt stock exchange and the downward movement are affectively charged by the face-screen constellation at the center of the report: the staging dramatizes the ungraspable complex and abstract dynamics of financial transactions as a play of facial expressions in a constricted image space. The "dramatic numbers" appear only through "anguished faces," one could say. These expressions are here less perceived as emotional reactions *of* individuals, but in the merging of the different expert figures through montage a shared mood is created *through* the multitude of nameless experts. The microexpressions of the closeup thus become the interface and metaphor for the abstract dynamics of digital trading: a viewing arrangement in which the understanding of the situation is closely tied to the figure of the expert. It is the expert's gaze that enables viewers to grasp affectively what a slump in the market could mean and what it feels like.

4 | CRISIS CONTAINMENT IN-BETWEEN "BROKER FACES"

In another *Tagesschau* (Bachmeyer, 2008) from later in 2008—exactly two days after the Lehman Brothers collapse—the reaction of the German market is again in the focus of the report with its face-screen-constellations. To the image of the zigzag line of the struggling DAX-index, the off-comment begins summarizing the trading day in Frankfurt: "By the late afternoon, when the DAX closed … ." Then, the report cuts to a montage of "broker faces" and continues: "… they were probably all glad it was over. 'The trading day, one nail-biter', a trader accounts" (see Figure 8).

Once again, we encounter "broker faces" in close relation to the graph indicating the daily development of the DAX. While the graph reduces a complex and manyfold development to an abstract falling and rising line, the

FIGURE 8 The first four shots of the report from *Tagesschau* September 16, 2008, 8 p.m. (Bachmayer, 2008).

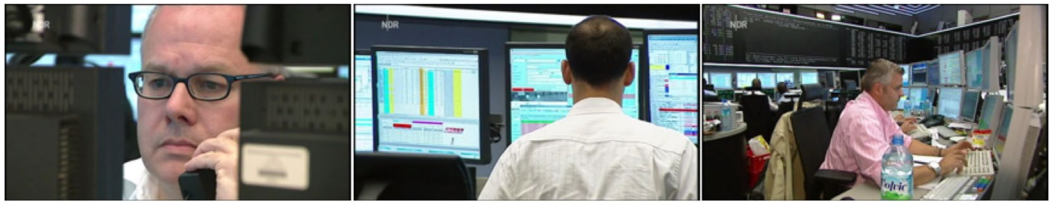


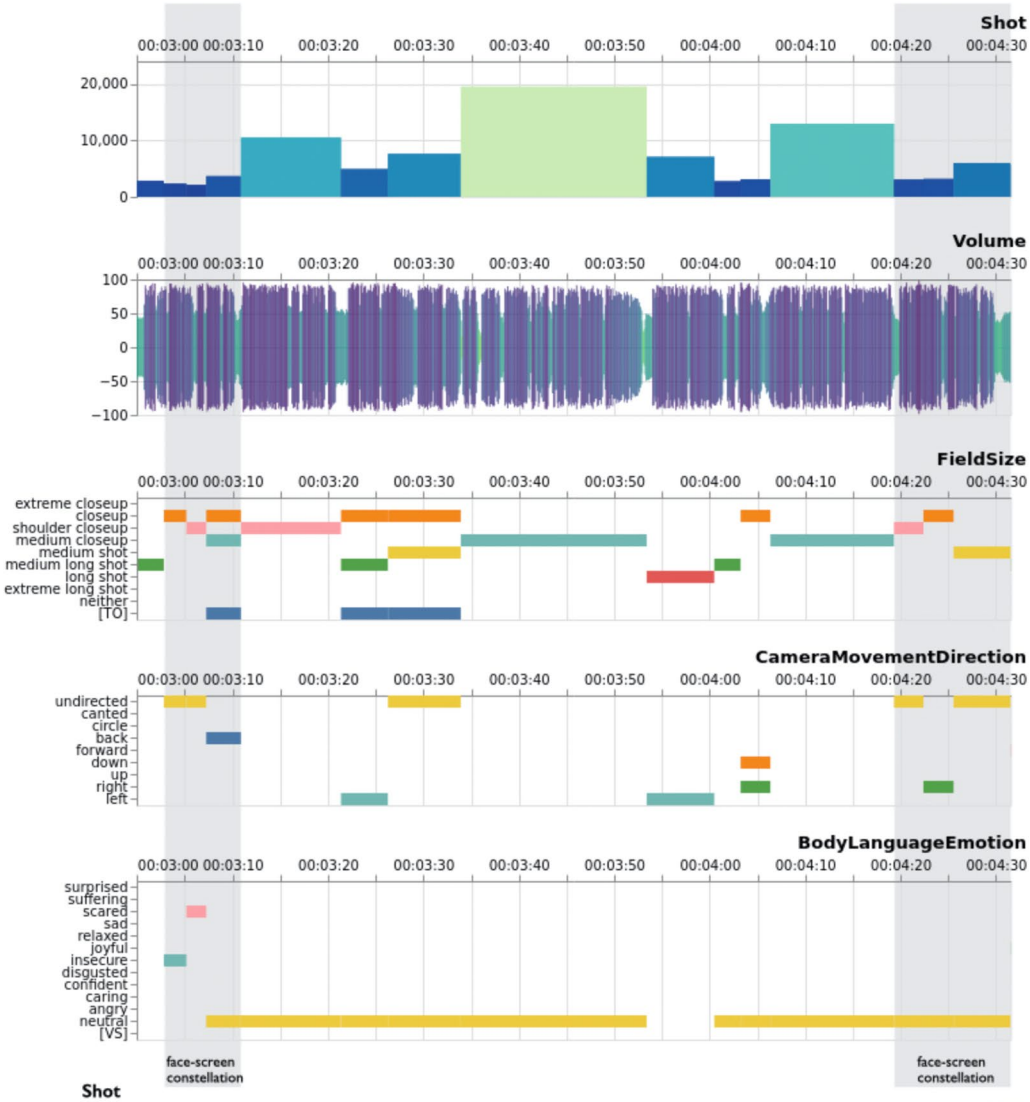
FIGURE 9 The face-screen constellations at the end of the report in *Tagesschau* September 16, 2008, 8 p.m. (Bachmayer, 2008).

