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'Movies and Meaning: Studying Audience, Fiction Film and Existential Matters'

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## Movies and Meaning: Studying Audience, Fiction Film and Existential Matters

### Abstract

In what ways and under what circumstances can a movie be a resource for individuals and their thoughts about existential matters? This central research question has been investigated using a both quantitative and qualitative approach. First, a questionnaire was distributed amongst 179 Swedish students to provide a preliminary overview of film habits. The questionnaire was also used as a tool for selecting respondents to individual interviews. Second, focus group and individual interviews were conducted, with viewers choosing their favourite movie of all time. In the study socio-cognitive theory and a schema-based theoretical tool is adopted to analyze how different viewers make use of movies as cultural products in an interplay between culture and cognition in three contexts; a socio-historic process, a socio-cultural interaction with the world and inner psychological processes. The viewers in the study seem to be inspired by movies as a mediated cultural resource, promoting the development of a personal moral framework with references to values deeply fostered by a humanistic tradition. It is argued that these findings support theories discussing individualised meaning making, developing 'self-expression values' and 'altruistic individualism' in contemporary western society.

**Key words:** Film, audience, meaning-making, existential matters, religion, social cognition, individualization

### 1. Introduction

What is important in life? What makes life worth living? What do dreams of a good and happy life look like? These kinds of questions are asked by scholars investigating people's worldviews and belief systems in everyday life (Bråkenhielm, 2001). Watching movies is a growing habit in Sweden and the consumption of film has never been as widespread amongst Swedes as it is today (Hedling & Wallengren, 2006).<sup>[1]</sup> Media scholars discuss how media habits are related to people's construction of worldviews and how meaning making is both a social and an individual practice, where mediated stories are interconnected with 'ideological horizons' (Höijer, 2007: 33). In what ways do movies intersect with the ways in which people in contemporary society deal with the meaning of life? That is the main point of interest for this study of film viewers and fiction films as an impulse for meaning making processes, with a special focus on existential matters.<sup>[2]</sup> I distributed a questionnaire among 179 Swedish students at Högskolan Dalarna University College in 2003. The questionnaire was primarily important as a tool for selecting respondents to thirteen individual interviews with viewers choosing their favourite movie of all time.

My aim as a sociologist of religion has been to reach a more nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between social and psychological processes in individuals' meaning-making, related to the

construction of personal belief systems with inspiration from movies.<sup>[3]</sup> First of all I have wished to give generous space to empirical examples of individuals and their ways of comprehending movies as important aspects of their personal lives. Secondly, with the help of a socio-cognitive perspective, I have in mind to contribute to a more developed theoretical elaboration of film interpretation processes among viewers.

### 1.1. Research Questions and Hypothesis

The main research question was as follows: *in what ways and under what circumstances could a movie be a resource for individuals and their thoughts about existential matters?* I also asked a more theoretical question: *how much are individuals guided in their interpretations by interpretative horizons internalized through primary and secondary socialization?*

My hypothesis said that individuals with a religious background, who also have a religious outlook on life today, would be less inclined to use movies to address important matters of personal relevance in life, whereas individuals with no religious background and not participating in religious activity today would be more active in using movies for this purpose. This preconception was formulated from a starting point in studies that described a historically strained relationship between organised Christian faith and fiction film.

Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century the Roman Catholic Church developed critical views on the film industry and church members were discouraged from movie watching habits (Miles, 1996, Johnston, 2000, Deacy, 2005). This was also an attitude developed by Lutheran and Pentecostal traditions in the Nordic countries.

My ambition has not been to evaluate films from a theological or philosophical point of view, as others have done (Baugh, 1997, Fraser, 1998, Coates, 2003). Neither was it to conceive film consumption as a ritual equivalent to the function of traditional religion (Lyden, 2003, Marsh, 2004, Jerslev, 2006), nor analyse mythological structures in popular culture products (Martin & Ostwalt, Deacy, 2001, Jewett & Lawrence, 2003). My focus has been on the choices of a few members of the audience and their wholehearted embrace of some important movies. I have then tried to describe and analyze, as thoroughly as possible, their own perceptions of meaning derived from these films.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1. Media Studies

The first of the theoretical sources used in my study was media studies. The development of mass media during the 20<sup>th</sup> century has completely changed society in a historical process where the production, storage and circulation of mediated symbolic content have been established as central aspects of social life (Thompson, 1995, Kivikuru, 2001, Jansson, 2001a). In a profound and irreversible way, the development of the media has transformed the nature of the exchange of communication. The media is now part and parcel of fabricating webs of significance and meaning in contemporary society (Thompson 1995: 10).

