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# Vernacular Meaning Making

## *Examples of Narrative Impact in Fiction Film*

### Questioning the ‘Banal’ Notion in Mediatization of Religion Theory

Tomas Axelson

#### **Abstract**

The outcome of an audience study supports theories stating that stories are a primary means by which we make sense of our experiences over time. Empirical examples of narrative impact are presented in which specific fiction film scenes condense spectators’ lives, identities, and beliefs. One conclusion is that spectators test the emotional realism of the narrative for greater significance, connecting diegetic fiction experiences with their extra-diegetic world in their quest for meaning, self and identity. The ‘banal’ notion of the mediatization of religion theory is questioned as unsatisfactory in the theoretical context of individualized meaning-making processes. As a semantically negatively charged concept, it is problematic when analyzing empirical examples of spectators’ use of fictional narratives, especially when trying to characterize the idiosyncratic and complex interplay between spectators’ fiction emotions and their testing of mediated narratives in an exercise to find moral significance in extra-filmic life. Instead, *vernacular meaning-making* is proposed.

**Keywords:** mediatization of religion, film, spectator, meaning-making, banal, vernacular

#### **Introduction**

Alongside individualization and secularization, mediatization is understood as one of the meta-processes shaping modernity (Hjarvard 2008, 2012, Lundby 2009, Hjarvard & Lövheim 2012). In 2008, Stig Hjarvard, Professor of Film and Media Studies in Copenhagen, outlined a theoretical framework that has attracted interest from a wide range of scholars in recent years. Among the many aspects of his theoretical framework, he looks at the logic of media and popular culture in an attempt to identify the principles that create conditions for religious change. He claims that

[A]s a language the media mould religious imagination in accordance with the genres of popular culture, and as cultural environments the media have taken over many of the social functions of the institutionalized religions, providing moral and spiritual guidance and a sense of community (2008: 9).

Hjarvard has contributed a fruitful theory that in crucial ways distinguishes between ‘mediation’ and ‘mediatization’. The former relates to the concrete act of communication through a medium while the latter tries to grasp the long-term process “whereby social

and cultural institutions and modes of interaction are changed as a consequence of the growth of the media's influence" (Hjarvard 2012: 26). Media as conduits, languages and environments change societal institutions in a process that shapes contemporary society on a societal macro-, institutional meso-, and individual micro-level. Hjarvard's framework is convincing in its broad perspectives that conceive of mediatization as a meta-process in society, and it has been recognized, for good reasons, as a useful tool in understanding a media-saturated society that creates new playing rules for different societal institutions, such as politics or religion.

According to Hjarvard (2008), the media supply individuals with narratives and have become a purveyor of enchanted experiences. With regard to this understanding of the role of the media, I agree with Hjarvard. Cinematic narratives, abundantly available in modern media society, embedded in everyday life, provide audiences with stories that have a potential for expressing moral guidance, enchantment experiences and dreams about life as it could be.

### *'Banal Religious Representations'?*

The theoretical framework outlined by Hjarvard has, in my view, one important flaw that diminishes its value when mediatization of religion theory is adopted to try to analyze meaning-making processes among individuals in society who consume popular culture. In Stig Hjarvard's first outline of the theory, the term 'banal' is argued to be useful in capturing popular and mundane beliefs that live in society below a manifest level, less noticeable, and that have weak links to institutionalized religions, such as ideas of the supernatural that have migrated into popular culture products like Harry Potter, Lord of the Rings and the like. "As conduits of communication, the media have become the primary source of religious ideas, in particular in the form of 'banal religion'" (Hjarvard 2008: 9). Hjarvard borrowed the term 'banal' from Michael Billig and his analyses of nationalism in everyday life (Billig 1995).

[B]oth individual faith and collective religious imagination are created and maintained by a series of experiences and representations that may have no, or only a limited, relationship with institutionalized religions. In continuation of Billig (1995), I label these as *banal religious representations* (Hjarvard 2008: 15, italics in the original).

