Postprint

Movies and the Enchanted Mind: Emotional comprehension and spiritual meaning making among young adults in contemporary Sweden

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Abstract

The outcome of an empirical audience study in Sweden including questionnaires, focus groups and ten in-depth individual interviews discussing favorite films supports claims about viewers as active and playful (cf. Frampton 2006, Hoover 2006, Plantinga 2009). The soft side of mediatization processes is illustrated showing young adults experiencing enchantment through films (Jerslev 2006, Partridge 2008, Klinger 2008, Oliver & Hartmann 2010). The 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, Suckfüll 2010, Oliver & Hartmann 2010, Axelson 2014). The results of the interviews exploring specific scenes of idiosyncratic relevance support theories about fiction films as important sources for moral and spiritual reflection (Partridge 2004, Zillman 2005, Lynch 2007, Plantinga 2009). The concept *thick viewing* is proposed for capturing these moments of film experience when profound and enchanted emotional interpretations take place.

Keywords

film, young people, identity, emotions, values, popular culture, media

Introduction

My aim in this article is to discuss what is going on in the mind of the viewer with a special focus on high cognition and spiritual reflection. I want to do it by showing young film viewers' own words about being immersed and deeply moved by a film and its symbolic content. Alexander, 27, and Philip, 22, will be given space to explain their engagement in a fundamental movie experience, *Avatar* (2009) and *Apocalypse Now* (1979) respectively. Their emotionally charged understandings of the films displays a rich interpretative process dealing with values and intricate moral judgments, as well as subjective and spiritual reflections about the nature of human life.

To be glued to the screen

A growing body of empirically oriented research shows interest in what happens when film viewers engage emotionally with filmic narratives, eliciting enchantment and spiritual meaning-making related to viewers' personal world views (Jerslev 2006, Marsh 2007, Klinger 2008, Axelson 2008, Barker 2009, Suckfüll 2010, Oliver & Hartmann 2010, Lövheim & Bromander 2012, Dahl 2013). Vernacular meaning-making embedded in everyday life among young film fans dealing with fiction narratives such as *Avatar, Amelie from Montmartre* or *Apocalypse Now* highlight a need for a more nuanced understanding of enchanted cinematic experiences.

Within film theory the concept *suture* has been developed to capture the process when a filmic narrative manages to glue the viewer to the screen. It has an effect "that 'stiches' the viewing subject into the film" (Elsaesser & Hagener 2010: 90). It was originally a term coined by psychoanalytically-oriented film theory to mark the force or strength of cinematic narrative technique that creates the very glue that makes the viewer absorbed by the filmic flow (Nolan 2009). In later years cognition-inspired film theory adopts this concept when trying to grasp complex experiences of being immersed in fiction films. This is when a viewer experiences condensed moments of narrative impact, where highly charged scenes are processed through a multidimensional interpretative process. This takes place through a powerful combination of affect and cognition, creating *emotions* in Noël Carroll's understanding, which he defines as *affect including cognitive elements* (1999: 21).

This is a perspective I endorse in my article, labeling certain kinds of fiction experiences *thick viewing*, underlining the complex and multilayered understanding of emotional engagement where passionate commitment is combined with abstract ideas about content. The reported impact of specific movies exemplified below is analyzed by conceptual tools where cognition and affect are emphasized aspects of spectators' engagements with a film (Caroll 1999, Grodal 2009). Emotions *deal* with something with an interpretative cognitive component as part of the process (c.f. Plantinga 2009). As philosopher Mitch Avila says: "Without the belief it is just a feeling, not an emotion" (2007: 223). This perspective gives an important place to the function of emotions and the mental activity which is called *intentionality*, directed towards the world, involving concepts and cognition, where things in the world, real or imagined, are emotionally evaluated (Avila 2007: 222). I find this approach fruitful in order to understand young people's use of fiction film as a resource for moral assessment and ideological judgments about life. Important in this context are theories of meaning-making where viewers' spiritual issues and spectators' moral frameworks are dealt with (Zillman 2005, Andersson & Andersson 2005, Frampton 2006, Lynch 2007, Avila 2007, Plantinga 2009). What I claim to be a contribution displayed in my empirical research with young passionate film viewers more than other case studies are the nuances of interpretation of often profound personal importance, occasionally even giving room for viewers to express experiences of a

wished for transcendence, displaying viewer's struggles of finding apt concepts for this experience.