As recipients of media messages we have to create some understanding of our position, who we are, what we want to become, or on the other hand what we don't want to be (Gripsrud, 1999: 17). The notion of meaning production is central to most definitions of media reception research (Hagen, 1998: 61). Earlier audience studies have often been framed as a textual enterprise, rather than understanding meaning as

something that takes place in the interaction between a text and specific receivers, or categories of audience. Over the past decade there has been a noticeable development in the international scholarly field of media, religion and culture (Hoover & Lundby, 1997, Hoover & Clark, 2002, Mitchell & Marriage, 2003). This has also been seen in the Swedish setting with a combination of theoretical perspectives from media studies and the sociology of religion (Linderman, 1996, 2002a, Lövheim, 2004, 2007, Sjöborg, 2003, 2006).

A special branch of this field is the interdisciplinary cross-section of film and religious studies, where a growing number of scholars from different research areas have shown interest. Rarely, however, has an audience approach been taken here. Jolyon Mitchell has summarized the development as follows: “[T]here has been a rapid increase in the amount of writing produced on discerning the sacred, religious or theological in film. Up to this time the vast majority of these texts focus on either the film itself or the director of the film, leaving out of the discussion what the audience does with the film” (Mitchell, 2006: 204). There remains, in other words, a lack of work done based on empirical evidence of what people do with films (Marsh, 2006). Some important initiatives have been pioneering in this direction, such as Martin Barker’s multinational *Lord of the Rings*-research project (Barker, 2007), with Scandinavian participation from the Danish film scholar (Jerslev, 2006). My study is a contribution in that vein.<sup>[4]</sup>

## 2.2. Religious Change

Secondly, I discuss religious change from a starting point in theoretical perspectives from the sociology of religion, where questions are asked about religious change in late modern society with different characteristics in various parts of the world. The American situation has its own peculiar traits with reasonably high levels of religious commitment (Bellah & Madsen et al. 1985, Roof, 1999, Norris & Inglehart, 2004). The European setting is different from this, displaying fewer obviously religious characteristics (Gill, D’Costa & King, 1994, Woodhead, Heelas & Martin, 2001, Davie, 2002). The question of a more detraditionalized European situation is addressed, as well as slow shifts in late modern society towards weakened religious traditions, more individualized belief systems and a sacralisation of the self (Woodhead & Heelas, 2000, Ahlin, 2005, Sjöborg, 2006). The question asked from this perspective is what kind of role media plays as a resource for shaping people’s personal worldviews.

In this context I have defined what is considered to be an existential matter. These topics have been empirically investigated by a certain branch of scholars in Systematic Theology studying worldviews. It is difficult to find an adequate English term with which to translate the term – ‘livsåskådning’ – used among Swedish scholars, but a number of suggestions have been posited such as ‘worldviews’ or ‘life philosophy’ or ‘view of life’ (Morhed, 2000). A view of life consists of a cognitive element encompassing the individual’s theoretical assumptions and comprehensive views about the world, an evaluative element with personal central values and finally a personal basic mood (Jeffner, 1976).

There are, on the one hand, examples of vague and abstract definitions of what is considered to be an existential matter addressing the profound questions of why we live, why we die and what the purpose of life is (Hartman & Pettersson, 1980). On the other hand there are quite detailed definitions listing many topics such as ‘race’, sex, love, suffering, loneliness, freedom, human conflict, life and death, guilt, responsibility, human dignity, euthanasia and abortion (Ronnås, 1969). I have revised 15 topics formulated by Bråkenhielm (2001), to create 10 defined existential matters to make use of in my analysis of thirteen individual interviews; 1, why we live and die; 2, purpose and meaning in life; 3, guilt and responsibility; 4, what is reality?; 5, what is a human being?; 6, what is love?; 7, the existence of God; 8, what is right?; 9, good and evil; 10, moral principles.