Hjarvard's use of the term 'banal' has managed to stir debates at several conferences and seminars where scholars from different fields have been engaged in discussions about the concept, leading to recurring conceptual (mis)understandings of whether it is a strictly descriptive analytical tool or also charged with pejorative connotations.

What I argue here is that human beings, as skilled consumers of symbols and metaphors, are surprisingly playful creatures when enjoying symbolic artifacts such as entertainment films. With the help of empirical examples, I wish to show how they often consume such artifacts in highly creative and personal ways, not at all trivial or dull as the term 'banal' implies. Instead I would like to describe these processes as *vernacular meaning-making*, indicating that this kind of meaning-making is commonplace in everyday life, but is complex enough not to be treated using awkward pejorative labels.

## **Moved By Movies: Empirical Examples of Making Meaning**

Recent statistics show that consumption of fiction films is increasing in contemporary Sweden, especially in the age groups above 25. New ways of measuring everyday viewing habits show that almost one fifth of the population in Sweden watch a movie every day (Nordicom-Sveriges mediebarometer 2013: 70). The overarching aim of my project, entitled *Spectator Engagement in Film and Utopian Self-reflexivity: Moving Images and Moved Minds*, is to broaden our understanding of the use of and need for fiction. More specifically, it is designed to develop a theoretical framework to analyze viewers' response to cinematic narration and to better understand the fact that viewers are deeply moved by movies. What kinds of thoughts and feelings are articulated when viewers talk about their favorite films and significant sequences in these films?

The present empirical findings contribute to developing a more sophisticated understanding of the complex interplay between moving images and non-visual meaning-making processes and how spectators use fiction in everyday life in relation to self-reflexivity as well as the quest to be part of a moral community, an interplay between their intra-textual experience of narration and the extra-textual implications for life outside the cinematic narrative.

### *Method*

In 2011, 309 questionnaires were completed by students attending nursing, education, social care and media programs. In open-ended questions, these young adults gave examples of contemporary films of personal importance that dealt with life issues. Some movies, such as *Pulp Fiction* (1994), *Shawshank Redemption* (1994), *Avatar* (2009), *Gladiator* (2000) and *Amelie de Montmartre* (2001), attracted a collective interest. The questionnaire functioned as a tool for data collection in two ways: first by mapping film consumption habits in Sweden today; second by painting an empirical picture of what kinds of stories attract a wide audience. The target group was dominated by young people in their early twenties.

Open-ended questions were used to elicit narratives about favorite films. Interviews were set up in five focus groups to discuss the most watched and loved films. Related to my focus on moments of narrative impact, I finally selected 10 individuals to interview about their favorite film. Each respondent outlined his/her views on selected scenes, explaining in detail how and in what ways he/she was moved.

### *Theoretical Framework*

The reported impact of selected scenes is analyzed through recent film theory and discussed in relation to other empirical case studies. The examples of viewers being moved by movies are analyzed first through film theories oriented toward cognitive psychology (Tan 1996, Carroll 1999, Plantinga 2011), where cognition and emotion are important aspects of spectators' relationship with a film and where narration is dealt with through a combination of affective and cognitive processes. I am especially interested in theories of meaning-making where spectators' detailed micro-level meaning-making in specific scenes is embedded in high-level meaning-making in which worldview issues and moral frameworks are activated (Andersson & Andersson 2005, Frampton 2006, Johnston 2007, Plantinga 2009, Axelson 2014), as well as the ways in which film viewing

can elicit self-transformation processes through cinematic narratives (McAdams 1993, Axelson 2008, Bruun Vaage 2009, Plantinga 2009).

One theoretical point of departure for entering the discussion is the concepts used in film studies to distinguish between ‘sujet’ and ‘fabula’. This distinction highlights the crucial recognition of the fact that spectators actively make meaning. The viewer’s everyday life works as a cognitive background for inferences and the 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. “As an active perceiver, the spectator is constantly testing the work for larger significance, for what it says or suggests” (Bordwell & Thompson 1997: 73).