Selected scenes are therefore presented below with recognition of many details, identified and framed by the young viewers, which are sorted out and dwelled upon by the viewers with the help of their own high-level meaning-making, including abstract reasoning and spiritual reflection.

A case study – young adults in Sweden

New ways to measure everyday viewing habits show that every day almost one fifth of the population in Sweden watch a movie (Mediebarometern 2013: 70). The research project *Spectator engagement in film and utopian self-reflexivity. Moving Images and Moved Minds* (The Swedish Research Council 2011 - 2014) was designed to develop and assess a theoretical framework to analyze viewers' response to cinematic narration and to better understand viewers being deeply moved by movies. The overarching aim was to broaden our understanding of young adults' use and need for fiction.

My main research questions were the following. How does engagement in fiction films affect spectators' meaning-making processes regarding more profound and long-lasting ideas about themselves and society? What kinds of thoughts and feelings are articulated when talking about their favorite films in groups and what kinds of thoughts and feelings are articulated when talking individually about significant sequences in these films?

The findings in the empirical data were used to illustrate as well as theoretically develop a more sophisticated understanding of the complex interplay between moving images and non-visual meaning-making processes and how spectators use fiction in every-day life related to self-reflexivity as well as the quest for being part of a moral community, an interplay between their intra-text experience of narration and extra-text implications for life outside the cinematic narrative.

My hypothesis was the following. In a society characterized by *individualization* and *mediatization* people are to an increasing degree dependent on fiction narratives as a primary means by which we make sense of our experience through time and our place in society (Hoover 2006, Lynch 2007, Hjarvard 2012) . Moving images are more and more in the centre of culture, providing individuals with stories by which reality is maintained and by which humans construct ordered micro-universes for themselves. Stories contribute a cognitive and affective understanding of life, including a critical view on contemporary societal conditions as well as utopian ideas about how life could be. I also brought in an assumption that some spectators in the audience were more engaged in film watching and this engagement is related to an experienced movement between fiction and real life, testing the cinematic

narrative for a larger moral significance. This was thought to be carried out in an intriguing and complex interplay between the fictive world and the viewer's own reality.

Method

In 2011, 309 questionnaires were sampled from students of Nursing, Education, Social Care and Media Programs. The target group was dominated by young people in their twenties. Approximately 85% of the 309 individuals answering the questionnaire were born between 1981 and 1992, which means almost everyone in the group was younger than 30 with a majority of 60% between 19 – 25 years old. In open-ended questions these young adults in their twenties 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 sampling in two ways: first for mapping film consumption habits in Sweden today, second for getting an empirical picture of what kind of stories attract a wide audience.

Open-ended questions were used to get answers about favorite films. Interviews were set up in five focus groups about the most watched and loved films among the spectators in this group of young adults. Related to my focus on moments of narrative impact, I finally selected individuals to interview about their favorite film, asking them about especially important scenes in the movie, 10 interviews in all. Each respondent developed their views on two or three selected scenes that touched them the most in the movie, explaining in detail how and in what ways they were moved.

Being moved by movies – spectators creating the story

In film studies an important theoretical notion is made to distinguish between 'sujet' and 'fabula'[1]. This distinction highlights the crucial recognition that spectators actively make meaning. We, as viewers, create the story in our minds, fleshing out the plot to form the full story on the basis of cues in the sujet (Bordwell & Thompson 1997). The total fable is constructed through the basis of different cognitive maps where the film's sujet and style is channeling the spectator's construction of the fabula (Bordwell 1985). The viewer's everyday life works as a cognitive background for inferences and the construction of the fabula (Persson 2000). "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).

The sujet is in other words the visible and audible events that occur during the film as seen and heard by the viewer (Coëgnart & Kravanja 2012: 87). A skillful storyteller finds the right

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[1] 'Sujet' or 'plot' relates to what is explicitly seen and heard on the screen. 'Fabula' or 'story' relates to the narrative the spectator creates in his or her mind based on cues in the plot, adding inferred events.

balance between showing enough detailed events on the screen and leaving enough space empty as gaps to be filled by the spectator, relying on the competence of the spectator to create the wished-for story. This leaves an interpretative space for the viewer and the ways the viewers use this interpretative space in his or her construction of meaning is at the center of my interest in this article. What I argue for is that human beings as skilled consumers of symbols and metaphors are clearly complex creatures and when we enjoy symbolic artifacts such as entertainment films, we often do this in highly creative, idiosyncratic and unpredictable ways. My purpose is to empirically illustrate this theoretical claim.

