When tears are dropping …

BEING EMOTIONALLY TOUCHED DURING FILM AND TV RECEPTION

Lothar Mikos

Not all viewers are emotionally stirred by the same film scenes. As this article explains, whether one is moved or not depends on the viewers' individual biographical structures of experience that interact with the way a programme is made.

We have all experienced it: there are scenes in movies or television which really touch us emotionally. A gesture, a look, or a movement can move us to the point of tears – even if we often try to hold back the tears, embarrassed to weep in an unrestrained way in front of other movie-goers or family members. But being ashamed of tears is not the focus of this text. Rather, this text tries to explain why we are emotionally moved by films and TV shows.

There are 2 basic requirements for being moved:

1) a film or a TV show must be made in a way that can move us, and
2) a viewer must allow him-/herself to be emotionally stirred; this is related to biographical experiences stored in his or her subconscious.

We are moved during media reception in 2 different ways:

- We either feel scared and distressed, or hope and optimism, the so-called expectation affects (Bloch, 1985, p. 121). These emotions are closely connected to cognitive processes: We understand that something (scary or joyous) is going to happen, and then we experience either fear or hope.
- We may also be moved by a scene when we allow ourselves to relive past experiences and the feelings we associate with them (Mikos, 2008, p. 32). Already in the womb, we experience moments which become important within our biography. That is why even children can cry based on their experiences.

HOW MOVIES AND TV SHOWS MOVE US

How one feels while watching a movie or TV show depends, on the one hand, upon how we relate to the characters; on the other hand, it depends upon the interaction structures in situational contexts provided by the media text. In practice these are intertwined, because interaction structures can only be presented with the help of characters. Here, it is important that we differentiate between sympathy and empathy (Neill, 1996; Smith, 1995, pp. 82 ff.).

To share perspectives and to feel for a protagonist

In order to feel sympathy for fictional characters, we have to acknowledge them as people, align ourselves with them, and feel loyalty towards them.[1] We judge the character on the basis of our own moral position (Mikos, 2008). If the character fits with our position, we develop sympathy for that person; if he or she doesn't, we develop antipathy. The feelings which play a role in this case are those with which we feel something "for" the character. We understand, for instance, that the mouse is scared of the cat, and for this reason we are scared for the mouse; we understand how Lars, the little polar bear, feels when he is all alone on an floating ice sheet in the ocean, drifting away from his home (cf. Ill. 1).

These feelings related to sympathy are different from those related to empathy. Empathy refers to "shared emotions" (Feshbach, 1989, p. 77): we feel what the character feels. Back to the previous example: when empathetic, we are not scared for the mouse; instead, we, ourselves, are scared, just as the mouse is scared. We are not worried about Lars; instead, we, ourselves, feel helpless, alone, and afraid. These shared emotions are independent of our moral position. However, we do have to understand the situation this character is in. To enable this, movies and television shows build up a so-called "empathetic field" (Wulff, 2002, p. 110). An empathetic field is constructed using the narrative, the dramaturgy, and film aesthetics in a particular way which allows us to feel empathetic. It is relatively irrelevant if the mouse really is scared or not; important is that we as the viewers feel scared, because the mouse in a particular scene could potentially become scared. Since our moral position does not play a role in this, it is not necessary for us to take on the values of the protagonist. Empathy takes place "at the level of physical appropriation" (Morsch, 1999, p. 34). We therefore do not have to share the good intentions of Simba in *The Lion King* in order to feel empathy for him in the fight against his uncle Scar. More generally, it is assumed that empathy processes are secondary to sympathy proc-

esses (Smith, 1995, p. 103). "However, in a concrete, action-filled situation, it [empathy] can become independent and undermine the moral position of the viewer." (Mikos, 2008, p. 180) One can therefore distinguish between the "automatic comprehension of another person's emotional state based on their body posture (body-oriented empathy)" and imaginative empathy, where we "in our imagination partially put ourselves in the situation of the other person and understand it." (Bruun Vaage, 2007, p. 101)

Children understand body-oriented empathy more easily

If we assume that there is a difference between these 2 kinds of empathy, then we can deduce that children can understand body-oriented empathy more easily than the imaginative empathy, since the latter requires that one comprehends the situation and is often connected to sympathy. Children can only feel sympathy with characters in fictional films and TV shows if they can judge how the characters are morally. At the same time, children viewers are actually in a safe situation; even if they feel fear like the mouse feels or rage towards an enemy fighter like Scar, these are not the feelings that they would actually feel in a real social situation. Even if they have not yet developed a consciousness about what is fiction and what is real, the situations in the movie or TV show are familiar to them based on everyday experience. In all of the described reception patterns, emotions play an important role; however, they do not necessarily make one cry. This requires "scenic comprehension."

SCENIC COMPREHENSION

The concept of "scenic comprehension" was developed in the 1970s and 1980s by Alfred Lorenzer as part of a kind of psychoanalysis, which builds upon findings in social science and interaction theory.