### *The Spectator – an Unpredictable Creature*

A large body of literature within film studies argues about the ideal and hypothetical ‘spectator’ and how he/she (re)constructs the fabula. In later years, a growing body of empirical case studies has emerged and entered into the discussion (Jerslev 2006, Klinger 2008, Axelson 2008, Suckfüll 2010, Oliver & Hartmann 2010). The theoretically-based discussions about the construction of the fabula (Bordwell & Thompson 1997, Coëgnart & Kravanja 2012) do not capture the unexpectedly wide range of meaning-making processes that unfold when scholars ask flesh-and-blood spectators about how they actually construct *their* fabula. What has been underestimated in previous research on narrative impact is the range of idiosyncratic meaning-making involved, variation that adds more profound and personal worldview concepts into the equation (Bruun Vaage 2009). We need concepts for analyzing audiences’ meaning-making that create a broader range of included mental processes, from basic emotions to high cognition, including normative critical views on society and the world.

### *Different Dimensions of Narrative Impact – a Model*

One fruitful contribution to describing the different aspects of emotional engagement is proposed by Ed S. Tan (1996) and developed further by Danish film scholar Anne Jerslev (2006). Jerslev differentiates between various dimensions of emotional enjoyment and implements these dimensions in a useful model. The main differentiation outlined by Tan is between enjoyment of what is going on in the story – the fictional universe – and the handicraft of the creation – the making of the fictional universe. For the spectator, these two emotional processes, fiction-emotions and artifact-emotions, are intertwined, as Anne Jerslev shows in her study on individuals immersed in the *Lord of the Ring* trilogy.

**Figure 1.** *A Model Differentiating between Viewers’ Various Emotions while Enjoying Movies*

| The fictional universe | The fictional universe | The making of the fictional universe  |
|------------------------|------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| (1): narrative theme   | (2): mise-en-scène     | (3): technical skills of movie-making |
| Empathetic             | Non-empathetic         | Non-empathetic                        |
| FICTION EMOTIONS       | FICTION EMOTIONS       | ARTIFACT EMOTIONS                     |

Sources: Ed S. Tan (1996) and Anne Jerslev (2006).

Enjoyment of the narrative is a specific engagement that relates to empathy and emotional engagement with characters' success and misfortunes, "'feeling into' fictional characters" (Tan 1996: 82). These empathetic emotions related to the narrative itself (1) should not be mixed with emotions related to the fictional universe that are more oriented towards *mise-en-scène* (2) and that are more non-empathetic, such as when someone is taken away by the realistic visual and audio representation of a fictional world, as is the case of my respondent 'Alexander' below and his enjoyment of the diegetic world of *Avatar*. Finally, there is also among film viewers a meta-awareness of the manufacturing of the fictional world and an expressed appreciation of the technical skills involved in putting the story together, such as the artifact emotions my respondent 'Felicia' articulates in regard to *Pulp Fiction*.

What I find in my data, and stress more than previous empirical case studies have done, is emotional engagement in the narrative itself, where spectators engage emotionally with empathy and evaluate the protagonist's moral behavior against the background of their own worldview and subjective ideas about what is important in life. This could also be described as a seamless movement between intra-textual engagement and extra-textual evaluation, where emotional and empathetic engagement with fictional characters – intra-textual – has consequences for emotionally anchored assessments of real-life concerns – extra-textual (cf. Seixas 1993: 355).