### 2.3. Film Studies – Sujet and Fabula

Third, I point to the notions used in film studies to distinguish between ‘sujet’ and ‘fabula’.<sup>[5]</sup> This distinction highlights the hugely important recognition that spectators actively make meaning. We, as audience, create the fabula in our minds, fleshing out the plot to form the full story on the basis of cues in the sujet (Bordwell & Thompson, 1997). Bordwell (1985), states that whether called perceptual or cognitive, organized clusters of knowledge guide our hypothesis making in film viewing based on cues of sound, light, editing, camera angles and so forth in the sujet. The total fable is constructed through the basis of different schemata or cognitive maps, where the film’s sujet and style interact in the course of cueing and channelling the spectator’s construction of the fabula (Bordwell, 1985).

In his thesis the Swedish film scholar Per Persson, argued that this approach should be tested empirically on what is going on when individuals watch films and how the viewer’s everyday life works as a cognitive background for inferences and construction of the fabula (Persson, 2000). This does not come out of the blue, but relies on a wide range of basic assumptions and personal knowledge and “as an active perceiver, the spectator is constantly testing the work for a larger significance, for what it says or suggests” (Bordwell & Thompson 1997: 73). Within film studies not enough has been done with empirical ambitions to address how these processes could be understood (Persson, 2000).