The outcome of responses in 10 in-depth interviews

Having conducted ten in-depth interviews about the emotional condensed moments I coded and categorized the interview transcripts in search for expressed dimensions of engagement. Knowing that a selection of ten is limited I nevertheless was in search of a possible diversity among the respondents. This generated bottom-up qualitative data which has helped me understand the impact of movies in new ways. Below I present the mapping out of the dimensions displayed in the group of all ten interviewees before presenting two individual voices of special interest. In this overview I am aware of the difficulties separating each theoretical dimension distinctively from the others, and this could be developed in detail (cf Axelson 2014). Even if this is a weakness defining different aspects of engagement on a theoretical level of precision, I am convinced that some conclusions could be drawn by presenting the pattern as I do in Table 1 below. Not all of these dimensions are equally present in the interviews. Some dominate among a number of respondents and some are present and dominate in only a few.

Table 1. Different types of engagement outlined analyzing ten individuals being moved by specific movies and selected scenes.

Dimensions of engagement of moving moments:	Theoretical label
1. Film stimulates conversation with others (Turner, Graeme, 1999)	Social dimension
2. Film gives relaxed moments of peace (Höijer, Birgitta & Werner Anita, 1998)	Contemplative dimension
3. Film forms regularity in everyday life (Lyden, John C., 2003)	Ritual dimension
4. Film generates physical responses (Grodal, Torben 2009)	Senso-motoric dimension
5. Film frames conflicts in life (Wuss, Peter, 2009)	Problem solving dimension
6. Film articulates dreams about life (Johansson, Thomas, 2002)	Utopian dimension
7. Film articulates moral principles (Zillman, Dolf, 2005)	Ethical dimension

8.	Film articulates critique of society (Elsaesser & Buckland, 2002)	Political dimension
9.	Film provides understanding of reality (Johnston, Robert K., 2007)	Philosofical-existential dimension
10.	Film forms understanding of the self (Vaage, Margrethe Bruun, 2009)	**Self-reflexive dimension**
11.	Film installs altered states of consciousness (Butler, L. & Palesh, O., 2004)	Hypnotic dimension
12.	Film provides sense of cultural coherence (Lynch, Gordon, 2007)	Symbolic-nomic dimension
13.	Film offers audiovisual pleasure (Best, Susan, 2007)	**Aesthetic dimension**
14.	Film gives insight about filmmaking as art (Monaco, James, 2000)	Production dimension

In an accumulation of dimensions present in several interviews two dimensions stand out predominantly as engaging aspects in the total number of interviews on an equal level: *film forms understanding of the self* (self-reflexive dimension) and *film offers audiovisual pleasure* (aesthetic dimension). On the next level, the following dimensions are significantly present in a number of interviews: *film articulates moral principles* (ethical dimension), *film articulates dreams about life* (utopian dimension), *film gives relaxed moments of peace* (contemplative dimension) and *film installs altered states of consciousness* (hypnotic dimension). The ritual dimension, the philosophical-existential dimension as well as the symbolic-nomic dimension are discernible as the most important dimensions in a few interviews. Present as a dominating dimension in singular interviews are the production dimension, the problem-solving dimension, the political dimension, the senso-motoric dimension and the social dimension. With an aim of developing further understanding of engagement in audiovisual representations these less identified dimensions are also vital in mapping out different forms of emotional commitment to fiction films.

The domination of the self-reflexive dimension as well as the aesthetic dimension and to some extent the ethical and contemplative dimensions points in interesting directions for further theoretical analysis. The marginal presence of the social dimension of film practice also calls for a new interpretation of the function of films in contemporary society, less social and more private. Together with interesting findings in the interviews I conclude that film viewing sometimes put people in meditative and hypnotic states of consciousness which is hard to share with others. More than one respondent expressed explicitly *avoiding* watching important films in company with others, not even close friends or partners.

Looking at two separable examples

I asked my respondents in the individual interviews to pick one or two specific scenes in their favorite film. The primary question asked was why they were moved by the scenes and in what ways. Each respondent could in rather lengthy detail explain to me why they were so moved and by what. I was cautious using the same phrase to all, 'being moved'. For me it was an open question if they would pick something appealing or appalling. Most of them picked scenes that could best be described as *mixed affect* in line with Oliver & Hartmann's case study on meaningful film experiences (2010: 130), but not all. The responses varied. Philip below was one of few to choose a violent and disturbing sequence.