### *Passionate Viewers – Two Empirical Examples*

Let us now take a look at two typical passionate viewers, one female and one male, and how they relate to a "special" film that in various ways has accompanied them in life, helping them struggle with conflicts and personally important ideas. Out of ten conducted in-depth interviews in the project, there is an observable pattern among the respondents that is demonstrated in these two examples. The pattern consists of the spectators' free movement through different dimensions of engagement in the model outlined in Figure 1: (1) emotional engagement in the narrative with empathy and moral identification, (2) emotional engagement in *mise-en-scène* and audiovisual aesthetic joy, and (3) emotional engagement in the manufacturing of the fictional world. Even if these two respondents are unique viewers with idiosyncratic responses to *Pulp Fiction* and *Avatar*, they are chosen as two voices out of a large group of participants who expressed interest in these two films. Both *Pulp Fiction* and *Avatar* are on the top of the list of films that attracted collective interest from a wide range of viewers.

#### *Felicia and Pulp Fiction (1994) – "Life is brutal – and fun"*

When Felicia watched the film in her mid-twenties she immediately identified with Uma Thurman's character.

*Uma Thurman. Uma is strong, sexy and beautiful. And she's out partying. Not that I was doing drugs, but a lot of partying and flirting, walking on the wild side. It was awesome in many ways. And ... her way of dancing (Felicia p. 1).*

Felicia was 25 years old and had watched this movie, which in her opinion exactly captured her mood at the time. Being a young woman, searching for meaning and direc-

tion, she was attracted to the film and Felicia mention the atmosphere of absurdity in the movie that corresponded to her own experience of life as quite chaotic.

*When I was 25 I had this good feeling for the movie because... there are more people living chaotic lives. 'Wow, could life be like this?' It makes you feel less lonely on the planet to see things that many others seem to have experienced. You share something (Felicia p. 22).*

Felicia believes that real life is often difficult. Life brings losses and misfortunes that can take you down and give you a dark outlook on life. But at the same time, it is fun. Felicia appreciates the raw and humorous violence in *Pulp Fiction*, which says something important about life as she perceives it. “*You have to have this bizarre ... you're allowed to laugh at the misery*” (Felicia p. 23).

When asked about the most significant scene in the whole movie, she chooses the scene where the protagonist Butch (Bruce Willis) is about to leave the shop where he and Marsellus Wallace were just kidnapped and held as captives by a couple of male rapists. Butch has the chance to get free, but at the doorstep he cannot just go out onto the street and leave the place. He hesitates.

#### **Scene 01:38:18 – Butch hesitates at the doorstep**

*You can see his consciousness sort of ... it's just when he opens the door...he is about to leave...not going to stay. But he happens to hear...and then you see how they are zooming in on his face. He is about to leave, but changes his mind. And you kind of see a wrinkle between his eyes. And then ... "No, this ain't right" ... sort of. "What the fuck should I do, just get the hell out of here?" ...you know. "Fuck no, I'm gonna give them bastards!" You can see how he thinks! And then ... "Hell no, I'll beat the shit out of them!" (Felicia p. 18).*

These seconds are very important for Felicia's engagement with the character Butch. This decision makes her like him much more. She *wants* him to help Marsellus. Doing exactly that, Butch shows her that he is more than simply a killer, which he obviously is capable of being.

*We all live in a universe, we live in different worlds. And you may think this world is a brutal and ruthless world. But if you only see that, you don't see these small moments of moral acts... and that there is humility and sensitivity as well (Felicia p. 20).*

Felicia thinks that you can actually find a moral code in *Pulp Fiction*. “*In their world it's somehow okay to fight and kill. But doing that [the raping in the basement] is their moral line. You don't do that*” (Felicia p. 17). These seconds while zooming in on Butch's facial expression are one example of a condensed moment of narrative impact that, in Felicia's viewing process, is filled with affects, evaluating emotions and high-order cognitive activities.