expressivity of the "broker faces" adds drama to the scene. While the graph shows no significant drop or rise, through the "broker faces" the developments of the day are experienced as exceptional and worrisome.

The report then cuts to two interview sequences and shots of a German car factory before returning, at the end of the report, to the Frankfurt trading floor. The report thus follows on the level of setting a circular structure that underlines the verbal argumentation: the stock market is in turmoil, the effects on the real economy are manageable, the prognosis is optimistic, the investors should not panic. When the report finally returns to the "broker faces" on the trading floor, they are staged slightly differently (see Figure 9): the facial expressions are now somber, and instead of passive staring, the traders are shown typing and taking calls.

Based on these observations and a close reading of the annotations visualized in Figure 10, we claim that the report stages an *image of containment* by unfolding a development from fright to cautiousness. The entire report can thus be described as a widening and contraction of the image space.

By presenting the car manufacturers (one of Germany's most important industrial branches) as unaffected by the market turbulences, the financial crisis is restricted to the stock market and is staged in the succession as calming down. Instead of panic sells, the expert advises those who deal in stocks to make smart investments (see Figure 11). Despite the off-comment remaining critical of the situation, the affective-rhetoric dimension thus counterpoints the verbal content, to a certain degree. The financial crisis is no reason for strong (conspicuously female-connotated) emotions, but it is focused on the financial industry and a mere cause for caution. By contrast with the next segment of the news report that chronicles (in continuous present tense) breaking news in Washington, locating the "actual" crisis in the US, the image of containment and the stance that builds on a dramaturgical framing of face-screen-constellations are further reinforced. As such these "broker faces" are an integral part of a rhetoric of appeasement which is an important mode of crisis communication: addressing a (German) news audience in this specific affect-dramaturgical parcours to potentially reassure investors against the backdrop of ongoing crisis developments. On the basis of our different examples we argue that "broker faces"—also in the context of news and documentaries—do not only document the reaction of witnesses to the event, but that they are an essential part of the films' unfolding affect dramaturgy. Here they serve as a point of contact between the incompatible worlds of finance and humans.



Shot
The framing face-screen constellations on the beginning and end of the report have the highest cutting rhythm (between 2000 and 6000 milliseconds).

FieldSize
In the highlighted-face screen constellations the camera is comparatively close to its reference objects, where as in the middle of the report more distanced medium and long shots dominate.

CameraMovementDirection
The face-screen constellations are additionally highlighted through camera movements. Whereas the middle part of the report only scarcely uses a mobilized camera gaze.

BodyLanguageEmotion
Gestural and especially facial expressivity ("insecure" and "scared") was only annotated for the "broker faces" at the beginning of the report, whereas the remaining report was consistently qualified as "neutral".