Excursus into the theory

According to Lorenzer the socialisation of the individual is realised in the context of interactive situations, more specifically, through "the integration of someone into everyday praxis within a network of interactions, sewn together by innumerous, individual (…) scenes of coordination with significant (family and non-family) attachment figures." (Haubl, 1994, p. 4) Interactive relationships are also often conflictual.

Our experiences in these socialisation situations shape our individual structures of experience. In turn, these structures of experience frame our later experiences at a mainly unconscious level. Our personal structures of experience include the unconscious scenes or "scenic arrangements" (Lorenzer, 1973, pp. 141 ff.), which represent our biographically significant experiences. Since we are socialised into a realm of social experience and thus a life practise similar to that of others in the same society, individual structures of experience are always socially structured and thereby variations of collective structures of experience.

Our experiences are visually and scenically organised

The representations of past experiences of interactive relationships are basically visually and scenically organised, since they are based upon experienced situations. Lorenzer's usage of the term "scene" does not only include concrete interactions, but also those interactions which arise in one's imagination.[2] Since these scenes refer-

ence situations in which we, ourselves, have acted and interacted, they are at the intersection of "subjective life practise" and "objective cultural context" (Lorenzer, 1983).

Scenic comprehension is always oriented toward an understanding of the situation, since an "understanding of a meaningful reality is the same as the ability to understand the relationship between the subject to its objects and the interaction between subjects" (ibid, p. 141). Scenic comprehension takes place beyond the verbal level of interaction at the level of presentational symbols. In presentational symbols emotionality is articulated. They are an expression of interaction forms of both a sensory-symbolic and of a direct sensory nature, and they mediate between conscious interaction forms (expressed in language symbols) and unconscious interaction forms.

"Direct, sensory symbols stand in close relationship with unconscious images of interaction and therefore represent feelings as well as those life relationships which are not verbally articulable; sensory symbols are also closely related to those unconscious images of interaction which contradict social norms and therefore cannot be integrated verbally." (Lorenzer, 1986, p. 59) They represent the experiences of sensory confrontation with the world, for in-

stance in the experience of space. "Scenic comprehension" is oriented toward unconscious images of interaction and attempts to comprehend one's own individual life history in the context of an objective cultural context.

Scenic comprehension in film and TV

The act of scenic comprehension is not only limited to an analytical setting, but is an everyday psychological activity in the context of our life practice. Situations, in which we must act, are often understood in scenes, because they remind us of past experiences in similar situations and the relationships to objects and persons therein. If scenic comprehension is an everyday psychological activity, then it is also a part of reception, whereby this understanding is not directed at real action situations, but rather at represented action situations on a screen.

The narratives in films and television make reference to the audience's life world contexts as well as to their scope of knowledge, their needs, wishes, and fantasies. They present action situations, in which a network of interactions and relationships develops between acting people and objects. Film characters' structures of experience are just as much a variant of collective structures of experience as individual structures of experience are. In this way, film narratives offer the viewer the presentational symbols, upon which they may project relationships and unconscious wishes and fantasies. Presentational symbols are symbolic representations of unconscious images of interaction, feelings, interaction forms, and experiences stored at different levels of consciousness; as such they are similar to images in dreams, memories, and in the imagination. According to Lorenzer it is the task of the arts to transfer the unconscious images of interaction and our expectations about experience into presentational symbols, "in order to open up

consideration of new life concepts of sensory experience" (Lorenzer, 1986, p. 60). At the level of presentational tools, such as images, sounds, and music, films can make it possible to communicate individual and collective unconscious structures of experience.

Film narratives relate to our unconscious wishes

HOW UNCONSCIOUS DESIRES ARE STIRRED

In depicting structures of experience, film narratives relate to our unconscious wishes. The unconscious desire wants to be fulfilled, "in that it (…) wants to recreate the symbols that it associates with the first experiences of satisfaction" (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1973, p. 635). As opposed to needs, which are satisfied by and with real objects and people, wishes are connected to lost objects and people; they can only be fulfilled in one's imagination, in one's fantasies. It is these lost objects and people that appear in the images and narratives in film and television. Unconscious wishes are constituted by memory traces recounting the structure of satisfying interaction from the past. Since it is only possible to satisfy them in one's imagination, symbolic representations of unconscious desires acquire a special significance in movies. If a film allows the viewer to satisfy these wishes at the symbolic level, then at least in one's imagination, what is lost, may return. Film narratives embody only broader, standard meanings, such that the conscious and unconscious structures of experience are only presented in a superficial way (Prokop, 1979, pp. 80 ff.). Therefore, the audience receives the task of assigning a concrete meaning to these represented structures of experience. They do this through their direct scenic comprehension of the depicted

situations, based on their personal understanding of the interaction symbols therein.

Viewers never develop a scenic comprehension of a complete film, but rather of the situations represented in them. That means that in every film we are confronted with numerous situations which we can understand scenically, because they reference basic patterns of experience as well as their symbolic transformations. When we negotiate our own biographical experiences with a film and the situations portrayed in them, we interpret that film in relation to our individual biographies.