*There are things that are worse than death, sort of... which he [Butch] doesn't accept. These things aren't right (Felicia p. 19).*

Butch is jeopardizing his own safety at this moment by going back and trying to save his former enemy, according to Felicia. The easy way out would be to just walk away

from the shop. “*He takes the risk because he has a conscience. He can’t let it go. It doesn’t feel right*” (Felicia p. 19). This quote illustrates what Dolf Zillman emphasizes: “recipients bring their idiosyncratic morality to the screen, sanction or condemn witnessed actions and agents in accord with it, and then experience emotions as a result of their assessment” (2005: 176). This is part of the fiction emotions within the narrative, where the actions of protagonists create moral engagement and empathetic emotions, (1) in the model above. Included in the rescue scene is also a moment in relation to which Felicia expresses appreciation of the *mise-en-scène* with another kind of fiction emotion, (2) in the model. Felicia looks at the scene as if it were a dance. It is an aesthetic moment of visual pleasure. Finally, Felicia enjoys the way the film is made as a flow with a combination of music and movement. Here I find a glimpse of emotions related to the making of the fiction, artifact emotions (3). Susan Best argues that this kind of visual pleasure needs to be recognized in visual theory today and not only dismissed as male-gaze voyeurism, as often has been the case (Best 2007). I agree.

The overall message in *Pulp Fiction*, which creates a resonance in Felicia’s personal worldview, is that the film helps her cope with life as *brutal* as well as *fun*. The film does that through a strong female character, Mia Wallace (Uma Thurman), who is much like Felicia herself when she was in her mid-twenties, a partying girl in the middle of life’s turmoil. *Pulp Fiction* seemed to help Felicia deal with a personal process of searching for orientation in life during a sensitive phase when she was 25, a process involving idiosyncratic responses on a personal level as well as high cognition, where Felicia’s personal belief system and moral worldview are deeply embedded in her enjoyment of the film, especially apparent in her key scene of choice above.

If Felicia was mostly caught up in identifying with the protagonist Mia Wallace as well as engaged in an ethical and emotional attachment to the other main character, Butch, let us take a look at another example, Alexander, and a more spiritual reading of a personally important movie.

*Alexander and Avatar (2009) – “Living in spiritual and ecological harmony”*

Alexander is 27 years old and one of many who was awestruck by James Cameron’s *Avatar* when it was released in 2009. He went to the cinema and watched it with some friends when it was released and the film immediately touched him very deeply. In fact he was so moved by the story that he felt ashamed to admit it to his friends, who dismissed the film as a rather poor Pocahontas rip-off. There was not so much for him to say, as his friends felt the film was silly and not worthy of any enthusiasm; he therefore kept quiet about his experience.

But the film was a kind of awakening for Alexander and it sparked him into thinking about themes in life that he had dwelled upon when he was much younger: a desire to live close to nature and be close to animals. He was profoundly inspired after his first viewing. He tries to describe for me what it was.

*I don’t know. The film pinpoints something in me I really can’t describe in words. Only that... the whole world and the aesthetics is... kind of ... picked directly out of my mind. In a way* (Alexander p. 4).

Alexander explains for me that the film is “*a sort of dream about a higher and more dignified life*” (Alexander p. 1). Alexander also appreciates how the film expresses criti-

cism of contemporary society and ongoing developments in the world, where society today, according to Alexander, has lost its connection with nature and down-to-earth contact with plain life.

The key scene in the film was not difficult for Alexander to choose. Every time he views this sequence he shivers. It is the scene where Jake manages to harness the great red dragon and becomes the dragon rider 'Toruk Makto'. As the dragon rider he returns to the Na'vi group with immense respect and prestige.

### **Scene 01:53:56 – Jake returns as 'Toruk Makto'**

Alexander thinks the scene is both spectacular and intimate, filled with mixed feelings among the Na'vi, which he perceives as an ambivalence between despair and hope when they see Jake coming as the Rider of the Last Shadow.