FIGURE 10 AdA-timeline visualization of a selection of annotations from the *Tagesschau* report from September 16, 2008, 8 p.m. Generated in Advene (Aubert & Prié, 2005). The highlighted sections indicate the two "broker face" sequences at the beginning and end of the 1:32-min report.

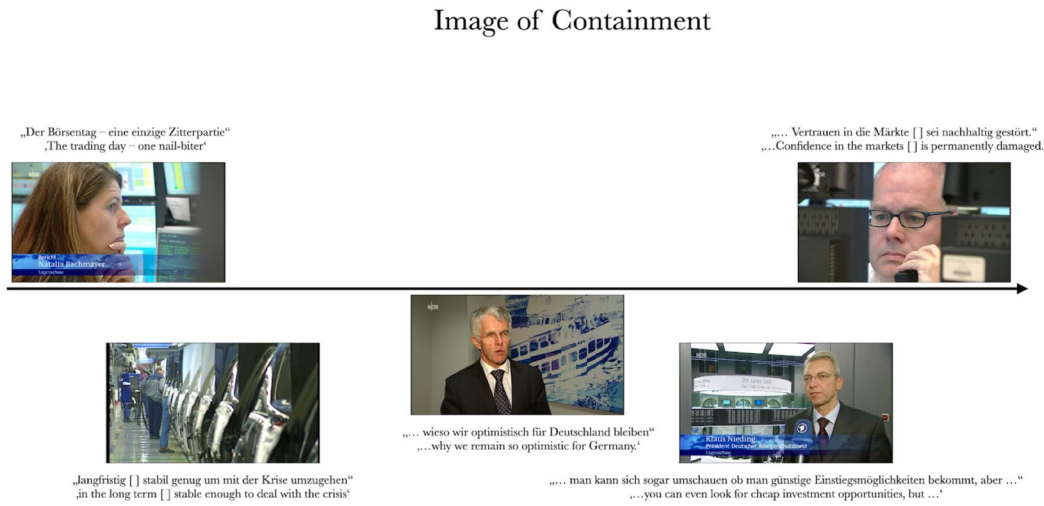


FIGURE 11 The argumentative arc of the *Tagesschau* report from September 16, 2008, 8 p.m. (Bachmayer, 2008). Exemplary stills and the off comment in German and English.

5 | BETWEEN OVERVIEW AND THE LOSS OF INSIGHT: FINANCIAL MARKETS AS "GRID SCREENS"

Screens as a contemporary medium of the financial markets have been noted by several scholars (Burgoyne, 2017; Meissner, 2012; Morsch, 2018) as characteristic elements of films on financial markets and their crises. Meissner (2012) remarks that "[i]t is not by coincidence that the only financial insider's perspective that is shown almost as frequently as the urban panorama view is the flickering surface of digital trading screens, displaying finance's indexical parameters of complex mathematic abstraction." (p. 104) Morsch even argues, concerning the different visuality of screens, that the dominant presence of screens can be related to post-cinematographic aesthetics in which (also) other formats, image types, narratives, and qualities of digital media are remediated (Morsch, 2018, p. 122).

One common motif for the routines of the financial system is the excess of multiple screens that mark the nodes of financial trading. These screens regularly appear beyond the mode of crisis communication—without faces as interfaces. Vast spaces become grids of screens that create physical landscapes for financial flows, inhabited by countless white-collared bankers that navigate these physical and digital spaces (see Figure 12). Together with the similarly grid-like facades of the bank towers, a world framed in rectangles appears before the viewers' eyes. These "grid screen" images mark, in their flatness, the threshold between oversight, on the one hand, and the loss of insight on the other. These nodes of financial trading appear as multiperspective and as ordered grids that are always on the brink of becoming an abstract pattern, an inorganic and inhuman space—as becomes especially apparent in Andreas Gursky's photographs of trading floors (see Figure 13).