During reception emotions are revived

When scenic arrangements or situations in television visually correspond to the scenic arrangements in our imagination and memories, then past experiences and the associated configuration of feelings may be resurrected. Scenes of lovers' joyous reunions, scenes of separation, scenes of recognition, scenes of helplessness, etc., may be revived and performed in one's imagination. The viewers react with the feelings they associate with these scenes, with tears of joy or sadness, with jealousy, envy, and many other emotions. During film reception we are psychologically activated, because in our imagination we are constantly oscillating between the narrated film scene and the memory of one's own scenes (ibid., pp. 146 ff.). In experiencing film we complete the story on the screen with the help of our own experiences.

Our own experiences make the scenes complete

The way we encounter films depends upon our identity issues, our structures of experience, and our social integration in our everyday networks.

Lorenzer, Alfred (1973). Sprachzerstörung und Rekonstruktion. Vorarbeiten zu einer Metatheorie der Psychoanalyse. *Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.*

Lorenzer, Alfred (1983). Sprache, Lebenspraxis und szenisches Verstehen in der psychoanalytischen Therapie. Psyche, 37, 97-115.

Lorenzer, Alfred (1986). Tiefenhermeneutische Kulturanalyse. In Hans-Dieter König et al. (Eds), Kultur- Analysen *(p. 11-98). Frankfurt: Fischer.*

Mikos, Lothar (2008). Film- und Fernsehanalyse. *Konstanz: UVK/UTB.*

Morsch, Thomas (1999). Die Macht der Bilder. Spektakularität und die Somatisierung des Blicks im Actionkino. Film und Kritik, 4, 21-43.

Neill, Alex (1996). Empathy and (film) fiction. In David Bordwell & Noël Carroll (Eds), Post-theory. Reconstructing film studies *(p. 175-194). Madison/London: University of Wisconsin Press.*

Prokop, Dieter (1979). Faszination und Langeweile. Die populären Medien. *Stuttgart: dtv/Enke.*

Smith, Murray (1995). Engaging characters. Fiction, emotion, and the cinema. *Oxford/London: Oxford University Press.*

Wulff, Hans J. (2002). Das empathische Feld. In Jan Sellmer & Hans J. Wulff (Eds), Film und Psychologie – nach der kognitiven Phase? *(p. 109-121). Marburg: Schüren.*

Successful relationships as well as separations

There are 2 kinds of scenes which trigger us to feel moved: on the one hand, we are emotionally touched by scenes of acknowledgement as an expression of successful interaction and object relationships; on the other hand, we are also moved by scenes of separation or loss as an expression of failed or ended interaction or object relationships. 2 examples illustrate this. In the romantic comedy *Pretty Woman* with Julia Roberts and Richard Gere, there is a scene – or in the words of Lorenzer, a "scenic arrangement" – which moves many men to tears. The old company owner James Morse puts his hand on the shoulder of the repentant broker Edward Lewis (Richard Gere) as a sign of recognition, as if to say "Well done, my boy!" This gesture is a symbolic expression of a successful father-son relationship. It reminds us of interaction relationships which we have already experienced, regardless of whether or not they were successful. In *The Lion King* we are moved to tears when Simba mourns his dead father Mufasa. In this case one is touched by Simba's loss; we feel sympathy for him, and we feel his pain. The loving father-son relationship between these 2 lions

ends abruptly, the mourning son is left behind. Also *The Last Unicorn* is based on the issue of being abandoned and alone (cf. Ill. 2).

When people are moved to tears, as women often are when they watch the *Sissi* movies, it is due to scenic arrangements of acknowledgement and of blissful, romantic love. Since we may already have our first experiences with successful object relationships and interactions in early childhood, also children may be touched by the right kind of scenic arrangements in movies and television. Being emotionally touched is always related to our experiences; without them, it is not possible to be moved. ■

REFERENCES

Bloch, Ernst (1985). Das Prinzip Hoffnung. *Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.*

Bruun Vaage, Margrethe (2007). Empathie. Zur episodischen Struktur der Teilhabe am Spielfilm. Montage 16(1), 101-120.

Feshbach, Norma Deitch (1989). Fernsehen und Empathie bei Kindern. In Jo Groebel & Peter Winterhoff-Spurk (Eds), Empirische Medienpsychologie *(p. 76-89). Munich: PVU.*

Haubl, Rolf (1994). Psychoanalytische Medientheorie. Ein Beitrag zu einer interdisziplinären kritischen Medienwissenschaft und Medienpädagogik. Medien Praktisch, 18(1), 4-11.

Laplanche, Jean & Pontalis, Jean-Bertrand (1973). Das Vokabular der Psychoanalyse. *Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.*

NOTES

THE AUTHOR

Lothar Mikos, Dr. phil., is a professor for television studies at the University for Film and Television "Konrad Wolf" in Potsdam-Babelsberg, Germany, as well as the managing director of Erich Pommer Institute for Media Law, Media Economy, and Media Research.