

**Paper Proposal to 5th Edinburgh International Film Audience Conference (EIFAC),
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Tomas Axelson, ThD, tax@du.se
Assistant Professor Religious Studies, School of Humanities & Media,
Högskolan Dalarna University, Sweden

Title

“Thick Viewing. Empirical examples of condensed moments of narrative impact in fiction film developing theoretical concepts for intensified engagement”.

Abstract

In a case study about viewing habits in a Swedish audience I sampled 309 questionnaires; interviews with five focus group were conducted together with ten in-depth individual interviews discussing altogether fifteen favorite films exploring specific scenes of idiosyncratic relevance. The outcome supports claims about viewers as active and playful (cf. Höijer 1998, Frampton 2006, Hoover 2006, Plantinga 2009). In line with mediatization theory I also argue that spiritual meaning making takes place through mediated experiences and I support theories about fiction films as important sources for moral and spiritual reflection (Partridge 2004, Zillman 2005, Lynch 2007, Plantinga 2009). What Hjarvard calls the soft side of mediatization processes (2008) is illustrated showing adults experiencing enchantment through favorite films (Jerslev 2006, Partridge 2008, Klinger 2008, Oliver & Hartmann 2010).

Vernacular meaning making embedded in everyday life and spectators dealing with fiction narratives such as *Gladiator*, *Amelie from Montmartre* or *Avatar* highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of elevated cinematic experiences. The reported impact of specific movies is analyzed through theories where cognition and affect are central aspects of spectators’ engagements with a film (Tan 1996, Carroll 1999, Grodal 2009). Crucially important are theories of meaning-making where viewers’ detailed interpretation of specific scenes are embedded in high-level meaning-making where world view issues and spectators’ moral frameworks are activated (Zillman 2005, Andersson & Andersson 2005, Frampton 2006, Lynch 2007, Avila 2007, Axelson 2008, Plantinga 2009). Also results from a growing body of empirical oriented research in film studies are relevant with an interest in what

happens with the flesh and blood spectator exposed to filmic narratives (Jerslev 2006, Klinger 2008, Barker 2009, Suckfüll 2010, Oliver & Hartmann 2010).

Analyzing the qualitative results of my case study, I want to challenge the claim that the viewer has to suspend higher order reflective cognitive structures in order to experience suture (Butler & Palesh 2004). What I find in my empirical examples is responses related to spectators' highest levels of mental activity, all anchored in the sensual-emotional apparatus (Grodal 2009). My outcome is in line with a growing number of empirical case studies which support conclusions that both thinking and behavior are affected by film watching (Marsh 2007, Sückfull 2010, Oliver & Hartmann 2010, Axelson forthcoming). The presentation contributes to a development of concepts which combines aesthetic, affective and cognitive components in an investigation of spectator's moves from emotional evaluation of intra-text narration to extra-textual assessments, testing the narrative for larger significance in idiosyncratic ways (Bordwell & Thompson 1997, Marsh 2007, Johnston 2007, Bruun Vaage 2009, Axelson 2011).

There are a several profitable concepts suggested to embrace the complex interplay between affects, cognition and emotions when individuals respond to fictional narratives. Robert K. Johnston label it "deepening gaze" (2007: 307) and "transformative viewing" (2007: 305). Philosopher Mitch Avila proposes "high cognition" (2007: 228) and Casper Thybjerg "higher meaning" (2008: 60). Torben Grodal talks about "feelings of deep meaning" (Grodal 2009: 149). With a nod to Clifford Geertz, Craig Detweiler adopts "thick description" (2007: 47) as do Kutter Callaway altering it to "thick interpretations" (Callaway 2013: 203). Frampton states it in a paradox; "affective intelligence" (Frampton 2006: 166).

As a result of the empirical investigation, inspired by Geertz, Detweiler & Callaway, I advocate *thick viewing* for capturing the viewing process of these specific moments of film experience when profound and intensified emotional interpretations take place.

The author

As a sociologist of religion, Tomas Axelsons research deals with people's use of mediated narratives to make sense of reality in a society characterized by individualization, mediatization and pluralized world views. He explores uses of fiction film as a resource in every day life and he is currently finishing his three year project funded by the Swedish Research Council: *Spectator engagement in film and utopian self-reflexivity. Moving Images and Moved Minds.*

<http://www.du.se/sv/AVM/Personal/Tomas-Axelson>

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¹ English translation: *Moving Images and Moved Minds.*

² English translation: *Our need for fiction. Deeply Moved by Moving Images. Cultural Perspectives.*

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⁴ English translation: *Our need for fiction. Deeply Moved by Moving Images. Cultural Perspectives*.

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