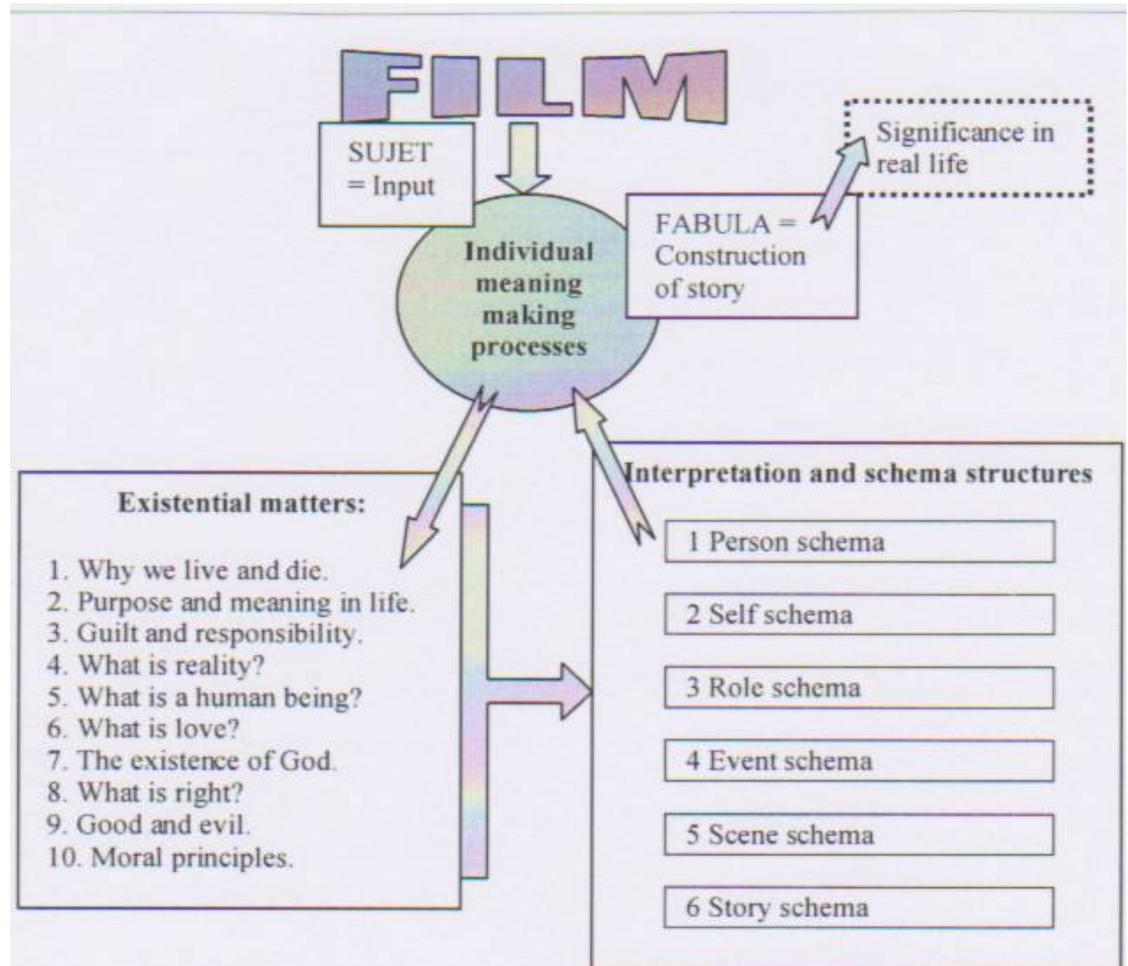
### 2.4. Socio-Cognitive Theory

Fourth, I frame the question about individuals’ personal beliefs within a theoretical paradigm of socio-cognitive structures of representations. Here cognitive psychology is developed in a social psychological direction. It is used to discuss cultural discourses and how they are comprehended and treated by individual subjects as a cognitive process in particular situations (Cole, 1996, Hagen, 1998, Höijer, 1998c). Socio-cognitive theory brings forth a more nuanced comprehension of “how ordinary people create and use meaning to make sense of the world” (Augoustinous & Walker: 141). Within cognitive psychology I have adopted a theoretical perspective derived from schema-theory to make use of as an analytical tool for detecting meaning making processes in the dynamics of the mind. As an audience researcher I have tried to “identify what could be described as more general mental/cognitive frames or schemata involved in the process of media consumption” (Eriksson, 2006: 41). I am following Birgitta Höijer’s approach by identifying interplay between culture and cognition in three contexts; 1, a socio-historic process, 2, a socio-cultural interaction with the world and 3, inner psychological processes (Höijer 1998c: 169).

### 2.5. A Theoretical Tool

Finally, I developed a theoretical model as a tool with which to analyse my interviews. For these interviews thirteen spectators chose their favourite film of all time and discussed its emotional and cognitive impact from their point of view. I adopted schema theory, inspired by Höijer’s use of six main schema-categories as basic cognitive structures through which people comprehend fiction narratives. They are 1, person schema, 2, role schema 3, self schema 4, event schema 5, scene schema and 6, story schema (Höijer 1995, Wahldahl 1998). Person schemas organise our knowledge of people and their traits. Here we store our evaluations of other people’s psychology and personalities and how they react in different situation. Role schemas organise our expectations of persons with particular roles and positions in society and of their behaviour in different situations. Self schemas organise our considerations of ourselves as persons

with particular traits, qualification and possibilities as well as weaknesses. We also have an idea of which dimensions we consider typical and important in our self image. Event schemas organise conceptions of sequences of events and how things usually happens in life. Expectations of different content in situations are linked together in an order building up plans of certain situations. Scene schemas represent places, the rooms and streets and buildings in which our daily routines take place. Finally, story schemas consists of sets of expectations about the way in which different kinds of stories proceed (Wahldal 1998: 46, Höijer 1998c: 173).



**Figure 1.** Theoretical model interpreting film viewing and meaning-making.

The model is to be understood as follows. The sujet is the input on the screen. The spectator becomes engaged in an interpretative process, where possible existential matters are processed through possible schema structures building up the construction of fabula in the mind of the spectator and the story is tested for significance in real life.

In my analysis of the interviews I have asked three main questions. What sort of existential matters are actualised by the chosen movie? Through which schema categories are the matters processed? What kinds of references are made between the intra-textual fictitious narrative of the movie and the individual's own extra-textual life?