6 | THE EMERGENCE OF A "BROKER FACE": LOOKING BACK (TO THE FUTURE)

We will take up this notion of the "grid screen" and lastly turn our attention to a "broker face" from *Margin Call* (Chandor, 2011). We are thus moving to a feature film which allows us to study the motif in a more pronounced aesthetic mode, interwoven in the film's poetic fabric, rather than the concise audiovisual gesture of a news report. In the first act of the film, a young risk analyst, Peter Sullivan (Zachary Quinto), gets a flash drive containing sensitive data about his company's finances. One night, he stays behind in the office, alone, while his colleagues leave for drinks and socializing. The analyst then makes the discovery—to quote Wikipedia's summary of the scene, exemplifying the

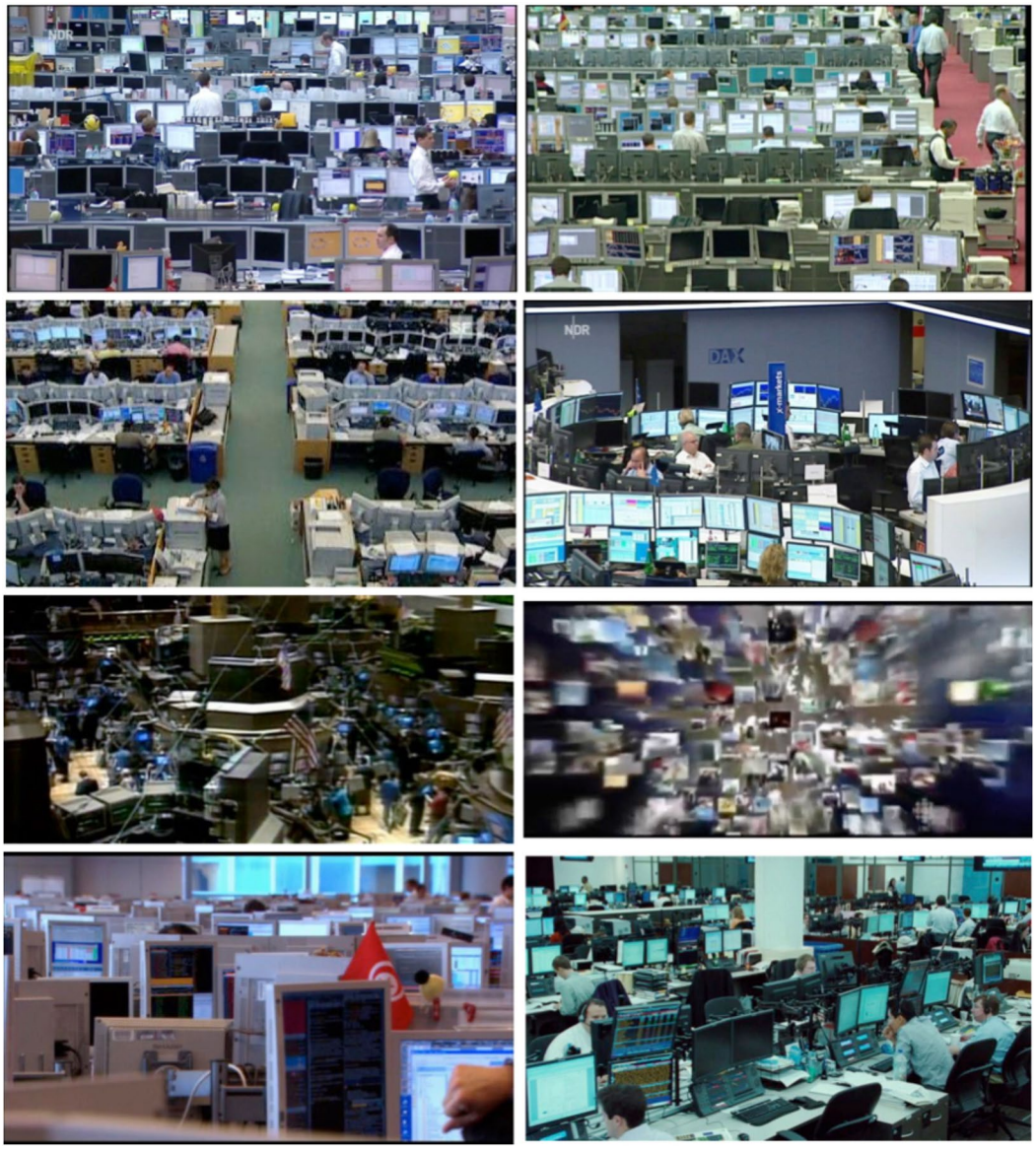


FIGURE 12 Top left to bottom right in rows: *Tagesschau*, November 6, 2008, 8 p.m. (Jakisch, 2008a); *Tagesschau*, July 15, 2008, 8 p.m. (Jakisch, 2008b); *Der Fall. Wie die UBS in den Strudel der Finanzkrise geriet* (Zumstein, 2008), *Tagesschau*, September 16, 2008, 8 p.m. (Bachmayer, 2008); *Generation Zero* (Bannon, 2010); *Meltdown: The Secret History of the Global Financial Collapse* (McKenna, 2011); *Frontline: Money, Power, and Wall Street* (Kirk, 2012); *Margin Call* (Chandor, 2011).