Let's take a deeper look at two passionate viewers and how they relate to their choice of a "special" film, which in various ways has accompanied them in life, helping them to struggle with their conflicts and important ideas about life. To create interesting examples of different attitudes for my presentation in this article I picked Alexander who exemplified an elevated and enchanted experience of a movie, evoking awe and triggering him imagining being part of something beyond himself, showing high-level cognitive and spiritual reflection fueled by utopian affect and aesthetic euphoria. Added to that I present a complicated case, Philip, who displayed another form of spiritual reading of a film, used by the respondent as a "private medicine" in a problematic struggle with a special conflict in life.

Alexander, 27, and Avatar (2009) – "Living in spiritual and ecological harmony".

Alexander is a man 27 years old and one of many who was awestruck by James Cameron's *Avatar* when it was released in 2009. Some of the participants in the questionnaire claim they have seen the film *Avatar* 30 times or more. Alexander has a more modest rate of viewing the film but he had seen it at least five times. 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 crappy *Pocahontas* rip-off. There was not so much for him to say really since they judged it as silly and not creditable of any enthusiasm and he kept quiet about his experience.

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

> *I don't know. The film puts the finger on 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)[2]

Alexander explains for me that the film is "*a sort of dream about a higher and more dignified life*". Alexander also appreciates the expression of a critique of contemporary society and the ongoing development of 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 01:50:56 - 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 identifies explicitly with the protagonist Jake and his journey to try to become a member of the Na'vi community, and he enjoys Jake's journey to come closer and closer to the Na'vi, looking 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"*. This aspect of identification with the journey of Jake is actually a philosophical issue for Alexander which he ponders upon in our interview. He believes that everything is connected with everything else. Everything functions together in the cosmos, and almost as it is depicted in *Avatar.*

> *And it's a bloody beautiful idea to meditate upon everything being connected and that everything is interdependent on everything functioning together. And at the same time, we as humans have drawn a line between us and everything that is tied together.*

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[2] Transcripts from interview with Alexander.

Alexander talks about the existential condition that makes us 'detached' from the rest of nature and his wish in life to transcend this condition, *"to overcome this detachment and unite with the total wholeness, or perhaps accept oneself as a part of everything"* 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 what to call it. And that Nature itself is a conscious force, like a… deity".*

This is a fascinating moment in the interview when Alexander is struggling to find the right words for his thoughts. He was not brought up within a Christian family nor acquainted with alternative forms of spirituality among friends. He thought a lot during childhood, he says, and these ideas are not anything he would share with his family or ordinary friends. He is eager to find an adequate description of what he personally believes in and this becomes especially poignant talking about the force that pervades the universe according to the Na'vi woman in the film. Alexander spins around this idea and how he perceives it.

> *But it is a physical, biological deity … if I believe there is such a deity. Yes. All of nature itself is something big altogether.*

Alexander is explicitly exploring the appropriate concepts for what he perceives as a kind of 'universal spirit' or 'life force'. He thus exemplifies what Nancy Ammerman and Christopher Partridge describes as a growing interest in non-traditional alternative spiritualities in the west. Ammerman defines it as connected to "a sense of awe engendered by the natural world and various form of beauty, and in the life philosophies crafted by an individual seeking life's meaning" (Ammerman 2013: 268). According to Partridge these alternative spiritualities derives from a numerous range of different ideas in contemporary society, including shamanism, goddess spiritualities and Gaia- or eco-spiritualities, (Partridge 2008: 113). This becomes explicitly poignant in Alexanders understanding of the concluding scene.

Scene 01:53:55 - Grace passes through the eye of Eywa.

The scene immediately following the Toruk Makto-landing is also highly significant for Alexander when the Na'vi queen and priestess Mo'at tries to help Grace pass through the eye of Eywa. The pulse and the energy displayed in the group are marvelous, according to Alexander. Grace was too weak though and failed eventually. Instead Jake finally succeeded in going through the whole process at the end of the movie. *"He is about to be reborn and become the avatar for real, leaving his body, through Eywa, and into his avatar body".*

At the end of the interview he concludes that this idea expressed 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 is here touched by an affective charged perception, where his modern immanent frame is open to something beyond ordinary life.