### 3. Methodological Framework

I combined a quantitative and a qualitative approach in two steps. First, I distributed a questionnaire among 179 Swedish students at Högskolan Dalarna University College with the aim of providing a preliminary overview of film habits. The questionnaire was primarily important as a tool for selecting respondents to the mainly qualitative investigation. Second, I proceeded with the qualitative approach consisted of focus group interviews where discussion centred on comprehension of the science fiction film *Contact* (1997) analyzing different patterns of meaning making related to the spectators' interpretative backgrounds. As part of the qualitative approach I also conducted individual interviews with thirteen viewers choosing their favourite movie of all time. According to their interpretative background I grouped them as belonging to one of three categories: group 1, *less religious socialization/practice*; group 2, *mixed religious socialization/practice characteristics* and group 3, *more religious socialization/practice*.

### 4. A Questionnaire

179 students responded to the questionnaire which was distributed in different classes between October 2002 and February 2003. They answered questions about their film habits, their views on watching movies and their social background. They were a mix of media students and students studying literature, history, religion, education and other courses within the field of social science. When summarizing their attitudes towards films a majority emphasised, first of all, the capacity of movies to promote experiences of strong emotions and the feeling of being deeply moved by movies. Second, a large number also considered movies to be entertainment and a way of getting away from everyday life for a while. Thirdly, an aspect that was also important, was watching movies as a stimulus for thinking about life and initiating discussions with friends. Less accentuated was film watching as a social act which strengthens bonds with others. Only a minority were interested in films as an artistic handicraft and a creative process.

An analysis of variables, in search of a correlation between background characteristics and whether individuals' use movies as a resource for coping with existential matters, did not produce results in accordance with my hypothesis. I had assumed that more religiously oriented people would be less frequently represented amongst those individuals using movies to deal with important issues in life. My analysis did not, after all, reveal such a correspondence. Regardless of interpretative background and ideological horizons both religious oriented and non religious oriented people were using films as a mean for dealing cognitively with personal questions about the purpose of life and what makes life worth living. This result in step one called for a deeper investigation of how this could be conceived in more detail in step two, focus-groups and step three, individual interviews.

### 5. Interviews – focus-groups and thirteen individuals

In step two, focus group interviews, I decided to mix individuals with three defined interpretative horizons in a conversation about the movie *Contact* (1997). This science fiction movie was especially interesting since it forced the viewer to construct a fabula from possibly contradictory cues in the sujet. Watching the movie you had to decide whether the main character Ellie Arroway – played by Jodie Foster – ever left earth or not. Did she experience a close encounter in outer space with an extra-terrestrial intelligence

which materialized in the shape of her father, or was the whole thing an hallucination, a result of her own imagination?

In the two focus groups no pattern in the individual's interpretations of what happened in the film on an explicit meaning level, could be found that followed the lines of interpretive horizons.<sup>[6]</sup> In the first group interview, five out of six held the opinion that she had had an inner psychic experience, both more religious oriented individuals and less religious oriented individuals. In the other group five out of seven, both more religious and less religious individuals, were convinced by the opposite alternative that she had made an actual trip to the centre of the universe and had met someone in the outer space.

It was reasonable to suppose that when the participants were constructing the fabula on an explicit meaning level group cohesion came into play (Wibeck, 2000). When given the chance to define more freely what the story was about and how it had touched the respondents personally, considerably more creative views developed in the groups on implicit, or even symptomatic, meaning levels where some relationship could eventually be detected between interpretative horizons and interpretation patterns. The most important impression, however, was the great creativity in moving from fiction meaning to real life meaning. What was to become personally relevant proved therefore both unpredictable and interesting.

In the next step I asked the participants to take part in a more personal interview about "a favourite movie which made a great impression on you and which had an impact on the way you look at the world and your personal experience of life". All participants in the focus groups agreed to be interviewed. I analyzed the interviews according to the questions mentioned above. What sort of existential matters are activated by the chosen movie? Through which schema, categories are the questions processed? What kinds of references are made between the intra-textual fictitious narrative of the movie and the individual's own, extra-textual, life?