*When he comes from heaven and lands and the Na'vis cover up and back away and they don't know if they should run away or... "What's happening?" There is such a beautiful ambivalence between fragility and enchantment in some way. They are on the brink of break down and annihilation and here he comes and they really don't know if this is the end or... their salvation. It's very powerful for me (Alexander p. 16).*

Alexander identifies explicitly with the protagonist Jake and his journey of trying to become a member of the Na'vi community. And he enjoys Jake's journey of coming closer and closer to the Na'vi, aiming to become one of them. *"It's so beautiful to flow with the film while the story unfolds. I just feel myself into this world. Extremely fascinating. And this great sense of community and belonging in the tribe"* (Alexander p. 5). This aspect of identification with Jake's journey is actually a philosophical issue for Alexander, which he ponders during our interview. He believes that everything is connected with everything else. Everything functions together in the cosmos, almost as it is depicted in *Avatar*.

*And it's a bloody beautiful idea to think about everything being connected and that everything is dependent on everything functioning together. And at the same time, we as humans have drawn a line between us and everything that's tied together. (Alexander p. 7-8).*

Alexander talks about the existential condition that makes us 'detached' from the rest of nature and his life's desire to transcend this condition, *"to overcome this detachment and unite with the wholeness, or perhaps accept oneself as a part of everything"* (Alexander p. 17). When Neytiri explains how the universe works through the cosmic energy called Eywa, Alexander listens attentively to what she says in the film. *"She indicates that there is some kind of consciousness... a planetary consciousness or whatever you might call it. And that Nature itself is a conscious force, like a... deity"* (Alexander p. 10-11).

He is eager to find an adequate description of what he personally believes in, and this becomes especially poignant when he talks about the force that pervades the universe according to the Na'vi woman in the film. Alexander turns this idea around and explains how he perceives it.

*But it's a physical, biological deity ... if I believe there is such a deity. Yes. All of nature itself is something big altogether (Alexander p. 11).*

At the end of the interview, he concludes that this idea expressed by Jake in *Avatar* is actually what he is longing for in real life. “*He has reached it and has become one with the whole. Reached exactly what I wish to reach*” (Alexander p. 17).

In Alexander’s appreciation of *Avatar*, I am able to detect an engagement in the different dimensions in Figure 1, especially the first two dimensions of fiction emotions: (1) emotional engagement in the narrative theme with a moral identification with the protagonist Jake and his destiny and (2) emotional engagement in *mise-en-scène* and aesthetic euphoria about the beautiful world of the Na’vi. The third dimension, (3) emotional engagement in the technical skills of manufacturing the fictional universe, is also articulated by Alexander but more in the background.

The overall impact of the narrative for Alexander can be summed up in a sentence where he articulates a conclusion filled with philosophically and emotionally charged personal meaning for him. The film’s aesthetics combined with its narrative essence is filled with a beautiful message according to Alexander: “*Just the possibility to understand that you are not the center of the universe but... a part of everything and...that everyone else...and everything else ... is a part of yourself*” (Alexander p. 17). Partly it articulates for Alexander a critique of society and ongoing developments in the world, but most of all it fuels a powerful vision with a great portion of euphoria and utopian affect for Alexander, which could best be described as a spiritual dream of a non-detached life in a close relationship with nature.

## Discussion

My examples show how the viewers experience condensed moments of narrative impact where scenes are processed by them through highly emotionally charged interpretations of sequences. This is done through a powerful combination of affect and cognition, creating *emotions*, as Noël Carroll stipulates when he defines emotions as affect including cognitive elements (1999: 21). Emotions *deal* with something, where an interpretative cognitive component is part of the process (cf. Plantinga 2009: 6). As philosopher Mitch Avila says: “Without the belief it is just a feeling, not an emotion” (2007: 223). This is the more or less standard view on emotions that has been developed within cognitive film theory.

The outcome of the present interviews is close to what Stewart Hoover found in his case study, where mediated narratives become meaningful resources, in the form of a symbolic inventory, in individuals’ quest for meaning in life and where he identifies a process of integration of narrative content into a personal construction of a worldview (2006). I argue that both Felicia’s and Alexander’s expressions in the responses outlined above support the idea that there is a seamless movement between viewers’ evaluation of the aesthetic qualities of the narrative – the *intra-text* – combined with fiction emotions related to empathetic engagement in the narrative, closely intertwined with a cognitive evaluation of its reference to real-life moral issues – the *extra-text*.