Summary

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 a narrative essence are filled with a beautiful message according to Alexander: *"Just the possibility to understand that you are not the centre of the universe but… a part of everything and…that everyone else…and everything else … is a part of yourself"*. The experience of *Avatar* points in some different directions. Partly it articulates for Alexander a critique of society and ongoing development in the world but most of all it fuels a powerful vision with a great portion of euphoria and utopian affect for Alexander and which could best be described as a spiritual dream of a non-detached life in a close relationship with nature, illustrating what Partridge labels as an important force in the growing ecological consciousness in the west with an encompassing environmentalism as "a thoroughgoing ecocentric way of life" (Partridge 2005: 57). It could also be paralleled with Ammermans understanding of a group of respondents in her recent case study and their experience of non-traditional spiritualities. It "may not come from a transcendent deity, and it is certainly not supernatural, but it is nevertheless transcendent in character" (Ammerman 2013: 269).

Philip, 22, and Apocalypse Now (1979) – "Film as my medicine"

Philip was only 14 when he came across *Apocalypse Now*. He believed it was some kind of spectacular war film. It was, but not in the way he had anticipated. It made an enormous impact on him. *"It was almost a religious experience first time I watched it. It showed me what a film really can be"* (Philip p 16).[3] He explained that after seeing it, the world was not really the same for him. *"I felt like…I don't know…It was like the world was not as simple anymore"*. What captured Philip was something about the ambiguity of life and how quickly a human situation could switch from normal to completely absurd or downright dangerous. Soon, when he entered upper secondary school, this film became extremely important for Philip. *"I used it like some kind of a medicine or something"*. Philip was deeply dissatisfied with his situation in school. He did not make any friends as a newcomer and eventually he became secluded and lonely in class. *"I didn't have a foothold and didn't know where to go in life"*. The teachers tried to deal with the situation but without any real change, only surface behavior changed.

This biographical note is important as a background to understand Philip's choice of the scene in the film that moved him the most.

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[3] Transcripts from interview with Philip.

Scene 01:29:09 – The patrol boat kills all Vietnamese on the djonk

In the sequence we follow a US Army boat up the river when they happen to encounter a small Vietnamese boat carrying vegetables and food. The patrol boat is on a top secret mission taking Captain Willard up the river beyond a proscribed border line illegally into Cambodia. Philip notices that they did not really need to confront the Vietnamese boat and their passengers. *"It's not their mission. They don't really need to search the boat"*. The boat's captain nevertheless decides to search the Vietnamese locals. *"I feel he there tries to stick to the military rank order, sort of …against chaos"*.

Due to language barriers they misunderstand the situation where a woman is sitting on a basket not moving from it. A young black soldier loses his temper and starts shooting at the Vietnamese. In the total chaos the rest of the American soldiers start shooting. Soon almost every Vietnamese is dead and the shooting stops. One woman is still alive, though bleeding and badly hurt. The American soldiers try to bring the wounded woman on board to deliver her to a Vietnamese camp up the river for treatment. Captain Willard, who has been a by-stander during the shoot-out, steps forward, takes his gun and without further notice shoots the wounded woman to death.

Philip points to the strange and relentless determination in his action. *"The brutality of it. I think it is interesting in the scene that Willard already knew where it should lead"*. Philip points to the paradox of the soldier's behavior, shifting between complete madness and reckless brutality and the military code of taking care of the wounded. *"This double standard, the crew shoot all the people in the boat and then they still want to rescue this woman"*. Philip dwells on this morality which is present on the surface but in any moment could crack to something menacing and lethal. *"You know what I mean? That people may try to behave and do the morally right thing, and then…in a sudden, haphazardly they go beyond the restrictions"*.

Morality is random and arbitrary

Philip is all too familiar with this random character of moral behavior and when ethical principles are abandoned in a blink of an eye. He links it with situations in school when he was isolated and nobody wanted to include him. Sometimes they also ridiculed him in class. He explained how a situation could shift from correct and almost pleasant company with the others in class, and suddenly it just changed to the opposite.

> *The others behaved in front of the teachers, the authorities, so to speak. And strangely enough, I socialized with the others in the group. And then it just blew off in the group against me. And then back to normal again. It was expected that we should socialize in some kind of … nice manners.*

For Philip these situations created extremely strong emotions whenever he or someone else was hit by the sudden swing from the normal face of the group to grim brutality. He speaks about the guilt he felt in these moment when he was unable to do anything about it,

powerless to defend himself. *"That I didn't do anything. I felt unable to…"Why don't you stand up for yourself?".* Philip also reflects on something more uncomfortable and awkward. He became used to and adjusted himself to abnormal circumstances and accepted tiny pieces of normal behavior and glimpses of security, comfort and company even though the situation was distressing in unacceptable ways. *"A guilt that I sort of…when it was alright I accepted it. I took the small pieces of normality I could get".* The situation was unbearable in class and it did not resolve until Philip changed school and moved on in life and befriended new people around him.