complex matter in the center of the film's plot—"that current volatility in the firm's portfolio of mortgage-backed securities has exceeded the historical volatility levels of the positions. Because of excessive leverage, if the firm's assets decrease by 25%, the loss will be greater than the value of the firm itself and the firm will go bankrupt." The bankruptcy could trigger a chain reaction on the stock markets—loosely referring to the Lehman Brothers collapse. In the unfolding of this scene, that stages how the analyst discovers this hidden danger in the data and then communicates his discovery to his colleagues and superiors, a "broker face" emerges in "a complex atmospheric network of mood, extended over time" (Müller & Kappelhoff, 2018, p. 156).

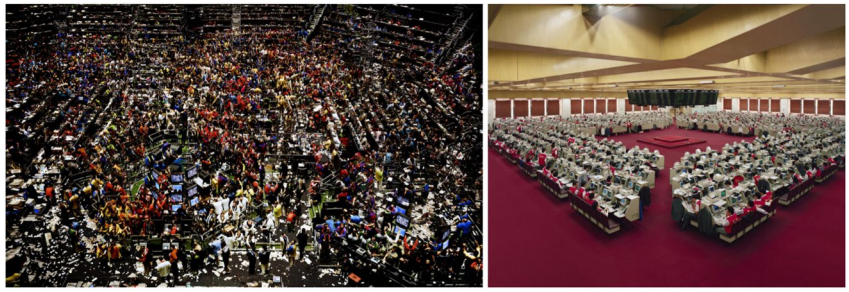


FIGURE 13 Andreas Gursky: *Chicago Board of Trade II*, 1999 (left); *Hong Kong, Börse II*, 1994 (right).

FIGURE 14 Fragmented and subjectivized image space as a staging of immersion into work. *Margin Call*, TC 00:16:48–00:17:32.

In the beginning, with his colleagues leaving ("Hey, be glad you're still alive," shouts one in reference to earlier lay-offs at their firm), the analyst fetches his headphones and begins listening to a song—"Wolves" by Phosphorescent. Using the privacy of the night shift, he takes a look at the sensitive data that was played into his hands. The song, which combines the gentleness of a lullaby (a soft voice and acoustic guitar) with menacing lyrics (*Mama, there's wolves in the house./Mama, they won't make nice)*, gets reverbed in a short cross-cut with closeups of Sam Rogers (Kevin Spacey), one of Sullivan's superiors, driving in his car: a sorrowful face only emerging out of the black through the headlights of passing vehicles, sometimes only as a reflection in the rear-view mirror. Through the overlapping song, the two men are juxtaposed in their parallel solitary night-time activities leading up to the discovery—darkness spills over into the empty office floor, with only the computer screens shedding some diffuse light. The scene returns to the office by looking over the shoulder of the young analyst onto the computer screen in front of him. There, we see a complex user interface with graphs and tables (see Figure 14)—incomprehensible for an audience of lay people. Meanwhile, the song dissonantly cross-fades into a spheric score which slowly develops a pulsating rhythm and increases in tension. The following fast paced shallow focus shots and extreme closeups stage a process of increasing immersion into work: the image space becomes flat and only shots of the protagonist's face and detail shots are edited to the music's beat. A previously solid space of narrative actions becomes, in this way, subjectivized and fragmentary.

This audiovisual flow is then interrupted by returning suddenly to Sam Rogers: in a comparatively static arrangement, we see him bent over a brown dog in the sterile environment of a veterinarian's room, with the old dog looking directly into the camera. Together with this change of the visual dynamics, the music's tonality changes as a string instrument playing melodic, stretched notes shifts the overall elegiac quality of the score. Through an elliptic cut, the camera shows Rogers in a second shot bidding farewell to his now lifeless dog by patting the flank of the creature, before burying his face in his palms. Cutting back to the office, a string staccato, picking up the previous tense rhythmic pattern, and extreme closeups of a hand scribbling numbers and the focused analyst's face continue the figuration of immersed and focused work.

FIGURE 15 The downward camera movement in the moment of realization leads to a drastic change of the background. *Margin Call*, TC 01:18:02–01:18:32.