The question is whether it is accurate to treat these emotionally charged interpretations as ‘banal religious representations’. The term ‘banal’ stems from Michael Billig and his analysis of patriotic sentiments and the relationship between extra-ordinary moments of patriotic celebrations of the nation-state, where flags are waved in a heightened patriotic emotional evocation combined with calm periods during the rest of the

calendar year when the flags are not waved, “when the banal routines of private life predominate” (1995: 45). But in comparison with Hjarvard, Billig is clear about the negative charge of the concept ‘banal’. Billig analyzes a social phenomenon that he warns us about because of its potential danger: “One point needs stressing: banal does not imply benign” (Billig 1995: 6). Nationalism, with its extra-ordinary moments of hot expression, lives alongside seemingly calm routines that possess a Jekyll-and-Hyde duality. Even if nationalism seems to possess a reassuring normality, it also possesses armaments that could suddenly be mobilized and at the ready for use in battle. “[B]anal is not synonymous with harmlessness” (Billig 1995: 7).

Stig Hjarvard seems to adopt Billig’s notion of a potential Jekyll-and-Hyde duality in the ‘banal’ notion in his early texts, mentioning banal Danishness as systematically excluding “elements of foreign culture of being worthy components of Danishness” (Hjarvard 2008: 15). Elaborating on the concept in later writings, Hjarvard tries to downplay the problematic connotations of his chosen concept:

It is important to stress that *banal religion* is not a pejorative term suggesting a lack of religious importance or seriousness compared to for instance institutionalized forms of religion (Hjarvard 2012: 36).

He tries to save the concept from being associated with heavy pejorative connotations. But I think he fails on this minor but important point. It is not enough to claim, as Hjarvard does, that banal religion is a primary or fundamental form of basic cognitive functions that seem to develop in all human societies.

Banal religious elements make up the brick and mortar of every religion, but banal religion in itself does not necessarily entail any elaborate propositions about religious doctrines or moral statements about the meaning of life (Hjarvard 2012: 36).

While elaborating on the term banal he *does have* a point, indicating that these religious elements may travel more easily below the radar of conscious thinking. “[T]heir implicit, de-contextualized and non-propositional character, make them unnoticeable as representations of or statements about religious issues, but they nevertheless provide a backdrop of religiosity in society” (Hjarvard 2012: 36). I agree with the main picture of the disconnected representations of religious symbols and ideas presented in contemporary popular culture, for example in films such as *Avatar* (cf. Sjö & Danielsson 2013: 47).

Still I argue that the term ‘banal’ should be abandoned and replaced with a concept that is much less charged. Apart from a range of synonyms such as predictable, trivial, trite, cliché, dull, boring and the like, which create an awkward mental space of associations around the term ‘banal’, the concept has also been hugely affected by philosopher Hannah Arendt. She followed the trial of German mass murderer Adolf Eichmann, responsible for genocide during WWII and sentenced to death in Jerusalem in 1960. Her famous expression – the ‘banality of evil’ – together with a description of Eichmann’s simple-minded behavior and reasoning has established certain criteria for what ‘banal’ means: a negative, authentic inability to think, using stock phrases and talking in clichés (1964/1996: 239). In a critical examination of associations related to the semantic range of connotations, it may be farfetched to make this reference to Hannah Arendt and her understanding of banality related to the personality of Adolf Eichmann. But this is done

in order to explain the controversial aspect of the concept and the misunderstanding it creates in different academic fora, given its heavily negative charge.