But the experience of psychological bullying and ostracism directed towards him and others established a cold fury within him that he harbored and concealed in himself, never exposing, only imagining. *"Many times you just wanted to have a machine-gun and …* (showing a move with his hands shooting with an imagined machine-gun)*".* He ponders upon the similarities between the scene that moves him in the film *Apocalypse Now* and his school reality. *"The randomness. One moment it is safe and the next moment it is… fatal.* It is exactly what it is like for the Vietnamese in the sequence. First it is safe and the soldiers conduct themselves correctly. *"And then it explodes. And then back to normal again".*

Summary

I interpret the interview with Philip as if we were walking on thin ice and touching on delicate personal issues. Philip's description of his inner feelings about the sequence and the topic involved led me to include other perspectives than previously adopted in interpreting the interviews above. Mapping different impact dimensions in the empirical output, in this specific case, I needed to supplement the main psychological cognitivist perspective with a psychoanalytical approach, interpreting a complicated viewing experience.

My conclusion is that I tapped into what Lisa Butler and Oxana Palesh call dissociative film experiences (2004). They argue that skilled filmmakers create complex characters that allow the spectator to engage with his or her own history of traumatic memories, projected onto the characters on the screen. Film gives room for voluntarily, spontaneously and positively dissociative experiences where suppressed memories are allowed to come forth within a safe haven of a film-viewing situation in a darkened theatre which serves as a container for the projection of private and unconscious issues. They claim that these altered states of consciousness are part of human beings' normal psychological resources which we make use of in everyday life involving non-pathological dissociation in moments of absorption.

> In everyday life these would include the normative activities of daydreaming, imaginative engagement, meditation, formal hypnosis, and pastimes that capture attention and oblate self-awareness, such as reading an engrossing book or watching a riveting film (Butler & Palesh 2004: 66).

These characteristics fit well with Philip's description of his encounter with *Apocalypse Now,* when he states it as religious-like experience. Philip's choice of expression points in interesting ways to how film theorist Steve Nolan understand suture processes. Nolan recognizes similarities between metaphorical representations in film and religious representations in liturgy, both creating narrative space for participants to experience identification and encounter subconscious content (Nolan 2009). With Philip's own words the film had an extra-ordinary impact on him and other quotes from Philip point in the direction that the film managed to put him in an unusual psychological mood, a changed state of consciousness, absorbed by the story as it unfolded on the screen.

> *It is almost like a meditation. Since I know it so well I can end up into some sort of pace, I can say… that makes the world…disappear.*

He has seen the movie 30 – 35 times altogether, preferably alone, he says. Obviously he seems to have found a way to enter into an interesting experience of an altered state of consciousness that Butler & Palesh address, which in itself seems to be coveted and pleasant for Philip and his way of using this specific movie as his 'medicine'. My conclusion is that through the movie he gets in touch with a dissociative 'ego state' – an unconscious part of himself that fuels the sequences on the screen with primary affect related to personal memories from school intertwined with reasoning about morality in a secondary level of high cognition.

DISCUSSION

Idiosyncratic richness in (re)constructing the fabula

What has been underestimated in previous research on narrative impact is what I refer to as *thick viewing* adding more profound and personal world-view concepts into the equation, a concept which creates a broader range of included mental processes, from basic emotions to high cognition, including normative critical views on culture and society.