Emphasized through a shift of the camera perspective, this flow climaxes in the discovery which is staged through a prominent camera movement as a moment of realization that leads to a "broker face": the reduced acting culminates in a combination of looking up and freezing in motion. However, the camera activates and anticipates the body movements and starts shifting from a high-angle to a straight angle perspective. Thus, a frontality of the face is achieved that intensifies its play—the camera rotates around the eye area of the face, thereby amplifying the gaze that is now looking directly into the camera (see Figure 15).

A feeling of discovery unfolds for the viewer in the audiovisual composition of the sequence: through the kinetic force of the audiovisual rhythm (Bakels, 2017)—the pulsating, swelling music (once again stretched-out, rising notes produced by a string instrument and a deep bass sound that shape the music's tonality) and the expansive camera movement, which captures the bodily movements of the analyst. Rather than a feeling attributed to the character, the realization is a carefully crafted feeling and affective stance for the audience. This sudden manifestation of insight is staged as an ambivalent figuration that subtly poses the question of agency: the figure of the analyst realizes future devastating financial dynamics as much as the "broker face" is realized through an outside force—a filmic gaze coming over him.

Through the camera movement screens behind the protagonist come prominently into view. While before in that sequence screen and face were spatially separated into shot and reverse shot, in this camera movement face and screen are folded into each other to form a "broker face" in the moment of discovery—both facing the camera. Morsch (2018, p. 140) highlights in *Margin Call* the images of glowing computer screens in empty offices at night as expressions of financial dynamics beyond human control and relates them to the abstract power of financial systems. Following this notion, the "broker face" in *Margin Call* is also the image of a haunting. Instead of showing what the protagonist sees in the following shot, what makes itself discovered *is precisely not to be seen in the image*. Herein lies a major difference to otherwise comparable stagings of major discoveries in films. For example, in a scene from *Jurassic Park* (Spielberg, 1993, TC: 00:19:48), a team of paleontologists encounters living dinosaurs for the first time. That scene also starts with an activating and anticipating camera movement, but after closeups of astonished faces the sequence cuts to the prehistoric creatures at which they are marveling. In this regard, it is crucial, in *Margin Call*, that the expressive face of the analyst is not followed by a shot from his point of view. However, something else becomes visible for the audience as already described: through a wall of glowing "grid screens" that appears in the background, almost uncannily lurking behind the analyst's back, the abstract powers of the financial system can be felt in their menacing presence.

The "broker face" in *Margin Call*, like the previous examples, also provides an interface to market dynamics: the lack in mortgage-backed securities, which may be complete gobbledygook for lay people and will only be explained much later in the film, becomes graspable as an affective intensity through the specific discovery of the expert's face. Here, the discovery emerges as the culmination of an affective parcours in the interplay of recognizing and being possessed, which becomes the medium for the display of financial market dynamics through a world viewed (Cavell, 1979; Kappelhoff, 2018b, p. 211).

Through the audiovisual staging of the scene, the discovery is closely tied to an atmosphere of solitude and the image of loss and grief. This image appears, for the audience, as an interruption of the montage sequence of focused work (see Figure 16), a shift in the tonality of the score (see "MusicMood"), increased shot length (see "Shot"), a reduced dynamicity of the image (see "OpticalFlow"), and a change in the bodily expressivity (see "BodyLanguageEmotion"). The "broker face"