*Free-floating Narratives – Templates for Thinking and Behavior*

In a case study of Danish teenagers and their engagement in the *Twilight*-saga as well as their participation in its fan culture, Line Nybro Petersen adopts the concept to identify religious concepts that are transformed and disconnected from institutionalized, homogenous religious worldviews. These disconnected ‘banal’ religious representations are more free-floating in media narratives of different kind, and teenagers come across them in movies such as *Twilight*, which Line Nybro Petersen analyzes in her interesting case study. In Nybro Petersen’s conclusion, she states that “*The Twilight Saga* [...] has the ability to promote spiritual and religious issues along with an emotional investment in such issues” (Nybro Petersen 2012: 179). I think this conclusion is important. A narrative that teenagers embrace with an emotional investment in religious issues is quite close to the empirical examples in my reception study, and I argue that this capacity to elicit emotions around key religious issues in personal ways should best be described by capturing the idiosyncratic mix of affects and cognitions involved, avoiding indicating something predictable, trivial or even dull.

What I find in my empirical examples I interpret as indicating the opposite. When affects and cognitions are intimately tied together in an enchanted and emotional evaluation of the narrative, the spectator’s response is related to the narration at its highest levels and engages his/her own highest levels of mental activity, all anchored in the sensual-emotional apparatus.

I agree with Carl Plantinga, and with a growing number of empirical case studies supporting the conclusion that both thinking and behavior are affected by film watching (Marsh 2007, Axelson 2008, Barker 2009, Sückfull 2010, Oliver & Hartmann 2010, Lövheim & Bromander 2012, Dahl 2013, and Axelson 2014).

In the short term, the function of emotion and affect is to make film viewing powerful, rather than merely an intellectual exercise. In the long term, such experiences may burn themselves into the memories of audiences and may become templates for thinking and behavior (Plantinga 2009: 6).

As a conclusion from several empirical case studies including my own, I also agree with Oliver and Hartmann’s assumption.

[F]ilm viewing may have the potential to do much more than provide viewers with feelings of gratification, but may also serve as a means for instigating positive social change (2010: 145).

I believe my passionate viewers Felicia and Alexander in part articulate and exemplify these processes. In certain film moments of emotional condensation, as spectators, they are absorbed by the narrative – the intra-text. Simultaneously they are deeply engaged in extra-textual references, testing the narrative for a larger significance, in profoundly idiosyncratic and personal ways, dealing with their own specific conflicts and aspirations in life, as well as displaying a normative critical approach to contemporary society and world developments.

### Conclusion – Vernacular Meaning-making

With the help of the mediatization of religion theoretical framework, it is rewarding to grasp the developments and meta-processes that are shaping modernity, especially on a macro- or meso-level. But trying to understand what is taking place when media, as environments, provide a moral orientation on a micro-level is less productive (cf. Lied 2012). With my empirical example of Felicia and Alexander, I stress the idiosyncratic character of meaning-making in response to narratives that generate philosophical and existential worldview orientations. Their meaning-making is done in a creative and imaginative way, which I think is incompatible with the ‘banal’ concept adopted by Stig Hjarvard, especially when individuals are given the opportunity to develop their response to fictional narratives in some detail, such as Felicia and Alexander do about *Pulp Fiction* and *Avatar*, respectively. Instead I advocate an understanding of these processes as *vernacular meaning-making*.

Recently, the term vernacular has been used among scholars in different fields, both in relation to pictures and religious habits. Graham Murdoch characterizes pictures distributed in Europe to depict the Lisbon earthquake in 1755 as a “vernacular visual archive” available to larger groups in society (2008: 32), and religious studies scholars use the label vernacular to understand expressions of belief in everyday life in today’s society (Bowman & Valk 2012).

Our media society, with its all-encompassing presence of media and media logic, provides audiences with innumerable narratives available through all kinds of screening windows, narratives that become purveyors of enchanted experiences. With the term *vernacular meaning-making* at least some of the conceptual misunderstandings are dealt with, and the term gives a more nuanced picture of the creativity and playful idiosyncrasy that are involved when profound meaning-making experiences among film viewers take place.

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