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#### Group 1: *Less religious socialization/practice*

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Kia, 27, talked about *Weird Science*, "*Weird Science*" (1985). She dealt most extensively with the existential issues of guilt and responsibility and also with the question of love. She processed this mainly through a combination of person schema and self schema cognitive structures. The movie, about a computer generated dream girl in charge of two younger boys, reminded her extra-textually of her role as an elder sister protecting her brothers when she and the brothers were all in their teens. She felt deeply responsible for them as her closest and most loved relatives.

For Erik, 30, *The Last Emperor* (1987) was his favourite movie. He touched primarily on the question of what a human being is and on matters of moral principles. He processed this through a combination of self schema and person schema. Erik talked about the impact the film had when at age 14 he went to the cinema with his father. Erik empathised with the child emperor as the loneliest child in the world. Extra-textually the film connected to the feeling Erik had in his early teens of being lonely in his class, abandoned by his friends. The movie helped to anchor in him a commitment to keep his word honestly and always to stand up for those less fortunate than himself.

*Leon* (1995) opened up the possibility of new types of content in action movies for film buff Jon, 27, because of its human touch and the sense of a sincere relationship developing in the film. Jon was moved by the contact built up between the hit man and the young girl, which eventually leads to his self sacrifice, saving her life and avenging the death of her family. Jon processed matters of guilt and responsibility and

the essence of love. Jon was the only respondent to reveal almost nothing about his personal life, processing the issues exclusively through story, role and person schema and saying nothing about himself.

Radomir, 24, picked *Fight Club* (1999) as his movie. The existential matters addressed in the discussion about the movie were the issue of purpose and meaning in life and what it is to be a human being. He processed this mainly through a combination of person schema and self schema cognitive structures. Extra-textually it tapped into his own struggle with being a man in a commercialized society and the problems of finding an authentic way to express his male identity in a contemporary Sweden where he felt feminism dominates.

For Sofia, 22, *The Matrix* (1999 – 2003) was a trilogy inspiring her in life, making her believe that she could accomplish more than she really dared to hope for. When hesitating she thought about the message in the movie to trust in your innermost capabilities. She touched upon issues of purpose and meaning in life and the question of what it is to be a human being. She processed this mainly through story schema and self schema. Extra-textually she used the notion of believing in herself when applying for work.

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#### Group 2: Mixed religious socialization/practice characteristics

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Madeleine, 25, watched *Dirty Dancing* (1987) over and over again with her friends at the age of 11 or 12 and they all learned the lines and the songs by heart. She dwelt mostly on matters of the essence of love and guilt and responsibility. She processed this mainly through self schema and person schema cognitive structures. She thought Baby was a perfect role model for someone interested in what is going on in the world, coupled with a wish to develop as an attractive young woman. Madeleine struggled with this in her extra-textual life, trying to combine a political awareness in life with an interest in gaining an attractive female persona.

Victoria, 24, used *Lion King*, 1994) as a film to console herself while longing for her family and her boyfriend when she was studying at university far from home. She was mostly occupied with matters about the essence of love and moral principles. She processed this mainly through self schema and person schema cognitive structures. She thought that the film expressed ideal relations between parents and child and between lovers which Victoria held very dear as extra-textual moral principles in her intimate relationships.

Jakob, 27, chose *The Shawshank Redemption* (1995) as a movie incorporating vital moral principles important to him as an individual raised in a Christian home, but not a believer himself. Jacob was preoccupied with issues of good and evil and moral principles and he processed these matters through self schema and person schema. He thought the movie depicted a character that incarnates a true human being acting out the essence of Christian values such as trustworthiness and altruistic ideals, but without the rhetoric of Christian lingo. This was a crucial task for him in life where Jakob perceived himself to be a good person although he did not share the Christian faith.

*The Butterfly Effect* (2004) made a distinct impression on Caterina, 21, in the middle of a life crisis where she eagerly wished she could turn back time and undo some crucial actions in the past and thereby change the course of events for her and her family. Caterina addressed matters of purpose and meaning in life together with matters of guilt and responsibility. She processed these matters through self schema and person schema cognitive structures with an unusually nuanced understanding of aspects of

her own strengths and weaknesses. Extra-textually the film sparked her into shaping up her routines and helped her break with self-destructive habits.