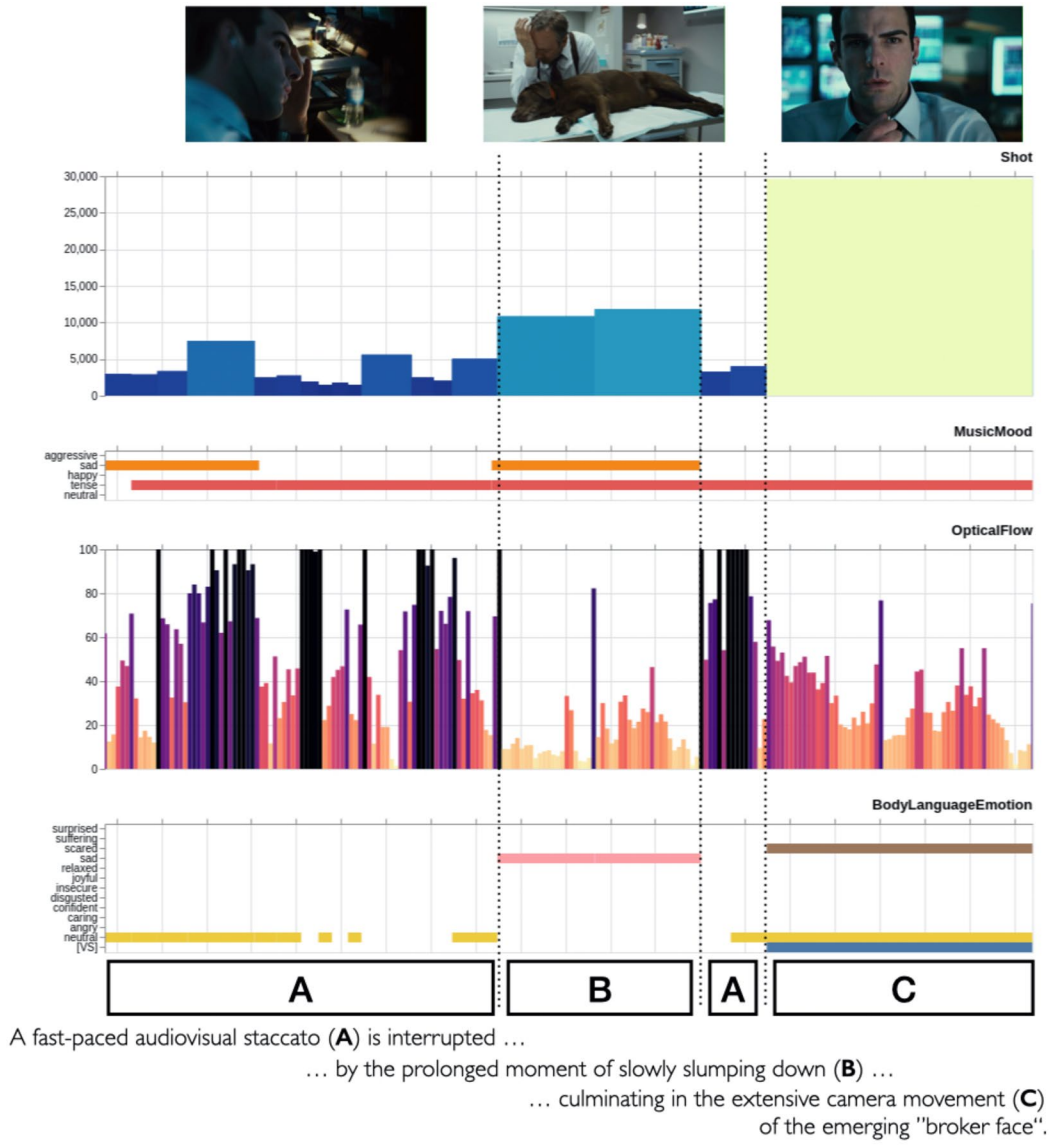


FIGURE 16 Audiovisual build-up to the "broker face" in *Margin Call*.

in this scene is therefore tied to an ambiguous sense of looking back. The independently moving camera gaze appears as an opposed gaze of screens and audience alike, looking diametrically back at the discovering face. Through the intimate interweaving with the exposed moment of grief, the forward pushing, rhythmic staging of the analyst's gaze into the company's future is interrupted by a prolonged moment of slowly slumping down—an affective parcours that entangles tense expectation with a figuration of grief. The resulting melancholic and suspenseful atmosphere stages a looking back into the future as cinematic experience and frames the entire scene in a figurative sense as a shared remembering—if not grieving—of the financial crisis and its bitter consequences. Perhaps, as Kloeckner (2020, p. 120) suggests, the "loss of an open future," that is in its emergence already met by an intense sense of an ending.

7 | CONCLUSION

In this case study, we asked how "broker faces" appear in movement-images of the financial crisis discourse. We described "broker face" images as an interface and metaphor for financial market dynamics in which these can be experienced through and as a face. In these different examples, the expert often emerges as a powerful figure, an authority with interpretational sovereignty that seemingly enables the audience to grasp the incomprehensible. In the analyzed audiovisual images, financial market dynamics only become a felt crisis through the arrangement of expert and screen—the "crisis" lies, so to say, in the eye of the beholder—which emerges in the act of film-viewing. "Broker faces" therefore serve as (re-/deflective) mirrors of the financial market. They do not offer an in-depth examination of financial data but allow for a brief glance that sensitizes (media) audiences for market "turbulences." In this sense, the "broker face" does not, however, only refer to a compositional motif, but also to a spatio-temporal configuration: through the dynamically unfolding face-screen constellations, the digital realm and human experience come into contact. The expert appears as a translator between the world of digital finance and an experienceable lifeworld—not through the cognitive interpretation of facts, but as affect.