Figure 1. A schematic figure of meaning-making processes while watching films, underlining the combination of affect and cognition as well as a combination of intra-text and extra-text critique.
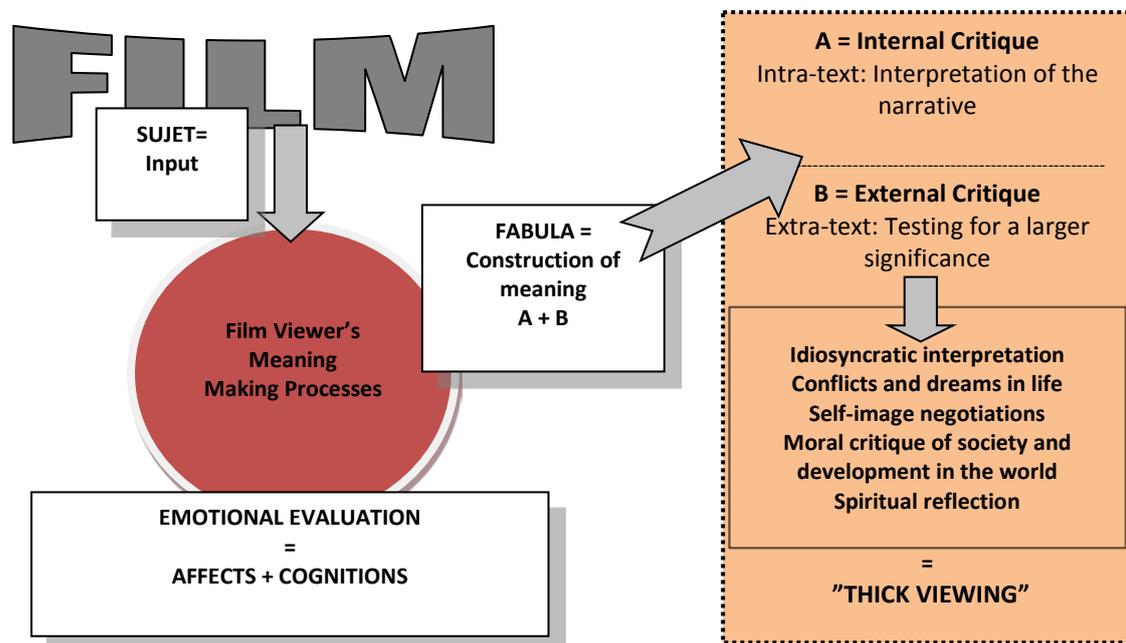
I argue that my respondents respectively articulate and exemplify these processes, as described in Figure 1. In certain film moments of emotional condensation, as spectators, they are absorbed by the narrative – intra-text. Simultaneously they are deeply engaged in extra-text references, testing the narrative for a larger significance, in profoundly idiosyncratic and personal ways, dealing with their own specific conflicts and aspirations in life, also displaying a normative critical approach to contemporary culture and development in the world. As philosopher Mitch Avila puts it. "Primary, basic emotional responses are given interpretative content by higher-order cognitive processes that follow temporally" (Avila 2007: 234). When this kind of multilayered mix of affects and cognitions takes place, identified as viewer's expressions of emotional condensation appreciating key scenes in significant movie experiences, I believe we could interpret this as some kind of "deepening gaze" (Johnston 2007: 307).

Narrative impact – intra-text and extra-text evaluation

When profound meaning-making takes place, through condensed moments of elevated enchantments accompanied by intense interpretation, I find a mix of affects and cognitions at hand, creating emotionally anchored perspectives. The viewer seems to engage in several different ways while enjoying movies. From empirical examples in my interviews with respondents I argue that this includes 'high cognition' where the viewer relates to the protagonist partly due to a moral judgment and an ongoing evaluation of virtuous and less virtuous behavior on behalf of main characters.

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 labels 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 does Kutter Callaway altering it to "thick interpretations" (Callaway 2013: 203). Frampton states it in a paradox; "affective intelligence" (Frampton 2006: 166). Detweiler's choice could also be a logic next step for my study in order to develop a concept for understanding the construction of meaning, inspired by anthropologist Clifford Geertz and his well spread idea claiming a need for thick description for understanding cultures (1973). As a result of this investigation in a search for an apt concept useful for understanding examples of profound and intensified emotional interpretation of specific moments in fiction film, inspired by Geertz and Detweiler, I advocate *thick viewing.*

Is suture compatible with philosophical reflection?

Examples of adopting suture-theory and film experiences can be found among scholars in psychiatry and behavioral science for a better understanding of the captive nature of film-watching related to an altered state of consciousness on behalf of the viewers. Stam, Burgoyne and Flitterman-Lewis put forward the idea that the cinematic situation as a whole facilitates this situation.

> The darkened theater, the illuminated large screen, and the placement of the projector behind the viewer, combined with technical equipment (cameras, lights, etc.), cinematic devices (creating of the illusion of reality), and the viewer's unconscious/conscious projections and processes are all part of the cinematic apparatus employed to produce a "dream state" in the viewer (In Lisa D. Butler & Oxana Palesh 2004: 65).

When Butler & Palesh analyze the cinematic situation with the help of the concept suture and they argue that it brings about a suspension of critical reflection. "When suturing is successful, viewers lose awareness of their surroundings and perceive the events on the screen as life-like" and the suspension of critical reflection and judgment are necessary preconditions to pleasurable film viewing (Butler & Palesh 2004: 65). They discuss similarities between the altered state of consciousness while watching a riveting film with other everyday life activities such as daydreaming, imaginative engagement, meditation, and formal hypnosis that involves absorption.