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### Group 3: More religious socialization/practice

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Karin, 33, chose *Angel Farm* (1992) as her favourite film. She dealt with matters of good and evil together with moral principles vital to her. She processed these matters through person schema and self schema. She identified herself with the female character moving to a new place and having to cope with a new set of expectations and prejudices, an experience which she herself has had first hand. She also connected to the priest's role as a mediator and related this to her own profession as a teacher dealing with tensions in a small village.

Lena, 24, used the film *Life is Beautiful* (1999) as a psychological defence in a very particular situation when under pressure in her role as a teacher. As a believer she felt she had been wrongfully criticized, by a senior colleague, for teaching religion in an unprofessional manner. Very upset and powerless she used the idea in the film of the power of imagination to escape the psychological pressure of reality in extra-textual life. She dwelt on matters of purpose and meaning in life as well as matters of good and evil. She processed these matters mainly through person schema and self schema cognitive structures.

Peter, 32, was impressed by the *Lord of the Rings*-trilogy (2001 – 2003) where the main message for him was the importance of carrying out the task which is given to you, no matter what. Peter was dealing mainly with matters of purpose and meaning in life as well as guilt and responsibility. He processed these matters through person schema and self schema. He made reference to several characters in the movie such as Frodo, Sam and Aragorn whose conviction and commitment, even in the darkest hours, touched him deeply. This inspired him in his extra-textual and less dramatic reality with responsibilities for his family in his role as a father.

For Maria, 26, the blockbuster *As It Is in Heaven* (2004) summarized her vision of life. It was an important impulse for her at a time when she was reconsidering her upbringing in a Pentecostal Christian tradition. The film confirmed her own extra-textual critical feeling that the church has a bad record of suppressing women in general and sexuality in particular. The film sparked a vision of emancipation and honest relations in love and she was uplifted and filled with joy, hope and self confidence after watching it. She dealt with matters of guilt and responsibilities as well as good and evil. She processed these matters through self schema and person schema cognitive structures.

When summarizing the interviews it was clear that some existential matters dominated. Questions about what kind of moral principles should guide your life, together with what kinds of responsibilities human beings have towards one another were present in a lot of interviews, as well as issues of individual purpose in life and the overarching question of the meaning of life. These more existential matters of immanent orientation – turn to life – dominated in all groups regardless of interpretative horizon. Transcendental issues and questions about what happens after death, the question of the existence of God and ontological issues about the essence of reality received much less attention.

Summarizing the analytical question, assessing through which schema structures the narratives were processed, it was possible to detect that most of the schema structures to some extent were used among the respondents as a group. But there was a clear emphasis on a combination of two main cognitive structures in processing these existential matters; a person schema and a self schema.

## 6. Conclusion

This outcome points back to my overarching research questions. In what ways and under which circumstances could a movie be a resource for individuals and their thoughts about existential matters? An overall analysis brings me to the following conclusion in one extensive formula. Detailed person schematic cognitive processes about fictitious characters on the screen and their role model behaviour are combined by the respondents with dynamic cross-references to detailed self schematic introspections about the respondents own characteristics, related to existential matters at some very specific moments in their lives. In short, it is my contention that there is an interplay between culture and cognition in three contexts; a socio-historic process, a socio-cultural interaction with the world and an inner psychological process.

As for the complementary question, here the conclusion was less clear. To what extent are individuals in their interpretations guided by interpretative horizons internalized through primary and secondary socialisation? The interpretative process was very complex and the results point in two directions, not inevitably opposing each other. To a certain extent respondents seemed to be guided by their repertoire of inherited interpretative patterns in the constructing of the fabula. At the same time one thing was obvious when meaning was created in the fabula with extra-textual references. The meanings were unique to the individual and transcended what could be expected from defined interpretative horizons. The individuals were very creative in constructing meanings on several different levels simultaneously in unpredictable ways.