Audiovisual movement-images, different qualities of being moved in the experience of an audience, and movements on the financial market are closely intertwined on various levels in "broker face" images. This only becomes apparent if the motif is not treated primarily as a photographic still image (with its inherent graphical tension) or analyzed on the level of representation. In orchestrated cinematic spatio-temporal configurations different processes of insight into the unknown, feelings of realization, anticipation, and shock unfold. Taken together, multiple variations and appropriations of "broker face" images can be regarded as discursive movements that establish insightful trajectories through an audiovisual discourse of the global financial crisis.

The exemplary analyses have shown that stagings of "broker faces" can be found in a wide range of media genres: in news reports, as well as in documentaries and fictional films. While the first example of the German news program *Tagesschau* used one "broker face" sequence in the middle of a report that stages a down-and-up movement to dramatize a market slump, the second report uses two "broker face" sequences as framing device to stage a slight change in perspective—a transformation from fright to cautiousness. In several accounts of the global financial crisis in documentaries and reports, the "broker face" creates an initial feeling of urgency for the consequence and relevance of financial market developments (often signaling critical events for crisis developments) and brings complex power dynamics of the financial markets to the attention of a humanly graspable discourse. In the feature film *Margin Call*, the "broker face" appears in a both melancholic and suspenseful atmosphere that intertwines the feeling of discovery and haunting with an image of grief. Rather than allowing the audience to "read" market dynamics like an open book, here it emerges as an ambivalent figuration bringing expert and market forces face to face. Starting from the "broker face" in *Margin Call* one could investigate further in fiction as well as non-fiction films the staging of insight and discovery as poetics of astonishment—may it be in regard to the spectacle of dinosaurs or in regard to abstract ideas.

"Broker faces" can be a tool for reducing the complexities of global finance to a personified drama, as well as for opening up urgent questions about agency and knowledge production. Thus the "broker face" is neither solely enabling nor deceiving in itself but marks a widely established figure of thought. The arrangements of experts and screens serve as a contact point between worlds of finance and lifeworlds of the audience. In this sense the experts' role oscillates between weather frogs, canaries in the mine shaft, and clairvoyants, they can be regarded as embodying the threatening power of a financial system as well as being threatened by its force. For this reason the category of "broker faces" lends itself as a discourse analytical audiovisual concept. Through the strict constraints on the level of the image composition on the one hand and its frequent repetition and variability in its embedding on the other, this audiovisual motif provides comparability for very different media formats and stances toward dynamics on financial markets. for example, in the course of the GameStop short squeeze of 2021 that was stylized as showdown between app-based amateur investors and hedge funds, sometimes even as retaliation for the handling of the financial crisis (2007–), the "broker face" reappeared with significant changes: In contrast to trading floor displays and professional

brokers the presence of mobile devices in point-of-view shots could be observed as recurring stylistic device (cf. Thorbecke, 2021). How fictional formats (like the upcoming feature film *Dumb Money* that is based on the book *The Antisocial Network* by Ben Mezrich) will react to this event has to be seen. But there are indications that the "broker face" might turn into the face of established professional trading while the emerging market force of interconnected retail traders turns against this "broker face" by appearing in several new forms in (audio)visual media.

An analysis of "broker faces" from this perspective sheds light on the media practices with which "we" (as a media public) struggle to make sense of the world of finance and its impact. We suggest studying audiovisual discourses by paying particular attention to the appropriation of motifs, circulating patterns and metaphors, thus conceptualizing and analyzing audiovisual discourses as webs of reciprocal relations from which meaning emerges. In this regard the "broker face" could be related to other recurring motifs of the financial crisis discourse: We referred to "grid screens" as a closely related expressive constellation of screens on the verge of becoming graphical patterns. Another recurring motif is the staging of crisis developments through the sudden appearance of "breaking news"—an audiovisual figuration that dramaturgically appropriates TV news and is modulated manifoldly in documentaries and fiction films. The expressive gestalts of the analyzed "broker face" sequences (as well as their dramaturgical and discursive relations) are pivotal to grasp the stances that these audiovisual images generate toward a financial crisis. Such an approach to audiovisual discursivity promises to offer insights into the medium of cinematic thinking as part of societal communication.

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