Interpreting the results of my in-depth interviews I want to challenge the claim Butler & Palesh make that the viewer *has* to suspend higher order reflective cognitive structures in order to experience suture. What I find in my study I interpret as empirical examples when

affects and cognitions are intimately tied together in an enchanted and emotional evaluation of the narrative. It is not a process that needs to be only subconscious. On the contrary, the spectator's response is related to the narration at its highest levels as well as engaging the spectator's own highest levels of mental activity, all anchored in the sensual-emotional apparatus.

Suture with high level cognition – fueled by affect

If my empirical examples say something on a general level I believe we need to talk about two kinds of *suture.* One kind with a lowering of awareness of the extra-text life, creating absorption in the fiction dominated by affect, inducing an altered state of consciousness where cognitive appraisals are *strongly reduced.* Another kind of suture would be of a kind when critical, ethical and moral evaluation is *fully activated*, enhancing the commitment to the fiction on the screen, fueling the filmic experience with euphoric affect, by pre-frontal cortex assessments, like my respondent Philip's ambivalent feelings for the characters' moral behavior in *Apocalypse Now* or Alexander about *Avatar* and his critique of contemporary society and his inspired thoughts, consonant with alternative ecological spiritualities (cf. Partridge 2005).

Recent cognitive film theory goes *beyond* psychoanalytical screen theory and its emphasis on predominantly subconscious processes in spectators' affective responses. In his theory of basal morality in drama appreciation Dolf Zillman sheds light on these phenomena. "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" (Zillman 2005: 176). In his experiments he shows how young viewers draw cognitive conclusions about protagonists' moral character which in turn creates a readiness to accept and approve the doings of this character. He shows how the cognitive consideration comes first and the affective disposition only after. It is this response Alexander displays when he talks about how his engagement in the Jake-character is amplified because of the empathy he shows to the suffering Na'vi people. His evaluation of Jake as character comes first, leading him to increased feelings of sympathy for him as the next phase in the process as a *result* of his moral judgement, a multifaceted ethical cognitive appraisal of him as a character.

That is why I put so much effort in mapping out the intra-text – extra-text dynamics in my model above with a focus on external critique. Through this process spectators test the fiction for a larger significance in unpredictable, playful and idiosyncratic ways, creating condensed moments of intensified engagement in film viewing, mobilizing the spectator's interpretative skills *in toto,* ranging from affect to high cognition, creating emotional evaluations and complex meaning-meaning, mobilizing the respondents total world view system.

The experience of the film *Avatar* is for Alexander charged with an emotional impact of an unmissable magnitude. It is a movie moment in the same vein as Nancy Ammerman's fruitful understanding of arts' capacity to generate meaning-making. Charged perceptions of meaning could be triggered by works of art, letting individuals "stepping out of the ordinary business of life, stretching the mind and imagination", evoking awe and a quest of meaning and purpose in life (Ammerman 2013: 269).

CONCLUSION

In this article I have tried to understand processes on a micro level when trying to interpret passionate film viewers' construction of meaning. Our media saturated society with its all-encompassing presence of media and media logic confronts young film viewers with innumerable narratives available through all kinds of screening windows. Cinematic narratives, embedded in everyday life, provide audiences with stories with a potential for emotionally anchored normative criticism as well as enchanted dreams about life and the world as it could be.

My conclusion is that mediated experiences through fiction film have the capacity to instigate experiences and reflection about what it means to be a human being. In the form of cinematic narration popular culture has a potential to facilitate contemplations of transcendent aspects of life as well as sophisticated moral concerns as Alexander's views on *Avatar* and Phillip's ideas about *Apocalypse now* indicate.

The spectators' responses creating affect-based high cognition need to be analyzed further with developed concepts capturing the very thickness of the interpretative process, where self-reflexive and ethical evaluative dimensions are intertwined with visual pleasure and aesthetic enjoyment of audiovisual details in surprisingly idiosyncratic and unpredictable ways. Frampton's paradox concept 'affective intelligence' is challenging and inspires me theoretically to conceptualize viewers' responses of being deeply moved as *thick viewing* processes, where cinematic experiences among young adults have the potential to include personal important existential issues, combining profound affect and high cognition, creating personal meaning-making and moved minds. It is not only entertainment, it is also providing meaning and sometimes even a transcendent sense of wonder and enchanted views on wholeness and purpose in life.

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