How then is it possible to evaluate these perceivable processes with several examples of respondents preoccupied with their self image, dealing and negotiating a socio-cognitive construction of their selves? Does it lead to individualism and a self centred cult of the ego? (Rothenbuhler, 2006). That is not the only conclusion available. Individualism in late modern society is of a kind which is institutionalized and forced upon the individual as Beck & Beck-Gernsheim emphasize (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002). They also claim that it is possible to trace forces in an individualised society developing 'altruistic individualism' where people are coping in creative ways with structural problems in the society. It is also interesting to mention Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel's analysis of 'self-expression values' in contemporary western society, where human self-expression gives "communal values and social capital a pro-democratic civic drive" (Inglehart & Welzel 2007: 6).

My empirical examples of individuals enjoying movies could be interpreted as being compatible with these perspectives. The viewers in my investigation seem to be inspired by movies as a mediated cultural resource, promoting the development of a personal moral framework with references to values deeply fostered by a humanistic tradition, in line with John C. Lyden's argument of what film is capable of doing with viewers. "We should [...] be able to appreciate and applaud the positive functions they perform (conveying hope, catharsis, and a range of societally supportive values)" (Lyden 2003: 248).

Many scholars from different fields, including film studies or religious studies, have formulated the lack of empirical examples of what viewers are experiencing while watching films. The vast majority of texts in the field focus on either the film itself or the director of the film leaving out of the discussion what the audience actually does with the film (Mitchell 2006). My study is an example of empirical work on "situated spectators of flesh and blood out there in the world" (Persson 2000: 298).

Culturally embedded values seem to be expressed and mediated in films and become a resource for personal belief systems and moral cognitive frameworks on an individual level. The respondents in my study illustrates processes where individual viewers are dealing with matters of human virtues and the dignity of what it is to be human such as trustworthiness, friendship, responsibilities for your neighbour, standing up for the less privileged, self sacrifice and other core moral principles. Individuals as social beings are, on the one hand, defined socially as being part of collective, ideologically coloured interpretative horizons. On the other hand, individuals seem to transcend the given conditions by constructing cognitively unique creations of normative and moral frameworks in ways that empirically underlines Lyden's conclusion, that movies proposes values according to which we can live (Lyden 2003).

With a socio-cognitive perspective and with a schema, "schema" -based theoretical tool I have in some detail analyzed how different viewers make use of movies as cultural products. With the help of cognitive perspectives I have empirically illustrated how members of the audience are making part of the culturally provided worldviews, projected on the screens, personally valid in creative and unpredictable ways.

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## Notes

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[1] The ways in which the Swedish audience consumes films has changed rapidly (Antoni, 2007, Ribrant, 2006). Recent developments in digital distribution have made it possible to watch films at home on bigger and better screens, on a laptop or even on the smallest of screens like the PlayStation Portable. Movies are no longer mainly enjoyed in cinemas, but via TV or DVD (Ribrant 2006: 125).

[2] I am using 'existential' in the first of the two meanings outlined by the Oxford Dictionary; 1) relating to existence. 2) Philosophy concerned with existentialism. The focus of my research is related to the construction of worldviews on a personal level in everyday life and I am not concerned with existentialism as a philosophical tradition.

[3] Cf. Clive Marsh, "what films do to people and what people do with films" (Marsh 2004: ix).

[4] I have distinguished between the most basic film genres such as 'documentary', 'fiction' and 'avant-garde' even if these categories are not watertight (Bordwell & Thompson, 1997: 42). In my study the investigation focused almost exclusively on fiction film. Documentary film was mentioned rarely and avant-garde film not at all.

[5] The 'sujet' is the input on the screen. The spectator becomes engaged in an interpretative process, building up the construction of the story in the mind of the spectator, which is called the 'fabula', "fabula"

[6] I am adopting Rousiley Celi Moreira Maias' definition of 'interpretative horizons'. "[T]he 'interpretative horizons' or the 'moral framework', given either by tradition or basic certainties of life, function as an 'implicit knowledge' or as a pre-discursive background structure from which all thinking, action and interpretation proceed" (Maia, 2001: s 40f).

## Biographical note

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